



**STAYING UNITED WHILE SEPARATED:
RETHINKING THE CONNECTIVITY AND INTERACTION
ON CHINESE SOCIAL MEDIA
DURING THE PANDEMIC OF COVID-19**

Qiyuan Hu

A thesis submitted to fulfil the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

The University of Sydney

December 2025

Declarations

Statement of originality

This is to certify that the content of this thesis is my own work. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any degree or other purposes at any other University or institute of higher learning.

I certify that I have produced the intellectual content of this thesis and that I have acknowledged all sources and assistance received in the preparation of this thesis.

Qiyuan Hu

31 December 2025

Statement of assistance

This research was self-funded, with partial support from the following scholarships: The John Anthony Gilbert (Humanities) Research Grant and the Postgraduate Research Support Scheme (PRSS).

Qiyuan Hu

31 December 2025

Attribution statement

During the preparation of the thesis, I used the generative AI tools *Grammarly* and *ChatGPT* (*OpenAI*) for grammar checking, language refining, and citation correcting, all under my direct instruction and supervision.

I confirm that any text suggested by generative AI was reviewed for possible errors, inaccuracies, and bias. All interpretations, analyses, and final wording are my own. I take full responsibility for the submitted thesis and certify that my use of generative AI complied with the University of Sydney's academic integrity policy and ethical standards for research.

Qiyuan Hu

31 December 2025

Abstract

This thesis investigates how digitally mediated interactions on China's two leading social platforms, Weibo and WeChat, shaped connections, cooperation, emotional expression, and civic engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, within the constraints of a politically conservative regime. It reveals the paradox at the heart of China's digital pandemic response: while online networks were mobilised to foster unity and 'connective action', the same networks were also instrumental in enforcing compliance, silencing dissonance, and reinforcing social and political divisions.

Centred on the official slogan "Stay cohesive, we can defeat the pandemic" (*Zhong Zhi Cheng Cheng, Kang Ji Yi Qing*), this study develops a new perspective on We Media by integrating the notion of "prosumers", "soft leaders" and influencers. It examines how ordinary citizens leveraged networked intimate relationships and social capital to share resources, coordinate local responses, and sustain morale during the pandemic. This citizen-led activity is analysed alongside concepts grounded in Western scholarship—augmented reality, the digital public sphere, convergence culture, networked publics, affective publics, and networked intimacy—while also engaging with Foucauldian theories of power and normalisation, Bourdieu's habitus, and Confucian understandings of *guanxi* and harmony to show how individual agency, cultural norms, and political discourse interplay in China's digital sphere.

The study employs Dahlgren and Hill's five parameters of media engagement as its analytical framework, supported by a mixed qualitative methodology. Data collection employed autoethnography and digital ethnography, along with 16 semi-structured interviews, yielding

rich insights from 18 participants. This mix of methods gives a detailed view of both everyday interactions and platform-specific affordances.

The findings indicate that online collaboration was driven not only by the technical affordances of the platforms. Weibo functioned as a volatile digital public sphere shaped by algorithmic visibility, censorship, and nationalist affect. While it enabled rapid information exchange, help-seeking and emotional solidarity, it simultaneously amplified polarisation, suppressed minority voices, and reinforced a binary between “us” and “others”. WeChat, by contrast, operated as a semi-public ecosystem influenced by Confucian relational ethics and networked intimacy. Group chats, Moments, and public account articles became key spaces for coordinating everyday cooperation, circulating affective content, providing emotional support, conducting peer supervision, enforcing moral norms, and engaging in subtle resistance. Across both platforms, users acted as We Media, engaging in relational, affective, and moral labour that shaped perceptions of the pandemic at both personal and collective levels.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that digital empowerment in China is inherently conditional: facilitated by technological affordances yet constrained by censorship, peer surveillance, algorithmic filtering, and sociocultural expectations of harmony. Chinese civic engagement during the pandemic emerged as affective rather than deliberative, relational rather than institutional, and momentary rather than sustained. The government’s slogan, “stay cohesive”, functioned as both a tool of solidarity and a mechanism of control: this paradox continues to erode the public’s tolerance for diverse voices and further contributes to the redefinition of “us” as the majority; connectivity is, then, enhanced by political, cultural, and social confrontation.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisor, Prof. Catharine Lumby, for her unwavering support throughout this thesis journey—not only academically but also personally. Her care, encouragement, and patience sustained me through illness and moments of difficulty. I am also sincerely grateful to Dr Su Chunmeizi, who kindly joined as my associate supervisor, dedicated her time and energy to guiding this project. My thanks also extend to Prof. Ilona Hongisto, Dr Lik Sam Chan, A.Prof. Tingting Hu, Dr Thomas Baudinette, Prof. John Hartley, Prof. Peter Bryant, Ryan Menner, and all colleagues at the University of Sydney Business School. My overseas study experience would not have been such rewarding without the opportunities and support you provided.

My heartfelt appreciation goes to my parents for their unconditional love, financial support, and enduring belief in my ability to complete this PhD. I am equally fortunate to have my cousin, Qianyi Huo, and my brother-in-law, Junyan Huang, who have always treated me like family and spent time with me generously.

I am deeply thankful to my peers, Zahrah Sahib and David Mason-Cox, for their kindness, encouragement, and companionship during challenging times. I am also grateful to the wonderful friends who have walked alongside me on this journey and brightened my path: Emilia Turnbull, Francesca Gatmeitan, Olivia Hsieh, Jordana Teixeira Rosa Costa, Jutinan Thammarongwit, Runzhe Liao, Kent Wong, Rui Guo, Junyi Cai, Xinlei Zhou, Kerry Hoko, Zhixun Chen, Jingya Yin, Meng Luo, Hanxu Lu, Jiun Cze Seet, Zhichao Ding, Diyun Chen, Trisha Nowland, and Lydia Cheng.

I also acknowledge the contribution of my interview participants in this study. Their unreserved opinions and keen hearts enrich the arguments and provide valuable insights for this thesis.

Finally, I extend my thanks to Anna Biddiscombe, Alex Sin, and Beth Mang at Macquarie University for their mentorship in fitness, and to all participants in my Les Mills classes. Your energy and encouragement helped me grow stronger and braver throughout this journey. Also, thank you to all my lovely barista friends on the Macquarie University campus, your coffee and smile have supported me every morning for these four years.

Table of Contents

<i>Title Page</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>Declarations</i>	<i>ii</i>
Statement of originality.....	ii
Statement of assistance	ii
Attribution statement	iii
<i>Abstract</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>vi</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>viii</i>
<i>Chapter One: Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
Background.....	2
<i>The quarantine life in China</i>	2
<i>Why Weibo and WeChat?</i>	3
<i>China versus the West</i>	7
Aims and significance.....	10
Research questions.....	13
Theoretical framework.....	15
<i>Digital public sphere in China</i>	15
<i>Conceptualising We Media</i>	16
<i>Platformised social life</i>	19

Chapter outline.....	20
Chapter Two: Literature Review	23
Part 1: Political governance in an augmented world	23
<i>Augmented reality in a segmented and regulated digital space</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Behind the feed: platforms, algorithms and control</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>The digital public sphere in the regulated augmented reality</i>	<i>29</i>
<i>How 'likes' reshape the digital public sphere</i>	<i>33</i>
Part 2: The social structure of the digital social networks	36
<i>Together apart: collectivism, quarantine and digital connection.....</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>A networked public with Chinese characteristics</i>	<i>38</i>
<i>The habitus of 'following' in China's digital culture</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>From social capital to soft leadership in networked publics.....</i>	<i>43</i>
<i>We Media as everyday opinion leaders.....</i>	<i>47</i>
<i>We Media and the pandemic expressions.....</i>	<i>49</i>
Part 3: Social media content, affect and participation	52
<i>Affective public and emotional convergence in China.....</i>	<i>52</i>
<i>We Media, liminal storytelling and affective sense-making.....</i>	<i>55</i>
<i>Political expression in a playful, attention-driven culture.....</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Discipline and post—a Foucauldian perspective</i>	<i>62</i>
Summary	67
Chapter Three: Methodology.....	68
Five parameters of media engagement	68
Research design	76

Immersing in quarantine life with autoethnography	78
Digital ethnography and participatory observation.....	79
Framing analysis for social media content.....	80
Understanding others' experiences through in-depth interviews.....	81
<i>In-depth interview: limitations and solutions</i>	82
Thematic analysis of interview data using the codebook approach.....	84
Data collection	85
<i>Screenshots from Weibo and WeChat</i>	85
<i>In-depth interviews</i>	87
Summary	90
Chapter Four: In the name of “fighting the pandemic”	91
Weibo: a source of updates	91
From community to consumption: Algorithms and commercialisation	97
Data, authenticity and trust	104
A participatory space hailing positivity	107
Storytelling of heroism and truth	116
Confucianism and transnational belonging.....	121
Platform censorship and strategic expression	126
Echo chambers and detox	132
Is disconnection the next trend?.....	134
Summary	136

Chapter Five: How did users interpret the slogan, “stay cohesive” on Weibo?.....	138
Public exposure and affective public	138
Help-seeking across social networks	143
Is it helping or sanctioning?	149
State-sponsored peer supervision.....	158
The accumulating pressure of the pandemic.....	165
An ongoing forum for marginalisation?.....	171
Summary	177
Chapter Six: Can WeChat leverage relationships?.....	179
Emerging intimacy on WeChat	179
Group chats: networked public and beyond.....	183
Family group chat	184
<i>Micro-units of pandemic coordination.....</i>	<i>184</i>
<i>Cognitive engagement: intergenerational gatekeeping.....</i>	<i>193</i>
<i>Negotiating relational trust and cooperation</i>	<i>196</i>
Friend group chat	198
<i>An augmented arena</i>	<i>198</i>
<i>Friends versus family support.....</i>	<i>201</i>
<i>Exploring trust</i>	<i>203</i>
Neighbourhood group chat	205
<i>From a group chat to a community?</i>	<i>205</i>
<i>Neighbourhood group versus rumours</i>	<i>219</i>

Summary	224
Chapter Seven: Visualising networked intimacy on WeChat.....	226
Moments: when private and public intersect	226
<i>Moments as an alternative version of Facebook</i>	226
<i>Moments as a communal space</i>	227
<i>Moments as an expressive space</i>	234
Turning intimacy into confrontation	241
The fear of othering	248
To mourn was to resist	260
Summary	266
Chapter Eight: Where are my allies?	268
What are public accounts?	268
Public accounts as educational hubs	271
Trust, habitus, and authority	274
The affective public and “positive energy”	277
Othering and emotional overload.....	279
Wuhan residents: Who are “we”?	283
Culture space and public account articles	292
Converging habits from using other platforms	297
Summary	303

Chapter Nine: Consequences: Is social media still capable of bringing us together?..... 304

Symbiosis: people, social media, and governance.....	304
A fragile promise.....	309
Lingering struggles: when empowerment meets containment.....	313
“The internet does not remember”	319
Post-pandemic moral order: othering, tolerance, and nationalism	325
Living in tribes.....	329
Need of security	333
Is confrontation a detour: consensus and the pragmatics of compliance.....	336
Summary	341

Chapter Ten: Conclusion..... 343

Key findings in response to the research questions	343
Significant contributions	349
<i>Conceptual contribution</i>	349
<i>Empirical Contribution</i>	349
<i>Theoretical Contribution</i>	350
<i>Analytical Contribution</i>	350
Limitations	351
<i>Forgetfulness and archive disruption</i>	351
<i>Limited sample size</i>	351
<i>Social desirability effect</i>	352
Future study suggestions.....	352

<i>Framework application to other platforms</i>	352
<i>Comparative studies among domestic regions</i>	353
<i>Extended research in social media-related fields</i>	353
Conclusion	354
References	356
<i>Appendix One: Human Research Ethics Approval</i>	388
<i>Appendix Two: Participant Information Sheet (English and Chinese)</i>	391
<i>Appendix Three: Participant Consent Form (English and Chinese)</i>	397
<i>Appendix Four: Sample interview questions</i>	400
<i>Appendix Five: Participant recruitment flyer (English and Chinese)</i>	402
<i>Appendix Six: Interview participants' demographic sketches</i>	404

Chapter One: Introduction

This thesis, as I will outline, is grounded, as deep research projects often are, in personal experience. While I was quarantined at home in China in 2020, my mother insisted that I take a handful of pills recommended by her WeChat group, claiming they could prevent infection. She had encountered the advice in an “older-people’s group”, where wellness tips and unverified medical claims were widely shared. I dismissed her advice, citing my postgraduate training and confidence in my own judgment. She, in turn, was offended by what she perceived as my condescension and insisted I take the pills anyway. They were harmless, though not helpful, yet the incident unsettled me deeply.

This exchange, trivial on the surface, crystallised a series of complex questions about digital communication and everyday life during the pandemic: how digital information, trust, expertise, and familial care became entangled under pandemic anxiety. It prompted broader concerns that anchor this thesis: How did social media shape what people believed? Why did certain messages feel trustworthy? And how did intensified digital engagement—driven by isolation—translate into offline actions?

This encounter was what triggered me to research and write my thesis. I wanted to understand how social media was used during the pandemic in China, how it influenced users and how their engagement with platforms changed as a result of the virus. This thesis investigates how Weibo and WeChat shaped Chinese citizens’ digitally mediated engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic and how communication on these platforms, embedded in cultural, political, and interpersonal contexts, informed collective responses to crisis. The remainder of

this chapter provides the background to the study, outlines its aims, presents the research questions, and introduces the structure of the thesis.

Background

The quarantine life in China

The year 2020 brought an abrupt rupture to everyday life as the first COVID-19 outbreak emerged in Wuhan and rapidly spread across China. To contain transmission, cities entered strict lockdowns, suspending mobility, closing public spaces, and confining people to their homes. What was typically a celebratory Spring Festival was marked instead by fear, grief, and separation. The quarantine life was also recognised as stressful and depressing, associated with citizens facing economic uncertainty, supply shortages, mandatory mass testing, the risk of infection and the prospect of being transferred to mobile cabin hospitals once confirmed positive. The instability extended beyond daily inconvenience to psychological strain, as individuals confronted uncertainty about employment, health, and the future.

In response to this unprecedented public health emergency, the state promoted a unifying slogan ‘Stay cohesive, we can defeat the pandemic’¹ (*Zhong Zhi Cheng Cheng, Kang Ji Yi Qing*). This discourse framed pandemic control not only as a biomedical challenge but as a

¹ This is a direct translation from Chinese. The translated meaning could be slightly different from the original meaning.

moral and collective undertaking. It positioned citizens as agents of national resilience and encouraged voluntary compliance, collective sacrifice, and mutual support. Rather than perceiving pandemic management as a purely top-down intervention, many Chinese citizens experienced it as a shared civic mission. Crucially, the collective logic of “stay cohesive” was enacted not only through institutions and policies but also through digitally mediated relationships, which enabled coordination, emotional solidarity, and the circulation of information during physical isolation. Lockdown did not simply push life online—it intensified social media’s role as an infrastructure of governance, communication, and care.

Why Weibo and WeChat?

This thesis centres on Weibo and WeChat because they functioned as the primary digital spaces through which Chinese citizens—myself included—navigated life during the pandemic. These two platforms offered a distinctive dual structure of public visibility and intimate relational communication that shaped both how information circulated and how it was interpreted.

Weibo operated as a fast-paced, thread-style, public arena for news discovery and opinion formation. It has replaced television news and other mass media and has become a fast, convenient, all-in-one social media platform for me to understand external events and discourse. The platform powered this function with real-time rankings of the most-discussed hashtag topics and top-searched keywords to cater to users’ needs for searching and reading about socially or politically salient topics, known as Trending Topics (*re sou*), and encouraging users to pool information and contribute to a topical issue within a networked community under the function of Super Topics (*chao ji hua ti*). During the pandemic, official media outlets frequently drew on Weibo hashtags for story selection, blurring the boundaries

between grassroots circulation and institutional reporting. On Weibo, I followed nationwide infection data, region-specific lockdown announcements, anxieties expressed by strangers, and the emergent vocabulary of crisis response.

WeChat served a different yet complementary function. It enabled ongoing communication with family, friends, colleagues, and neighbourhood communities through private chats, group conversations, and Moments (*peng you quan*, a posting and sharing function), particularly when physical gatherings were prohibited. And that was where I could stay close to them, while reading divergent ideas on Weibo, while resonating with their emotions through everyday interactions. Public accounts (*gong zhong hao*) also served as an alternative source of information for circulated commentary and news. And the requirement to use the “health code” (*jian kang ma*²), made WeChat even more critical to my pandemic life. WeChat thus became a space where public narratives from Weibo were interpreted through personal relationships, emotional bonds, and cultural expectation— a shift from open, public discourse to intimate acts of reassurance, persuasion, and negotiation. Thus, these two platforms have become important conduits for staying informed about the rapid changes in the pandemic and experiencing emotions online, as noted by McLuhan (1964) in his work illuminating the affective dimensions of humans’ engagement with media.

² A QR code generated in WeChat for scanning to demonstrate the user's health condition, COVID vaccination status, and trace their travel records with the location function. It was an essential function for people going out, as ‘checking in’ became compulsory to enter public spaces, including taking public transportation.

Above all, content from Weibo can be seamlessly shared to WeChat via the “share” button under Weibo posts. At the same time, information and opinions are generated in the private sphere, such as in those private chats and small group chats on WeChat, can also break through the boundary between public and private, and contribute back to the public thread of discussion of the issue. This two-way remediation, firstly, created a pattern of information convergence, in which public discourse funnels inward toward smaller social circles. Secondly, it acknowledged the central dynamic of networked public (boyd 2010) and further illuminated the influential potential of personal flows in a public setting, which paves a solid foundation for the rise of ‘we media’ that will be discussed later.

I conceptualise this as a system of concentric circles, with Weibo as an outer, peripheral ring of public exposure, composed of connections with strangers, acquaintances, and influencers, and WeChat as a central, semi-public, relational core where intimacy and interpersonal bonds are augmented and meaning is personalised and acted upon. This can also be viewed as a “narrowing down” or filtering of information inward. This model arguably helps explain why advice passed between trusted contacts can outweigh expert commentary, and why emotionally resonant posts from friends can feel more compelling than official information. Similarly, the outward flows can demonstrate how personal issues can resonate with wider audiences, or in other words, become ‘viral’ with the help of algorithms following the logic of the latest model of “siloeed virality” (Lee & Umback 2026). Although Lee and Umback’s research (2026) focused on the algorithm model on TikTok, the findings discovered how the traditional social media networks and following logic can be superimposed by algorithms, which allows niche issues to be seen by relevant interest-based audiences, and in the context of COVID-19 pandemic, by wider WeChat and Weibo users.

That being said, this thesis does not mean that there is no other Chinese social platforms that trend: Chinese and international communities are immensely popular and vital, for example TikTok (named *Douyin* in China); RedNote (*Xiao Hong Shu*) has become a massive platform for lifestyle and daily experience sharing, gradually taking over part of the searching function of Baidu³, and even for international networking in the later ‘TikTok refugee’ issue in 2025 (Baptista et al. 2025). Besides, QQ is a primary communication tool for younger generations, which is fertile ground for the growth of sub-cultures and internet slang; Zhihu focuses on content moderation, knowledge dissemination and community building; Bilibili.com is known as a creative space for video production and distribution and where “nijigen (*er ci yuan*)” culture, such as anime, manga, and game, and “danmaku (*dan mu*)” culture comes to thrive. With all these options, one may ask why I focused on Weibo and WeChat.

In scoping this thesis, I considered the different affordances social media platforms offered for maintaining relationships and communication networks. I concluded that WeChat and Weibo, as Social Network Sites (SNSs) provide superior supplementary means for users to explore, express, and exchange information conveniently and straightforwardly, while Douyin and RedNote are user-generated content sites (UGC) (van Dijck 2013) which prioritise entertainment, lifestyle content, and influencer-driven consumption rather than deep and real-time interpersonal coordination. In addition, I chose WeChat and Weibo for reasons of scope, to enable a thesis that engages in deep and thick qualitative research.

³ A Chinese version of Google.

It is also important to note that emerging platforms such as Douyin and RedNote have a much shorter history in the market than Weibo (launched in 2009) and WeChat (launched in 2011). Their user demographics also target younger groups, which limits intergenerational participation. Ultimately, content from these platforms frequently migrates back to Weibo and WeChat, reinforcing these two platforms as central hubs through which pandemic narratives were shaped, debated, and enacted. Thus, this thesis focuses on Weibo and WeChat not only because of their technical affordances, but because they became alternative news sources, emotional communities, and civic infrastructures—a digital public sphere through which pandemic life was negotiated.

China versus the West

A further dimension of pandemic communication was influenced by geopolitical tensions, particularly political tensions between China and Western countries. Weibo and WeChat played an important role in countering accusations from “the West⁴” that demonised China and frequently framed COVID-19 as a consequence of the failure of Chinese governance or opacity. The claim circulated widely on international platforms and, through screenshots, commentary, and translated posts, re-entered Weibo and WeChat ecosystems. My research finds that the countering narratives were constructed in two directions, inward and outward.

⁴ “The West” in this context, instead of highlighting any specific countries, is a broader concept that refers to opposite ideological camps led and represented by the United States. Normally, citizens adopt this concept from political discourse without considering the nuance between those countries.

The inward focus was on disciplining people and building their confidence in facing the crisis. On the one hand, social platforms helped disseminate the lockdown policy and COVID-19 information, educating citizens to quarantine at home, protect themselves and facilitating the government's efforts to contain the virus's spread before it further infected children and older people in the community. This resulted in a relatively low mortality rate during the first wave of the pandemic, i.e. from January to March 2020. The positive outcome suggested there was a hope of winning the battle against the virus and reinforced the legitimacy of the quarantine policy. This built Chinese citizens' confidence in the ruling regime and generated momentum for them to follow the government's instructions. This trust in the Government's strategy was essential in preparing citizens to accept the "zero-COVID" (*qing ling*) policy, which lasted till the end of the pandemic in 2022.

At the same time, the platforms also afforded users an opportunity to foster a supportive public atmosphere by pervasively sharing positive stories, including reaching out to Chinese migrants, organising donations, sending supplies from around the world, and having older Party⁵ members volunteer to support communities. These heartwarming moments represented the love and care of a connected society, underscoring and legitimising the slogan "stay cohesive", in which unity made a change. Although these were revealed as part of the state's propaganda strategy in a later study (Xu & Gong 2024), the touching feeling, to me, remained real and motivating. The voluntary movements motivated ordinary people to take on social

⁵ "Party" referring to the Communist Party of China (CPC).

responsibility, recruit and share their own resources and, indirectly, allowed the government to reallocate limited resources to areas that needed them in the long term.

Regarding the outward focus, I observed a contrast between China and other countries that dominated the mainstream news. The mainstream media in China also used Weibo to highlight the divide between the success in China combatting the virus and the alleged chaos in Western countries, particularly the United States, after President Donald Trump denounced COVID-19 as “China’s fault” (Griffiths 2020; Xinhua News 2021a). The news showed that many people in those countries found it difficult to function after their lives were significantly disrupted. Some people in the United States refused to wear face masks, ignored social distancing and quarantine policies, gathered on the streets and protested in crowds to reject lockdowns (BBC 2020a; Xinhua News 2020a). Similar protests were also captured by friends living in Australia and posted on Moments. Movements doubting the local quarantine policies and vaccination were also organised, scattered across countries, for example, the United Kingdom, France, Canada and Australia (CCTV News 2020a; Poole 2021). The chaos was further fuelled by the growing conspiracy theories, for example, the belief that the 5G signal could carry the virus (CCTV News 2020b; Nicholls et al. 2020), or it was designed as a bioweapon by the Americans (Xinhua News 2021b). The radical reactions to the pandemic above did not spread widely. Nevertheless, the different stances toward this public health crisis reinforced perceptions of Western dysfunction. These protests were further framed as irrational and portrayed as the failure of the Western democratic system by the Chinese mainstream media, which was potentially aimed at fostering citizens’ trust in the Chinese government.

These contrasting framings did more than inform public opinion; they shaped emotional orientation. By framing the battle against COVID-19 as also a confrontation between China and Western countries, the Chinese government's framing presented a broader picture of the challenges faced by citizens in the crisis. For many users, including myself, the sense of being under external ideological attack potentially intensified identification with national unity and reinforced the moral significance of compliance. The pandemic became not only a public health emergency but a symbolic confrontation between governance models.

According to this logic, “stay cohesive” became geopolitical: adhering to containment measures for Chinese citizens signified loyalty, responsibility, and a defence against external hostility.

This thesis does not evaluate the accuracy of these narratives. Rather, it investigates how they shaped digital participation: how global tensions were reframed through domestic social media, how nationalism influenced interpersonal interactions, and how citizens positioned themselves with—or against—state-aligned narratives.

Aims and significance

This thesis examines how Weibo and WeChat shaped Chinese citizens' digitally mediated engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on how communication practices, cultural values, and interpersonal relationships informed collective responses in a crisis.

Rather than treating digital participation as a straightforward extension of technological affordances, this study conceptualises engagement as emerging from a hybrid environment in which expressive capacities are enabled by platforms yet constrained by political governance, cultural norms, and relational obligations.

This thesis aims to contextualise this research within my firsthand lived experiences during the first half of the COVID pandemic, from 2020 to 2021, living and working full-time in Foshan, China. In addition to conducting interviews, the authenticity of this thesis is anchored in my role as a significant participant observer on Weibo and WeChat, during the height of pandemic restrictions, actively using both platforms to obtain information, maintain relationships, and navigate daily life. Even though I returned to Australia to continue my degree in 2022, these experiences position me as both participant and analyst, bridging local knowledge and external scholarly perspectives. As a citizen who grew up in Mainland China, received patriotic education and immersed in Chinese traditional culture, while spending 10 years studying overseas pursuing postgraduate education, I acknowledge that my integrated Chinese and Western education experiences influences the way I understand connectivity and interactions on Weibo and WeChat and influences my research in an autoethnographic sense. My proficiency in Chinese allows direct access to posts, memes, commentaries, and interpersonal exchanges often inaccessible to non-Chinese-speaking researchers. This dual positioning informs the methodological approach of this thesis: part insider digital ethnography, part reflective analysis within autoethnography.

The study draws together multiple established Western scholarly works. On one hand, it engages with concepts that have paved the solid foundation for Western social media studies, such as internet freedom (Shirky 2011), convergence culture (Jenkins 2006a), networked society (Castell 2012), prosumption theory (Ritzer & Jurgenson 2010) and context collapse and social media affordances (boyd 2010). On the other hand, it situates these concepts within historical and ideological frameworks embedded in China's socio-political context, including Confucianism, as well as propagandistic notions, such as "harmony" (*he xie*) and "positive energy" (*zheng neng liang*) promoted by Presidents Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping (Geis

& Holt 2009; Wang 2023). The goal is not to reject Western theories, but to adapt and extend them, demonstrating how mediated engagement operates differently within a politically conservative system with distinct cultural norms.

The thesis also extends my Master of Research (MRes) study on the role of social media in contemporary ‘augmented revolution’ (Hu 2018). My findings in this phase of my research further provide an alternative perspective that challenges conventional views of social structure and communication on social media. These values have often been portrayed as horizontal, casual, free, and equal. It also opens up new questions, including how other factors, for example, interpersonal relationships, cultural background, habits, social atmosphere, policies, impact civic engagement through social media. This PhD thesis will build on my previous research and explore the gaps I identified.

This thesis thus contributes to three intersecting areas of scholarship. Firstly, digital media in China is revisited by examining how platforms mediate civic participation under both infrastructural constraints and relational expectations. Secondly, it investigates critical perspectives on social media affordances by illustrating how empowerment and control are intertwined through architectures of visibility, surveillance, and cultural values. Finally, by reviewing narratives circulated during the COVID pandemic, it ground my analysis in everyday interactions rather than in state policy or geopolitical discourse alone.

Ultimately, this research argues that pandemic engagement on Weibo and WeChat was neither purely top-down nor purely grassroots. Instead, it emerged through collaborative dynamics between state actors, platform infrastructures, cultural norms, and interpersonal influence—a process that simultaneously enabled solidarity and constrained dissent. These findings

contribute new insights into how digital publics are formed, mobilised, and disciplined in China, and how collective action evolves under crisis conditions.

Research questions

This thesis is guided by one overarching question: How did Weibo and WeChat shape Chinese citizens' digitally mediated engagement in the COVID pandemic, and what does this changing dynamic tell us about the evolution of civic engagement in a politically conservative context? This core question recognises that digital participation in China emerges from a hybrid environment: digital engagement in China does not unfold in a neutral technological space. Platforms offer expressive capacity and connectivity, yet they operate within sophisticated architectures of control. The pandemic intensified these forces, creating a moment in which digital activity became deeply interwoven with offline survival, emotional coping, and collective mobilisation.

In addressing this question, I have identified five related questions. The first focuses on how these systems enabled communication while simultaneously regulating behaviour, shaping modalities, and normalising boundaries of engagement, to examine how platform governance, state regulation, and algorithmic mechanisms structured users' everyday communicative practices. This analytical lens foregrounds the role of technical architectures and political power in producing forms of conditional empowerment, and how these social platforms, then, construct and renew Chinese digital public's perceptions about their circumstances and reshape their behaviour and operations under the call for action, "Stay cohesive, we can defeat the pandemic".

Drawing on the technological affordances of Weibo and WeChat, this thesis also asks a secondary question: How do Weibo and WeChat function as spaces for public opinion formation during the pandemic, and how were opinions and information circulated and delivered through social networks? This question prompts an investigation into organisational efforts in WeChat groups, viral outrage on Weibo, and cross-platform circulation of information.

At the same time, amid intensified confrontation between China and the United States over differing pandemic attributions and responses, I identified an increasing divide between the two camps in public sentiment. It is interesting to observe the rise of binary positions on these social platforms, which, as I outline in the thesis, involved a simplification of how “the West” was conceived, reducing it to a vague, convenient ideology confrontation in which China was opposed to “everything else that goes against China”, as outlined in my discussion of the radical shaming of “Westernised” returning diasporic Chinese who refused to follow quarantine instructions (see also Sohu News 2020a) and equally in the scapegoating of the proposal for “P.R.C. Regulations on the Administration of Permanent Residency for Foreigners” (*Wai Guo Ren Yong Jiu Ju Liu Tiao Li*) on Weibo (see also Wen 2020).

Bearing the ideological tension in mind, thirdly, this thesis also examines the kinds of connective actions that emerged through these platforms, and how unity was boosted through social media engagement during the pandemic. I do so to address the question of why Chinese citizens were willing to “stay cohesive” under pressure, how ideological conflict produced a new definition of identities and boundaries of belonging, and how dissent was delegitimised through both state control and citizen-driven othering.

Fourthly, my conversation with my mother also directs me to investigate how interpersonal relationships—especially family ties and friendship networks—shape trust, truth-verification practices, and emotional support online. This question shifts the focus to semi-public and intimate spaces on WeChat, where micro-level interactions influence opinion formation and the resonance between emotions and crisis responses, which have not yet been widely studied.

Finally, this thesis will try to explore what the longer-term consequences of pandemic-era digital engagement were and what the implications are for future civic participation.

Together, these questions position the pandemic as a critical moment that made visible the tensions embedded in Chinese digital life: empowerment and control, solidarity and exclusion, participation and withdrawal. By tracing these dynamics, the thesis seeks to contribute to broader debates about how digital publics are shaped in environments where cultural values, social responsibilities, and political imperatives intersect.

Theoretical framework

Digital public sphere in China

This thesis continues to collaborate with contemporary Western studies on social media, drawing on concepts such as augmented reality (Jurgenson 2012), the digital public sphere (Papacharissi 2010), the networked public (boyd 2010), the affective public (Papacharissi 2014), and connective actions (Bennett & Segerberg 2013), and soft leadership (Gerbaudo 2012). These frameworks provide the foundation for understanding how Weibo and WeChat operate as technological infrastructures and social environments during the pandemic. Both

sites constitute an augmented dimension that ignores time and space in which digital interactions overlap with, reshape, and reproduce physical social relations. Through these interactions, a digital public sphere—a term which is grounded in Habermas' (1989) notion of public deliberation but reconfigured through platform affordances—emerges in China. However, the public nature of this sphere is constrained by censorship and by different levels of mediated intimacy (Chambers 2017), where varying ties produce different thresholds of trust, disclosure, and emotional expression.

Conceptualising We Media

As well as investigating the structural and governmental constraints of how social media platforms operate in China, this thesis also foregrounds individual agency within Chinese social media ecosystems and acknowledges the ability of users to influence others in social networks. As Miller and colleagues argue in 'scalable sociality' (2016), social media supports users to join private and public communication by switching between large and small groups based on their needs. This scalability offers options and channels for Chinese citizens to share their pandemic stories, laying a solid foundation for the influence of 'we media' in the following discussion.

Furthermore, drawing from Gerbaudo's (2012) soft leadership and literature on 'micro-celebrity' (Marwick 2015), as well as influencers in cultural and creative industries (Cunningham & Craig 2017; Duffy & Wissinger 2017; Marwick & boyd 2011), I conceptualise a hybrid model of 'we media'. This framework builds on the concept coined by Bowman and Willis (2003) and emphasises how ordinary users—rather than professional content creators—collaborate on knowledge development, shape interpretations of events, and influence social networks through affective content. This thesis further recognises ideas

adopted in discussions of augmented social activism, namely how activists, as ‘we media’, portray their roles and frame their legitimacy through affective content on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, to stress their opinions and recruit potential participants (Hu 2018; Lee & Ting 2015; Mendes et al. 2018). Therefore, ‘we media’ shares similar characteristics with the soft leaders in hashtag activism.

However, rather than engaging followers to form a frontline to counter the government, it is intriguing that ‘we media’, during the COVID-19 pandemic, facilitated the strengthening of the existing social structure and the belief in “stay cohesive”. This thesis argues that ‘we media’ is helpful for understanding grassroots coordination during the pandemic, not as a call to uprising, but as a way to live together as an augmented community. Through those interactions, generated within the cultural framework and political and ideological ideas persisting offline, and within the social structure and habitus of the online world, ‘we media’ in China shaped and reclaimed the “mainstream” opinion representing the ruling regimes and the interests of the “majority” for their social networks. The connections on social media, on the other hand, help such an opinion be amplified, discover allies, and confront dissenting ideas. As a result, ‘we media’, during the pandemic in China, was not completely aligned with the soft leadership in hashtag activism, as argued by those Western scholars, being essentially an opponent of the government. Instead of being the “voice of the people” and contesting the CPC’s decisions, ‘we media’, in this case, became a beacon uniting audiences who upheld the hope promised by the enacted quarantine policies.

Additionally, in the same vein as Marwick’s idea (2015), awareness of ‘we media’ as a vital channel of information transmission on Weibo and WeChat is increasing in the field of digital marketing in China (Li et al. 2019). ‘We media’ content became influential on consumers’

decision-making by leveraging trust (Fang 2015; Hsu et al. 2010), idealising the image of the marketers (Yang 2014), and blurring the formal and informal communication (Li et al. 2019). Following this logic, within private and semi-public digital spaces, social media users, as ‘we media’, serve as micro-mediators, guiding opinion formation and reinforcing shared values of the society. While “storytelling” has become an effective approach in persuasion (Li et al. 2019), this thesis also discovers a similar information sharing pattern in the COVID-19 communication—Weibo and WeChat users actively mediated their quarantine life and shared through the platforms as authentic experiences—this allows individual users to convey their narratives with the inbuilt ‘authenticity’ (Marwick 2013), and perceptions of their circumstances, as well as their interpretation of the quarantine policies, and then shared within social networks.

Drawing on this, I use the term ‘we media’ (hereafter, We Media⁶) to highlight the agency and ability of an ordinary user within a social network to influence connected friends within the Chinese social media context. Rather than being defined by average users on social media, this thesis argues that We Media is a phenomenon in which individual users anchor their positions within social networks, leverage their relationships and emotions to wield persuasive power within a cultural and moral sphere, mediate and select “stories” to broadcast to their audiences in order to inform, promote and amplify opinions, and encourage participation in collective actions. During the pandemic, We Media became a mechanism for grassroots coordination and a hub for emotional expression of personal narratives, enabling

⁶ Hereafter, We Media will be used without quotation marks and capitalised to distinguish from the initial use of ‘we media’.

individuals to motivate collective actions, circulate practical knowledge, and mobilise care in response to the national call to “stay cohesive”.

Platformised social life

However, this agency of We Media unfolded within dense architectures of platform governance. This thesis recognises both the strong platform regulation (Flew 2021) that mandates censorship enacted through the Great Firewall, and equally the algorithmic mechanisms used by platforms on Weibo and public accounts, as well as the networked public on WeChat, to create filter bubbles and echo chambers (Bruns 2019; Flew 2020; Su 2024) and the role they play in strengthening polarised opinions. These dynamics are further embedded in China’s sociocultural context. The collectivism in China (Jackson 2014), which prioritises the collective over individual, and Confucianism that has ruled Chinese political philosophy and social structure for thousands of years (Weber 1968), values social order and hierarchy and emphasises obedience (Qiu 2009), and has embedded social capital (Putnam 2000) in “relationships” (*guanxi*) (Bian 2019; Wang 2023) to generate the social fabric. As MacKinnon (2012) argues, this historical legacy creates a communication environment which is fundamentally distinct from Western liberal paradigms.

To analyse how these forces shape user behaviour, this thesis draws on Bourdieu’s concept of habitus (1990; see also Papacharissi 2014) and on Foucauldian perspectives in relation to power and normalisation (1979), which illuminate how social norms are internalised and enacted through everyday mediated practices and discourse. These frameworks help explain how peer supervision—resembling a distributed Foucauldian Panopticon (Feder 2014)—emerged among citizens, reinforcing moral expectations of respecting collectivity during the pandemic. As nationalist narratives intensified, civic participation evolved from expressions

of care and mutual aid into a moralised duty to uphold social harmony and project strength against perceived external threats. In this configuration, the public did not merely comply with state messaging but became active participants in what Fang (2024) conceptualises as Collaborative State–Society Influence Operations. Under this model, users co-produce and enforce ideological boundaries through sentiments involving patriotism and moral outrage.

Thus, rather than fostering open deliberation based on shared civic identity, connectivity on Chinese social platforms during the pandemic increasingly became organised through confrontation—political, cultural, and affective. The logic of “stay cohesive” functioned simultaneously as an expression of social solidarity, a mechanism of moral regulation, and a vehicle for reproducing and defending dominant narratives.

Chapter outline

This thesis unfolds across ten chapters to examine how Weibo and WeChat shaped Chinese citizens’ engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic and how these engagements reveal shifting forms of civic participation in a politically conservative context.

Chapter Two contains my literature review. This chapter reviews scholarship on China’s digital media ecology and situates Weibo and WeChat within global debates about networked publics, affective participation, and digital public spheres. It bridges Western theoretical frameworks with literature grounded in researched on China-specific cultural, political, and technological issues.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological framework, drawing on autoethnography and digital ethnography, which integrate my life experiences and observations on these platforms during the pandemic, and semi-structured interviews. The research design is guided by Dahlgren and Hill's (2023) five parameters of media engagement.

Chapter Four analyses Weibo as a digital public sphere, examining its affordances, limitations, and the dynamics of visible participation, disengagement, and public opinion formation during the pandemic.

Chapter Five focuses on the emotional and relational dimensions of participation on Weibo, demonstrating how cultural values, moral sentiments, and social ties motivated digital engagement and shaped responses to crisis communication.

Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight outline my findings and focus on WeChat as a semi-public and relational space, analysing group chats, friendship networks on Moments, and public accounts as sites of emotional exchange, coordination, and connective action. By spotlighting the bonds and responsibilities embedded in relationships, I address how the affective content in an intimate space, and connective actions mobilised by nationalist moral standards and collectivist cultural statements, the modalities for individuals to “stay cohesive” operate.

Chapter Nine evaluates the broader consequences of digital engagement, including conditional empowerment, engineered forgetting, heightened polarisation, and negotiated forms of resistance and compliance. It considers how these outcomes reshape understandings of civic participation in China. The thesis concludes in Chapter Ten by outlining how my

findings have implications for future research on digital governance, mediated participation, and crisis communication in authoritarian contexts.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

This chapter reviews scholarship on China's digital media ecology and situates Weibo and WeChat within global debates. By contextualising these social media theories in a regulated digital space, this chapter will firstly explore political governance in an augmented world and how it relates to social media affordances and algorithmic mechanisms. Building on this, I will discuss the social structure of the Chinese social media, to investigate how networked publics were enabled under the national call for action embedded in the slogan "stay cohesive" through cultural and social factors, such as Confucian values, habitus, and We Media. In the final section, this chapter further examines the relationships among We Media, social media content, affective publics, and participation during the pandemic. It demonstrates how emotional and political discourse permeated personal relationships and shaped perspectives on the pandemic that guided citizens' connective actions. By bridging the Western theoretical frameworks with literature grounded in research on the China-specific context, this chapter intends to respond to the sub-questions: 1) how platform governance, state regulation, and algorithmic mechanisms structured Chinese citizens' everyday communicative practices, and 2) how were opinions formed, and information circulated and delivered through social networks?

Part 1: Political governance in an augmented world

Augmented reality in a segmented and regulated digital space

Jurgenson (2012) develops his ideas based on the fact that the internet offers global connection and therefore grounds the capacity for global democracy. He suggests that an

‘augmented reality’ has emerged from the connections made through digital networks that constitutes social media. Jurgenson is talking about the reality that brings the actual and the virtual worlds together. In his argument, social media breaks down the boundaries of time, thereby connecting like-minded people from remote locations to local issues that are mediated. Onlookers and audiences who are not on-site are able to support political rallies and other gatherings in the physical world by sharing and arguing online (Lee & Chan 2015; Lim 2017). By doing so, social media users stand in a liminal position where the real and virtual worlds intersect, providing an “in between” situation in which spaces, roles, and identities are opened to be redefined and reconstructed, leading to experiences that go beyond the natural order of things (Ibarra & Obodaru 2016).

Similarly, Weibo and WeChat, as mainstream Chinese social platforms, also enable Chinese users to respond to issues occurring in other locations. When the COVID outbreak in Wuhan first occurred, I paid close attention to posts about Wuhan on Weibo, then joined a WeChat group chat, talked to friends, learned about the policies and rules applied to my home community, and shared information and commented on Moments. This interaction overcomes the boundaries between time and space, forming an overlapping dimension (Potts 2015), but also collapses the boundaries between mass and social media—the news was reposted, remediated, and converged across these two platforms (Ahy 2016), and then, individual users, as We Media, could step up to form their own narratives.

Later, during the lockdown, people were physically separated, and WeChat was my primary way to connect with friends, learn about each other’s circumstances, and support one another. This was not like joining a rally in Jurgenson’s study. Yet, this online connection facilitates building a common experience within friendship groups. Scrolling on the phone, indeed, is

far more meaningful than the practice Morozov describes as “slacktivism” (2009)⁷. Our sense of reality has been expanded and augmented by social media. This immersive feeling of “being there” demonstrably prompts social media users to be more engaged in social incidents and events that they can relate to.

The augmented reality enabled by Weibo and WeChat remains constrained. Although Jurgenson (2012) suggests that social media’s fusion of virtual and physical worlds enables global interconnectedness, this potential is equally limited by platform infrastructures. Even Facebook lacks universal reach, and many regions remain digitally disconnected (Wong et al. 2009; Wijetunge 2014). In China, the Great Firewall and strict regulations on foreign platforms have pushed services such as Facebook and Google out of the market, isolating Chinese users from international competition and interrupting their access to global representations of China (Nip & Sun 2018). While some users rely on VPNs to reach Western platforms, most VPNs are illegal, unstable, or insecure, and language barriers further constrain engagement. As a result, information about life outside China is largely circulated by Chinese migrants or diasporic communities on domestic platforms.

Weibo and WeChat function as substitutes for banned Western platforms, adopting similar communicative features while maintaining a distinctly “domestic” digital sphere. Restrictions on internet access sharply separate this internal space—where Chinese users rely on Chinese apps—from the “external” world dominated by Western platforms. This division limits

⁷ Morozov (2009) defines slacktivism is a type of feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact.

exposure to diverse global contexts and values (particularly Western democratic ideals) and enables the state to continue its long-standing tradition of domestic propaganda. As a result, Chinese users form networked publics (boyd 2010) primarily with others from comparable cultural and political backgrounds. Increased interaction within these homogeneous networks heightens users' susceptibility to shared cultural norms, political views, and behaviours, even among those living abroad (Nekmat 2012). Thus, the division between "domestic" and "external" digital spaces underpins ongoing tensions between Chinese and "other" value systems.

In addition, Western scholars have proposed the concept of "stacks" to identify the new architecture of the 'platformised' digital world (Bratton 2015; van Dijck et al. 2018; Valtysson 2022). They illustrated the layers from the natural mine (physical world, hardware) to the final content shown on users' screens (virtual world, software) to articulate how users' perceptions and behaviours can be shaped through intervention at one or more layers. Policies and governance are one of those critical layers that partly determine the final presentation of content on social platforms. Having said that, the Chinese government's regulation of social media has been widely discussed by scholars (for example, see Bamman et al. 2012; MacKinnon 2012; Shao & Wang 2017; Ye et al. 2017). The central government in China indeed has strong power to regulate infrastructure and censor the media, enabling the ruling regime to track the sources of posts, detect and take down sensitive content, remove users' accounts, punish the providers of communication services, or even arrest improper users. The government regularly restricts free public participation in the online space through deterrents including breaches of the law and penalties. A notable case is the arrest of Dr Li Wenliang in 2020, who was later recognised as a COVID-19 whistle-blower. He was accused of "sharing untrue content and disturbing social stability" after he shared information about an unknown

contagious virus linked to the mystery pneumonia cases in Wuhan on a WeChat group and reminded his friends to wear facemasks on the eve of the outbreak (Xinhua News 2020b). It is reasonable to argue that this kind of government regulation of information flows triggers ‘self-surveillance’ among social media users (Foucault 1979). This not only means that people are aware of the sensitive topics and words to avoid in their posts, but also that they do not express their true opinions, even in private chats on social media, because all data is potentially under surveillance.

Behind the feed: platforms, algorithms and control

Beyond direct state intervention, Jurgenson (2012) and van Dijck et al. (2018) also recognises that internet giants, such as Google and Facebook, monopolise and intrusively exploit user data. Although they critique centres on unethical data practices and algorithmic business models, they alert users to the broader consequences of big-data mining, namely the unequal distribution of visibility (Bucher 2012): algorithms increasingly prioritise user-preferred content and redefine “popularity” through metrics such as likes and other indicators (van Dijck 2013). His theoretical trajectory diverges from Jenkins’s (2006a; 2006b) early optimism about convergence in the digital era.

By selectively ranking and filtering information, algorithms not only structure what becomes visible but also reinforce forms of platform-level self-censorship (Bucher 2012; Roberts 2018). In this sense, algorithmic governance shapes the informational environment in ways that mirror, complement, or intensify other mechanisms of control.

Having said that, following the logic of “stacks”, Weibo and WeChat play an active role in algorithmic filtering and content removal. Even when users encode or remediate messages to

evade censorship, the platforms can still detect keywords and block posts, searches, or hyperlinks. Such interventions further constrain the affordances typically associated with social media in Western contexts (boyd 2010). These practices are difficult to avoid because China's social media market is highly monopolised; with user data concentrated in the hands of a few companies, users have limited awareness of how their data is used and even less capacity to contest it, as agreeing to extensive terms and conditions is mandatory for participation.

Flew (2021) further notes that, unlike Western platforms such as Facebook or Twitter—which grew in relatively liberal environments with independent capital—Chinese tech giants like Sina (Weibo) and Tencent (WeChat) developed through substantial state financial and political support. These tech giants in China are treated as productivity boosters by the government, and they are heavily reliant on government policies to transform from a consumer economy to a massive industrial economy, which allows them to develop competitively within markets; however, in turn, they become a regulating tool of the government (Yuan & Zhang 2025). Consequently, the government has greater influence over social platforms in their operations and development to ensure the platforms do not disrupt the government's plan to strengthen ideology and counter geopolitics while pursuing profit (Yuan & Zhang 2025). When state regulation converges with platform policies and is embedded within algorithms and content rules (Bratton 2015), restrictions on expression become more subtle yet more pervasive, shaping the conditions of daily communication within China's augmented reality.

The digital public sphere in the regulated augmented reality

Grounded in a discussion of how social media connections are constrained in China by the government's platform regulation, this project examines the formation of public opinion around "stay cohesive" through the lens of the digital public sphere, while recognising that augmented reality now plays a significant role in reshaping this sphere in China.

Incorporating augmented reality is crucial for understanding how online-offline interactions structure contemporary digital communication.

However, it is equally vital to include an understanding of augmented reality and its potential role in reshaping the Chinese digital public sphere in the discussion. In my previous study (Hu 2018), I sought to understand how Habermas' ideal public sphere operated and was altered in the digital media era. I explore how protesters in the Umbrella Movement were brought together on social media in debates about contemporary social movements, how public opinion was pooled, developed, and then disseminated across different social networks, and how Facebook motivated potential activists worldwide to join the social movements.

Considering that Chinese social media users adopted Weibo and WeChat to share quarantine life updates, collaborate, and transmit supplies, conduct 'neighbourhood watch' as a form of civic engagement, and cultivate faith in the government through public discussions, this study argues that the digital public sphere remains vital for understanding civic interactions.

The public sphere that emerges in digital media can be further explained by McLuhan's theory of media, as the 'extension of man' (1964). Social media allows users to extend their sensorium, feeling, understanding, and explore augmented reality. In other words, when social media is installed on smartphones, and smart devices become an essential part of the human communicating regardless of time and space, users can condense reality to a screen

and interact with topics as big as climate change to as small as a friend's manicure by just moving their thumbs. The agency of the users is supported by Prosumption Theory (Ritzer & Jurgenson 2010; Toffler 1989), which argues that social media users occupy an active position and are able to produce original ideas. This corresponds to the cultural logic of 'collective culture' that emerges from the e-commerce model of Web 2.0 in which the traditional producer-consumer relationship has been transformed into 'co-creation' that blurs the distinction between collective (non-market, public) and commercial (market, private) (van Dijck & Nieborg 2009).

The digital public sphere is also applicable to the Chinese internet ecosystem today, as it shares characteristics with Western societies in using social media to connect multiple users and facilitate communication (Bennett 2012; Bennett & Segerberg 2013; Castells 2012; Rane & Salem 2012). However, the previous discussion about the digital public sphere built on the use of Facebook and Twitter and did not consider the Chinese government role in modern digital communication. Instead, it viewed social media as a revolutionary tool that subverted the government's restriction on information flow (including shutting down the internet service) and attempts to frame communications in official/mass media. By overthrowing the 'gatekeepers' and the hierarchical communication structure controlled by powerful groups (Shirky 2008), social media appears to offer ordinary users the potential to redefine what is important to them. This is not the case in China, as the ruling regime retains strong oversight of social media and utilises it as part of its propaganda (Chen 2022; Roberts 2018; Ryan 2022). Van Dijck and Nieborg (2009) and Fuchs (2017) further contend of participatory culture that, even if everyone is allowed to create opinions and share, not all content is equal.

Habermas highlights a free, rational, and critical debate in the public sphere (Duvenhage 2005; Thussu 2000), which is not the case in China. Public discussion in China is not democratic. At the same time, anonymity online has dramatically decreased since President Xi Jinping came to power in 2014 because of the application of a real-name identification system and facial recognition technology (Cadell 2022), which led to a surge in self-surveillance among citizens in the past decade.

Although most Chinese social media users today have received some level of education, enabling them to understand and participate in public discussions, the information and values they encounter online have been filtered and selected. Additionally, according to Nip and Sun's study of China's propaganda on Twitter (2018), Chinese official media frequently focuses on the opinions of the top leaders and the achievements of the government.

This thesis will further argue that rational public debate was disrupted by the national call to "stay cohesive" and the government's injunction to display "positive energy" (*zheng neng liang*) (Chen 2022; Li 2013). That is not to say that being positive or maintaining bonds is worthless. However, the propagandistic nature of the manner in which these ideas were conceived and reinforced was unquestionably ideological and served a primarily political purpose. These themes, embedded in daily communication, constructed a nationalistic framework underpinning public discussion (Chen 2022). These themes potentially "other" diverse ideas and, in the long term, marginalise them. An example was the comments posted under the news about female nurses shaving their hair to wear protective suits, as discussed in Chapter Four. While the comments mainly glorified their sacrifice and highlighted its benefits, feminists questioned the necessity of the action and their willingness to undertake it. However, these voices were quickly drowned out by mainstream opinion, which held that

collective efforts should not be undermined by personal interests. Peer pressure among social media users operated to defend and secure specific ideological values.

On the other hand, the inherent limitation of the public sphere's inclusiveness also persists in the digital dimension. When Habermas (1989) coined the idea of the public sphere, he formed it with a critical limitation—he developed his political communication model based the 18th-century coffee houses that were not open spaces for all citizens. Women for instance were not allowed to enter and the clientele was by definition upper class. The 'public' who participated in these salon conversations were implicitly defined by capital, gender and access to education. In other words, the public sphere, in fact, as defined by Habermas favours the interests of only the classes that have power in terms of politics, economics, and culture. Marginalised groups such as the poor, women, and racial minorities were excluded from Habermas's ideal public sphere (Fraser 1992; MacKee 2005; Negt & Kluge 1993; Pateman 1989; van Zoonen 2005).

It is true that, with the widespread use of smart devices and easy access to social platforms, the cost of participating in the public sphere in the digital era has been dramatically reduced (Flew 2021). Yet, from the perspective of augmented reality, it is important to ask whether most social media users are interested in receiving messages from marginalised groups—if social media is a genuinely political space given the pervasive 'white noise' that characterises it (Terranova 2004). This study argues that, although marginalised groups have a platform in the digital public sphere, social media helps them to overcome, in the virtual world, the domination of the public sphere by those with power in the actual world (boyd 2010).

How 'likes' reshape the digital public sphere

As mentioned, other factors, such as personal preferences and 'big data', inform algorithms and shape what audiences see on their screens (boyd & Crawford 2010; Bucher 2012). Van Dijck (2013) notes that the most 'liked' and most searched content, as well as sponsored posts, were always shown before other news on social media. The quantitative value of posts redefines the 'importance' and 'quality' of the content and guides social media users on what to focus on as 'mainstream'. In other words, the more 'popular' a post, the more likely it is to be visible and recognised, and vice versa.

Moreover, there is no quality assessment built into these engagement affordances (popularly known as 'like' or 'comment' buttons): online quantification favours acclamation but equally deprecation and disapproval. The algorithms favour strong emotions. Offering users buttons to impulsively click favours instant, gut-fired, emotional, positive evaluations" (van Dijck 2013, p.14). Thus, interaction in the digital public sphere potentially favours the casual, the numerical, and the symbolic, rather than the in-depth exchange of ideas. That is to say, communication in the digital public sphere is strongly influenced by the way big corporate tech platforms use social media data to manipulate feeds. Dominant voices and topics are weighted by the number of 'likes' and tend to set an implicit agenda while the voices of minority opinions receive decreasing attention and potentially remain unheard. And, importantly, users are sent down rabbit holes of information by receiving more of what they have indicated they already liked.

Furthermore, social media data empower those who master social media logic, namely micro-celebrities or influencers who mobilise a large number of followers. This development contradicts Shirky's early prediction that social media would democratise the online sphere

by giving all users and equal voice (2011). Influential accounts become more dominant and influential than those of ordinary users because of their online social capital, based on virtual connections and the credibility embedded in their 'likeability' (Rheingold 2002; van Dijck 2013; Warren et al. 2015). Key opinion leaders (KOLs), following the logic of word-of-mouth marketing, are potentially able to influence others' attitudes or behaviours, while not being obliged to show their direct connection to the sources of their commercial funding or provide independent verification of their expertise (Li & Du 2011).

In the Chinese context, prominent influencers advising users what to know about and read during the pandemic, namely the recommended messages from the "big Vs" (*da V*, verified content creators/celebrities) and the "Trending Topics" (*re sou*) that appeared in the news feed on Weibo, was selectively reinforced by algorithms. The algorithms follow the guidelines of the Chinese government's regulations and integrated them in social media using the power of influential accounts. These accounts arguably amplified an atmosphere of hope and love, strengthening people's loyalty toward the government and their country.

The platform economy further strengthens the relationship between algorithmic importance and visibility, and blurs the boundaries between business models and everyday expression (Su 2024). This is also noted by Bucher (2012), arguing that instead of supporting visibility, social media actually makes visibility scarce and generates a fear of not being seen and therefore pressured to continually interact. It is interesting to note that this logic is now embedded in Chinese internet slang used in phrases such as "top-ranked" (*ding liu*, something/someone ranked at the top position in a recommendation list according to the social media data), "the secret of traffic" (*liu liang mi ma*, the gimmick to gain a large number of 'likes' and views), "strong wind" (*feng hen da*, something is frequently discussed

across the internet/by influencers), and “influencer” (*wang hong*, a noun initially means influencers, then expanded to describe something that received a large number of ‘likes’ or recommended by influencers or many people via social media). Through repeated exposure to and adoption of this language, users become deeply immersed in a data-driven culture of likeability and popularity.

At the same time, users are continuously reminded—by both platforms and peers—that visibility equals importance (boyd & Crawford 2010; Fuller & Sedo 2023; van Dijck 2013), gradually allowing data to shape their judgment and perceptions. As data and algorithms become entangled with regulation, Chinese users find it increasingly difficult to detach themselves from government supervision and propaganda in the digital public sphere, as social media has become embedded in everyday life almost as an extension of the body. This condition lays the foundation for exploring how the discourse of “stay cohesive” became naturalised in daily communication during the pandemic.

Part 2: The social structure of the digital social networks

Together apart: collectivism, quarantine and digital connection

Why is being together so important and what does it mean to the people in China? A gathering is not just about having meals and fun. To many Chinese, it symbolises “reunite” (*tuan yuan*, reunion with family). It is a crucial ritual embedded in most Chinese traditional festivals, not to mention that the Chinese New Year which is where families come together to conclude the previous year and make wishes for the coming one. This ritual is, in the traditional Chinese mindset, a symbol of the “collectivist” culture in Eastern countries, which emphasises domestic bonds, values family and kinship, respect for the social order and prioritising the interests of a group/organisation (Jackson 2014).

The outbreak of COVID not only disrupted this cultural ritual but also led to the imposition of “quarantine” measures to stop the spread of the virus. The quarantine policy required that people “celebrate Chinese New Year in the local city” (*jiu di guo nian*) and applied to everyone in the country. Intercity migrants were obliged to stay and spend the holiday wherever they were to avoid further spread of the virus. Later, the travel restriction was extended to suspending international travel. This had the effect of severely restricting Chinese families ability to meet face to face and enact cultural rituals.

Furthermore, quarantine at home increased the deep feeling of isolation. Physical activity area was limited, for most, to the size of their apartment. The squeezed boundaries of daily life prompted citizens to rely more heavily on virtual communication. According to an industry report (iResearch & Sina 2020), the number of devices browsing Weibo had surged from 618,000,000 in December 2019 to 642,000,000 in February 2020. This indicates a

strong demand to retrieve information, rebuild the connection they temporarily lost in the real world and find a way to vent their loneliness. In my case, there was excessive tension between my parents and me because we had not lived together for a long time. This experience aligns with Jurgenson's (2012) idea that social media is an outlet to connect with like-minded people who shared the same feelings during the quarantine.

The interactions on Weibo and WeChat during the lockdown demonstrated more about showing mutual support and alleviating mental pressure by finding emotional resonance in satirical posts (e.g. "cloud-supervising" the construction of the Huo Shen Shan and Lei Shen Shan hospitals via live-streaming and naming the excavators in the construction sites, see You 2020; Sohu News 2020b), talking about a drama series being watched at home, and sharing hyperlinks on how to buy facemasks and heartwarming stories through public account articles (e.g. the stories of couriers helping supply delivery beyond their job). Thus, instead of a simple connection of similar minds, online interactions supported psychologically togetherness and emotionally addressed anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

While the Chinese government and the operators of social platforms have greater control over expression and dissemination on social media than Western democracies, content can remain online for a while before it is finally detected and taken down. That allows the message to be shared within a specific range and to be remediated into other novel forms or onto other platforms, stimulating more users to engage in "onlooking" (*wei guan*, following gossip in cyberspace with others) and "melon-eating" (*chi gua*, watching, sharing, discussing gossip). Such online activities allow social media users to gather around topics where they share similar concerns, forming a 'square' for large-scale discussion and feeling connected (Friedman 2014).

Weibo and WeChat have provided a digital space for various ideas to be pooled and exchanged. While Weibo worked as a communal information hub for delivering the government's announcements, social surveillance, and constructing a caring atmosphere, WeChat also accelerated the distribution of critical information through interconnected social networks (iResearch & Sina 2020). It became an important source of knowledge for ordinary users to learn about COVID-19 from the perspective of Social Learning Theory (Bandura 1986; 2002), especially when there was a lack of information about the virus, and most of the citizens had no personal experience with such an unprecedented incident. Hence, staying 'together' in cyberspace also meant not being disconnected from important information and getting left behind by the rapidly changing circumstances of the pandemic.

A networked public with Chinese characteristics

The ability to 'stay together' online is rooted in social media's affordances and involves communication mediated by smart devices. While social media reformulates communication, scholars also believe it impacts the formation of social networks in the virtual world (Meyerhoff 2006; Seargeant & Tagg 2013). In particular, boyd (2010) formulates her theory of the 'networked public' and regards people on social media as an imagined collective (or community) constructed through networked technologies. Users on WeChat who share their lives and connect with a close friend circle via 'Moments', and people who gather in the sharing circle embedded in reposting, hashtagging, mentioning, and commenting under a post on Weibo, embody networked publics.

This thesis also draws on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the "rhizome" (2004) and recognises that these networked publics, instead of being separate and independent, are interconnected since individuals online are unlikely to stick to just one social platform and

belong to just one social group; social platforms perform as “nodes”, in which they provide a solid ground for various networked public to meet each other; and the nodes spread with no direction, with no beginning and no end. In other words, when social media functions as a network of nodes that allows information to converge on platforms, it forms a structure in which information is not limited to specific groups or social apps but can flow through various networked publics and across platforms. Thus, a many-to-many, or more precisely, networked public-to-networked public communication can be achieved in the virtual world. Interestingly, this relates to a popular expression in Chinese cyberspace today: “break the boundaries” (*chu quan*), which means the ideas and understandings about some things generated in a specific sub-cultural/interest group can spread out of the circle they initially belong to, and be known, modified and accepted by other groups, or even become a widespread phenomenon.

Building on Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas, Lim (2017) reviews his observation about the mobilisation of social movements through social media in Malaysia and suggests that the rhizomatic structure online forms a horizontal alliance with the networked public, allowing parts of the rhizome to interact with one another. By theorising that for civic engagement in activism is based on a rhizomatic assemblage, he demonstrates a horizontal communication structure where hierarchical leadership in a social movement becomes decentralised.

Simultaneously, boyd (2002; 2008; 2010), Marwick and boyd (2011), and Wesch (2008) argue that participants in the networked public are often invisible. In this sense, their demographic context is collapsed, and the boundary between public and private lives blurs, which reinforces the formation and expansion of the networked public.

When people use social media to mediate amongst themselves and construct a networked public, they do so on the basis of shared interests and collective goals. By creating an avatar and performing a persona that represents only a selected part of the self, social media users are able to detach from their identities in the real world and connect more strongly to the political valences of a particular cause (Davis & Jurgenson 2014). The networked structure on social media explains how news and opinions about the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan diffused quickly through the networked public on Weibo and WeChat, becoming a nationwide event.

However, Jurgenson (2012) cautions that “augmented reality is one where the politics, structures and inequalities of the physical world are part of the very essence of the digital domain; a domain built by human beings with histories, standpoints, interests, morals and biases” (p. 85-86). In other words, even if social media today constructs a digital domain where users communicate with a very low cost of connection in easily expanded social networks and a relatively horizontal structure even with weak social ties (McLaughlin & Vitak 2012), the users are still physically living in the actual world where they immerse and grow with various cultural, political, and economic factors. Chinese citizens’ responses to COVID-related news and cooperation during the pandemic were, in fact, still located in daily life in the actual world.

The Chinese users were not only aware of the supervision of the ruling regime but also significantly influenced by the Chinese collectivist culture described by Jackson (2014) and Hofstede’s dimensional model of national culture (Hofstede 1980; 2001; de Mooij & Hofstede 2015), indicating respect for authorities (high power distance). This cultural model that they were subject to was grounded in the Confucian values of “harmony” (*he*)—to create

a “harmonious society” to maintain the stability (*wei wen*) and solidarity at grassroots level (Wang 2023)—and “five pairs of social roles” (*wu lun*) to implement the “harmonious society” and maintain a hierarchy within interpersonal relationships (Bian 2019).

This thesis argues that the networked public emerging in the Chinese context was not structured horizontally. Following the logic above, instead of empowering individuals to participate in online societies and restoring access to the online public sphere for regular social media users, it rather reallocates the dominant power to those who are capable of accumulating social capital and forming/directing mainstream stances.

The habitus of ‘following’ in China’s digital culture

The behaviour of social media users and why they follow particular individuals can be explained by the “habitus” suggested by Bourdieu (1990). In Bourdieu’s seminal theoretical work, ‘habitus’ is the product of “a particular class of objective regularities” that form all the “reasonable” and “commonplace” behaviours, which provide a sense of belonging and comforting homogeneity for the individual. Papacharissi (2014) adds that habitus is grounded in the daily practices that are taken for granted and grounded in lengthy and ongoing processes of socialisation. As a result, habitus unconsciously determines how individuals use a particular social platform and the way they understand the norms of expression and connection in the digital world (Papacharissi 2014). A collectivist culture stresses the importance of elevating the public interest over personal interests, in many Asian countries, but particularly in China (Jackson 2014). It is equally a culture that demonstrates a high tolerance for power imbalances. Qiu (2009) cites Max Weber to argue that Confucianism, an ethic which has shaped Chinese political philosophy and social structure for thousands of years, values social order and hierarchy and emphasises obedience, noting that China “has

been the archetype for culturally sanctioned inequality” (p. 2). Social media users in China are, therefore, more conditioned on the whole to follow messages sanctioned by authorities, people/groups in power, and the dominant public.

When the public lacked verified knowledge of COVID-19 in the early stages, it is reasonable to assume that Chinese people were conditioned to follow authorised content distributed by the central government via We Media. This tendency stands in stark contrast with the response of many citizens in the West who questioned their governments and scientists.

Additionally, according to the theory of Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer 1969), a physical space does not determine how people act. Rather, it is always imbued with an understanding of the social norms that structure the environment. Similarly, Gladwell (2010) and Morozov (2011) argue that social media is not a channel intentionally designed for serious political discussions, but for fun and light conversations; it is nothing more than a convenient means of modern communication and therefore is not suitable for opposing hegemony.

Moreover, Yu et al. (2011) studied trends on Weibo and Twitter and noted that mainstream sharing in China focused, at the time, on jokes, gossip, and playful images and videos. In understanding how Trending Topics on Weibo are constructed, it is important to note that a large number are retweets of media content, suggesting that people use social media to bring them closer to their friends and reinforce social relations (Yu et al. 2011). In terms of the Chinese government’s mobilisation of social media to promote conformity, social media provided a readymade platform for ‘following’ to promote their agenda under the guise of promoting a community of love, hope and support for everyone to stay together and cohesive during the pandemic based on an existing online habitus (Laurier & Philo 2006).

Laurier and Philo (2006) contrast Habermas's 18th century coffee shop with a modern Starbucks in which interactions are both "heavily gestural" and "lightly conversational" (p. 197). This resonates with the experience of new members of a social media platform. To start their journey in social network building, new members have to click buttons such as 'follow', 'subscribe', 'like' and 'add friend'. Yet, at the same time, they implicitly and consistently expose themselves to information that already interests them and makes sense to them, thereby educating the algorithms about their preferences. Choosing to follow or friend others is driven by a motivation to stay part of communities, groups, and networks or perhaps just to be recognised as a 'fan' (Dahlgren & Hill 2020). Although individuals have the power to choose and 'unfollow' at any time, this thesis recognises that 'following', in fact, is an unconscious exchange of power where users hand over their rights to choose what they want to see because of the power of algorithms.

Meanwhile, gestural communication also involves simplifying discussion. In the coffee shop scenario, nodding heads to greet newcomers, handing napkins over for split coffee, or even not looking around and pretending to be busy on a computer, engage people in minimal effort in complicated meaning construction and expression. So does clicking buttons on social media. Papacharissi and Trevey (2018) agree that in the networked public, individuals are permitted to express interest in or allegiance to issues "without having to enter the complex negotiation of personal vs collective politics" (p. 91). This further indicates that 'following' can happen easily without in-depth consideration.

From social capital to soft leadership in networked publics

This study further argues that, given the existence of influential accounts on social media, connections are not 'horizontal' (Bennett & Segerberg 2013) in the sense that everyone has

an equal status. While this study does deny the way social media empowers ordinary people to express themselves online it equally notes that it is not a democratic forum where all voices are equal. As Qiu (2009) argues in his study on working-class internet users in China, the digital divide in the digital era is not about the binary sense of ‘have’ and ‘have-not’—even working-class Chinese with limited income can access the internet. But being on the internet does not automatically mean being seen and being heard.

Social Capital Theory (Coleman 1988; Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998) argues that actual and potential resources (social capital) are obtained through networks of social relationships among individuals. In particular, Warren et al. (2015) suggest that trust is a form of social capital that is derived from the ties of social interaction. Trust can be developed from strong interpersonal networks, such as friends and family members (Gladwell 2010; McAdam & Paulsen 1993), reflecting the bonding social capital within homogeneity and shared identities (Putnam 2000). However, in scenarios where there are weak social ties, if an individual persistently invests time and contributes resources to the network, they can develop a positive reputation, building up the trust among their followers and becoming an opinion leader (Rheingold 2002). This aligns with van Dijck’s (2013) logic of algorithmic mechanisms on social platforms.

Open networks and the collapsed context indeed help those who need such capital to acquire what they need; the ability of context collapse to go beyond network walls is instrumental in obtaining social, informational, and material resources (Ellison et al. 2007; 2011; Rainie & Wellman 2012). Interestingly, the scholars above mainly focus on relational capital and how this capital can be used to brand oneself as authentic. In other words, they indicate that social

connection in the networked public has become essential in evaluating the messages people encounter in virtual communication rather than just the content itself.

Davis and Jurgenson (2014) supplement context collapse with ‘context collusion’ and ‘context collision’ in order to clarify and distinguish the different effects and consequences of context collapse on social relations management and social capital acquisition. In particular, context collusion “focus[es] on network building...is the process whereby social actors intentionally collapse, blur, and flatten contexts, especially using various social media... (to) invite various social contexts to come together” (Davis & Jurgenson 2014, p. 480).

Simultaneously, scholars point out that the weak-tie connection facilitated by social media collusions is key in garnering and maintaining social capital (Ellison et al. 2007; 2011; Hampton, Lee & Her 2011). Thus, this thesis will adopt context collusion to examine the power disparities in interactions in the expanding networked public when we “reunite” online in the pandemic.

Wilson and Dunn’s (2011) observe that a minority of users produced content for the majority’s consumption on Twitter during the Arab Spring. Further, Gerbaudo (2012) highlights the role of “soft leaders”, a form of leadership built on the participatory character of Web 2.0, in a dialogical or interactive form. These leaders write the scripts and set the scene, seeding emotional arguments that diffuse through their networks. Examples include Wael Ghonim in the Arab Spring, and Joshua Wong in the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement (Lin 2017). They both relied heavily on Facebook to disseminate political opinions and mobilise activists to join the protests highlighting their rallies and aligning themselves with a collective goal—reclaiming “democracy”. In particular, Joshua Wong, in the Umbrella Movement, stood up and took to the streets as a young middle school student, got hurt and

arrested at the end. His “innocent” and “devoted” persona not only attracted the attention of his generation but also generated huge pressure on his parents’ generation because battling on the street was supposed to be the job of the adults (*Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower* 2017). Soft leaders, therefore, can develop strong charisma and recruit, unite, and motivate their followers, allowing them to promote their political statements widely and to stimulate further radical actions.

From the perspective of popular culture, the ‘micro-celebrity’ (Marwick 2015) or ‘influencer’ (Duffy & Wissinger 2017) on social media has come to gradually dominate fans’ lifestyles and preferences. Influencers, inform their followers about trends, guide their consumption behaviour while stressing that they are “normal” and obscuring the time and effort they invest in their persona and the existence of the operation team and sponsors, as well as production infrastructure (Cunningham & Craig 2017; Duffy & Wissinger 2017). Simultaneously, social media influencers “reveal what appears to be personal information to create a sense of intimacy between participant and follower, publicly acknowledge fans, and use language and cultural references to create affiliations with followers” (Marwick & boyd 2011, p. 139). These “real-time”, “transparent”, “dialogic” and “interactive” elements, influencers demonstrate their authenticity, as Cunningham and Craig (2017) argue the distinctiveness of the influencers is their claim to authenticity. Influencers intentionally blur the boundary between the authentic self and the commodified self (Banet-Weiser 2012), aiming to create a sense of peer-to-peer equality. Yet, by telling subscribers what to think and do, they are actually manipulating followers for their own economic interests.

The number of followers an influencer has is a key indicator of authenticity online (van Dijck 2013). Unlike in the offline world, where people are “well-connected”, online social activities

are translated into algorithmic concepts due to the abnormally large number of contacts.

“Friends” and “followers” can be interpreted the popularity principle which means that the more contacts a person has on social media, the more valuable, popular and authoritative they become, and hence the more other people want to connect with them (van Dijck 2013).

We Media as everyday opinion leaders

The wealth and fame of influencers incentivise regular social media users to mimic them (Duffy & Wissinger 2017). Even though not everyone can be an influencer, the broader social media sphere increasingly aims to copy their success. Similar to influencers, We Media refers to individuals’ active use of social media for content production, relying on the affordances of digital platforms with the aim of influencing those who network with them (Li & Du 2011).

In Bowman and Willis’ definition of ‘we media’ (2003), We Media also notably played a key role in contemporary social movements by establishing public pages and disseminating self-edited ‘affective content’ (Papacharissi 2014) to mobilise potential activists on Facebook (Lee & Ting 2015). This framework can be drawn on to understand how social media collectivity operated during the pandemic in China. Reviewing the rise of influencers (Duffy & Wissinger 2017; Marwick 2015; Marwick & boyd 2011; Senft 2013), studies show influencers also start their career by operating their social media accounts as a We Media. This further elucidates the agency and affordances of ordinary users’ potential on WeChat and Weibo to mobilise others to “stay cohesive”. This thesis, therefore, recognises that ordinary users on WeChat and Weibo can become a We Media dependent on the following characteristics 1) they have autonomous control over their connection and visibility within social networks; 2) they are able to compose content as a ‘prosumer’ with a certain level of internet literacy; 3) their social media content can be shared in a specific range; 4) they are able to accumulate social

capital through their social networks. While on Weibo, We Media could actively share their experiences in Trending Topics and Super Topics to paint a full picture of life during the pandemic for society; on WeChat, the same information could resonate even more strongly with friends who shared similar circumstances or opinions, given the established sense of intimacy.

How ordinary users accumulate social capital is bound up with the different interaction affordances of Weibo and WeChat. Weibo, as a substitute for X in China, allows users to connect with strangers, explore trending online issues and ideas, and share their opinions through Trending Topics and posts by “big Vs”. The interactions between these Weibo users are mainly based on common interests and are open to algorithmic recommendations based on preference settings, recent search history, or topical issues, such as COVID-related news during the pandemic. As discussed, We Media credibility here is related to the number of followers, the number of ‘likes’, reposts, the reputation of the source of information, and the little ‘V’ icon next to their account name⁸. This is also known as Putnam’s bridging social capital (2000), which refers to the capacity to access external information.

WeChat provides a relatively private space for connection due to limited options to add “friends” (*hao you*) to the contact list. Thus, most of the contacts are likely to be someone a user already knows in their real life. The stronger bonds among WeChat friends enhance

⁸ The “V” icon next to the account name is for a regular user, which means the account has been verified by Weibo and is owned by a real person. This is different from the “big V” mentioned above. The “big V” icons have different colours based on their levels.

credibility through bonding social capital (Putnam 2000). WeChat group chats and “Moments” (*peng you quan*) have become an augmented place to mediate real-life situations and to remediate information from other platforms, where the authenticity of the information is further boosted by interpersonal relationships. Therefore, it is safe to argue that the motivation for friends to “stay cohesive” is more relational on WeChat.

When I related the conversation between my mother and me in the Introduction chapter, I was acknowledging that misinformation can also be enhanced by We Media. When people follow and trust connected friends as We Media, they can become affected by emotion and sharing care and hence their behaviours are open to manipulation and exploitation. False fundraising for a “family that suffers from serious illness” became a widespread fraud on WeChat.

We Media and the pandemic expressions

The concept of ‘context collision’ helps explain why minority perspectives were increasingly absent from social networks during the pandemic. According to Davis and Jurgenson (2014), context collision is a consequence of context collapse in which multiple social contexts unintentionally collide, producing tension, misinterpretation, and social risk. Unlike strategic ‘context collusion’ as mentioned, context collision involuntarily emerges when the public and private spheres intersect. Under such conditions, users often respond through silence, self-censorship, or extreme caution in order to avoid conflict, misunderstanding, or punishment. In the context of the pandemic, this risk was further amplified by the moral and political pressure embedded in the national call to “stay cohesive”, which transformed disagreement into a potential threat to collective unity.

Davis and Jurgenson (2014) further note that context collision is closely associated with authority–subordinate relations, a dynamic that also underpins the power relations surrounding We Media in Chinese networked publics. Individuals operate as We Media not only by producing content but also by being cautious about not disrupting existing relationships. Brandtzaeg, Lüders, and Skjetne (2010) note that these collapsed contexts intensify surveillance and social control, encouraging conformity in order to avoid negative sanctions from peers, family members, and professional contacts. Thus, posting, as a form of self-exhibition and a means of acquiring visibility within social networks, also entails self-surveillance for senders (Trottier 2016). Within the Chinese pandemic context, this mechanism aligned seamlessly with the affective and moral logic of “stay cohesive”: to be part of the collective meant not only sharing content, but sharing the right content, in the right emotional tone, and in support of the right political stance. As a result, being “together” online increasingly pointed toward the convergence of expression rather than the diversity of views. This convergence differs fundamentally from Jenkins’ (2006a) notion of technological convergence and instead reflects a social convergence of acceptable opinion.

This logic closely echoes contemporary Chinese political discourse on “harmony” (*he xie*)—a concept derived from the Core Socialist Values promoted by President Xi Jinping in 2012—that emphasises social stability. In everyday digital culture, to be “harmonised” has become a euphemism for being censored due to political, moral, or ideological dissonance. Notably, this regulatory pressure is no longer exercised solely by the state; it is now increasingly enforced through peer reporting (*ju bao*) within social networks (Fang 2024). As a result, peer supervision has emerged as a significant risk for We Media expression. In this way, the imperative to “stay cohesive” is operationalised not only through platform regulation but also through bottom-up practices of exclusion, where users actively participate in policing the

emotional and ideological boundaries of the collective. While users may attempt to manage these risks through privacy settings, selective blocking, or posting only within specific groups (Vitak 2012), or by sharing only content they assume will be acceptable to all audiences (Davis & Jurgenson 2014), these strategies ultimately lead to the same outcome: the systematic silencing and withdrawal of minority voices from networked public discourse under the moral banner of cohesion.

Part 3: Social media content, affect and participation

Affective public and emotional convergence in China

‘Affective publics’ is a concept developed by Zizi Papacharissi (2014) to explain how social movements were mobilised through social networks. She argues that under conditions of pressure and grievance, netizens’ emotions are easily ignited and temporarily united through political expression. Rather than focusing on ideology itself, her work foregrounds the affective content circulating within networked publics. Papacharissi defines ‘affect’ as a field of discordant feelings embedded in mediated expression, capable of driving, neutralising, or entrapping publics through rhetorical circulation.

Drawing on protesters’ use of Twitter during the Arab Spring, Papacharissi (2014) demonstrates how public storytelling enables emotions to circulate through digitally networked environments and recruit audiences who identify with shared grievances. The rapid diffusion of negative emotions activates latent ties within the networked public and facilitates the formation of communities of resistance through hashtags, while also enabling disengagement from other groups. Supported by the affordances of social media (boyd 2010), such affective publics are able to expand across regions and persist over time in online spaces.

Zizi Papacharissi (2014) defines affective publics as publics that “actualize by feeling their way into politics through media”, noting that such publics can either propel an issue forward or become trapped in sustained loops of emotional engagement. This concept does not deny the presence of rational discourse in civic participation; rather, it suggests that when diverse sociocultural, economic, and political tensions converge in the digital public sphere,

individuals are more likely to locate their political positions through sentiment than through deliberation (Papacharissi 2014).

By contrast, Jürgen Habermas conceptualises the public sphere as ideally grounded in rational-critical debate. Papacharissi (2014) revisits this concern in a media-saturated environment, arguing that when public communication is mediated and sustained by platform content, emotional expression increasingly displaces rational deliberation. Habermas' concerns are arguably even more relevant to the operation of social media today in China, as social platforms thrive and public opinion becomes highly susceptible to affective mobilisation through content produced and circulated by We Media.

To analyse Chinese citizens' solidarity in the face of the pandemic, this thesis adopts Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) concept of connective action and contextualises it through affective publics in China. While grievances more readily resonate among individuals with shared life experiences, triggering collective outrage, Papacharissi (2014) further argues that "media typically invite audiences to consume content via affective relationships developed with particular media genres and media personas." This suggests that users who share similar identities and interests on social media are more easily mobilised by specific rhetorical styles as a group. At the same time, affect operates as an experience of intensity that precedes conscious reasoning, positioning audiences under the continuous influence of emotion (Massumi 2002; Shouse 2005), and functions as a mode of sense-making in relation to lived circumstances (Seigworth & Gregg 2010). Through this process, social media users come to 'feel' the outside world via mediated content and respond emotionally to perceived conditions.

Interestingly, compared with the chaos in Western countries reported by mainstream media in China, I observed that public responses to lockdowns on Chinese social media were marked by a relatively calm, positive sentiment in 2020. Beyond direct surveillance, this thesis finds that the discourse of “positive energy” (Chen 2022; Li 2013) played a central role in steering collective sentiment. This discourse encouraged users to prioritise uplifting content to prevent fatigue and negative emotions from accumulating. It also aligned closely with the government’s call to “stay cohesive” during the pandemic and resonated with long-standing collectivist cultural values (Jackson 2014).

As a result, narratives highlighting collective contribution and moral role models became highly visible on social media. These included citizens spontaneously organising domestic and overseas donations, medical workers sacrificing time and personal safety to save lives, and retired members of the Communist Party of China (CPC) volunteering to serve neighbourhoods during staff shortages. Together, these stories reinforced a positive affective atmosphere and foregrounded a sense of communal responsibility during the lockdown.

Drawing on Papacharissi’s (2014) notion of the affective public, “positive energy”, in China transformed into a harmonising affect that reinforced emotional bonds within the networked public and projected a shared imagination of a hopeful future grounded in connection and engagement. Rather than foregrounding the shortcomings of quarantine policies, users increasingly acknowledged the government’s efforts to contain the unknown virus and recognised their own compliance with lockdown measures as a form of civic contribution.

At the same time, sharp contrasts with Western pandemic responses further strengthened public confidence in both the government and the nation. Media circulation of examples such

as President Trump's widely reported remark about disinfectant as a possible COVID-19 treatment (BBC 2020b), as well as reports of people in the United Kingdom setting fire to 5G towers in a misguided attempt to stop virus transmission (Perrigo 2020), were mobilised as negative examples. Through these comparisons, Chinese users further consolidated their faith in China's pandemic governance and intensified patriotic loyalty.

However, this affective alignment also generated irrational patriotism fostering exclusionary nationalism, the suppression of dissenting voices, and ultimately polarised public opinion through the reinforcement of binary oppositions within the public sphere. When alternative perspectives are overwhelmed by dominant emotional narratives, the space for critical debate and pluralism becomes increasingly constrained.

The marginalisation of dissent can also be linked to enduring hierarchical values associated with Confucianism (Bian 2019; Weber 1968), which historically privileged long-term over short-term interests, male over female, urban over rural, humans over animals, and the collective over the individual. These ideological hierarchies persist within affective publics, allowing mainstream voices aligned with such values to gain amplified power through social media. Consequently, minority perspectives are further compressed and marginalised. This dynamic challenges arguments that online media inherently enhance visibility for socially marginalised groups (Berry et al. 2010; Couldry 2012; Mendes et al. 2018).

We Media, liminal storytelling and affective sense-making

Responding to the horizontal structure of the networked public (boyd 2010), Papacharissi (2014) proposes 'liminality' as a way to understand the structure of affective publics.

Liminality offers a perspective on relationships formed in digital networks where face-to-face interaction is disrupted and social connections remain undefined. Drawing on Turner's (1967)

formulation, Papacharissi (2014) argues that, because news is no longer exclusively determined by either authorities or individuals, the networked public occupies a liminal space that generates “novel configurations of ideas and relations” (p. 97). In this transitional state, social norms are temporarily suspended and actors are positioned as equal participants (Ibarra & Obodaru 2016; Papacharissi 2014).

At the same time, ‘sharing’ has become central to information circulation in digital networks (Bennett & Segerberg 2013; Castells 2012), disrupting traditional news production processes. This liminal condition creates a temporary void where the rules and standards of the traditional media no longer apply, enabling ‘prosumers’ to experiment with new forms of engagement and redefine creative modes of interaction on social media. Within this context, the rise of We Media can be understood as a product of both structural uncertainty and expanded participatory possibilities.

Building on the liminal restructuring of digital production—marked by the disempowerment of organisational producers and the empowerment of We Media—this thesis argues that the supposedly horizontal structure of social media is not fully realised in practice. As We Media increasingly assume the role of opinion leaders within friendship networks, they reintroduce hierarchical relations by shaping what others should attend to and by directing collective sentiment in the public sphere. As a result, the amplification of mainstream ideas is the likely outcome of affective publics, rather than their disruption.

Papacharissi (2014) further notes that liminality also characterises the transformation of news events into stories. In this process, We Media, as prosumers, retain core factual elements while overlaying personal interpretations that enable them to make sense of events and situate

themselves emotionally within the narrative. This affective reproduction encourages the synthesis of fragmented information and further consolidates We Media's position as a convenient, resource-rich intermediary that informs networked public knowledge and guides collective action.

This logic resembles the growing reliance on chatbots such as ChatGPT, or DeepSeek and Doubao⁹ in China, which use artificial intelligence (AI) to automatically summarise and optimise answers by searching online information. Similarly, when users post requests, such as “almighty Weibo”, “almighty Moments”, or post messages such as “waiting online, urgent” (*wan neng de Weibo/peng you quan; zai xian deng, ting ji de*), they mobilise their social networks to ask for ready-to-use solutions. These requests usually receive quick responses, as mutual assistance is a taken-for-granted social norm within friendship circles.

However, this “lazy” mode of information acquisition creates opportunities for We Media to frame and circulate affective content. Drawing on observations from older people's WeChat group chats, many of the answers shared within these networks originate from aggregated online sources rather than from verified expertise. As a result, panic-infused misinformation can be rapidly diffused through social networks during crises such as the COVID pandemic, as repeated circulation by trusted contacts amplifies its credibility.

At the same time, online searching has become the most direct and efficient way to access information, as phrases like “Google it”, or in China, “Baidu it” (*bai du yi xia*), and more

⁹ DeepSeek and Doubao are AI tools developed in China as substitutes for ChatGPT.

recently, “check it on RedNote”, have become everyday habits. With information converging online (Jenkins 2006a) and accessible through a few taps on a mobile phone, the process of acquiring knowledge is increasingly simplified and accelerated. This raises the question of whether such ease of access also reduces the cognitive effort required for critical thinking (Carr 2020).

This shift further problematises the issue of trust in online information. Hongisto and colleagues (2017) question the relationship between trust and truth in contemporary media environments. In the post-truth era, “bits of information are selected and circulated not for their truth-value but for their affective impact” (p. 61). Trust, therefore, following van Dijck’s argument (2013), becomes progressively detached from verification and instead attaches to visibility, repetition, and emotional intensity.

This concern is closely connected to the way social media performs authenticity through remediation (Byam 2010; Marwick 2013). As theorised by Bolter and Grusin (2000), digital media achieve a sense of immediacy by remediating earlier media forms such as images, symbols (including emojis), audio, video, and written text. Through these layered representations, platforms simulate “realness” and emotional presence. When such affordances equip We Media to narrate affective stories—especially stories of crisis, suffering, fear, or hope—users are drawn not only into the content but into the emotional atmosphere surrounding it. In affect-driven information environments, emotional coherence may override factual coherence; stories that feel moving, morally compelling, or urgent may be trusted more readily than those that are carefully verified. As a result, affective authenticity can come to substitute for epistemic reliability.

In this sense, social media does not merely transmit information but reconfigure the criteria by which truth is evaluated. Trust is no longer anchored primarily in institutional authority or empirical verification, but increasingly in affective alignment, relational proximity, and platform-driven visibility. This transformation is fundamental to understanding how We Media gain credibility through authenticity and influence within networked publics—especially during moments of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, when emotional vulnerability intensifies the demand for meaning, reassurance, and actionable knowledge.

Political expression in a playful, attention-driven culture

Beyond the issues of trust and truth embedded in online interaction, the concept of ‘affect’ redirects attention to the dynamics of social media content itself. Contrary to the optimistic claim that social media heralds “freedom for everyone” as Shirky claims (2008), the logics of context collapse demonstrate that latent rules govern what and how users share in digital networks (Davis & Jurgenson 2014). Taylor and Nichter’s (2022) study of college students’ social lives further foregrounds the role of the attention economy in shaping social media practices. They argue that, in an information-rich environment where attention is scarce, and users’ attention spans are short, content selection, post timing, and persona management become central strategies for We Media seeking audience engagement. As their participants reported “social media as an extension of self and likes represented external validation” (Taylor & Nichter 2022, p. 38), visibility, measured through metrics such as likes, significantly shaped students’ sense of identity and social connection, and in turn subtly reformed their sharing behaviours.

Additionally, playful and entertaining content is generally more acceptable to the public (Jenkins 2006a; Yu et al. 2011). Morozov (2011) similarly notes that social media is not

primarily a space for serious political deliberation. This perspective resonates with the distinctive sharing practices of Chinese citizens during the pandemic. On Weibo and WeChat, memes and humorous videos were widely circulated as a way to cheer up friends during an emotionally difficult period, reinforcing playfulness as a dominant affective mode of interaction. This understanding can be further supported by the modern memes and remix cultures in the digital world (Navas 2012; Shifman 2014). In which, they allow digital artefacts, such as images, sound, videos and text, to be replicated, combined, and adjusted easily based on the affordances of platforms; they invite a wide range of online participants to join the cooperative process of reproducing, transforming and sharing, by which new meanings can be developed throughout this process of evolution of artefacts; they also signal a sense of belonging to a social group via the cultural elements imbedded in the new artefacts and encourage further connection within networks.

At the same time, playfulness functioned as a strategy for political expression under censorship. To avoid content removal and to reach wider audiences, political messages were frequently masked with humour and creative encoding. For example, to recirculate blocked content criticising the government's treatment of the COVID outbreak by Dr Ai Fen¹⁰, users transformed messages into multiple formats and encrypted them across languages and symbol

¹⁰ Dr Ai Fen was a colleague of Dr Li Wenliang. She shared the report of the unknown SARS virus with Dr Li in the first place. Later, based on the report, Dr Li warned his friends in the WeChat group chat. The message then went viral and prompted the local police to file charges of “spreading rumours” against Dr Li. Dr Li was recognised as the ‘whistle-blower’ of the outbreak of COVID-19 in China. Dr Ai was recognised as the person who “issued the whistle” in a later interview.

systems—from English and emojis to ancient Chinese and Morse code. This process turned message circulation into a form of hide-and-seek with the authorities. Through such playful engagement with content, social media enabled large-scale collaborative creation, allowing political expression to travel more widely. Jenkins (2006a) documents similar practices in the circulation of ‘photoshopped images’ during the 2004 US presidential election, showing how popular culture embeds political meaning into everyday communication and shapes how citizens interpret and act upon political discourse. He argues that citizens start “to apply what they learned as consumers of popular culture toward more overt forms of political activism. Popular culture influenced the way that the campaigns courted their voters—but more importantly, it shaped how the public processed and acted upon political discourse” (Jenkins 2006a, p. 219).

However, while playful content attracts engagement, it also risks shifting attention from the political message to the act of playing itself. At the same time, new eye-catching topics can quickly divert users’ focus. As a result, political debate on social media rarely develops in-depth discussion or leaves a lasting impression, as audiences constantly jump between fragmented content with limited time for reflection. The acceleration of attention thus weakens sustained political deliberation. When combined with van Dijck’s (2013) critique of the quantitative logic of likes, the use of playful elements in the competition for attention further encourages the simplification of complex political arguments. Audiences are pushed to make rapid, emotionally driven judgments through quick clicks, rather than through careful evaluation. As Papacharissi and Trevey (2018, p. 91) note, individuals are enabled to express affinity or allegiance to issues “without having to enter the complex negotiation of personal vs. collective politics”. Under conditions of information overload and accelerated skimming,

polarised opinion becomes more likely, as choosing a side offers a fast resolution to online debate.

Discipline and post—a Foucauldian perspective

Jenkins (2009) argue that while new media lower the cost of expression and civic participation, enable individual content creation, and disrupt top-down mass media structures, participatory culture also encourages ordinary users to believe that their contributions matter and that they are socially connected to others. This assumption presumes that everyone can participate through sharing, yet, again, as Fuchs (2017) notes not all content is valued equally. Less trending content receives less attention and generates a weaker sense of participation (Fuchs 2017). To sustain connectivity within their networks, social media users are thus urged to stay visible to friends (Bucher 2012), to post more influencer-like, and to orient their content toward audience interests (Marwick & boyd 2010).

Jenkins (2006a), as mentioned, argues that popular culture influences and helps shape the public's response to political discourse (in this case, the national call for action, "Stay cohesive, we can defeat the pandemic"). Similarly, We Media in China created an atmosphere that stressed collectivism through Weibo participation in COVID-related discussions. They developed a strong feeling of antipathy among the social media users towards any individual or institution that doubted, denied or undermined efforts directed at fighting the virus. By excluding dissident voices, We Media redefined who 'we' are.

This idea of othering aligns with Foucault's arguments on discourse and subjectivity (1979) that discourse not only emerges within society but also, in turn, governs society and individuals through language and symbols. "Discourse in these terms is not merely

describing, nor is it prescribing meaning; rather, it constructs subjectivities. Discourses are the means by which individuals come to know themselves, achieving a sense of continuity, stability and purpose.” (Machin 2018, p. 520). Here, ‘we’ was an abstract, semiotic and descriptive role that pointed to the identity as Chinese citizens, community members, faithful friends and family members who were responsive to the crisis and recognised the necessity of sacrifice during the pandemic embodied in the discourse of “stay cohesive”.

In other words, social media discourse guided what ‘we’, as legitimate Chinese citizens, needed to do to return to normal life. We Media worked collaboratively on Weibo, with a shared identity, to organise donations across the country and around the world, to expose the corruption of the hospitals in Wuhan and Red Cross China (Guo et al. 2020; Zi 2020), and to hunt down the escaping people from the quarantine areas, etc. As argued in my previous MRes study (Hu 2018), a sense of community was foregrounded, and collective identity was solidified through online connective actions.

In addition, the logic of collective intelligence (Jenkins 2006a) became dysfunctional in this context. As COVID-19 emerged as a new virus across all research fields, reliable information on transmission, symptoms, mortality, treatment, and protection was initially unavailable. This uncertainty allowed rumours and misinformation to accumulate and dominate social media, rather than enabling the effective pooling of knowledge and expertise. At the same time, We Media selectively captured and circulated tragic and chaotic moments to intensify public focus on local crises through networked platforms. These emotionally charged narratives were further amplified by algorithms (van Dijck 2013), escalating public perceptions of threat.

As panic, confusion, and depression spread across social networks, these emotions reinforced the threat of COVID-19 and intensified the desire for reliable, authentic information. While We Media, such as close friends and family on WeChat powered by bonding social capital (Putnam 2000), often served as trusted reference points for what one should do (Marwick & boyd 2010)—as in the case of my mother, who tended to trust information shared by her friends, ironically, from unknown “experts”—this environment also created an opportunity for the government to educate and guide public behaviour. Through this process, new social norms related to personal hygiene and social interaction were introduced and normalised within society through personal relationships.

The increasing dependence on authorities during the pandemic can also be attributed to the state’s dominance over key institutions and its capacity to control knowledge about COVID-19 by positioning specialists as authoritative spokespersons. The long-standing habit of relying on authority can also be understood through the cultivation of biocitizenship centred on “life-nurturing” (*yang sheng*) in China (Sun 2015). The *yang sheng* television programs focus attention on the authorities (Sun 2015). Through the self-healthcare education and related audience practices, individuals are encouraged to adopt healthy lifestyles in ways suggested by the state. Indirectly, audiences’ practice ease pressure on the public medical system, while simultaneously reinforcing personal responsibility for health. In this process, audiences are also implicitly trained to value and defer to expert knowledge.

A prominent example is the mobilisation of Dr Zhong Nanshan—widely recognised for leading efforts to contain SARS in 2002—as an authoritative figure guiding COVID-19 responses in Wuhan. His strategies and findings were rapidly circulated through mass and social media and adopted by the public as new hygienic standards. Once expert authority was

taken up and reframed by We Media within everyday social relations, it generated a dominant pandemic discourse and shaped the context of peer-to-peer sharing (Blumer 1969; Marwick & boyd 2010). Through this mediated process, the government was able to indirectly reshape public opinion and guide behaviour, which was reinforced by peer surveillance.

Peer surveillance is also in line with Foucault's account of how surveillance becomes internalised in *Discipline and Punish* (1979) where prisoners are "isolated and are the clear objects for anonymous gaze signified by the invisible inhabitant(s) of the central tower", and the objective of this system is to internalise the authoritative gaze (Feder 2014, p. 58).

Although people were isolated at home under the quarantine policy, they were interconnected via social media and visible to their networks when they posted online. As social norms evolved during the pandemic, they informed individuals about what they should share online (Trottier 2016).

This sense of supervision and the awareness of being under surveillance is even more obvious on an open sharing platform, in this case, Weibo, as all content can be searched with default settings (Marwick & boyd 2010). These considerations generate moral pressure that alerts both platform operators and, potentially, the police, who ultimately impose judgment and restriction on "inappropriate" speech (Feder 2014).

It is also notable that the Chinese government did not lift its quarantine controls until December 2022, and that it did not resile from strict policies as the pandemic progressed. Rather, the government consistently deployed propaganda to stabilise domestic sentiment (Xu & Gong 2024) and recruited foreign experts' opinions to strengthen its credibility in response to the pandemic (Fang 2022). In early 2022, I met some young Chinese international students

who had just come to Sydney and still believed that they needed to be fully equipped to prevent infection because they still considered COVID-19 as a fatal illness, while the local government no longer regarded COVID-19 as a public health emergency. They appeared to believe that living in other countries was unsafe due to differences in COVID-19 control policies. Their views were undoubtedly influenced by the Chinese government's hostility to the pandemic policies in other countries, including the concept of 'herd immunity' (Armitage & Hawke 2020). Additionally, it is reasonable to infer that fear and anxiety about COVID-19 were amplified by the circulation of social media content depicting COVID-19-related consequences, such as post-cure sequelae, and by the repetition of chaotic scenes from foreign countries portrayed by official media (Xu & Gong 2024).

By emphasising the danger of COVID-19 and prioritising public safety over any radical call to "free" people in the name of protection, the government subtly normalised pandemic disruption in Foucauldian terms (1979). This normalisation operated through the routinisation of extensive control measures under the framework of "ongoing pandemic prevention and control" (*chang tai hua yi qing fang kong*), including quarantine for suspected cases, QR code check-ins, negative test verification at public venues, and temperature monitoring (Du & Zhou 2022). It also aligned with the repeatedly enforced 'zero-COVID' policy through mass COVID testing and lockdowns. Over time, this disruptive lifestyle became stabilised and institutionalised through the discourse of "stay cohesive".

As citizens gradually adapted to these changes and came to accept cooperation as the only viable pathway to ending the pandemic, this response stood in sharp contrast to Western strategies as portrayed in media narratives. Through such comparison, confidence in China's COVID-control standards was further strengthened. In Foucauldian terms, this reflects a

process in which “by comparing individuals against one another, measuring their differences and then asserting the truth of the standard it ‘discovers’ as the rule” (Foucault 1979, cited in Feder 2014, p.63).

Summary

This chapter contextualised Western scholarship in the Chinese context, where posts on Weibo and WeChat were disrupted by political governance enhanced by censorship and algorithms. Propaganda, social media data and visibility influenced what was seen and discussed in the digital space during the pandemic. Although Weibo and WeChat facilitated connections within social networks, user interactions also mediated cultural values and biases from the physical world. As Confucian philosophy values hierarchy, compliance, and collectivism, the habitus of ‘following’ on social media enabled individuals to operate as We Media, shaping others’ perceptions within this framework by leveraging social capital and embodying mainstream opinions. At the affective level, emotions embedded in everyday communication worked alongside We Media influence to displace truth with trust. The desire for connection during lockdowns further encouraged affective publics to adopt dominant views in order to build collective identity, sustain collective effort, and exclude dissent. Through the internalisation of these discourses, We Media enacted peer supervision through personal relationships in response to the state’s call for “stay cohesive”.

Chapter Three: Methodology

A robust methodology always needs to be closely grounded in the key research questions.

This thesis adopts the five parameters of media engagement developed by Dahlgren and Hill (2023) as the primary framework to guide this study. Focusing on *contexts, motivations, modalities, intensities, and consequences*, this chapter explains how the framework is applied to examine Chinese citizens' engagements on Weibo and WeChat during the pandemic, and how it supports an in-depth understanding of ordinary users' experiences as We Media in everyday pandemic life through digital ethnography, autoethnography and interviews.

Five parameters of media engagement

Dahlgren and Hill (2020), firstly, argue that 'engagement' encompasses something more than just focus, user interaction, brand loyalty or any other terms commonly used in the media industries to analyse engagement; rather, media engagement is a powerful subjective experience—not only stimulated by consumption practices and regulated by economic and political factors but also energised by internal forces—driven by affect and identity that eventually propel users to act. In other words, media engagement is a process in which individuals establish relationships with media based on their habits, engage with preferred content and forms, and respond correspondingly according to their own understandings of social, cultural, political and economic backgrounds in both individual and collective levels.

This definition foregrounds the agency of individual users and positions them at the heart of media interaction, which aligns closely with the approach of this thesis. By emphasising that 'we' are at the core of media experiences, it highlights how perceptions, sharing practices,

emotions, subjectivity, and actions emerge through everyday media use and social connection. The five parameters extend this perspective by examining engagement from multiple dimensions, including where users are, how and why they use media, who they connect with, and with what consequences. By adapting this framework, this study systematically conceptualises the role of ordinary users as We Media and examines their lived experiences within social networks during the pandemic. In recognising individual differences, the framework provides a theoretical foundation for analysing how personal perceptions, cognition, and behaviours are formed and transformed, and how these processes collectively shape connective actions in digitally mediated pandemic life.

As outlined by Dahlgren and Hill (2020; 2023), these parameters encompass *media contexts*, *motivations*, *modalities*, *intensities*, and *consequences*. Each of them targets a definitive attribute of media engagement and yet equally focuses on how they interact (Dahlgren & Hill 2023). To explain:

1) *Media contexts*, according to Dahlgren and Hill (2020), includes “features at both the sites of production and reception in local, national and transnational settings” and “society-wide hegemonic discourses, prevailing political climates, or economic constrictions” (p.13-14). In practice, they could be cultural, political, economic, technical, institutional, and (socio-) psychological backgrounds in which the given media is located.

In this thesis, *contexts* can relate to the fact that, as discussed, China has a huge internet user group supported by well-constructed communication infrastructure with high-speed internet connection and prevalent use of smart devices (Wang 2023). This paves a solid foundation for social media and relevant phenomena, such as e-commerce, internet slang and influencers, to

flourish (Cunningham & Craig 2019; Su 2024). Weibo and WeChat are two well-known social platforms in China. However, the infrastructure on which they are based is owned by the state. Internet services are operated by only a few large internet companies, such as, Tencent and Sina, and subsidised by the central government, which allows the government to monitor and regulate the digital world.

Political tensions between China and the United States intensified following President Trump's 2020 claim that China was the origin of COVID-19 (Stolberg et al. 2023), contributing to a broader atmosphere of hostility towards the United States in China (Bicker 2024; Xinhua News 2021a). Alongside these geopolitical dynamics, Confucian values—deeply embedded in Chinese culture—continued to shape public attitudes, as discussed. Together, political and cultural factors structured online social norms and redirected citizens' perceptions and behaviours during the pandemic.

The parameter of 'contexts' refers to the time and place in which a given media engagement occurs (Dahlgren & Hill 2023). This study argues that the COVID-19 pandemic constituted a unique context marked by widespread anxiety, stress, depression, and confusion. As a public health emergency, the pandemic affected the population collectively and stimulated participation in virus containment as a form of civic engagement. At the same time, quarantine policies enforcing physical distancing led to prolonged periods of home isolation and disruption to daily routines. This isolation and uncertainty, in turn, intensified people's emotional and practical attachment to social media during this period.

2) *Motivations* relate to the motivations for using a given media platform and the rationale of the intent (Dahlgren & Hill 2020). The motivation can be unconscious or embedded in a

long-standing habit. And there are also clear rational reasons people use social media. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, people used social media to check in with friends; they were also keen to seek relevant information online due to limited knowledge of the virus and to follow official accounts for updates on the pandemic and the latest policies.

Dahlgren (2013) points out that feeling connected emotionally or intellectually to a post is also a strong motivation. Dahlgren and Hill (2020) recognise that, in particular, posts that trigger strong and pleasurable emotions are motivating. However, this parameter does not account for the influence of negative emotions. This study argues that if social activism is a special *context* for media engagement, as the scholars state, then it is safe to assume that both positive and negative affects can mobilise media users to engage with social media by posting and reposting to influence friends to join and act collectively (Bennett & Segerberg 2013).

Dahlgren and Hill (2020; 2023) also stress that wanting to belong to a social group is a natural part of motivation. Being a member of a group, community, or network can lead to media engagement because of the need to feel a sense of belonging. This type of social community is related to the networked public (boyd 2010). In this thesis, I explore the way members of particular groups are connected by sharing common interests and goals on social media, for example, neighbourhood group chats on WeChat. Residents living in the same area used group chats to support one another and conduct mutual supervision to regulate members' conduct in accordance with the principle of "staying cohesive".

The sense of community highlighted by Dahlgren and Hill (2020; 2023) in the sense of membership strongly resonates with the caring, mutual support, and collectivism embedded in Chinese cultural values. This motivation was reflected in users' ongoing communication on

social media to ensure the safety and well-being of family and friends during the pandemic, as loyal members and peers. Acts such as ordering medical supplies or supplements from overseas and sending them to Wuhan were often motivated by kindness and concern, and by a sense of moral obligation as citizens. Collective donation campaigns on Weibo became a significant expression of communal care and a means of cultivating a shared sense of social belonging.

3) *Modalities* is a parameter that points to the ways that users engage with media. Dahlgren and Hill (2023) note that modality is “the communicative character of that on which the engagement builds” (p. 30). In the same vein, Dahlgren and Hill (2023) also indicate that media engagement is intertwined with affective and cognitive modes. They recognise that numerous modalities coexist in media engagement. Yet they also argue that categorising them as affective or cognitive engagement is the most efficient way to begin the discussion. This thesis will also adopt this methodological framework to support my arguments and methods.

Dahlgren and Hill (2023) argue that media engagement can be fundamentally emotional. Affective participation centres on subjective and moral issues, personae, and characters, and is stimulated by the affect embedded in narratives, live events, or visual content that evokes emotional responses—an understanding aligned with Papacharissi’s (2014) discussion of affective publics. In this sense, moods and lived feelings shape the form and intensity of affective engagement. During quarantine, citizens’ affective engagement with both their circumstances and social networks occurred largely through social media, where experiences were mediated through posts and chats using images, text, videos, audio, emojis, memes, voiceovers, and narrative structures. While such remediation makes content appear more immediate and relatable (Bolter & Grusin 2000), it also creates greater scope for senders to

frame opinions and express emotion. Overall, affective engagement is tightly intertwined with storytelling, as it mobilises audiences' emotions through the construction of characters and situations. This dimension also justifies the use of framing analysis in this study to examine the rhetoric of pandemic-related posts.

On the other hand, cognitive engagement requires more critical thinking and knowledge that require citizens to question, understand and participate in complicated claims, arguments and social issues (Dahlgren & Hill 2023). To illustrate, Dahlgren and Hill (2023) stress that “a cognitive modality of engagement can be crafted by producers to invite citizens and audiences to think through the media about a variety of social, political and moral issues, or to understand more about a particular problem, reflect on the implications of the problem and to potentially do something about it” (p.31). However, this thesis also cautions that cognitive engagement may lead to unequal or misinformed participation in understanding complex issues. Key questions thus arise: do citizens share comparable levels of knowledge and education to interpret and respond to problems collectively, are they equipped to think critically, and can social media engagement address cognitive gaps? As discussed earlier in relation to the digital public sphere, although overall educational attainment in China has risen, significant gaps remain between rural and urban areas, as well as between younger and older generations. Those who lack understanding of public debates or are disconnected from them are consequently more likely to find their voices absent from public discourse.

At the same time, social media facilitates the rapid spread of misinformation within and across networks. Smaller and marginalised groups may form closed communities that circulate shared beliefs as alternative sources of knowledge (Jurgenson 2012). This dynamic can lead to the dissemination of myths, particularly among older users with lower levels of

formal education, thereby disrupting cognitive engagement. For example, during lockdown in China, I observed posts from dubious sources claiming that traditional Chinese medicines could prevent COVID-19 infection. Despite the lack of scientific evidence, these claims triggered panic buying. This reflects the broader problem of trust in online information when messages circulate through dense interpersonal relationships and critical evaluation is weakened.

Dahlgren and Hill (2023) add that modalities also relate to the forms of content—for example, genres, styles, and themes—which reshape audiences’ overall experiences through imagination, typical tropes, and narrative forms, and can be multimedia, mixing visual, aural, textual, or other modalities. They state that adding extra elements for certain texts and artefacts will create a new type of sensory engagement, which is crucial to boost the outcome of affective and cognitive engagements (Dahlgren & Hill 2023). Building on this idea, this research also aims to examine the content of interactions on Weibo and WeChat and the impressions they generate.

4) The parameter of *Intensities* refers to the extent of engagement, for example, length of time, depth of attention, and frequency of media use. In short, this parameter is a mix of emotional force and duration. It focuses attention on how long the particular experience of engagement is sustained, which is of considerable significance understanding the significance any media engagement (Dahlgren & Hill 2023). Although it is normal to assume that the longer the time a person uses a media platform, the higher the intensity of their engagement, this is not always the case.

Dahlgren and Hill (2023) caution that the intensity of engagement can be affected by a genre and cultural artefact that drives users away from normal routines, resulting in a short yet intense period of media engagement. This research recognises that the COVID pandemic is a unique period for media engagement, as people had more free time to seek useful information and to vent their emotions due to lockdowns and working from home. This is also in line with the time aspect in *contexts* (Dahlgren & Hill 2023).

Dahlgren and Hill (2023) point out that the term *intensities* also includes the capacity for constant engagement with media. It is a more sustained form of media engagement, where “there are deeper connections that involve embedding particular media experiences into the spaces and places of regular routines, family rituals and cultural memories” (p. 32-33). Hill’s study (2018) suggests that this intense engagement can occur over a lifelong time and happen regularly. This engagement will become a part of a person’s identity and become embedded in everyday practice. Although the COVID pandemic was short-lived, the years under the zero-COVID policy have subtly altered citizens’ perceptions of health and self-discipline. Regular engagement with COVID-related content potentially resulted in the growth of new habits.

Interestingly, the scholars recognise that short-term but intense experiences of media engagement leave a deep impression on people’s memories (Dahlgren & Hill 2020). What happened during COVID may leave a deep impression on Chinese citizens, prompting them to recall their feelings and experiences, indicating the potential for interviews to uncover their behaviours regarding past experiences and the rationales behind them.

5) *Consequences* refers to the results of a particular engagement. The results usually relate to relevant groups, such as engaged citizens, readers, audiences, viewers, and so on. However, the results may or may not align with pre-existing goals of engagement (Dahlgren & Hill 2020). As they argue, the outcome could be a sense of empowerment, the experience of pleasure, a feeling of satisfaction, or even disengagement, which provides a broader understanding of social media users' responses regarding their experiences and social networks (Dahlgren & Hill 2020). The *consequences*, that I observed when I was in China living and working during the pandemic, other than behavioural changes, also included social norms and belief changes. To capture and understand both intentional and unintentional consequences of political and cultural engagement, this research project will employ interviews and framing analysis.

In short, these parameters serve as a roadmap for exploring the trajectories of engagement, including the lead-up to engagement, the moment and place of engagement itself, and what transpires beyond engagement, in this case, massive cooperation during the pandemic. In particular, this thesis centres on We Media, which emphasises the agency of individual social media users and their real yet unique experiences during the pandemic. These five parameters can help us explore the details of the engagement at a personal level.

Research design

The five parameters of media engagement, as discussed, align closely with the key arguments of this thesis and provide a framework for addressing the research questions. Accordingly, this research adopts five major qualitative research methods: autoethnography, digital ethnography, in-depth interviews, framing analysis and thematic analysis, to conduct the

study. Autoethnography is used to incorporate my lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in Foshan, China, living with my family in 2020 and 2021, grounding the analysis in the specific *context* of this research. Digital ethnography enables the documentation of my interactions with friends and the observation of opinions, emotions, and activities on Weibo and WeChat as a citizen participant. These digital traces illuminate the *modalities* and *intensities* of participation in the digital public sphere.

Building on framing analysis, the study further examines shared content posted by friends, officials, and other creators, as well as interactions in comment threads and WeChat group chats, to explore the *motivations* and meanings behind specific communicative practices. At the same time, my analysis of social media posts demonstrates emerging themes in the online discussion and informs the thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews.

Given the role of algorithms in shaping personalised media environments, this thesis recognises that users inhabit diverse augmented realities structured by preferences, habits, online ties, and network demographics. In-depth interviews are therefore conducted to extend insight beyond my immediate social circle and, crucially, to examine the *motivations*, *modalities*, *intensities* and *consequences* of citizens' engagement with Weibo and WeChat during the pandemic through thematic analysis.

The analysis of engagement on Weibo and WeChat continues to follow the concentric circles framework outlined in Chapter One. In this model, Weibo functions as the outer, peripheral ring of public exposure, characterised by weaker ties and the circulation of topical issues and mainstream public opinion. By contrast, WeChat operates as a central, semi-public relational core in which intimacy is intensified, and meaning is personalised and enacted through strong

interpersonal bonds. This framework enables the analysis to trace how engagement across these two platforms is interconnected and mutually influencing.

Immersing in quarantine life with autoethnography

Autoethnography provides vital data for this research, as my immersive experience provides real, authentic, and holistic evidence as a background to my research (Boellstorff et al., 2012). Participant observation, which is a core method in modern ethnography, assisted this project in collecting meaningful data about Chinese citizens during the COVID pandemic (Adler & Adler 2008; 2012). I did not just observe or study fellow citizens as objects separated from myself. Rather than merely ‘observing’ from the outside, I actively engaged in my pandemic life—I lived in my hometown in China from 2020 to 2022, was affected and witnessed the development of policies alongside the progress of the pandemic. I was part of the target population for this research project—felt isolated, panicked, stressed and relied on my phone and computer to connect to the outside world, and my experience is part of the evidence for this study, which helped me empathise with my participants later in interviews.

“Native anthropology” is a term in autoethnography which refers to the way people ,who were a part of the target of ethnography, become the authors of studies of their own group (Reed-Danahay 2021), or what is also framed as ‘analytic autoethnography’ which acknowledges that “the researcher’s self is a representative subject” and that “these overlapping interests in seeing the participant observer as a full member of the group or setting of study, visible in this membership role in written reports, and oriented to theorizing about more encompassing social and cultural phenomena” (Jorgensen 2020, p. 113). When

deployed in a structured and reflective manner, this kind of autoethnography can enhance a study's authenticity and depth (Jorgensen 2020; Reed-Danahay 2021).

Hence, applying autoethnographic theory as a method and theoretical framework acknowledges my experience of 'being there' during the pandemic. This experience is rare and extremely valuable in providing a foundation for this project. My participation in the social network and interpretation also fosters further discussion of the theoretical literature and enables me to understand, empathise and compare with others' situations in the interviews I conducted.

Digital ethnography and participatory observation

Digital ethnography is essential for this research project. It is designed to accommodate a situation where the researcher and the informants experienced the lockdown, where physical quarantine became a part of daily life, and social media became a primary way to maintain the connection between friends and families, and a space to communicate. This method not only recognises the connections between the physical world and the virtual world but also admits that virtual worlds are a place that encompass practices of play, performance, creativity, and ritual, and that lead to possibilities for the rise of new identities, cultures and practices (Boellstorff et al. 2012).

Additionally, participant observation in digital ethnography emphasises that researchers place themselves in a field site engaging in everyday activities (Boellstorff et al. 2012). With the support of Weibo and WeChat, I was able to observe and interpret people's behaviours and opinions in the digital world while complying with the quarantine policies. Drawing on

Jurgenson's concept of augmented reality (Jurgenson 2012), it is reasonable to argue that observing content shared on social networks also entails observing a portion of friends' real lives behind the screens. In light of this, I remained connected with the research participants, observed their quarantine lives, and recorded their speeches, behaviours, and opinions via screenshots. Participant observation supports this study in learning cultures, communities and activities that are composed of diverse social media users' interactions in the digital world.

Framing analysis for social media content

The content shared and encountered on Weibo and WeChat is crucial to discovering the relationship between audiences and posts and the intentions of senders. Adopting a framing analysis is key to discovering the implications of the content, the influences of selected posts and the intentions of the senders because it guides researchers to examine textual materials through framing devices (metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions and visual images), which are commonly used in posts, to explain how messages are packaged and delivered (Boulding 1959; Pan & Kosicki 1993; Gamson & Modigliani 1989; Goffman 1974; Gitlin 1980).

Framing analysis further supports the investigation of the emotional impact embedded in social media content. Nip and Berthelier's (2023) study of the anti-National Security Law protests in Hong Kong shows that emotions have become a crucial factor in news distribution when ordinary users act as news sources. Emotions expressed in social media messages are transformed into 'affect'—publicly displayed, identity-linked emotions within interpretive networks—that function both as personal expression and as strategic acts, complementing commenting and sharing to sustain affective publics across connected networks. This insight

reinforces the value of framing analysis in this study and sharpens reflexive attention to my own interpretation of content and interactions with friends in digital ethnography, offering a lens through which to examine how social networks shaped my perceptions. The results from the interpretation can also develop themes for the thematic analysis of the interview data.

Understanding others' experiences through in-depth interviews

In-depth interviews are vital to this research because the project aims to move beyond the limits of autoethnography and digital ethnography. As Jorgensen (2020) notes, participant observation is shaped by researchers' differing biographies, interests, values, and skills, meaning that field observations inevitably vary across individuals. This limitation is particularly evident on Weibo, where censorship, algorithms, filter bubbles, and echo chambers shape what can be seen, potentially minimising dissonant viewpoints. Likewise, WeChat's closed network structure restricts access to other friend circles and constrains broader observation. In-depth interviews are therefore necessary to understand what appeared on others' screens, how they used these platforms, how their networks were structured, and how interactions shaped their opinions and behaviours, thereby providing essential insights for addressing the research questions.

Traver (2013) adds that the in-depth interview is usually conducted to support ethnographic fieldwork to produce a more comprehensive study. While ethnographic fieldwork can describe the setting in which the interview takes place and what it reveals about the interviewee, the in-depth interview can generate further understanding of what happens in the social setting and allows individual participants to speak out about how they interpret the social world (Traver 2013). The effect of interviews will be further enhanced by my shared

cultural background with the interviewees. As Chinese citizens, we share a common culture and language (I speak both Mandarin and Cantonese at a native level). This shared background guarantees that the conversations conducted in the interviews can be fully understood and the meanings conveyed more directly.

In-depth interview: limitations and solutions

Yet Traver (2013) cautions that the in-depth interview, compared with other quantitative methods, has obvious limitations. “It addresses the experiences of only a small group of people; it is not concerned with obtaining a representative sample from a larger population” (p. 244). However, this weakness is offset by the fact that in-depth interviews can gather thicker, richer, and more personal data.

Secondly, Becker and Geer (1967) found in their study that interviewees tended to self-censor when they realised that the questions they were asked to respond to related to personal, sensitive or controversial information. This is further discussed by Traver (2013) in their discussion of the ‘social desirability effect’, which underlines the phenomenon that interviewees often want to leave a positive impression on others by giving modified and slanted answers.

Thirdly, interviewees may find it difficult to recall relevant information and issues, particularly small details, in relation to the research topic. The difficulty increases with the amount of time that passes. This is highly relevant to this thesis, as interviews were permitted only after ethics approval was granted in 2024, whereas the targeted pandemic period was primarily 2020 and 2021.

I have reflected on these potential limitations and amended my approach. Firstly, I adopted a semi-structured interview approach to engage interviewees in the conversations and avoid the potential for the interviewer to lead the interviewee. The semi-structured interview, using open-ended questions, is flexible and versatile (Kallio et al. 2016). This method enables reciprocity between the interviewer and interviewee (Galletta 2012). It provides more freedom to participants to share the experiences they want to, allow them to expand on a particular point and explore the relationship with the themes (Hardon et al. 2004; Rubin & Rubin 2005; Polit & Beck 2010; Whiting 2008), and encourage the interviewer to follow up accordingly based on the information provided (Kallio et al. 2016). I also act as a facilitator, prompting my interviewees to share using specific news items and questions, including references to major incidents and digital trends from the lockdown periods, to assist their memory and recall how they felt. The semi-structured interview allows both the interviewer and the interviewee to collaboratively shape the conversation and creates opportunities for valuable insights to emerge.

Self-censorship cannot, of course, be fully eliminated. However, building rapport can effectively reduce self-censorship (Travel 2013). Rubin and Rubin (2005) point out that sharing a common background can pave a solid foundation for building trust. This is a critical observation in relation to this project because I shared the same language, culture, and quarantine life with the participants. There is also evidence that the rapport between the interviewer and the interviewee is higher if there is a mutual acquaintance who can vouch for the interviewer (Rubin & Rubin 2005). Additionally, conducting an interview in a quiet, private, and safe space also improves rapport. Participants are more likely to speak honestly when they know no one will judge them or overhear the conversation.

Thematic analysis of interview data using the codebook approach

These five parameters also work as foundational codes in the thematic analysis process. Accordingly, the interview questions were intentionally designed to assess users' media engagement within these five dimensions, ensuring that the interviews produced data that aligns with theoretical categorisation. In turn, these five aspects also served as a guide for interpreting the data.

This approach is consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2021) Codebook Thematic Analysis, which reflects on thematic analysis as a hybrid method that blends theory-driven deductive coding with openness to inductive theme development. In this framework, initial codes are generated from existing theoretical structures—in this thesis, Dahlgren and Hill's five parameters—but new themes can emerge through close, interpretive engagement with the interview and framing analysis data. This coding is useful for capturing relevant narratives from the interview transcripts and for comparing them with data from my framing analysis on Weibo and WeChat content.

As transcripts were reviewed, additional sub-themes emerged from participants' narratives, enriching the codebook and enabling a more nuanced understanding. This research also acknowledges that not all participant responses directly map onto the five parameters. Given the conversational nature of the semi-structured interviews, I expected that some insights fall outside the predetermined categories or span multiple parameters simultaneously. This dynamic process enabled the framework to expand organically in response to the data, ensuring that emergent insights were not excluded simply because they did not fit neatly into a pre-established structure.

By adopting Codebook Thematic Analysis, the role of the researcher's subjectivity is acknowledged. As Braun and Clarke (2021) argue, efforts to eliminate 'bias' and overly insist on 'objectivity' in qualitative research are both misguided and counterproductive, given that meaning-making is contextualised and inherently situated and interpretive. The researcher's position, shaped by personal history, cultural knowledge, and academic training, is a resource for insight and knowledge production. This understanding also acknowledges the rationale for employing autoethnography in this research.

Data collection

Screenshots from Weibo and WeChat

In practice, my iPhone functioned as the primary tool for data collection. I used my phone to capture screenshots of real-time, authentic data, including posts, comments, shared articles, images, and conversational threads, in 2020 and 2021. Importantly, screenshots serve as time-stamped records of digital communication that remain reliable even if the original content is subsequently deleted due to platform regulations or users' self-censorship. This is especially critical in the Chinese online context, where those platforms frequently alter or remove politically sensitive content. Thus, screenshots offer a layer of permanence in an otherwise fleeting digital environment.

In this process, screenshots were taken, and relevant images were downloaded opportunistically when I engaged with everyday Weibo and WeChat content related to my quarantine life. This method increases the likelihood of receiving diverse opinions from random senders rather than only from specific accounts, enabling a broader picture of public opinion in my social networks to be detected. In particular, screenshots were taken during an

urgent outbreak or when a new local policy was announced to capture the real-time reactions of my connections. This data set reflects the perspectives I encountered within my networks, or, along with Kaye et al. (2022) and Su's (2024) ideas, what were counted as matters in my 'echo chamber', considering the networked intimacy and visibility of opinions. By reflecting on what was presented, this method encourages this research to focus on what was missing and outside of the 'echo chamber' and acknowledge the public relevance of algorithms on social media (Bucher 2012; Gillespie 2014).

Content captured through screenshots was gathered from publicly accessible posts and comment threads. All personal identifiers were anonymised or removed to ensure confidentiality. Furthermore, participants who voluntarily contributed screenshots from group chats or one-on-one conversations were fully informed about the research aims, and their data was granted permission to be included in the study.

Between 2020 and 2021, a total of 903 screenshots were collected from WeChat and Weibo for framing analysis. Of these, 399 were obtained in 2020, during the early and most restrictive phase of the pandemic, with a higher intensity, about two to three hours per day on Weibo and WeChat. These included posts from the feed and Trending Topics listed on Weibo, as well as posts and comments from Moments on WeChat. In addition, 113 screenshots were retrieved from WeChat group chats, including neighbourhood community groups and family groups, particularly during a localised lockdown of my residential compound in 2021. These group chats offered rich insights into how digital communication shaped localised collective behaviours, emotional climates, and decision-making processes.

Another 391 screenshots were generously shared by research participants. This data further diversified the study's perspective by including digital content that I might not have otherwise encountered, broadening the scope and improving the objectivity of the analysis. The inclusion of content sourced from others' Weibo and WeChat activities allowed for the comprehensive collection of data and the identification of thematic patterns that extended beyond my individual perspective.

Additionally, 70 screenshots were collected in 2022, highlighting discussions of key public incidents that attracted significant online attention and reflecting the contradiction between fatigue and hope at the end of the pandemic. Screenshots capturing comments, memorials, and posts surrounding the incidents provided important contextual data for understanding the emotional, symbolic, and political functions of digital media in times of crisis.

In-depth interviews

The in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of Sydney and were approved by its Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number: [2023/HE000641]). Participant recruitment was carried out through both digital and interpersonal channels. A Chinese-language recruitment poster containing study information and my contact information was shared via Moments and sent to private and group chats on WeChat. Additionally, details about the project were shared informally in face-to-face conversations and online chats. This multi-channelled strategy was chosen not only to maximise outreach but also to leverage the trust embedded in preexisting social networks. In the Chinese digital media environment, where suspicion toward unexpected messages is common, such familiarity helped to enhance the authenticity of the study and reduce the risk of potential participants dismissing it as a scam. This approach

fostered a sense of relational accountability, ensuring that participants were aware of the researcher's identity as someone they had encountered or interacted with in real life, now conducting a legitimate academic study.

Considering the existing rich first-hand data from digital ethnography, as well as the execution and timeframe of this research project, a maximum of 20 participants were anticipated to be recruited for this thesis to balance the quality of data, personal finance support and meet the scheduled research plan. Ultimately, 18 participants were successfully recruited for 16 interviews—in two cases, I interviewed two interviewees simultaneously. Although the sample remains relatively small, it still well represents the perspectives from diverse occupational, educational, age, and location backgrounds. This sample size is considered manageable and satisfied in this doctoral project.

All participants recruited were ethnically Chinese and used Mandarin or Cantonese as their primary language. Their ages ranged from 23 to 62 years, with a slight concentration of individuals in their 30s, reflecting the demographics of my social and professional circles. This thesis acknowledges that participants under 30 and over 50 accounted for only one-third of the sample, potentially leading to the omission of specific age-related behaviours. Particularly, regarding the substantial arguments about intergenerational dynamics—older users' vulnerability to misinformation and younger users' gatekeeping roles—having fewer participants from these age groups can be a constraint.

Educational backgrounds were diverse: while younger participants typically held tertiary degrees, some older interviewees had received only secondary education. The sample included participants with extensive overseas experience—whether through education or

work—in countries such as Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan. Such exposure introduced alternative viewpoints and comparative reflections on digital governance and social response mechanisms during the pandemic.

Geographically, participants were located across multiple Chinese cities and provinces during the pandemic, including Foshan, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Zhuhai, Wuhan, Xiamen, Wanning, and Ningbo, as well as international cities, such as Sydney (Australia), London (the United Kingdom), New York (the United States), and Fukushima (Japan). This diversity provided valuable insights into how location-specific conditions influenced the use of Weibo and WeChat, as well as pandemic experiences.

Participants also came from a wide range of professional backgrounds, encompassing public service, legal services, education, finance, marketing, property management, architecture, trade, and homemaking. While the participants' background information will still be taken into account in the data analysis, this thesis will de-identify all interviewees, including their gender, as required by the ethics approval. Thus, the interviewees will be assigned the pronoun 'they/them' later in the analysis.

Each interviewee provided informed consent prior to participation, and consent forms were signed either digitally or in person, depending on the interview methods. Interviews were conducted via Zoom or in person, according to interviewees' preferences. For face-to-face interviews, audio was recorded using the Voice Memos app on my iPhone. For Zoom sessions, the built-in recording function was used. The resulting high-quality audio recordings facilitated accurate transcription and analysis while preserving the authenticity of participants' expressions and emotional tones.

Most interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, a duration designed to minimise fatigue and optimise the richness of responses. However, in several instances, interviews extended beyond this timeframe as participants expressed a desire to share more detailed accounts. These contributions were welcomed and treated as valuable additions to the research dataset.

Summary

This research employed a solid, ethically sound, and context-sensitive data collection strategy that combined autoethnography, digital ethnography, and in-depth interviewing. By including real-time digital content, personal narratives, and lived observations, the study captures the complexities of social media engagement in pandemic-era China. The methodological design not only ensures data richness and reliability but also foregrounds participant agency, reflexivity, and the socio-political embeddedness of digital communication practices.

Chapter Four: In the name of “fighting the pandemic”

This chapter examines Weibo as a regulated digital public sphere shaped simultaneously by political intervention, algorithmic design, and cultural expectations—factors that both enable and limit communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. It addresses sub-questions 1), 2) and 3) by analysing how Weibo structured everyday communicative practices and how it functioned as a space where public opinion and perceptions of COVID-19 were produced, circulated, and contested. Anchored in the national call to “stay cohesive”, the chapter investigates how this ideological summons was interpreted, negotiated, and enacted by Weibo’s networked public. To lay the analytical foundation, the chapter begins by exploring the contextual conditions of Weibo engagement in 2020 and 2021.

Weibo: a source of updates

Dahlgren (2013) argues that the most basic motivation driving media engagement is interest, including pure curiosity and pursuing knowledge that draws upon reason and rationality.

Weibo emerged as a vital source of real-time updates during the early waves of the pandemic. It served as a powerful platform for sharing information and disseminating news. The responses in this research indicate that a common incentive for using Weibo was to receive first-hand information about the pandemic.

Weibo is an open-access platform that everyone can search, view and repost information from, aligning with the social media affordances noted by boyd (2010). Breaking news can be shared immediately with a wide range of audiences. Interviewee H shared their impression of using Weibo, saying that:

“Weibo is probably a faster conduit to spread information. Because all the issues go to Weibo in the first place, like they would go to the ‘Trending Topics’ list immediately.”

(Interviewee H)

In particular, the Trending Topics (热搜) provided a speedy summary of the rapid changes in circumstances during the pandemic on a timely basis, with a real-time ranking of popularity. For example, in Figure 1, seven of the nine ranked topics were related to the COVID pandemic (no. 1-3, 5-8). At 12.04 pm on the day, the top-ranked news discussed on Weibo was “973 people were quarantined due to a confirmed COVID-19 case in Tianjin”, with 4,431,172 relevant posts (circled in red). The list provides a summary about the key issues being discussed on Weibo and a timeline, as it indicates “real-time trends, update every minute”. Ranking all topics and assigning numerical importance ratings ensured that Weibo users knew which ones were important and urgent (Interviewees H & S).



Figure 1: A screenshot of the Trending Topics on Weibo, viewed 7 February 2020.

According to Interviewee Y's experiences, checking the Trending Topics is the fastest way to navigate current issues and discover what fellow users are most focused on. It becomes a direct, convenient, and efficient way to gain important information in a short amount of time. It played an important role in Interviewee Y's daily life as a source of information to share. At the same time, they could quickly remind their friends and family on WeChat if anything on it caught their attention. Thus, this function also served as a public health alert for Weibo users.

Acknowledging the efficiency of Trending Topics, Interviewee K added that Weibo has its Trending Topics function updated so that it can help filter false messages and provide more precise information in a crisis:

"...whenever you click into a Trending Topic, it gives you a whole timeline of how things developed. In the past, everything was pretty unfiltered, but now that they're [Weibo] trying to crack down on people spreading rumours or causing panic, they've added a mechanism to show more verified, official updates. So, let's say there's a big earthquake in Japan—they'll start the timeline with when the first reports came in, what time it happened, and then walk you through how the situation unfolded... [T]hey lay it out with a full timeline that's more curated and official. It's meant to give you accurate, relevant information on that particular event." (Interviewee K)

Interviewee S also noted that it is inevitable that the algorithm on Weibo recommends content it deems may interest them based on their following and search history. Nevertheless, Interviewee S acknowledged that it was helpful when exploring COVID-related topics, as the algorithm collects relevant news, ranks it by significance and emergence, and presents it to

the audience in order. Hence, Weibo transforms into a search engine and replaces other services, for example, Baidu, in terms of browsing COVID-related news.

Additionally, Trending Topics works closely with verified accounts. Interviewee N shared their habit of following news on Weibo. In addition to Trending Topics, they also follow “verified creators” or so-called “big Vs” (*da V*). They believe that these functions on Weibo, when combined, are sufficient to cover most major events happening in China in real-time. Furthermore, the response reveals that a numerical value was involved in this judgment. Interviewee N explained that an issue can only become “lit” (*huo*) and picked up by verified creators when the number of searches and mentions is large. Interviewee N also compared what they saw on Weibo to shared content in Moments on WeChat. Although they barely used Moments, they occasionally found friends there also discussing the same issues as on Weibo. The overlapping and repetition across platforms is another indication of the significance of the event.

Yet, Interviewee C felt hostile to the content shared by verified creators and celebrities and argued that their sharing was neither helpful nor insightful on the basis that they were all aware of the level of censorship, and thought no one would risk their reputation and career to help amplify dissent that went against government policies. In most cases, Interviewee C argued, posts from verified accounts could hardly be critical. Their opinions were usually very close to those expressed in mainstream media. They were rarely original posts but rather reposts from official sources augmented with banal comments such as “Everyone please take care”, or “FYI”.

Interviewee S stated that Weibo can be a means to acquire knowledge that they could not obtain on WeChat, as Weibo has broader access to public information by allowing users to search. Weibo enables them to learn more about unfamiliar concepts and issues about which detailed information is not readily available on Moments. They used Weibo as a research tool to explore the context of an event.

Interviewee K agreed with this, saying that Weibo was a better platform for searching for comprehensive information than WeChat. Interviewee K argued that the relationship-centred design on WeChat only allows searching content shared through established contacts. They also noted that many organisations and national institutions still actively use Weibo to release official announcements to the public. So, during the pandemic, “I definitely relied on Weibo for information, to keep up with the latest updates on COVID and everything related to it.” These updates, in turn, were shared with families and friends on WeChat and to let them know about changing circumstances.

Other respondents also agreed that Weibo has been redefined as a primary source of information for news consumption beyond its socialisation function, supporting the dissemination of important updates and useful tips during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviewee D described Weibo as a platform that can reach ‘outside the region’ compared to WeChat. On WeChat, connections were enhanced by close relationships. Most of the contacts on the Friend List are, in Interviewee D’s case, those living in and around Guangzhou or within Guangdong province, as they grew up locally and never resided outside of Guangdong. Therefore, there is an invisible boundary in their friendship circle, and conversations on WeChat tend to focus more on local issues. Instead, Weibo works as a portal to an open world. Interviewee D said that they “could search for information from different

parts of the country” and access content that was not shared by their ‘friends’, which is obviously restricted on WeChat.

In particular, Interviewee J pointed out that Weibo was an important source of medical knowledge and public health advice for them. Especially during the initial lockdown, there was limited knowledge available about the lockdown, and there was limited knowledge available about the virus. This use of Weibo also has a lot to do with a sense of obligation or duty to protect loved ones’ safety (Dahlgren & Hill 2020). By accessing this knowledge, Interviewee J was able to advise family members, especially the older, to conduct self-protection scientifically. This also demonstrates the way Weibo allows information to flow from a public space to a private group where the information could bear fruit.

Interviewee J emphasised that there were numerous verified experts they could follow, including experienced doctors. Weibo also provided opportunities for ordinary citizens to connect with “medical experts” virtually when access to hospitals and medical resources was extremely limited. By accessing these online consultations and knowledge checks via Weibo, Interviewee J relieved their anxiety and felt more confident in pushing through the lockdown with their family in real life. The connection between offline actions and online activities is again realised through ‘augmented reality’ (Jurgenson 2012). Although the authenticity of those ‘experts’ is debatable, this connection allowed practical knowledge to be passed on from professionals to the grassroots public.

From community to consumption: Algorithms and commercialisation

The heavy reliance on Weibo for pandemic news also indicates a tendency to consume information only. The interview data indicates that the use of Weibo gradually shifted from community building to information consumption only. Partly, as Interviewees K, M, R, and N recognised, this is due to the commercialisation of the platform. This does not mean that Weibo users no longer use Weibo to post—the ethnographic data indicates that many users still used Weibo to post urgent issues they encountered in real life during the pandemic, which means Weibo still helped virtualise the physical world as previous social media studies suggested (Hui 2017; Lee 2017; Lim 2017; Wang 2017). However, Interviewee K added that advertisements and commercial campaigns can overwhelm users' experiences and disrupt everyday catch-ups with friends' posts, undermining the community atmosphere.

Additionally, Weibo favours capital over individual We Media. As Interviewee Y observed, topics on the trending list came from two categories: 1) the topics that are collected by the algorithm because of the high volume of searches and tags, and 2) the topics that Weibo itself wanted to promote. While the former usually results from the interaction of Weibo users, the latter can be determined by the platform operator in accordance with financial benefits and political requirements. In either case, the respondent recognised that the algorithms behind the list played a significant role in shaping their information feed. At the same time, the interviewee expressed concerns that the algorithms manipulated the information they were exposed to. While Interviewee Y acknowledged the effectiveness of the news update on Weibo, they were concerned that the algorithm reinforced the platform's gatekeeping role, not only because of censorship but also because of the platform's inherent characteristics.

Celebrities, large companies and the government all “pay Trending Topics” (*mai re sou*) to promote themselves and influence rankings, which, as Interviewee N observed, has become a common phenomenon on Weibo in recent years. These capitalised topics can easily dominate the Trending Topic section, manipulate the rankings, and change the order of the feed, resulting in a high exposure rate that posts of individual users can’t achieve, and draw attention from the public, by reducing the space for other posts. It aims to remind Weibo users of what to focus on, leaving little room for dissenting opinions and We Media perspectives. Consequently, posts from ordinary users will not reach a wider audience but remain confined within the network. Only if their discussions are closely related to trending discussions or manage to “ride the wave” (*ceng re sou*)— by hooking topics to trending hashtags can ordinary users break through and gain attention.

Not all expressions of grievance were able to gain traction or attract collective attention on Weibo. When faced with local authorities’ ineffective implementation of pandemic control measures, ordinary citizens lacked the individual influence needed to challenge the authorities and tell the truth about what they were experiencing on the ground. Instead, as shown in Figure 2, they had to rely on “riding the wave” of Trending Topics so that they could overcome the limitation of their personal network to attract broader social attention and support:

4:15

1

微博正文

公开

搜帮新闻

2-16 07:40 来自微博 weibo.com 已编辑

【武汉社区漏报新冠肺炎疑似病人消息 致其自缢身亡】近日，武汉市纪检监察机关先后查处了4起在疫情防控工作中不认真履职尽责案件。其中一件为：长丰街正康社区向街道漏报辖区居民程某某为新冠肺炎疑似病人信息，街道、社区未有效组织治疗，程某某在家自缢身亡，造成严重不良影响。正康社区居委会党支部书记涂耀、副主任吴爱勤明知程某某病情却未按规定作出合理处置，漏报信息致使街道未能及时采取必要措施，分别受到党内警告处分；街道二级调研员孙遂义履行包保社区职责不到位受到诫勉处理，街道工委书记徐启平统筹不够、工作不细致深入被责令作出检查。

纪检监察机关还通报了洪山区副区长不认真执行上级决定，导致大量密切接触者未被及时集中隔离；未督促开展全区病毒消杀工作，导致集中隔离点病毒消杀不规范不彻底，增大了交叉感染风险；医疗救治工作协调不力、衔接不到位，发生了部分患者送医过程长时间滞留问题；落实“应收尽收、应治尽治”工作要求严重不到位，以致大量患者未及入院收治，造成恶劣影响。网页链接

转发 评论 点赞

-skr哟

2-16 13:54 来自 iPhone 客户端

2 +关注

#漏报信息致患者自缢武汉多人被处理#我妈妈与2020年2月3日，在硚口区古田二路汉口人家自杀，跟社区上报没有任何反应，只说要等，2020年2月1日，因呼吸困难，打了120，被拉去医院后，没有人管，后2月2号回家，病情垂危，2月3日上午因得不到救治，看不到希望，上午10时，在家中割腕自杀。现在给我1500元，呵呵了，本人桂榕，真实可循！！



分享到

@英雄救RunningBravely

-skr哟

2-16 14:06 来自 iPhone 客户端

3 +关注

这是我妈妈给我的最后的话..，图二是我妈妈的身份证，图三是我妈妈的死亡证明！！

本人桂榕，41152119960227****，请政府严查！！@人民日报 @长江日报 @武汉晚报






-skr哟

2-16 14:13 来自 iPhone 客户端

4 +关注

本人桂榕，我的父亲在2008年车祸去世，我唯一相依为命的母亲，2020年2月3日上午10时在家中去世，我所说全部真实，下图是我的身份证，我现在变成一个孤儿，我什么都不怕了，之前一直诉说无门，有半点虚假我可以接受惩罚，只希望国家能给我妈妈一个说法！！



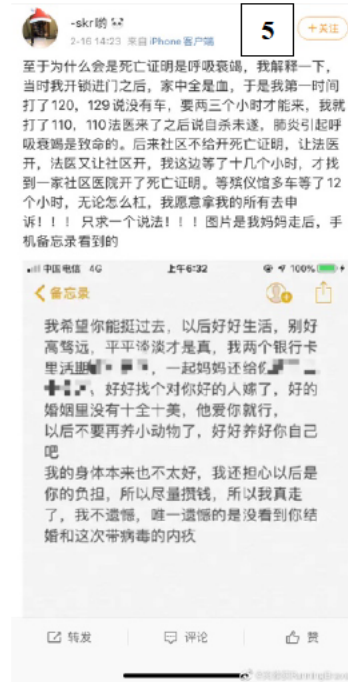



Figure 2: A Weibo user “rode the wave” to report that the hospital failed to provide her mother treatment, which caused the patient to commit suicide, and still received no attention from the local community, viewed 17 February 2020.

In Figure 2, the screenshots demonstrate a series of posts by a Weibo user to “ride the wave” to ask for attention. In Screenshot 1, mainstream media outlet *Sohu News* reposted a news story stating that public officers were punished for neglecting a suspected COVID-19 case in the local community, which led to the delayed treatment of the case and caused the patient to suicide. The Weibo user (Screenshot 2) adopted the hashtag topic, “missing information led to a patient hanging themselves, relevant staff had been punished”, which refers to the news in Screenshot 1, to report her mother’s suicide at home after contracting COVID-19, which was similar to the situation in the news. The user exposed her ID card to prove her identity as Ms Gui Rong (Screenshot 4), the daughter of the patient shown in Screenshot 3, and to confirm the authenticity of her request. In Screenshot 2, Ms Gui described that her mother who was infected with COVID-19, also committed suicide and died at home because of a

lack of treatment. This devastating situation drew no attention from the local community (Screenshot 5). Ms Gui had to post on Weibo and hope that she could urge the government to investigate the incident. All her posts were full of anger and desperation, reflecting her despair after losing her loved one in such a futile way. By referring to her mother's last words, expressing love and wishes for her daughter in Screenshots 3 and 5, Ms Gui attempted to convey "love" as a contrast to her sorrow, thereby resonating with the audience, who were already affected by the previous news.

On the one hand, this example illustrates how an individual user attempted to "ride the wave" by sharing their own story, integrating it with an existing hashtag, and mobilising emotions to recruit an affective public for support. On the other hand, this example also demonstrates the effect of "riding the wave". Without this strategy, as I did not know Ms Gui, her story may never have been shown in my feed.

Many stories were left untold during the pandemic, given that their dissemination was suppressed by the manipulation of data on Weibo. Fuchs (2017) argues that social platforms that are dominated by corporations can never be participatory or democratic because they accumulate capital by exploiting users and commodifying their data. It is reasonable to deduce that the participatory culture once lauded by Jenkins (2006a) is inherently limited on Weibo, and that open participation in discussions is biased because the topics have been preselected by influential actors. This limitation becomes especially apparent on Weibo, where algorithmic visibility and trending mechanisms determine what constitutes a "public issue", gatekeeping dissenting voices.

Interviewees were aware that their individual posts were quickly overshadowed by other content unless they purchased a service to increase visibility. Weibo indeed presents algorithmic obstacles to disseminating information. For instance, Interviewee M was planning to run an e-commerce business on Weibo during the pandemic, but quickly became aware of the limitations of the platform:

“There was a time, like when I first got into [a business name], I tried using things like private networks to sell products. If you use it well, it can definitely be a way to monetise, but I’m not really great at using it for that. Plus, my friend count is pretty low. It’s not like others who have, like, 5,000 followers—like my trainer... I did try it when I first started, but after a while, I realised it wasn’t really making much money...So, I slowly drifted away from focusing on it.” (Interviewee M)

As Interviewee M noted, unless a user has already accumulated fame in real life or a whole professional team to assist them, the personal network of an average user is neither broad nor specialised enough to be recognised as significant by the algorithm to achieve their business goals and create impact. It’s an observation which is confirmed by contemporary studies on influencers (Cunningham & Craig 2017; Duffy & Wissinger 2017). Scholars (Fuchs 2017; Wilson & Dunn 2011) acknowledge that social media is inherently designed to offer unequal exposure to users: big companies, celebrities, influencers, and prominent political figures, among others, enjoy more attention privileges; popular hashtag topics and trending opinions tend to be produced and dominated by the minority. Simultaneously, as Franck (2019) argues, the more attention paid to already notable social media figures, the more financial and reputational benefits the medium can draw from them, and the more willing the medium is to support these figures to extend their influence in order to maximise profit.

As a result, the motivation for ordinary users to share publicly on Weibo is reduced. Following Wilson and Dunn's (2011) logic, users are compelled to align with what others have already created if they wish to "ride the wave" and express their opinions more widely. In this context, Weibo users need to apply trending hashtag topics in their posts, turn their opinions into 'likes' or comments under a popular post, or endorse others' ideas by reposting. This then reinforces the accumulation of social capital by influential accounts.

This imbalance between voices makes We Media distribution unsustainable on Weibo because ordinary users find it difficult to attract attention. Interviewee M's encounter is in the same vein as Interviewee R's who noted that were unable to use Weibo to start up a We Media and connect with like-minded people, to—in boyd's (2010) sense—find a networked public. Although the cost of participating in an online community is still low, the profit-driven ecosystem on Weibo clearly constrains the potential for ordinary users to generate influence as We Media by raising the threshold of attention capital.

Interviewee N was highly sceptical about how Weibo mined users' data. They said that Weibo failed to control "ghost followers" (*jiang shi fen*) and promoted "online paid commenters" (*shui jun*). They were critical of data manipulation and the way Weibo enabled toxic

behaviours, such as “comment control”¹¹ (*kong ping*) and “boosting popularity”¹² (*da tou*), degrading any sense of community and the credibility expected of We Media. In addition, Interviewee N also said that the system had operated their account at the back end to ‘like’ a random account as part of a paid promotion without their permission. This unauthorised operation, indicating the capitalisation of data on Weibo, is a reminder of the way large tech companies and platforms operate to disrupt participatory democracy (Fuchs 2017). The meaning of social media data is more ambiguous than ever before and not necessarily reflective of genuine users’ views, but rather reflects the profit motives of the platform.

Data, authenticity and trust

Given concerns about algorithmic manipulation on Weibo, several interviewees explicitly problematised the link between popularity and trust on the platform. Interviewee J observed impersonation of “experts”, confusing information seekers and undermining credibility. While Interviewee N noted that, while verified creators could be a source of information, simply being well-known in their fields did not necessarily mean that these content creators

¹¹ Usually happens in the comment area under the posts or news related to a celebrity. Fans will collectively ‘like’ or generate a large volume of positive comments to boost the visibility of positive voices and suppress the visibility of opposing voices (BBC 2021).

¹² The behaviour that fans raise funds and spend money on activities that would boost their idol’s vote on a show, or, if not financially related, engage a large number of followers online to conduct massive activities that intend to generate data and show support for the idols (BBC 2021).

were well-informed in medical sciences. They were also concerned that the “experts” popularity could also be manufactured, based on Interviewee N’s experience of being an “online paid commenter”. As van Dijck (2013) notes commercial platforms associate attention with authority, and as boyd (2010) notes, context collapse allows messages to circulate beyond their original audiences, regardless of the origin and expertise.

Their awareness of the way platforms deploy algorithms and manipulate data did not lead interviewees to simply reject the platform. It led to vigilance—rather than withdrawal—becoming a guiding principle of everyday digital life. This is consistent with Dahlgren and Hill’s modalities parameter, in which they discuss the role of cognitive engagement of social media, in which users demonstrate critical thinking when drawing on their knowledge of social media (Dahlgren & Hill 2023).

Interviewee J also questioned the authenticity of “quality creators”, noting that Weibo’s authentication criteria emphasised popularity metrics rather than domain expertise.

Interviewee J’s own experience as an “Orange Label Verified Creator¹³” during an earlier period of fan participation suggested that verification was easily attained by amateurs, signalling a low bar for authority. This disjunction—verification without expertise—clarifies

¹³ Weibo (2025) classifies individual verified creators into different levels with colour to indicate their influence. The orange label is granted automatically to a verified lawful user when they: have more than 100 verified followers who have interacted with them at least three days in the past 30 days; their content has more than 300,000 views in the past 30 days. The next level is the gold label with much higher requirements.

why interviewees refused to equate “big Vs” with credibility. In practice, verification prioritised visibility and status over reliability.

Regarding social media data, interviewees consistently refused to treat likes and reposts as indicators of credibility. Rather, interviewees regarded them as an indicator of significance. They all agreed that the meaning of “likes” on Weibo is ambiguous: likes can express agreement, irony, social grooming, habit, or nothing more important than impulse, echoing boyd and Crawford (2012) and van Dijck (2013; van Dijck & Poell 2013).

Against this background, interviewees talked about how they worked to reduce uncertainty about the validity of information. For example, Interviewee A traced screenshots to their original posts by identifying platform-specific fonts, then used cross-platform searches (including VPN access) to locate sources, compare narratives, and find objective facts before sharing posts with WeChat groups. Interviewee A saw it as their responsibility not to mislead close friends or family on WeChat. Interviewee A’s cognitive engagement with social media was driven by a sense of social duty.

Similarly, Interviewee H acknowledged that many issues could trigger an emotional response, and that facts may be adjusted in a repost when affective content is added and the purpose of the original post was reframed. They tracked the original post through the repost chain in order to filter out emotional comments and rephrasing that were added in circulation.

Interviewee S compared the post with posts shared by others on Weibo to explore other perspectives or to seek help in trusted WeChat groups, which emphasised trust embedded in relational social capital that developed from interactive, long-term relationships and closeness (Adler & Kwon 2002; Al-Tabbaa & Ankrah 2016). Interviewee J paid further attention to the

data used in a post and followed it up with references noting that, while some data may not be erroneous, it may be outdated.

Notably, some interviewees tended to defer to official channels on Weibo, during the pandemic. As Interviewee J pointed out, although the information released by official channels on Weibo was always slower than other sources, the fact they were shared could be seen authoritative. For Interviewee H, the advice shared through official accounts could not be “too wrong”, because the government had to be responsible for the health of more than a billion citizens in China and could not be trying to harm its people. The interviewees’ comments above indicated greater faith in the government, preparing them to be open to the authorities’ explanations and to allow mainstream media to construct a truth for them, even when there was controversy.

A participatory space hailing positivity

The chaotic ecosystem has led more Weibo users to adopt a more passive mode of information consumption, according to observations from interviewees who still use Weibo. Indeed, all the interviewees in this study expressed hesitation about posting on Weibo during the pandemic. Among them, Interviewees D and R used Weibo to share personal thoughts and life during the pandemic. They regarded Weibo as a personal blog to replace face to face connections with friends or used it as a search engine for a niche hobby. Yet, the respondents did not deny Weibo that was an open space for pooling information. Indeed, based on the ethnographic data, other users still considered Weibo an open platform and consistently

contributed to Trending Topics and “Super Topics”¹⁴ (*chao hua*) to share their personal encounters during the pandemic, reproducing their lives online and making Weibo a virtual community.

This transformation allowed Weibo, which originally resembled Twitter, to develop functions similar to Facebook, where users can create groups and quickly locate their target audiences. The digital ethnographic data presented in this study show that participants continuously broke through the boundaries of information dissemination during their engagement, blurring the distinction between We Media and mainstream media. The boundary between formal news (public) and personal posts (private) has thus become increasingly indistinct, which is in line with Papacharissi’s (2010) framing of the blurring of the boundaries between the public and private spheres in the digital era. This blurring also encourages local events to become national, and increases awareness of the experiences of local citizens among audiences in other provinces or even in other nations.

Individual users, like mainstream media outlets, took on the role of citizen journalists, enabling them to showcase authentic situations from their immediate surroundings rapidly. Meanwhile, mainstream media drew on trending topics and personal Weibo posts to identify

¹⁴ A function on Weibo that builds virtual communities based on various topics and themes. It has stricter rules than joining Trending Topics. Participants must sign in regularly and accumulate points to join the communities. Their contribution will also increase the ranking of the Super Topic and make it more apparent to other users.

and further amplify verified social issues. In this way, personal content entered the realm of official media and was validated by its institutional authority (Gamson & Wolfsfeld 1993).

Through mutual aid and empathetic exchanges, individuals also constructed a sense of community identity, building networked publics through emotional resonance and resource sharing. Building on Jenkins (2006a) earlier research, Weibo is a platform that demonstrates the affordances of information convergence, allowing users to link their posts to popular topics through hashtags or participate in “Super Topics”. This feature enabled individuals’ accounts of COVID-19 recovery experiences to reach and guide the public immediately (see Figure 3), facilitating cross-verification and collective education among different cases.

ShungNin 2月7日 20:41 亲自 微博 weibo.com 已编辑

1 肺炎患者求助贴话 #武汉加油# #新型冠状病毒#

写下这段话的时候我的试剂盒测试结果已经两次转阴，现已正式录入医院患者计数表，简单来说我康复了，杀死了体内所有的新型冠状病毒，现在，我将我的治疗过程和经验分享给大家，希望能帮到还在与阎王爷对线的患者们，私信询问优先，评论区看不过来了

1月17日周五，我开始有浑身酸痛的感觉，可能已经开始发烧了但我对体温没有特别感知，当时我还在语言学校上课，今天问了下班上其他同学在那天也有不同程度的发烧，但都自行恢复了，想想挺可怕的，我的家和语言学校都在疫区的高危区，离华南海鲜市场不远，但全程没有接近那里

针对酸痛，我开始服用茶诺，以为只是普通感冒，现在想想，那个时候我错过了最佳的治疗期，没能通过抗病毒药物把病情扼杀在萌芽状态，而且茶诺的舒缓作用很有可能掩盖了病情，有点后悔。至于其他同学，大家要么吃抗病毒要么吃抗生素，都退烧了

1月21日周二，中午感觉身体非常酸痛，速联系我爸，他敏锐地意识到可能出问题了，叫我赶紧回家，傍晚在家量体温，低烧，但我身体仍无特别感觉，因为吃了火锅，我妈提出晚点量体温，如果还是低烧就去医院，11点发现仍然低烧，遂去同济医院，发现人山人海，第一次看到医生穿隔离服，气氛不太对劲，我看到堆积如山的病例，果断决定去不远处的武汉肺科医院，事后证明这是正确的选择，那层楼一个人都没有，明明也在发热门诊门诊名单上，顺利挂上急诊，查了血常规肝功能CT，CT甚至在当晚就出结果了，双肺阴影，双下肺感染，第二天出来的肺功单显示一切正常，血常规也一切正常，但超敏C反应蛋白（CRP）偏高，0.5致6.3

2 药物方面，我开始服用医院开出的奥司他韦，奈诺沙星，金莲花软胶囊

1月26日周六复查，这两天我逐渐开始咳嗽，带有极少量痰，且很难咳出，检查结果也显示病情加重，感染扩散至全肺，CRP飙升至39.76，医生开出输液处方，口服药物继续保持

晚上老猫开始数据分析，肝功能数据无明显异常，“超敏C反应蛋白”升高，一般提示急性感染加重

26日起床格外困难，且伴随寒战，我意识到可能是高烧，一直39+，后面的报道显示该病中期进展极快，好在当晚就没有高烧了，鬼门关一日游还进来了！开始家中隔离，待在房间内基本不出来

当晚爹妈开始求助医生同学/朋友，得到的答复是高度疑似

27日上报社区，通过武汉微邻里小程序，考虑到奥司他韦严重的副作用（呕吐腹泻），口服药物转为阿比多尔+左氧氟沙星

28日复查，全肺感染好转，专家会诊后给了我试剂盒测试资格，最先一批的试剂盒价格为99元

29日，我可出现发烧，咳嗽症状，前往医院检查，双肺出现小片磨玻璃影，高度疑似，我妈奶开始发烧，我的试剂盒结果双阴，正式被确诊，医院免费发放了5天的艾诺病毒逆转录药物克力芝，家人也开始服用阿比多尔+左氧氟沙星，由于我的病情继续好转，医院床位紧张，医生叫我回家继续隔离，输液停止

3 回家后，我爸推荐给我二联和三联治疗方案，二联为克力芝+阿比多尔，三联加沙星类药物，于是我开始三联疗法，发烧随即停止，克力芝对我的副作用不大，腹胀和腹泻粪便仍然让我不爽，我爸看到的报道见此链接 [网页链接](#)

2月1日周六复查，病灶吸收只剩双下肺的了，咳嗽也开始缓解，CRP降至2，恢复至正常水平，最严重的时候咳得肚子疼，那几天真的难过

2月2日我复查，CRP升至18.1，试剂盒检测阳性，正式确诊，医院开出5天免费克力芝

2月4日周二复查，CT显示肺部继续好转，咳嗽停止，试剂盒测试，补开两天克力芝，第二批的试剂盒价格为150元

5日试剂盒结果阴性，接到短信要求6日回医院做二次试剂盒检测

6日的试剂盒是免费的，挂号后医生把打印好的试剂盒单据给你后，进入发热门诊直接做测试无需经过门诊医生开处方环节

7日(今天)出结果，阴性，宣告治愈，从患病到治愈，历时20天，全程未住院，仅家中隔离，全程只在武汉肺科医院进行诊疗，询问得知肺科医院就是试剂盒的检测单位，其他医院的试剂盒都往这边送，目前哥哥大幅好转，奶奶已经不发烧了，我妈妈几天也不烧了，4个疑似2个确诊，均安然无恙

以上就是我和阎王爷对线的过程，下面给还在对线的患者一些个人建议，不保证有效和专业性，但我靠这些方法重生了转阴

4 我的口服药从开始的奥司他韦+沙星类(无效)转为阿比多尔+沙星类(有效)，最后加入克力芝形成口服三联疗法(效果很好)，转阿比多尔的时候加入了5天输液，奥司他韦能不吃就不吃除非实在不到阿比多尔，因为副作用太大太影响生活质量，我一换阿比多尔副作用立马没，这些药都是处方药，去医院就诊时可以让医生开，我家因为相关行业，知道吃什么药最有可能有效，研究之前非典的各种报道/实验后，在钟南山发言之前就屯了不少阿比多尔，让我们少跑了趟不用总是去医院开，方便了不少，事后证明，我们赌对了

抗病毒方面，达芦那韦在体外细胞测试中比无药物对照的效果高了280倍，而阿比多尔是60倍，但这玩意好像是国家统采的，很有可能买不到，去就诊时记得问问这个药的情况，我在本次治疗中由于中后期病情减轻，还没用上达芦那韦就无症状了，所以没用这个药

抗病毒药物优先级：达芦那韦(很可能买不到) > 阿比多尔(推荐) > 奥司他韦(不推荐)

克力芝没法在没处方的情况下买到，很早之前就是国家统采品种了，但我所在的武汉肺科医院是免费发放的，别搞丢了，这玩意价格不贵但极难获取，领药的时候会让你登记身份证

手不要碰眼睛鼻子嘴巴，勤洗手

口罩买不到？可以看看3M6200普通+过滤盒，6200是入门型号，也可以买更好的，搭配紫色的圆形过滤棉也是可以的，这些都是P100标准，最高标准，N95是最低标准

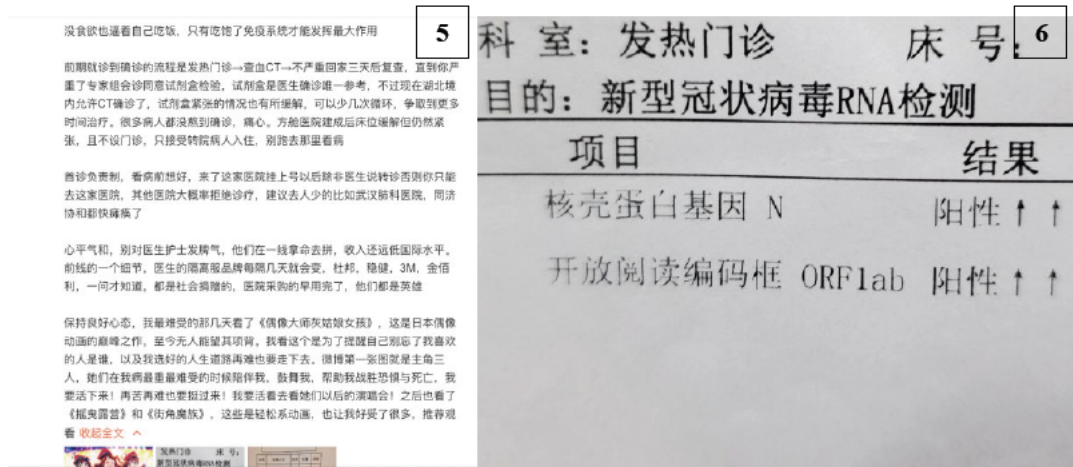


Figure 3: A Weibo user posted via Trending and Super Topics to share their recovery experience from COVID with others, viewed 8 February 2020.

For example, a Weibo user named ShungNin provided a detailed account of her entire experience—from suspected infection, diagnosis, and treatment to full recovery. She described her physical sensations, the progression of symptoms, and her emotional fluctuations throughout the process (Screenshots 1-3). She also shared information related to treatment and prevention, including which masks to purchase, how to take medication, and how to seek medical care (Screenshots 4 & 5). She not only documented her personal experience, demystifying the virus for concerned audiences, but also constructed a

framework of trust grounded in authenticity and emotional transparency. This information was shared with the “COVID-19 Patient Seeking Help Super Topic” and the Trending Topics of “Stay Strong, Wuhan” (*#wuhanjiayou*) and “new type of coronavirus” (*#xinxingguanzhuangbingdu*).

Her descriptions of her physical symptoms, emotional changes, and treatment methods created a sense of immediacy and credibility that institutional media often lacked. In this case, a firsthand narrative carried significant persuasive power. Although these details were not necessarily accurate or universally applicable, her narrative conveyed a powerful message: with timely medical attention and appropriate medication, recovery at home was indeed possible. The affective tone of care and sincerity encouraged identification and interpersonal trust among readers who were anxious and uncertain. Her investment of time and effort to record her case and share her perspectives also potentially helped her build up trust with her audience and turn it into a form of social capital (Rheingold 2002).

ShungNin mentioned that she had a background in medicine and pharmacology, which allowed her to offer personal insights into the use of specific drugs. Beyond professional treatment, she also suggested ways to care for oneself—such as maintaining proper nutrition and keeping a positive mindset. She even shared recommended models of medical mask substitutes for others to purchase (Screenshots 8 & 9). These practical suggestions served as a useful reference for people isolating and treating themselves at home.

In her post, she also called for calm and respectful attitudes toward healthcare workers, highlighting their professionalism and dedication despite shortages of protective equipment (Screenshot 5). Her comments contribute to the formation of a positive and thankful affective

public (Papacharissi 2014). Expressions of gratitude toward medical workers, along with an emphasis on empathy and responsibility, extended the moral horizon of her post beyond individual recovery, transforming her narrative into a collective resource for building hope.

Furthermore, ShungNin's disclosure of her medical test results and related costs served as evidence of her transparency, reinforcing the credibility of her account (Screenshot 6 & 7). This act of self-verification demonstrates how trust in times of crisis is often established through embodied evidence—the sharing of tangible proof rather than mere institutional endorsement. Compared with the reports from mainstream media, the information she provided was more detailed and authentic, filling the informational gaps about COVID-19 treatment and transforming Weibo into a space for collective learning. By positioning herself as both a patient and an expert, she blurred the traditional divide between private storytelling and public communication, embodying the participatory affordances of Weibo as a platform where lay expertise could emerge.

Among the Weibo posts that engaged with Trending Topics, some focused on sharing practical tips for personal protection when going out during the pandemic. Although the mainstream media also reported on preventive measures, they rarely provided detailed, actionable guidance for individuals. A user named “Cabbage That Sells Men” (*Mai Da Shu De Bai Cai*) used hashtags such as “Stay strong, Wuhan” (*#wuhanjiayou*) and “the battle around us” (*#shenbiandezhanyi*) to promote her own everyday protective practices (see Figure 4). Her suggestions were drawn from personal experience, combining publicly available knowledge on disinfection with real-life experimentation and feedback, which made the content both relatable and practical for her audience, filling the information gap through peer-to-peer instruction.

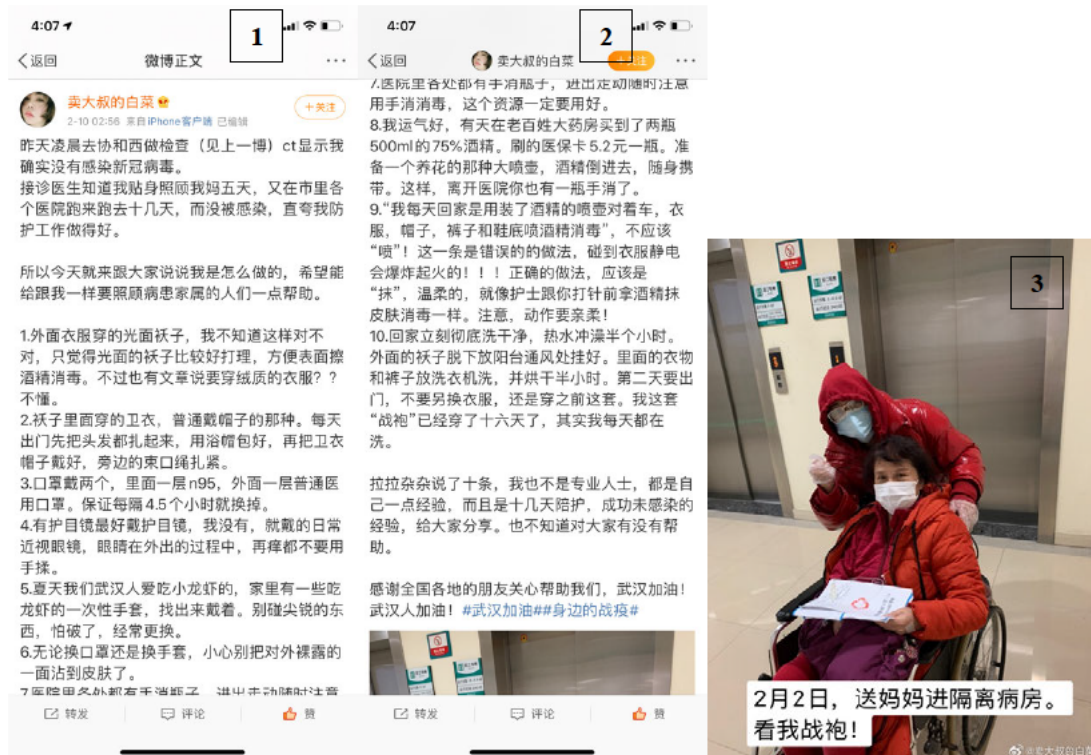


Figure 4: A Weibo user shared her “homemade personal protective equipment (PPE)” idea and disinfection measures, viewed 12 February 2020.

The user, who frequently visited hospitals to care for her COVID-infected mother yet remained uninfected, attributed her safety to thorough protection. She shared ways to utilise common household materials to reduce the risk of infection in the absence of professional equipment (Screenshots 1 & 2). This type of advice resonated strongly with ordinary citizens because it was both emotionally genuine and practically feasible. By including photos of herself accompanying her mother in the hospital—showing her protective attire—the post further enhanced its credibility (Screenshot 3). In closing, she expressed gratitude toward people nationwide for their concern for Wuhan, projecting a tone of appreciation and positivity that offered a constructive example for the Weibo crowds in demonstrating how to respect others’ efforts.

By reproducing the everyday quarantine lives in Wuhan in the digital dimension, turning individual intelligence and contributions into a representation of the identity of the members of online communities, and showing mutual care for each other, Weibo users created a new form of social life during the lockdown period (Halvorsen 2015). They took responsibility not only for their own safety but also for the well-being of others. Their participatory efforts blurred the conventional distinction between state-led guidance and citizen-led knowledge, demonstrating that digital publics can complement and even enhance official health communication through grassroots experimentation and mutual learning.

Through learning and applying citizen-led knowledge in real life, a sense of belonging to a broader community was realised. According to Morrow and Scorgie-Porter (2017), bridging social capital refers to “the connections between individuals, and the social networks, trust, and reciprocity that such connections involve”. It is “outward-looking and encompasses people from a broad social spectrum” (p. 72) and “helps to circulate information and provide links to external assets” (p. 38).

Interviewee J talked about learning on Weibo, for example, how to disinfect and reuse masks when supplies were scarce, which relieved the anxiety her family faced given mask shortages. As a result of sharing this information, Interviewee J became directly involved in the collective effort against the pandemic. Weibo users’ connective contributions embodied the spirit of “stay cohesive”: practising personal protection in the physical world, while staying informed, and updating and sharing knowledge.

In addition, personal sharing on Weibo can be seen as a spontaneous, autonomous, bottom-up supplement to the “Tell China’s Anti-Pandemic Stories Well” (TCAPSW, *jiang hao zhong*

guo kang yi gu shi) propaganda strategy. This strategy was implemented by President Xi in February 2020 as a way of using strategic storytelling to improve the coherence and effectiveness Chinese government propaganda at home and abroad in the context of COVID pandemic (Xu & Gong 2024). Scholars (Xu & Gong 2024) point out that President Xi urged the state media to lead international public opinion and demonstrate a responsible image by proactively promoting China's collective efforts and effective measures against the pandemic and address international concerns with confidence. The media was also urged, in a domestic context, to update the death toll, the number of infections, discuss preventative measures and quarantine policies, while also presenting touching stories of the frontline medical workers to boost public confidence in the government (Xi 2020a). Although TCAPSW was a top-down propaganda initiative that was driven by the government, the grassroots examples shared above also shows that social media users posted material that was aligned with the TCAPSW framework, facilitating "positive energy" on social media.

While personal storytelling has always been a powerful tool in propaganda (Piechota 2020), it can also be seen as an influential way for individuals to share their authentic experiences and turn experiences into narratives that resonate with audiences emotionally. As Polletta and Lee (2006) suggest, storytelling functions not merely as a form of narration but as a social practice that generates empathy, legitimises collective agency, and enables marginalised voices to contest dominant narratives through alternative meanings. These functions can be enhanced via the wide and fast connection that Weibo enables.

By sharing beautiful stories about, for example, COVID patients being taken good care by doctors, Uber drivers getting nurses home, local restaurants and cafes provided free food and coffee to medical workers, as well as personal experiences about the healing process, the

heroic actions of medical workers, and the mutual support of those around them, the authors in Figure 4 also created their own stories about local life. With these uplifting and touching stories, which became authentic rather than official testimonies about the effects of the government's policies, Weibo users persuaded, mobilised and influenced their immediate audiences through their social networks (Xu & Gong 2024). Xu and Gong (2024) further argue that such storytelling could actually help the government to promote nationalist sentiments in a time of crisis. It is evident that positive personal posts on Weibo contributed to President Xi's TCAPSW strategy and were utilised to enhance the "stay cohesive" opinions. As Fiedler and Tagespiegel (2020) underline, these posts can trigger greater cohesion within countries while equally generating hostility between countries.

Storytelling of heroism and truth

In addition, the interviews also speak to a broader transformation in what counts as "truth" online. Hongisto and colleagues (2017) argue that digital technology has produced a new desire for authenticity that is enacted through public acts of sincerity in the post-truth media ecology, where the affective impact of information gradually overrides its truth-value. In other words, to be viewed as real and genuine online, more people perform public acts of sincerity to "profess truth through being 'heartfelt'" (p. 68), such as emotional confessions, self-reflective posts, or sharing personal struggles (e.g. self-development documentaries, reality shows, online support forums). Yet, the scholars argue, these displays of sincerity are not necessarily "the truth". Instead, they create the appearance or effect of truth, which means these acts feel true or make truth seem present through immediacy and emotional attachment, even if they're partly constructed or performative. Hence, the boundary between "acting real" and "being true" is blurred. This logic aligns with Duffy and Wissinger's question (2017)

about how influencers' attempts to appear 'real' on social media; it actually masks all the labour put into script writing, practice, and video editing behind the scenes that are intended to deliver the illusion of authenticity. It is reasonable to conclude that when affective content evokes a sense of truth, it creates more opportunities for rhetorical editing and framing to construct truth and manipulate reality through emotional elements.

The arguments I have outlined above raise the question of how we understand "truth" in the age of algorithm-driven social media, which is based on agreed facts. Dahlgren (2018) argues that emotion now prevails over factual evidence and reasoned analysis in the post-truth era. Rather, it allows political speeches during the pandemic to have a chance to produce the desired effects to influence public opinion as part of the TCAPSW campaign. In Figure 5, a controversial news story about female nurses from Gansu Province shaving their hair before departing to support Hubei Province went viral and sparked a discussion about the truth on Weibo.



Figure 5: Questioning the news about female nurses shaving their hair, was it a willing sacrifice or a performative show? Viewed 18 February 2020.

In Figure 5, Screenshot 1, the *CCTV News* Weibo account glorified the actions of the female nurses who shaved their hair. In the picture, the woman wearing a mask had her hair cut by someone in personal protective equipment (PPE); her long hair was trimmed and fell to her shoulders; the “hairdresser” continued shaving her hair to make it almost bald. Following the first hashtag topic, “Medical workers shaved their hair to bald before departing to Hubei Province”, the report quoted a line from their interviewees and added the hashtag, “We don’t even care about our life, why do we care about our hair!”, to demonstrate their determination and bravery, with a “red heart” emoji to show “love”. The report explained that female nurses cut their long hair to make wearing PPE gear easier to explain their actions. By highlighting their rationale: “That’s our responsibility when our country needs us, no reason asked”, and

that some of the nurses were even engaged and getting ready for marriage, the media sentimentalised their actions. The narrative used touching visual aids to promote the idea that “the medical staff are doing everything they can to save others by highlighting their “self-sacrifice”.

There was, however, a quick backlash. 2,941 readers reacted with an “awkward” emoji. A Weibo user commented at the bottom, criticising the *CCTV News*, an official news outlet, for being sensational and misleading (Screenshot 1). Another Weibo user, in Screenshot 2, responded with shock and anger, accusing them of shaving their hair, not for trying to encourage the public, but to humiliate female nurses. By comparing happy nurses who had normal haircuts (the first line of the pictures) to the tearful, shaved nurses (the second line of the pictures), the user suggested that they were forced, rather than willing, as portrayed on *CCTV News*. Furthermore, the user commented that justifying the hair shaving was not only a cruel, offensive “show” and a “moral hijack” of the medical workers, but also an implied instrumentalisation of women’s bodies for propaganda. The user also flagged a gender double standard: “the male staff were not required to do anything to their hair.” This post highlighted the way an apparent “self-sacrifice” was disrupted and redefined as a political performance, becoming a new “truth”.

It is interesting to observe the spectrum of interpretations among interviewees who encountered this news, based on their understanding of how to discern the “truth” behind social media posts regarding this incident. Most of my interviewees agreed with the scientific rationale for the nurses’ decision to shave their hair and expressed understanding of the risk of compromising the airtightness of PPE garments and allowing bacteria and viruses to hide in hair. Yet, Interviewees X, H, A, and Y asserted that it had nothing to do with demonstrating

solidarity or feminism. They argued that professionals should be able to choose between obeying orders and quitting their jobs—that the nurses should not have to demonstrate their emotional connection to the collective but should be able to make rational personal choices.

Interviewee N viewed this news as an extension of collectivism from traditional culture, because it created a collective image by eliminating individual uniqueness (e.g. students in schools must wear uniforms, stripping individual identities under a unified framing of students), and highlighted cohesion. Interviewees S and K also associated this observation by contrasting it with the frustrating reality of ignorance about marginalised groups in a crisis. While the country was focused on the success in managing economic loss and death toll, there was little attention paid to the experience of female workers in real life, not even menstrual products were considered a compulsory supply. Interviewee C noted that it was not only a performance of obedience, but also an event staged on a “stage” on social media, dramatised as a moral example for “us” all to follow. Interviewees E and D, similarly, felt grateful for their sacrifice but admitted that a few acts should not be universalised and advertised because they displayed “positive energy”. Autonomy and consent must remain central. Interviewee J expressed empathy for the difficult decision medical workers made to give up their physical beauty under pressure.

This contestation demonstrates how affective storytelling constructs moral truths that are then reinterpreted by publics, producing counter-narratives that reveal coercion, gendered inequities, and can lead to or aid ideological instrumentalisation. The same news can act as evidence of virtue in one reading and violation in another.

This thesis does not intend to provide a solution to the various interpretations of “truth” on social media. Instead, it argues, the existence of multiple “truths” complicates the modality of media engagement when cognitive and affective engagements are intertwined under platform capitalism and political communication. The micro-evidence in the discussion above reminds us that truth is fluid, uncertain, and no longer consensual because individual “agency is distributed across complex (media) systems, that we are swept up by those systems, and that affect informs our actions at least as much as our presumed rationality, those very assemblages increasingly escape our intellectual grasp.” (Hongisto et al. 2017, p. 64). In the context of augmented reality, this thesis argues that the battle against the COVID pandemic is open not only to propaganda but also to individuals articulating their own systematic doubts about credibility, rebuilding their own truth, deciding on their best responses to manage uncertainty, and responding to the call for “stay cohesive”.

Confucianism and transnational belonging

Although Weibo is less socially oriented, it still allowed interviewees to record their lives during the lockdown period. Interviewee R posted on Weibo for various reasons. Although Interviewee R was frustrated by censorship, before they got banned from Weibo, they posted frequently on Weibo:

“During the pandemic, I posted on Weibo quite a lot—just random thoughts, places I visited, people I met. I would even write little stories. Since I had been living abroad for a long time... There was nowhere to use Chinese, and I rarely chatted with friends on WeChat. So Weibo became my only outlet for writing in Chinese. I actually really liked

it—posting long texts, reading others’ posts, and interacting with people.” (Interviewee R)

Weibo became a tool for reconnecting overseas residents with their culture. Interviewee R indicated that they were the only one from China in their workplace, so they had very limited opportunities to use or speak Chinese with anyone in their daily life. This resulted in a disconnection with their home country and culture, and the surging feeling of loneliness and isolation, especially during the pandemic when international travel was restricted. Posting updates as a personal diary and reading others’ content in Chinese offered psychological comfort and a sense of connection to their homeland. For example, Interviewee R constantly looked up the latest trendy places in their hometown on Weibo and planned their schedule for when they returned after the pandemic, which sustained their connection with their home country and maintained their sense of hope for reconnection.

Jackson (2014) emphasises the importance of using Chinese in this situation, underscoring that one’s mother tongue, as an essential part of one’s identity, is closely tied to one’s culture and regional affiliation. Familiar expressions can evoke a sense of comfort and belonging when one is far away from home in a foreign environment. Thus, Weibo allowed Interviewee R to stay informed about current changes in China while restoring their language skills by immersing themselves in a pure Chinese environment. In this context, Weibo resonates with Jurgenson’s idea that digital spaces can augment offline realities, providing virtual immersion that sustains identity during moments of physical disconnection (2012).

Interestingly, Interviewee R effectively leveraged the potential of social networking on Weibo by consistently documenting their life. They were highly concerned about the shrinking

Chinese social circle within their local workplace. They attempted to connect with others via Weibo, as it was still regarded as an active platform for overseas Chinese. Interviewee R discussed their hobby of “mountain driving” (*pao shan*)¹⁵ and “car camping” (*shachuuhaku* in Japanese). Although they knew this was a very niche hobby that might yield very limited results when they started searching Weibo, they were hopeful that there might be fans of it in some corners of the internet. Because of the niche nature of their hobby, their message to the algorithm was highly specific and clear. As long as they continued to search for relevant keywords and post content about their road trips, they knew the algorithm would help them reach those people. In this sense, Weibo successfully connected Interviewee R with local Chinese fans living in Japan.

At the same time, the constant sharing of personal life also reminded Interviewee R of their visibility on Weibo and inspired them to try to become an influencer. However, this aspiration was quickly dampened when they found out that running an account as an influencer was not as simple as “just being me”:

“At the time, my main goal was making friends, but I also thought—hey, maybe I could try doing content creation too? I did consider it. But after giving it a shot for a while, I realised... this whole thing runs deep. Especially in the overseas Chinese community in Japan—it's not as simple as just putting out content. You have to blend into the existing

¹⁵ Interviewee R explained that “mountain driving” meant selecting remote, unpopular routes, driving along off-the-beaten-track or even abandoned roads in rural or mountainous areas to explore and record the view as an adventure.

circles...There are all kinds of hidden forces operating behind the scenes, and if you're not part of that network, it's hard to break in." (Interviewee R)

As Duffy and Wissinger's study (2017) shows, becoming a social media influencer is not as simple as it appears. Although Weibo provides an open environment to realise the potential to become an influencer, the average person faces many other barriers to reaching larger audiences. Understanding the promotional logic of each platform is only the beginning (Interviewee K). The emotional, promotional, and entrepreneurial efforts required to create a charismatic persona on social media are onerous (Duffy & Wissinger 2017). Interviewee R reported being unable to commit to a heavy content-editing workload while holding a full-time job. Interviewee R's experience further suggested that sharing ideas and becoming influential on Weibo actually requires more than just content and technical support. Interactions and communication on Weibo are also heavily intertwined with Chinese traditional culture, namely Confucianism.

Interviewee R discovered that they were required to possess a deeper understanding of the industry's structure and have a solid "social relation" (*guanxi*) to promote themselves (Wang 2023). They also thought that Weibo, instead of being a free, public platform, has its account traffic controlled by a few. For example, the owner of the contacts of local Chinese in Japan became a gatekeeper of information within the diaspora digital sphere:

"There's a site called xiaochun.com—basically, every Chinese student coming to Japan uses it to gather information... and the founder of that site has now become one of the biggest power players in Japan's Chinese-language new media area. A lot of influencers and content creators in Japan—whether they're vloggers or independent writers—

actually have to maintain a good relationship with him if they want to get traffic. When I found out about all this, I backed off.” (Interviewee R)

Interviewee R’s case illustrated how *guanxi*, as a cultural factor, intersects with platform capitalism and technological affordances on Weibo. Qi (2013) states that *guanxi* is a special form of social capital in the Chinese context, which can both boost and constrain general distribution and access to resources. *Guanxi* is a crucial component in constructing and sustaining the traditional fabric of society, often described in terms of Confucianism, which focuses on the relationships between people (Fei 1992; King 1985). It is significant in 21st-century China (Chiao 1982; Yang 1994), particularly after former President Hu proposed the concept of a “harmonious society” (*he xie she hui*) in 2002 in order to address social issues by reviving a Confucian-style approach on the basis that “harmony” (*he*) is the core value of Confucian ethics (Wang 2023).

Qi (2013) demonstrates that two common kinds of *guanxi* can be found in the Chinese context. One is generated and emerges from a long-term stable relationship within networks with mutuality—this exchange is characterised by “moral obligations and emotional attachments” (Yan 1996, p. 226-9), such as friendship and family, which can be known as ‘primary’ *guanxi* that emphasises favour-seeking, or namely *ren qing* in Chinese (Hwang 1987; Qi 2013). Through such a reciprocal relationship, *guanxi* constructs a “harmonious society” by enhancing interpersonal commitments, trust, responsibilities, and bonds, which can also be observed between “friends” on WeChat in social life during the pandemic. The other one is ‘extended’ *guanxi*, which is a transactional, advantageous relationship intentionally formed as an instrument to collaborate or access, likely dominant, economic or political benefits by circumventing an inadequate system or utilising bureaucratic privilege

(Hwang 1987; Qi 2013; Yan 1996). While this phenomenon can be observed in the business sector, it also occurs between individuals in different hierarchical relationships and may lead to corruption (Qi 2013).

This case illustrates how the desire for visibility in the digital dimension intersected with cultural expectations rooted in Confucian relational norms that persisted in the physical realm. While utilising *guanxi* can accelerate the path to success, Interviewee R realised they needed to grovel to build an extended relationship with the person who controlled traffic allocation, in exchange for expanding their influence. The lack of *guanxi* and the unwillingness to “please someone” to initiate a connection with the contact owner created a sense of exclusion and prevented Interviewee R from becoming an influencer. The inequality embedded in the social structure of traditional Chinese culture bleeds into cyberspace, unconsciously disrupting the dissemination of information, decision-making and the operation of an account on Weibo by establishing implicit rules and social norms that extend beyond technical affordances and platform regulations.

Platform censorship and strategic expression

Interviewees A and K shared similar experiences in searching for and accessing information on other platforms via Weibo. Interviewee A said that not everything can be found or explained completely on Weibo due to the strict censorship and limitations of the forum. Interviewee A added that they mainly follow vloggers on Weibo, who often base themselves on other platforms such as bilibili.com, using Weibo primarily to promote content on those sites. When vloggers post on Weibo, they typically share a brief description, a trailer, and a hyperlink directing followers to bilibili.com, rather than uploading the entire work to Weibo.

As Weibo is not a typical UGC platform, it cannot serve as a professional vlog-sharing website like bilibili.com. However, this approach remains effective in disseminating key information and attracting traffic for vloggers. Hence, Weibo converges information from other platforms to enhance convenience and diversify sources.

The role of censorship on Weibo was a recurring theme in participants' narratives.

Interviewee K used Weibo to access content that was attempting to circumvent censorship.

They are obsessed with BL fan fiction, which is considered taboo under the so-called “harmony” (*he xie*) framework, and faces the risk of being labelled vulgar and obscene under the current publication policies¹⁶. As a result, their reading experience is frequently disrupted by websites shutting down due to censorship. Su has discussed censorship in China in her study on TikTok (2024), which is also applicable to this research. She notes that cultural production in China is facing double-layered censorship from both the platforms and the state. Although the initial aim was to “stabilise society, filter harmful content and, most importantly, contain the democratising potential of the Internet” (p. 51), Su (2024) observed that censorship now penetrated every corner of content production, including banning or removing content related to subjects such as homosexuality, sociopathy or suicide.

Interviewee K found the level of censorship frustrating. However, Interviewee K equally used Weibo to track back to the authors' accounts and access alternative links to access the works

¹⁶ The “clear-up” web campaign (*qing lang xing dong*) has been implemented since 2020, to eliminate pornography and violent content on the internet. This campaign also targeted BL fan fiction, authors and relevant platforms due to the erotic depiction of homosexuality (Cyberspace Administration of China 2020).

saved on other covert platforms. VPN services are sometimes also used to access files stored outside of China¹⁷. Learning how to access covert sites is a skill one must cultivate in ‘boys’ love’ (BL) fandom, according to my latest research on transcultural BL fandom consuming Chinese BL works (Hu, Hu, & Zou forthcoming). Weibo enforces censorship and is also a platform where users can help one another circumvent it.

While Interviewee S knows that censorship on Weibo cannot be entirely circumvented, they nonetheless use Weibo tactically to circumvent censorship for a short time. The use of “strategies” confuses the system, meaning it takes a longer time to detect and respond to certain keywords. Almost every Weibo user in this study had strategies to avoid censorship on Weibo, including transforming texts into pictures, adding random watermarks on pictures without blocking key information, inserting punctuations or spaces between words, quoting from literature and applying metaphors (see Figure 6), using homophones, deploying abbreviations from pinyin or online language to compose posts and replacing sensitive words with emojis. All these methods were aimed at concealing critical information.

¹⁷ Su’s study (2024) also shows that the Chinese government has made a giant effort, including issuing a series of laws, to ban and crack down on unauthorised use of VPNs to increase cyber control. Yet, in practice, there are still VPNs available to download online.

“塞德里克·迪戈里是被伏地魔杀死的。魔法部不希望我告诉你们这些。有些同学的家长可能会对我的做法感到震惊——这或者是因为他们不能相信伏地魔真的回来了，或者是因为他们认为我不应该把这件事告诉你们，毕竟你们年纪还小。然而我相信，说真话永远比撒谎要好。如果我们试图把塞德里克的死说成是一场意外事故，或归咎于他自己的粗心大意，那都是对他形象的一种侮辱。”

Figure 6: A quote from *Harry Potter 4*, the novel¹⁸. It was used on Weibo to imply the government was ignoring their mistake and lying about Dr Li Wenliang being the real whistle-blower on the outbreak of COVID-19, screenshot provided by Interviewee A.

Additionally, Interviewee S noted that the algorithm on Weibo is normally reactive, and in most situations, it will not take immediate action, leaving a window for sensitive information to be seen and disseminated. Interviewee K, with their social media marketing experience, stated that the algorithm tends to prioritise monitoring an unusual volume of sharing rather than every single word posted. Thus, before a post reaches a threshold due to the surging number of reposts, content can stay online for a short time, be captured and saved in other forms for further dissemination.

¹⁸ This quote refers to the scene in which Albus Dumbledore announces the truth of the death of Cedric Diggory. According to the plot, Voldemort actually killed Cedric, but the Ministry of Magic denied the fact that Voldemort had revived to cover up a series of mistakes they had made and to protect their authority, using the excuse of “Do not want to cause public panic”.

Applying these strategies and having a tactical understanding of the platform's moderation logic allows Weibo users to share sensitive messages and express their opinions about the government and other circumstances during the pandemic. However, the necessity of such tactics also reveals the pervasive nature of digital repression and the limits of civic expression in tightly controlled media environments. Without these strategies, views critical of or at odds with the policies of the ruling regime will automatically be removed on social media platforms. And more ironically, this became the standard operating procedure on Weibo. The phenomenon reinforced the Foucauldian notion of 'normalisation' (1979) discussed in the Literature Review chapter by which forms of suppression become naturalised. Here, censorship has become a natural part of the interviewees' daily life. The interviewees are fully aware of the restrictions, understand the mechanism, recognise the triggers, and know how to address them. Instead of thinking about how to restrict or subvert government control of Chinese social media, many Chinese users accept and continue to live with it.

The unique political context in the digital public sphere further encourages users to express their creativity when posting, particularly when their opinions relate to sensitive topics. At the same time, these restraints can equally be an obstacle for some users, particularly older users. While the need to be creative adds some entertaining elements to Weibo use, it requires Weibo users to have a rich knowledge of popular culture and online language to understand encoded content.

For example, some transformation and pinyin abbreviations can be very confusing: homosexuality has turned into “phonebook” (*tong xun lu*)¹⁹, police have become “Uncle Hat” (*mao zi shu shu*); some references to crime, such as rape and theft, are rephrased as “forced love” (*qiang zhi ai*) or “QJ” (*qiang jian*), and “shopping for free” (*0 yuan gou*); “government” and “political correctness” can be shortened to “ZF” and “ZZZQ” (abbreviation of *zheng fu* and *zheng zhi zheng que*) and the word “sensitive” (*min gan*) can be modified as “min G”. These techniques are more popular and effective among young people who have mastered the pinyin system, unlike older generations, whose pinyin education was limited. While encoding sensitive information can seem exciting, the overuse of pinyin abbreviations, as Interviewee S argued, only adds an extra obstacle to content delivery. Instead of helping content to be shared more widely, this strategy actually limits its audience.

Similarly, medical staff wearing PPE during the pandemic were called “Baymax” with love (*da bai*, as they resembled the character in *Big Hero 6*). In addition, the quote in Figure 6 from *Harry Potter* was used to denote that the Chinese government had censored something on the grounds that it would harm the public. Social media users from older generations may not be familiar with the children’s literature or movies that appeal to younger people. Hence, they cannot fully understand the messages.

¹⁹ Homosexuality is a sensitive word in China, so it is shortened as “txl” (*tong xing lian*) in digital communication or further refers to “phonebook” (*tong xun lu*, the same result using the abbreviation “txl” typing in pinyin on keyboard).

Echo chambers and detox

Weibo creates a space for users to pursue their hobbies and manage their emotional well-being. This aligns with the ‘networked public’ on social media, through which frequent interactions can form based on shared interests and goals among users (boyd 2010).

Interviewees K, C, and N all indicated that they were enthusiastic fans of BL stories and specific genres, including audio dramas, video streaming, novels, and fan fiction, actively absorbing relevant content as part of their entertainment. They expressed a strong desire to use Weibo to engage in fandom and “follow celebrities” (*zui xing*) during the pandemic.

Interestingly, Interviewees K and C both adopted similar strategies to isolate preferred voices and improve the efficiency of gathering information: limiting the number of accounts they follow or categorising preferred bloggers in a special list and viewing them from there.

Beyond ‘following’, Interviewee K emphasised that there is now another level named “highlight” (*te bie guan zhu*). “Highlight” ensures that the content from “highlighted accounts” will stand out from the content shared by those in the following list. Hence, although they did not spend much time on Weibo, they could swiftly get updates by simply scrolling through the top posts in their feed.

Three points are noteworthy based on the responses above. First, the efficiency of collecting information is supported by the openness of Weibo and its unlimited post capacity with instant notifications pushed to followers via phones, unlike public accounts on WeChat, which only allow owners to post a certain number of times per day (Interviewee K). This feature enables users to receive immediate updates from their followed accounts. Second, by separating their preferred accounts from the main news feed, the users simultaneously exclude themselves from COVID-related news and foreground their preferred items.

Interviewee C emphasised that they did not actively follow either the latest news of COVID or the Trending Topics on Weibo because they were overwhelmingly negative and anxiety inducing. Furthermore, Interviewee C was concerned that there was “so much disinformation”. It was interesting to discover that users managed to customise their news feed, filtering out distressing content and avoiding anxiety-inducing posts.

Thirdly, they used filters, which they call “highlighting” to narrow their field of engagement. Adding specific labels to those accounts indeed helps the algorithm to identify users’ preferred topics and separate targeted content from other ‘white noise’ (Terranova 2004). This echoes Interviewee S’s reliance on the algorithm to constantly check for pandemic news. It follows that the users themselves, are constantly blocking unwanted content and customising their feeds. While the increasing weight put on those accounts enhances the efficiency of extracting necessary information, the need for echo chambers is foregrounded. At the same time, it emphasises the need to establish boundaries for self-protection or create a ‘filter bubble’. It is intriguing that this filter bubble, instead of fixing personalised feeds and constraining one’s worldview, as argued by other scholars (see Bruns 2019; Flew 2020; Su 2024), is vital for avoiding negativity by restoring the nature of entertainment and focusing on fun. Weibo, then, can function as a protective zone during public health crises. The flexibility to curate content allowed users to assert control over their digital environment, creating a space of psychological reprieve within a broader atmosphere of fear and uncertainty.

Is disconnection the next trend?

As noted, the respondents saw Weibo as a less attractive platform for socialising and sharing their personal lives. Apart from the regulated nature of the platform, research participants cited various deterrents to active posting. Interviewee N was concerned about the risk of cyberbullying because of the experience of being harassed by “keyboard warriors” (*jian pan xia*) and “trolls” (*gang jing*).

Privacy issues are also concerning on Weibo. As Weibo is a public space where everyone can view each other’s posts by default and is likely to track identities through public content (Interviewees M & N), this also highlights the issue of personal information abuse, which can lead to cyberbullying or even cancellation. This problem gained widespread attention after news that the teenage daughter of a Baidu executive “doxed” (*kai he*, also known as *ren rou sou suo*) a pregnant woman on Weibo as revenge for a conflict in March 2025²⁰ (Luo 2025). Weibo users were shocked by her malice and concerned by how easily personal data can be accessed and traced on Weibo with just a few details, as well as by the inaction of the

²⁰ The 13-year-old girl used “doxing” as a “punishment” against other fans who hold different opinions, which led to massive cyberbullying against a pregnant lady. The teenage girl claimed that her father, an executive at Baidu, had granted her access to the company’s database, allowing her to freely trace anyone’s personal information by using their information shown on Weibo.

platform owners. This revealed the potential for data breaches on Weibo, which puts users' anonymity at risk.

Echoing Etter and Albu (2021), Interviewees K and M felt exhausted by the overwhelming number of advertisements on Weibo due to the highly commercialised nature of the platform and worried that whatever they posted would be overwhelmed by advertisements, making it impossible for them to reach the people they wanted to connect with. Interviewee C also cautioned about widespread disinformation on Weibo. Reposting may contribute to the dissemination of false information. These factors, they felt, jeopardised the digital public sphere on Weibo and resulted in declining meaningful interactions. While Weibo was once a vibrant space for peer socialisation, they viewed it as either an obsolete or a dysfunctional site for one-way content consumption.

Interviewee D typified this shift and now views Weibo as a channel for venting negative emotions and recording unconventional opinions—precisely because it has lost its social vibrancy. They said that they had already lost almost all their contacts on the platform. They said Weibo was popular among high school and university students at the time, corresponding to Interviewee D's generation, so they mainly connected with classmates and friends from that period via Weibo. When their lives drifted apart after graduation and new platforms emerged, they abandoned Weibo. Interviewee D opined that there is a life cycle for social platforms as a product, and it is normal for people to leave the old for the new. However, Interviewee D found that being disconnected from past contacts offered a paradoxical sense of expressive freedom.

Interviewee D explicitly said that they were against the government regarding the quarantine policies, a position which put them at risk of being reported. Interviewee D viewed Weibo as a safe space to jot down ideas as a “personal journal” without being judged or causing arguments, because they are not “discussing” their ideas with friends. This concept aligns with Davis and Jurgenson’s notion of ‘context collision’ (2014), which emphasises the importance of maintaining boundaries in order to avoid a social crisis. It is also interesting to note the struggle of sharing in every mediated conversation, as a sender must always presume the stances of their imagined audience “in order to present themselves appropriately, based on technological affordances and immediate social context” (Marwick & boyd 2010, p. 115). Interviewee D prefers posting on Weibo, where “no one’s watching”, to sharing on WeChat, where the contact list is full of people from various backgrounds from daily life and work and different levels of intimacy. Anyone is a potential source of conflict. This implies that connections on social media can become limitations when the sender conceptualises context collision, leading to potential self-censorship.

Summary

Weibo’s role during the COVID pandemic reflects a complex interplay of technological affordances, user agency, political regulation, and cultural norms. It served simultaneously as a news source, an emotional nexus, a propaganda battleground, and a diasporic connector.

While the openness of Weibo allowed for diverse forms of engagement, the structural, cultural and socio-political limitations embedded in the platform shaped users’ modalities.

Rather than viewing Weibo through a singular lens—regarding it as a state propaganda tool or a public sphere—the study reveals its hybrid nature as a space of both empowerment and

constraint. The interview data illustrates not only how people consumed and verified information in the public health crisis but also how they protected their loved ones, reset emotional boundaries, expressed dissent, sought identity continuity, and eventually renegotiated their relationship with digital platforms. In this light, Weibo exemplifies the broader tensions of media engagement in contemporary China: the coexistence of expressive creativity and structural limitation, visibility and vulnerability, connection and fatigue. In Chapter Five, this thesis will focus on intense emotions and motivations, and their relations to modalities, examining how Weibo's affective public ignited, sustained, and disrupted the collective impulse to "stay cohesive".

Chapter Five: How did users interpret the slogan, “stay cohesive” on Weibo?

This chapter will examine how the affective content circulating on Weibo translated into large-scale cooperation in response to the national call to “stay cohesive”, and how the sense of “unity” was produced, negotiated, and contested in order to address sub-questions 3) and 4). In particular, I will explore how shared emotions—fear, grief, pride, frustration, hope—became catalysts for coordinated behaviour across networked public. The chapter begins by tracing the formation and disruption of the affective public on Weibo, analysing how emotional expression not only forged temporary solidarities but also revealed deep fractures in participation and belonging.

Public exposure and affective public

Beyond providing a space for knowledge exchange, Weibo also offered users a platform to promptly disclose policy deficiencies and voice concerns about the current situation. Through mobile photography and posting on Weibo, users exposed information that had not yet received public attention and lay outside the narratives of mainstream media. In complementing official perspectives, they indirectly performed a supervisory role—sometimes even demanding that official media collaborate with citizens to monitor the implementation of government policies. Public grievances triggered negative emotions that circulated within social networks, forming affective publics (Papacharissi 2014) and transforming Weibo into a virtual site of protest (Jurgenson 2012), especially when physical rallies were prohibited during the pandemic. These posts revealed loopholes in pandemic

prevention policies and uncovered various errors that occurred during implementation at the grassroots level. Such details, which were absent from both mass media and official Weibo accounts—and even contradicted them—allowed audiences to see the stories behind the government’s positive reports.

Most of these posts appeared first-hand on individual Weibo accounts. By using hashtags to enter Trending Topics, they attracted extensive discussion and were later followed up by mainstream media. In this way, citizens’ posts and reposts prompted news coverage and foregrounded civic supervision, sometimes leading relevant authorities to take corrective action. For example, during the Wuhan outbreak, when hospital isolation wards were insufficient, Weibo posts reported that dormitory buildings at a local university had been repurposed as a quarantine facility during the suspension of classes. Although other Weibo users expressed understanding of the government’s order to handle the crisis, the university’s implementation was disrespectful and inconsiderate: students’ personal belongings left in dorm rooms were cleared out and disposed of without notice (see Figure 7). Without on-site workers posting on Weibo on behalf of the students, they would not have known that their properties had been treated as waste and thrown away without notice.

The incident quickly escalated on Weibo’s trending list, causing anxiety among university students whose accommodations had also been repurposed. Indeed, more issues relevant to this problem were exposed on Weibo in late February 2020, including the violation of the residents’ privacy (e.g. male staff and volunteers broke in, checked and used the owners’ personal storage and items without permission, filmed and posted the inside of the rooms to social platforms after moving into a female dormitory), sexual harassment (e.g. male staff and volunteers expressed obscene comments about the girls’ items in their videos; some of them

dug out the female residents' contact and harassed them on WeChat), and property damage (e.g. personal property that left in the dormitory, such as desktop computer, were broke by the staff).

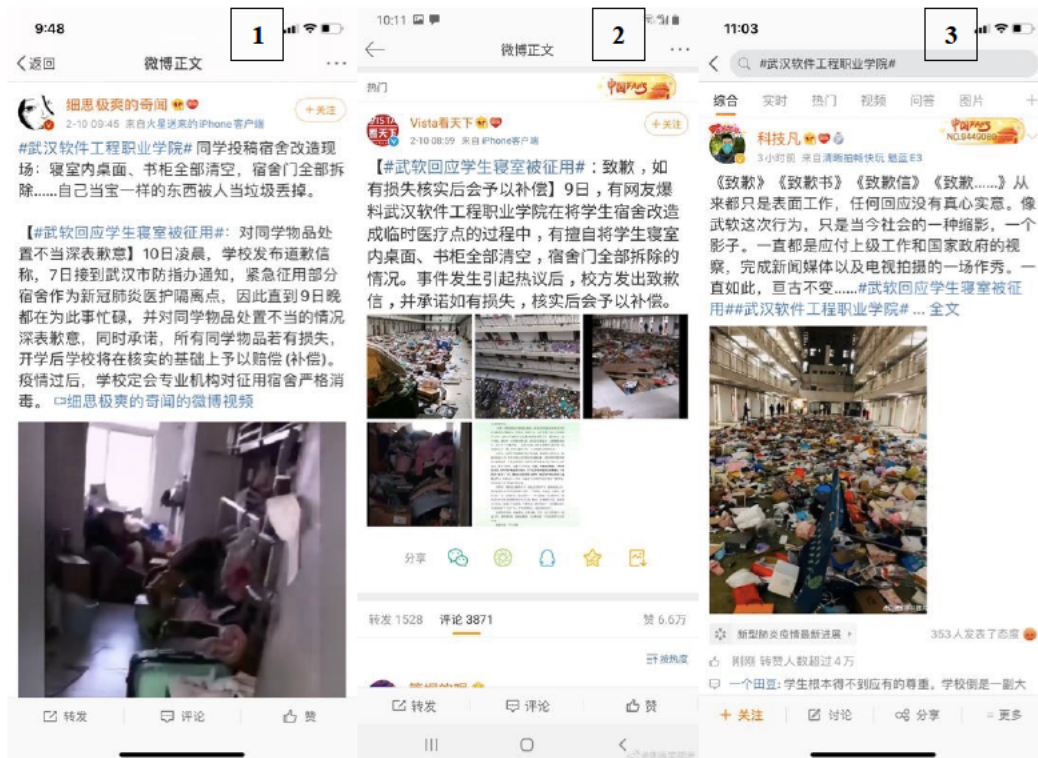


Figure 7: Weibo posts sharing that students' personal belongings were treated as garbage and disposed of without respect during the repurposing of the accommodations, viewed 10 February 2020.

The posts demonstrated the frustrating result of the dormitory transformation. The messy construction site was directly mediated through mobile phones, as the primary material, to Weibo, which embodied the authenticity and immediacy. The emotions of individual students were further conveyed and amplified by influencers.

In Figure 7, Screenshot 1, the user mentioned the affected student who provided the video for them to share, implying their identity as an influencer, or at least having a certain number of followers. They spoke for the students and commented that, on the construction site, the dormitory was emptied, and personal belongings were discarded as rubbish. This sympathetic expression contrasted with the hypocritical apology from the university. Although the university admitted its wrongdoing, it attributed this to the “urgent request” of the local government and claimed that the staff were too hectic to remain careful and considerate, implying they could not be blamed. A mainstream news agent picked up this incident and juxtaposed more pictures of the dreadful situation with the letter of apology in Screenshot 2, which attracted 1,528 reposts, 3,871 comments and 66,000 likes. Although the widespread discussion generated public pressure, pushing the university to promise an internal investigation and compensation for affected students, the apology, as criticised in Screenshot 3, appeared perfunctory and performative—a response to reassure the government rather than a genuine reflection to acknowledge the students. This statement was liked and reposted by more than 40,000 people. These data provided substantial support for the criticism and indicated the rise of the affective public.

Yet, unlike traditional protest arenas, this digital activism was ephemeral and constantly subject to moderation. The institution’s “performance” and its intention to calm the students were also reflected in its promise to verify losses and provide compensation to the students—it offered no concrete standards or procedures. From beginning to end, students’ rights were neither acknowledged nor seriously considered, as one user commented, as shown at the bottom of Screenshot 3. Instead, the university justified its actions in the name of “fighting the pandemic”, implying that individual rights could be overlooked when collective safety was at risk.

Moreover, this participatory supervision was never fully autonomous. It operated within a system where state and platform governance coexisted, shaping what could be seen, discussed, and amplified. This case demonstrates that social media in China did not necessarily function, as some scholars have suggested of Western social media, as an instrument for the marginalised to equally pursue change (Asen 2000; Bennett 2012; Castells 2012; Loader & Mercea 2011; Warner 2002); rather, it allowed dominant powers to further amplify their influence and shape public opinion. Participatory democracy does not automatically materialise simply because more people are involved (Fuchs 2017).

The power to define which grievances became visible remained asymmetrically distributed, reproducing the existing hierarchy between citizens and institutions. The government and affiliated institutions wield control over both narrative and visibility, often reframing civic discourse into patriotic or moral terms aligned with state ideology. Governments and universities can harness social media to reinforce the “main melody” (*zhu xuan lü*²¹) and disseminate “positive energy” (*zheng neng liang*), thereby devaluing the legitimacy of student grievances. By subtly reframing students’ appeals for information and respect as selfish concerns over private interests, authorities positioned them against the larger collective cause of pandemic control and moral value. Through this discursive comparison, students were cast as being on the opposite side of the “stay cohesive” narrative. This rhetorical strategy reflects

²¹ Party-approved “main melody” refers to assenting narratives promoting the moral and political superiority of the CPC regime (Chen 2022).

Foucault's notion of biopolitical rationality, in which state and institutional power regulate bodies and rights through discourses of protection and necessity (Taylor 2014).

Meanwhile, the illusion of empowerment—expressing grievances and seeing them spread—masks the persistence of surveillance and top-down control. Even though students could use Trending Topics to mobilise broader support, Weibo ultimately remained under state surveillance and corporate control. The practice of “removing Trending Topics” (*che re sou*) at the request of powerful institutions and enterprises has been common. Thus, while Weibo appeared to function as a digital public sphere, its operations were deeply constrained by the intertwined interests of government and capital, both of which take precedence over the appeals of individuals or the public as a whole.

Help-seeking across social networks

Interviewee K said that many users, including themselves, used Weibo to seek help or assist others by amplifying calls for assistance. Weibo's affordances for openness and connectivity made it a critical space for seeking and extending help, especially when official systems of assistance were slow, fragmented, or inaccessible. Unlike WeChat, whose architecture centres on private, bounded networks, Weibo's public visibility facilitated encounters among strangers who could mobilise collective empathy and practical support. Interviewee K recalled seeing Weibo posts during the lockdown period in which many migrant workers were forced to quarantine in place and could not return home for the Spring Festival in 2020. Because they were separated from their elderly parents, they were unable to accompany them or receive immediate updates about their health after the outbreak of COVID. Many older people suffered from chronic diseases and did not know how to use smartphones or social

media, resulting in communication breakdowns. Their children, therefore, turned to Weibo to search for neighbours living nearby who could visit their parents on their behalf. Such requests for help were numerous at the time.

Whenever Interviewee K saw similar posts, they would help by reposting them—even though they had few followers and did not personally know the people involved. They believed that through Weibo’s algorithmic mechanisms, reposts and likes could help increase visibility and push these messages to a broader audience. Although they could not provide direct physical assistance, they saw such small acts as part of their personal contribution to the collective struggle against the pandemic—small gestures that transformed ordinary users into contributors to a greater social effort “with a click”.

Interviewee K also attempted to use Weibo when trying to care for their elderly grandfather, who was isolating separately and suffering from chronic illness. They admitted to feeling frustrated and angry with the situation, pointing out that during the lockdown, the government’s policies for caring for the elderly with chronic conditions existed largely in name only. Although official documents listed relevant procedures and contact points, when they actually tried to reach out to these departments, they faced multiple barriers and received no response. Desperate, they began searching Weibo for related posts and Trending Topics to compare his experience with others in the same area, only to find widespread feelings of helplessness and despair:

“I remember that during the pandemic, Weibo also published information about these so-called convenience services for people with chronic illnesses. But if you looked at the comments under those Trending Topics, most of them were people questioning it—like,

why can't I access this service?... There was an overwhelming amount of public frustration....And under those hashtag topics, you'd also find people sharing their own situations or asking for help—hoping that collective input might offer some practical advice...So the overall feeling on Weibo at the time was this: everyone's asking, but no one has any answers.” (Interviewee K)

In the absence of clear guidance from official Weibo channels, Interviewee K observed that citizens started mobilising their own networks to take action. Using grassroots coordination, they created informal systems of support that often combined Weibo and WeChat. Users first posted or collected requests for help on Weibo, then followers searched within their own resources to see what they could contribute. They exchanged suggestions, developed strategies, and then used WeChat to activate their social networks—contacting friends, relatives, or couriers to implement specific tasks. In Interviewee K's case, to prevent interruptions in their grandfather's medication, Weibo users identified designated hospitals and pharmacies, while others found couriers through WeChat. They coordinated with local community committees, connected couriers with volunteer leaders, provided recipient lists and addresses, and eventually succeeded in delivering medicine to isolated residents in need.

This cross-platform form of civic collaboration can be understood as connective action (Bennett & Segerberg 2013). It relied less on central organisation and more on the distributed coordination of individuals whose personal motivations and emotional investments aligned around shared social goals. Although the term originates in the study of social movements (Bennett & Segerberg 2013), it closely describes this type of grassroots coordination, which emerged as a response to rigid lockdowns and bureaucratic inaction. Through Weibo, users aggregated dispersed requests for help, while WeChat provided the infrastructural affordances

for operational management—organising volunteer groups, allocating resources, and coordinating last-mile deliveries. This interplay between platforms served two functions: first, it avoided systemic interference from censorship and comment filtering on Weibo; and second, it leveraged WeChat’s organisational affordances for data management, such as the “group notes” function (*jie long*) for collaborative documentation and the sharing and editing of Word or Excel files (Interviewee K). In this sense, WeChat acted as a tool of efficiency within the broader framework of connective action, facilitating the actualisation of collective intentions into concrete outcomes. Instead of worrying solely about their own circumstances, citizens used social media to integrate and distribute resources through mutual aid. Moreover, this process demonstrates how Weibo users’ *guanxi* (Qi 2013)—their personal networks and relational capital—were transformed into bridging social capital during resource coordination (Putnam 2000).

Following Jurgenson’s (2012) concept of augmented reality, social networks transform local issues into borderless concerns when they enter the virtual world, enabling citizens scattered across the city to become aware of community difficulties and provide assistance through online support networks. Local crises—such as medicine shortages or isolated elderly care—became augmented issues: grounded in physical communities yet amplified through networked public. The success of such cooperation served as a further motivation, reinforcing the momentum of local collaboration.

Importantly, although these spontaneous, urgent civic initiatives resulted from shortcomings in pandemic policy, they were not acts of resistance but complementary contributions to the official prevention effort, driven by a sense of collectivism and care for others that is central to Chinese traditional culture. In doing so, they enacted what could be described as bottom-up

governance—where civic engagement emerged not as protest, but as an actualisation of solidarity and pragmatism within state-defined moral frameworks. This resonates with Dahlgren and Hills' (2023) discussion of civic culture in facilitating media engagement, in which they argued a self-perception as a subject capable of engagement is powerful to spur engagement toward participatory democracy. The scholars mentioned “people must be able to take on a civic self, to imagine themselves as actors who can engage, participate and can make meaningful interventions in relevant political issues” (Dahlgren & Hills 2023, p. 80).

In this process, individuals filled the gaps left by formal policies without violating laws or regulations, establishing new modes of cooperation among individuals, communities, and local institutions. Through affective participation and relational reciprocity, platforms like Weibo and WeChat functioned as dual infrastructures of connection and actualisation, where individual goodwill converged into collective agency. Before the government could respond, they had already set practical examples for others to follow. Essentially, this grassroots action embodied the spirit of “stay cohesive”. By sharing their connections through social media, participants collectively benefited and developed a stronger sense of community.

Similar forms of connective action within augmented reality were also evident in the provision of material support to Hubei Province during the early stages of the outbreak. The sudden announcement of the outbreak and strict lockdown measures left many people unprepared, especially in terms of personal protective equipment. For frontline medical workers who worked tirelessly to care for patients, this shortage created an urgent crisis. Many hospitals and organisations began to post calls for help on Weibo, appealing to the public for donations.

These requests were then disseminated through WeChat, where interpersonal trust networks facilitated the material logistics of donation. They entered users' personal social networks and spread further through group chats and Moments. For example, as shown in the Figure 8, one Weibo user received a hospital's request for help from Enshi, Hubei, and subsequently shared it within a WeChat group of 71 people, to mobilise friends in her network who were keen to support the lockdown areas, demonstrating how digital networks made local suffering globally perceptible and actionable:

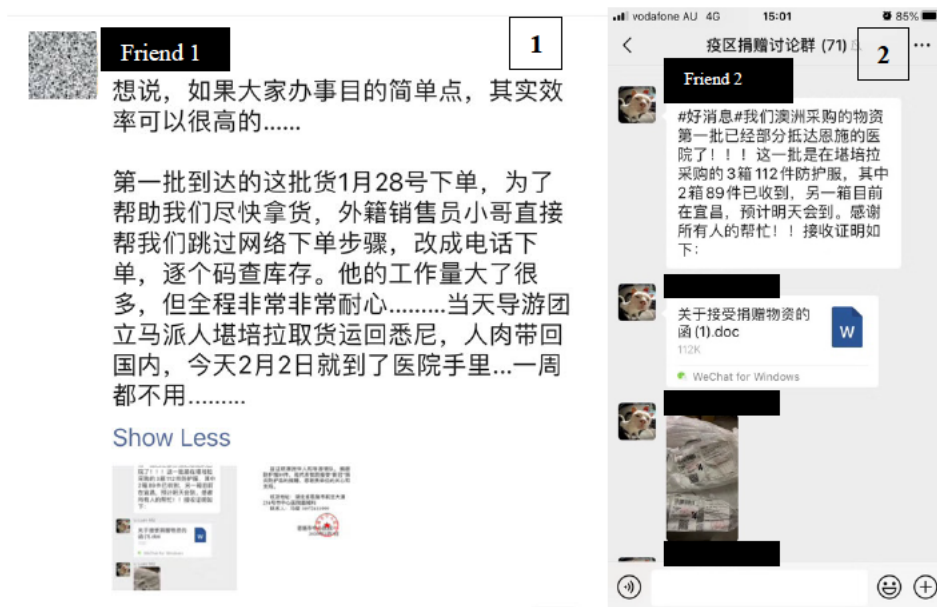


Figure 8: A friend shared their experience on Moments about organising overseas PPE donation via WeChat, viewed 2 February 2020.

In Screenshot 1, Friend 1 appreciated the patience of the local salesman, who helped quickly locate and collect inventory for their order. Then, they collected protective equipment from Australia and arranged for tour guides returning to China to carry and deliver the supplies directly. Friend 1 quoted the conversation in Screenshot 2 to demonstrate the efficiency of the grassroots donation. Friend 2 reported that 89 (two boxes) of 112 protective suits (three

boxes) purchased from Canberra have arrived at the target hospital, and the remainder are expected to arrive by tomorrow. With this, Friend 1 further stated that if everyone could maintain a sincere, pure heart in helping, grassroots efforts could become a powerful source of support.

This form of online–offline international collaboration maximised the power of grassroots volunteerism and enabled the international audience to stay informed and support the local community. These spontaneously organised donation campaigns also reflected widespread public disillusionment with the Chinese Red Cross (Interviewees K, S & Y). Supported by social media, grassroots donations were perceived as more efficient and transparent, challenging the legitimacy of official charity organisations that were often criticised for corruption and mismanagement. The affordances of Weibo and WeChat—instant documentation, traceable updates, and peer verification—made ordinary citizens not just donors but coordinators, witnesses, and auditors of humanitarian practice.

This transformation also underscores how social capital was reconstituted in digital form. Trust was no longer just derived from institutional reputation but also from the relational credibility of individuals within overlapping Weibo–WeChat ecosystems. Each successful delivery, photograph, or thank-you post reinforced this affective loop of trust, where authenticity and immediacy became new moral currencies.

Is it helping or sanctioning?

While Weibo enabled the rapid circulation of information and mutual assistance during the pandemic, it also became a site where moral outrage, anxiety, and collective frustration

converged into digital violence. What began as a plea for medical help turned into a public spectacle of condemnation, exposing how affective energies could be redirected from solidarity to aggression, for example, cyberbullying and scapegoating. The following case reveals the darker side of emotional mobilisation and moral discourse on Chinese social media.

Interviewee R shared a controversial incident involving a young woman who became a target of online abuse after seeking help on Weibo in March 2022. The user, who went by the name “Evie Bu-bu” (hereafter referred to as Evie), was a Chinese student studying in the United Kingdom. After being diagnosed with sarcoma, she returned to China for further treatment. Although Evie’s critical condition allowed her to be hospitalised, she was unable to receive immediate therapy due to strict quarantine regulations. Doctors warned that delaying treatment could be life-threatening, so she posted on RedNote and Weibo to appeal for help—hoping to find an alternative solution that would allow her to begin treatment without completing the quarantine period.

Evie’s plea quickly went viral and became a Weibo Trending Topic, with the hashtag “A quarantined overseas student returned with cancer cannot receive therapy in Shanghai” (see Figure 9). While some users expressed sympathy and offered advice, a much larger portion of online commentary accused her of selfishness and moral failure. Many users presumed her wealthy background because she was studying abroad and claimed she sought to exploit her family’s wealth and privilege to gain unfair access to scarce medical resources, while others were still waiting in line.



Figure 9: The Trending Topic attracted 2,766,900 views and 1,830 discussions related to the topic, viewed 26 September 2025, *Sohu News*.

The brutal wave of cyberbullying forced Evie to delete her Weibo account and withdraw from the internet quickly. Although her original posts and comment threads are no longer accessible, related news coverage remains available (Sohu News 2022). Interviewee R emphasised that this case was evidence of how moral judgment became weaponised on social media: users framed themselves as morally righteous while projecting aggression and frustration onto a vulnerable individual. Typical comments included: “Do you think you’re the only one with cancer?” and “Other people’s lives matter too!” (Sohu News 2022). These statements rhetorically positioned the attackers as defenders of social fairness, while constructing Evie as selfish, entitled, and disruptive.

Critics also justified their hostility through pandemic-related reasoning, arguing that Evie’s request would force medical workers to quarantine with her and further strain limited resources as a result. Some posts carried slogans such as “Say no to attention-seeking and disruption!” (*fan dui an nao fen pei*), accusing Evie of exploiting others’ attention to take advantage and reinforcing her image as a public enemy. In this way, the online crowd transformed moral reasoning into collective condemnation, judging the girl as unethical rather than empathising with her as a patient seeking survival.

Yet, it is important to note that the emotional alignment among the attackers did not necessarily indicate that they shared a collective political standpoint (Papacharissi & Trevey 2018). This implies that the affective public is not necessarily fighting for what they are claiming loudly. They were simply clusters of commenters hiding behind screens and keyboards, without clarifying their own positions in this particular case. Through likes, comments, and reposts, they continuously fuelled the anger and frustration that had accumulated online during the pandemic.

Interviewee R argued that most of these users failed to establish any logical connection between their personal situations and Evie's appeal, nor could they justify the reasons for their hostility. The case, as Interviewee R described, happened to make Evie a scapegoat, vilifying her as the source of their suffering and providing a convenient outlet for their repressed emotions. Evie's request itself might not have directly affected such a large group of people, but it intersected with broader discourses of social injustice within China's *guanxi*-based society, referring to the extended, rent-seeking and strategic relationship of benefits (Qi 2013; Yan 1996), and collided with rising nationalist sentiment at the time. This thesis argues that Evie's situation triggered the public not only because of the fear of the pandemic but also because it mirrored their own lived experiences of inequality, the pain of being marooned, and neglect under state control. In that sense, the incident triggered self-reflection on systemic discontent, which people then projected onto her and others with similar backgrounds.

Interviewee R further pointed out that the criticisms directed at Evie were not based on rational evaluation but were deeply infused with anti-rich and xenophobic emotions, equating studying abroad with Westernised rich men despising their own country. Many users used the

opportunity to gain online attention by “riding the wave” while unleashing their negative emotions toward the broader group of overseas students. This further undermines the rationality of Weibo users and supports Weibo’s role as a digital public sphere for open discussion about social issues—Interviewee R criticised those attackers as a rabble.

This scapegoating is becoming a social media ritual, as a communicative tool for the public to build solidarity and construct public discourse via responding to urgent media events in certain patterns (Burgess et al. 2019; Hallinan et al. 2021; Highfield 2016). Here, it reflects a collective and underlying dissatisfaction with government control and social inequality, yet the public cannot change that. Alternatively, the public formed a connective action to target any activities that reminded them of the dilemma. Tragically, this expression was built upon collective bullying and the sacrifice of an innocent individual, exposing the coldness and intolerance of the digital community, as well as the disconnection between emotional empathy and rational judgment.

In fact, Evie was not the true cause of the public’s frustration and suffering; rather, it was the overly strict regulations imposed by the “one-size-fits-all” mindset of the policymakers. What she desired through social media—timely and humane treatment—was actually the same hope shared by many families affected by pandemic policies. At the same time, due to the pervasive system of censorship and digital governance, people lacked legitimate channels to express opposition toward the authorities. By directing their panic, frustration and anger toward Evie, Weibo users engaged in a symbolic form of protest online—Evie’s hope to live has been framed as the embodiment of systemic injustice and administrative imbalance. The emotional conflict surrounding her case revealed not hostility toward her as an individual but rather implicit disapproval of the existing system and its pandemic governance. By

integrating protest for the public's circumstances with emotional release, they were able to relieve psychological pressure while masking it with moral righteousness. This form of resistance to governance and social structure was often realised as internal conflict among the people.

It is sad to admit that although scholars often emphasise the way social media facilitates communication and emotional connection (Castell 2012; Meyerhoff 2006; Sargeant & Tagg 2013), this example corresponds to the popular online saying that “On the internet, people cannot relate to the joy and sorrow of each other” (*hu lian wang shang de bei xi hu bu xiang tong*). In other words, it is often hard to achieve consensus without mutual understanding. Users' expressions of need and the audience's interpretations of those motivations were often misaligned, which intensified rather than resolved social tension.

From a Foucauldian perspective (Feder 2014), this incident reflects how disciplinary power operates not only through state surveillance but also through internalised social norms. Weibo users disciplined each other by enforcing moral conformity. By collectively attacking Evie, users believed they were defending the virus control measures and the outcomes of these policies. However, this thesis argues that their actions reflected resignation toward the costs of maintaining those measures and even a subconscious yearning for the very privilege Evie requested. Their discourse revealed a wish that their own severely ill families might receive the same special consideration and that medical resources might be distributed more fairly.

Yet, such desires clashed with long-standing and well-known Confucian values and the logic of political discipline, which emphasise equality over fairness in collectivism—“do not worry about scarcity, but about unevenness” (*bu huan gua er huan bu jun*). Since no one could

expect special treatment, denying exceptions in the same social class has been internalised as a common personal choice and a way to maintain social harmony (Wang 2023). Under pandemic conditions, individuals wished for personal needs to be fulfilled but were acutely aware that such desires were impermissible. They were repeatedly reminded to remain united, to “stay cohesive” and to avoid undermining collective solidarity for fear of public condemnation. This dynamic reveals how individuals, in order to be accepted within their social network and preserve the right to speak in the public sphere, suppressed personal desires and aligned themselves with collective expectations. Through this process, personal emotions were disciplined, and conformity became the precondition for belonging in the digital public arena.

Interviewee C pointed out that such social codes effectively created a frame for collective behaviour—an implicit standard that governed citizens’ actions. While individual interests were not always be represented by collective goals, violating collective expectations entailed enormous risk. This ever-present risk compelled people to “take sides” to avoid being perceived as a “traitor” and monitor one another, internalising social discipline and suppressing their own dissatisfaction with the call of “stay cohesive”. This also resonates with participatory censorship (Wang & Tan 2023), which refers to decentralised online censorship applied by individuals to establish micro-rules and set the boundaries of discourse. This aligns with “digital vigilantism”, as suggested by Trottier (2017), which describes how citizens adopt public naming and shaming to suppress people and voices they favour less, turning Weibo into a stage to display the consequences of misalignment with mainstream ideas. This practice can be weaponised by Weibo users to target and punish anyone based on their emotions (Fang 2024). As a result, individuals were not perceived as integral parts of the collective but were instead alienated from it, becoming potential “rebellious elements” when

they claimed personal needs. The tension between personal needs and pandemic policies was thus redefined as a contradiction between private interest and collective ideals.

Through social media, citizens took up the role of enforcement, sustaining social stability by framing the opposition between individual and collective as a moral choice. The goal was not only to eliminate dissent but also to unify belief from within via discursive power. In Chinese online society, individual desires like Evie's are now defined as "mad" and excluded to preserve the rational order and correctness of the society. Likewise, users refused to acknowledge the possibility that the girl who sought medical help online might reveal the fragility of their own sacrifices and the uncertainty of their obedience. To preserve the righteousness of their compliance, they cyberbullied and "othered" her—framing her as selfish, deviant, and irrational. This symbolic struggle reaffirmed the idea that following policies and upholding social rules were the only legitimate means of defending collective justice. Yet, it also exposed the citizens' deep frustration with their inability to escape social control and their disillusionment with the lack of reward despite their obedience—a product of their awakening and ambivalence, constrained by their own prior investments in compliance. This process of alienation was not only imposed by the state, but also emerged from people's internalised self-discipline, and should be viewed as a state-society collaborative influence operation (Fang 2024).

At the same time, Interviewee C observed that the cyberbullying and merciless attacks on Weibo revealed the hatred and malice hidden within digital networks. They believed that many comments were not motivated by genuine discussion but by a desire to harm others under the guise of debate. By inflicting pain, perpetrators sought emotional release:

“But to be honest, just because someone is capable of posting that kind of thing doesn’t necessarily mean they’re a terrible person in every aspect—they might actually be a law-abiding citizen in real life. But the fact that they can say those things online shows that there’s definitely a bit of darkness in them... Their family or friends likely won’t see what they’ve said, and that’s part of the reason why online bullying is getting worse and worse... They’re not even based on facts... It’s all about venting by using venomous language to attack people, without having to take any responsibility for it.” (Interviewee C)

Interviewee C further noted that the tension and frustration of the pandemic intensified people’s irritability and sense of helplessness, turning Weibo into a space charged with hostility. As Weibo’s active user base declined, these aggressors became increasingly unrestrained, unconcerned about exposing their darker impulses to acquaintances—thus avoiding what Davis and Jurgenson (2014) describe as “context collision”, which was supposed to be a restriction in such a situation. During this period, affective publics became highly emotional and contagious; perpetrators, on the other hand, found like-minded participants through shared aggression, reinforcing their belief in their own moral correctness (boyd 2010). Speaking from the imagined position of “the majority”, they displayed no empathy toward those who fell outside that frame. Confronted with this increasingly radical discursive environment, Interviewee C gradually disengaged from Weibo.

Interviewee R felt sorry about the impulsive and vindictive attacks that ignored real suffering and showed no respect for life in favour of defending “collective ideals”. Such behaviour, while satisfying for perpetrators, generated immeasurable harm—both psychological and reputational—on the young woman who had turned to social media in a desperate attempt to

survive. Although some users later tried to defend Evie, Interviewee R believed that at the time, few were willing to admit wrongdoing or face the risk of becoming the next target. Ultimately, the girl became a sacrifice to the ideal of “stay cohesive”, dying before society could offer her understanding or compassion:

“Was she actually in the wrong? I don’t think so. She was just trying to survive. Now, some people are finally speaking up for her, saying she had no other choice, that her type of cancer was incredibly aggressive, and that she didn’t actually take away resources from others. But at the time? People just lashed out first and thought later. And now that she’s gone, what’s the point of saying oh, maybe we were wrong? It doesn’t change anything.” (Interviewee R)

In this case, the discursive environment and the dominant political culture deepened the conflict between individual and collective values. Individual needs were urgent and tangible, while the collective goal of “defeating the pandemic” remained abstract and indefinitely postponed. Although logically attainable, this goal was in conflict with a real and immediate struggle between life and death, forcing citizens to confront a moral dilemma: whether to save an individual’s life in the present by risking others’ interests, or to prioritise the collective’s imagined future victory.

State-sponsored peer supervision

“Stay cohesive” was a core value and strategy promoted by the ruling regime and adopted by most citizens to “defeat the pandemic”, representing an alignment between the government’s goal and the citizens’ hopes. This created a momentum for the public to work with the

government and comply with quarantine policies, including policing others' behaviours.

When people used Weibo to cyberbully the young woman with cancer, the government did nothing to stop the bullying and did not censor the Trending Topic. Alternatively, state-controlled outlets or mainstream media may disseminate or amplify slur content created by individuals, provide additional materials to individuals or groups engaging in harassment, and may help censor competing ideas or viewpoints (Fang 2024).

From Fang's (2024) perspective, the state encourages such behaviours, possibly because they are perceived as helping the government to guide the direction of public opinion and avoid potential social unrest (Xu 2016; Xu & Sun 2021). By framing Evie, the victim, as a selfish "traitor", the confrontation generated multiple layers of conflicts between individual and collective interests, Chinese and Western values, and mainstream ideas and dissent. This confrontation enables an affective public to regulate others with shaming (Ahmed 2014) and engage in "digital vigilantism" (Trottier 2017).

A similar form of confrontation and regulation occurred at the beginning of the pandemic, when overseas Chinese returned to China seeking safety but found themselves in conflict with the country's strict epidemic control policies. During quarantine, returning students were the subject of collective online attacks on Weibo because of comments they made criticising the strict policies. Unlike in Evie's case, they were not facing life-threatening emergencies; their resistance to the policies was largely triggered by the fact that they were aware the Western world was managing the pandemic differently.

As observed, some WeChat users shared related Weibo content to their Moments with sarcastic remarks such as "You weren't here when the motherland was fighting the virus, but you're the first to deliver it from thousands of miles away" (*zu guo kang yi ni bu zai, qian li*

tou du di yi ming) (see Figure 10). Such comments reflected the disdain law-abiding citizens had toward this group whom they perceived as behaving irresponsibly and selfishly. Their attitudes were framed as arrogant and entitled, and as reflecting a perceived superiority tied to their overseas background.

The image displays four screenshots of Weibo posts, each with a numbered box (1-4) highlighting specific elements:

- Post 1:** A user named 'Friend 1' (头像: 熊猫) posted a text-based video. The text reads: "今天一整天没刷微博，刚刚看了一下气到睡不着！祖国抗疫你不在，千里送毒排第一。既然回来了，国家也不会不理你，但是请你们做个人好吗？一个个把自己当大爷，提各种要求，还发视频到推特diss疾控中心 😡😡😡 草尼玛的祝新冠早日战胜你们 😡😡😡". Below the text are several small video thumbnails. A comment below the post says: "就是图3的这个脑残，去推特说中国没人权不给她矿泉水喝，滚你麻痹的，气死了气死了气死了".
- Post 2:** A user named '上帝之鹰_5zn' (头像: 地球仪) posted a video titled "#豌豆公主病的日常#". The text says: "这tm哪是回国避难来了，简直就是回国当大爷来了！" and "上帝之鹰_5zn的微博视频". The video thumbnail shows a person's feet on a red carpet with the text "接受新冠病毒检测 却质疑监测点服务不到位".
- Post 3:** A user named '北京人不知道的北京事儿' (头像: 北京) posted a video. The text says: "网友投稿，国外返京不按规定居家隔离，不戴口罩出去跑步，防疫人员劝她不听还大喊救命说工作人员骚扰她。。。这样的你怎么看？" and "北京人不知道的北京事儿的微博视频". The video thumbnail shows a woman in a blue tank top speaking.
- Post 4:** A user named '服务长春' (头像: 服务长春) posted a video. The text says: "“我不喝开水，我要人权，我要喝矿泉水。” 回国外要啊！回中国干嘛呢？" and "#女子被隔离坚持要喝矿泉水#" and "吡吡爆料的微博视频". The video thumbnail shows a woman in a black coat standing in a doorway.



Figure 10: A WeChat friend quoting Weibo posts to express their fury against the troublesome and shameful behaviours of the returned diaspora and students who studied abroad, viewed 17 March 2020.

Friend 1 in Screenshot 1 became furious because of the Weibo news shared in their Moment posts. They demand that returning people strictly follow the quarantine instructions and view them as a favour from the motherland, rather than complaining about quarantine. Friend 1 highlighted the girl in Screenshot 4 with a sarcastic “smile” and “chick” emojis, who accused China of the exploitation of human rights because she was forced to drink boiled water instead of mineral, and criticised a video she posted on Twitter blaming the Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC) and calling it foolish, disloyal, and unappreciative.

Friend 1’s emotion resonated with the quoted Weibo posts. In Screenshot 2, the Weibo user commented on a video that someone who returned to China from overseas shared which challenged the COVID test service for not meeting their standards: “They are not coming

back for safety, they come to enjoy being served.” About 3,9000 people reacted “angry” to this post. Also, a lady who returned to Beijing was filmed by another Weibo user, showing that she not only refused to follow the quarantine at home instructions, but also insisted on running outdoors without a face mask, and blamed the staff who asked her to put on a mask for harassing her (Screenshot 3). In Screenshot 4, the video about the girl attracted 3.5 million views. The sender questioned, “Why come back then? Go ask the Western countries for your human rights!” A nine-second video received 119,000 views in Screenshot 5. The Weibo user reported that an Italian-Chinese person yelled at the airport and refused to follow the instructions, “That’s how you treat people who come back from Europe!” Meanwhile, the sender commented that they should feel lucky they were not sent back to Europe immediately.

The conflicts between domestic Chinese citizens and the diaspora revealed in the posts are significant because they clearly the way nationalism was mobilised during the pandemic to draw a boundary between “us” and “them”. As shown in Screenshot 1, Friend 1’s statement went beyond criticism of the behaviours, implicitly condemning these returning people for exploiting their Chinese identity and taking advantage of the motherland, benefiting from the nation’s success without showing gratitude or respect for its rules. The use of “motherland” in the post is unusual for a casual post; it is more commonly used in formal statements expressing loyalty and belonging to the country, or in a battle-like metaphor to distinguish friend and enemy and construct the confronting concepts, such as us and them (Zheng 2017). The phrase, “You weren’t here when the motherland was fighting the virus” encapsulated a powerful moral exclusion. The “motherland” is not merely about a geographical belonging but equally about moral citizenship; it further referred to domestic citizens collectively as “us”, while “you” represented those who were absent and disqualified from belonging. This

linguistic separation drew a moral boundary between us—the contributors to collective victory—and them—the outsiders who returned only to claim its benefits.

Interviewee Y also shared the same view on this issue, explaining that China's success in controlling the virus was the product of nationwide sacrifice—of citizens giving up personal freedom and cooperating under strict lockdown measures. Hence, returning Chinese should also respect the collective effort behind these results, which represents the fundamental logic of *guanxi* in terms of carrying mutual obligations and benefits (Qi 2013). For them, enjoying the safety and stability of the homeland requires reciprocation through compliance and participation, rather than assuming a superior position by believing their Western background granted them privilege. In this moral equation, the collective interest was always positioned as superior to individual interests. Collective achievements could only be preserved through the suppression of personal needs and the acceptance of shared norms and supervision. Sacrifice, therefore, was not only necessary but also noble.

This conflict was not merely about individual versus collective interests but also about identity negotiation. On the surface, it reflected divergent understandings of the virus's severity and of proper quarantine practices between overseas Chinese and domestic residents. Yet, the language used in the posts reveals a deeper exclusionary logic. As the Weibo posts demonstrate, people returning from overseas were consistently labelled as having different identities from domestic citizens, with their “foreign” attitudes (e.g. they judge everything by Western standards), lifestyle (e.g. they insist on doing what they want), and values (e.g. they think drinking mineral water is a human right). Furthermore, the phrase “You weren't here when the motherland was fighting the virus” explicitly emphasised shared experiences and excluded those who had been absent from the national experience of suffering.

In other words, “suffering” and “pain” had implicitly become bonding social capital to identify “us” in Putnam’s (2000) framework, which, while it “creates strong in-group loyalty”, “may also create outgroup antagonism, or hostility” (Morrow & Scorgie-Porter 2017, p. 38). Domestic citizens’ resentment against those returning developed from a lack of shared experience and empathy. The returning people had not endured the prolonged lockdowns, supply shortages, or pervasive fear that had defined everyday life in China. Their decision to return during the safer phase of the pandemic was interpreted as opportunistic and selfish. There was legitimate concern that their refusal to comply could lead to another round of outbreaks, invoking painful memories of hardship for domestic citizens. In the Weibo screenshots, this collective memory of sacrifice became a unifying affective bond, expressed through angry comments, reposts, “likes”, and the exposure of the culprits’ faces, signifying moral consensus and digital shaming.

Through this process, Weibo users collectively redefined the meaning of “us”, classifying returnees as “others”. Which countries they came back from no longer mattered; what mattered was their perceived detachment from the collective struggle. Those who had not contributed to the “fight” were stripped of their Chinese identity, then expected to conform to domestic social norms; otherwise, they faced moral judgment imposed by “us”. In this context, the identity of the Chinese became not a legal status but a moral identity—constructed through shared suffering, social responsibility, and emotional alignment.

This thesis thus argues that such public shaming and cyberbullying were not entirely meaningless, as Interviewee C suggested. On the contrary, they resonate with Fang’s (2024) concept of collaborative state–society influence operations, which describes how non-state actors in China actively participate in promoting state propaganda through motivations such

as nationalism, personal grievances, or a desire for recognition. Although Fang (2024) acknowledges that it is difficult to prove direct coordination between these aggressors and the state, the Chinese government undoubtedly cultivated an environment conducive to such state–society partnerships. In the previous cases, the government did not stop the cyberbullying against Evie or apply any measures to restrict the circulation of the haters against returning Chinese, which implicitly approved that the concept of “we” did not refer to everyone. In managing public opinion, the slogan “stay cohesive” was reinforced through what Repnikova and Fang (2018) describe as participatory persuasion, whereby online users voluntarily reproduce and circulate propaganda through positive personal sharing, such as mutual support in a community and the sacrifice of the medical staff.

By collectively shaming the returnees, Weibo users enacted a form of digital vigilantism (Trottier 2017). Combining emotional nationalism with moral justification, they rationalised their attacks as efforts to protect the collective from selfish behaviour. Their discourse framed returnees as opportunists who sought to reap the benefits of China’s success in containing the spread of the virus while endangering public safety—thereby legitimising digital punishment as a patriotic act. From a Foucauldian perspective, the public of “we” has replaced the guards of the Panopticon in the central tower, monitoring “others” through social media.

The accumulating pressure of the pandemic

Interviewee S further argued that the exclusion of overseas returnees reflected a deeper public fatigue with long-term restrictions and moral pressure. “Stay cohesive”, they observed, did not simply promote active contributions, such as volunteering, donating, or assisting medical workers—activities frequently highlighted by the mainstream media—but also encompassed

the silent endurance and self-restraint of ordinary citizens. To achieve the goal of the “zero-COVID” policy (*qing ling*), people endured quarantine at home, the loss of any social life, psychological strain, and economic hardship. “Stay cohesive” required self-sacrifice, compromise and endurance.

The public discourse emphasising the need for returning Chinese to “cherish the collective achievement” magnified these narratives of hardship and turned them into shared emotional capital. In social networks, such narratives were repeatedly circulated and reinterpreted. On the surface, these narratives worked as a form of digital vigilantism (Trottier 2017), but in reality, they signified citizens’ exhaustion and their fear of having to repeat their experiences.

Interviewee S stressed that citizens cooperated because these sacrifices were neither fully voluntary nor easy—they were the results of legal force, peer pressure, and necessity. Similarly, Interviewee E verified this feeling in their description of reluctantly accepting their partner’s assignment to the frontlines shortly after their child’s birth. They had to admit that that was their partner’s obligation as a civil servant and Communist Party member in a crisis. These personal compromises, though seen as virtuous, were, in fact, painful. These compromises came at the expense of individual well-being and autonomy, leading to collective emotional fatigue that made the strict policies unsustainable. Consequently, any behaviour that appeared to jeopardise the zero-case achievements provoked strong public backlash, as it went against the collective wish to return to normal as soon as possible.

This thesis finds that in continually identifying and combating “enemies”, citizens maintained their motivation and solidarity in fighting the COVID pandemic. This is supported by Fiedler and Tagespiegel (2020), who suggest that the development of a shared national emotion in a

health crisis fosters a stronger sense of cohesion within countries but also generates hostility between countries. This suggests that the existence of ‘enemies’ and the will to fight are necessary for “stay cohesive”.

At the same time, drawing from Herman and Chomsky (2002) in their discussion on the intervention of the government in news releases in mass media, this thesis argues that the elements that influence the composition of news and political views, namely ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak and fear, are also sustained on social media in Fang’s state-society collaboration model on Weibo. This is because Weibo and its operator are also subject to state regulation as mass media. Despite the communicative freedom (Shirky 2008), social media users remain subordinate data providers to tech giants, with little potential for impact (Zuboff 2020). Weibo users also rely on the official mechanism, such as “report” (*ju bao*), and adopt the government’s discourse to justify their bullying behaviour (Fang 2024), for example, the cyberbullying against Fang Fang in 2020, the author of *Wuhan Diary*, which recorded the lockdown life in Wuhan, was accused of a degradation of the Chinese government’s efforts. Thus, following Herman and Chomsky (2002), such state-society cooperation allows the ruling regime to frame “enemies” for the public. Consequently, confrontations helped the CPC gain public support for policymaking and social governance domestically and shifted the focus of contention from domestic problems to Western countries that held competing views with China (Xu & Gong 2024). Thus, it is reasonable to deduce that, by othering returning Chinese in Figure 10, domestic citizens also resist the Western ideologies underpinning their behaviours.

At the same time, following Foucault’s notion of normalisation, Weibo users internalised strict controls as part of everyday life: social order is maintained not through coercion alone

but through the voluntary reproduction of obedience (Feder 2014). This also in line with the logic in legitimacy and propaganda: political authority always seeks legitimacy, to hold and exercise political power with legality, justification and consent from the standpoint of all of its citizens (Gilley 2009), then, they can make sure that “their governance is widely accepted by the public without resorting to overt coercion” (Fang 2022, p. 75). In this way, “fighting the pandemic” evolved beyond a public health campaign or a scientific goal of virus containment. It became a political discourse and socially constructed ethical practice—a daily practice of discipline, vigilance, and collective righteousness.

The contextualisation of legitimacy of the governance in the COVID pandemic went hand-in-hand with the application of “ongoing pandemic prevention and control” (*chang tai hua yi qing fang kong*) by the government²² which forecast the long-term persistence of the virus and suggested a series of measures to regulate domestic life. The constant reproduction of conflict against the competing views of Western countries not only rationalised obedience and sacrifices but also transformed them into the emotional foundation of everyday life. This

²² According to the State Council Information Office (SCIO) (2020a), “Ongoing prevention and control” was the fifth stage of the battle against the first wave of COVID pandemic, as guidance for normalising the virus spread control in daily life as an ongoing strategy in order to gradually restart daily economic activities, considering the long-lasting global pandemic of COVID-19. This guidance emphasised the strict screening of imported cases from foreign countries and the monitoring of domestic activities to prevent further outbreaks across a wide range of areas.

strengthened moral identity and sustained the momentum in the collaborative state-society battle against the virus.

This finding reflects Interviewee R's question about the definition of "pandemic" and its long duration in China. Especially in the later phase of pandemic control, when other countries were already reopening, how were Chinese citizens told to "stay cohesive"?

"What does 'fighting the pandemic' mean? What exactly is the pandemic, and who exactly 'created' this pandemic? Because towards the end of the pandemic, all the countries had already said that COVID-19 was no longer a big issue. Its impact had already diminished...but in China, people were still 'united' and fighting the pandemic. So, who were we fighting this pandemic against? Who created this pandemic? Was it man-made, or did it actually exist?" (Interviewee R)

In other words, Interviewee R questioned the problematic rationale behind state-society cooperation in framing and sustaining pandemic regulations, using public figures, scientific evidence, foreign expertise endorsement and emotional manipulation, such as promoting fear and anger, to maintain control over citizens. This further prompted Interviewee R to realise the contradiction between China and Western countries regarding the "correct" understanding of the virus.

"The Chinese government was still emphasising how severe the pandemic was, how high the death rate was, and how everyone needed to unite to fight it. But at the same time, the international narrative had already shifted—other countries were saying that COVID was no longer a major threat. At that point, it was like the outside world was

constantly 'slapping China in the face'. So, the government's response was to block external information and keep telling the public that the virus was still dangerous, prolonging the crisis. That's when things became exclusionary—China needed to sustain its own narrative for as long as possible and get more people to believe it. And to keep up this so-called 'correct' stance, the price was restricting people's freedom of speech.”
(Interviewee R)

Interviewee R's reflections provided an alternative view of the state-society cooperation on Weibo. They argued that while the citizens adopted and followed the government's discourse and sustained the effort of “stay cohesive”, the state concealed and disrupted international realities to mislead the Chinese people. They suggested that there was a contradiction between the state's promotion of “normalised” daily life and Western countries' definition of “normal life”, which is returning to normal life as before the pandemic. In fact, however, many citizens longed to return to life before the pandemic, effectively aligning them with Western perspectives.

Interviewee R regarded the pandemic as a political concept used by the government to regulate the domestic social order, rather than a scientific one. The government's denial that other countries had reopened their borders was an attempt to transfer the conflict over ongoing pandemic control to the conflict between China and foreign countries. The government attempted to shape people's perceptions and manipulated them to gain their trust and support (Xu & Gong 2024). The government also applied information control on social media through censorship and knowledge/education about the virus, integrating moral narratives to prolong the sense of crisis.

An ongoing forum for marginalisation?

The continual exposure of extreme incidents on Weibo, which targeted already marginalised groups, became evidence of the widening divide between “us” and “others”. The incidents shocked and disturbed many interviewees. The constant flow of negative news and tragic events generated immense psychological pressure, frustration, and anxiety for Interviewees C, N, H, K, and R, which led to their disengagement from the platform later.

While official and mainstream media celebrated the achievements of China’s efforts to contain the spread of the virus, many of my interviewees frequently encountered contrasting stories on Weibo that punctured the official narrative of harmony. Although the national success of pandemic control was widely acknowledged, vivid and detailed posts describing individuals’ hardships during quarantine were also part of the lived reality. These recurring extreme cases undoubtedly exacerbated the tension and distress for an already strained population. The moral rhetoric of “stay cohesive” was, at times, transformed into a license for aggression, again, producing what scholars such as Papacharissi and Trevey (2018) describe as affective publics sustained by shared emotion rather than shared reason. Anger, fear, and anxiety circulated faster than factual information, at times, transforming Weibo from a platform of deliberation into a theatre of catharsis.

Interviewee H recalled one incident they saw on Weibo, in which a man was beaten for violating lockdown rules for food:

“I remember it was Xi’an, and there was some very negative news. Like, it was during lockdown, people were not allowed to go out to do grocery shopping. A person was

running out of food, so they went out to buy some steamed buns. Then they were beaten on the way back, and all the buns were thrown on the ground.” (Interviewee H)

Interviewee H believed that although the man had indeed violated isolation regulations, his intention was not to endanger others but to meet his basic survival needs. He simply failed to consider the broader consequences of his actions. His behaviour should not have been punished with violence.

While the man’s conduct posed potential risks to himself and the community, Interviewee H continued to argue, ordinary citizens had no authority to use violence as “punishment”. The public was neither law enforcement officers nor had the right to “judge” others. The slogan of unity thus masked an emergent culture of peer surveillance and moral and even physical violence, where obedience was equated with virtue and compassion with weakness.

Another example of such excessive behaviour was the killing of pets belonging to quarantined residents. As shown in Figure 11, during disinfection procedures in Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, community workers discovered a cat in the home of an isolated resident and buried it alive, claiming it was to prevent potential viral transmission. Screenshots on Weibo illustrated discrepancies between animal welfare advocates’ accounts and official reports.



Figure 11: Contradicting descriptions about the cat burying issue on a non-state account and mainstream media, viewed 1 February 2020.

In Figure 11, Screenshot 1 emphasises the dramatic contrast between the owner’s identity as a medical worker and how the cruel way the government treated their cat. The Weibo account “Volunteers of Animal Protection in China” (*Zhong Guo Xiao Dong Wu Bao Hu Zhi Yuan Zhe*) confirmed the cat was taken away and cruelly buried alive by the community staff when the owner was under quarantine.

On the other hand, the official account of Weibo News, in screenshot 2, endorsed the action as a First-Level Public Health Emergency Response²³. They justified the killing by claiming it was carried out “in response to strong demands from nearby residents” and “for the safety of the community”, while offering no apology to the owner. Rather than viewing the cat as a pet and emotional companion to its owner, the news quoted the law to justify the culling of domestic animals as if they were ordinary livestock.

Interviewees C, N and M also recalled a similar news story on Weibo, in which community staff broke into a room and beat a dog to death in the name of sanitisation while its owner was quarantined in the hospital. The entire process was viewed and recorded by the devastated owner via the home CCTV, which caused considerable shock after being posted on Weibo. The interviewees condemned these actions as cruel, ignorant, inhumane and unacceptable. Interviewees C, N, and M noted that experts and research had already refuted rumours about animals transmitting COVID-19. Moreover, humane alternatives clearly existed, yet the executors deliberately chose the most extreme and brutal option. They saw the act as one of personal malice—the patient had no power to stop the killing and the dog had no power to resist the violence. Simultaneously, for Interviewees K and C, this was a manifestation of “over-enforcement”—a visualisation of the “one-size-fits-all” approach by

²³ Based on the definition of the SCIO (2020b), “according to the nature, severity and scope of impact, public health emergencies are classified into four levels (I, II, III and IV), with severity decreasing from Level I to Level IV. The novel coronavirus epidemic is a public health emergency with the fastest spread and the widest range of infections, and has been the most difficult to prevent and control in China since the founding of the People’s Republic in 1949.” This required the strictest methods to control the spread of the virus.

local authorities (see Deutsche Welle 2022; Ma 2021). They argued that this behaviour revealed local governments' obsession with meeting upper-level administrative targets rather than protecting residents and their properties.

Weibo, then, failed to serve as a platform for dialogue between the state and the affected public; instead, it became a space where users decoded the implicit meanings behind official narratives and allowed the divide between different interest groups to widen. The quotation in the news of the role of “public demand” (*qun zhong yao qiu*) in this context did not represent the collective will but rationalised the sacrifice of vulnerable groups for the sake of maintaining social order—killing a dog in the name of reassuring the neighbours. Removing sources of anxiety to maintain the illusion of control. This dynamic exposed the underlying logic of state interest disguised as public interest. This contributed to some interviewees' growing disillusionment with the policies.

For interviewees C, N, M, and others, this incident was deeply traumatic not only because of animal suffering but because it revealed the moral erosion and the increasing microphysics of power embedded within pandemic governance in a Foucauldian perspective (Hoffman 2014). Their outrage was intensified by the discursive asymmetry between mainstream and alternative media: whereas official reports framed the killing as necessary and rational, Weibo users circulated emotional counter-narratives exposing its cruelty. Yet these counter-voices remained fragmented, often confined within algorithmic and social boundaries.

Notably, I first learned about this case through WeChat, not Weibo. I learned more about the issue later on Weibo after I checked my friends' posts in Moments. On Weibo—an open, algorithmically curated environment—expressions of dissent faced the dual pressures of

context collision (Davis & Jurgenson 2014) and hostile affective publics. The first post I encountered came from Interviewee C's WeChat Moments. They explained that Weibo had become a toxic environment, full of users who expressed hatred and hostility, easily influenced by the pandemic's tense atmosphere. Thus, the risk of cyberbullying pushed sympathetic users to retreat into WeChat's semi-private circles, where relational trust rather than algorithmic recommendation determined visibility, offering a safer and more empathetic space for sharing. Interviewee M was also aware of their marginalised position, noting that Weibo had a growing number of users hostile toward pet owners. Following earlier reports of uncontrolled dogs (especially big dogs that walked without a lead) attacking people, pet owners were widely perceived as irresponsible, further weakening the discursive power for them to defend animal rights in the public space.

Moreover, empathy was limited by experience. Interviewees Y, E, J, and H, who did not own pets, expressed sympathy but ultimately supported the government's actions on similar issues. They believed that with limited manpower and resources, prioritising human safety was vital. Without full scientific certainty that animals could not transmit the virus, maintaining vigilance was justified. This stance aligned with the broader trend of othering seen on Weibo, where moral legitimacy was granted to the majority who upheld "rational" collective values. As a result, discussions sympathetic to animals or their owners migrated to WeChat—a more private and controlled space—rather than unfolding in the public sphere of Weibo.

In addition, among Weibo users, only pet owners (Interviewees C, N, M) and animal lovers (Interviewee D) reported seeing posts about such incidents. Others claimed they had never encountered related content or had no memory of this. This supports the earlier discussion of

algorithmic filtering: Weibo's algorithm categorised users based on interests and interactions, reinforcing information bubbles. It repeatedly pushed similar content to users with relevant preferences while isolating others from the conversation. From the sender's perspective, this limited the dissemination of information; from the receiver's perspective, it disrupted convergence consistency, meaning that different audiences experienced fragmented realities shaped by personalised feeds.

This thesis further argues that this dual platform ecology shows how affective content was distributed across technological and social infrastructures. Although I had not encountered the story on Weibo, I was still exposed to it via friends' reposts in WeChat Moments. Weibo's algorithms transformed moral outrage into visibility, rewarding emotionally charged content that sustained public vigilance. WeChat, by contrast, became a quieter space where empathy, grief and dissent could be shared among trusted contacts. Yet both platforms ultimately reproduced exclusion. Weibo, through algorithmic amplification of conformity, excludes marginalised voices. WeChat, through social familiarity and shared understanding, based on relational closeness, potentially creates new echo chambers. The result was a fragmented emotional public, where each user inhabited a tailored moral reality.

Summary

This chapter examines disrupted engagement on Weibo, showing how an affective public could gather around mainstream opinion and use algorithmic mechanisms to amplify their requests, yet intensify the difficulties minority groups faced when speaking up, seeking support, or expressing dissent during the pandemic. Once "stay cohesive" became the dominant emotional and political tone, only posts aligned with this discourse were

algorithmically promoted, while dissenting views were deprioritised, criticised, or met with backlash. In this sense, Weibo functioned less as an open public sphere than as a digitally mediated arena in which conformity was rewarded, and divergence penalised. This affective hostility—expressed through mass criticism, cyberbullying, and moral condemnation—worked alongside state propaganda to reinforce a binary between “us” and “others”. As a result, Weibo became a space where the majority of users performed compliance, reproduced moral consensus, and built solidarity, often internalising the Confucian ideal of harmony. Those cast as “others”—labelled as troublemakers, traitors, or “Westernisers”—were excluded from legitimate participation.

Chapter Six: Can WeChat leverage relationships?

The previous chapter demonstrated that Weibo functioned as a volatile public arena where affect, nationalism, and algorithmic curation converged to define who belonged and who was pushed to the margins. Yet public cohesion on Weibo represented only one layer of pandemic engagement. To fully understand how cooperation was enacted and sustained, this chapter, following the logic of the concentric-circle system, shifts from Weibo's outer public ring to the core, semi-public environment of WeChat. Focusing on group chats—including friend circles, family groups, and neighbourhood collectives—this chapter examines how individuals operated as We Media within these relational networks. These private and semi-private communicative spaces became crucial sites for coordinating everyday crisis responses, negotiating truth, circulating emotions, and maintaining social order under pandemic pressures. In doing so, the chapter responds directly to sub-questions 2), 3), and 4), demonstrating how connective actions emerged not only from public discourse but from culturally embedded interpersonal ties that shaped trust, perceptions, cooperation, and survival.

Emerging intimacy on WeChat

Notably, some interviewees viewed WeChat as replacing the functions of phones and other messaging platforms, such as QQ, which was popular among Chinese users but now is mainly used by younger generations, as well as Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp, after they withdrew from the Chinese market. This tendency indicates a significant wave of information convergence on the platform and, on the downside, enables the operator, Tencent, to exercise centralised data control and monitoring. Interviewee M noted that WeChat has

integrated and replaced traditional phone functions, such as calling and texting, into one platform, utilising verbal and non-verbal elements to optimise the chat features. At the same time, they compared the chat feature between WeChat and Western social platforms and noted that:

“WeChat doesn’t have a ‘read status’, so you never really know if someone has seen your message or not. That actually makes things better, because otherwise, if someone reads your message but doesn’t reply right away, it could come off as rude.”

(Interviewee M)

In other words, unlike other Western social platforms, such as Messenger, Instagram, and WhatsApp, WeChat offers users more space to communicate at their own pace, enabling delayed, thoughtfully composed responses. This reduces the pressure of conforming to social norms and creates a more casual environment for interactions. As a result, WeChat provides an option to break the synchrony in social media communication because the person being contacted does not feel obliged to reply immediately (Chambers 2013).

According to Gershon (2010), WeChat is highly flexible and can be used for both deeply intimate as well as factual communication, allowing users to manage larger numbers of broader and weaker, or looser, contacts (Broadbent 2011, cited in Chambers 2013). Broadbent (2011, cited in Chambers 2013) notes that if the person contacted responds quickly, it reinforces the strength of the relationship. Through this blend of synchronous and asynchronous communication, WeChat helps users transcend the divide between intimate and less intimate interactions (Chambers 2013).

Moreover, Interviewee M's reflections resonate with the concept of "WeChat ethics" (*wei de*), a term rooted in Confucian ethics and observed in Wang's (2023) study of older generations' engagement with WeChat in Shanghai. WeChat ethics is married to Confucian ethics in the way it embeds existing social relations in a relationship-centred communicative approach. Building on Wang's insight, this thesis proposes that WeChat ethics can be understood not only as an extension of Confucian values but also as an umbrella term encompassing more recent practices, such as the so-called "etiquette of Moments" (*peng you quan li yi*). This etiquette urges users to respond to all unread private messages before posting publicly on Moments²⁴, thereby prioritising interpersonal obligations over public self-expression.

This emphasis on responsiveness reflects one of the central tenets of Confucianism: the importance of cultivating and maintaining proper social roles through active engagement in "social life here and now" (Bian 2019; King 2018). Simultaneously, WeChat ethics implies an informal, shared code of conduct that facilitates smooth interpersonal communication by encouraging users to be attentive to detail, behave ethically in the digital space, and show respect for others' time and emotional labour. While such practices may appear to be adaptations to digital life and shaped by technological affordances, Wang (2023) argues that WeChat ethics are deeply entangled with Confucian values that aim to foster a "harmonious secular world" (p. 125). Through the reciprocal obligations enacted within these interpersonal

²⁴ If a user wants to post on Moments, they must see all the notifications about the unread chats in the WeChat interface. If one finds out the user sent a post without responding to the chat, that will generally be considered rude and offensive, as the chat is highly likely to be ignored or muted.

interactions, WeChat has become deeply embedded in everyday interpersonal practices and now plays a central role in sustaining and nourishing *guanxi*—the fabric of Chinese social relationships—and contributing to the reproduction and reinforcement of relational ethics among ordinary Chinese users.

As Allen and colleagues (2011), Wilson (2009), and Wei and colleagues (2010) observe, information-seeking becomes a vital coping mechanism during crises, helping individuals manage emotional stress and make sense of institutional responses to uncertainty. Enabled by the platform's affordances, all interviewees identified WeChat as a central hub for accessing and sharing COVID-related news and information. Information is usually shared through Chat, Moments, and public account articles. User interactions primarily take place through the 'Chats' function—WeChat's original feature launched in 2011—which includes both private (one-on-one) and group conversations. The Moments feature, introduced in a subsequent 2012 update, further extended the platform's capabilities for public-facing, one-to-many sharing in a semi-public context, where different relations with audiences are blended. The Chats feature allows users to initiate one-on-one conversations or participate in group chats with multiple contacts. Public accounts later provide another channel for soft opinion leaders, influencers, and official channels to reach normal WeChat users with multimedia "articles", which are also a major recognised source of information. Although technically all WeChat users can create and operate a public account, most do not do so because they are unlikely to attract a sufficient number of followers without a preexisting public profile or recognised expertise. Thus, users tend to consume the articles rather than produce content, as my interviewees attested. I will discuss the significance of public accounts later in this thesis.

Group chats: networked public and beyond

Due to ethical considerations and privacy constraints, this study does not directly examine content from private chats unless explicitly referenced by participants during the interviews, as these communications fall outside the scope of ethics approval. Instead, the analysis focuses on interactions within group chats, which may be considered a semi-public space established for various contexts and purposes. Different group chats provide a different sense of connection. Family and friend groups, representing more intimate relationships, generated spaces for caring for loved ones, helping to combat isolation and loneliness during the lockdown period (Interviewees E and S). Neighbourhood groups, although formed by a group of acquaintances living in the same spatial area, foregrounded the concept of the networked public (boyd 2010) and were transformed into a highly collaborative digital public sphere in the crisis. Colleague groups construct a professional digital workplace for formal discussions. Some groups were shaped by a cluster of people with mixed shared characteristics. For example, a group fitness group (Interviewee M), a frisbee group (Interviewee Y), and an orchestra group (Interviewee A) were formed among acquaintances who shared the same hobbies and strengthened by relationships between friends or classmates who also shared the same interests during the pandemic. And that effectively engaged a relatively loose structure of ‘connective actions’ which allowed individuals to express interest in or allegiance to issues “without having to enter the complex negotiation of personal vs. collective politics” (Papacharissi & Trevey 2018, p. 91).

The findings reveal that group chats served not only as a particularly effective structure for disseminating information during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also as a closed space for discussing various topics, including sensitive ones, in different network dynamics. Alongside

Moments, they enabled users to function as We Media—individual media nodes capable of influencing multiple specific recipients simultaneously within their social networks. At the same time, the structure of group chats further leveraged interpersonal trust, facilitated coordination during quarantine, and enhanced the effectiveness of peer supervision.

Family group chat

Micro-units of pandemic coordination

Indeed, group chats were frequently mentioned as a centre for exchanging ideas in various contexts in this study, particularly those among families, friends, neighbours, classmates, and colleagues. While the latter groups usually thrive based on shared interests and experiences (Meyerhoff 2006), the family group chat, in contrast, is a space that directly digitalises one of the closest relationships offline, namely kinship, into the online world, overcoming time and space (Potts 2015). Interviewee J actively reposted content to the family group chat during the lockdown, explaining that:

“I would share Weibo content on WeChat, mostly in family group chats. While I did send some posts to friends individually, younger people like us can usually access Weibo and get information on our own. So, in terms of frequency, I shared Weibo content more often in family groups to keep them informed.” (Interviewee J)

Interviewee J demonstrated a strong awareness of their superior information-gathering skills and their perceived responsibility within the family to bridge the informational divide concerning the virus, especially for older family members. To perform this role, Interviewee J utilised the family group chat as a conduit, intentionally sharing Weibo content with WeChat

users, thereby integrating information across platforms within their social network. In other words, group members spontaneously play a crucial role in information convergence in a niche environment, ensuring the efficiency and accuracy of the content. Through this process, they not only gather but also filter reliable information to those who need it. Hence, crucial information was disseminated quickly to family members, leveraging the higher education levels of the younger generation. They also addressed the vulnerability of older people in disaster communication, which was previously considered slow and isolated, leading to delayed responses, reluctance to seek help, and false positivity (Bodstein et al. 2014; Gibson et al. 2013; Pang et al. 2020).

While Interviewee J sought to expand the family's access to diverse sources of information, several other participants—namely Interviewees A, C, D, E, K, M, Q, and W—also highlighted the function of family group chats as spaces for sharing reliable, verified content with parents. These chats also evolved into dynamic arenas for 'live-streaming' updates on the shifting realities of daily life under lockdown. Interviewee D particularly stressed that, thanks to the family group, they could keep up with their sister's situation, who was living in the United States and approaching the due date of her baby during the lockdown, when the family could not physically be there to support her, which restored the sense of connectivity. Through communication in the family group, Interviewee D later also compared the situation in the United States, as relayed by their sister, with domestic circumstances to evaluate China's pandemic control policies, leading them to question the "zero-COVID" policies. It is reasonable to argue that family group chat provided a safe space for the most authentic digital storytelling for overseas Chinese, as a 'transnational social field' (Wong 2020), to transmit the immediate situation in the host country.

Facilitated by WeChat's cloud-based storage system—which retains chat history unless manually deleted or, when cloud storage is unavailable, and a new device is purchased—this study is able to reconstruct and analyse the flow of information shared within a 12-member family group chat during the initial wave of the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, as illustrated in Figure 12.



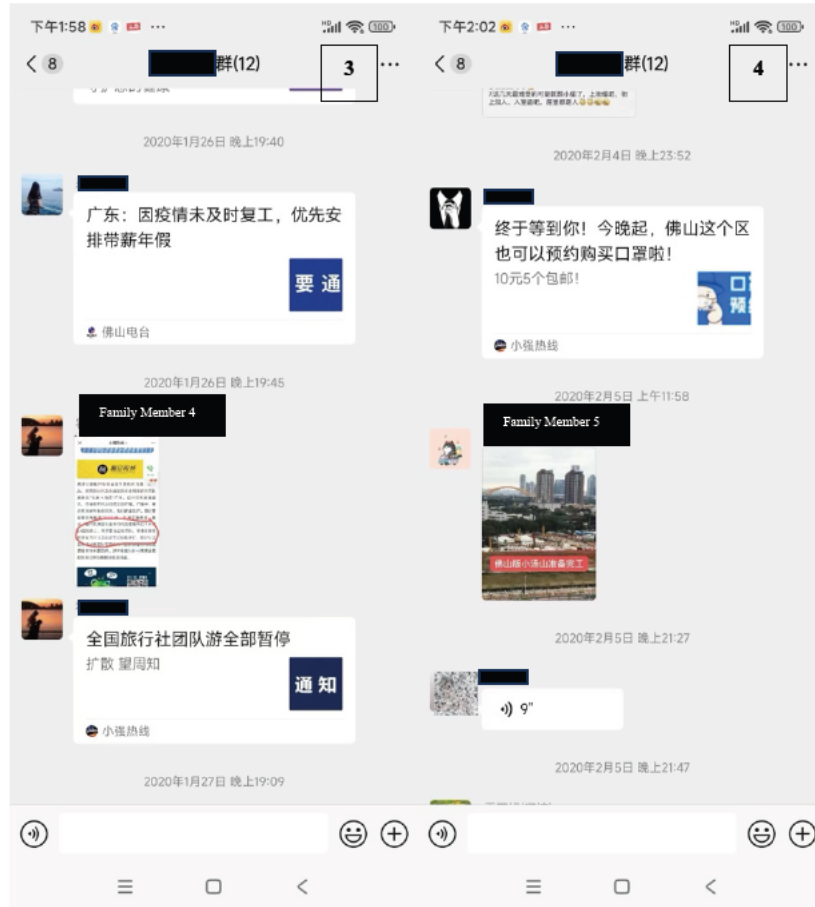


Figure 12: Lockdown updates in a family group chat from 24 January to 5 February 2020, viewed 10 February 2020.

In Screenshot 1, dated January 24, 2020, Family Member (FM) 1 shared a video depicting the closure of the local Spring Festival market in response to the sudden implementation of lockdown measures, accompanied by a caption noting the presence of officers restricting access to the area. FM 2 subsequently advised FM 1 to complete their shopping and leave the area as swiftly as possible. Later that day, FM 2 circulated a link to an announcement from the official WeChat account of the Foshan Bureau of Tourism, which declared the temporary suspension of all public facilities and events. On the afternoon of January 26 (Screenshot 2), FM 1 shared an official notice from the Foshan Government’s account, “Foshan Release” (*Foshan Fa Bu*), announcing the immediate suspension of all inter-provincial transportation

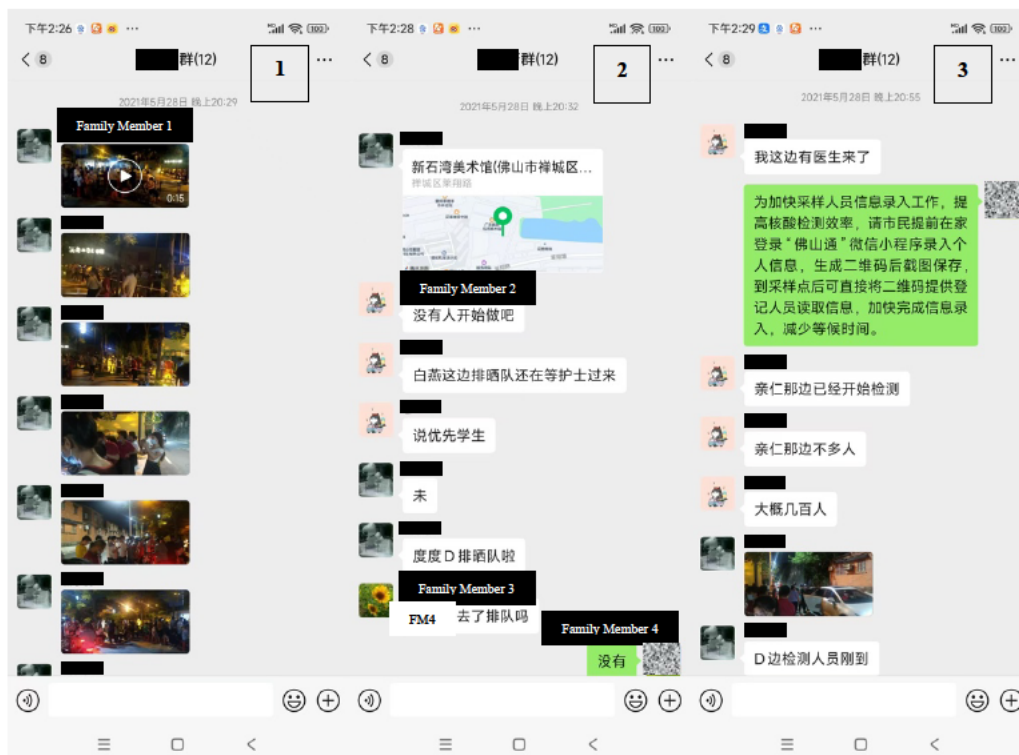
services. Approximately 45 minutes later, FM 3 shared a link from the verified account of “DXY Healthcare” (*Ding Xiang Yi Sheng*), a medical science communication media, offering real-time pandemic updates. That evening, FM 2 also shared news regarding remote work arrangements, sourced from the official Radio Foshan account.

In Screenshot 3, on the same night, FM 4 posted a screenshot highlighting key information, followed by a link to the original report from a Foshan local television news commentary program, “Xiaoqiang Hotline” (*Xiao Qiang Re Xian*), announcing the suspension of all tour group activities nationwide. In Screenshot 4, FM 1 quoted a news update from the same television source on 4 February, indicating that “Foshan residents can preorder face masks starting tonight, five for ten yuan, with free shipping.” Immediately below, FM 5 contributed a photo of a newly constructed mobile cabin hospital in Foshan on the next day.

This case vividly illustrates how the family group chat functioned as a hub for real-time updates, blending personal experiences with urgent public announcements, and evolving beyond its pre-pandemic functions of casual daily interaction to become the most fundamental yet solid unit in the fight against COVID-19. By recording what they had encountered, the family members took on a role as grassroots citizen journalists and virtualised the physical dimension, as Gillmor (2004) outlines and as I discussed in my MRes research (Hu 2018). Even though the family members were separated across different districts, local situations were mediated, further inviting them to participate in discussions in a virus-free space. Through the simple act of reposting, family members actively participated in disseminating timely information within the group, which could then be further relayed to their broader social circles. Interviewees Z and U recalled this practice as highly beneficial, noting that they had limited access to diverse information sources at the time. Family group

chat enabled them to stay informed through updates from younger relatives and redistribute the shared resources across other networks. Moreover, the evolving content of the family group chat mirrored both governmental responses and the unfolding stages of the lockdown, allowing family members to discern that “the situation is getting worse” and take the COVID pandemic seriously.

The continuous convergence of information within family WeChat groups, later, became a key mechanism for coordinating the large-scale COVID-19 testing campaigns that followed the detection of cases in my hometown, Foshan, in 2021. In my family group chat discussed above, members further actively exchanged the latest announcements from local authorities, shared short videos of on-site queues, offered tips for locating quieter testing venues, discussed practical solutions for immobile elders, and circulated warnings about newly locked-down compounds (see Figure 13).



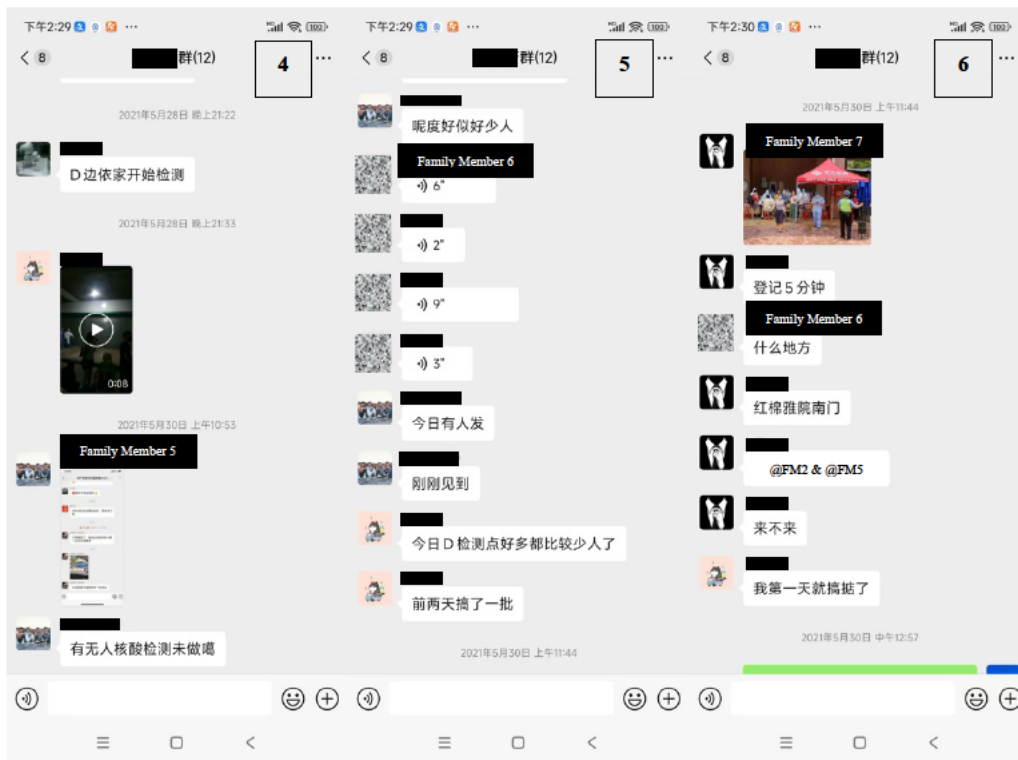


Figure 13: Using family group chat to coordinate COVID-19 tests in 2021, viewed 7 June 2021.

In the family group chat (Figure 13), at 8:29 p.m., 28 May 2021, Family Member 1 (FM1) shared a series of videos showing many people already queuing for the COVID test (Screenshot 1). A location was shared in Screenshot 2, indicating where he was. FM2 then questioned whether it had started yet, as the situation looked similar to where FM2 was queuing: people were waiting for medical staff to arrive and were told that students would be prioritised. FM3 and then asked FM4 if they had gone for the test. Later, in Screenshot 3, FM1 and FM2 told other family members that the test sites across the city began operating around 8:55 p.m. FM4 then kindly reminded those going to the test sites to prepare their documentation. FM2 also shared a short video of his test at 9:33 p.m. (Screenshot 4). Based on the timestamp, FM2 only spent about half an hour waiting for the test, indicating the testing was run efficiently.

Two days later, on 30 May, FM5 continued to encourage family members to test, if they hadn't already, as quieter sites were available for citizens, according to her colleagues. FM6 used voice messages to ask for more information (Screenshot 5). In Screenshot 6 and 7, FM7 seemed to have missed the previous chat and further shared a test site where no one was queuing, and advised FM2 and FM5 to come test together. FM2 confirmed that they had done it two days ago. While FM4 confirmed they finished the test yesterday, FM6 shared a picture of an announcement about confirmed cases detected in my compound to remind FM4 to be aware (Screenshot 7).

The family group chat supported members by using videos as a form of digital storytelling to virtualise their experiences (Xu & Zhao 2022). Even though they were all separated in different communities across the city, they could share immediate information with other members for their reference when planning their tests, which helped reduce the uncertainty.

In other words, the group chat fostered the enactment of the urgent order. The convenient voice messaging feature enabled FM6, an older user who types slowly, to join the conversation seamlessly.

Additionally, as they synchronised the “test” virtually (i.e., FM1 and FM2), a sense of connection emerged. The constant updates about quieter test sites was a gentle reminder to take the test. FM3 and FM7 also attempted to “invite” other members living around them to do the test together, using the COVID test as a bonding activity. It is also interesting to note that FM6 shared an announcement about my compound to draw FM4’s attention to their safety (Screenshot 7), which was initially posted in the compound’s neighbourhood group chat. This showed how fast and broadly a piece of information can be shared across social networks, as the original photo was first shared in the neighbourhood group at 11:47 a.m. that day (see Figure 15, Screenshot 10).

These everyday exchanges reveal the potential for a family group chat to transform into a basic organisational unit through which citizens collectively complete testing requirements under intense pressure. Such actions were not enforced by coercive mandates but reinforced through familial responsibility and trust. Kinship ties operated as both communicative and moral infrastructures: they enabled rapid information flow, ensured compliance through care rather than discipline, and turned crisis management into an extension of domestic obligation. In contrast to the complaint-based tone, questioning, and chaos that characterised many open social media spaces, such as Weibo, WeChat family groups that developed on the basis of *guanxi* of long-term stable mutuality with obligational commitment and emotional attachment (Qi 2013) showcased calmness and reciprocity, demonstrating how digital kinship networks strengthen collectivist values and support grassroots crisis governance.

Cognitive engagement: intergenerational gatekeeping

The sharing of pandemic information within these family chats also reconfigured generational roles. Resonating with the case in Figure 12, where the announcements were mainly shared by my cousins and their partners, younger interviewees in this study frequently described feeling a duty to act as “gatekeepers” or information managers for their families. This is not to suggest that older relatives completely lacked digital competence. Rather, interviewees such as C, K, M, Y, Q, W, A, and E perceived their parents as less adept at identifying misinformation circulating on platforms such as RedNote and Douyin. The parents in their 60s mentioned in this research—particularly those who had adopted smartphones only within the past decade—were portrayed as vulnerable to clickbait and sensationalist narratives because of lower social media literacy. Interviewee Z, a retired housewife in their 60s, openly admitted struggling to resist emotionally charged posts even when doubtful about their accuracy, while Interviewees K and C noted similar experiences when their parents were faced with content that provoked insecurity or fear. This further indicates that, instead of worrying about older WeChat users not having enough information during lockdown, they had too much information because they were better informed and connected through social media (Pan et al. 2020).

The revival of the term gatekeeping—traditionally used to describe editorial control in pre-digital media, stating that gatekeeping refers to the selective process through which vast amounts of information are filtered and shaped into the limited messages that reach the public (Shoemaker & Vos 2009)—captures this narrowing of information flows inside domestic digital spheres. By reposting selected content from other platforms into family groups, users reproduced an alternative to the traditional news-filtering process. Interviewees E, K, H, and

Y explicitly described themselves as gatekeepers, filtering and verifying what entered the group, urging elders to follow vetted advice, and correcting rumours. Other interviewees implicitly agreed that they played the role of selector, but argued that instead of “gatekeeping” or “policing”, they were just working as “fact-checkers” or slightly more reliable contributors in a family group chat. They realised that there were other senders in the group, and even in a smaller family group with their parents only, that their parents still had their own sources of information. Nevertheless, these practices illustrate a clear centripetal flow of information—from open, algorithmically driven networks into tightly bounded family spaces—where it was contextualised, filtered, and emotionally re-interpreted. In doing so, participants effectively created distinct augmented realities (Jurgenson 2012) related to the pandemic on WeChat, shaped by relational trust and moral obligation.

Beyond mere filtering, younger interviewees demonstrated strong cognitive and moral motivations to verify information before sharing. Many described this as a personal responsibility to protect the family’s well-being. Interviewee A, for example, characterised their behaviour as driven by a “sense of justice” (*zheng yi gan*): a refusal to allow misinformation to manipulate people’s emotions during a public health crisis. Particularly, Interviewee A found that a lot of content found in the family and friend groups was shared out of context and cherry-picked; some content, the original sources were in English and on foreign platforms, was poorly translated into Chinese and became misleading; some content seemed real and shocking, but could not be verified. Thus, they had to regularly trace the origins of screenshots, check foreign-language sources, and cross-reference platforms—sometimes using VPNs—to correct misleading posts.

In the example below (see Figure 14), Interviewee A questioned that the numbers seemed concrete and shared by someone with the title of ‘doctor’, but this was unverifiable.

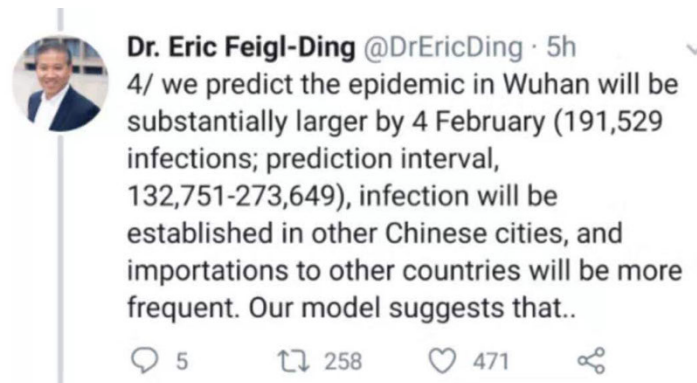


Figure 14: A tweet containing shocking numbers was screenshotted and shared to one of Interviewee A’s friend groups, provided by Interviewee A, 16 February 2024.

Interviewee A also faced some problems in this process. The labour of verification was time-consuming and often unrewarding. Preparing the evidence required a lot of effort, especially when the original sources were on foreign platforms and had to be transferred back to WeChat, but sometimes it just led to more fights, which generated fatigue and frustration. Still, Interviewee A regarded these efforts as a form of “moral volunteering”: spontaneous, unpaid work aimed at safeguarding the information environment for loved ones, free from the dominant voice and rhetorical statements.

Interviewee Y linked verification to their professional ethos. As a practising lawyer, they emphasised authenticity as integral to personal credibility. When uncertain about an update—such as rumours of newly opened testing sites—they would physically verify it before reporting back to the family chat. Their posts, grounded in first-hand observation, carried authority. Such examples illustrate what Dahlgren and Hill (2023) define as cognitive

engagement: a knowledge-based, truth-seeking, critical and reflective media participation, but here manifested as a moral practice.

Negotiating relational trust and cooperation

Despite their diligence, some younger participants found this gatekeeping role exhausting because older relatives did not always accept their corrections. Scholars (Miller et al. 2021) study similar cases that highlight the way that modern technology, including smartphones, has disrupted the long-standing mode of knowledge delivery. There is arguably less attention paid to the wisdom and experience of older people, and, simultaneously, young people can be unhelpful and impatient when teaching older family members about technology. (Miller et al. 2021). Other scholars (Bodstein et al. 2014; Gibson et al. 2013; Groen & Polivka 2010; Pang et al. 2020) have also found that older people are less resilient during disasters due to their lower media literacy. This thesis argues that this tension is intensified when it intersects with the Confucian hierarchy of family authority, in which filial respect and deference structure intergenerational communication (Bian 2019; Yan 2010, 2020). Within this Confucian framework, younger people trying to persuade an elder may appear disrespectful.

The resulting negotiations illuminate how bonding social capital (Putnam 2000) operates under cultural constraints: while trust within kinship networks facilitates rapid coordination, it also limits open disagreement. Participants' efforts to "teach" their parents to evaluate sources, thus, reveal both the potential and the boundaries of relational trust in digitally mediated families. These observations foreshadow later discussions on how public-account articles circulated within group chats, where authority and authenticity were jointly constructed through emotional closeness and cultural norms of respect.

The combined efforts of these interviewees—motivated by family responsibility, moral justice, and practical necessity—enabled families to coordinate quarantine routines calmly and effectively. Through the micro-infrastructure of the family chat, governmental testing directives were translated into manageable household actions. In this sense, WeChat became a bridge between macro-level policy and micro-level compliance. As Interviewees Z, U, E, and Y observed, citizens and authorities appeared to form a collaborative partnership: the government stabilised logistics and supply, while households ensured adherence through communication and mutual encouragement. The state’s slogan “stay cohesive” thus materialised in everyday life through voluntary cooperation rather than coercion, resulting in self-disciplining collectivism within China’s moral order.

Yet not all interviewees perceived their engagement as part of state-directed mobilisation. Interviewees K and D explicitly rejected framing their actions within official narratives. Interviewee W argued that the slogan offered no practical guidance and contended that survival depended on personal initiative rather than government planning. Interviewee C and S further argued that the pandemic policies were built at the expense of people. For these participants, the motivation to care for friends and family stemmed from the “norms of interpersonal behaviour” (*ren qing*) of *guanxi* (Qi 2013) and ritualised social responsibility rather than propaganda. Their goodwill and sincerity, they insisted, should not be reduced to political compliance.

This perspective highlights a crucial paradox: collectivism in Chinese culture (Jackson 2014), often invoked by the state as an ideological tool, can also function as an individual moral compass and a subtle form of resistance. When citizens acted out of genuine care rather than institutional pressure, they reappropriated collectivism as a personal ethic rather than a

political requirement, further demonstrating the public's increasing immunity to the state's performance of compassion in a disaster (Xu 2016). The lower level of political trust expressed by some interviewees reveals an enduring belief that governmental messaging was tied to an agenda of surveillance and regulation. Yet, paradoxically, these same participants enacted the values—responsibility, compassion, discipline—that state discourse sought to promote.

Friend group chat

An augmented arena

Interviewees C and S also reported that WeChat friend groups served as a primary source of up-to-date information on COVID-19. Interviewee C, in particular, described feeling overwhelmed by the volume of disinformation and misinformation circulating on broader social media platforms. As a result, they deliberately limited their exposure to excessive news coverage and instead chose to rely on content shared by trusted friends. In comments that resonate with social capital theory (Warren et al. 2015), Interviewee C said their strategy was based on the belief that friends were capable of collecting, identifying and disseminating only the most relevant and credible information to the group, thereby serving as a filter to reduce cognitive overload and improve self-protection. In other words, from Putnam's perspective (2000), the friends' bridging social capital was utilised to circulate information in the group chat. Meanwhile, the WeChat friend group can be understood as an extension of relationships in the physical dimension (Jurgenson 2012). Thus, the trust among the friend group members developed from the understanding of a person in real life, such as personality, location, educational background, professional expertise, and mindset (Interviewee C).

Simultaneously, such an ‘augmented friendship’ reproduces the implicit social norm embedded in the offline world. Group members can continue identifying appropriate topics to share in the group chat.

Interviewee S similarly regarded the discussions and shared content within friend groups as both significant and worthy of engagement. It is noteworthy that the high dependence on friends also opens up an opportunity for the transmission of not merely information but affective content, as discussed by Papacharissi in her theory of the affective public (Papacharissi 2014). While the theory builds upon the idea that people form loose, emotionally connected online communities based on shared concerns and feelings, in this case, the emotional connection was amplified through preexisting relationships and ‘subscribing’ to friends, and by allowing users to constantly expose themselves to the expression of the same people. Hence, what gets shared is not just about facts or accuracy, but also about whether the information ‘feels right’ or ‘trustworthy’ emotionally and socially, resulting in higher acceptance of the filtered content shared within the social networks.

Based on the trust within friendship groups, Interviewee S felt safe discussing topics captured from Weibo with friends when unsure— sometimes even sensitive ones. This echoes Papacharissi’s study of the ‘private sphere’ in the digital age (2010), in which she acknowledges that social network sites extend the connectivity and mobility of the private sphere, which was initially developed within individuals or families. Now the private sphere is open to being defined by individuals through their control of privacy, with technological affordances; it allows individual users to traverse the list of connections, construct a semi-public profile within a bounded system, and sustain social contact via privately framed, technologically enabled realms (boyd & Ellison 2007; Papacharissi 2010). Together, the trust

of friends and the privacy of a friendship group chat can further boost bonding social capital among members, enhancing the freedom of reciprocal discussion (in contrast to the tightened censorship in the public sphere) and motivate members to be authentic, emotionally and cognitively. Such group discussions were beneficial during the pandemic, as Interviewee S reported:

“My purpose in discussing things with friends wasn’t to influence them or to tell them something I know and make them believe it. The reason for discussing was actually the uncertainty around a topic—I wanted to hear how my friends see it and share my own perspective... It’s more about adding on viewpoints I hadn’t considered rather than outright disagreements... So generally, we just shared our views and often had those moments of, ‘Oh yeah, I think so too.’ Sometimes, during the discussion, someone would suddenly go, ‘Oh! Did you see that thing from so-and-so? Have you read that?’ Then, more resources and information got added to our conversation.” (Interviewee S)

Contrary to Interviewee C’s intention above, Interviewee S’s case illustrates the potential of engaging in a WeChat friend group: instead of narrowing down and filtering content, exploring various ideas and positions about the circumstances through contributions from friends broadens their insight into pandemic control. The discussion also facilitated Interviewee S in addressing information uncertainty, thereby avoiding becoming an accomplice to the spread of misinformation, which highlighted their sense of social responsibility as a lawful citizen.

Friends versus family support

Nevertheless, Interviewee S emphasised their mental health support from the friend group rather than from their parents. It is interesting to observe that not only Interviewee S but also other younger participants indicated that although they love and respect their parents, they feel a stronger emotional attachment to their friends, so that they were more willing to express their difficulties and mental stress with them. Interviewee S explained:

“The mental support I mentioned earlier is really something I share with friends, not my parents. Talking to parents about worries just makes them more anxious, which then makes me worry about them worrying about me—it’s like this endless cycle of stress... With friends, though, it’s much more relaxed. We can chat and vent, and it feels lighter.”

(Interviewee S)

Although Interviewee S framed this as a duty not to worry their parents, they also subtly underline the lack of resonance and the emotional burden they felt from their parents. This thesis argues that the seemingly intimate family relationship masked the weakened closeness to parents (*qin*) (Wu & Chao 2017) due to intensified parental control (*guan*) (Chao 1994; Wu 2013) rooted in Confucian philosophy about the parental role that underlines the imbalanced power relationship between parents and children (Bian 2019). The concept of closeness to parents was discussed as a sense of togetherness and harmony, as well as a way to show respect and appreciation, and to express gratitude for parents’ devotion and sacrifice through efforts and achievements (Wu 1996; Wu & Chao 2017). Yet, based on Wu and Chao’s study (2017), the expression of love among Chinese parents is more about making children feel beholden (sacrifice-return), which embeds a provider (e.g. food and financial support)-receiver (e.g. must be “sensible”, *dong shi*) relationship in a moral sense, rather than a

genuine mutual expression of unconditional love. This may restrict the two-way emotional expression in the parent-child relationship (i.e. Interviewee S felt worried about their parents worrying about them). Wu (2013) further notes that Chinese parents are considered a child's first and eternal teacher and are required to provide advice and guidance even after the child becomes an adult (Kelley & Tseng 1992; Wu 1996), which sustains the teacher-student roles in a family structure (e.g. a common Chinese parents saying is "It's for your own good", *dou shi wei ni hao*). This expression of love and care, then, can be understood as a form of parental control or *guan*: to train, and most importantly, to govern (Chao 1994). This reveals the superior role parents play in the Chinese context, which can restrict their children's ability to express their true feelings.

It is intriguing to find that Interviewee E, as a parent, also implicitly employed this parental control model to understand the relationship between the government and citizens during the pandemic. They said:

"For a long time, we've had 'a strong government and a small society', which means our government handles a lot more things... I still felt very fortunate because I could see the government really taking on responsibility. Particularly in the early stages of the pandemic, the mobilisation at the grassroots level was incredible... Everyone was really united, and that solidarity in the face of the pandemic touched me deeply... However, from the perspective of foreign media, or even some people abroad, they often view it with negative connotations, seeing things like control and restrictions in a negative light. But as a Chinese citizen, I believe the Chinese government did a great job."

(Interviewee E)

According to their description, “a strong government” corresponds to a superior, guiding, caring, responsible, and powerful parent, while “a small society” corresponds to the child’s role of “being trained”, “being cared for” and “being governed”. The way the Chinese government took on responsibilities—providing supplies, organising medical services, supervising their behaviour and intervening in almost every aspect of the public’s quarantine life—could be viewed through the lens of sacrifice and devotion in the name of love. In return, the public was asked to be “sensible” and repay this love, which can be viewed as following “stay cohesive” and being compliant.

Finally, it is crucial to note that the reduced level of *qin* should not be interpreted as a fading of love, but rather as a different way of expressing love in other cultures. This can explain why communication in the family group chat remained calm, as noted in the previous section. Younger family members tended to harness their affective expressions and temper their emotions when the audience was comprised of older relatives and parents. Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that friend groups, where relationships are outside the hierarchy and based on real-life friendship, can replace family groups and serve as an outlet for feelings.

Exploring trust

Interviewee R demonstrated that intense conflicts could also arise in discussions, even within long-term friend groups, due to ideological differences. Interviewee C also cautioned that, in certain cases—particularly within friend groups composed of older generations—the authenticity of shared content was potentially significantly compromised. In other words, this same affective logic could produce problematic outcomes in other contexts. This vulnerability often comes from participants having limited educational backgrounds and an uncritical trust in social relationships. As an illustrative example, Interviewee C described

how their father, a man in his 60s who grew up in Northeast China, possesses a relatively low level of formal education and adheres to a rigid, traditional patriarchal worldview. WeChat has enabled him to reconnect with former acquaintances—referred to as his “bros”—who share similar demographic and ideological profiles and sustained strong emotional ties within a group that lacks media literacy.

By reviewing the chat history in this cohort, Interviewee C observed frequent circulation of fake news and misinformation, as well as pseudoscientific or misleading health advice. Group members appeared to accept the content without judgment, trusting it solely because of their personal connections. These highly active interactions, while seemingly indicative of strong social cohesion, actually created a self-perpetuating cycle of misinformation. As a result, the group chat became a breeding ground for rumours, further entrenching disinformation and making its older members vulnerable to manipulation and confusion. Following Interviewee C’s reasoning, similar groups are likely to form across the networked public with the help of WeChat, which could promote misguided perceptions among older individuals.

Interviewees D, C, E, and Y also noted that smaller, more intimate WeChat group chats—typically composed of close friends—were often key spaces for acquiring ‘insider information’ regarding changes to quarantine policies. Again, this distribution of information illustrates the indispensable relation of ‘primary’ relationships (Yan 1996), reflecting the way “long-term relationships which are sustained through trust, mutual obligation and reciprocity... individuals bonded through *guanxi* are obliged to provide assistance to each other” (Qi 2013, p.312). Such information was frequently sourced from individuals working within relevant institutions, who had early access to internal communications prior to official public announcements. This method of information acquisition represents an informal—and

potentially risky—approach to accessing government-related intelligence through social networks. Consequently, the circulation of such updates was generally confined to a limited circle of highly trusted contacts and handled with considerable discretion, at times even raising suspicions due to its unofficial nature. Nonetheless, as Interviewee D observed, this information was often “surprisingly accurate”, enabling recipients to adapt quickly to rapidly evolving policy changes, a point echoed by Interviewee Y. Interviewee C, because of the reminder from their cousin, who was a journalist working for *Caixin* in Wuhan, could leave Wuhan before the lockdown was implemented in 2020.

Neighbourhood group chat

From a group chat to a community?

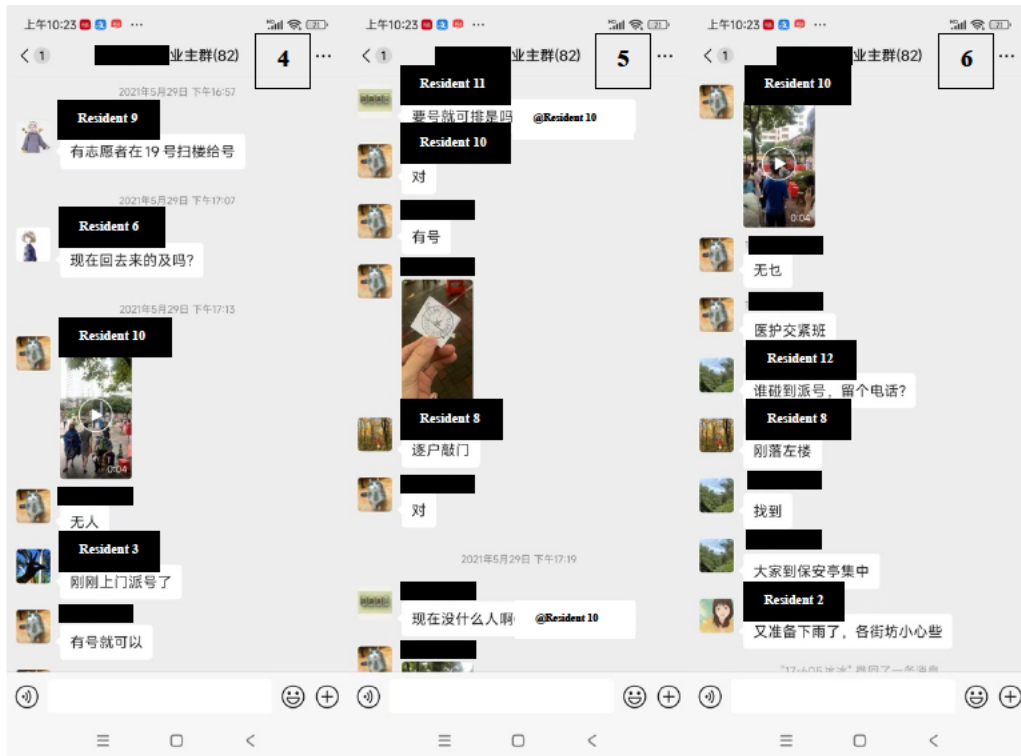
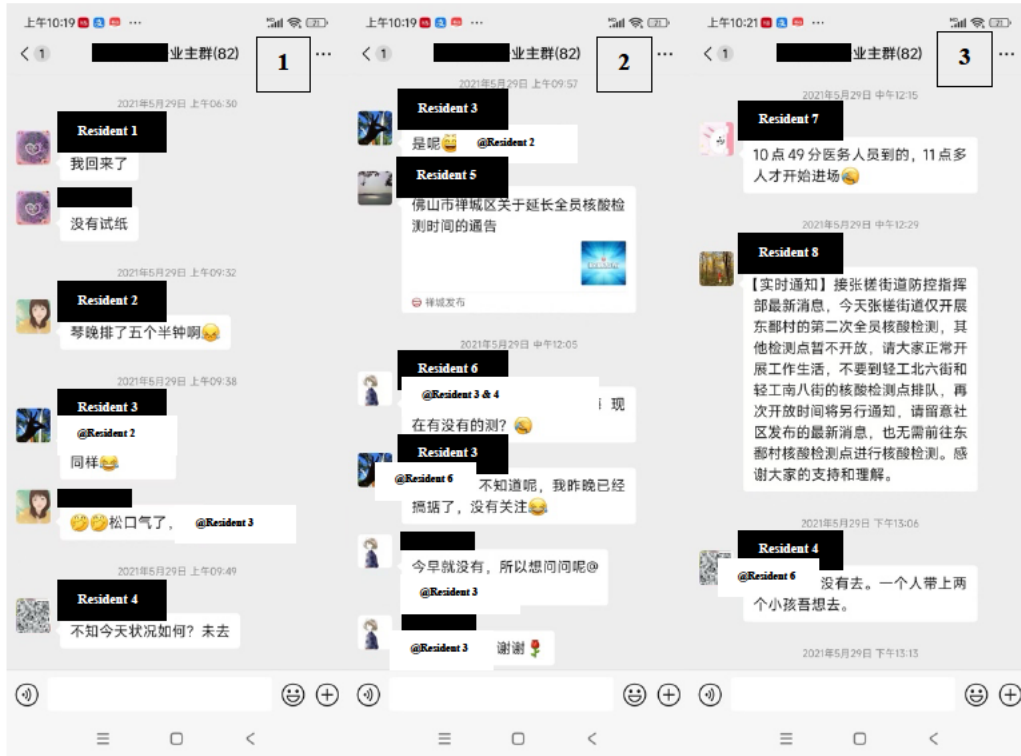
In addition, it is noteworthy that WeChat neighbourhood groups emerged as a crucial communicative space during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly for disseminating time-sensitive and locally relevant information. These groups typically consist of residents from the same residential complex, building, or compound. While some were initiated by property management teams, many were also formed spontaneously by residents themselves, with a primary function of addressing and resolving everyday communal issues. Members of such groups are inherently stakeholders in matters that affect their immediate living environment. Although emotional intimacy may be limited among group members, their interactions are shaped by a shared sense of interest and collective vulnerability due to their physical proximity. This produces a form of pragmatic solidarity, driven not by interpersonal relationships but by mutual reliance within a common living space.

Many cases of neighbourhood group chats used to cope with lockdown life were recorded throughout the pandemic. When the public health emergency hit, neighbourhood groups became the first place for local inhabitants to participate in the massive battle against the pandemic. Firstly, neighbourhood groups allow residents to arrange supplies and stabilise their life under quarantine. Interviewee K mentioned that many communities in Guangzhou organised group orders for grocery shopping in neighbourhood groups during the lockdown, especially for those unfamiliar with online shopping, such as the elderly, and for those who were living in “urban villages” (*cheng zhong cun*) and out of the range of delivery service of supermarkets. Community volunteers also used the “group note” (*jie long*) function to quickly confirm each family’s needs and purchase and distribute food. In particular, when the number of couriers was very limited due to strict lockdown policies, neighbourhood groups stepped in to replace the formal delivery system, becoming the main channel for local volunteers to contact residents and deliver online orders. Interviewee J recalled that, to avoid in-person contact, their compound also used the neighbourhood group to schedule each family’s grocery shopping during the lockdown. Later, during the Shanghai lockdown in March 2022, when government supplies were restricted, residents in the same building also used neighbourhood groups to seek help and aid one another. Thus, neighbourhood groups had become a digital communal space for local residents to come together and organise their quarantine lives and provide mutual support, and through this, they began to negotiate a new public order for the area’s inhabitants.

Neighbourhood groups also helped inhabitants govern autonomously. An example occurred in May 2021, when confirmed COVID-19 cases were reported in my hometown, Foshan, prompting the urgent implementation of citywide mandatory testing. During this period, residents in my compound actively engaged in the WeChat neighbourhood group of 82

people to exchange information on nearby testing sites and to coordinate testing schedules with local community volunteers and other residents to minimise overcrowding and reduce the risk of cross-infection²⁵. It is worth detailing this chat at length to illustrate how these groups operated in real time. Figure 15 illustrates the group conversation from 29 May to 31 May 2021:

²⁵ The call for the citywide mandatory test was so urgent that it initially failed due to understaffing, a shortage of antigen test reagents, insufficient testing sites, unclear instructions and goals, and severe weather such as storms and heatwaves. This resulted in long queues and crowds at the testing sites, which increased the risk of heatstroke and cross-infection, and led to surging frustration and non-compliance. Subsequently, remedial actions were taken, including increasing the number of testing sites and employing volunteers to send booking numbers to nearby communities, rather than asking the public to wait in queues. This aimed to ensure proper matching of residents with reagents and to manage crowd congestion.



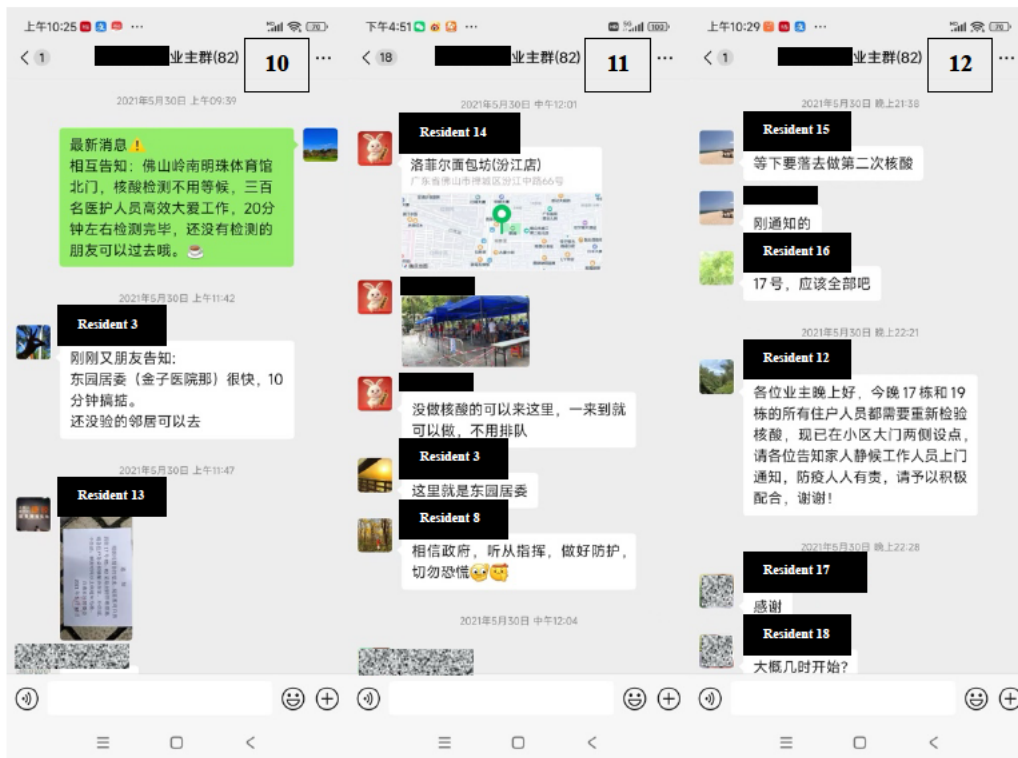
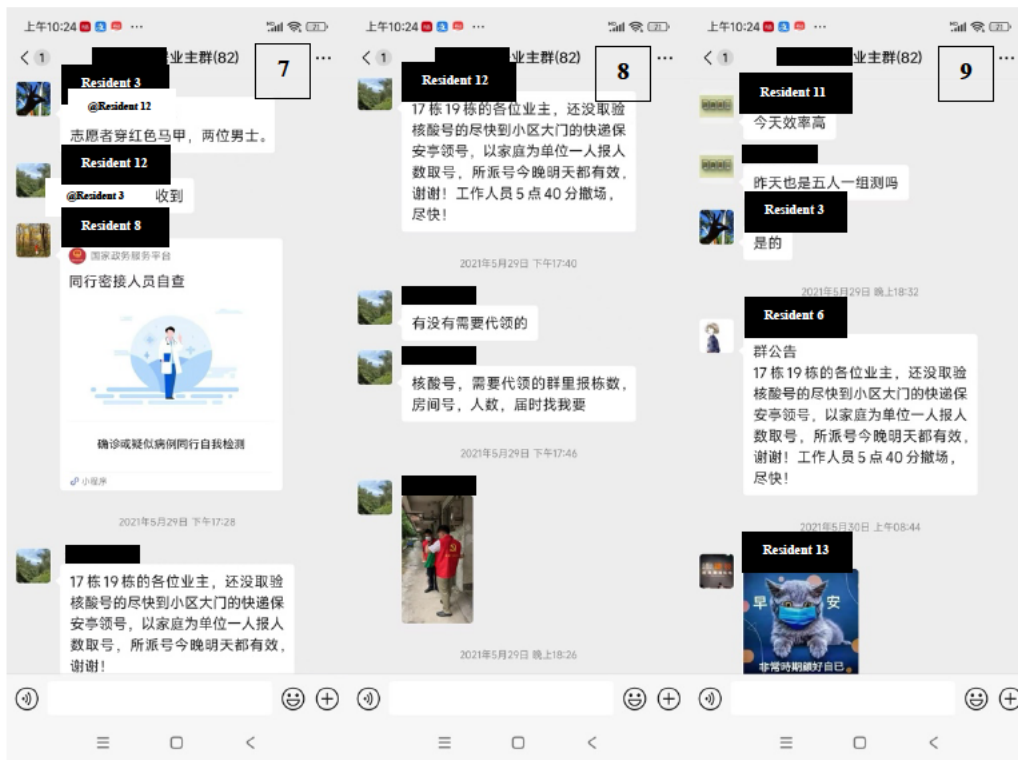




Figure 15: Coordination and announcement in the neighbourhood group of the compound in May 2021.

As shown in Figure 15, Screenshot 1, the group chat activity began early on the morning of 29 May 2021. At 6:30 a.m., Resident 1 (R1) expressed frustration after visiting a COVID-19 testing site early morning only to find testing suspended due to a shortage of reagents. Later that morning, around 9:30 a.m., R2 used a “cry” emoji to recount the difficulty of queuing, sharing that they had waited five hours the previous night to complete testing. R3 affirmed this sentiment, and the two exchanged messages using the mention function²⁶ (“@”) and

²⁶ In WeChat, putting ‘@’ before a username can trigger the ‘mention’ function in a group chat. The user who is mentioned will receive a direct notification from the system. Even if the group notification is muted, the notification will still display in the interface.

light-hearted emojis (e.g., “giggle”) to signal relief that their efforts had not been in vain—implicitly contrasting their situation with R1’s continued uncertainty.

Following R2’s message, R4 expressed concern about the day’s testing arrangements, while R5 shared an official announcement extending the mandatory testing period in Chancheng District (Screenshot 2). Around midday, R6 asked R3 and R4 whether any testing sites were currently open, using a “facepalm” emoji to express embarrassment about relying on others. R3 responded that they had ignored the test that day as they had already finished yesterday, and R6 thanked them with a ‘rose’ emoji. Later, R4 ‘mentioned’ R6 and clarified that they were reluctant to seek testing while caring for two young children (Screenshot 3). At this point, R7 added further context, stating that medical staff had only begun setting up at 11:00 a.m., and echoed R6’s frustration with another “facepalm” emoji. R8 attempted to ease tensions by sharing a message from a seemingly official source, suggesting that only one community would require a second round of testing that day—implying that other residents might not need to worry.

In the late afternoon (Screenshot 4), R9 informed the group that volunteers were distributing booking numbers door-to-door in Building 19. R6 followed up if it would still be possible to obtain a number after returning home. At the same time, R10 shared a short video of a quiet testing site, suggesting it was a good time to go. R3 confirmed that volunteers had just passed their door, implying that R6 might still catch them in time. These conversations continued into Screenshots 5 and 6, where R11 sought further confirmation from R10, who repeated the need for booking numbers and shared photos and another video for verification. R10 also indicated that the shift change among medical staff made it an ideal time to go. These media-

rich updates enhanced the credibility of the information shared, facilitating timely and confident responses from group members.

Simultaneously, R8 verified R9's report that volunteers were going door-to-door and added that they had just gone down the stairs—helping R12 locate them. R12 subsequently urged neighbours to collect booking numbers at the security room. R2, in parallel, posted a friendly reminder that rain was approaching if they were going. In Screenshot 7, R3 clarified that the volunteers were wearing red vests, and R8 contributed a link to a government mini-program for self-screening COVID-19 exposure risk. R12, later, confirmed their coordination role by composing a formal announcement urging all residents of Buildings 17 and 19 to send a family member to collect booking numbers before the 5:40 p.m. deadline (Screenshot 8). Their formal tone and inclusion of logistical details suggested they were acting directly alongside the volunteers. At the cutoff time, R12 even offered to collect numbers on behalf of others, requesting basic information and further affirming their presence with a photo.

These efforts continued into the evening. In screenshot 9, at 6:30 p.m. R11 followed up about testing procedures, and R3 confirmed that testing was still proceeding in groups of five. Although the deadline had passed, R6 reshared R12's announcement to ensure others remained informed. The following morning (30 May), R13 greeted the group with a sticker (*biao qing*) showing a masked cat and text reading “Good morning, take good care of yourself in this crisis”—a style of digital expression described by Wang (2023) as essential to maintaining interpersonal ties and sharing good wishes among older users. Later that day, both R3 and Interviewee Z reported on two testing sites with short wait times (10–20 minutes), which they heard about from friends, helping residents choose convenient options

(Screenshot 10). R13 followed up with a photo of an official notice confirming the upcoming quarantine of Building 17, thereby alerting neighbours to prepare accordingly.

In Screenshot 11, R14 shared the location and a photo of a nearby quiet testing site, urging others to “come quickly”. R3 confirmed this was the location they had recommended earlier in Screenshot 10, reinforcing its reliability. Responding to the notice of quarantine by R13, R8 encouraged group members to “trust the government, comply with instructions, protect ourselves, and don’t panic”, using cheerful emojis (“hey” and “go for it”) to express their calm attitude and cautious optimism. However, anxiety escalated later that afternoon as the predicted situation unfolded: a close contact of a confirmed case was identified in Building 17, triggering another round of mandatory testing for the compound.

Despite rising tension, the group remained largely cooperative and supportive. At 9:38 p.m., R15 announced that another test round had just been confirmed. R16 asked whether all residents in Building 17 were required to participate, and about an hour later, R12 responded in formal language, stating that testing was compulsory for Buildings 17 and 19 and that medical staff were setting up at the main gate. The message ended with a conventional call for action: “Fighting the pandemic is a responsibility for everyone, please strictly follow the instructions, thank you!”—aligning individual actions with a collective moral duty, resonating the theme of “Stay cohesive, we can defeat the pandemic” suggested by the government.

Subsequent responses reflected a mix of appreciation and emotional strain. R17 thanked R12, while R18 inquired about testing times. R8 encouraged others to “sit and chill at home, wait peacefully”, and R19 expressed gratitude to frontline workers (Screenshot 13). However,

Resident R20, under visible stress, criticised R12 for not sharing “good news” (retrieved from the erratum), asking aggressively, “What about the people who are not at home?????” and demanding an immediate response, using a direct ‘mention’ and multiple exclamation marks. R12 calmly ‘quoted’ R20’s message and asked for clarification²⁷, noting that if R20 referred to absent family members, they would need to check with the medical staff.

By midnight, the testing had commenced. R12 and R17 thanked R3 for reminding them to wait until contacted before heading down (Screenshot 14). At 12:15 a.m., R3 reported that the process was progressing quickly and encouraged R17 to proceed. R1 then quoted an earlier message from R17, noting that although no notification was received, staff had come door-to-door—confirming the thoroughness of the testing process.

Collectively, these interactions demonstrate that WeChat neighbourhood groups emerged as a crucial digital infrastructure during the COVID-19 pandemic, facilitating real-time, hyperlocal coordination, emotional regulation, and mobilisation among residents. Far from being passive communication spaces, these groups became dynamic and highly responsive sites of action, where all residents could contribute their ideas and resources, actively

²⁷ Users on WeChat can use the ‘quote’ function to reply/refer to a specific message directly to indicate that they are only addressing that point. This is similar to the ‘reply’ function on Messenger, Instagram and WhatsApp. The target audience who is ‘quoted’ will receive a notification as well.

participate in real-time decision-making, share responsibilities, and co-constructed meaning in response to public health uncertainty.

At the most basic level, the group chat served as a real-time coordination tool, enabling the rapid exchange of critical updates about COVID-19 testing logistics, such as wait times, volunteer activity, the presence of medical staff, and booking number distribution. Residents frequently accompanied their updates with visual content—photos, videos, and screenshots—which not only increased the immediacy and clarity of their messages but also served as mechanisms of peer verification and reducing uncertainty. This kind of grassroots fact-checking reflects the affordances of networked publics (boyd 2010), where digital platforms enable users to share, verify, and act upon information through fluid, asynchronous interactions. In doing so, these groups served not only as information channels but also as self-organised, autonomous, networked spaces of practical problem-solving, allowing neighbours to navigate pandemic restrictions more efficiently. Then the neighbours, who may not have talked to each other in real life, can share and shape an online community.

Beyond coordinating COVID tests, neighbourhood groups fostered a form of pragmatic solidarity. Although emotional intimacy among group members may have been limited, the shared risk of living together in the same residential environment drove decentralised collective action, resonating with the concept of ‘connective actions’ which emphasises the organisational power of networks, along with personal interests and expression, using digital technology to organise social movements (Bennett & Segerberg 2013), or, in this study, to respond to a public health crisis. From Dahlgren and Hill’s perspective (2023), the contribution to the group chat can be understood as the member’s acknowledgement of their essential role in the residential community. Mutual assistance—such as offering to collect test

booking numbers on behalf of others—reflected a sense of responsibility grounded in spatial proximity rather than emotional bonds.

At the core of this transformation was the group's capacity to act as an affective public (Papacharissi 2014), in which emotional communication, or affective content—through emojis, stickers, tone, punctuation and moral appeals—became central to meaning-making and civic participation. Residents did not merely exchange factual updates about testing schedules or booking numbers; they infused these messages with expressions of empathy, humour, frustration, anxiety and solidarity. Emotional expressions such as “sit and chill”, and using expressions such as “go for it”, “facepalm”, “cry”, or “rose” emojis functioned as relational cues, helping to stabilise social harmony during a time of collective stress. These interactions were not peripheral to the group's informational function—they were constitutive of it, shaping how people interpreted risks, responded to uncertainty, and made decisions collectively.

During the neighbourhood's coordinated testing, certain residents (e.g., R12, R3, and R10) informally assumed leadership roles by compiling and redistributing official announcements, drafting collective messages, and assisting neighbours who were unable to reach testing sites. These emergent figures exemplify what Gerbaudo (2012) terms ‘soft leaders’: individuals who are not formally appointed but arise organically through the participatory affordances of Web 2.0, dialogically and interactively. Their authority rests on visibility, initiative, and communicative competence rather than institutional mandate. By consistently contributing to problem-solving and mediating between residents and property management, such figures temporarily became moral anchors of local cooperation.

Yet, as in my previous MRes research (Hu 2018), these forms of online coordination also exposed the limits of representation in digitally mediated collectives. The absence of formal legitimacy opens leadership up to contestation. For instance, R20 questioned both R12's competence and the accuracy of the information they conveyed, undermining the group's fragile consensus. Similarly, Interviewee J observed that even well-intentioned efforts to organise shopping schedules within the neighbourhood group chat provoked emotionally charged reactions. Some elderly residents rejected the plans, insisting that it did not meet their needs and demanding either complete service from property management or unrestricted mobility. By rallying others to oppose the proposed rules, they effectively rejected the legitimacy of peer leadership and denied collective representation based on weak social ties.

These conflicts illustrate both the potential and fragility of grassroots digital governance. Neighbourhood WeChat groups can function as ad hoc civic infrastructures—building new forms of public order through cooperation and mutual aid—but their stability depends on affective alignment rather than formal authority. Without coercive power or institutional endorsement, order is sustained through moral consensus and reciprocal trust among residents, echoing Papacharissi's (2014) theory of affective publics. Based on Bennett and Segerberg's (2013) argument in the context of connective action, digital collectives derive cohesion not from centralised leadership but from the shared performance of responsibility and care. However, this decentralised model also makes them susceptible to fragmentation once participants withdraw from a collective understanding of moral consensus. In this sense, neighbourhood group governance during lockdown reveals the dual nature of soft leadership in China's pandemic response: empowering ordinary citizens to coordinate action, yet constantly at risk of collapse when emotional and moral consensus dissolves.

The group's role as an informal coordination hub also exemplifies the mobilisation of social capital. Scholars emphasise that social capital can effectively facilitate trust and create bonds between neighbours (Morrow & Scorgie-Porter 2017). Putnam (2000) defines social capital as the connections that are established among individuals that nourish social networks, generate trust, and enhance the reciprocity embedded in social norms. He further stresses that bridging and bonding capitals co-exist in social lives that encompass people from various dimensions and strengthen internal, exclusive and homogenous identities (Putnam 2000). Following Putnam's argument, in this neighbourhood group, the ties among neighbours, although they remained weak, became resources for mutual aid, information verification, and emotional support, based on bonding social capital arising from the shared relational obligation of living in the same area and a shared sense of responsibility when formal authority was absent. Bridging social capital, reflected in the capability to distribute real-time official and external information of R12 and R10 through the network, was mobilised within the digitally mediated community to support collective wellbeing.

Simultaneously, their dissemination of formal announcements, offers to help others obtain booking numbers, and clarification of testing protocols within the social network clearly reflect a key role played by WeChat users in promoting networked democracy in a form of lifestyle and identity-based politics (Bennett et al. 2003; Dahlgren 2009; Papacharissi 2010). These users were not necessarily engaging in formal political activism, but instead, through practical and relational acts, performing civic engagement that is embedded in personal routines and social relationships. This self-organised participation demonstrates how digital platforms such as WeChat facilitate the emergence of everyday citizens as agents of care, coordination, and civic responsibility, and indicates the growing momentum of a bottom-up,

spontaneous, autonomous, participatory, and augmented civic engagement that is argued for in this thesis.

In the Chinese context, these group dynamics, again, must also be understood through the lens of Confucian relational ethics, which continue to shape expectations around social conduct and communication. WeChat ethics are embedded in practices of digital courtesy, attentiveness, and reciprocity—values rooted in Confucian ideals of maintaining harmony (Bian 2019; King 2018). The interactions in the group, including the sharing of “good morning” stickers, reminders of the weather, the avoidance of conflict, and the public articulation of gratitude and moral duty (“fighting the pandemic is everyone’s responsibility”), reflect this ethical framework. Thus, these are not merely digital habits; they are reflections of the Confucian habitus in a contemporary, digitalised form.

Neighbourhood group versus rumours

The circulation of rumours about suspected COVID-19 cases became another major source of anxiety for residents in the compound described above. In addition to the internal pressure to comply with home quarantine and mass testing, external speculation spread rapidly across the city and destabilised residents’ sense of safety. The neighbourhood WeChat group thus became a frontline for both information management and collective defence (see Figure 16).

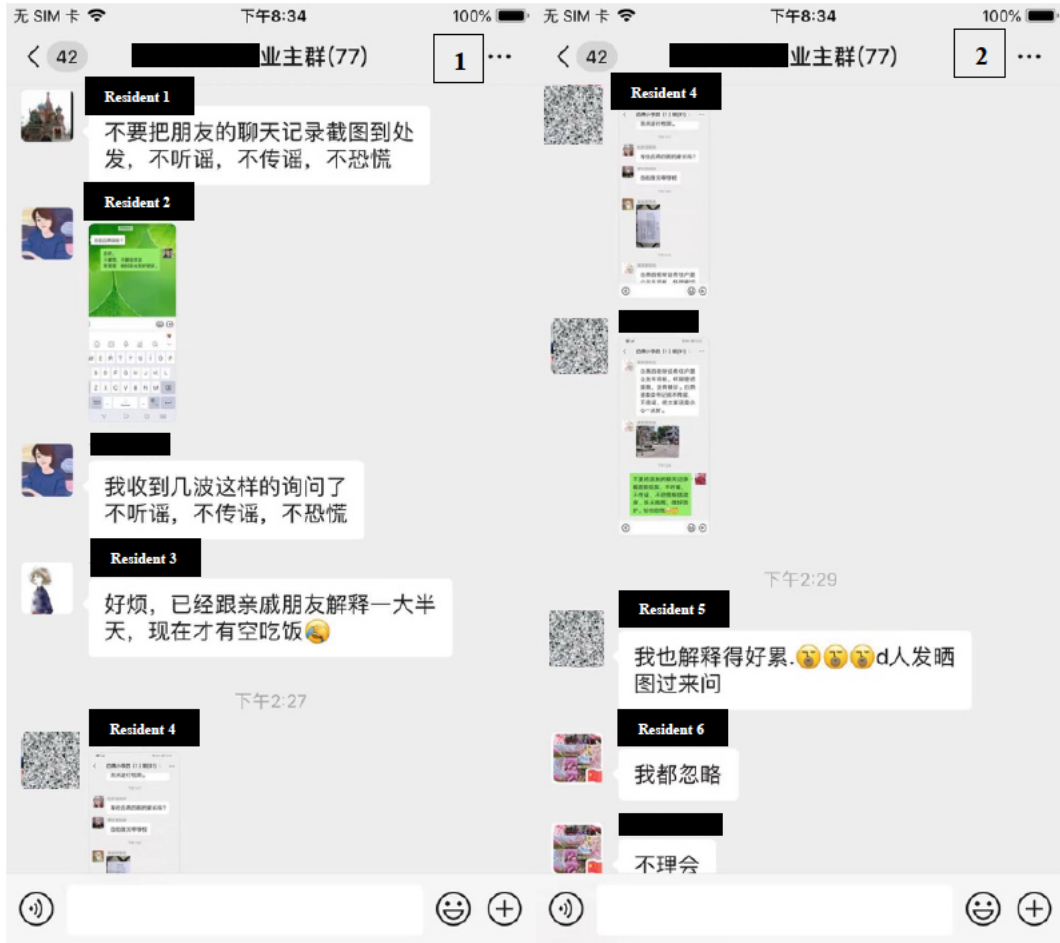




Figure 16: Residents reminding each other not to spread rumours, screenshots captured in May 2021.

As shown in Screenshot 1, Resident 1 (R1) urged others not to share screenshots or internal messages beyond the group, reiterating the government's official instructions for managing rumours: do not listen, do not spread, do not panic. R2, R3, and R5 (Screenshots 1 & 2) voiced frustration at having to repeatedly refute misinformation when questioned by friends and relatives. Even when these inquiries came from goodwill, residents reported feeling uneasy and stigmatised. R4 faced similar tensions in the parents' group of their child's class, where questions about the compound's status implicitly grew accusatory. Rather than engage emotionally, R4 showed the residents how they copied and pasted the official guidance to calm the group (see Screenshots 5 & 6). Meanwhile, R6 insisted in the neighbourhood group that explanations were unnecessary.

The internal policing intensified. In Screenshot 3, R3 anonymously shamed neighbours who had posted prematurely on WeChat Moments, calling their behaviour "impulsive" and attention-seeking. R2 supported this post, reminding the group that spreading rumours was illegal. R7 later exposed another smaller chat (see Screenshot 7) allegedly responsible for leaking information to outsiders, accusing an insider "traitor" of fuelling chaos. R2 and R3 (Screenshot 4) expressed disappointment at those who "stirred up trouble" (*dai jie zou*), while R4 warned that unchecked gossip could harm children, who might face discrimination at school.

This reveals how rumours created not only informational but also emotional and moral crises. Residents feared being labelled as "contagious", which threatened both their social reputation and their children's inclusion. The need to defend collective honour produced an affective public—a networked collective bound by shared emotions of anger, frustration, and fear (Papacharissi 2014). Within this affective alignment, insiders and outsiders were clearly

defined: those within the compound were imagined as a cohesive moral community, while those spreading rumours were cast as irresponsible others. In Putnam's (2000) terms, bonding social capital intensified, reinforcing internal homogeneity while deepening exclusionary boundaries.

The neighbourhood chat, in effect, turned into a "war room". Members shared strategies for containing misinformation—such as remaining silent and adopting a firm personal stance—to draft an informal norm of "responsible neighbourly conduct"—encouraging members to align their behaviour with group ethics to preserve community solidarity (Dahlgren & Hill 2023). At the same time, the group mobilised shame and exposure as disciplinary tools. Anonymised criticism and the public naming of "traitors" served as collective punishment, echoing Ahmed's (2014) analysis of how shame operates as a mechanism of social control. Through such peer surveillance, the residents effectively enacted a form of digital vigilantism (Trottier 2017), turning the affective energy of fear and anger into moral policing.

Paradoxically, while these acts defended the community's integrity, they also reproduced the emotional logic of state propaganda: order through self-discipline. Yet, rather than being imposed from above, this order was internalised in daily life and co-produced by residents seeking moral coherence amid uncertainty. The result was a microcosm of emotional governance at the grassroots level: solidarity sustained by vigilance, care intertwined with control. Building on Couldry and Hepp's (2017) argument, social life was increasingly organised through relationships of interdependence structured by media technologies. As media become embedded in daily practices, they no longer simply transmit messages but actively shape how individuals connect, cooperate, and make sense of the world, which echoes the concept of augmented reality (Jurgenson 2012). In this sense, the neighbourhood

WeChat group constructed a moral world in which truth was defended through loyalty, and loyalty was proven through the collective suppression of doubt.

Above all, the WeChat group constituted a hybrid digital public, blending technological affordances with the cultural norms of relational harmony, emotional responsiveness, and civic responsibility. Residents actively mediated official communications by translating government announcements into actionable advice, often through peer interpretation and localised updates. This bottom-up communication filled crucial gaps in institutional outreach and strengthened policy compliance at the grassroots level. The neighbourhood group thus operated as a temporary digital public sphere for civic engagement, where everyday digital participation blurred the boundary between citizen and state, demonstrating the potential of WeChat to support informal governance, emotional regulation, and community resilience during an emergency. Ultimately, the group dynamic helps fellow residents fulfil public health requirements, and indirectly safeguards their own households by contributing to a COVID-free living environment.

Summary

This chapter has shown how cooperation during the pandemic was enacted through the everyday interactions of family, friend, and neighbourhood group chats on WeChat. These semi-public relational spaces served as crucial units of grassroots governance, translating the national call to “stay cohesive” into interpersonal obligations. Family groups mobilised kinship hierarchies to inform, monitor, and correct one another’s behaviour and maintain compliance; friend groups provided safer spaces for honest discussion, emotional support, and collective truth-seeking; and neighbourhood groups became hubs for pooling information

from the public sphere and mutual aid while simultaneously enforcing peer supervision and moral discipline.

Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate how Confucian relational ethics—particularly *guanxi*, hierarchy, and reciprocity—intersected with digitally mediated connectivity to produce new forms of community organisation during the crisis. Such connective actions not only facilitated the practical coordination of daily life but also shaped moral expectations and emotional climates within these intimate networks.

Chapter Seven: Visualising networked intimacy on WeChat

Chapter Seven turns to WeChat Moments, shifting from the private intimacy of group chats to the semi-public sphere where networked relationships become visible. As an interface that blends personal archiving with social display, Moments offered users a means of documenting their pandemic life while simultaneously exposing these reflections to the interpretive gaze of their friend networks. Within this hybrid space, interpersonal bonds shaped how opinions were expressed, contested, or withheld; and the ideological boundary of who counted as “us” became more sharply defined under the banner of “stay cohesive”.

By analysing how users shared, reacted to, or strategically avoided sensitive content on Moments, this chapter deepens the investigation into sub-questions 3) and 4). It focuses on how networked intimacy mediated emotional resonance, shaped truth-verification practices, and produced a semi-public form of connective action that was both supportive and exclusionary. Moments, as this chapter demonstrates, became a crucial arena for understanding how care, conformity, resistance, and fear converged during the pandemic.

Moments: when private and public intersect

Moments as an alternative version of Facebook

Moments is another distinctive and popular feature on WeChat. As the second most frequently used function, in total, in 2021, about 780 million WeChat users engaged with Moments per day, in which about 120 million users actively posted, including 670 million pictures and 100 million videos (Liu 2021). As Facebook does, Moments provides a space for

users to share both original and reposted content from external social platforms and websites, including Weibo, as well as internal sources, such as public accounts, mini-programs, Live and Channels. The content can include images, videos, live photos, text, locations, and hyperlinks.

And through ‘like’ and comments, users can engage in quick interactions under the post. The user who gets a comment directly replying to them will receive a notification in the app. Also, the sender and the friends who liked the post receive a notification when a new ‘like’ is added by common friends. However, unlike Facebook, which has multiple options of how to like a post to show emotional reactions, as Nip and Berthelie (2023) describe it: “a one-click shortcut to express a variety of affective responses such as excitement, agreement, compassion, understanding, but also ironic and parodist liking” (cited Gerlitz & Helmond 2013, p. 1358), the ‘like’ in Moments is basic and simple, with only one option. Yet, as Interviewee N argued, in such a space mediating interpersonal relationships, clicking ‘like’ means more than just an instant emotional reaction—it implies that the sender approves of the position in the post. Thus, the number of likes under a commentary post on Moments can indicate the trend of the sentiments among friends. Simultaneously, a like is more meaningful than just a polite gesture.

Moments as a communal space

The interactions in Moments, thus, are straightforward for WeChat users, which is more friendly to older users than other platforms (Interviewee Z). At the same time, it is important to note that because of WeChat’s mechanism for maintaining close friend circles, posts in Moments cannot be reposted and can only be viewed by friends on the friend list.

Additionally, comments and likes will only be visible to mutual friends. Hence, Moments

offers a safe and intimate space for accountable interactions, facilitating the formation of affective relationships (Papacharissi 2014), and encourages the sharing of emotions and resonance for further expressions and connective actions (Bennett & Segerberg 2013).



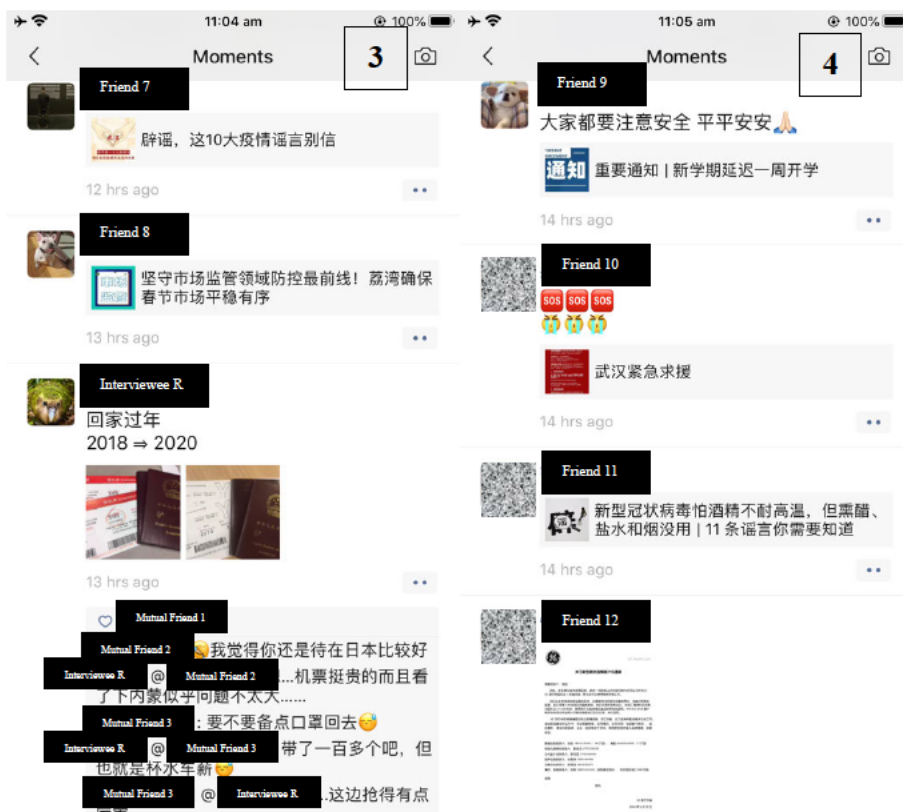


Figure 17: Sample posts in Moments on the first day of the Wuhan lockdown, viewed on 23 January 2020.

Figure 17 illustrates how friends used WeChat Moments to circulate information, express care, and engage in light emotional interactions during the early stage of the COVID-19 pandemic. Friends 2, 3, 8, and 10 actively shared links to news and official announcements to inform their networks. Friends 2 and 3, both based in Foshan, focused on local updates (Screenshot 1). Friend 2 corrected a headline earlier reporting five currently confirmed local cases by adding, “Foshan now has 6 cases!” Friend 3, a police officer, shared news about the suspension of the 2020 Spring Festival market. Friend 8 (Screenshot 3), who worked for the Market Regulation Department, reposted a link emphasising their department’s ongoing efforts to stabilise local market activity to show the determination of the government, while

Friend 9 (Screenshot 4), a university employee, forwarded the official announcement of the delayed semester start, accompanied by a wish for the safety of students and friends.

Moments also republished voices of public concern. Friend 1 posted a statement urging the government to prioritise the well-being of medical staff, noting that “saying nice things won’t help” (Screenshot 1), signalling support for frontline workers. Similarly, Friend 6 (Screenshot 2) shared an analytical article from a public account revealing that the shortage of reagent test kits hindered the timely confirmation of COVID-19 cases, implicitly suggesting a policy priority for the government.

Moments became a space for offering and seeking help. In Screenshot 4, Friend 10 posted an “Urgent request from Wuhan”, marked with “SOS” and “cry” emojis, expressing empathy for the situation and appealing for donations of medical supplies. By contrast, Friend 12 shared a practical resource—an announcement from General Electric Healthcare China providing emergency contact information and service continuity—so that anyone in their network could access timely support.

Expressions of care and informal public education were also prominent. Friend 4 posted a humorous reminder to wear face masks, captioning a meme of Captain America being choked by the Winter Soldier²⁸ with, “Why not wear a mask!” and noted dramatically as “A reminder

²⁸ A scene from the Marvel movie, *Captain America 2: The Winter Soldier*, launched in 2014. In the movie, the character Bucky the Winter Soldier wears a mask to conceal his identity at all times.

from Bucky” (Screenshot 2). Friend 5 reposted a CCTV Weibo post encouraging the importance of reducing unnecessary family gatherings to protect public health. Similarly, Friends 7 (Screenshot 3) and 11 (Screenshot 4) reposted content clarifying COVID-19 rumours, reinforcing informal peer-to-peer health communication. Such micro-interventions demonstrate how personal networks strengthened a sense of social responsibility, encouraging adherence to scientific and ethical practices during the lockdown.

An example of a more relational dimension of Moments interaction is demonstrated in Interviewee R’s post (Screenshot 3), announcing a return to China for the Spring Festival after two years abroad. Mutual Friend 1 ‘liked’ the post, conveying happiness for the reunion. Mutual Friend 2, however, expressed concern and suggested delaying the trip with a “facepalm” emoji, while Mutual Friend 3 recommended bringing face masks to comfort Interviewee R, as the itinerary was already confirmed. When Interviewee R responded that they had prepared 100 masks but still felt underprepared, with a “sweats” emoji indicating nervousness and the phrase “it is what it is”, Mutual Friend 3 noted the global mask shortage, mentioning that supplies in the United States were also limited. Through this brief exchange of concerns and care, there was a bridging of mutual friends between those located in China, Japan, and the US. Interviewee R and their friends engaged in spontaneous emotional and informational interaction: exchanging advice, sharing risk awareness, and reaffirming their digital social connection. Even a simple status update evolved into a moment of networked intimacy (Chambers 2017), reminding Interviewee R that they were cared for within their online community.

Above all, Moments became a space where informational and emotional exchanges were tightly intertwined. The interactions ranged from sharing local updates and official

announcements to help-seeking, moral reminders, and personal suggestions, reflecting the modern mediated networked intimacy. In this context, the term ‘intimacy’ was freed from the traditional face-to-face scenario and became contextualised in the digital era (Chambers 2013; Chan 2018; Giddens 1992). The connectivity within social networks is empowered by constant sharing, disclosure, and the trading off of privacy, as individuals express care, share risk awareness, and reinforce mutual visibility in a time of social disruption (Chambers 2017; Quinn 2016). Unlike group chats, which generally emphasise exclusive communication within a specific group of people, Moments encourages openness and steers users to share more personal information to fuel the networked intimacy (Chambers 2017). Drawing on contemporary scholars’ ideas (Chambers 2013; 2017; Giddens 1992; Willmott 2007), I argue that clicking the ‘share’ button, not only enables intimacy through mutual disclosure, but also acknowledges the agency of social media user and their freedom to elect, form and manage friendships based on personal preferences. When Interviewee R clicked the post button to share their trip returning to China, they were also sharing their schedule, destination, and purpose with the people they care about (Bucher 2013), and that enabled an exchange of private information with advice and emotional support from friends and transformed a simple announcement into a moment of relational engagement.

Similar to the affordances on Facebook, Moments also generates and utilises the trust from the ‘recommendation culture’ (Chambers 2017), building on the networked public framework (boyd 2010), and as Bucher (2013) argues, ‘we trust our friends and think like our friends, turning friends into the most relevant recommenders’ (p. 488). The sense of trust can be further amplified, given the expectation of the privacy of communication (boyd 2010) is

lifted, due to the limited ways to add contacts to WeChat²⁹. Users are more likely to have knowledge about potential connections when they exchange their contact information before they finally become ‘friends’, regardless of whether they were friends in real life or acquaintances online. Trust and understanding of contacts potentially evolve into social capital as users engage in Moments (Coleman 1988; Nahapiet & Ghoshal 1998).

At the same time, trust embedded in WeChat friendships enabled individuals to mobilise social resources during the pandemic. Interviewee J described how a friend, confined to a university dormitory under lockdown, posted complaints about the daily hardship they experienced on Moments. After reaching out privately, Interviewee J persuaded their parent to activate *guanxi* to assist the friend. Drawing on what Yan (1996) terms “extended” *guanxi*—instrumental ties and transactional relationships that extend beyond close kin to include colleagues and acquaintances—Interviewee J’s parent contacted a colleague still working on campus to deliver food to the student. Through this interaction, a relational circuit connecting friendship, family, and *guanxi* emerged, forming a network of reciprocal care that bridged digital and offline spheres. It illustrates how WeChat communication can translate

²⁹ The common ways to add ‘friends’ on WeChat are through QR code, WeChat ID/QQ ID/phone number search, name card sharing, group chat member list, and connected WeCom (enterprise version of WeChat) users. Contacts can also be added by using ‘radar search’ (*fu jin de ren*) to find strangers on WeChat around, or ‘shake-shake’ (*yao yi yao*) to match a random user by shaking a phone (the latter is recently offline). These two methods focus on more socialisation, but are also problematic due to scammers.

emotional connection into practical assistance, extending traditional relational ethics into digital contexts.

Moreover, the networked public indicates a blurring of the boundary between public and private spaces (boyd 2010). ‘Public’ and ‘private’ are no longer binary but exist in a liminal space where individuals actively manage self-presentation and personal boundaries within social networks (Rainie & Wellman 2012). While the concept of privacy becomes more fluid online, networked intimacy can pose risks to individuals, making them vulnerable when they expose themselves and their bodies in exchange for visibility (Chambers 2017). Scholars warn that failing to control these boundaries may lead to serious consequences that can harm mental health, including the risk of associated with cyberbullying, sexting, and revenge porn (Ringrose et al. 2013), as well as financial loss. Interviewees C, E, N, and D, who shared these concerns, felt insecure about posting in Moments due to the variety of relationships and viewpoints that could lead to conflict. While this reflects the previous discussion on ‘context collision’ (Davis & Jurgenson 2014), Interviewees D and C added that an extremist trend had emerged on WeChat where individuals tend to “report” (*ju bao*) any sender or content as a violation of rules and law if they find it conflicted with what they believe, as observed in Fang’ study (2024), especially when it comes to topics such as the relationship between individualism versus collectivism or patriotism.

Moments as an expressive space

The emergence of networked intimacy enables WeChat users to leverage ‘friendships’ to continue building trust and maximise their influence within social networks. Although it poses challenges to privacy protection, it also promotes the opportunity for exhibitionism (Chambers 2017). While technical affordances facilitate public promotions of the self

(Koskela 2004), and a certain level of exposure of the self on social media that can now be viewed as a validation rather than a violation of privacy (Turkle 2011), Chambers (2017) agrees that a new form of ‘public intimacy’ is rising rapidly on social platforms, migrating the preexisting market logic of displaying and commodifying emotions by promoting personal problems and feelings. Following this logic, public intimacy that is trading selected parts of personal information for visibility and affective connection, aligns with an individual’s desire for connection and attention in the current influencer industry by demonstrating a part of “real me” to create an ‘authentic’ self (Duffy & Wissinger 2017; Marwick & boyd 2011), which further promotes the rise of We Media on WeChat.

WeChat indeed offers a wide range of privacy settings, allowing users to define their own boundaries and decide what to share with whom and how to interact in various intimate contexts. A Moments sender can use their settings to ensure who can see their selected posts and who to exclude views by grouping friends into various customised categories before posting, allowing them to share specific content intentionally to their carefully chosen target audience. WeChat also offers privacy settings for accessing Moments. For example, users can completely disable their Moments or make them visible for only a short period; they can also set a contact to ‘chat only’ mode to avoid any interaction with Moments or block someone’s posts or a person’s ability to view their posts without blacklisting them. Consequently, Moments tends to create a close yet semi-public space for an individual to disclose selected parts of their life safely and interact safely with friends who are regarded as reliable.

By using options to restrict access and choose their target audience, Moments users also behave similarly to what Tayler and Nichter (2022) describe as ‘digital multiples’ in their study on the ‘attention economy’ to explain social media users’ behaviours in presenting

themselves differently across different platforms on the basis of “site-specific affordances, social norms, and perceived audience expectations” (p. 13). Building on Goffman’s theories (1959), which considered social life as a constant performance representing the interplay between actors and their audience, and regarding individuals’ behaviours as a form of ‘impression management’, Moments allows performers to control the way their persona. ‘Self-branding’, then, emerges as a keyword in recent influencer entrepreneurship and is useful for understanding how users create personas on social networks (Duffy & Hund 2015; Tayler & Nichter 2022), a phenomenon also applicable to WeChat. By allowing a user to foreground and disclose different aspects of themselves across cohorts, Banet-Weiser (2012) argues that this apparently ‘authentic’ communication of self actually offers the audience a view of a person’s real self, which enhances connection and creates a sense of intimacy. Hence, Moments becomes a space that not only facilitates the dissemination of COVID-related information but also amplifies the influence of the individual in social networks.

Interviewees in this study discussed various ways to practice and foster their influence via Moments. Interviewee K valued Moments as a journal to record every happy moment and achievement in their life, accompanied by a time label, so that they can easily track past events and facilitate conversations with friends. At the same time, this function serves as a means of tracking their career trajectory, or, in their words, a “resume”. Interviewee K strategically posted content to create a persona in Moments. Interviewee K first recognised that they had a large, diverse friend list of about 2,000 contacts, comprising a fair number of family members and friends, as well as colleagues and clients. To maintain professional connections, Interviewee K, in the same vein as Papacharissi’s (2002) argument, acknowledged that “a carefully controlled performance through which self-presentation is achieved under optimal conditions” (p. 644) and that they planned carefully to share specific

content in Moments to enhance their career. Importantly, Interviewee K said that disclosing a bit of their personal life was the key to creating a “real man” image and making themselves sound genuine. They added, “No one is going to read through your Moments if you look like an advertising robot.” The little private details not only spice their narrative up but also serve as a signal of authenticity.

Similarly, Interviewee Y also viewed Moments as a space for self-expression. However, Interviewee Y suggested that a successful strategy for attracting attention in Moments had to also consider the audience and focus on rhetorical style:

“First of all, whenever I post something on my Moments, I always try to keep it short and to the point. People don’t have that much time to read what you’re trying to say...When people scroll through Moments, they’re not really looking to read something super serious—they mostly just want to see what’s going on in other people’s lives or catch something interesting... If your goal is to get your message across, then you need to communicate in a way that people actually enjoy. That’s why I try to say things in a light-hearted, humorous tone—make it more fun for others to read.” (Interviewee Y)

It is interesting to note that Interviewee Y, instead of focusing on the content itself, paid more attention to their narrative to ensure an effective content delivery for self-promotion, focusing on the affordances of WeChat. This demonstrates that on Moments, as discussed in the Literature Review, fun, light-hearted and playful content is more likely to be absorbed and considered (Jenkins 2006a; Yu et al. 2011). However, a drawback also emerges. While entertaining and positive posts are engaging, they can also subtly marginalise other voices by making light of serious issues or alienating those who are not ‘in’ on the joke.

Furthermore, some interviewees said they were very selective about who they shared their posts with, in order to maintain intimate connections and filter acquaintances in their social networks. Interviewee N clearly separated their contacts into online and real-life categories. They explained that they only added people they know in real life on WeChat, rather than acquaintances they met on the internet, to ensure their privacy was protected and to avoid 'context collision'. Interviewee N also disabled their Moments access for most contacts but kept it for a few close friends to ensure privacy.

Interviewee M, on the other hand, kept the number of contacts small on WeChat. They have fewer than 100 contacts on their friend list and regularly delete contacts that they have not seen or been in touch with for a while, for example, former colleagues and university classmates, whom they see as "strangers". This resulted in a decreasing friend circle after both physical and virtual connections were removed, but Interviewee M believed that the ones left on the list are "true friends" and that is sufficient to fulfil their need for connection. They adopted this tactic to ensure that they share only with people who want a meaningful interaction, rather than wasting time on those who interact only by 'liking' posts on Moments. Baym (2010) supports this rationale by stating, "Resources exchanged in strong tie relationships run deep and may be emotionally and temporally expensive. As a result, we cannot maintain too many strong tie relationships at any given time and have many fewer strong ties than weak ones" (p. 125). Simultaneously, Interviewee M expressed their understanding that some friends have stopped posting in Moments by recognising the conflict between using Moments as an intimate space and the inconsistent expectation of level and intensity of intimacy in their social networks:

“When you have too many random contacts—like the corner store owner, the delivery guy, or just people you add for convenience—it gets messy. But your Moments aren’t really meant for those kinds of connections to see. So if someone doesn’t post, I completely understand.” (Interviewee M)

Other interviewees in this study also revealed their limited group of contacts on WeChat, categorised into friends, family members, classmates, and colleagues. These habits demonstrate that the interviewees valued preexisting relationships more on WeChat because they regarded them as an extension of the physical world into the virtual world. At the same time, these frequent intimate practices in everyday life suggest that family and friendship are converging online (Pahl & Spencer 2004), in terms of meanings, expectations and behaviour. In some cases, especially during the COVID pandemic, drawing on Pahl and Spencer (2004), friends are taking over some of the functions of family, with friends now more important in support networks than in the past.

The profile and utility of audiences on WeChat also exemplify Matsuda’s (2005) ideas of ‘selective sociality’, which portrays the freedom of choice in friendships based on the affordances of new social technologies. In addition, the efforts of users to improve influence through persona building, content composition, and access management in Moments also resonates with the notion of ‘elective intimacy’ in the digital era (Chambers 2017), which based on Giddens’ argument (1992) that, in late capitalist societies, there is a declining sense of the importance of duty and a growing emphasis on individual choice, agency, equality and pleasure in personal relationships.

However, scholars also warn of the negative impact of this mediated selective intimacy (Bauman 2001, 2003; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995). These scholars point to the rise of a self-absorbed, individualistic narcissism and social isolation at the individual level and a lack of social responsibility and social cohesion. One of the criticisms expressed by Interviewee N is that Moments has an inherent “showing off” aspect that encourages users to share their lives, but not necessarily the “real” side of themselves, leading to a disengagement with Moments.

Furthermore, it is important to note that, while people, as We Media, choose to highlight particular thoughts with their target audience as a way of sustaining networked intimacy, they are also careful to avoid posting material that might be unpopular (Marwick & boyd 2010). These digital ways of networking are unpacked by key theorists in discussions of the way digital communities balance self-interest to avoid triggering disagreements in interpersonal relationships in online communities (Bauman 2001, 2003; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Putnam 2000). For example, as Interviewee D said, they sensed that some of their opinions “might not be what people in today’s society like to hear”. Therefore, they posted personal thoughts on Weibo, where they have no close contacts, rather than on WeChat, to avoid conflict. In other words, mainstream public opinion restrained the potential of We Media to amplify the voices of marginalised groups due to a fear of being unacceptable, boycotted or even ‘cancelled’. This contradiction between ‘being true’ and ‘being likeable’ represents a paradox in networked intimacy, further separating the power of We Media to promote the voices of minority groups, which diminishes the potential of social media in terms of reconstructing a digital public sphere to address injustice and inequality, as discussed in my Literature Review.

Turning intimacy into confrontation

Cancellation is a term which describes the silencing and othering of voices on the basis that the view of a given individual or group does not comply with a favoured ideological view. This thesis examines the phenomenon of cancel culture in the Chinese social media context. Cancellation can take the form of deplatforming (actively trying to shut down speech), doxing (releasing someone's private details on social media) or online abuse, also known as trolling. Cancel culture can be broadly defined as ostracising someone because of a misalignment of social norms (Norris 2023) or because of related boycotts on the basis that their speech or actions are regarded as offensive and unacceptable in terms of moral accountability or for ideological reasons (Lizza 2020; Ng 2020). Clark (2020) adds, 'cancelling' happens when someone no longer feels comfortable contributing their time, money, or attention to an individual because they are offended by the political or social behaviour of those they have previously followed. Cancellation takes a range of forms: isolation, public shaming, withdrawal of support, and the desire to see the target receive punishment or become socially isolated (Tandoc et al. 2024). In the social media context, 'cancelling' can escalate from simply "unfollowing", to using social platforms to aggressively shame individuals or organisations deemed "guilty" (Sdrigotti 2018), in order to impose sanctions on the target resulting in exclusion from public platforms, reputation damage, career suspension, or even legal action (Picarella 2024).

In practice, although not many interviewees had directly experienced 'being cancelled' during the pandemic, they did realise the risk of being cancelled in their social networks and had seen someone cancelled online. Interviewee C recalled their experience of being attacked by a nationalist friend on WeChat when they posted in Moments an expression of their sorrow

about the ‘cancellation’ of one of the actors in China³⁰. Interviewee C felt sorry that a young, talented actor had to suffer for a mistake he made, which did not pose a significant risk to the public. They commented on the fanatical nationalism, which they found toxic and frightening. This post turned one of Interviewee C’s friends, who they met while studying overseas, against them:

“I posted on WeChat, just a simple comment about how this kind of nationalism was terrifyingly toxic. And that’s when my UK classmate went off on me—attacking me like crazy. They called me a “Westernised traitor”, saying things like “People like you go abroad and forget who you are”, and “If you love foreign countries so much, just get out of China and never come back.” I ended up blocking them completely. There was no

³⁰ In 2021, the actor, Zhang Zhehan, who was famous for his performance in a BL drama “Word of Honour” (*Shan He Ling*), was reported to have “visited the Yasukuni Shrine” on Weibo. This triggered massive requests for an apology and suspension of his career in Mainland China from both fans and the general public. The cancellation was announced with a post by the actor on Instagram, which was about him sightseeing in Japan and enjoying cherry blossoms around 2019. As a building in the background of the picture was “identified” as the Yasukuni Shrine, Zhang was accused of “visiting”. The Yasukuni Shrine is widely recognised as a controversial landmark and a taboo symbol in China, as it represents the denial by the Japanese government of their war crime in World War II. Later, more “evidence” appeared on the internet questioning Zhang’s character and political position. Although all the accusations remained debatable, Zhang was cancelled due to this ideological problem. This study does not intend to prove or disprove any of the allegations and the defence, as the cancellation phenomenon itself is chaotic and unprovable. All the descriptions of this incident were collected from the participant and the internet.

point in arguing. But this whole incident really affected me emotionally.” (Interviewee C)

Interviewee C expressed their shock that such radical and aggressive comments came from a friend who grew up in a big city and also received higher education in a Western country, identified as part of the LGBTQ community, loved the BL drama that the actor was performing in, and who they used to have a good time with. In other words, Interviewee C expected that their friend, who had received education from both China and the Western world, with overseas and minority group experience, would be more critical and rational, as well as more empathetic, given that they already shared common interests and an emotional connection. The irrational and hostile reaction shocked Interviewee C, because they discovered that the friendship was fragile in the face of overwhelming nationalism. In this case, conflicting political positions outweighed the preexisting relationship leading to irrational abuse and disconnection. This backlash in a relatively safe environment, such as Moments, made Interviewee C feel betrayed and traumatised.

Interviewee C also believes that the trigger for the cancellation was closely linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, during which many people were extremely sensitive due to the pressure of lockdown, and nationalism was amplified as a means to suppress rule-breaking behaviours by ordinary people. This study also recognises that the emergence of nationalism in this context was stimulated by pressure from Western countries that tried to blame China as the origin of the virus and portrayed China as an enemy, for example, using terms such as “Wuhan virus”, “Chinese plague”, and “Chinese virus” fuelled by inflammatory remarks by President Donald Trump (Griffiths 2020; The Conversation 2020). Simultaneously, overseas WeChat friends shared the responses of local authorities in Moments, for instance, local news

media intentionally highlighting Chinese migrants in local communities and targeting them as a threat (see Figure 18), and discriminatory actions against Chinese locals (see Figure 19). Furthermore, hate speech against China, such as suggesting that Chinese authorities deliberately or negligently spread both SARS and COVID-19, that they had a hidden agenda, or that China should pay for what they have done to the world, was also posted by Chinese people living outside the country via Moments (see also Figure 19). These factors fuelled hostile attitudes towards the Western world among the public, further divided online communities, strengthened ideological and political divides, and, in turn, enhanced the connections between friends as an affective public through an empathetic feeling and a sense of standing united against a common enemy, thereby nurturing the rise of nationalism.



Figure 18: A gigantic, bold frontpage title, “CHINA KIDS STAY HOME”, posted by The Daily Telegraph on 29 January 2020, Australia, was viewed as offensive by local readers.

Viewed from Moments on 30 January 2020.



Figure 19: Friends sharing local life in the US and transmitting foreign comments from Twitter (now X) to Moments. Screenshot 1 retrieved on 8 March 2020; Screenshots 2-5 retrieved on 14 March 2020.

In Screenshot 1, Figure 19, Friend 1 expressed their mixed feelings during the pandemic in the US. They noted that there were some friendly people who still had a positive mindset and were helpful and supportive during the global pandemic, such as the reception staff of USPS who helped them deliver face masks back to China by marking them as humanitarian aid supplies to speed up the process. Friend 1, sadly, also experienced hate speech and discrimination in real life. An African-American family shouted at them on the street, “Stay away from me, Corona!” implying that they were contagious. A staff member at a pharmacy also blamed them for the virus, saying, “All the masks are bought out by your kind!” when they walked in, suggesting that the panic buying of Chinese/Asians was responsible for the lack of supplies. Friend 2 in Screenshot 2 commented, “What is going viral on foreign platforms will blow your mind!” with screenshots from Twitter to illustrate content from outside the Great Firewall (Screenshot 3-5). Friend 2 did not translate the screenshots but left a space for their audience to decide whether they wanted to read it or not, and suggesting that the audience should have a certain level of English proficiency to understand the original comments to ensure the accuracy of the content and avoid content being “lost in translation”. Most of the comments in the screenshots framed China as an enemy. To those who read the Twitter comments, this post may have sparked a sense of confrontation with the Western world, as it challenged public opinion and the government’s discourse in China at the time.

The convergence of foreign opinions on Moments led WeChat users to perceive hostility from other countries, seeing them as Chinese who were encouraging discrimination instead of as victims of the pandemic, like everyone else. This, in turn, strengthened their nationalist identity as a form of defence and arguably increased their sense of unity. It is also interesting to note that the rise of nationalism echoed the government’s call for action, “Stay cohesive, we can defeat the pandemic.” By using the word “defeat”, which means to win against

someone in a fight, a war, or a competition (Cambridge Dictionary 2025), the slogan employs a war-like metaphor to describe the crisis and guide collective actions using a battlefield analogy.

According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphor is not just a linguistic device; it is rooted in people's conceptual systems and helps them understand and explain unfamiliar experiences based on existing ones, enabling them to think and act accordingly. In other words, abstract ideas and concepts can be derived from a familiar source and mapped out metaphorically in the real world (Zheng 2017). Indeed, in practice, it is not difficult to observe similar battle-related metaphors used by the government in other aspects of daily life. For example, using “battle of defence” (*bao wei zhan*), “protracted war” (*chi jiu zhan*), and “fight against a tough problem” (*gong jian zhan*) to describe strategies, actions, and attitudes used to tackle issues and difficulties in official documents.

While the metaphors are used to enhance the effectiveness of the structure and efficiency with which a task is executed by highlighting the order and obedience required in a battle, they foreground the determination, collective identity, loyalty to the homeland and peers, and the severe consequences of losing the war. Following this logic, the slogan here also emphasises that the fight against the virus is akin to a war, a “do or die” situation; only by everyone remaining at the front line and fighting together will there be a chance of survival. The battle metaphor underlines not only the collective efforts required to contain the spread of the virus, but also the shared acknowledgement of Chinese identity that motivates unity at a cognitive level when facing accusations of disgracing the country. Ultimately, it is reasonable to argue that nationalism surged to an unprecedentedly high level across the

platforms because of the external anti-China sentiment that blamed the country for the pandemic.

Hence, Interviewee C's concern about cancellation—that nationalism might become the ultimate tool for ordinary people to silence opposing voices—became a reality. Interviewee C had to refer to a novel to express their frustration about the wave of cancellations in Moments, instead of speaking out directly themselves (Figure 20), which suggests that in China, disagreement and debate lacked a foundation in facts or logic; one was proven wrong only by their political stance, intentions, and character:

海默提声说道：“有人告诉我，在中国，如果你不同意别人的观点，你不必去寻找事实，也不必整理逻辑。你只需要质疑他的立场，猜测他的动机，寻找他过去的道德缺陷，好像只需要这样，你就能证明对方的错误。是的，我

Figure 20: A quote from Interviewee C posted in Moments. Viewed on 13 August 2021.

The fear of othering

This thesis contends that the fear of cancellation was intensified when a WeChat user saw themselves as part of a counter-public—as part of a group who challenged the status quo or dominant ideology. Challenging or questioning the government messaging was viewed as offensive because it contested the slogan, “Stay cohesive, we can defeat the pandemic”, which undermined a stable social order and a low mortality rate from the virus. At the same time, “positive energy” (*zheng neng liang*), a term frequently quoted in President Xi's

speeches and in the documents of Communist Party of China³¹ and official news releases³², referring to a positive attitude and spirit of optimism (Li 2013), was used to shape the public's perception of the pandemic—mainly by praising the government's performance (Chen 2022).

While the ostensible success of containing the virus seemed to reflect the triumph of collectivism demonstrated by cooperation with quarantine policies, it was also deeply rooted in the Confucian ideal of *social harmony*. In this view, harmony is sustained through the interaction of different social roles and unequal status within a hierarchical structure (Bian 2019; Wang 2023). Compliance has historically functioned as the core principle for maintaining stability in such relations, legitimised by the authority of the feudal hierarchy. Although this hierarchical order is less visible in contemporary China, inequalities in social status and roles persist. They are embedded in political structures (e.g. police officer–citizen), educational relations (e.g. professor–student), cultural spheres (e.g. celebrity–fan), and economic systems (e.g. employer–employee). On social media, similar dynamics emerge through the asymmetries between friends, influencers and followers, or majority and minority

³¹ For example, it was used in the speech to instruct the organisation of the COVID pandemic control and restoration of economic development (Xi 2020b).

³² For example, a commentary titled *Consolidating Positive Energy for Final Victory through Reform — Studying and Implementing General Secretary Xi Jinping's Important Speech at the 14th Meeting of the Central Committee for Deepening Reform* (Xinhua News 2020c).

groups shaped by algorithms. These relations reveal how power continues to be exercised by those with greater resources or legitimacy.

Although Bian (2019) notes that the friend–friend relation is relatively less influenced by Confucian hierarchy—requiring only mutual respect—this study argues that friendship can take on intensified regulatory power when embedded in networked intimacy. Emotional attachment, enables friends to influence each other’s behaviour with moral authority. By identifying themselves as part of a collective “us”—standing with frontline workers, following government instructions, and maintaining trust in state narratives—users mobilised peer pressure and the weight of public opinion to enforce compliance.

Hence, what appeared to be voluntary alignment with collective goals was in fact mediated through both cultural traditions of harmony and the emotional bonds of networked friendship. Together, these dynamics legitimised peer regulation and contributed to the broader normalisation of compliance during the pandemic.

Media consumption during the pandemic also played a key role in shaping public perceptions of government performance (Xi 2020a). Interviewees Z and U recalled watching *CCTV News* during dinner as part of their daily routine. The news often highlighted China’s success in controlling the pandemic, followed by reports of disorder in the Western world, especially in the United States. This juxtaposition implicitly reinforced the effectiveness of China’s policies. Interviewee K explained that such reporting, whether on television or social media, created a sense of safety and hope, which in turn fostered public confidence in the government’s actions, signalling the government’s TCAPSW strategy (Xu & Gong 2024). However, Interviewee U observed that these comparisons lacked logical grounding, since each country faced different conditions—such as population size, culture, economic

development, and political system—that shaped their responses and outcomes. Similarly, Interviewee S argued that presenting other countries as incapable of containing the pandemic did not necessarily mean that China’s approach was superior. Ultimately, it could only indicate that China’s strategy was the most appropriate for its own national context. Above all, the selective comparisons potentially generated different understandings depending on whether the viewers could critically examine the narratives.

Although Interviewee C saw it as mass media manipulation and a common form of government propaganda, which was “too obvious” to influence them, Interviewee S expressed concern about a deeper risk: the emotional weight of these comparisons was amplified by ideological factors. This study finds that nationalism and individual identity were intensified by the negative emotions—worry, anxiety, fear, and uncertainty—produced during the pandemic and commonly experienced through affective content across social networks and among the networked public. To combat these emotions, many social media users sought a sense of security from official authorities. This reliance on official sources reinforced public confidence in the government, which in turn aligned citizens’ personal interests in health and safety with the enforcement of quarantine policies. In this way, individuals were not merely passive recipients of state messaging but became active supporters and enforcers of government measures, effectively taking on the role of guardians of official decisions. The internalisation of the guardianship role reflects previous discussions of Foucault’s “normalisation” (1979), the way in which compliance was normalised, not only as a rational but equally as a moral requirement for the public to sustain the “success” of China, in urging the public to internalise government policy and discipline both their own and others’ behaviours. Interviewee E commented of protests in other countries:

“At that time, they [people in Western countries] were advocating for freedom, wanting to go out and protest, while here [in China], everyone was obediently staying at home. I think this reflects collectivism. Also, the idea of freedom—freedom comes with limits. If you want freedom, does that mean you don't have social responsibility? Don't you consider the cost your freedom may impose on others?” (Interviewee E)

Interviewee S had indeed come across posts on Weibo criticising the poor quarantine enforcement and low health awareness in the United States, with statements such as “I would rather be placed in lockdown than live the American way!” Similar comparisons were shared by friends in Moments, implying that ‘China is doing better than other countries or regions’, to acknowledge the efforts of the government and the public’s health awareness. For example, Figure 21 indicates how these posts were shared:



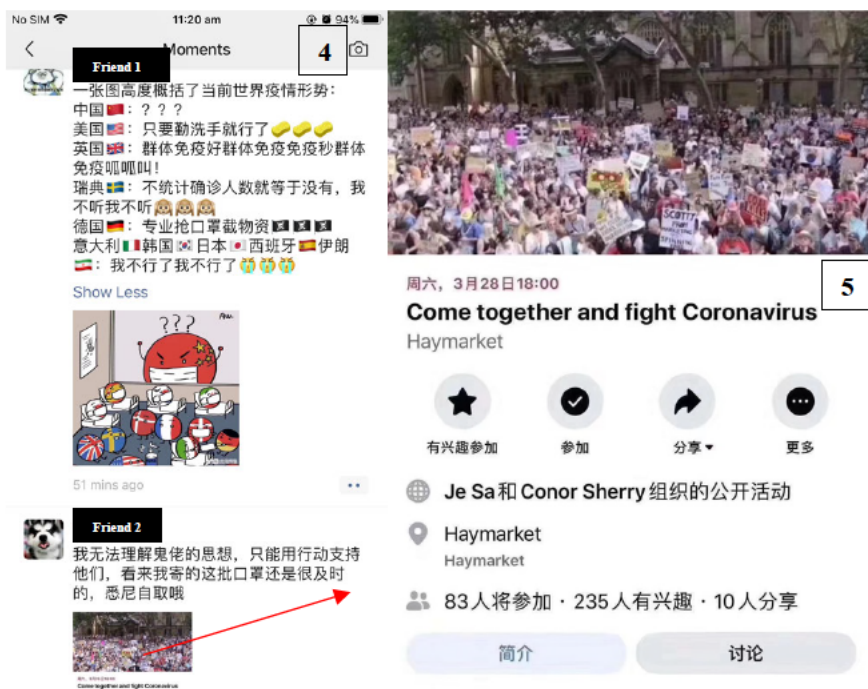


Figure 21: Radical statements shared by friends on WeChat. Screenshots 1 and 2 viewed on 23 February 2020, Screenshots 3-5 viewed on 14 March 2020.

In Figure 21, Screenshot 1, Friend 1 reposted a news article from Weibo onto WeChat Moments, captioning it with “Stupid South Koreans” accompanied by a “doggy” emoji. The article (Screenshot 2) reported on a rally held in Seoul on 22 February 2020, during which a large group of South Korean citizens ignored quarantine policies, gathered in public, refused to wear masks, and even shared food. The Mayor of Seoul attempted to dismiss the protest and encourage citizens to act responsibly, but the intervention was met with insults and hostility. Before Friend 1 shared the news to WeChat, the original post on Weibo had already been hashtagged and attracted wide attention, accumulating 5.5 million views, 2,700 reposts, 7,300 comments, and 115,000 likes. Friend 1’s repost combined humour and derogation: by using a homophone for the word “stupid” (*yu chun*), the tone appeared sarcastic and somewhat playful, but the accompanying label “bang za” (*bang zi*, a derogatory slur for Koreans) framed the event in explicitly discriminatory terms. This conveyed both a sense of

mockery toward the chaotic scenes in South Korea and a comparative sense of national superiority, implicitly affirming that China's policies and citizen compliance were more effective and commendable.

In Screenshot 3, Friend 1 photographed a television news broadcast and added a sarcastic comment about Taiwan's stance on travel tracking in Mainland China. Friend 1 argued that travel restrictions were needed to help contain the spread of the virus, but Taiwan framed it as an intrusion on personal freedom. With a "smile" emoji to signal irony, Friend 1 remarked that "Taiwan just loves to smear their China daddy." The post was composed in a casual, derogatory and linguistically playful tone. By using a homophone and reduplication, "curl-curl" (*wan-wan*), as a pun to mimic the tone of the way parents address children, Friend 1 infantilised Taiwan, mocking its position. A superior-subordinate relationship was also emphasised in the phrase "China daddy" (*zhong guo ba ba*), which reinforced the claim that "Taiwan belongs to China". This rhetorical frame further depicted Taiwan as childish and politically irrational, while depicting China as the responsible authority. The comparison was not merely political but also emotional: by ridiculing Taiwan's refusal to adopt stricter measures to save people, the post implied that China's policies were rational and effective. Through sarcasm, homophones, and derogatory language, the post heightened emotional investment in China's approach while discrediting alternative approaches, creating a sense of pride and emotional reassurance among friends (Mutual Friend 1 expressed the same feeling as Friend 1), reinforcing the perception that China's pandemic strategy was superior.

Friend 1 continued to reinforce their support for China's pandemic policies by reposting a comic from Weibo (Screenshot 4). The comic humorously depicted global pandemic scenarios but also conveyed a strong symbolic message. It showed a "large-sized China",

masked and standing outside a hospital ward, looking in on “smaller-sized countries”. The size difference and gaze subtly highlighted China’s superior position, while the ward represented the chaos and “sickness” of the outside world. China, by contrast, was portrayed as safe, peaceful, separate, and already recovering due to its effective policies. The comic further underlined China’s stability through the visual cue of “China’s confusion” (represented by triple question marks), contrasted with the supposedly disordered responses of other countries—an image that echoes the official narrative of China’s “success” versus the West’s “failure”.

Friend 1 amplified this message by translating the comic into text with mocking commentary: the United States only promoted handwashing; the United Kingdom believed in herd immunity; Sweden deceived itself by refusing to act on data; Germany “robbed” itself of masks; and other countries were portrayed as collapsing. By circulating this comic on WeChat Moments, Friend 1 not only expressed their confidence in China’s strategies but also demonstrated their national identity in a way that contrasted pride in China by ridiculing others. The act of reposting, therefore, served as a comparison that validated China’s approach while fostering a sense of “luck” and emotional reassurance for being on the “winning” side of the crisis for their friends.

Similarly, Friend 2 shared a screenshot of an upcoming rally organised via Facebook in Sydney, calling for residents to gather in Haymarket on 28 March 2020 to “fight Coronavirus” together (Screenshot 5). The event had attracted 83 confirmed participants, 235 interested users, and 10 reposts. In response, Friend 2 (Screenshot 4) expressed confusion about “not following foreigners’ logic”, contrasting the rally with their own contribution of

sending face masks to Sydney to support the local community. They added that the masks had arrived and encouraged those in need to contact them.

Although Friend 2 did not explicitly criticise the Sydney event, the juxtaposition between the two actions conveyed a striking comparison. On the one hand, local residents chose a collective yet risky form of protest that potentially increased contagion. On the other hand, Friend 2, a Chinese national, was rational and supportive by providing much-needed protective equipment. Through this contrast, the post implicitly framed Chinese citizens as more responsible, compliant, and united in the fight against COVID-19, while presenting Western responses as illogical and counterproductive. The comparison not only validated China's quarantine policies but also reinforced the notion that Chinese contributions were constructive, thereby reinforcing a sense of moral superiority and national pride.

Besides the nationalism that internalised pride in China's successful containment of the virus, the normalisation of strict policies and peer discipline was further reinforced by public glorification of the noble sacrifices care workers and members of the public made. Social media narratives frequently highlighted the heroism of medical workers, volunteers, and ordinary citizens, encouraging respect and gratitude toward those "fighting on the front lines" (see Figures 5 and 22). This discursive framing resonates with the state-promoted concept of "positive energy", which encouraged favourable portrayals of the government's performance and dovetailed with supporting "mainstream values" (*zhu liu jia zhi guan*) that reflect the positive narratives supporting the ruling regime (Chen 2022). President Xi Jinping said that (Li 2013), "positive energy" refers to a guiding principle for encouraging citizens to resolve real-life challenges with optimism, recognise collective efforts, and counteract negative speech or behaviours that might threaten social cohesion. During the pandemic, this

framework was aimed at redirecting public frustrations away from the government and toward a shared moral obligation of unity and resilience.

By circulating stories of sacrifice and framing obedience as a moral virtue, the concept of “positive energy” was deployed as a technique to align personal conduct with state objectives and embed discipline through peer networks. The demonstration of gratitude, admiration, and grief illustrates the emotion of love shared across social networks (Liu & Shi 2024). Ahmed (2014) argues that “through love, an ideal self is produced as a self that belongs to a community; the ideal is a proximate ‘we’” (p. 106), indicating a sense of belonging mobilising the emergence of cohesion. Yet, through shame, as Ahmed (2014) also argues, an individual will be reminded that they “have failed to approximate ‘an ideal’ that has been given to us through the practices of love” (p. 106), (see Figure 23). Exposing and shaming those behaviours that disrupted collective efforts is aimed at strengthening the “positive energy”.



Figure 22: posts praising the medical staff. Viewed on 28 January, 2 and 10 February 2020, respectively.

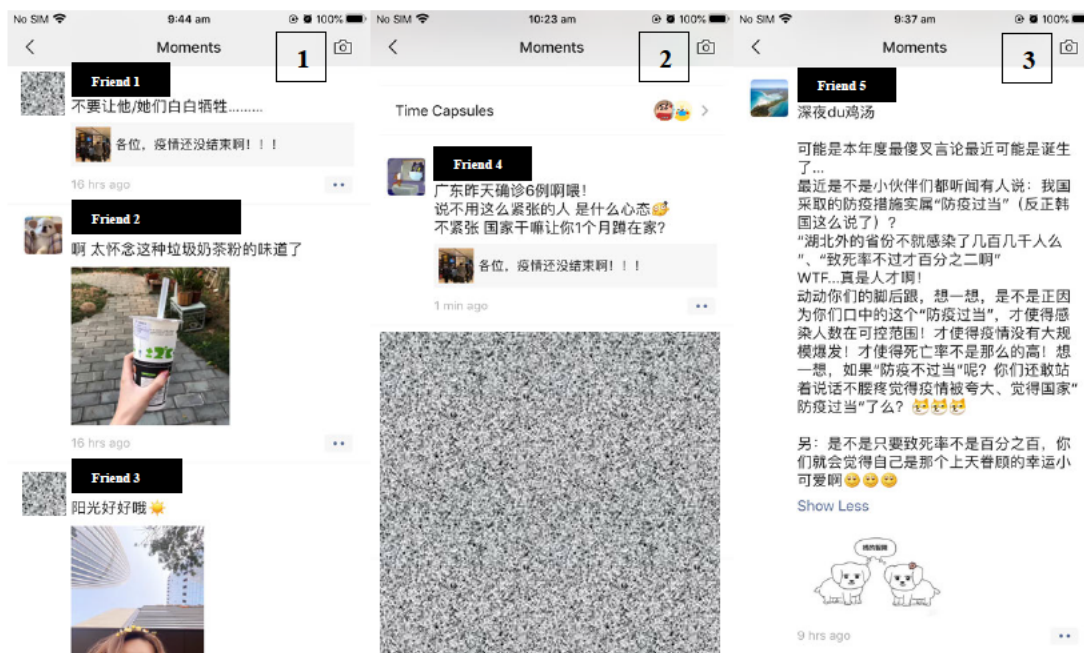


Figure 23: posts countering the opposite opinions. Viewed on 23 February (Screenshots 1 & 2) and 29 February 2020 (Screenshot 3).

The narratives in Figures 22 and 23 demonstrate how personal posts on WeChat integrated official discourses of sacrifice with everyday experiences, reinforcing the legitimacy of China's strict pandemic control. Friends in Figure 22 shared articles from official accounts that praised the courage of medical staff sent to Wuhan (Screenshots 1 and 3) and policewomen working in Foshan during lockdown (Screenshot 2). These portrayals of heroism implicitly reminded the public that their safety at home depended on the sacrifices of others.

Similarly, in Figure 23, while some users expressed relief at resuming leisure activities such as drinking boba tea or walking outdoors (Screenshot 1), others circulated the same article warning against early celebration. For example, Friend 1 urged peers not to “waste” the sacrifices of frontline workers (Screenshot 1), while Friend 4 questioned the logic of

“relaxing” given rising infections in Guangdong, arguing that such risks justified the month-long quarantine (Screenshot 2). These interventions reveal how narratives of sacrifice were mobilised not only by state media but also by ordinary users, who actively reinforced vigilance within their peer networks.

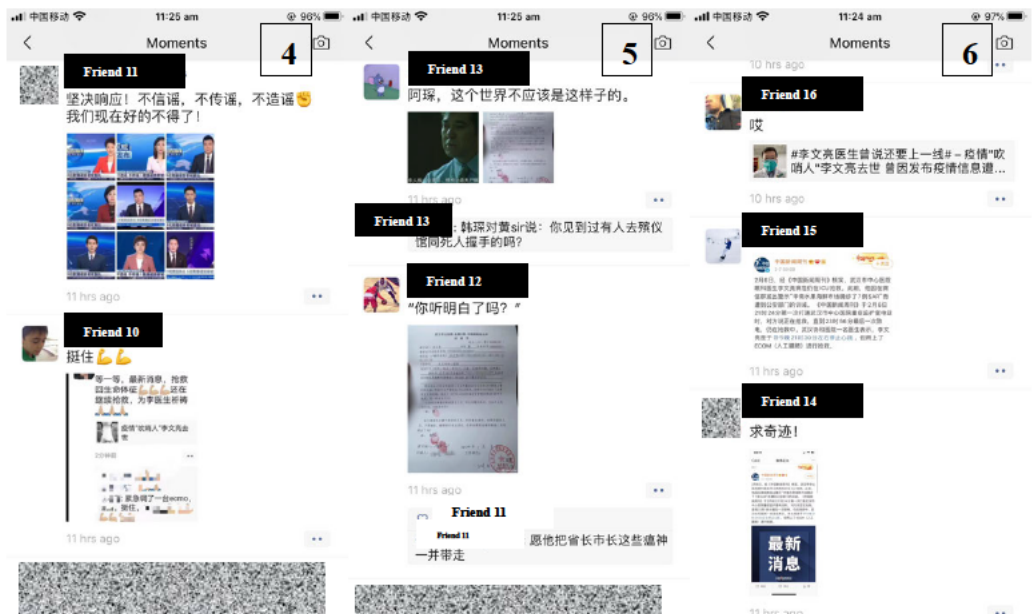
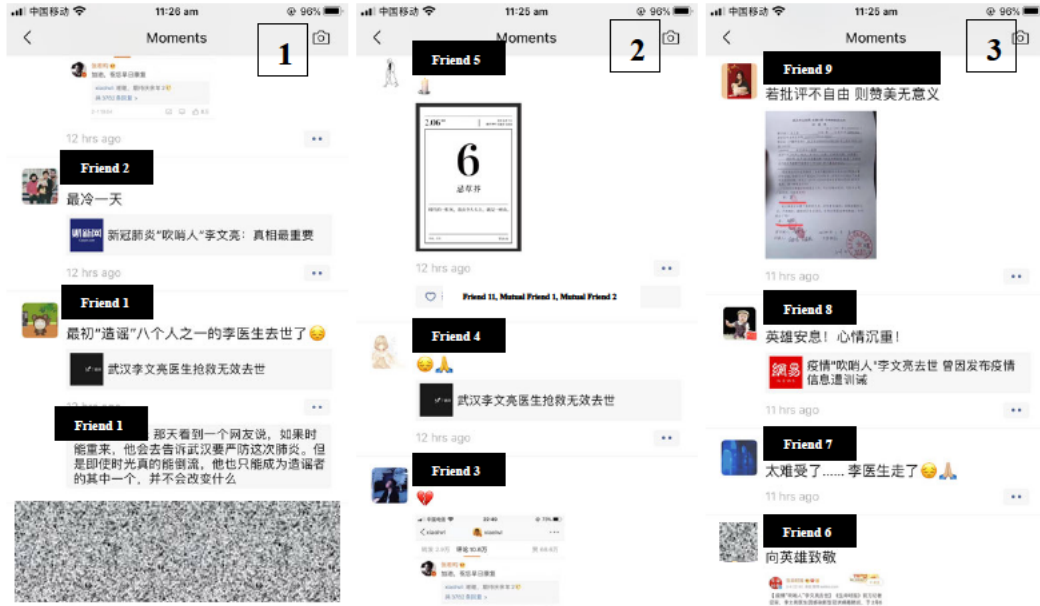
Friend 3, for example, rage-posted a long critique of those following a claim from South Korea and questioning China’s “overzealous” control measures. Accompanied by a meme labelling them as a “fucking idiot”, the post condemned individuals who downplayed the virus or cited lower mortality rates as evidence of exaggerated control. By shaming such attitudes (with “doggy” emojis) as “delusional” and “lunatic”, Friend 3 reframed strict policies as the only legitimate means of maintaining low mortality, while depicting those who dismissed sacrifice as selfish free riders “enjoying the fruit of others’ labour” with no recognition. Here, the language of anger, ridicule, and emojis served to delegitimise alternative perspectives and intensify peer discipline.

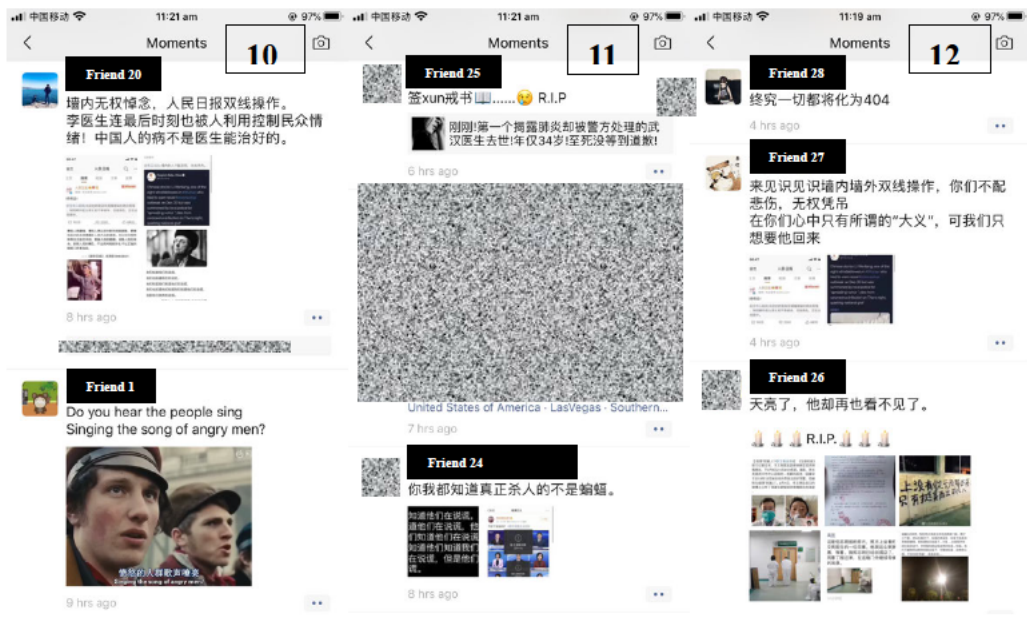
Following Ahmed (2014), these posts demonstrate how emotions circulate and “stick” to certain bodies—heroes, frontline workers, careless citizens—transforming sacrifice into a boundary marker of belonging. Love, gratitude, and pride attached to medical workers positioned them as role models, while shame attached to opponents positioned them as threats to collective survival. In Ahmed’s terms, love for the community fosters a sense of “we”, while shame reminds individuals of their failure to live up to that ideal, compelling them to correct their behaviour—in this case, it silences opposition in the name of love, or in the government’s terms, “positive energy”.

In this way, although the users were not directly required to “shame” others by the state, the widespread display of “heroic” contributions not only fostered admiration but also moralised compliance, allowing social media users to align their own behaviour with a broader sense of duty. The emphasis on sacrifice and gratitude established moral boundaries within digital communities, subtly regulating speech and actions by discouraging dissent as “negative” and promoting conformity as virtuous. Ultimately, positive energy transformed personal choices into moral acts of citizenship, normalising obedience to strict policies while legitimising peer surveillance and discipline within social networks.

To mourn was to resist

Dr Li Wenliang, the Wuhan ophthalmologist later hailed as the whistleblower of the COVID-19 outbreak, died on 7 February 2020 after contracting the virus. Yet at the time of his death, he remained officially censured as a “rumour-monger”. His passing triggered a nationwide wave of mourning and moral shock. On WeChat Moments, friends and acquaintances turned their feeds into affective spaces of sorrow, confusion, and anger—spaces sustained by the expectation that others within their networks would feel the same. The circulation of grief, disbelief, and indignation momentarily transformed private feeds into what Liu and Shi (2024) call a “moment of dissent”, where emotion became a vehicle of critique. Through shared obituaries and quotations, users collectively condemned the state’s suppression of speech and its failure of moral accountability. Figure 24 below shows an intense, continuous, consistent flow of posts on Moments generated by my friends from various backgrounds.





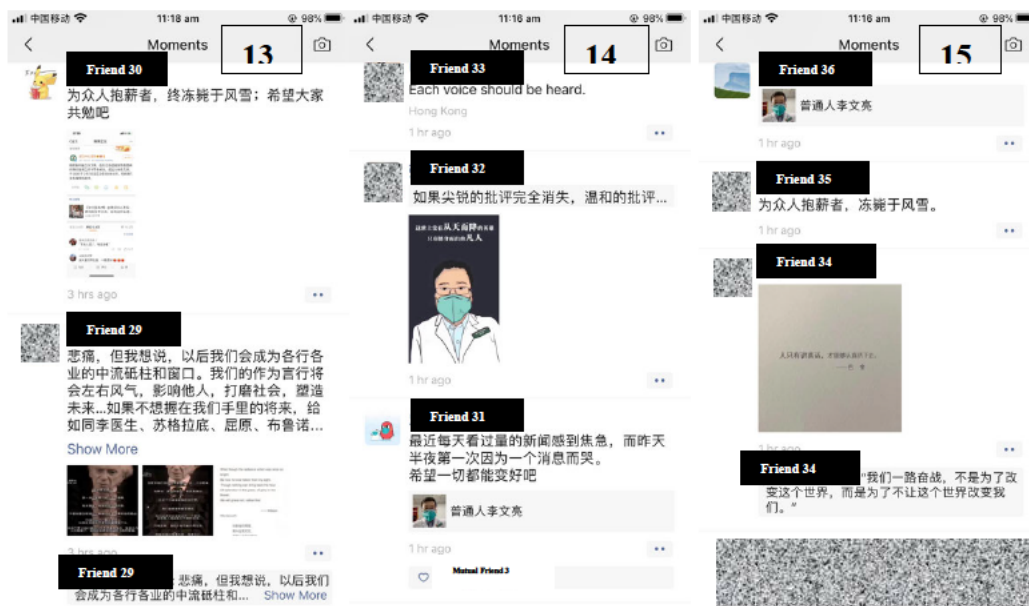


Figure 24: The collective mourning of Dr Li Wenliang on Moments, viewed 7 February 2020.

In Figure 24, in total, about 40 WeChat friends shared their feelings about losing Dr Li on Moments. Some of the friends, such as Friends 10, 14, 18 and 19, traced Dr Li's condition from midnight on 6 February 2020, prayed hard for his life and upheld hope. The messages about Dr Li's passing left the WeChat friends devastated. Friends 3, 4, 6, 7, 15, 16 and 17 reposted content from Weibo and public accounts to share their sadness. Friends 26 and 33 still could not recover from the news. Others reflected on the meaning behind Dr Li's death while mourning. These senders all acknowledged Dr Li as a hero who was brave enough to challenge the authority of the ruling regime. Friends 2, 9, 12, and 13 condemned the government's manipulation of truth with a picture of the "Letter of Admonition" (*xun jie shu*) that Dr Li was convicted of "spreading rumour" and forced to sign, questioning how authoritarian power could replace truth. This was followed by Friends 21 and 24, who stated, "We all know it was not the bats killing!"

Friend 11, with screenshots from *CCTV News*, sarcastically commented on the government's instructions about how to handle rumours, arguing that no dissent was what the ruling regime wanted (Screenshot 4). Friends 19 and 20 shamed the government and urged the authorities to restore Dr Li's reputation (Screenshot 8). Ironically, Friends 19 and 27 noted that the *People's Daily* released different information on domestic and international platforms. While admitting that Dr Li had passed away on Twitter, on Weibo, the official channel claimed that he was still under emergency resuscitation. The friends' anger surged upon discovering that the government was still trying to manipulate the public's emotions and stop people from mourning him. Friend 1 (Screenshot 10) then quoted a song from *Les Misérables* to warn that the public was growing furious and could no longer be contained.

Friends 30, 34, and 35 reflected that Dr Li died for his people, even though few of them supported him, implying it was time to consider the consequences when no one spoke up and spoke the truth. This revelation further subtly shames people who stayed silent and will continue to do so. Then, in a gentler form, Friends 31, 32, and 33 suggested that the government should be open to diverse, even opposing, voices. Yet, Friend 28 left a pessimistic prediction: "Everything would eventually turn into the Error Code 404³³", noting that no one can win this fight against the government and that all these voices will be muted and deleted. This resonated with Friend 1's comment on their own post in Screenshot 1: even

³³ 'Error Code 404' is a standard HTTP status code, usually presented as '404 not found', meaning the website cannot be opened as it may have been removed or deleted, or because the URL is incorrect. Here, the WeChat friend implied that all the posts they were circulating would be soon deleted because of censorship.

if the time could go back, they could tell everyone to be aware of the pandemic, they would be treated like Dr Li back then, nothing would change.

These expressions of grief and outrage converged into a networked mourning ritual.

According to Liu and Shi's observation (2024), "public displays of grief and sorrow are an old way of expressing protest and dissent in China. Mourning enables a display of unapproved emotions" (p. 172). Although those friends might not have intentionally targeted me, their sharing on Moments has reflected their belief that someone in their social networks would resonate with them and understand their emotions. Most of these friends did not know each other, but their scattered affective posts converged on my personal timeline, making my Moments an intersection of perspectives. And by recognising the similarities among these emotionally charged narratives, it is safe to argue that these grievances and mourning among different friends were not coincidental but reflected public opinion at that moment.

In this collective narrative, Dr Li transcended his professional identity to embody civic virtue—the conscientious individual confronting authoritarian power. His suffering magnified public awareness of the costs of silence and spurred self-reflection among observers who felt complicit in passivity. The death of Dr Li stimulated the public's sense of responsibility, impelled the WeChat users to recall their own experiences of living under control, and speak up on social media to claim their rights, echoing Liu and Shi's study (2024) on the mourning of Dr Li's death on Weibo that views mourning as awakening. Expressing grief on Moments allows WeChat friends to effectively mobilise the affective public in their own networks, start organising their resistance within digital intimacy, creating safe yet resonant spaces for dissent.

However, this thesis argues that these affective reactions were impulsive and transient, as they rarely translated into sustained political action. This is because, even though the emotions were powerful, contagious and successfully affected others, people only rose up momentarily and then their political sense of purpose was diluted and became merely symbolic (Hu 2018; Papacharissi & Trevey 2018). Under the strict supervision of China's censorship regime, their attempts to fight back were thwarted and became rallying and protesting online using sarcasm, metaphors, reposted messages, and memes still signalled their fear of punishment, as also agreed in some of the interviews. As Gladwell (2010) argues, overturning a hegemonic structure requires a will to make real sacrifices and put flesh on the bones of organisational action. Posting on Moments does not equate. Quarantine restrictions further foreclosed the possibility of physical gathering, confining resistance to the screen.

The digital mourning of Dr Li thus illuminates both the potential and the limits of affective publics in China's controlled social media ecology. It disrupted the narrative monopoly of the state and revealed latent moral solidarity, yet its energy remained contained within the boundaries of fear and censorship. What emerged was not a social movement but a fleeting moral awakening—a reminder, quickly suppressed, that truth and empathy could still unite individuals across fragmented networks. Such an emotional outburst in the digital world signals a collective conscience that persists beneath political constraint, waiting for the next moment when grief can again speak truth to power.

Summary

This chapter explored WeChat Moments as a semi-public yet intimate space where users shared personal reflections, sought help, and circulated emotional responses during the

pandemic. Its design enabled authentic and decentralised expressions, but also created context collisions: the convergence of friends, colleagues, relatives, and acquaintances in a single audience constrained what people felt safe to voice and sharpened the boundaries of acceptable sharing.

Under the ideological climate of “stay cohesive”, these tensions often escalated into confrontation or subtle forms of cancellation within friend circles, reinforcing radical nationalism and discouraging dissent. Yet Moments also hosted brief counter-publics—shared grievances, mourning, and emotional surges that momentarily challenged dominant narratives. Though fleeting, these acts of resistance revealed that even within tightly regulated and relationally fragile environments, users retained the capacity to recognise injustice and voice alternative perspectives within their trusted networks.

Chapter Eight: Where are my allies?

Chapter Eight moves from personal networks to a broader communicative layer within WeChat. Public accounts provide a key channel for circulating information and shaping networked publics through article publication and reposting. This chapter examines how public account articles became tools for public education, truth negotiation, and the reinforcement of institutional authority during the pandemic. By analysing how users read, interpreted, and shared these articles across their social circles, this chapter addresses sub-questions 2), 3), and 4), illuminating how WeChat mediated trust, opinion formation, and connective action under the call to “stay cohesive”.

What are public accounts?

Public accounts are personalised feeds, and an individual needs to choose to follow them. Public accounts are the third most widely used feature on WeChat. According to data from 2021, there were about 360 million WeChat users who read public account articles per day (Liu 2021). These accounts are created either by individuals to share content in specific areas or by organisations and institutions to communicate with subscribers and conduct business activities. Users must actively subscribe before receiving content from them, meaning account selection is shaped by both individual interests and how effectively accounts promote themselves to gain visibility. As Interviewee K noted, following is a highly subjective act, echoing van Dijck’s (2013) argument that algorithmically mediated feeds reinforce personal preferences. Algorithms thus foster reliance on personalised content streams, producing echo chambers and filter bubbles (Su 2024). This demonstrates how WeChat’s design integrates platform logic and user choice to create a selective information environment.

Public accounts create spaces for the accumulation of social capital and facilitate official communication. Once the connections between the authors and subscribers have been established, public accounts allow individual authors to expand their influence beyond the relatively closed circle of Moments, functioning as tools to build social capital and act as We Media. The influence of public accounts is enhanced when they are operated by organisations and stamped with their reputation. During the pandemic, articles posted by organisations such as “DXY Healthcare”, were widely trusted due to their professional medical expertise. Interviewee J noted that they are a popular account to follow for COVID-19-related knowledge. Interviewee A valued the public account of *bilibili.com*, which combined pandemic information with hobby-related content, which help to ease the emotional burden of quarantine. At the same time, institutions and governments also adopted this format as their official communication channel because it reinforces institutional legitimacy by positioning themselves as the most authoritative sources. Official accounts play a crucial role in disseminating critical information and helping their followers to cope with quarantine life. As Interviewees E, C, Z and K recalled, official accounts such as “Chengdu Release” (*Chengdu Fa Bu*), “Guangzhou Release” (*Guangzhou Fa Bu*), and “Suzhou Local Information Hub” (*Suzhou Ben Di Bao*), were more credible than Weibo because their content carried state authority.

Content shared through public accounts is usually referred to as an “article” (*wen zhang*), which differs from the shorter, fast-paced posts of Weibo. An article serves as a powerful tool for information delivery because it allows detailed writing and can also contain a variety of media, including video, audio, images, live pictures, memes, and hyperlinks, making them effective for both information sharing and persuasion. Additionally, they also include interactive design features, such as picture swipes, that enhance user engagement. This design

exemplifies Jenkins' notion of Convergence Culture (2006a): articles integrate different media forms and circulate across private chats, group discussions, and Moments. In doing so, they further function as a digital public sphere supported by participatory affordances enabled by their interactive elements.

Public account articles are interactive. Reading an article appears to be an individual act, but on WeChat, each click on an article leaves a trace, and the number of friends who have read it is displayed under the title, signalling shared interests (see Figure 25):

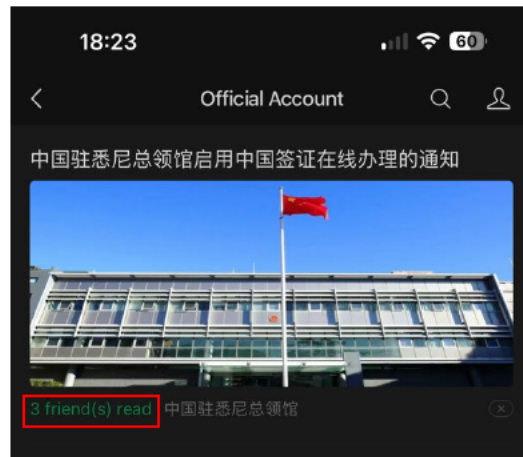


Figure 25: An article from the official account of the Consulate General of China in Sydney shows that three friends have read it. Screenshot retrieved 8 September 2025.

Articles also feature view counts, likes, comments, reposts, and a “recommend” button (a heart-shaped button), which pushes the content into Top Stories.³⁴ Comment sections, which often open by default, allow readers to post opinions, reply, and “like” others’ contributions, with the most popular comments ranked higher. Authors may also respond directly, like, or “pin” (*zhi ding*) selected comments and help shape the conversation. In this way, articles become semi-public spaces where strangers encounter each other’s views, which resonates with boyd’s (2010) understanding of how social media affordances support the networked public. Here, public accounts move beyond simple information delivery to provide interactive arenas where collective interpretation and affective engagement unfold.

Public accounts as educational hubs

At the start of the pandemic, when public knowledge about the virus was scarce, rumours and misinformation proliferated, and uncertainty was widespread. WeChat public accounts became crucial channels for learning and guidance. Both professional and official accounts played central roles in filling the information gap. As mentioned, Interviewee J highlighted “DXY Healthcare” as a trusted account providing practical medical advice to prevent contagion and strengthen immunity. Similarly, Interviewees M and K valued the Shenzhen Health Commission (*Shenzhen Wei Jian Wei*) account for publishing accessible and instructive content in an engaging way, using comics and light-hearted jokes. Some interviewees sought alternative perspectives: Interviewee C, who only followed a few public

³⁴ “Recommend” has recently replaced the previous button “Wow” (*zai kan*). The old “Wow” button can be found as shown in the red rectangle, Screenshot 2, Figure 27.

accounts on the grounds that many of them were “too messy”, relied on *Caixin*, a news agency, and their official account on WeChat for independent reporting. Interviewee Z relied on *Tencent News* as a convenient and comprehensive portal for staying informed about the rapid changes as the virus spread from Wuhan to the entire country, without subscribing to multiple other news outlets. This reliance illustrates how public accounts functioned as educational hubs for followers to consult when they felt uncertain during the lockdown, thereby reducing anxiety.

Additionally, this chapter aims to argue that reading public account articles was akin to attending a simplified Zoom class during the pandemic. The articles themselves delivered consistent content to their readers. Meanwhile, readers were able to gather at the bottom of the articles to share their thoughts in text or symbols with others in a discussion. The authors were able to further engage in the discussion, as mentioned. In other words, articles were not only read individually, but also in tandem with others in the audience, transforming the articles into an open discussion forum in the digital public sphere. Yet, as Habermas (1989) argued, the vitality of a public sphere depends on critical debate and the capacity of individuals to evaluate information. In the early pandemic, citizens were unable to justify government measures on their own; instead, they depended heavily on state-sanctioned expertise. This substitution of education for debate effectively displaced the “critical” element of the public sphere.

At the same time, it is noteworthy that articles were also read “together” with friends on social networks and widely shared in Moments and group chat, as the interview results from this research confirm. Thus, public account articles served as both educational hubs and as a provocation for debate, mediating public opinion from a public space to a conversation

among the networked public. This enabled specific information to more effectively infiltrate personal social networks and shape them.

In particular, younger interviewees in this study all indicated that they had forwarded public account articles that they found “useful” to their family and friend groups during the pandemic. Another example of sharing articles in Moments is shown in Figure 17 from Chapter Seven, where official account articles were used to compose posts to be shared in Moments. Interviewee Z, a 62-year-old, less tech-savvy WeChat User, noted that although they followed a limited number of official accounts, many articles from other public accounts were still reposted to group chats and Moments by friends and family members, so that they could easily keep up with the latest policies and changes in circumstances. This information pooling helped bridge information gaps for them, reflecting Jenkins’ (2006a) theory of information convergence that allows various content flows across media and networks to be presented in one space.

However, it was not merely knowledge being shared but also opinions. Following Jurgenson’s (2012) concept of augmented reality, when public account articles enter an augmented community, the educational function of the articles becomes intertwined with the subjective interpretation of networked intimacy. Therefore, in the process of reposting to semi-public spaces, namely group chats and Moments on WeChat, the understanding and the rational discussion of the public account articles, expected by Habermas (1989), were influenced by affective factors.

Trust, habitus, and authority

As argued above, official account articles were replacing what Habermas refers to as the “critical” role played by the public sphere (1989). The critical debate in the public sphere is based on an individual’s personal experiences and education. However, basic education about the virus in China was mainly dominated by the government and official professional accounts. The reliance on authoritative sources is reflected in the frequent expressions of the interviewees. To emphasise the credibility of official accounts, Interviewee U contrasted mainstream media with social media:

“I only trust mainstream media. If they [the information] didn't come from official channels/authorities, I don't trust them 100%. Especially on WeChat, in Moments, and even in some group chats, there are so many opinions... If you follow mainstream media, they are, like, they must be trustworthy, so they become mainstream. Then, that is a very good reason for you to trust them. Those posts on social media, you just read them for fun.” (Interviewee U)

Interviewee U’s trust in official accounts from mainstream mass media, such as *CCTV* and local satellite television news, also echoed Interviewee K’s parents’ impression of the public figure, Dr Zhong Nanshan, the official spokesman for the quarantine policies. They highly valued his words and were willing to follow his instructions, which reinforced their focus and dependence on mainstream media. Additionally, as illustrated in Figure 12 in Chapter Six, the government-operated accounts served as a means to issue urgent announcements. During their experience of the urgent lockdown in Chengdu, Interviewee E, agreed that the official account of the local government, “Chengdu Release”, became their primary source of

information for preparing for life at home during the lockdown. Although the reports conflicted with news reports about the situation in other countries by the mainstream media, Interviewee H still believed information about the virus from official sources was infallible. This reliance on the credibility of official information meant citizens were more likely to adopt official guidelines without questioning them:

“I think I hold a neutral attitude toward official channels. They will definitely enhance their image by modifying, but they still hold their credibility...I will trust them. You know, they have so many audiences across the nation, they can't be harming you, right?... I don't think the authorities would try to hurt you. Maybe their instruction was not the most effective, but I still trust they won't risk people's lives.” (interviewee H)

The citizens' faith in authorities further reflects the habitus of the public in China, developed through the long-term socialisation under Confucianism and collectivist culture (Bourdieu 1990; Jackson 2014; Weber 1968), and reflects a widespread tendency to obey the authorities (Qiu 2009). This habitus, as Papacharissi notes (2014), is deepened and internalised through users' social platform experiences in the digital era by “following” the official accounts. In this way, everyday practices of following, reading, and reposting official articles demonstrate an implicit endorsement of state authority, while simultaneously reproducing its discourse within social networks.

When official account articles were routinely shared to group chats and Moments, they became part of the collective discussion and of peer regulation. This circulation transformed top-down state messaging into horizontal flows across intimate networks, blending authoritative power with networked intimacy. Reposting them signalled one's alignment with

mainstream views, while resisting them put individuals at risk of suspicion or shaming. Here, disciplinary power, as Foucault describes it, the surveillance directed at subjects from in the central tower of the Panopticon (Feder 2014), is reinforced through sharing official articles. It is diffused through social networks, where friends become the enforcers of norms. Ordinary citizens were able to draw on and wield the power of knowledge and political discourse to promote the call to action of “stay cohesive” and enact spontaneous peer supervision.

Citizens, motivated by fear of contagion and the desire for safety, internalised this surveillance and pressured peers to comply. Thus, the credibility of official accounts was backed not only by their state authority but also by their embedding within everyday peer relations.

By reposting official information, social media friends strengthen the influence of official posts, facilitated by the use of algorithms (van Dijck 2013). The algorithm works to marginalise opposing opinions and reinforce information previously posted. Interviewees C, T, and K believed that the statements of medical professionals, which were widely adopted, for example, those of Dr Zhong Nanshan, were withholding information to keep the public calm. Although those professionals seemingly provided solid guidance and built confidence among the public that they could face the pandemic, their instructions and opinions were very conservative—they were also under the supervision of the government and could not speak freely. Instead, their speech was shaped to align with the government’s discourse in order to stabilise the social order. Through public figures, the government’s agenda was implicitly amplified by the speakers’ authority and expertise. Critical debate in the public sphere was suppressed in favour of government-sanctioned posts.

The affective public and “positive energy”

Apart from being a source of information, public account articles also mobilised emotions. The assumption that social media operates as a space for public rational debate is problematic (Liu & Shi 2024). Karatzogianni and Kuntsman (2012) argue that rationality, a core component of the Habermasian public sphere, fails to take political processes driven by emotions into account. Instead of responding to rational political arguments, the impulse to join social movements is more often tethered to the latent ties embedded in the emotional responses, for example, the heightened sense of ‘instant grievance’ and the mobilising effect of ‘war-like’ imagery (Tang 2015). This corresponds to the ‘war-like’ metaphor of fighting against the pandemic promoted in government slogans.

Rather than being grounded in rationality, Garde-Hansen and Gorton (2013) suggest that social media constructs a space for individuals to bind and divide each other through emotions. In the same vein, Gan and colleagues (2017) and Tang (2009) highlight that, in China, social media often serves as a safe space for micro-narratives to be disclosed and circulated, allowing strangers to connect emotionally. In particular, online emotions can become contagious and grow aggressively in a crisis (Zhou et al. 2019)—in this study, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Being exposed to emotional disclosures and a sense of solidarity, can recruit, motivate and engage people to join political action through emotional incentives (Papacharissi 2014). Thus, social media in China became an ‘affective space’, where, although “rationalist perspective is a valid approach to thinking about what democracy ought to be like” (p. 148), online political participation has a closer relation to shared sentiments within social networks (Liu & Shi 2024).

It is important to recognise that when public account articles are used by individuals to express their perspectives in WeChat groups and Moments, the emotions of both the authors and the audience are also mediated in this semi-public space. It is important to bear in mind that the circulation of mainstream opinions and sentiments is enhanced by censorship on WeChat, which filters out opinions that are not acceptable to the ruling regime. Interviewee K observed that publishing an article on WeChat faces stricter censorship than on Weibo. Censorship on Weibo is more ‘passive’, only occurring after content is posted. As Interviewee K pointed out, WeChat’s censorship is more proactive. Articles cannot be published until the content has been inspected—articles that do not meet the *Internet User Public Account Information Service Management Regulations*³⁵ are not approved. In addition, those that have already been published but are subsequently detected or reported as violating the *Regulations* are removed, and the person posting is asked to revise the material. In marginalising dissent, material that complied with what President Xi termed “positive energy” (Li 2013), which channels hope, gratitude, and bravery, was elevated.

As demonstrated in Figure 22 in Chapter Seven, the public account articles reposted to Moments about the sacrifices of the medical workers and policewomen acknowledged their bravery and contributions by friends. By highlighting the fact that those workers in the frontline were also ordinary people among us: they had feelings; they had flesh and blood; they were loyal friends of their peers, precious sons/daughters of their parents, great husbands/wives of their partners and even dedicated parents of their young children. A strong

³⁵ For more information, see <https://digichina.stanford.edu/work/internet-user-public-account-information-service-management-regulations/> (Creemers 2017, viewed 30 August 2025)

communal feeling emerged about the fact that service workers chose to serve their country and respond to the duty of their job to protect their loved ones but would possibly not be able to go back home as a result. The social media audience can relate their own behaviours to others' sacrifices and align their mentality with the quarantine policies through the feelings evoked by others' encounters, without explicitly expressing or even realising their understanding or support of the "positive energy" or the slogan of "stay cohesive". This disruption of rationality is in the same vein as Papacharissi and Trevey's (2018) discussion, which asserts that civil engagement in the era of social media is less politically driven and more aligned with the emotional valence generated by an interest in or allegiance to issues "without having to enter the complex negotiation of personal vs. collective politics" (p. 91).

Othering and emotional overload

Liu and Shi (2024) argue that the tendency to divide social media users into those who are with or against us, also known as "othering", further disrupts the rational Habermasian public sphere. The core challenge at the heart of Habermas's idealised public sphere is the pursuit of democracy. The idea is that emotional factors can be eliminated by forming a universal and impartial consensus that meets everybody's interests equally (Dahlberg 2001; Tanner 2001; Janssen & Kies 2005). Young (1990) adds that "no one can adopt a point of view that is completely impersonal and dispassionate, completely separated from any particular context and commitments" (p. 103). He is arguing that the intention to create a universal and imperial consensus beyond personal desires and identities is unachievable because perfectly rational citizens do not exist, and emotions cannot be expunged from the public sphere (Fraser 1992; Nicholson 2018).

Dahlgren (2006) also argues that pursuing uniformity in the idealised version of the public sphere denies the heterogeneity of people and the lived experience of marginalised groups, recognising difference is crucial for democracy. Schmitt (1996) argues that the emergence of diverse voices inevitably leads to tribalism which cannot be avoided in this context because politics always needs an enemy. Thus, Liu and Shi (2024) affirm that the various statements and the struggles that filled Chinese cyberspace during the pandemic were, in fact, conflicts of facts and political viewpoints fuelled by emotions. Strong emotions such as anger and hatred ultimately override objective statements of fact.

This discussion can also be linked to Ahmed's (2014) discussion of the relationship between emotions and politics: emotions such as love and gratitude can foster a sense of belonging, but shame also disciplines those who fail to conform. Figure 23 from Chapter Seven also demonstrates how feelings affect behaviours and identify "others". The same public account article was shared in Moments by two friends of mine to express their worry and confusion about the need to "unwind" after a month-long lockdown. They reminded their friends to keep following the quarantine policies by questioning the article's content in sad and angry tones. From my perspective as a follower of the senders, while they did not know each other, they were sharing the same articles from the same public account and were communicating a political view which called for their followers to bond over a particular sense of belonging. This put me in the position of deciding whether to agree and become part of the imaginary 'us' or disagree and become 'othered'. The fear of being shamed and isolated potentially asked me to call my integrity into question in my friendship group. As Ahmed (2014) argues, the power of belonging to a "we" reinforces the self-discipline outlined in Foucault's Panopticon model (Feder 2014).

However, the overuse of heroic sacrifice narratives also produced fatigue and backlash. Some users began to question whether widely circulated stories were exaggerated “performances” (*zuo xiu*) or “manipulative sentimentality” (*shan qing*). For example, in Figure 26, a friend explicitly questioned the necessity of “sacrifice” in a Moments post:

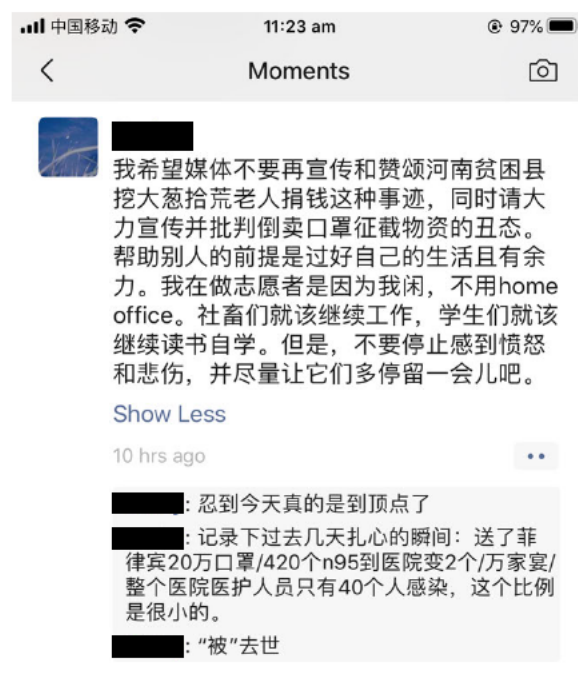


Figure 26: A WeChat friend questioned the overexposure of the “sacrifice” of ordinary people. Screenshot retrieved 7 February 2020.

In Figure 26, a WeChat friend criticised the imbalance of media coverage on different topics. They pointed out that the media focused too much on positive stories rather than exposing issues that needed to be condemned and addressed. They argued that many problems did not receive enough attention (added in the comment section): China sent 200,000 face masks to the Philippines while their own citizens faced shortages; only two N95 masks arrived at a hospital when 420 were donated; some places still had large gatherings; someone claimed

that 40 COVID-infected medical staff in a hospital was a “small” ratio; some were marked as “dead” and ignored when still alive. Instead, a story praising a senior scavenger in a small, underdeveloped town in Henan Province, who donated their savings while living by digging leeks in the wild and recycling garbage, was widely circulated.

The post challenges the legitimacy of the narrative of the senior scavenger’s donation. They argue that volunteering and donation should be dependent on an individual’s capacity and not required in a way that asks people to disrupt their normal life. The post suggests that the media’s exploitation of vulnerability misleads the audience and is unethical. While the media praise the senior scavenger’s goodwill, they equally ignore the fact that the “sacrifice” of a poor man’s last property was entirely unnecessary—they neither had the responsibility nor the means to do so. Instead, marginalised individuals should be protected, not showcased as role models. This post exposes the mainstream media’s tendency to prioritise emotional appeal over rational behaviour, reflecting the misuse of “positive energy” and forced sentimentality in relation to so-called heroic deeds.

Instead of feeling motivated or touched, the WeChat friend was shocked and only felt sad and angry towards the mainstream media and the government for their performative manipulation of the public’s emotions during the crisis. By suggesting, “If you’re feeling sad and angry, don’t resist and stop, let them stay as long as possible”, at the end of the post, the WeChat friend encouraged friends to listen to their hearts and follow their intuition, and, even when they feel different from others, to stand by their opinions.

Such reactions illustrate the limits of affective governance: while emotions can mobilise solidarity, they can also expose contradictions and stimulate counter-narratives that challenge

the legitimacy of state discourse. Furthermore, using Foucault's concept of 'power/knowledge' as a guide (Feder 2014), the contradiction between the emotions promoted and those invoked, reflects the awakening of the affective public to the existence of disciplinary power, helping the audience learn to think critically and pay attention to the missing voices in public discourse, thereby developing a broader understanding of the circumstances.

In short, public account articles on WeChat played a complex role during the pandemic. They attempted to replace critical debate by offering top-down education, reinforced by citizens' habitus of trusting authority. When circulated through social networks, they combined official discourse with peer surveillance, embedding discipline within digital intimacy. At the same time, they mobilised affective publics, aligning citizens emotionally with state narratives of sacrifice and resilience under the banner of "positive energy". Yet, over time, emotional overexposure produced fatigue and scepticism, leading some users to question the legitimacy of these narratives. In this tension between education, affect, and critique, WeChat public accounts exemplify both the power and the fragility of China's digitally mediated public sphere.

Wuhan residents: Who are "we"?

The confrontation between "us" and "them" was a recurring theme in online discussions during the Wuhan lockdown. On the surface, aligning with the "us" promoted in mainstream discourse appeared to facilitate compliance with quarantine policies and strengthen confidence in the ruling regime. Yet this raises a deeper question: who defines "us", and can mainstream ideas always represent the whole population?

This study shows that WeChat public account articles provided a space for citizens to negotiate these definitions. While many public account articles reinforced the dominant narrative of collective unity, some of them, to varying degrees, exposed the exclusion of marginalised groups from being part of a “we”. These individuals were not included in the public discourse of mainstream media or mentioned in narratives of official accounts. In such cases, public accounts became tools for counter-public expression (Fraser 1992), enabling overlooked groups to challenge official discourse and dominant forces including experts, law enforcement, the media, and other social institutions (Asen 2000; Squires 2002), and to seek recognition within the broader public. Jackson and Foucault Welles (2015) investigate the emergence of the ‘networked counter-public’ built on the pervasive use and affordances of social media, and the application of connective functions such as hashtags and ‘mentions’. These small, networked groups aim to “create and maintain their own, alternative publics with the express goals of both legitimising and communicating their lived realities and pushing the mainstream public sphere to acknowledge and respond to these realities” (Jackson & Foucault Welles 2016, p. 398).

Connecting this framework with the networked public (boyd, 2010), this thesis argues that the concept of networked counter-publics extends beyond the traditionally ignored minority that was previously identified as lacking in the inclusiveness of Habermas’ public sphere (Fraser, 1992; MacKee, 2005; Negt & Kluge, 1993; Pateman, 1989; van Zoonen, 2005). Not only those who are politically, culturally, or economically inferior, but even ordinary citizens are at the same risk of being overlooked if they are socially misaligned—if they doubt the accomplishment of collective efforts in fighting the virus, or if their reality was too disruptive for others to acknowledge during the pandemic. Hence, even if they were still identified as part of the citizens (“us”), they were labelled as counter-public in relation to the “public” as

defined by the ruling regime. It follows that “we” can also be a group of marginalised people whose interests and real situation were omitted by the broader “us” (or the official “us”) in the sense of “them” or “others” due to their absence in mainstream media.

Squires (2002) is aware that counter-publics attempt to challenge dominant narratives directly when media and communication resources are also accessible to minority social groups. By forming a networked counter-public using public account articles, “we” are expected to counter the public discourse and challenge the common understanding of “us” under the pandemic. Given WeChat’s massive user base—1.09 billion per day by 2021 (Liu 2021)—even “minor” groups can represent millions of voices, making their interventions difficult to dismiss. Public articles can be seen, not only be seen as an attempt to be heard, but also as a window for the official “us” to see the existence of “others”. The networked counter-public therefore grows even larger by recruiting potential supporters from like-minded individuals on the official “us” side using contagious emotions (Bennett & Segerberg 2013; Papacharissi 2014). In the same vein as We Media, Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira (2012) further support the view that public account articles can be viewed as a convenient resource generated by “crowdsourced elites”, based on social media data and/or social capital. The interactions with them, through reposting, liking, and commenting, allow other ordinary individuals to join a prominent voice within networked counter-publics and amplify their own influence by borrowing others’ social capital. This helps bridge the gap between mainstream reports. Instead of separating an “us” from a “them”, networked counter-publics allow us to share our difficulties in a collective manner.

Articles like this were always blocked rapidly. Suzuki and Velasquez (2025) conceptualised the actions and strategies employed by, not necessarily, but mainly official institutions and the

dominant public to attack and dismiss networked counter-publics, aiming to undermine their discourses, performances, and movements, as ‘networked counter-publics sanctions’. The most common networked counter-publics sanctions in China are performed through censorship by ‘state actors’ (Suzuki & Velasquez 2025). According to Interviewee K, ‘corporate actors’, the operators of the social platform, also play an important role. These articles were removed not necessarily because they were sensitive or opposed the government. Rather, the viral spread of the articles triggered the alarm of the WeChat algorithm’s rumour detection when the repost volume was unusually high (Suzuki & Velasquez 2025).

Yet, this study still argues that when an article went viral during the pandemic, it was normally too shocking or appeared so real and relevant that it resonated emotionally with a large amount of social media users. As Liu and Shi (2024) note, audiences can be mobilised by the emotions expressed in the comment area of articles, forming an affective space for them to share points of view and cope with the difficulties they face together.

In Figure 27, a public account article questioning the inclusiveness and effectiveness of the city-wide COVID-19 test in Wuhan was widely shared. While it reflects the friction between the official “we” and the citizen “we”, it also demonstrates how the networked counter-public gathers and constructs its own affective space for cooperation and mutual support:



Figure 27: A public account article questioning a post from the official CCTV News account on Weibo with comments seeking help from other readers. Screenshots retrieved on 11 February 2020.

The short article titled “Today, Someone Said the COVID-19 Case Screening Was 98.6% Done”, was posted by a public account named “Wuhan Forum Boomer” (*Wuhan Zha Ba Ge*). The article firstly quoted a screenshot from the Weibo account of *CCTV News*, which posted news with the hashtag: the confirmed case screening rate has reached 99 per cent in Wuhan (Screenshot 1). The news reported that, as of 9 February, 3,371 communities, encompassing approximately 4,210,000 families and 10,590,000 residents, which equalled 98.6 per cent of the total families and 99 per cent of the population in Wuhan, had been tested and screened. The report further indicated that 1,499 confirmed cases with severe symptoms that could not be sent to hospitals, as of 8 February, have now been confirmed to have received treatment in hospitals. The author wrote under the news, employing a strong sense of sarcasm, and expressed “lucky” with the “smiling” emoji to convey their anger and ridicule with politeness, questioning whether they were the 1.4 per cent left behind or if they were living in “another Wuhan” (Screenshot 2). They argued that the news did not reflect the truth at all and encouraged readers to click “Wow” and share this article with their networks to expose the “real” Wuhan. With only a few lines, the article offered a dramatic twist in the mainstream “facts” presented in the news, revealing the reality of quarantine life and raising an alarm about the authenticity of the data.

The article had wide resonance, with more than 100,000 readers (shown as “100k+”) having read and shared it as of the time the screenshot was captured, indicating they recognised that the report was false, or they were in the same situation, being categorised as “we” while living without a COVID test being done for them. In Screenshot 3 to 5, the author ‘pinned’ comments from the audience that indicated they were in an urgent situation requesting help from the public. The pinned comments, then, subtly become a part of the article content to support the author’s argument and become affective content to provoke the audience. The

implication here was that while the government was putting the spotlight on their achievement of the “99 per cent”, the people who lived in that “1 per cent” and did not receive the COVID test were facing a life-threatening situation and should be worthy of more attention. Or at least the same level of attention and support as other citizens.

The Wuhan families in the pinned comments were suffering from chronic diseases or suspected infection of COVID-19 with severe symptoms, but had all been rejected by hospitals, even though their lives were in danger. The comment senders also exposed their personal information to the public, which prompted potential helpers to contact them directly, and also validated the authenticity of the cases. Each of these cases received, respectively, about 29,700, 25,600 and 19,300 likes from the audience, a clear challenge to the efficacy of quarantine policies. These posts acted as both personal testimonies and collective indictments of the gap between policy and lived reality. By helping these families get help, the author underscored that “we” were also Wuhan residents, but “our” suffering was ignored and concealed in the fake data presented in the news. This contrast further raised doubts about the official “we” that the government was referring to in the report, because the citizen “we”, who were omitted from the news, were in fact suffering and left unattended. A networked counter-public began to emerge from the comments and likes. The likes here were more than just a reflection of an emotional impulse, but a way of “picking a side” (*zhan dui*) to show support (Interviewee N).

The counter-public’s opinion was made explicit through approving comments. In Screenshot 6, some audience members commented that “they” were also residents of Wuhan, even though they belonged to the “1.4 per cent”. They stated that they hadn’t received any COVID communication from Wuhan, but rather relentless screening calls from other places, such as

Hainan Province and Suzhou, simply because they had a property their or their household registration was there. Approximately 15,800 and 14,400 audience ‘liked’ and shared the same sentiments as these comments. This indicated that there were probably other similar hidden cases. The author of the post also responded to them expressing their disappointment with the local government, “We were lucky, but also unlucky to be ‘Wuhan people’”, and “We love Wuhan, but the reality was just so disappointing.” The “love of Wuhan” was emphasised through the emerging citizen “we” in which “our” love was more human, practical, and down-to-earth, and aimed at comforting and saving each other with genuine care and recognition, rather than relying on numbers to represent lives.

One commenter said sarcastically, “It seems we don’t deserve to be tested”, noting that they were simply labelled a “no infection” case via a piece of paper stuck to their door, contradicting claims that everyone was offered testing. More than 15,000 readers liked and shared the comment. Another comment revealed that a compound had detected 32 confirmed cases, but no one was sent to the hospital. The highest number of likes, approximately 19,600, was given to a comment that explicitly accused local government leaders of continuing to lie about the real situation during the crisis. This comment criticised the way the leaders’ prioritised their good reputation over the well-being of the citizens. Here, following Ahmed’s discussion of emotions and politics (2014), expressions of shame and anger were mobilised to reframe the citizen “us” as the neglected residents whose suffering was erased by official statistics. Accordingly, “we”, as networked counter-publics who were separated from the public discourse, could reclaim “our” subjectivity and turn the local government into a “them” (Foucault 1979).

This conflict highlights the tension between top-down and bottom-up constructions of collective identity. On the one hand, state-controlled mainstream media defined “we” as compliant, unified Wuhan residents, embodying “positive energy” and collective sacrifice. On the other hand, marginalised citizens used public account articles to reclaim their subjectivity, insisting that “our” suffering was also part of the Wuhan story. From a Foucauldian perspective, this reflects the clash between disciplinary power exercised through official discourse and the resistance of citizens who used digital tools to redefine themselves (Foucault 1979). While the government intended the articles to convey official data to lead public opinion and internalise, public account articles also enabled the autonomous construction of counter-public networks controlled and managed by WeChat users (Castells 2012). By shedding light on the absence of the marginalised “us”, the networked counter-public challenged the authenticity of government channels.

Importantly, the article in Figure 27 did not aim to break Wuhan residents into competing camps. This article may also be viewed by those who have already been tested and who recognised themselves as part of the government’s data. Instead of comparing the differences between the circumstances of citizens, it focused on the reasons some were “unlucky”. The citizen “us”, then, became inclusive and foregrounded solidarity with other citizens. This article and its comments sought to remind others of the hidden struggles behind the banner of unity and “positive energy”. By echoing the affective content and evoking empathy, those who remained silent and obedient were potentially recruited as potential supporters (Lee et al. 2017).

The rallying cry of this article can also be viewed as a virtual protest. Instead of occupying a physical space, it used data to “occupy” the audience’s attention and capture their emotions. It

was emotionally contagious and gathered an affective public through shared similar experiences or expressing solidarity. It also provided a digital space for the audience to vent their grievances, resolve their confusion, reveal the truth of their circumstances, and support one another in collective resilience (Ahmed 2014). Even though opposing voices were continuously removed, Interviewee K observed the rapid re-emergence of the removed content—not just the original post but also content relayed by other people—which used creative coding strategies to ensure distribution. This persistence illustrates how affective publics in China resist authoritarian constraints by generating “repertoires of circulation” that allow suppressed voices to endure.

Ultimately, the conflict over “we” in Wuhan reveals the fragility of state-crafted narratives. While official discourse sought to internalise compliance by defining “we” in harmonious, unified terms, citizens’ lived experiences disrupted this harmony. Through affective publics, they exposed exclusions, challenged official legitimacy, and reasserted their right to define themselves as part of Wuhan’s “we”.

Culture space and public account articles

It is interesting to observe that conflicts often emerged when public account articles were shared within family group chats. In this study, younger interviewees consistently reported that they felt a responsibility to share educational content with parents and older relatives, recognising both their own greater digital literacy and the need to protect the elderly during the pandemic. This sharing occurred in both extended and immediate family groups. This motivation can also be traced back to the previous discussion of bonding capital in the analysis of Putnam’s social capital (2000; Morrow & Scorgie-Porter 2017), which posits that

social capital is enhanced by the affiliation with a particular group (a family), based on the tight relational, emotional and obligational connections (kinship, close relationships) and sustained by reciprocal actions (embedded in the shared obligation for mutual caring), providing social and psychological support and generating solidarity.

Yet, some interviewees, such as Interviewee X, N and H, felt that their bonds with family members established boundaries to determine their sharing range and restricted their contributions to small, close circles. One interviewee explicitly said, “I don’t care about others.” Sharing with the immediate family group can maximise the effect of education and reduce the risk of unintentional ‘context collision’ in the semi-public sphere (Davis & Jurgenson 2014). Following Davis and Jurgenson’s (2014) argument, sharing in an immediate family group chat with goodwill can be viewed as ‘context collusion,’ where children intentionally invite parents to the same space, pay attention to and witness updates of the development of the COVID pandemic. However, Davis and Jurgenson (2014) also note that the disciplinary power implicit in the ‘authority-subordinate relation’ between parents and children cannot be ignored. Thus, this study observes that despite these differences in the range of sharing, the younger generation usually acted as the main senders in family groups. In some cases, parents accepted this guidance (Interviewees Q, W, K, H), while in others (Interviewees J, R, S, C) their input was resisted, leading to conflict.

These tensions highlight how cultural norms shape digital interactions. Habermas’ ideal of rational-critical debate fails to capture the persistence of Confucian hierarchy within Chinese family groups, where seniority often outweighs rational argument. As Jurgenson’s (2012) notion of augmented reality suggests, online spaces reproduce offline power relations rather than replacing them. Bian (2019) further traces modern Chinese family interactions to

Confucian “five pairs of social roles” (*wu lun*). In particular, three pairs of them: the father-children, husband-wife and elder brother-younger brother relationships, are highly relevant here. They can be understood as children being subordinate to the father (*fu zi*), women, particularly the wife, being subordinate to the male, specifically the husband (*fu qi*), and younger brothers/sisters as subordinate to the elder ones (*xiong di/jie mei*). These enduring hierarchies are carried into modern life, intersecting the ‘authority-subordinate relation’, giving older members authority in digital conversations, even when their knowledge is less accurate.

Generational differences in education and political orientations also shaped these interactions. As Wang (2023) recognises, the older generation in China, who used to be seen as ‘information have-less’, have now embraced smartphones in profound ways and are living their ‘unlived’ youth with the support of smart devices. However, they often lack the critical skills to evaluate digital content, leaving them vulnerable to pseudoscience, conspiracy theories, and politically biased narratives. For example, as Interviewees C and R noted, their parents’ preferences were strongly related to their educational and professional backgrounds. Interviewee C’s father, with less education, enjoyed more “tacky” topics, whereas Interviewee R’s parents, who have been CPC members for many years, tend to accept the statements of the government. These polarisations and gaps invite the younger generation to step in and take over, assessing the veracity of posts.

Additionally, algorithms reinforce the dissemination of already received ideas by steering older users into echo chambers (Sunstein 2018), further entrenching bias. Younger participants in the study, aware of this, often dismissed what parents shared with the family group, anticipating that it would be unreliable. The parent-child relationship, though

sometimes reframed as an intimate digital friendship which might be expected to enhance social bonding capital (Pahl & Spencer 2004), accordingly failed to generate trust. Authority and intimacy clashed in ways that disrupted rational communication.

Based on this, the interaction between younger and older generations in the digital era potentially faces an endless struggle between the increasing influence of the young, due to their better education, ability to access knowledge and authoritative information, and the inherent ‘authority-subordinate’ power imbalance within the family and kinship, which instead of leading to trust and harmony, resulted in more conflicts and uncertainty. Younger interviewees, such as A and K attempted to subvert these power relations by instructing their parents using evaluated official account articles. The younger generation, in this sense, flipped the traditional family hierarchy (Brandtzaeg, Lüders, and Skjetne 2010). While the children wanted to keep their family safe, they equally further internalised the instructions of the government. At the same time, these conversations risked the elderly rejecting them irrationally and intensely because their pride and their belief systems were challenged.

Empirical examples illustrate these struggles vividly. Interviewee J referred to their friend’s story. Their friend’s grandmother refused to listen to the family, but insisted on their belief in superstition and, in turn, urged her family to eat the soil in the garden in the name of “for your own good” (*dou shi wei ni hao*), claiming that the “nutrition of nature” could help prevent the virus. Interviewee C’s father insisted on learning from Douyin and what was shared by his “bros”, dismissed Interviewee C’s expertise and advanced educational levels. Interviewee S’s parents embodied a split: the mother, easily confused, leaned on her child, while the father insisted Interviewee S “not make a fuss”. Interviewee R withdrew from a family group after an elder cousin, convinced that COVID-19 and vaccines were

conspiracies, dismissed official articles and overwhelmed the chat with dubious sources (see Figure 28). Interviewee R felt exhausted and had to give up talking in the family group to avoid further conflicts that may ruin relationships. These cases show how younger relatives' use of official accounts as persuasive "weapons" often provoked defensive reactions from elders, whose sense of pride and authority was challenged.



Figure 28: The elder cousin of Interviewee R claimed that the pandemic was a means to sabotage and reset the social order and manipulate and filter people with a video from a public account; and argued that science itself was a religion developed to control the world

according to plans hatched in WW I and WW II. Screenshot of the chat history provided by Interviewee R on 2 February 2024.

These conflicts further correspond to Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus, which is developed through examining the lengthy and ongoing processes of socialisation that guide individuals' behaviours considered natural and legitimate (Papacharissi 2014). On one hand, for the younger generation, shaped by higher education and digital literacy, critical evaluation was a natural mode of engagement. On the other hand, for the older generation, shaped by earlier educational and cultural contexts, reliance on rumours or superstitious practices also felt equally natural. On WeChat, these competing habitus collided, with Confucian norms of respect amplifying rather than resolving the gap. The result was a cultural struggle in which intimacy and duty encouraged intergenerational sharing, but hierarchical pride, echo chambers, and differing habitus undermined genuine dialogue.

Converging habits from using other platforms

While public accounts appear to provide We Media with opportunities to reach a wider audience through audience participation in sharing, their actual effectiveness is constrained by technological and capitalist factors. Firstly, the high competition and the role of algorithms determine the visibility of content. Interviewee K, a marketing professional, explained that competition among public accounts has become increasingly intense as more competitors have come to the market, and more creators attempt to capture users' limited attention spans. Although users can technically subscribe to unlimited accounts, time and attention are finite, meaning only a few subscribed accounts consistently receive engagement. Thus, in order to stand out from other competitors, frequently updating readable and meaningful content was a

core strategy for the authors to attract the audience. Later, the competition became more significant when WeChat grouped all public accounts into one portal, aiming to reduce push notifications and, in turn, reinforce reliance on algorithmic ranking. In this case, not only subscribed accounts, but also random public accounts, are promoted simultaneously and mixed into the same list. Interviewee K regarded the algorithm as a “score” system—popularity, measured through subscriptions, cumulative likes and views, and browsing frequency, determined which accounts appeared at the top. While this ranking system appears to be an incentive for higher-quality content, Interviewee K warned that the logic behind this is that users’ preferences are reinforced and amplified by algorithmic curation, with recording and exploiting the users’ behavioural data and, ultimately, creating personalised echo chambers (boyd & Crawford 2012; Sunstein 2018).

Interviewee K’s highlighting the algorithmic logic of the public accounts reminds us of the capitalist nature of social media. Indeed, this is precisely Fuchs’ criticism of Jenkins’ participatory culture (Fuchs 2017). Jenkins asserts that social media users are empowered by lower costs of engagement and the shareable nature of social media (Jenkins 2006b; 2009) and proposes the emergence of participatory culture to understand the interaction of the digital era, in which he highlighted participatory culture as a culture that fans and media consumers are invited to actively participate in creation and circulation of content and connect with each other (Jenkins 2006a; 2006b). Fuchs (2017) argues that this theory reflects the positive and collective aspects of social media—engagement, creation, sharing, experiences, contributions and emotions—but fails to acknowledge “how these practices are enabled by and antagonistically entangled into capital accumulation” (p. 70). To elaborate, the profit-driven motive of the platforms disrupts ‘participation’ in Jenkins’ sense, because what can be posted and circulated online has been determined in the first place by

commercial imperatives (Fuchs 2017). The self-censorship of Sina and Tencent, as well as the pervasive online censorship policed by the Chinese government, further limited what is shown on the users' screens. This thesis does not intend to deny individuals' agency and their opportunities to create change. Jenkins insists that individuals' contributions always matter in civic engagement (Jenkins 2009)—they still embrace this potential by shaping the content and participating in its distribution (Jenkins 2006a; 2006b). However, the reality of censorship in China means that citizens participation is limited because their visibility is out of their control. Simultaneously, the competition between public accounts for the audience's attention is, in fact, a competition for acquiring user data such as likes, reposts, and comments, which can be transformed into reputation and influence, and then boost capital accumulation (Fuchs 2017). Flew (2020) adds that these competition models are more profit-driven and less favourable to being friends with social media users. The algorithm, alongside this, further accelerates the process by privileging what the algorithm deems relevant, and in turn, challenges the participatory culture itself, as it now clearly shows that not all content is valued equally by both sides of the platform and the audience. While social media users celebrate their participation by 'prosuming' cultural goods (Jenkins 2006a), such as public account articles, the more they interact with the content, the more it drives them into filter bubbles and echo chambers, constraining their own worldview (Su 2024).

Secondly, misinformation in public account articles adds another layer of concern, particularly during the pandemic. Interviewee S criticised "*Sydney Today*" (*Jin Ri Xi Ni*), a public account claiming to be the largest Chinese-language platform in Australia, as an example of sensationalist and misleading reporting. The account frequently employed clickbait titles, such as "Breaking news!" (*tu fa*), "Shocking!" (*zhen jing*) and "Earth-shattering!" (*zhong bang*), while failing to contextualise or verify claims. It also generalises

subjects to veil their relevance by vaguely concluding “all Chinese in Australia” (*zai ao hua ren*) or “every Chinese overseas student” (*quan ti zhong guo liu xue sheng*) or “every family has to know” (*mei ge jia ting dou yao zhi dao*). By framing incidents in broad ethnic terms as “Chinese” (*hua ren/hua nan/hua nv*) even when irrelevant, it exaggerated risk and generated fear and anxiety. This rhetorical expression confuses overseas readers who rely on the account for understanding local life, causing unnecessary stress without explanation.

Interviewee S noted that their parents, who relied on *Sydney Today* to stay connected to their child in Australia, became anxious and worried, adding to Interviewee S’s emotional burden.

This misuse of the clickbait strategy further reflects the capitalist nature of social platforms. It disrupts the distribution of useful tips for educational purposes. To obtain more data, this strategy encourages more consumption than production by focusing on increasing the clicking rate (or the reposting rate). It can be argued that reposting can also stimulate users to share their opinions. But according to Fuchs’ (2017), consumption and circulation in participatory culture are more likely to generate an interpretation of content rather than produce new content. This can also be observed when elderly WeChat users share articles with shocking titles and extreme conclusions—they are not producing any genuine ideas, but rather repeating content by reposting to initiate another round of consumption, driven by emotional incentives. Thus, the role of the prosumer has been eroded.

Simultaneously, this data-driven strategy can also be critiqued using boyd and Crawford (2012) and van Dijck’s (2013) notion of ‘big data’, in which the quantitative value of the viewer data is not equal to the quality of the content; it simplifies the process of evaluation and simply builds a specious connection between popularity, visibility and importance. These symbolic numbers have no concrete value, but tend to evoke an instant, impulsive, emotional,

and positive response to the content, rather than a rational analysis (van Dijck 2013). The absence of a ‘dislike’ button on WeChat further silences opposing or negative voices. An extreme example of obtaining data in contemporary Chinese social media ecology can be found in the expression, “negative publicity is still publicity” (*hei hong ye shi hong*). This criticism accuses those using controversial topics or intentionally using negative news to attract attention. In other words, it demonstrates, again, that data may not always be the ultimate goal, but rather an unavoidable factor on social media, allowing strategies to outweigh content and enabling the commodification and exploitation of users’ attention and activities.

Finally, the effectiveness of public accounts also depends on evolving media habits shaped by other platforms. Interviewee K noted that users trained by Douyin and RedNote prefer visual content and have shorter attention spans and lower tolerance for long videos and text. Their user habits, then, continue to affect their behaviour on WeChat in terms of how they receive and interpret public account articles. This shortened attention is in line with Simon’s (1971) theory of the attention economy, in which the wealthier the information in a message, the poorer the attention of the reader. This is even more obvious in today’s social media environment. When We Media use multiple social platforms to compete and gather ‘attention capital’, referring to the amount of attention a specific communicator receives through likes and comments from social networks (Smith & Fischer 2021; van Krieken 2019a, 2019b), users have to divide their already limited attention into fragments. This incentivises content simplification, privileging immediacy over depth, which aligns with Taylor and Nichter’s study (2022), asserting that communicators must compete through timing, aesthetics, and persona management to capture scarce attention, rather than focusing on content itself.

To adapt to this situation, the content composition gradually shifts away from meaning-making in storytelling to focus on speedy delivery with elements of amusement or drama. Interviewee K observed that many public account articles have shortened the length to five times the length of a “thumb-scrolling” on screen, which can contain around 500 Chinese characters, at most, in order to make an article readable. Images and effects are also added to the articles to enhance the amusement, which takes away more space from the text.

Hence, the majority of recent public accounts articles are no longer an ideal place for a detailed explanation of a complex topic, but often jump to conclusions by skipping or simplifying discussions and causation. This is not to dismiss the efforts of a public account to advocate close reading—such as *Sanlian Lifeweek*, a public account operated by the magazine that has the same name, which still insists on posting long articles to engage readers. But in practice, according to my research, most WeChat users do not even have the patience to finish a one-minute video (e.g. Interviewee K). Some articles even display “TL; DR”³⁶ (*sheng liu*) at the beginning to directly present the findings in one sentence to save the readers’ time. Interviewee K argued that these methods continue to encourage lazy, passive consumption and undermine analytical thinking, leaving audiences vulnerable to

³⁶ “TL; DR” is an internet slang term short for “too long; don’t read” used to indicate a brief abstract of the following text, in case the reader has no time to read. A similar concept in Chinese is *sheng liu*, which means “to save your data”; therefore, there is no need to load the following passages.

misinformation and pseudoscience. It is reasonable, then, to conclude that the idealised critical debate characterised by Habermas' public sphere has become increasingly irrelevant.

Summary

During the COVID-19 pandemic, WeChat public account articles became a central mechanism through which information, emotion, authority, and resistance circulated among Chinese citizens. These articles reinforced state narratives by providing accessible education, amplifying official expertise, and extending institutional authority into personal networks, where peer sharing and platform algorithms strengthened calls to “stay cohesive”. At the same time, their emotionally charged content mobilised affective publics, fostering solidarity through stories of sacrifice while also generating fatigue, scepticism, and conflict as users confronted the limits of these narratives. Moments of disruption emerged when marginalised citizens used public account articles to form temporary networked counter-publics, challenging official data and reclaiming their own definition of “we”. Yet these counter-publics remained fragile under censorship and algorithmic suppression. Within family group chats, generational divides, Confucian hierarchies, and unequal digital literacy further complicated the circulation and interpretation of public account articles, often producing tension rather than consensus. Together, these dynamics illustrate how WeChat public accounts operated as a semi-public sphere shaped by authority, affect, and constraint—facilitating both compliance and contestation, and revealing the complex, often contradictory consequences of digital engagement during the pandemic.

Chapter Nine: Consequences: Is social media still capable of bringing us together?

Consequences is the final parameter studied in Dahlgren and Hill's (2023) five parameters of media engagement. As they note, consequences refer to the result and implications of the particular form of media engagement. They are always related to specific media users (Dahlgren & Hill 2023)—in this thesis, I have investigated the way users of Weibo and WeChat both find a sense of engagement while dealing with the disengagement provoked by censorship and algorithmic alienation. Simultaneously, *Consequences* can manifest in diverse ways. As Dahlgren and Hill (2023) emphasise, “the consequences of engagement can take many forms—ranging from a sense of empowerment, to the experience of pleasure, to the attainment of satisfactory audience statistics for media organisations” (p. 34). At the same time, consequences may be unforeseen and unintentional, and disengagement is itself a possible outcome. This parameter is closely linked to the final research question of this study: after three years of intensive social media engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, what insights can Weibo and WeChat usage offer for understanding augmented life in the post-pandemic era? After the Chinese nationwide battle against the pandemic and collective experience of “stay cohesive”, how do individuals now perceive connectivity, and how do they revisit their relationship with society through the lens of social media engagement?

Symbiosis: people, social media, and governance

Using Dahlgren and Hill's (2023) framework as a guide, interviewees were asked whether they felt Weibo and WeChat had empowered them. All participants agreed that these social

media platforms did empower them in various ways. Yet, their reflections reveal that empowerment in China's digital sphere is felt rather than guaranteed. The interviewees' reflections on empowerment resonate strongly with longstanding theoretical debates about the democratic potential of digital media. Their responses illustrate how Weibo and WeChat function as infrastructures of expressive power, visibility, and augmented participation, aligning with early scholarship that frames social media as an enabling force for publics previously excluded from mass communication and emphasised the democratic potential of social media (Asen 2000; Bennett 2012; Castells 2012; Dahlgren 2005; Lee et al. 2015; Papacharissi 2010). My interviewees, then, grounded these hopes in everyday, pragmatic experiences of agency under constraint.

Across interviews, empowerment was articulated through the lens of affordances (boyd 2010). The sense that "everyone has a microphone", as Interviewee N described it, signals a shift from hierarchical modes of communication to a more horizontal media environment in which individuals can find ways of getting attention, express agency, and shape public discourse. This perception of expressive equality, even if not matched by structural equality, is central to how users conceptualise digital empowerment. Even if when structural hierarchies interfere with their ability to be heard, the feeling of being able to speak and be heard carried emotional weight for many of my interviewees.

For Interviewee J, empowerment emerged from exposure to multiplicity and diversity. During the pandemic, Weibo and WeChat opened their eyes to the multiple social issues that emerged during the pandemic. Although they caused chaos and conflict, being exposed to these issues also helped them understand the difficulties faced by different social groups. Even though Interviewee J did not always agree with or immediately comprehend every viewpoint, the

platforms nevertheless broadened their understanding of their society. Building on this, Interviewee S said how important it was to hear every voice, reflecting a deeper philosophical relationship between social media, memory and participatory democracy (Fuchs 2017). Even fleeting posts—deleted, censored, or buried by algorithmic flows—carried symbolic significance for them, simply by having existed. This is in line with Jurgenson’s (2012) argument about ‘augmented revolution’ which emphasises that social media users are not simply “shouting into the wind (made of atoms), they are also shouting into a network (made of bits)” (p. 88), and that, accordingly, the act of posting produces traces that can be screenshotted, archived, or echoed across platforms. The possibility of persistence enables minority voices to overturn dominant narratives, however briefly. In the Chinese context, where mainstream media offers limited space for pluralism, this ephemeral visibility becomes a subtle form of empowerment, allowing dissenting or minority perspectives to momentarily enter public consciousness.

For Interviewee H, empowerment was also relational and collective. Their example of the 2022 Shanghai lockdown highlights how social platforms can transform isolation into connective action (Bennett & Segerberg 2013): WeChat neighbourhood groups and comments posted under public account articles enabled individuals to support each other by exchanging goods and sharing resources to survive the crisis together, while the government’s support was limited (see also Figure 29). Social media provided logistical coordination, emotional solidarity, and practical support in material exchanges—transforming private suffering into shared mobilisation. In these moments, empowerment was framed in terms of broadcasting dissent but was more about connection, where empowerment manifested as a form of emotional connection and relational care rather than overt political contestation.

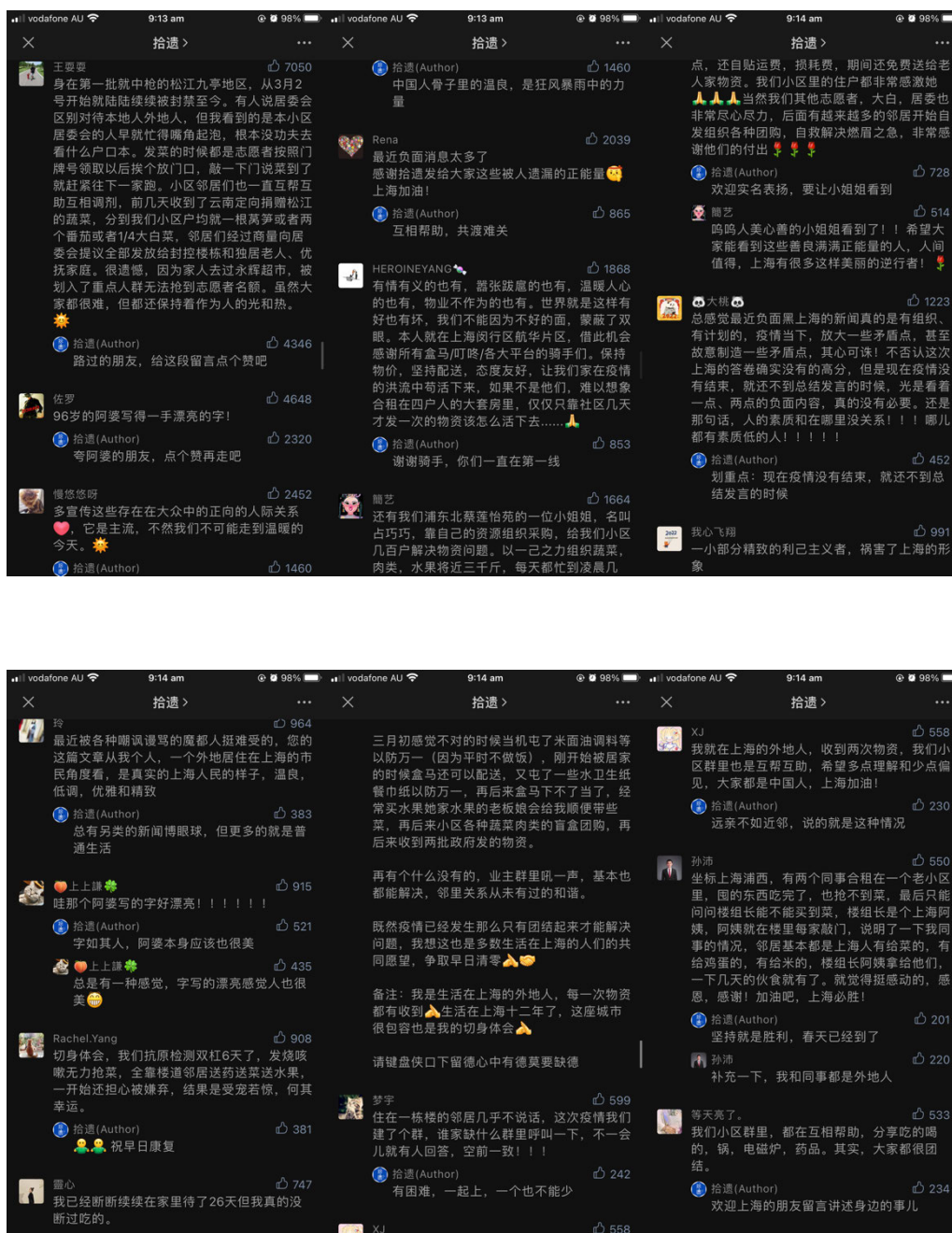


Figure 29: The comment area under a public account sharing about the neighbourhood caring during the 2022 Shanghai lockdown. WeChat audiences shared their heart-warming moments with neighbours as evidence of mutual support to underscore cohesion. Viewed 6 April 2022.

Additionally, my research found that empowerment was also enhanced through perceived responsiveness. Interviewee H's belief that issues that entered Weibo's Trending Topic spurred policy attention reflects a perception of affective influence: that collective outrage, sympathy, or concern can build momentum. Even though state intervention shapes the visibility, the public still treats trending mechanisms as pathways to visibility and change. This perceived responsiveness contributes to a sense of agency. Empowerment, therefore, was not only performative but also affective: users believed their actions could be both effective and affective using social networks (Givan et al. 2010; Suh et al. 2017).

Above all, these testimonies support and complicate Western perspectives on the role social media plays in empowering users. On one hand, interviewees echoed early optimistic views of social media—seeing social media as a space for civic voice, consciousness-raising, and counter-public formation. On the other, their accounts demonstrate that empowerment is contingent, temporary, and highly mediated by platform governance, censorship, and evolving political climates. Empowerment emerges not as a stable condition but as a momentary affordance, activated at particular times under particular social pressures.

In this sense, the interviewees' narratives reveal a more nuanced conceptualisation of empowerment under Chinese authoritarian conditions: empowerment as expression (the ability to speak), resonance (finding others who care), mobilisation (organising resources and mutual aid), interruption (briefly disrupting dominant narratives), and imagination (believing that collective attention can effect change). These layers show that empowerment on Weibo and WeChat is less about structural transformation and more about micro-level adjustments that enable individuals and communities to feel seen, acknowledged, and momentarily

connected—an affective and relational form of agency that coexists with, rather than replaces, systemic constraints.

A fragile promise

While interviewees acknowledged that Weibo and WeChat offered a certain sense of empowerment, their reflections also reveal the conditional and fragile nature of this agency within China's tightly governed media environment. That is not only because of external regulations, but because users internalise the logic of control, transforming self-expression into both compliance and creativity, and that they take this pattern for granted even when they sense the control is tightening. The interviewees' narratives highlight a central paradox of digital participation under authoritarian power: the affordances are embedded in architectures of control. What emerges here is a complex form of conditional empowerment, shaped by structural limits, internalised constraints, and the tensions between participation and regulation in Chinese digital spaces.

Interviewees S, D, T, U, and W emphasised that the empowerment they experienced was overshadowed by pervasive state surveillance and censorship. In such a system, expression is never detached from the platforms that mediate it; users must constantly learn to anticipate the boundaries of permissible speech and adapt their behaviour accordingly. This dynamic unconsciously aligns with scholarship on “participatory persuasion” (Repnikova & Fang 2018), in which the state cultivates a participatory appearance by encouraging users to contribute only positive or patriotic content. Over time, the boundaries of permissible expression become internalised as a form of everyday political discipline. What appears as self-protection is also a consequence of what Foucauldian viewed as normalisation, in which

individuals govern themselves in anticipation of an invisible authority. This explains why many interviewees adopt “read but don’t post” practices, or engage only in coded, cautious expressions that balance the desire for participation with the need for self-preservation.

The paradox is even more foregrounded by attempts to bypass censorship—via screenshots, homophones, altered formatting, or elaborate “encryption”—which represent a mode of soft resistance in environments where explicit confrontation is dangerous. The viral circulation of “The One Who Issued the Warning” (*Fa Shao Zi De Ren*³⁷) across WeChat public accounts in early 2020 exemplifies such ingenuity (see Figure 30, see also BBC 2020c). Fang Kecheng, in a BBC (2020c) interview, interpreted this transformed, viral, creative relay of the rescue of the forbidden article as a ritual of connectivity that allows members to recognise one another and agree on a shared value.

This thesis partly endorses this analysis. Initially, encryption served as a participatory soft resistance practice: a grassroots strategy to preserve politically significant information, and to resist erasure. Yet as the techniques grew increasingly performative and dramatic—German, and Japanese translations, emoji reconstructions, Morse code, hexadecimal renderings, even

³⁷ The article was initially published on *Ren Wu* magazine by Gong Qingqi, on 10 March 2020. The article portrayed Dr Ai Fen’s encounter and feelings after she was accused of being the source of the “COVID-19 rumour”. She was the person who took a picture of the first “unknown pneumonia” report and shared it with her colleague. This report later spread across the local professional network, including Dr Li Wenliang. The article was already removed from the Chinese domestic internet. Backup recorded by a third-party organisation was viewed on < <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/637830.html>>.

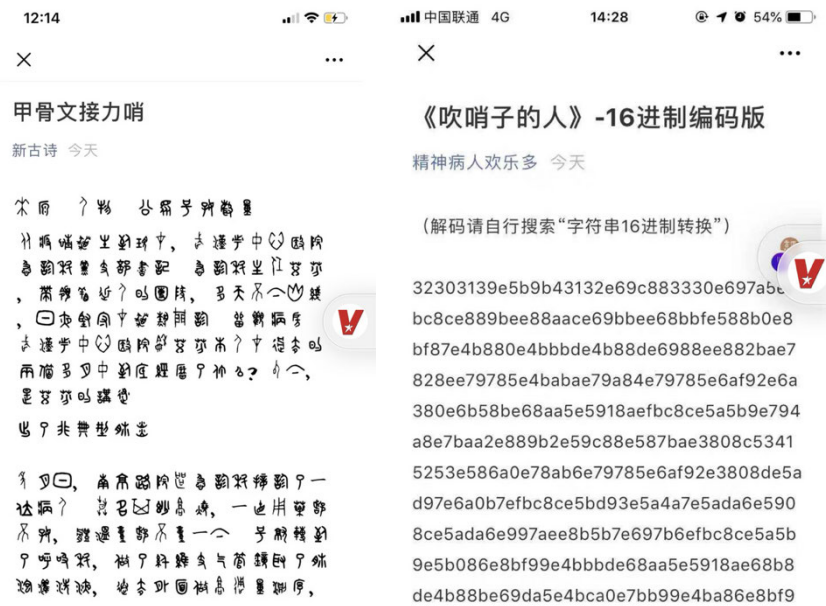


Figure 30: Creative transformation of the article in Cantonese, German, emoji, Morse code, oracle bone script and hexadecimal code, viewed 11 March 2020.

Importantly, this shift illustrates a deeper structural tension. “Encryption” began as a tool to preserve truth, but my research suggests that it sometimes ended up as an aesthetic performance detached from content. Paradoxically, this ultimately resulted in the same outcome as censorship, as Interviewees S and N observed: a form of obtuse paraphrasing that neither the censorship system nor the readers could meaningfully understand, further diluting the original message. The tactic that once preserved meaning ultimately produced noise—a phenomenon anticipated by social media researchers (Lee & Ting 2015; Morozov 2011). Social media is not primarily a space for serious political discussions. The logic of engagement often overtakes political deliberation in digital spaces. The very practice meant to resist state control risks becoming part of the sensory and affective overload that can undermine serious engagement.

Despite these limitations, Interviewee N argued that the “entertainmentisation” (*yu le hua*) of politics is not merely negative. Playful, ironic, or humorous expression constitutes a bottom-up, inclusive form of vernacular politics—an implicit attitude that speaks to the view that “You cannot fully control how we speak.” This further implies that censorship can effectively suppress text, pictures, and videos that contain concrete ideas and objects, but it struggles with, for example, memes, humour, coded jokes, and subcultural aesthetics. These cultural forms circulate meanings in a way that can evade textual policing while equally fostering a sense of shared complicity among users. Thus, entertainment is also a mode of resistance—an indirect but persistent way to reclaim agency within constrained communicative environments.

Thus, “entertainmentisation” functions as both symptom and strategy. It is a mode of evading direct critique while sustaining a subtle form of agency through playfulness and creativity. Within these moments, empowerment becomes conditional yet affectively real, through mediated humour and shared recognition. The paradox of Chinese digital culture lies precisely here—where compliance and resistance, seriousness and play, converge within the same communicative act in the intersection of public sphere and playground. These ambivalent practices reveal that even under the constraints of architectures of control, users cultivate emotional adaptability—a capacity to manoeuvre, encode, and laugh. Such affective agency does not dismantle power but quietly redefines what participation feels like under it.

Lingering struggles: when empowerment meets containment

My study reveals that the later stages of the pandemic were marked by an increasingly assertive state agenda. The government not only cooperated with foreign experts to endorse

the legitimacy of the policies (Fang 2022), but as Xu and Gong (2024) observe, the government strategically mobilised the TCAPSW campaign to amplify the “main melody” (*zhu xuan lü*) and “positive energy” (*zheng neng liang*) narratives as part of a broader propaganda framework. According to ethnographic observation and interviews, events across the pandemic—the accusation that Dr Li Wenliang was “spreading rumour” accusation, the cancellation of Fang Fang, the deletion of posts criticising the Red Cross China corruption, the elimination of content from the Shanghai lockdown, the censorship of the video of “Voices of April” (*Si Yue Zhi Sheng*³⁸), and the suppression of footage dissemination about citizen riot in Guangzhou and the deadly residential building fire in Urumqi, and the rise of “Blank Paper Movement” (*Bai Zhi Yun Dong*³⁹)—reflected an escalating tension between expanding public grievance and intensifying information control.

³⁸ “Voices of April” was a short video first posted on a WeChat public account on 22 April 2022 (see also BBC 2022a), recording the lives of Shanghai residents during the massive lockdown in 2022. Even though the audiences defended the video as a gentle reminder and objective documentary, the video showed parts of the citizens’ struggle to survive under the “zero-COVID” policy and their negative opinions about life under lockdown, which was deemed “sensitive” and led to its removal online. Backup recorded by a third-party organisation was viewed on < <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/四月之声>>.

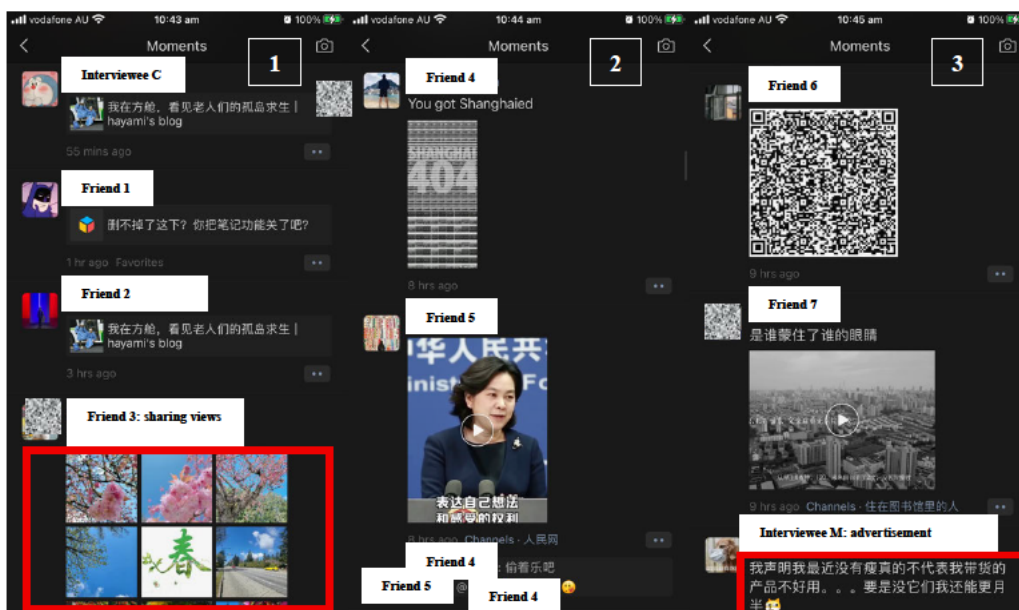
³⁹ The “Blank Paper Movement” was triggered by the Urumqi residential fire incident that caused ten residents’ deaths. The tragedy was believed to be due to strict quarantine measures that obstructed the emergency exit. Relevant posts were quickly removed online, which ignited public outrage. Then, university students and citizen protesters stood silently at the rallies across the country, holding blank A4 sheets of paper, symbolising “all the voices will be silenced” to resist censorship (see also BBC 2023).

In this context, social media empowerment became a double-edged sword. The same platforms that amplified citizens' voices also magnified the reach of state surveillance, propaganda, and algorithmic governance. Through coordinated action between platform operators and state policies, dissenting voices were swiftly deleted or ironically “harmonised” (*bei he xie*), leaving only positive information and preventing users from accessing a fuller picture of events. It is safe to deduce that Chinese social media has shifted from the “decentralised” model envisioned by Western scholars (boyd 2010; Castells 2012; Bennett & Segerberg 2013; Lim 2017) to a re-centralised state-controlled system. This is especially evident on Weibo—highly curated, algorithmically filtered, politically sanitised, and structurally aligned with state priorities. This resulted in declining user engagement and trust (Interviewees N, D, T & W).

Within this tightened infrastructure, affective participation persisted but became temporally compressed. Drawing on the concept of the affective public (Papacharissi 2014; Papacharissi & Trevey 2018), it is clear that dissent can go viral for minutes and disappear forever within hours on Weibo. This temporal compression is itself also a form of control—producing emotional release while preventing sustained mobilisation by controlling how long an issue or comment can be discussed. As a result, citizens could find an emotional release with the brief visibility of their post, yet the time required to mobilise resistance and activism—such as the time to talk, form shared narratives, coordinate action, and establish networks—was shortened due to the discontinuity of online content and fragmentation of opinions. Such a system provides a temporary “pressure valve”. Still, it negates the opportunity for long-term collective organisation, prevents narratives from solidifying, and creates a balance in the digital public sphere that keeps users emotionally engaged (maybe also exhausted) but politically isolated.

Dr Li Wenliang’s warning which the government described as a mere “rumour”, reminded users that any dissent can carry legal risks. Interviewees W, T, and U all said they now “think twice before sending”, fearing repercussions that casually posting, reposting, or commenting would go beyond deletion to potential surveillance. Consequently, self-censorship among social media users potentially became more pronounced, and public discourse became increasingly one-sided.

Currently, WeChat Moments—being more intimate and relatively safer as a semi-public space—still retain more opportunity for resistance according to my research. For example, as discussed earlier, users collectively flooded their timelines mourning Dr Li Wenliang, and as shown in Figures 31 and 32, WeChat friends also reposted *Voices of April*, public account articles, and sent messages supporting Shanghai and Urumqi residents during periods of anger. However, such posts quickly disappeared down the timeline and were buried beneath new posts, leaving no accessible archive.



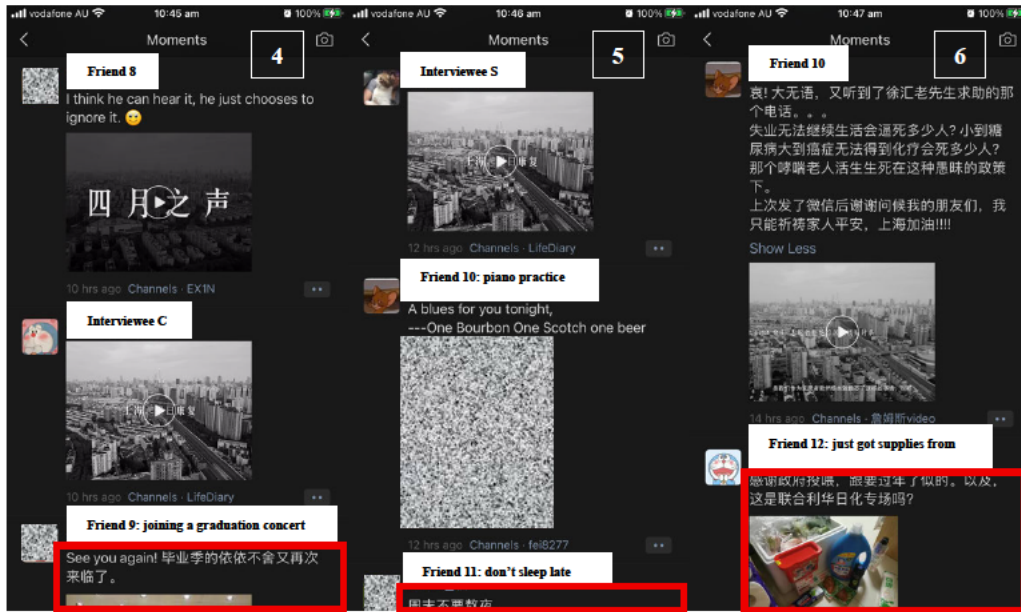
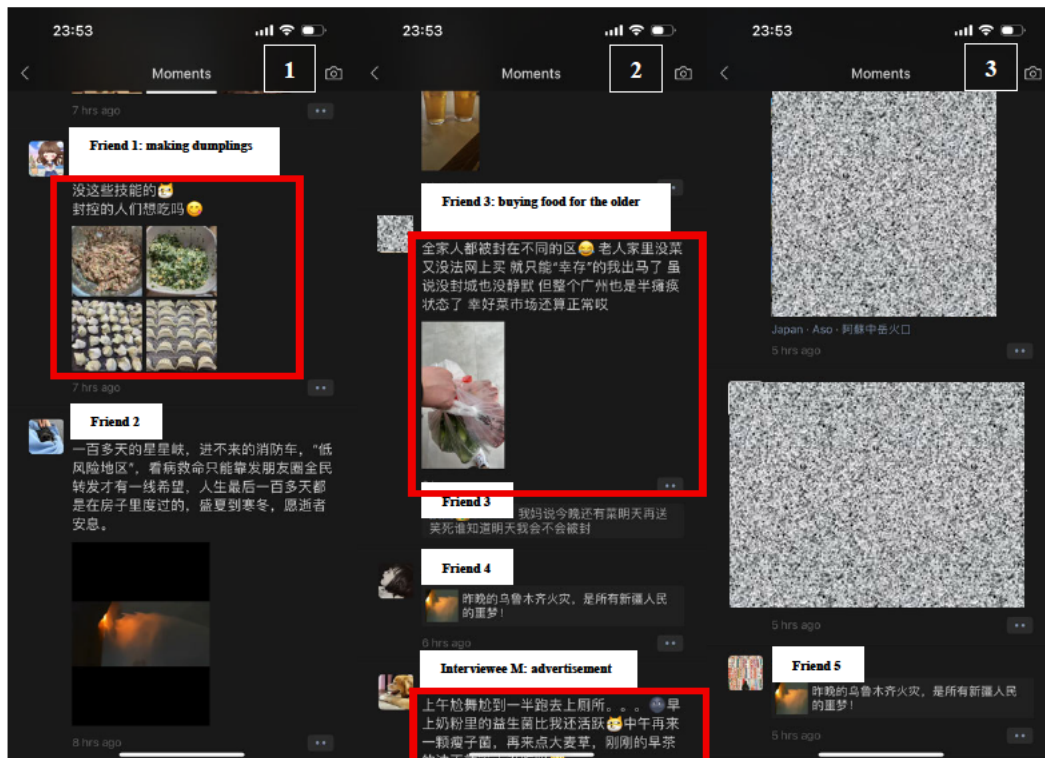


Figure 31: WeChat friends spontaneously reposted the video of *Voices of April* relayed from virous sources to support the expression of Shanghai residents, viewed 23 April 2022



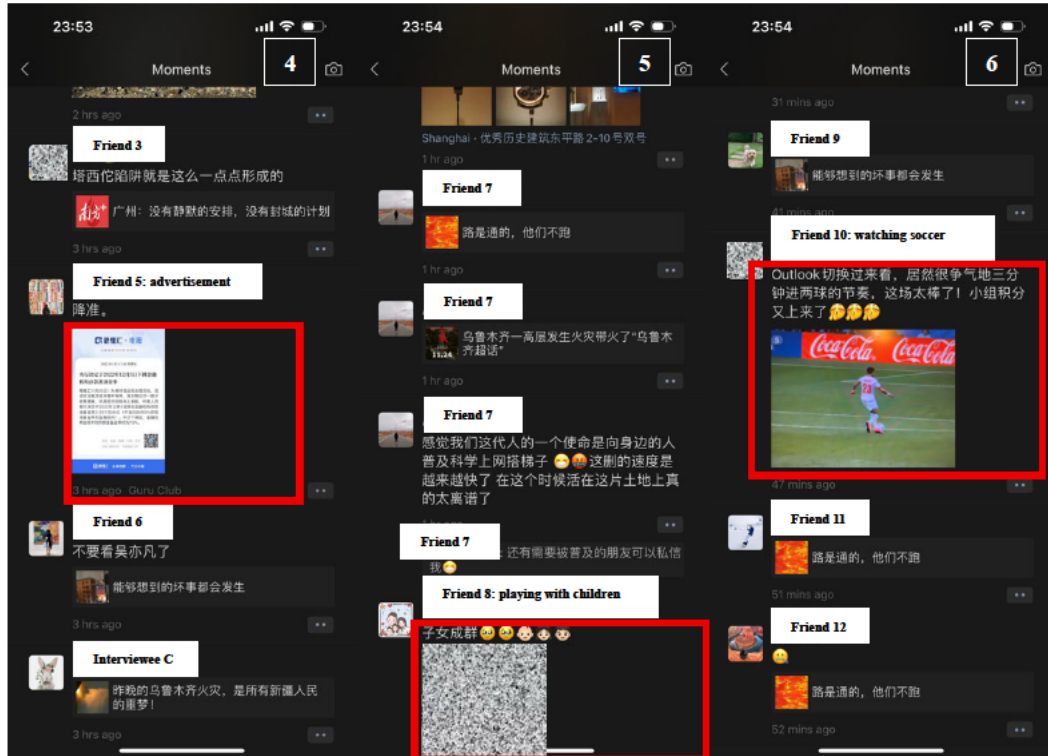


Figure 32: WeChat friends spontaneously reposted the same public account articles about the Urumqi residential building fire incident to question the quarantine policies and show their alliance position of the local residents, viewed 25 November 2022

Interviewees X and H's reflections further articulate an important insight: social media offers only momentary empowerment, not sustained political negotiation. Social media offers Chinese citizens fleeting opportunities to speak out and mobilise instantaneous emotional outbursts, revealing that people retain clarity beneath state propaganda. However, it must also be acknowledged, as Gladwell (2010) famously argues, that social media is not the natural enemy of the status quo. It cannot facilitate negotiation with state power nor alter political realities simply through emotional resonance. Every dissonant post eventually turns into Error Code 404.

“The internet does not remember”

The gradual disappearance of collective memory on Chinese social media represents one of the most profound consequences of digital engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. The popular expression, “the internet does not remember” (*hu lian wang mei you ji yi*), frequently circulated among Chinese social media users, symbolises the phenomenon of engineered forgetting. It signals that, under increasingly strict censorship, earlier user-generated content has been systematically erased, thereby undermining the core affordances of social media outlined by boyd (2010). Before enabling replication, scalability, and searchability, networked technologies must first record content. When content cannot be recorded or preserved, these affordances cannot operate. When memory itself becomes unstable, the

social media environment loses its archival capacity, transforming from a participatory record of lived experience into a managed site of selective remembrance.

During the pandemic, users attempted to virtualise their lived realities by posting updates, frustrations, and observations. These practices constituted an informal archival process—what Rumsey (2016) describes as the digitalisation of memory, where everyday expression becomes an act of preservation for future memory destruction. The platforms themselves served as a means of documenting these moments. The digitalisation of archives further enabled the wider dissemination and knowledge production (Yasseri et al., 2022).

Interviewees K and M also described WeChat Moments as a form of personal diarising, where timestamps allow them to revisit past events (this was also one of the methods they used to recall their pandemic experiences during the interviews). On public digital platforms such as Weibo, users' shared posts and reflections during the pandemic—through processes of information pooling—in theory, accumulate into a collective memory (Yasseri et al., 2022). The disruption of digital archives prevents collective memory from accumulating, deprives society of essential references for retrospection, and importantly, leaves gaps into which official narratives can later be inserted—as digital traces fade or are deleted⁴⁰, the state

⁴⁰ Some third-party operated websites archive and file the deleted items, but may require a VPN to access, which is not available for every regular internet user in China. And the authenticity of the backup is not guaranteed.

gains greater latitude to reinterpret events. In an authoritarian context, forgetting is not accidental; it is engineered.

Scholars (Yasseri et al., 2022), building on Halbwachs and Coser's (1992) concept of collective memory, argue that individuals are limited in their ability to recall past events coherently beyond the social frames of their groups. Thus, society plays a decisive role in shaping memory. They define collective memory as the body of memories and remembering processes built and maintained by a social community, which are always responsive to the context of the present. Collective memory comprises recollections produced and shaped by groups.

They further argue that despite the emergence of digital media, individuals have not overcome the cognitive limitations of memory (Yasseri et al., 2022). On the contrary, reliance on smart devices that retrieve facts on demand has increased the need for aided recall (Anderson 2016). Following Yasseri and colleagues' (2022) logic, the digital reproduction of collective memory—through sharing, discussing, negotiating, and even contesting (Zelizer 1995)—is now even more reliant on digital media. The digitalised collective memory should, in principle, be preserved as fully as possible by servers. As a result, these memories can be constructed and reconstructed through ongoing dialectics of remembering and forgetting, shaped by semantic and interpretive frames, and subject to various distortions (Climo & Cattell 2002). They can also complement official records and contribute additional perspectives and details to historical understanding.

However, Chinese digital platforms do not offer this kind of stability. Interviewees repeatedly observed that critical posts documenting lockdown struggles or policy failures had vanished,

particularly on Weibo. This clearly demonstrates that digitalised collective memory is disrupted by platform regulation, preventing dissenting voices from being recorded and collective memory from consolidating. The collective experience of the lockdowns—citizens' struggles, frustrations, and survival stories—have been erased behind the Great Firewall, making memories inaccessible online.

In addition, algorithmic curation prioritises novelty, continuously pushing older posts into obscurity and eroding the continuity necessary for collective remembering. The overwhelming volume of information on social media, which exhausted Interviewees C, N, H and K, further weakens users' ability to remember. In addition, once-prominent Trending Topics were quickly replaced by new ones. Within already fragmented attention spans, new emotional stimuli further distracted audiences, disrupting the cognitive process by which the brain constructs meaning through affective coherence—connecting emotional experiences with factual patterns for future use (Rumsey 2016). On Weibo's trending list, it is common to see emotionally intense COVID-19 death statistics one moment and celebrity gossip the next (see Figure 33, highlighted in red). Similarly, as shown in Figures 31 and 32, posts resisting lockdown measures coexist with entirely unrelated content (highlighted in red) in WeChat Moments feeds.



Figure 33: Entertaining discussions always came with the serious news about the COVID pandemic on Weibo, viewed 2 March 2020.

According to Rumsey's theory (2016), the fragmented presentation of content disrupts emotional coherence and weakens participants' recall of events. This phenomenon echoes the interviewees' descriptions of the pandemic as feeling "like another lifetime"—a limitation of this study. Many interviewees' memories of the three-year period have become blurred; they require prompts to retrieve recollections and often recall only fragments or broad emotional impressions. Forgetting here operates simultaneously as a cognitive outcome of platform design and as a political mechanism of control.

Yet forgetting is not always negative: some interviewees (e.g. E, J, Q) felt that gradual forgetting helped them recover from pandemic-related trauma. Conversely, Interviewees C and S believed that the loss of collective memory and the tendency to forget reduced their

opportunities for reflection, potentially leading to repeating the same mistakes in a future crisis. The duality of forgetting also demonstrates one of the central insights from Dahlgren & Hill's *Consequences* parameter (2023): digital engagement produces ambivalent outcomes. Empowerment and disempowerment, memory and amnesia, healing and suppression coexist within the same technological ecosystem.

Interestingly, Interviewee K's recollections revealed how collective memory in digital spaces diverges along networked lines of intimacy and interest. Their WeChat feed contrasted with what I observed in my own. They noted that during the pandemic, Moments posts that resisted or criticised pandemic governance were relatively rare. Most users, themselves included, used social media primarily to seek help, share resources, and ensure the safety of their families. Before securing stability and survival, few had the emotional capacity to engage in political critique. For example, although some reposted or commented on news items such as the Gansu nurse who shaved her head before departing to support Wuhan, no one engaged in prolonged debate. Academic or critical commentary—similar to that proposed by Interviewees C and S in the present study—offered little practical value for coping with real-time survival challenges.

This difference, I argue, represents the influence of WeChat network demographics, divergent life histories and echo chambers. It also illustrates a key dimension of digitalised collective memory: in digitally connected contexts, shared memory no longer depends on traditional forms of spatial or temporal proximity. Instead, it emerges through connections based on shared interests, identities, experiences, and emotions. Extending Flaxman and colleagues' (2016) argument, collective memory on WeChat becomes fragmented, selective, or

ideologically insulated, leading to different perceptions and emotional experiences of the same pandemic. This heterogeneity complicates the possibility of future collective reflection.

Ultimately, the erosion of digital memory is both technical and political. Platforms designed to connect and record become instruments of omission and silence. Forgetting, in this sense, is not merely a lapse but a form of governance—a process that neutralises the disruptive potential of remembering. What remains are traces of emotion without an archive, catharsis without continuity, and a collective memory continually overwritten by the next update.

Post-pandemic moral order: othering, tolerance, and nationalism

Weibo and WeChat do not simply expand opportunities for public expression; they also help reconstruct a new internal hierarchy of power among users. This emergent structure operates outside formal state political control, yet is still shaped by platform algorithms, affordances, and the cultural–moral logics circulating within digital publics. These factors collectively generate new social norms and delineate new boundaries of mainstream values. Crucially, these dynamics simultaneously produce new margins: through processes of othering, social media users implicitly redefine who belongs, whose voices are legitimate, and what counts as “appropriate” and acceptable speech. In doing so, they establish new standards of “tolerance” while actively disempowering those positioned outside the normative centre. This reality stands in contrast to earlier Western scholarly analysis of the potential of the internet to democratise communication, which often celebrated social media’s participatory and inclusive potentials (Jenkins 2006a; Papacharissi 2010; van Dijck 2013).

Interviewee K's reflections provide a critical conceptual entry point into the issue. For them, inclusion entails genuine respect and acceptance for difference. In contrast, this thesis argues that today's Chinese digital environment operates at a far more superficial level of tolerance—a kind of debatable, conditional “putting up with” of divergent views that collapses once ideological boundaries are crossed. As earlier chapters illustrate, the pervasive use of othering—moral shaming, public humiliation, and cyberbullying—is aimed at producing behavioural alignment from marginalised users rather than recognising their claims as legitimate. This mechanism reinstates what scholars (Matthes et al. 2018) call the spiral of silence in a digital form. Thus, social media users internalise the majority sentiment through online discussion and suppress dissent to avoid social sanction. In this context, the legitimacy of speech is determined not by argument or evidence but by moral and social conformity—by whether one's expression complies with dominant discourses. In this sense, inclusion is not rooted in empathy, care, or truth-seeking; it is contingent on fitting into boundaries set by the majority.

This echoes Hongisto and colleagues' argument (2017) that once human agency becomes entangled with technological systems, individuals cannot fully control their cognitive processes. Algorithmic curation, affective triggers, and platform architectures shape perception in ways that make finding a “consensual truth” nearly impossible in the digital era. Under these conditions, the minimal requirement for a functional public sphere is not acceptance, but the more basic capacity to allow divergent voices to exist without punitive intervention—a condition that remains unmet in China's current online climate.

Observations of Weibo during the later pandemic period show that public opinion did not move toward greater pluralism but rather intensified into polarisation under the sway of rising

nationalism. Fandom communities became key arenas where this tension materialised. Interviewee K noted that, in the late pandemic, a Thai celebrity's tweets questioning the efficacy of China's vaccine quickly escalated into a nationalist "moral panic" that immediately circulated on Weibo. It caused a dramatic twist in the fandom, from "melon-eating" (*chi gua*) to recognising it was "house collapsing"⁴¹ (*ta fang*), and among related business agents: marketing accounts and "big Vs" framed the comments as "insulting China" (*ru hua*), prompting fans to publicly sever ties, unfollow their idol, and even "turn into haters" (*fen zhuan hei*), i.e. turn into haters in public criticism. Their positions were changed instantly due to the spread of affective content and the stimulation of superficial political statements that push users to "pick a side". For Interviewee K, the pandemic had politicised fandom to an unprecedented degree: securing profit and seeking support from Chinese fans to be famous now required explicit political loyalty to China. Consumption became nationalised, entertainment intertwined with geopolitics, and fandom behaviour became an extension of propaganda.

What appeared to be a spontaneous patriotic defence was, in practice, the enforcement of a rigid, superficial, binary moral order: supporting China equalled virtue, deviation equalled betrayal. In this case, Chinese fans often assumed that their patriotic education—rooted in a national curriculum that emphasises unity and territorial integrity—was universally shared.

⁴¹ It is a popular internet slang to describe the situation when an idol is involved in negative news, which ruins their reputation and impression among fans. Even if the scandalous stories are not yet validated, they already damage the idol's image, leaving fans shocked, disappointed, and devastated that "the house they built and live in is collapsing".

They overlooked the fact that foreign celebrities are embedded in entirely different educational systems, historical narratives, and political expectations. The result was a profoundly illiberal reaction: divergent opinions were dismissed, and some fans even attempted cross-border attacks via VPNs. Ironically, as Interviewee K remarked, the Great Firewall, in fact, effectively “protected” foreign celebrities from an even larger wave of Chinese nationalist backlash.

This reaction suggests that part of the public has further internalised the state agenda—such as “China versus the West”—unconsciously as part of their criteria of tolerance, which is understandable in the context of surging political tensions between China and Western countries led by the United States throughout the pandemic. The binary moral schema of patriotism versus betrayal invited wider participation in ideological policing, as ordinary users disciplined one another in the name of national loyalty. Through affective contagion and algorithmic amplification, nationalism became an everyday affect—simultaneously emotional, moral, and performative.

Consequently, the Chinese digital public sphere today operates through a form of collaborative control (Fang 2024): the state enforces top-down technical regulation, while citizens reproduce ideological conformity through bottom-up moral surveillance. The interplay between these layers reveals that the governance of expression no longer relies solely on censorship but on participatory enforcement. Empowerment and obedience thus coexist in a recursive loop—citizens use social media to express belonging and agency precisely by enforcing the norms that constrain them.

In this sense, the pandemic did not simply amplify nationalist affect; it redefined the moral coordinates of digital citizenship. To be visible online required demonstrating not individuality but alignment—performing correctness as a marker of loyalty. What emerges is a new moral order of participation: inclusion without pluralism, voice without dissent, and empowerment through compliance.

Living in tribes

Interviewees U, R, Y, and C all agreed that expressions of online Chinese public opinion have become intolerant. Interviewee R argued that escalating heavy censorship and one-sided information flows naturally bred ideological closure: blocking exposure to alternative perspectives and solidifying users' ideological beliefs. Interviewee C voiced particular concern for younger generations whose digital experiences are dominated by entertainment platforms such as RedNote and Douyin. These algorithmic ecosystems privilege spectacle and speed over reflection, exposing users to high-volume information yet few divergent viewpoints. Interviewee K added that algorithmic recommender systems on Weibo create filter bubbles that hinder cross-perspective learning, further amplifying polarisation. Meanwhile, shrinking attention spans and platform commercialisation reduce the visibility and circulation of substantive discussions, narrowing the space for divergent voices.

However, Interviewee R also noted that low tolerance is not only about dominant views excluding marginalised ones—it is also the result of mutual exclusion between mainstream and minority perspectives. Interviewee R acknowledged the impact of one-sided public opinion. They explained that they personally resisted Chinese propaganda and felt increasingly disillusioned with the government's sanitised discourse during the pandemic. As

a result, they gravitated toward arguments that countered state narratives, following bloggers who articulated such perspectives both on Chinese and overseas platforms. They realised that this twisted their own understanding of China's pandemic policies, acknowledging that the discursive environment they occupied also had an inherent ideological agenda, making objective understanding impossible and inclining them to distrust mainstream narratives. Interviewee R said that, as a result, they deliberately avoided expressing opinions in public digital spaces, such as Weibo.

The emotional cost of this polarisation became apparent when Interviewee R described their inability to communicate with friends in China. Interviewee R went on to note that, in an isolated climate, people cling to the truths they believe in (including state-constructed or “performative” truths). Thus, during the pandemic, Interviewee R found it difficult to communicate or empathise with friends in China. Observing from abroad, after a long time living in Japan, they could not comprehend why domestic citizens continued to support such extreme containment policies.

“I remember chatting with [a college friend] on WeChat. The ‘zero-COVID’ policy had just come up in China, and she thought it was a really good policy. I remember thinking like, ‘What?’ I wanted to empathise with her, but I just didn’t know where to start... The situation she was describing didn’t match the logic I was following... So, no matter how angry or upset she was about something, I just couldn’t understand. For instance, I couldn’t wrap my head around why she would support the ‘zero-COVID’ policy.”

(Interviewee R)

In addition to failing to understand their friend, Interview R felt disconnected by discourses that prioritised political loyalty over compassion. They recalled seeing a news story from Hohhot, where a mother under lockdown, who was experiencing a mental health crisis and being unable to obtain help, died by suicide while her daughter watched helplessly behind a welded-shut door (see BBC 2022b). Although the tragedy prompted some reconsideration of “zero-COVID” and overly strict controls, Interviewee R still saw people defending the policy, leading them to question the logic behind that support. Whether these voices were speaking from privileged detachment or genuine endorsement of containment, these reactions convinced Interviewee R that moral reasoning had been replaced by ideology.

In such a climate, dissenters often resorted to silence or anonymity to avoid conflict on Weibo and WeChat. This echoes the experience of Interviewee D, who “secretly” expressed opposition to zero-COVID on a Weibo account, but intentionally did not share with friends. Interviewee D believed individuals should have the right to choose whether to accept reopening rather than being forced to comply with lockdowns—even if reopening carried infection risks. Since this argument was unacceptable to most people at the time, Interviewee D returned to Weibo to avoid conflict on WeChat.

Interviewees U and Y believed social media enabled holders of extreme nationalist views to locate like-minded peers through networked publics. Click speech on social media, such as likes and reposts, as well as comments, symbolise the majority opinion (von Sikorski & Hänel 2016). These users were able to exploit these cues to reinforce their positions, generate a so-called “shitstorm” to attack and disgrace others, and even use reporting mechanisms (*ju bao*) to suppress dissent (Fang 2024), escalating rhetorical framing using patriotism to suppress other opinions. For instance, during the 2022 Shanghai lockdown, pro-

lockdown groups attacked “lying-flat⁴²” (*tang ping*) position holders, accusing them of being selfish, being influenced by Western ideology, disrespecting government arrangements, lacking patriotism, ignoring the pandemic’s severity and the pressures on the healthcare system, and betraying those who “stayed cohesive” and made sacrifices. Even if some minority concerns were legitimate, this tension further fuelled the intimidation of public expression of opinions and contributed to the silence of the minority, even with anonymity (Matthes et al. 2018).

Yet withdrawal does not signify total disengagement. Many participants described relocating expression to smaller, trusted circles on WeChat—family groups, close-friend chats, or private Moments—where they could speak candidly without fear. Interviewees depicted these spaces as refuges of authenticity, reviving the traditional sense of a private sphere before social media (Papacharissi 2010). Public disillusionment thus coincides with a revival of intimate publics grounded in relational trust. Face-to-face conversations persist as complementary venues for meaning-making, indicating that counter discourse did not vanish but rather retreated into quieter, semi-private enclaves.

Ultimately, rather than cultivating an open forum for deliberation, China’s networked publics fragmented into multiple digital tribes—clusters united by homogenous values and affective loyalties as bonding capital, particularly for minority groups. Each tribe constructed its own moral universe, validating internal coherence while discrediting outsiders. This tribalisation is

⁴² “Lying-flat”, an internet slang, reflects a “it is what it is” attitude that stops making efforts, accepts what is about to happen.

not unique to China but acquires distinctive characteristics within an authoritarian-capitalist ecology: surveillance suppresses dissent, while algorithms and nationalism reward conformity. The consequence is a paradoxical blend of hyper-connectivity and emotional isolation—an environment where participation is abundant, but mutual understanding is scarce.

Need of security

Low tolerance and rising polarisation have intensified users' desire for security, generating a pervasive culture of self-protection across Chinese social media. Interviewee U, a former civil servant, explained that they had learned to remain completely silent online—never commenting, reposting, or even liking others' posts. For them, self-censorship was both professionally prudent and a form of moral discipline. Beyond official surveillance, Interviewee U was concerned that online conflict can trigger revenge and spill into offline consequences. This sentiment was echoed by Interviewees X and H, who viewed political expression as a source of endless “trouble and drama”. They observed that online trolls and “keyboard warriors” weaponised nationalism and morality to shame others, intensifying irrational debate, escalating emotional conflict and pushing neutral users into opposing camps. These attackers may not be more patriotic or morally superior; yet were able to stir up mass confrontations and incite others, cultivating a hyper-vigilant environment—where everyone was a potential enemy. That was precisely why Interviewees C and N withdrew from social media.

Interviewee S associated such an intimidating atmosphere with the prevalence of “little pinks” (*xiao fen hong*) and a “50-cent army” (*wu mao dang*), who post nationalist content

driven by emotional or financial incentives. Their interventions blur the line between authentic belief and performative loyalty, fuelling suspicion that every user might be an ideological enforcer. Consequently, dissent comes to appear as both dangerous and futile. Interviewee X felt that expressing dissent was not worth the risk of harassment. Interviewees H and S added that the flood of contradictory information further paralysed them. They could not determine what was true and felt hesitant and reluctant to take a stance for fear of inadvertently spreading misinformation or offending peers. This uncertainty reinforced the dominance of mainstream narratives. As users retreated from participation, the opinion environment on Weibo and WeChat grew increasingly one-sided—sustained not only by censorship but by collective anxiety.

The need for a sense of security prompts the increasing use of “self-protection” measures when expressing personal opinions. Interviewee K found this phenomenon tragic but necessary. Before sharing their thoughts, many people felt compelled to add extensive disclaimers stating that they meant no offence, hoping to defuse potential backlash before it occurred. This happened even in fanfiction:

“These days, I’ve noticed that even content creators—like those who post opinions or even just creative stuff—feel the need to add tons of declarations under their posts, just to avoid getting attacked... Take fanfiction, for example. A lot of it is pure imagination... they [authors] feel they have to pre-emptively explain themselves... Even if the author did write something with questionable motives, like maybe they don’t love that character—so what? Just click the little cross and move on. You don’t need to attack the author and say, “Hey, I think you’re being disrespectful”, or pressure them into writing a whole explanation.” (Interviewee K)

Similarly, when posting potentially controversial comments in comment sections or WeChat group chats, some users often employ the “doggy” emoji to soften critical comments and signal a non-threatening stance. Interviewee A explained that “dog-head for safety” (*gou tou bao ming*) is a common strategy to avoid being attacked by using humour, irony, or self-deprecation. This practice functions as a social shield, transforming potentially contentious remarks into ironic banter. What might appear as playful meme culture is also a survival strategy: a performative display of submission to the dominant moral and emotional order.

“The ‘doggy’ emoji for me is a way to express my feelings—it’s like a symbol that shows I’m not being too serious or forceful about something. It’s not meant to be taken as a strict or intense statement. Instead, it just represents my opinion, but I don’t expect others to agree with me. I’m just putting it out there, and that’s it. No need for debates or arguments... It signals that I’m not demanding agreement—whether you accept it, disagree, or just don’t comment at all, it’s all fine. It gives people some breathing room.”

(Interviewee A)

Paradoxically, the use of disclaimers and emojis reflected the intolerant climate and underscores the fragility of digital empowerment. The very platforms that promise universal visibility have become spaces where users must continually anticipate risk and self-regulate to remain safe. Interviewees were torn between the desire to speak and the fear of being targeted, revealing how affective insecurity structures participation itself. Social networks thus evolve into constrained arenas—regulated not only by technical filters but by the moral surveillance of peers. These self-deprecating and defensive communicative strategies therefore operate simultaneously as survival tactics and subtle forms of resistance. However, these micro-resistances also reveal the limits of digital agency: when a concern about safety

becomes the primary condition of expression, communication ceases to be enlightening and empowering. In an era when everyone can ostensibly speak up, my research suggests that many users ironically speak less, trust less, and feel less secure.

Is confrontation a detour: consensus and the pragmatics of compliance

Not all interviewees critiqued China's tightly regulated digital environment. Unlike Interviewees S, C, N and D, other interviewees still viewed the critical information the government provided as authentic. As Interviewees H and W stated, the government did not intend to harm their people, even though it did hide some information and "enhance" the statistical numbers, which did not significantly affect their daily routine. Some interviewees supported the government's use of mainstream values to guide public behaviour during the crisis. Interviewee X argued that when civic education and critical thinking are underdeveloped, unstrained freedom of expression can be dangerous and destabilising. They compared pandemic governance to the 2019 Hong Kong Anti-Extradition movement, which, in their view, illustrated how "unregulated ideas" on social media could incite chaos and incubate riots, ultimately at the expense of other innocent citizens' daily lives. While acknowledging that Chinese propaganda seeks to shape opinion, Interviewee X regarded this guidance as necessary in emergencies to maintain order and prevent misinformation from spiralling into panic.

Interviewee Y, in the same vein, believed that constant online venting and state criticism contributed little to pandemic control and instead distracted the public from the collective goal of containing the virus. Interviewee Y believed that social media users should first reflect on whether their words and actions undermined social cohesion. Complaints and

accusations, they argued, only increased confusion and weakened unity when clear communication was most needed. During a crisis, the costs of the misaligned behaviour of a few people were ultimately borne collectively. Their defence underscores how state messaging, civic virtue, and collective responsibility are intertwined through the TCAPSW strategy (Xu & Gong 2024). Both Interviewees X and Y conceptualised obedience not as submission but as pragmatic and moral—an ethical choice that transforms discipline into virtue.

Interviewee Y further reflected that reposting calls for justice for Dr Li Wenliang, though emotionally understandable, ultimately added to public anxiety and obstructed constructive action. From this perspective, restraint and silence constituted moral responsibility.

“So when it came to news stories like this one [request to restore Dr Li Wenliang’s reputation] ... Even if I thought the article made a valid point, I still wouldn’t repost it. Because in a time like that, blindly spreading this kind of content doesn’t actually help with pandemic control—it could make things worse... Misunderstandings or misinterpretations from individual people involved in the execution can cause issues; that’s normal. But I don’t think it’s fair—or healthy—to completely deny or criticise the entire system just because of how one person executed something poorly. That only makes things more chaotic.” (Interviewee Y)

Interviewee H expanded this logic into a cultural critique of Western liberal assumptions. In their view, tolerance on Chinese social media is “already relatively high”: users may post freely so long as they avoid legal violations or avoid challenging the collective moral order. Intolerance, in this framing, does not originate solely with the state but with the social

expectation of upholding harmony and shared values. Interviewee H argued that those who feel “silenced” often import Western liberal discourses—such as individual rights, feminism, or democracy—into discussions that are structured around collectivist and nationalist logics. Such expressions are perceived as undermining unity, as culturally dissonant and emotionally disruptive, provoking a backlash not because it is censored by the authorities, but because it violates affective alignment within the community.

To illustrate this, Interviewee H recalled the controversy over the Gansu nurses who shaved their heads before supporting Wuhan. The news story was widely framed as a heroic sacrifice intended to celebrate the collective spirit, yet some critics reinterpreted it through a feminist lens as a form of patriarchal exploitation. For Interviewee H, this was a “misreading of cultural logic”: the act was meant to symbolise selflessness and solidarity, not gender oppression. Online condemnation, therefore, appeared to them as an attack on collective virtue. In this sense, the moral legitimacy of an argument on Chinese social media depends more on its cultural resonance with mainstream sentiment than on its factual accuracy. Citizens who internalised this logic perform what Wang and Tan (2023) call participatory censorship—voluntarily correcting or excluding views deemed incompatible with shared values online.

Interviewee H’s reflections illuminate a broader epistemic divide. The application of global liberal frameworks to Chinese contexts often clashes with Confucian and collectivist understandings of social order and virtue. Within this moral landscape, “tolerance” signifies the preservation of relational harmony and the respect for the shared feelings of the community, rather than the protection of adversarial speech, and, in turn, it reminds community members of their own role within the collective.

This echoes the “life-nurturing” (*yang sheng*) rationale central to Traditional Chinese Medicine and widely disseminated through public health education and everyday social media discourse (Sun 2015; Wang 2023). The *yang sheng* principle facilitates the internalisation of personal responsibility for wellbeing, encouraging citizens to view health—and by extension social harmony—as both a moral and social obligation. In this worldview, harmony within the body parallels harmony within society: the two are mutually constitutive. Rather than relying on “Western medicine” as an external, alternative cure, the pursuit of internal balance becomes the ultimate path toward both longevity and collective stability (Wang 2023).

Following this logic, harmony functions simultaneously as self-care and as moral cultivation. Social media users participate in this process through moral labour—self-regulating behaviours that correct or exclude perspectives deemed incompatible with collective sentiment. Such affective moderation sustains communal balance and exemplifies how Confucian and Foucauldian biopolitical rationalities converge in China’s digital moral order.

Yet Interviewee H’s account also suggests the possibility of gradual transformation within this conservative digital sphere. Confrontation, they implied, may be counterproductive in a digitally conservative environment where opposition quickly hardens into binaries of loyalty and betrayal. Instead, they advocated for contextual adaptation—translating unfamiliar ideas into culturally recognisable narratives to foster acceptance. Constructive engagement in Chinese digital publics, therefore, depends on understanding the cultural affordances and moral boundaries that structure discourse. Recognising these limits does not entail endorsing conformity; rather, it offers a pragmatic strategy for cultivating reflection within an affectively charged, morally ordered networked society.

In this light, the question “Is confrontation a detour?” can be reinterpreted as a methodological and ethical challenge. For many users these days, overt resistance risks moral condemnation, algorithmic invisibility, and social ostracism. However, subtle negotiation—embedding critique in familiar idioms of harmony, sacrifice, or collective care—may sustain dialogue without triggering defensive closure. The path to meaningful change, as in Interviewee H’s implication, lies not in refusing mainstream values but in expanding their moral vocabulary. By working within the emotional grammar of the network, citizens can open discursive spaces for reinterpretation and, perhaps, gradual evolution.

This thesis argues that despite being rooted in vastly different cultural and political contexts, social media engagement in China and in the West has begun to yield strikingly similar outcomes: increasingly polarised discourse, public shaming and “cancel culture”, and the rise of militant nationalism (e.g. President Xi’s “Chinese Dream” (*Zhong Guo Meng*) for the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation” (*zhong hua min zu wei da fu xing*) and President Trump’s “Make America Great Again”). These convergences reveal how social media has been systematically appropriated by ruling regimes, which use algorithmic infrastructures to filter, amplify, or erase certain voices according to ideological priorities.

While Western media often describe China’s regulation of speech as authoritarian, this study suggests that Western democracies, under the banner of “freedom” and “democracy”, have likewise engaged in subtle yet sophisticated forms of opinion control through the very same digital platforms. This is in line with Gerbaudo’s (2021) observation that in the post-pandemic era, a new “authoritarian statism” is emerging in Western societies, which emphasises the heavy reliance on the state’s role, or the return of a “big government”, in discipline and addressing social issues and crises. The illusion of a freer, more connected, and

more emotionally charged networked world has, paradoxically, facilitated the direct embedding of propaganda within everyday communication. Through algorithmic mediation, platforms can shape citizens' perceptions of social circumstances at the intimate level of personal interaction.

In doing so, social media opens new pathways for increasingly authoritarian forms of governance, allowing political power to transcend cultural differences and social norms and move toward a globalised mode of ideological convergence. By examining Chinese citizens' social media engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, this thesis offers a micro-level lens for understanding this homogenising tendency in digital public discourse. It shows how individuals, through everyday interactions, repeatedly reinforce these impressions, normalising control as participation.

Ultimately, this research invites a forward-looking question: as dramatised in the recent science fiction series *Pluribus*, in an era of enforced unity and "shared belief", does ideological uniformity truly serve as a remedy for social fragmentation—or does it conceal a deeper cost beneath the promise of solidarity?

Summary

This chapter shows that engagement on Weibo and WeChat during the pandemic enabled cooperation and expression, yet this empowerment remained highly conditional. Alongside tightening censorship, users increasingly faced pressures from peers: communication became "entertainmentlised", digital collective memories disappeared through content removal, and

tolerance for disagreement declined. As a result, users were pushed into closed tribal clusters, feeling disconnected, vulnerable, and exposed to growing polarisation.

This chapter also suggests that the patterns observed during China's pandemic response—particularly the integration of emotional mobilisation, moral alignment, algorithmic governance, and peer-driven enforcement—offer an important lens for anticipating future developments in Chinese social media, as well as for examining the growing propagandistic capacities of Western platforms as they undergo similar transformations.

Chapter Ten: Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted an unprecedented public health emergency that reshaped not only Chinese citizens' understanding of health, risk, and daily routines, but also their relationships with society as digital interactions increasingly replaced face-to-face communications. This crisis offers a critical lens through which to examine how ordinary citizens engage with Weibo and WeChat, in a study which focuses on how they navigated the uncertainties, pressures, and emotional turbulence of pandemic life in 2020 and 2021. Against the backdrop of the national call to “stay cohesive”, this thesis examines how digital interaction and connectivity on these platforms shaped public behaviour, social relations, and collective meaning-making during enforced physical separation. This concluding chapter synthesises the key findings in response to the research questions, outlines the theoretical and empirical contributions of the study, and identifies future directions for research by reflecting on the limitations of the project.

Key findings in response to the research questions

This thesis shows that Weibo and WeChat are not merely neutral communication tools, as Interviewee K and N believe. The two platforms inherently operate within complex infrastructural constraints shaped by commercial imperatives, algorithmic systems of visibility, and regulatory mechanisms aligned with the Chinese state's legal requirements. As a result, when Chinese citizens entered the augmented reality facilitated by these platforms, their interactions were already constrained by these structural and political forces. These forces grew stronger during the pandemic due to the government's Tell Chinese Anti-Pandemic Stories Well (TCAPSW) propaganda. Over time, users have become accustomed to

internalising state control and evading it through practices such as coded expression, strategic ambiguity, and selective disengagement, and they have normalised both the vanishing of their posts and the dominance of patriotic, one-sided discourse. Simultaneously, platform connectivity reinforces algorithmic filter bubbles and echo chambers, fragmenting users into smaller, potentially insular tribes and constraining communication between majority and minority groups. Understood together, these dynamics suggest that China's digitally mediated public sphere—rather than resembling a “global village” or a space of convergence—is increasingly characterised by ruptured, disconnected segments that shape and limit civic engagement.

Building on this understanding, Chapter Two examined individual agency during the pandemic by conceptualising users as ‘We Media’—active producers, interpreters, and circulators of information within both the digital public sphere of Weibo and the networked intimate spaces of WeChat. These two domains, where cultural, emotional, and relational forces intersect, were analysed through the system of concentric circles developed in this thesis. In this model, Weibo functions as the outer, peripheral ring of public exposure, where users interact with a broad, loosely connected audience; WeChat, by contrast, operates as the central, semi-public relational core in which intimacy, trust, and long-term interpersonal bonds are augmented.

Within this dual environment, individuals interpreted circulating discourse through personal and relational lenses, built trust, exercised critical thinking, verified health information, and responded to emotionally charged content through affective participation. The ability to occupy a liminal, both public- and private-facing, communicative position enabled information to flow inward—to be “narrowed down”, altered, and filtered—as it moved from

broader public discourse into the micro-level interactions that shaped everyday cooperation during the pandemic. This thesis demonstrates that such individual interactions across Weibo and WeChat were not only technologically facilitated but were also shaped by deeply rooted cultural logics and rituals. In particular, by Confucian values—centred on relationality, hierarchy, responsibility, and moral self-cultivation—which played a crucial role in structuring social norms of engagement and informing the connective actions that emerged during China’s pandemic response.

As Chapter Three notes, this study adopted Dahlgren and Hill’s (2023) five parameters of media engagement: *contexts*, *motivations*, *modalities*, *intensities*, and *consequences* to analyse the complexities of everyday digital practices during the pandemic. Through the combined use of digital ethnography, autoethnography, and in-depth interviews, the thesis incorporates my own firsthand experiences as a citizen living in China during the crisis, alongside testimonies from participants with diverse social backgrounds.

In Chapter Four, this thesis explores the regulated digital public sphere on Weibo. It argues that, although the platform enabled users to remain informed about the rapid developments of the virus, users needed to be constantly vigilant about the authenticity of posts, given the manipulation of visibility by platform data and algorithms. At the same time, affective content circulated widely on the platform, reinforcing and amplifying the national call to “stay cohesive”, and fostering an atmosphere oriented toward mutual encouragement and collective responsibility.

Yet this shared affective climate also carried the risk of exclusion. It implicitly demanded alignment with dominant cultural and political sentiments—particularly those tied to national

unity—thereby defining the boundaries of what could be acceptably expressed in a public space. Users who recognised themselves as holding minority or dissenting views often experienced a growing sense of disconnection. As a result, Weibo became a site not only of engagement but also of strategic retreat, with many participants choosing disengagement as a protective response to the narrowing space for alternative perspectives.

Chapter Five builds on Chapter Four with a deeper analysis of the patterns of disrupted engagement on Weibo. It shows how algorithmic mechanisms exacerbated the difficulties minority groups faced in speaking up, seeking support, or expressing dissent during the pandemic. Once the government’s call endorsement of “stay cohesive” became the dominant emotional and political framework for digital interaction, only posts that aligned with this discourse were algorithmically promoted. In contrast, dissenting views were deprioritised, criticised, or triggered intense backlash and public shaming. Such affective hostility—mobilised through mass criticism, cyberbullying, and moral condemnation—worked in tandem with state propaganda, reinforcing a binary distinction between “us” and “others”. As a result, Weibo became a pragmatic space for majority users to perform compliance, reproduce moral consensus, and build solidarity, while simultaneously internalising the Confucian ideal of “harmony” embedded within political discourse. Those positioned as “others”—framed as troublemakers, traitors, or “Westernisers”—were excluded from legitimate participation.

Chapters Six, Seven, and Eight turn to WeChat, examining its core communicative spaces—group chats, Moments, and public accounts. Chapter Six investigates group chats, a key but understudied modality of Chinese social media engagement that has received minimal attention in Western scholarship. In these private, digitally mediated spaces, intimate

interpersonal relationships—particularly those embedded in Confucian *guanxi* structures—were activated and strengthened. Trust intensified through kinship ties and long-standing friendships, enabling these micro-networks to function as the basic organisational units for coordinating pandemic life. It was also interesting to observe the rise of Neighbourhood groups. They created a mediated community square wherein residents could negotiate routines, request assistance, and uphold shared norms. Within these interactions, peer supervision and moral regulation emerged organically: group members monitored one another's behaviour, corrected misinformation, and enforced collective expectations, illustrating how Confucian relational ethics and digitally mediated connectivity co-produced new forms of grassroots governance during the crisis.

Chapter Seven moves to Moments where networked intimacy is visualised. It worked as a communal space for mutual friends to seek help, express concerns, and circulate emotional moments in a personalised way. Yet, the context collision led to a risk of people being cancelled from friendship circles. My research found that Moments was a semi-public sphere where mainstream opinion was amplified and enhanced by intimate relationships. While these interactions could potentially trigger an enthusiastic response to the discourse of “stay cohesive”, the fear of othering and confrontation in such closed relationships equally silenced individuals who held divergent ideas. Nevertheless, Moments also provided a relatively safe yet limited space for resistance. This reveals that citizens still retain some emotional and intellectual autonomy, even if only fleetingly.

Chapter Eight found public account articles acted as a conduit for education, a means to negotiate trust and truth, and to rebuild the influence of authorities. The affective public was also mobilised when rhetorical articles that embedded “positive energy” were shared in group

chats. The articles were also a tool for children to break through the Confucian hierarchical structure within family groups to correct parents' behaviour. Not all interviewees found the articles encouraging; rather, they expressed emotional fatigue from overexposure to others' sacrifices, which created a moral burden. Through this process, minority groups were able to connect with the networked counter-public. Although such online rallies were quickly taken down, their ephemeral efforts show the potential for the minority to challenge official legitimacy and redefine who "we" are.

Chapter Nine explores the consequences of engagement on Weibo and WeChat during the pandemic. This thesis rethinks the connectivity and interactions on those platforms and argues that the ability of users to be empowered on Chinese social media is always conditional. Users always face additional constraints. As discussed, Chinese social media users have to navigate, not only algorithmic logics, but censorship, by the government and themselves.

Overall, this thesis answers the overarching question: how did Weibo and WeChat shape Chinese citizens' digitally mediated engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic and what does this dynamic reveal about the evolution of civic engagement in a politically conservative and authoritarian context. This thesis argues that pandemic engagement on Weibo and WeChat was neither purely top-down nor purely grassroots. Instead, it emerged through collaborative dynamics between state actors, platform infrastructures, cultural norms, and interpersonal influence—a process that simultaneously enabled solidarity and constrained dissent. The findings reveal a mode of civic engagement that is affective rather than deliberative, relational rather than institutional, and momentary rather than sustained.

Significant contributions

Conceptual contribution

This thesis makes a significant conceptual contribution by articulating We Media, a term aligned with but distinct from the Western framing of influencers or citizen journalists. We Media emphasises the relational and affective nature of influence in Chinese social networks, where social norms were explicitly shaped by persistent political, cultural and moral values. It highlights how ordinary users—through emotional expression, moral persuasion, and everyday engagement—shaped others' perceptions during a crisis. This concept pivots influence away from metrics like visibility or follower count and toward relational authority, cultural resonance, and soft leadership.

Empirical Contribution

Through autoethnography, digital ethnography and interviews, the thesis provides an insider's account of Chinese digital life during the pandemic. Given the difficulty of accessing such contexts from outside China and, particularly, WeChat as a customised semi-public platform that is difficult to fully understand from outside China, and given that the presentation of Moments is different for each user, this thesis aims to bridge and illuminate this gap and preserve the moments that are no longer able to be accessed today due to censorship. This material constitutes a rare, detailed empirical record of crisis communication, rumour dynamics, online moral policing, and the lived experience of navigating Weibo and WeChat during unprecedented social restrictions. The empirical richness of the thesis extends scholarly understanding of Chinese digital media beyond official narratives or state-centric analyses.

Theoretical Contribution

By integrating Western theories of digital publics, such as the affective public, connective action, the networked public, with an analysis of Chinese cultural values, political structures, and moral frameworks, the thesis develops a hybrid theoretical approach that more accurately captures how digital engagement operates in China. It allows me, as a Chinese citizen who has received both an orthodox Chinese education in mainland China and a tertiary education in Australia, to position myself and my firsthand pandemic experience in this research project. This integration bridges the gap that Western models alone cannot explain by using the particularities of Chinese digital life and, as Chapter Nine states, offers a more globally relevant analytical framework that incorporates culture, emotion, and governance.

Analytical Contribution

The thesis advances an analytical argument that digital engagement during the pandemic was co-produced by nationalism, moral labour, and interpersonal intimacy. These dynamics do not merely coexist; they reinforce each other. Nationalist narratives shaped moral expectations; moral expectations shaped interpersonal relations; and interpersonal relations shaped the emotional climates of digital platforms. This integrated analysis deepens scholarly insight into how political and cultural forces shape everyday communication during crises. It also adds to scholarship by applying Western theorists, such as Foucault, Habermas, and Bourdieu, to a modern Chinese context involving crisis communication, social media and community identities.

Limitations

Forgetfulness and archive disruption

As Chapter Nine shows, the limitation of memory was, at times, a significant obstacle in this research. Even though this PhD project began in 2022, the interviews were only conducted in 2024, due to a prolonged human ethics review process. It was almost three years after the research-targeted pandemic period. Interviewees reported difficulty in having a detailed recall of 2020 and 2021. Thus, this thesis captures fragments of memories of events and incidents that left them with a strong emotional impression, rather than a continuous narrative of their pandemic life. Nevertheless, this research deployed news prompts and used WeChat Moments to assist recollection. The interviewees' use of the emotional anchor of an event actually helps this thesis to locate and trace what and how they made the interviewees think and feel in a specific way. In addition, some digital archives that served as references had already been deleted by the platforms. As a result, there were inevitably gaps in this research.

Limited sample size

Given the scope and timeframe of this thesis, I conducted 16 interviews to engage in deep, reflective, and meaningful conversations with 18 participants—in two cases, I interviewed two interviewees simultaneously. As discussed in Chapter Three, in-depth interviews only represent the experiences of a small group in a study of this scope, unlike quantitative methods. To overcome this limitation, this thesis focused on the diversity of participants' backgrounds. Yet, across age groups, participants under 30 and over 50 accounted for only one-third of the sample, potentially leading to the omission of specific age related behaviours. At the same time, participant recruitment relied, to some extent, on my personal WeChat

network and on limited promotional channels. Hence, the demographic backgrounds of the participants were limited by my connections; for example, all participants lived in urban communities, meaning the study did not explore pandemic experiences in rural areas.

Social desirability effect

As a researcher I am also cautious to acknowledge the ‘social desirability effect’, which commonly affects interviewees and can cause them to self-censor when they feel their answers might be controversial (Becker & Geer 1967), or to slant and modify their answers to present a ‘better’ version of themselves (Traver 2013). This study did not find this was a significant limitation, given the well-established rapport throughout the interviews. However, it was interesting to find that participants with a higher degree research background tended to give more “rational” responses to the questions. In other words, they appeared to suppress emotional reactions in their answers and tried to provide a more critical perspective. I hypothesise that this is due to the research training they received, which encouraged them to describe their experiences and relate them in a manner which appeared ‘objective’.

Future study suggestions

Framework application to other platforms

The findings of this thesis open several avenues for future research. As mentioned, Chinese citizens’ engagement on Weibo and WeChat elucidates a new pathway for understanding how political control can potentially be normalised in citizens’ daily digital participation and how political discourse can penetrate through to the individual level via sociocultural norms and become enforced by communal moral standards. Yet, this research foregrounds only social

network sites (SNS) and, due to the research scope, does not extend to other popular user-generated content (UGC) platforms. Thus, future studies could focus on digital social spaces, such as RedNote and Douyin, from a cultural perspective, to investigate how the production, rhetorical narratives and entertainment on these platforms are entangled with political discourse and continue to reshape users' perceptions of governance. Moreover, a more extensive study could also pay attention to the sub-cultural field of Chinese social media, such as bilibili.com, where “nijigen” (*er ci yuan*, opposite to life in the physical world) fans gather, to explore the impact of political sanitisation on so-called “harmful” anime and literature genres, such as material which engages with categories such as the supernatural, the erotic, the homosexual or the antisocial.

Comparative studies among domestic regions

A comparative study could also be conducted to examine generational differences in WeChat usage, given the limitations of the younger and older age groups in the sample, or to compare pandemic life in urban and rural communities.

Extended research in social media-related fields

It would be interesting to conduct further investigations into the rapid evolution of internet slang as a sub-cultural signifier, an intersection of entertainment, creativity and resistance, and a pathway to the development of grassroots communication and public discourses on Chinese social platforms, in relation to the increasingly tightened political context and the economic recession after the pandemic. During data collection, this thesis observed the pervasive use of internet slang in daily expressions, helping social media users to articulate

their opinions in a practical, yet subtle and light-hearted way. The growing adoption of internet slang in contemporary China warrants a hermeneutic study of its social meanings.

Moreover, the growing role of artificial intelligence (AI) in the already chaotic information ecosystem on social media deserves urgent attention. AI-generated content has been widely shared online and contributes to the spread of fake news when it is combined with algorithms (Ma et al. 2025). We need to know more about the challenges ordinary users face in terms of building trust and reclaiming truth when AI-generated fake news enters mediated relationships, and what We Media do about this?

Conclusion

In closing, this thesis demonstrates that digital life during the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be understood through technological or political analysis alone. It was lived, negotiated, and felt at the intersection of platforms, power, culture, and intimate relationships. Weibo and WeChat did not simply mediate communication; they structured how citizens interpreted risk, cared for one another, found consensus, contested meaning, and navigated the moral expectations of a society under pressure. Their affordances simultaneously expanded modes of expression while paradoxically curtailing them. Their connective capacities united communities while splintering publics; their emotional circuits inspired hope while exhausting users' capacity for dissent.

This research is grounded in my lived experience during the pandemic—residing with my family in a second-tier Chinese city, and navigating Weibo and WeChat alongside friends whose fears, frustrations, and hopes shaped my own. The arguments developed throughout this study, therefore, carry traces of my own reflections and emotions. This is not to diminish

the importance of scholarly objectivity; rather, it acknowledges that an insider's perspective offers essential vernacular insight that can speak back to Western-dominated academic framings and recast China not as an abstract political case, but as a lived social world. At the same time, by analysing the shared content, this thesis does not seek to compare China's pandemic outcomes with those of the West, despite the geopolitical confrontation that defined much of the global discourse. Beyond any political evaluation of "success" or "failure", the lives lost during the pandemic, regardless of nationality, deserve respect and remembrance. Their deaths are not metrics of national pride but human costs borne by families and communities.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that the central question is no longer whether social media empowers or constrains us as humans, but how citizens learn to navigate, negotiate, and reimagine agency within systems that shape their lives at every level. The pandemic made these dynamics impossible to ignore. In understanding them, we not only illuminate a singular historical moment—we also gain insight into the future of digital civic life in a world where connectivity is both our most incredible resource and our most profound vulnerability.

References

- Adler, PA & Adler, P 2008, 'Of Rhetoric and Representation', *Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 1, pp. 1–30.
- Adler, PA & Adler, P 2012, 'Keynote Address', *Qualitative Sociology Review*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 10–32.
- Adler, PS & Kwon, S-W 2002, 'Social Capital: Prospects for a New Concept', *The Academy of Management Review*, vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 17–40.
- Ahmed, S 2014, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2nd edn), Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
- Ahy, M, 2016, 'Networked Communication and the Arab Spring: Linking broadcast and Social media', *New Media & Society*, vol.18, no.1, pp. 99-116.
- Allen, D, Karanasios, S & Slavova, M 2011, 'Working with activity theory: Context, technology, and information behavior', *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, vol. 62, no. 4, pp. 776–788.
- Al-Tabbaa, O & Ankrah, S 2016, 'Social capital to facilitate “engineered” university–industry collaboration for technology transfer: A dynamic perspective', *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*, vol. 104, pp. 1–15.
- Anderson, CB 2016, 'The Future of Memory: A deluge of digital data threatens to destroy our collective identity', *Science*, vol. 351, no. 6277, pp. 1033–1033.
- Armitage, R & Hawke, J 2020, 'What is herd immunity and could it slow the spread of coronavirus COVID-19 around the world?', *ABC News*, 19 March, viewed 26 December 2022, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-19/what-is-herd-immunity-and-could-it-stop-coronavirus/12059968>>.
- Asen, R 2000, 'Seeking the “counter” in counterpublics', *Communication Theory*, vol.10, no.4, pp. 424-446.

- Bamman, D, O'Connor, B & Smith, NA 2012, 'Censorship and Deletion Practices in Chinese Social Media', *First Monday*, March, vol.17, no.3-5, viewed 6 June 2019, <<https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/rt/printerFriendly/3943/3169>>.
- Bandura, A 1986, *Social Foundations of Thought and Actions: A Social Cognitive Theory*, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs.
- Bandura, A 2002, 'Social cognitive theory of mass communication', in J Bryant & D Zillman (eds), *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, 2nd edn., NJ: Erlbaum, Hillsdale.
- Banet-Weiser, S 2012, *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*, New York: New York University Press.
- Baptista, E, Hu, K & and Oladipo, D 2025, 'Over half a million 'TikTok refugees' flock to China's RedNote', *Reuters*, 15 January, viewed 18 November 2025, <<https://www.reuters.com/technology/over-half-million-tiktok-refugees-flock-chinas-rednote-2025-01-14/>>.
- Bauman, Z 2001, *The Individualized Society*, Polity Press, Malden, MA.
- Bauman, Z 2003, *Liquid Love: On the frailty of human bonds*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Baym, NK 2010, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- BBC 2020a, 'COVID-19: What Drove the Anti-Lockdown Protest Wave in the U.S., Onstage and Behind the Scenes', *BBC*, 29 April, viewed 18 November 2025, <<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/world-52476669>>.
- BBC 2020b, 'Coronavirus: Outcry after Trump suggests injecting disinfectant as treatment', *BBC*, 24 April, viewed 10 January 2023, <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52407177>>.
- BBC 2020c, 'The Censorship War Triggered by "Fa Shao Ren": Chinese citizens counter back with creativity', *BBC*, 11 March, viewed 10 November 2025, <<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-51831652>>.

- BBC 2021, 'Fandom Economy: Time, money and terminology', *BBC*, 8 September, viewed 8 October 2025, <<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-58475660>>.
- BBC 2022a, 'The Removal of Voices of April: Chinese government reassert the zero-COVID policy', *BBC*, 24 April, viewed 14 November 2025, <<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-61207922>>.
- BBC 2022b, 'A Lady with A Mental Health Issue Fell From A Building in Inner Mongolia: Questioning the "over-control" of the quarantine policies', *BBC*, 7 November, viewed 10 November 2025, <<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/63541219>>.
- BBC 2023, 'A Year After: What happened to the young protesters of the Blank Paper Movement', *BBC*, 26 November, viewed 14 November 2025, <<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-67529828>>.
- Beck, U & Beck-Gernsheim, E 1995, *The Normal Chaos of Love*, Polity Press, Cambridge, UK.
- Becker, H & Geer, B 1967, 'Participant Observation and Interviewing: A Comparison', in Manis, J & Meltzer, B, (eds), *Symbolic Interaction: A Reader*, Allyn & Bacon, Boston.
- Bennett, LW, 2012, 'The personalization of politics: Political identity, social media and changing patterns of participation', *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol.644, pp. 20-39.
- Bennett, LW, Corner, J & Pels, D 2003, 'Lifestyle Politics and Citizen-Consumers: Identity, Communication and Political Action in Late Modern Society', in *Media and the Restyling of Politics*, SAGE Publications, Limited, United Kingdom, pp. 137–150.
- Bennett, LW & Segerberg, A 2013, *The Logic of Connective Action*, Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Berry, C, Kim, S & Spigel, L 2010, *Electronic Elsewheres: Media technology and the experience of social space*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Bian, Y, 2019, *Guanxi: How China works*, Polity, Cambridge.

- Bicker, L 2024, 'Trump and Xi's 'Love' Has Turned Sour — Is There a Way Back?', *BBC*, 22 November, viewed 3 November 2025, <
<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/articles/cr4l7xxl276o/simp>>.
- Blumer, H 1969, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Boellstorff, T, Nardi, B, Pearce, C, & Taylor, TL 2012, *Ethnography and virtual worlds: a handbook of method*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Bodstein, A, Lima, Vva de & Barros, Ama de 2014, 'The vulnerability of the elderly in disasters: the need for an effective resilience policy', *Ambiente & Sociedade*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 157–174.
- Bolter, JD & Grusin, RA 2000, *Remediation: understanding new media*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Boulding, KE 1959, 'National Images and International Systems', *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 3, No. 2, June, pp. 120-31.
- Bourdieu, P 1990, *The logic of practice*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bowman, S & Willis, C 2003, 'Introduction to participatory journalism', in JD, Lasica (eds.), *We Media: How audiences are shaping the future of news and information*, The Media Centre at The American Press Institute.
- boyd, d 2002, 'Faceted ID/entity: Managing representation in a digital world', Master's thesis, Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- boyd, d, 2008, 'Why youth heart social network sites: The role of networked publics in teenage social life', in D, Buckingham (eds.), *Youth, identity, and digital media*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- boyd, d 2010, 'Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications', in Z, Papacharissi (eds.), *Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, Routledge.

- boyd, d & Crawford, K 2012, 'CRITICAL QUESTIONS FOR BIG DATA: Provocations for a cultural, technological, and scholarly phenomenon', *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 15, no. 5, pp. 662–679.
- boyd, d & Ellison, NB 2007, 'Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship', *Journal of Computer-mediated Communication*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 210–230.
- Brandtzæg, PB, Lüders, M & Skjetne, JH 2010, 'Too many Facebook "friends"? Content sharing and sociability versus the need for privacy in social network sites', *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, vol. 26, no. 11-12, pp. 1006–1030.
- Bratton, BH 2015, *The Stack: On software and sovereignty*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Braun, V & Clarke, V 2021, 'One Size Fits All? What Counts as Quality Practice in (Reflexive) Thematic Analysis?', *Qualitative research in psychology*, vol. 18, no. 3, pp. 328–352.
- Broadbent, S 2011, *L'intimite' au Travail*, Fyp Editions, Paris.
- Bruns, A 2019, 'It's not the technology, stupid: How the 'echo chamber' and 'filter bubble' metaphors have failed us', paper presented at the *IAMCR 2019 Conference*, 7-11 July, Madrid, Spain.
- Bucher, T 2012, 'Want to be on the top? Algorithmic power and the threat of invisibility on Facebook', *New Media & Society*, vol. 14, no. 7, pp. 1164–1180.
- Bucher, T. 2013, 'The Friendship Assemblage: Investigating Programmed Sociality on Facebook', *Television & New Media*, vol. 14, no. 6, pp. 479–493.
- Burgess, J, Mitchell, P & Münch, FV 2019, 'Social Media Rituals: The Uses of Celebrity Death in Digital Culture', in Z Papacharissi (ed), *A Networked Self and Birth, Life, Death*, Routledge, United Kingdom, pp. 224–239.

- Cadell, C 2022, ‘It seemed like fun, I decided to join in’: Inside the biggest human surveillance experiment on the planet’, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 September, viewed 5 September 2022, <<https://www.smh.com.au/world/asia/it-seemed-like-fun-i-decided-to-join-in-inside-the-biggest-human-surveillance-experiment-on-the-planet-20220827-p5bd8g.html>>.
- Cambridge Dictionary 2025, ‘defeat’, *Cambridge Dictionary*, viewed 10 August 2025, <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/defeat>>.
- Carr, N 2020, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains*, 2nd edn., W.W. Norton & Company, New York.
- Castells, M 2012, *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age*, MA: Polity Press, Malden.
- CCTV News 2020a, ‘Anti-Lockdown Protests Erupt Across Australia as Demonstrators Chant ‘COVID-19 Is a Hoax’’, *CCTV News*, 24 October, viewed 18 November 2025, <<https://m.news.cctv.com/2020/10/24/ARTI7KvEL8HxAXebWaLlj9JJ201024.shtml>>.
- CCTV News 2020b, ‘Several Cell Towers Vandalised: How Did the ‘5G Causes COVID-19’ Rumour Begin?’, *CCTV News*, 13 April, viewed 18 November 2025, <<https://news.cctv.com/2020/04/13/ARTI6UDucTh8kxfzfwl0uoAZ200413.shtml>>.
- Chambers, D 2013, *Social Media and Personal Relationships: Online Intimacies and Networked Friendship*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, London.
- Chambers, D 2017, ‘Networked Intimacy: Algorithmic friendship and scalable sociality’, *European Journal of Communication (London)*, vol. 32, no. 1, pp. 26–36.
- Chan, LS 2018, ‘Ambivalence in Networked Intimacy: Observations from gay men using mobile dating apps’, *New Media & Society*, vol. 20, no. 7, pp. 2566–2581.
- Chao, RK 1994, ‘Beyond Parental Control and Authoritarian Parenting Style: Understanding Chinese parenting through the cultural notion of training’, *Child Development*, vol. 65, no. 4, pp. 1111–1119.

Chen, TC 2022, *The Making of a Neo-Propaganda State: China's Social Media under Xi Jinping*, Brill, Leiden.

Chiao, C 1982, 'Guanxi: A Preliminary Conceptualization', in K Yang and C Wen (eds), *The Sinicization of Social and Behavioral Science Research in China*, Taipei: Academia Sinica.

China Digital Time 2020, *Fa Shao Zi De Ren*, viewed 10 November 2025, <
<https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/637830.html> >.

China Digital Time 2024, *Voices of April*, viewed 10 November 2025, <
<https://chinadigitaltimes.net/space/四月之声> >.

Clark, DM 2020, 'DRAG THEM: A brief etymology of so-called "cancel culture"', *Communication and the Public*, vol. 5, no. 3–4, pp. 88–92.

Climo, JJ & Cattell, MG (eds.) 2002, *Social Memory and History: Anthropological Perspectives*, Rowman Altamira.

Coleman, J 1988, 'Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol.94, pp. 95-120.

Couldry, N 2012, *Media, Society, World: Social theory and digital media practice*, Cambridge: Polity.

Couldry, N & Hepp, A 2017, *The Mediated Construction of Reality: Society, culture, mediatization*, Polity, Cambridge, England.

Creemers, R 2017, 'Internet User Public Account Information Service Management Regulations', *Digital China*, Stanford University, viewed 30 August 2025, <
<https://digichina.stanford.edu/work/internet-user-public-account-information-service-management-regulations/>>.

Cunningham, S & Craig, D 2017, 'Being 'really real' on YouTube: authenticity, community and brand culture in social media entertainment', *Media International Australia*, vol. 164, no. 1, pp. 71–81.

- Cyberspace Administration of China 2020, *The start of Project 'Qing Lang' in 2020*, 22 May, CAC, China, viewed 28 February 2024, < https://www.cac.gov.cn/2020-05/22/c_1591689448656108.htm>.
- Dahlberg, L 2001, 'The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring The Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere', *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 4, no. 4, pp. 615–633.
- Dahlgren, P 2005, 'The Internet, Public Sphere, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation', *Political Communication*, vol.22, no.2, pp. 147-62.
- Dahlgren, P 2006, 'Doing citizenship: The cultural origins of civic agency in the public sphere', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 9, no. 3, pp. 267–286.
- Dahlgren, P 2009, *Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, communication, and democracy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Dahlgren, P 2013, *The Political Web: Participation, Media, and Alternative Democracy*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Dahlgren, P 2018, 'Media, Knowledge and Trust: The Deepening Epistemic Crisis of Democracy', *Javnost*, vol. 25, no. 1–2, pp. 20–27.
- Dahlgren, P & Hill, A 2020, 'Parameters of Media Engagement', *Media Theory*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 1-32.
- Dahlgren, P & Hill, A 2023, *Media Engagement: Key ideas in media and cultural studies*, Routledge, Oxon.
- Davis, JL & Jurgenson, N 2014, 'Context collapse: theorizing context collusions and collisions', *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 17, no. 4, pp. 476-485.
- de Mooij, M & Hofstede, G 2015, 'The Hofstede model: Application to global branding and advertising strategy and research', *International Journal of Advertising*, vol. 29, no. 1, pp. 85-110.

- Deleuze, G & Guattari, H 2004, *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*, Massumi B (trans.), London: Continuum.
- Deutsche Welle 2022, 'China's COVID-19 Response Amid One-Size-Fits-All and Excessive Lockdown Measures', *Deutsche Welle*, 8 November, viewed 3 August, <<https://www.dw.com/zh/一刀切和层层加码下的中国防疫/a-63678043>>.
- Du, J & Zhou, H 2022, 'Beijing finds infections, looks to prevent more', *China Daily*, 17 August, viewed 7 January 2023, <<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202208/17/WS62fcca47a310fd2b29e72c6e.html>>.
- Duffy, BE & Hund, E 2015, "'Having it All" on Social Media: Entrepreneurial Femininity and Self-Branding Among Fashion Bloggers', *Social Media + Society*, vol. 1, no. 2.
- Duffy, BE & Wissinger, E 2017, 'Mythologies of Creative Work in the Social Media Age: Fun, Free, and "Just Being Me"', *International Journal of Communication*, vol.11, pp. 4652-71.
- Duvenhage, P 2005, 'Habermas, the public sphere and beyond', *Communicatio*, vol.31, no.1, pp. 1-12.
- Ellison, NB, Steinfield, C & Lampe, C 2007, 'The benefits of Facebook "friends:" Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 1143–1168.
- Ellison, NB, Steinfield, C & Lampe, C 2011, 'Connection strategies: Social capital implications of Facebook-enabled communication practices', *New Media & Society*, vol. 13, no. 6, pp. 873–892.
- Etter, M & Albu, OB 2021, 'Activists in the dark: Social media algorithms and collective action in two social movement organizations', *Organization*, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 68–91.
- Fang, LY 2015, *Research on the influence of audience trust on We Media audiences' purchase intention*, Southwest Jiaotong University.
- Fang, KC 2022, 'Praise from the International Community: How China Uses Foreign Experts to Legitimize Authoritarian Rule', *The China Journal*, vol. 87, no. 1, pp. 72–91.

- Fang, KC 2024, 'Wangbao (Cyberbullying) and Jubao (Reporting): Strategic Ambiguity in Collaborative State-Society Influence Operations in China' 2024, *Journal of Online Trust & Safety*, vol. 2, no. 3.
- Feder, EK 2014, 'Power/knowledge', in D. Taylor (eds), *Michel Foucault: Key concepts*, Routledge, New York.
- Fei, X 1992, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Fiedler, M & Tagespiegel, D 2020, 'Despite increased solidarity in the pandemic, authoritarianism threatens', *EURACTIV*, 20 April, viewed 8 October 2025, <<https://www.euractiv.com/news/despite-increased-solidarity-in-the-pandemic-authoritarianism-threatens/>>.
- Flaxman, S, Goel, S & Rao, JM 2016, 'Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, vol. 80, no. S1, pp. 298–320.
- Flew, T 2020, 'Trust and the future sustainability of news: The collapse of traditional newsrooms and the rise of subscriber-funded news media', *SSRN*, 18 June, viewed 4 July, <<https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3625428>>.
- Flew, T 2021, *Regulating platforms*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Foucault, M 1979, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan (trans.), New York: Vintage.
- Foucault, M 1990, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, R. Hurley (trans.), New York: Vintage.
- Franck, G 2019, 'The economy of attention', *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 55, no. 1, pp. 8-19.
- Fraser, N 1992, 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', in C. Calhoun (eds.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, MA: The MIT Press, Cambridge.

- Friedman, TL 2014, 'The square people, part 1', *The New York Times*, 13 May, viewed 23 July 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/14/opinion/friedman-the-square-people-part-1.html?_r=0>.
- Fuchs, C 2017, *Social Media: a critical introduction*, SAGE.
- Fuller, D & Sedo, DR 2023, *Reading Bestsellers: Recommendation Culture and the Multimodal Reader*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Galletta, A 2012, *Mastering the Semi-structured Interview and Beyond: From Research Design to Analysis and Publication*, New York University Press, New York.
- Gamson, W & Modigliani, A 1989, 'Media discourse and public opinion: A constructionist approach', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 95, pp. 1-37.
- Gamson, W & Wolfsfeld, G 1993, 'Movements and media as interacting systems', *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 528, pp. 114-25.
- Gan, C, Lee, FLF & Li, Y 2017, 'Social media use, political affect, and participation among university students in urban China', *Telematics and Informatics*, vol. 34, no. 7, pp. 936–947.
- Garde-Hansen, J, & Gorton, K 2013, *Emotion Online: Theorizing Affect on the Internet*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, London.
- Gerbaudo, P 2012, *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*, PlutoPress, London.
- Gerbaudo, P 2021, *The Great Recoil : Politics after Populism and Pandemic*, Verso, London.
- Geis, JP & Holt, B 2009, 'Harmonious Society: Rise of the New China', *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 75–94.
- Gerlitz, C & Helmond, A 2013, 'The Like Economy: Social buttons and the data-intensive web', *New Media & Society*, vol. 15, no. 8, pp. 1348–1365.
- Gershon, I 2010, *The breakup 2.0: Disconnecting over new media*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y.

- Gibson, M, Gutman, G, Hirst, S, Fitzgerald, K, Fisher, R & Roush, R 2013, 'Expanding the Technology Safety Envelope for Older Adults to Include Disaster Resilience', in A Sixsmith & G Gutman (eds), *Technologies for Active Aging*, Springer US, Boston, MA, pp. 69–93.
- Giddens, A 1992, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, love, and eroticism in modern societies*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, Calif.
- Gillespie, T 2014, *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality and Society*, The MIT Press.
- Gilley, B 2009, *The Right to Rule: How States Win and Lose Legitimacy*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gillmor, D 2004, *We the Media: Grassroots Journalism by the People, for the People*, O'Reilly.
- Gitlin, T 1980, *The whole world is watching: Mass media in the making and unmaking of the New Left*, CA: University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Givan, R, Roberts, K & Soule, S 2010, 'Introduction', in R. Givan, K. Roberts, & S. Soule (eds.), *The Diffusion of Social Movements: Actors, Mechanisms, and Political Effects*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gladwell, M 2010, 'Small Change: Why the revolution will not be tweeted', *The New Yorker*, 4 October, viewed 1 November 2017, <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/10/04/small-change-malcolm-gladwell>>.
- Goffman, E 1959, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Anchor Books for Doubleday, New York.
- Goffman, E 1974, *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Griffiths, J 2020, 'Trump has repeatedly blamed China for a virus that now threatens his health. This will make Beijing nervous', *CNN*, 3 October, viewed 13 August 2025, <<https://edition.cnn.com/2020/10/02/asia/trump-china-coronavirus-intl-hnk>>.

- Groen, JA & Polivka, AE 2010, 'Going Home After Hurricane Katrina: Determinants of return migration and changes in affected areas', *Demography*, vol. 47, no. 4, pp. 821–844.
- Guo, SY, Ye, YC, Deng, SX & Wang, YY 2020, 'Special Investigation: The "Missing" Masks and the 'Black Hole' within the Red Cross System', *Yi Cai News*, 2 February, viewed 9 December 2025, < <https://www.yicai.com/news/100485738.html>>.
- Habermas, J 1989, 'Social Structures of the Public Sphere', in T Burger & F Lawrence (eds.), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, The MIT Press, Cambridge.
- Halbwachs, M & Coser, LA 1992, *On Collective Memory*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Hallinan, B, Kim, B, Mizoroki, S, Scharlach, R, Trillò, T, Thelwall, M, Segev, E & Shifman, L 2021, 'The value(s) of social media rituals: a cross-cultural analysis of New Year's resolutions', *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 26, no. 4, pp. 764–785.
- Halvorsen, S 2015, 'Taking Space: moments of rupture and everyday life in Occupy London', *Antipode*, vol. 47, no. 2, pp. 401-17.
- Hampton, KN, Lee, CJ & Her, EJ 2011, 'How new media affords network diversity: Direct and mediated access to social capital through participation in local social settings', *New Media & Society*, vol. 13, no.7, pp. 1031–1049.
- Hardon, A, Hodgkin, C & Fresle, D 2004, 'How to Investigate the Use of Medicines by Consumers', *World Health Organization and University of Amsterdam*, viewed, <<http://apps.who.int/medicinedocs/en/d/Js6169e/>>.
- Herman, E & Chomsky, N 2002, *Manufacturing consent: the political economy of mass media*, New York: Pantheon Books.
- Highfield, T 2016, *Social Media and Everyday Politics*, Polity, Malden.
- Hill, A 2018, *Media Experiences: Engaging with Drama and Reality Entertainment*, Routledge, London.

- Hoffman, M 2014, 'Disciplinary Power', in D. Taylor (ed), *Michel Foucault: Key concepts*, Routledge, New York.
- Hofstede, G 1980, *Culture's Consequences: International differences in work-related values*, Beverley Hills, CA: Sage.
- Hofstede, G 2001, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hongisto, I, Pape, T & Thain, A 2017, 'Introduction: The ring of the true in contemporary media', *NECSUS*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 61–75.
- Hsu, CL, Liu, CC & Lee, YD 2010, 'Effect of Commitment and Trust Towards Micro-Blogs on Consumer Behavioral Intention: A Relationship Marketing Perspective', *International Journal of Electronic Business Management*, vol. 8, no. 4, p. 292.
- Hu, Q 2018, *Augmented Revolution: The Role of Social Media in the Arab Spring and the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement*, Master of Research thesis, Macquarie University, Sydney.
- Hu, T, Hu, Q & Zou, C forthcoming, 'Transcending Borders: The Digital Queer Spaces of Transcultural Fandom in Boys' Love Narratives', in T, Hu and F, Wu (ed.), *Transcultural Media Fandom in Asia Pacific*, Bloomsbury in contract.
- Hui, YF 2017, 'The Umbrella Movement: Ethnographic explorations of communal re-spatialization', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 146-61.
- Hwang, K 1987, 'Face and Favor: The Chinese Power Game', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 92, no. 4, pp. 944–74.
- Ibarra, H & Obodaru, O 2016, 'Betwixt and between identities: Liminal experience in contemporary careers', *Research in Organizational Behavior*, vol. 36, pp. 47-64.
- iResearch & Sina 2020, *Research Report on the Social Value of Chinese Social Media in the Context of the Pandemic*, iResearch, viewed 17 January 2024, <<https://www.vicsdf.com/doc/3ea9113fa911ba39>>.

- Jackson, J 2014, *Introducing Language and Intercultural Communication*, Routledge, New York.
- Jackson, SJ & Foucault Welles, B 2015, 'Hijacking #myNYPD: Social Media Dissent and Networked Counterpublics: Hijacking #myNYPD', *Journal of Communication*, vol. 65, no. 6, pp. 932–952.
- Jackson, SJ & Foucault Welles, B 2016, 'Ferguson is everywhere: initiators in emerging counterpublic networks', *Information, Communication & Society*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 397–418.
- Janssen, D & Kies, R 2005, 'Online Forums and Deliberative Democracy', *Acta Politica*, vol. 40, no. 3, pp. 317–335.
- Jenkins, H 2006a, *Convergence Culture*, New York University Press, New York.
- Jenkins, H 2006b, *Fans, bloggers, and gamers exploring participatory culture*, New York University Press, New York.
- Jenkins, H 2009, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture Media Education for the 21st Century*, The MIT Press, Cambridge.
- Jorgensen, DL 2020, *Principles, Approaches and Issues in Participant Observation*, Routledge, Abingdon.
- Joshua: Teenager vs. Superpower* 2017, Netflix, viewed 15 June 2018, <<https://www.netflix.com/watch/80169348?tctx=0%2C0%2C16f11284-4c73-4979-92f9-c87b3b554443-13323682%2C%2C>>.
- Jurgenson, N 2012, 'When Atoms Meet Bits: Social Media, the Mobile Web and Augmented Revolution', *Future Internet*, vol. 4, pp. 83-91.
- Kallio, H, Pietila, AM, Johnson, M & Kangasniemi, M 2016, 'Systematic methodological review: developing a framework for a qualitative semi-structured interview guide', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, vol. 72, no. 12, pp. 2954–2965.

- Karatzogianni, A & Kuntsman, A 2012, *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect and Technological Change*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, London.
- Kaye, DBV, Zeng, J & Wikström, P 2023, *TikTok: creativity and culture in short video*, Polity, Cambridge, UK.
- Kelley, ML & Tseng, H-M 1992, 'Cultural Differences in Child Rearing: A Comparison of Immigrant Chinese and Caucasian American Mothers', *Journal of Cross-cultural Psychology*, vol. 23, no. 4, pp. 444–455.
- King, A 1985, 'The Individual and Group in Confucianism', in D Munro (ed.), *Individualism and Holism: Studies in Confucian and Taoist Values*, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
- King, A 2018, *China's Great Transformation: Selected Essays on Confucianism, modernization, and democracy*, The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, Hong Kong.
- Koskela, H 2004, 'Webcams, TV shows and mobile phones: Empowering exhibitionism', *Surveillance & Society*, vol. 2, no. 2–3, pp. 199–215.
- Lakoff, G & Johnson, M 1980, *Metaphors We Live By*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Laurier, E & Philo, C 2006, 'Cold shoulders and napkins handed: gestures of responsibility', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, June, vol.31, no.2, pp. 193-207.
- Lee, K 2017, 'Looking back at the candlelight protest of 2008, South Korea: Reflection on its multiple implications and lessons', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 193-208.
- Lee, FLF & Chan, JM 2015, 'Digital media activities and mode of participation in a protest campaign: The case of Umbrella Movement', *Chinese Journal of Communication*, vol.8, no.4, pp. 393-411.
- Lee, FLF, Chen, H & Chan, JM 2017, 'Social media use and university students' participation in a large-scale protest campaign: The case of Hong Kong's Umbrella Movement', *Telematics and Informatics*, vol. 34, pp. 457-69.

- Lee, SNP, So, YKC & Leung, L 2015, 'Social media and Umbrella Movement: insurgent public sphere in formation', *Chinese Journal of Communication*, vol.8, no.5, pp. 356-75.
- Lee, YL & Ting, KW 2015, 'Media and information praxis of young activists in the Umbrella Movement', *Chinese Journal of Communication*, vol.8, no.4, pp. 376-92.
- Lee, J & Umback J 2026, 'The viral turn: rethinking virality in the creator economy on TikTok', *Continuum*, vol. 40, no. 2, pp. 319-44.
- Li, J 2013, 'Xi Jinping Stresses the Profound Significance of Inspiring Positive Social Energy', *News of Communist Party of China*, 11 March, viewed 18 August 2025, < <https://cpc.people.com.cn/pinglun/n/2013/0311/c241220-20746904.html>>.
- Li, F & Du, TC 2011, 'Who is talking? An ontology-based opinion leader identification framework for word-of-mouth marketing in online social blogs', *Decision Support Systems*, vol. 51, no. 1, pp. 190–197.
- Li, J, Zou, S & Yang, H 2019, 'How Does "Storytelling" Influence Consumer Trust in We Media Advertorials? An Investigation in China', *Journal of Global Marketing*, vol. 32, no. 5, pp. 319–334.
- Lim, J 2017, 'Engendering civil resistance: Social media and mob tactics in Malaysia', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol.20, no.2, pp. 209-27.
- Lin, Z 2017, 'Contextualized Transmedia Mobilization: Media Practice and Mobilizing Structures in the Umbrella Movement', *International Journal of Communication*, vol.11, pp. 48-71.
- Liu, J 2021, 'The WeChat Night with Zhang Xiaolong', *YiMagazine*, 19 January, viewed 10 November 2025, < <https://www.yicai.com/news/100920500.html>>.
- Liu, S-D & Shi, W 2024, *Affective Spaces: The Cultural Politics of Emotion in China*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
- Lizza, R 2020, 'Americans tune in to 'cancel culture'—and don't like what they see', *Politico*, 22 July, viewed 23 August 2025, < <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/07/22/americans-cancel-culture-377412>>.

Loader, B & Mercea, D 2011, 'Networking Democracy?', *Information, Communication & Society*, vol.14, no.6, pp. 757-69.

Luo, Y 2025, 'Baidu responded to the doxing issue, exposing illegal database as a grey area industry', *Sina Finance*, 20 March, viewed 7 June 2025, <
<https://finance.sina.com.cn/wm/2025-03-20/doc-ineqihxm7633034.shtml>>.

Ma, Z 2021, 'Those Excessively Layered Pandemic Control Policies Should Be Washed Away', *Xinhua News*, 31 January, viewed 3 August 2025,
<http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2021-01/31/c_1127047284.htm>.

Ma, R, Wang, X & Yang, G-R 2025, 'Fighting fake news in the age of generative AI: Strategic insights from multi-stakeholder interactions', *Technological Forecasting & Social Change*, vol. 216.

Machin, D 2018, 'The hybrid professional: an examination of how educational leaders relate to, with and through managerialism', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 518-534.

MacKee, A 2005, *The public sphere: An introduction*, Cambridge University Press.

MacKinnon, R 2012, *Consent of the Networked: The Worldwide Struggle for Internet Freedom*, Basic Books, New York, US.

Marwick, AE 2013, 'Online Identity', in J, Hartley, J, Burgess & A, Bruns (eds), *A Companion to New Media Dynamics*, Wiley, Chicester.

Marwick, AE 2015, 'Instafame: Luxury selfies in the attention economy', *Public Culture*, vol.27, no.175, pp. 137-60.

Marwick, AE & boyd, d 2010, 'I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience', *New Media & Society*, vol. 13, no.1, pp. 114–133.

Marwick, AE & boyd, d 2011, 'To see and Be Seen: Celebrity Practice on Twitter', *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 139–158.

- Massumi, B 2002, *Parables for the virtual: Movement, affect, sensation*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Matsuda, M 2005 'Mobile Communication and Selective Sociality', in Ito, M, Okabe, D, and Matsuda, M (eds.), *Personal, Portable, Pedestrian: Mobile Phones in Japanese Life*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, pp. 123–142.
- Matthes, J, Knoll, J & von Sikorski, C 2018, 'The "Spiral of Silence" Revisited: A Meta-Analysis on the Relationship Between Perceptions of Opinion Support and Political Opinion Expression', *Communication Research*, vol. 45, no. 1, pp. 3–33.
- McAdam, D & Paulsen, D 1993, 'Specifying the Relationship between Social Ties and Activism', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol.99, no.3, pp. 640-67.
- McLaughlin, C & Vitak, J 2012, 'Norm evolution and violation on Facebook', *New Media & Society*, vol. 14, no. 2, pp. 299–315.
- McLuhan, M 1964, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man*, The MIT Press.
- Mendes, K, Ringrose, J & Keller, J 2018, '#MeToo and the promise and pitfalls of challenging rape culture through digital feminist activism', *The European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 236–246.
- Meyerhoff, M 2006, *Introducing Sociolinguistics*, Routledge, Abingdon.
- Miller, D, Rabho, LA, Awondo, P, de Vries, M, Duque, M, Garvey, P, Haapio-Kirk, L, Hawkins, C, Otaegui, A, Walton, S & Wang, X 2021, *The Global Smartphone: Beyond a youth technology*, UCL Press, London, England.
- Miller, D, Costa, E, Haynes, N, McDonald, T, Nicolescu, R, Sinanan, J, Spyer, J, Venkatraman, S & Wang, X 2016, *How the World Changed Social Media*, UCL Press, London.
- Morozov, E 2009, 'The brave new world of slacktivism', *Foreign Policy*, 19 May, viewed 24 May 2018, <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2009/05/19/the-brave-new-world-of-slacktivism/>>.

- Morozov, E 2011, *The Net Delusion: how not to liberate the world*, London: Allen Lane.
- Morrow, E & Scorgie-Porter, L 2017, *An Analysis of Robert D. Putnam's Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community*, Routledge, London.
- Nahapiet, J & Ghoshal, S 1998, 'Social Capital, Intellectual Capital, and the Organizational Advantage', *Academy of Management Review*, vol.23, no.2, pp. 242-66.
- Navas, E 2012, *Remix Theory: The Aesthetics of Sampling*, Ambra.
- Negt, O & Kluge, A 1993, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an analysis of the bourgeois and proletarian public sphere*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Nekmat, E 2012, 'Message expression effects in online social communication', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol.56, no.2, pp. 203-24.
- Ng, E 2020, 'No Grand Pronouncements Here...: Reflections on Cancel Culture and Digital Media Participation', *Television & New Media*, vol. 21, no. 6, pp. 621–627.
- Nicholls, S, Russell, A & Selvaratnam, N 2020, 'What is the truth about 5G? Four Corners spoke to leading experts and anti-5G activists to find out', *ABC News*, 3 August, viewed 18 November 2025, < <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-03/5g-conspiracy-theory-investigation-coronavirus-health/12507368>>.
- Nicholson, L 2018, *The Play of Reason: From the Modern to the Postmodern*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY.
- Nip, JYM & Berthelie, B 2023, 'Emotional Profiles of Facebook Pages: Audience Response to Political News in Hong Kong', *Journalism and Media*, vol. 4, pp. 1021–1038.
- Nip, JYM & Sun, C 2018, 'China's News Media Tweeting, Competing With US Sources', *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, vol. 13, no. 1, pp. 98–122.
- Norris, P 2023, 'Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?', *Political Studies*, vol. 71, no. 1, pp. 145–174.
- Pahl, R & Spencer, L 2004, 'Personal Communities: Not Simply Families of "Fate" or "Choice"', *Current Sociology*, vol. 52, no. 2, pp. 199–221.

- Pan, SL, Cui, M & Qian, J 2020, 'Information resource orchestration during the COVID-19 pandemic: A study of community lockdowns in China', *International Journal of Information Management*, vol. 54.
- Pan, Z & Kosicki, GM 1993, 'Framing Analysis: An Approach to News Discourse', *Political Communication*, vol.10, pp. 55-75.
- Pang, N, Karanasios, S & Anwar, M 2020, 'Exploring the Information Worlds of Older Persons During Disasters', *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, vol. 71, no. 6, pp. 619–631.
- Papacharissi, Z 2002, 'The Presentation of Self in Virtual Life: Characteristics of Personal Home Pages', *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, vol. 79, no. 3, pp. 643–660.
- Papacharissi, Z 2010, *A private sphere: Democracy in a digital age*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Papacharissi, Z 2014, *Affective Publics: Sentiments, Technology and Politics*, Oxford Scholarship Online: Oxford University Press.
- Papacharissi, Z & de Fatima Oliveira, M 2012, 'Affective News and Networked Publics: The Rhythms of News Storytelling on #Egypt', *Journal of Communication*, vol. 62, no. 2, pp. 266–282.
- Papacharissi, Z & Trevey, M 2018, 'Affective Publics and Windows of Opportunity: Social media and the potential for social change', in Meikle, G (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Media and Activism*, Routledge, Oxon.
- Pateman, C 1989, *The disorder of women: Democracy, feminism, and political theory*, Polity Press, Cambridge.
- Perrigo, B 2020, 'How Coronavirus Fears Have Amplified a Baseless But Dangerous 5G Conspiracy Theory', *TIME*, 9 April, viewed 27 February 2023, <<https://time.com/5818574/5g-coronavirus-conspiracy-theory-inaccurate/>>.
- Picarella, L 2024, 'Intersections in the digital society: cancel culture, fake news, and contemporary public discourse', *Frontiers in Sociology*, vol. 9.

- Piechota, G 2020, 'Storytelling as a Form of Political Propaganda. Political Protests in Hong Kong in the Narrative of RT and CCTV Networks', *Zarządzanie Mediami*, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 347–370.
- Polit, DF & Beck, CT 2010, *Essentials of Nursing Research: Appraising Evidence for Nursing Practice* (7th edn.), Lippincott- Raven Publishers, Philadelphia.
- Polletta, F & Lee, J 2006 'Is Telling Stories Good for Democracy? Rhetoric in Public Deliberation after 9/11', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 71, no. 5, pp. 699–721.
- Poole, T 2021, 'COVID-19 Vaccines: Three Arguments For and Three Against Mandating Inoculation', *BBC*, 7 December, viewed 18 November 2025, <
<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/world-59546686>>.
- Potts, J 2015, *The New Time and Space*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK.
- Putnam, RD 2000, *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community*, Simon & Schuster, New York.
- Qi, X 2013, 'Guanxi, social capital theory and beyond: toward globalized social science', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 64, no. 2, pp. 309-24.
- Qiu, JL 2009, *Working-Class Network Society: Communication Technology and the Information Have-Less in Urban China*, MIT Press.
- Quinn, K 2016, 'Why We Share: A Uses and Gratifications Approach to Privacy Regulation in Social Media Use', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 60, no. 1, pp. 61–86.
- Rainie, L & Wellman, B 2012, *Networked: The new social operating system*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Rane, H & Salem, S 2012, 'Social Media, Social Movements and the Diffusion of Ideas in the Arab Uprisings', *The Journal of International Communication*, 18:1, pp. 97-111.
- Reed-Danahay, D 2021, *Auto/ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (1st edn.), Routledge.

- Repnikova, M & Fang, KC 2018 ‘Authoritarian Participatory Persuasion 2.0: Netizens as Thought Work Collaborators in China’, *The Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 27, no. 113, pp. 763–779.
- Rheingold, H 2002, *Smart Mobs*, New York: Basic Books.
- Ringrose, J, Harvey, L, Gill, R & Livingstone, S 2013, ‘Teen girls, sexual double standards and “sexting”’: Gendered value in digital image exchange’, *Feminist Theory*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 305–323.
- Ritzer, G & Jurgenson, N 2010, ‘Production, Consumption, Prosumption: The nature of capitalism in the age of the digital “prosumer”’, *Journal of Consumer Culture*, vol.10, no.1, pp. 13-36.
- Roberts, ME 2018, *Censored: Distraction and diversion inside China’s great firewall*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey.
- Rubin, HJ & Rubin, IS 2005, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing the Data* (2nd edn.) SAGE, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Rumsey, AS 2016, *When We Are No More: How Digital Memory Is Shaping Our Future*, Bloomsbury Publishing, USA.
- Ryan, F 2022, *Frontier Influencers: The new face of China’s propaganda*, Australian Strategic Policy Institute.
- Schmitt, C 1996, *The concept of the political*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Seargeant, P & Tagg, C 2013, ‘Introduction: The language of social media’, in P, Seargeant & C, Tagg (ed.), *The language of social media: identity and community on the internet*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK.
- Senft, TM 2013, ‘Micro-celebrity and the branded self’, in J, Hartley, J, Burgess & A, Bruns (eds.), *A companion to new media dynamics*, pp. 346-54, Oxford: Blackwell, UK.
- Seigworth, G & Gregg, M 2010, ‘An inventory of shimmers’, In M. Gregg and G. Seigworth (eds.), *The affect theory reader*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- Sdrigotti, F 2018, *Shitstorm*, Open pen, London.
- Shao, P & Wang, Y 2017, 'How does social media change Chinese political culture? The formation of fragmentized public sphere', *Telematics and Informatics*, vol.34, pp. 694-704.
- Shifman, L 2014, *Memes in Digital Culture*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Shirky, C 2008, *Here comes everybody*, London: Penguin.
- Shirky, C 2011, 'The political power of social media: technology, the public sphere, and political change', *Foreign Affairs*, vol.90, no.1, January, pp. 28-41.
- Shoemaker, PJ & Vos, TP 2009, *Gatekeeping Theory*, Routledge, New York.
- Shouse, E 2005, 'Feeling, emotion, affect', *M/C Journal*, vol. 8, no. 6, <<https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2443>>.
- Simon, HA 1971, 'Designing Organizations for an Information Rich World', In M Greenberger (eds), *Computers, Communications, and the Public Interest*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- Smith, AN & Fischer, E 2021, 'Pay attention, please! Person brand building in organized online attention economies', *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, vol. 49, no. 2, pp. 258–279.
- Sohu News 2020a, 'From 'Princesses' to 'Mineral-Water Girls': You Look Terrible When You Go Back Home', *Sohu News*, 18 March, viewed 18 November 2025, <https://www.sohu.com/a/381182949_164924>.
- Sohu News 2020b, 'From the "Excavator Squad" to Online "Cloud Supervision": The Construction of Huoshenshan and Leishenshan Hospitals in the Public Spotlight', *Sohu News*, viewed 16 November 2025, <https://www.sohu.com/a/370768364_716901>.

- Sohu News 2022, 'A Chinese overseas student girl returning to China for cancer treatment: Controversy arose when her life was threatened during the quarantine', *Sohu News*, 23 March, viewed 26 September 2025, <
https://www.sohu.com/a/532107931_120575971>.
- Squires, CR 2002, 'Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres', *Communication Theory*, vol. 12, no. 4, pp. 446–468.
- Stolberg, SG, Mueller, B & Zimmer, C 2023, 'The Origins of the COVID Pandemic: What We Know and Don't Know', *The New York Times*, viewed 11 May 2024, <
<https://www.nytimes.com/article/covid-origin-lab-leak-china.html>>.
- Su, C 2024. *Douyin, TikTok and China's Online Screen Industry: The rise of short-video platforms*, Routledge, Abingdon.
- Suh, CS, Vasi, IB & Chang PY 2017, 'How social media matter: Repression and the diffusion of the Occupy Wall Street movement', *Social Science Research*, vol.65, pp. 282-93.
- Sun, W 2015, 'Cultivating self-health subjects: Yangsheng and biocitizenship in urban China', *Citizenship Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3–4, pp. 285–298.
- Suzuki, T & Velasquez, A 2025, 'Theorizing networked counterpublics sanctions', *New Media & Society*. [online first article]
- Tandoc, EC, Tan Hui Ru, B, Lee Huei, G, Min Qi Charlyn, N, Chua, RA & Goh, ZH 2024, '#CancelCulture: Examining definitions and motivations', *New Media & Society*, vol. 26, no. 4, pp. 1944–1962.
- Tang, G 2015, 'Mobilization by images: TV screen and mediated instant grievances in the Umbrella Movement', *Chinese Journal of Communication*, vol.8, no.4, pp. 338-55.
- Tang, L 2009, 'Shaping feelings in cyberspace: The case of Chinese seafarer-partners', *Emotion, Space and Society*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 104–110.
- Tanner, E 2001, 'Chilean conversations: Internet forum participants debate Augusto Pinochet's detention', *Journal of Communication*, vol. 51, no. 2, pp. 383–403.

- Taylor, C 2014, 'Biopower', in D. Taylor (ed), *Michel Foucault: Key concepts*, Routledge, New York.
- Taylor, N & Nichter, M 2022, *A filtered life: social media on a college campus*, Routledge, New York.
- Terranova, T 2004, *Network Culture: Politics For the Information Age*, Pluto Press.
- The Conversation 2020, 'Donald Trump's 'Chinese virus': the politics of naming', *The Conversation*, 22 April, viewed 13 August 2025, < <https://theconversation.com/donald-trumps-chinese-virus-the-politics-of-naming-136796>>.
- The State Council Information Office 2020a, *Record of China's actions against the COVID pandemic*, The State Council of the People's Republic of China, viewed 18 October 2025, < https://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2020-06/07/content_5517737.htm>.
- The State Council Information Office 2020b, 'First-Level Public Health Emergency Response Activated', *China Keywords*, 9 September, viewed 18 October 2025, < http://english.scio.gov.cn/featured/chinakeywords/2020-09/09/content_76686084.htm>.
- Thussu, DK 2000, *International communication: continuity and change*. London: Arnold.
- Toffler, A 1980, *The third wave*, New York, William Morrow.
- Traver, M 2013, 'Qualitative Research Methods', in Walter, M (ed.), *Social Research Methods* (3rd edn.), Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, Vic.
- Trottier, D 2016, *Social Media as Surveillance: Rethinking visibility in a converging world*, Routledge, London.
- Trottier, D 2017, 'Digital Vigilantism as Weaponisation of Visibility', *Philosophy & Technology*, vol. 30, no. 1, pp. 55–72.
- Turkle, S 2011, *Alone Together: Why we expect more from technology and less from each other*, Basic Books, New York.
- Turner, VW 1967, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu ritual*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- Valtysson, B 2022, 'The Platformisation of Culture: Challenges to Cultural Policy', *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, vol. 28, no. 7, pp. 786–798.
- van Dijck, J 2013, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, Oxford Scholarship Online.
- van Dijck, J & Nieborg, D 2009, 'Wikinomics and Its Discontents: A critical analysis of Web 2.0 business manifestos', *New Media & Society*, vol. 11, no. 5, pp. 855–874.
- van Dijck, J & Poell, T 2013, 'Understanding Social Media Logic', *Media and Communication*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 2–14.
- van Dijck, J, Poell, T & de Waal, M 2018, *The Platform Society*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- van Krieken, R 2019a, *Celebrity Society: The struggle for attention* (2nd edn), Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon.
- van Krieken, R 2019b, 'Georg Franck's "the economy of attention": Mental capitalism and the struggle for attention', *Journal of Sociology*, vol. 55, no. 1, pp. 3–7.
- van Zoonen, L 2005, *Entertaining the citizen: When politics and popular culture converge*, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham.
- von Sikorski, C & Hänel, M 2016 'Scandal 2.0: How Valenced Reader Comments Affect Recipients' Perception of Scandalized Individuals and the Journalistic Quality of Online News', *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, vol. 93, no. 3, pp. 551–571.
- Vitak, J 2012, 'The impact of context collapse and privacy on social network site disclosures', *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, vol. 56, no. 4, no. pp. 451–470.
- Wang, C 2017, "'The future that belongs to us": Affective politics, neoliberalism, and the Sunflower Movement', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, pp. 177–92.

- Wang, X 2023, *Aging with Smartphone in Urban China: From the cultural to the digital revolution in Shanghai*, UCL Press, London.
- Wang, Y & Tan, J 2023, 'Queer Cultures in Digital Asia| Participatory Censorship and Digital Queer Fandom: The Commercialization of Boys' Love Culture in China', *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 17, pp. 2554–72.
- Warner, M 2002, *Publics and Counter publics*, MA: MIT Press, Cambridge.
- Warren, AM, Sulaiman, A, Jaafar, NI, 2015, 'Understanding civic engagement behavior on Facebook from a social capital theory perspective', *Behaviour & Information Technology*, vol.32, no.2, pp. 163-75.
- Weber, M 1968, *The religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism*, Free Press.
- Wei, J, Zhao, D, Yang, F, Du, S & Marinova, D 2010, 'Timing crisis information release via television', *Disasters*, vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 1013–1030.
- Weibo 2025, *Verified Individual Level Up System*, 25 August, viewed 20 October, < <https://kefu.weibo.com/faqdetail?id=20201>>.
- Wen, S 2020, 'The New "Chinese Green Card" Regulation Caused Trouble', *Deutsche Welle*, 5 March, viewed 18 November 2025, < <https://www.dw.com/zh/中国绿卡新规惹起民怨/a-52649772>>.
- Wesch, M 2008, 'Context collapse', *Digital Ethnography @ Kansas State University*, viewed 25 March 2018, <<http://mediatedcultures.net/projects/youtube/context-collapse>>.
- Whiting, LS 2008, 'Semi-structured interviews: guidance for novice researchers', *Nursing Standard*, vol. 22, no. 23, pp. 35–40.
- Willmott, H 2007, 'Young Women, Routes through Education and Employment and Discursive Constructions of Love and Intimacy', *Current Sociology*, vol. 55, no. 3, pp. 446–466.
- Wilson, TD 2009, 'Activity theory and information seeking', *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*, vol. 42, no. 1, pp. 119–61.

- Wilson, C & Dunn, A 2011, 'Digital Media in the Egyptian Revolution: Descriptive Analyses from the Tahrir Data Set', *International Journal of Communication*, vol.5, pp. 1248-1272.
- Wijetunge, D 2014, 'The Digital Divide Objectified in the Design: Use of the Mobile Telephone by Underprivileged Youth in Sri Lanka', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol.19, no.3, pp. 712-26.
- Wong, J 2020, 'Digital Environments and the Aspirations of International Students', In C Gomes & S Chang (eds), *Digital Experiences of International Students: Challenging Assumptions and Rethinking Engagement*, London: Routledge, pp. 25–45.
- Wong, YC, Fung, JYC, Law, CK, Lam, JCY & Lee, VWP 2009, 'Tackling the Digital Divide', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol.39, pp. 754-67.
- Wu, DYH 1996, 'Chinese Childhood Socialization', in MH Bond (ed), *The Handbook of Chinese Psychology*, Oxford University Press, Hong Kong, pp. 113143–134154.
- Wu, M-Y 2013, 'The Concept of Guan in the Chinese Parent-Child Relationship', in C-C Yi (ed), *The Psychological Well-being of East Asian Youth*, Springer Netherlands, Dordrecht, pp. 29–49.
- Wu, C & Chao, RK 2017, 'Parent-Adolescent Relationships Among Chinese Immigrant Families: An Indigenous Concept of Qin', *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, vol. 8, no. 4, pp. 323–338.
- Xi, J 2020a, 'Speech at the meeting of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CCP Central Committee on battles against the COVID-19 pandemic', *Qiu Shi*, 3 February, viewed 18 October 2025, <https://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2020-02/15/c_1125572832.htm>.
- Xi, J 2020b, 'Xi Jinping's Address at the Meeting on the Integrated Promotion of COVID-19 Prevention and Control and Economic and Social Development', *Xinhua News*, 23 February, viewed 17 August 2025, <https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-02/24/content_5482502.htm>.

Xinhua News 2020a, ‘Under the Assault of Multiple Crises, the U.S. Is Engulfed in Fire and Fury’, *Xinhua News*, viewed 10 December 2025, < http://www.news.cn/world/2020-06/12/c_1210657156.htm>.

Xinhua News 2020b, ‘Notification on the Investigation into Issues Concerning Dr Li Wenliang as Raised by the Public’, *Xinhua News*, 19 March, viewed 7 December 2025, < http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-03/19/c_1125737457.htm>.

Xinhua News 2020c, ‘Consolidating Positive Energy for Final Victory through Reform — Studying and Implementing General Secretary Xi Jinping’s Important Speech at the 14th Meeting of the Central Committee for Deepening Reform’, *Xinhua News*, 3 July, viewed 17 August 2025, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-07/03/c_1126194542.htm>.

Xinhua News 2021a, ‘The Truth About the U.S. Side’s Malicious Slander of China on the Issue of COVID-19 Origins’, *Xinhua News*, 5 November, viewed 18 November 2025, < http://www.news.cn/2021-11/06/c_1128036565.htm>.

Xinhua News 2021b, ‘COVID-19: A Wicked Fantasy of American Politicians’, *Xinhua News*, 29 August, viewed 18 November 2025, < http://www.news.cn/world/2021-08/29/c_1127805290.htm>.

Xu, B 2016, ‘Moral Performance and Cultural Governance in China: The Compassionate Politics of Disasters’, *The China Quarterly*, vol. 226, no. 226, pp. 407–430.

Xu, J 2016, *Media Events in Web 2.0 China: Interventions of online activism*, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton.

Xu, J & Gong, Q 2024 “‘Telling China’s Story Well’ as Propaganda Campaign Slogan: International, domestic and the pandemic’, *Media, culture & society*, vol. 46, no. 5, pp. 1064–1074.

Xu, J & Sun, W 2021, ‘Propaganda Innovation and Resilient Governance: The case of China’s smog crisis’, *Media Asia*, vol. 48, no. 3, pp. 175–189.

Xu, J & Zhao, X 2022, ‘Coping with the “double bind” through vlogging: pandemic digital citizenship of Chinese international students’, *Continuum*, vol. 36, no. 2, pp. 260–273.

- Yan, Y 1996, *The Flow of Gifts*, Stanford University Press, Palo Alto.
- Yan, Y 2010, 'The Chinese Path to Individualization', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 61, no. 3, pp. 489–512.
- Yan, Y 2020, *The Individualization of Chinese Society*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London.
- Yang, M 1994, *Gifts, Favours and Banquets*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca.
- Yang, L 2014, *The effect of content marketing through "We Media" on customers' online interaction propensity*, Xiamen University.
- Yasseri, T, Gildersleve, P & David, L 2022, 'Collective Memory in the Digital Age', in S O'Mara (ed), *Collective Memory*, Elsevier, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.
- Ye, Y, Xu, P & Zhang, M 2017, 'Social Media, Public Discourse and Civic Engagement in Modern China', *Telematics and Informatics*, vol.34, pp. 705-14.
- You, Y 2020, 'Behind the Brawl at the Huoshenshan Hospital Construction Site: Naming Trees, Ranking Forklifts, and 50 Million Viewers Engaged in Online "Cloud Supervision"', *Sina Finance News*, viewed 16 November 2025, <
<https://finance.sina.com.cn/wm/2020-01-31/doc-iimxyqvy9231769.shtml>>.
- Young, IM 1990, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J.
- Yu, L, Asur, S & Huberman, BA 2011, 'What Trends in Chinese Social Media', *arXiv.org*, (Cornell University). [Preprint]
- Yuan, JE & Zhang, L 2025, 'From Platform Capitalism to Digital China: The Path, Governance, and Geopolitics', *Social Media + Society*, vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 1-9.
- Zelizer, B 1995, 'Reading the Past against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, vol. 12, no. 2, p. 214.
- Zhao, Y 2008, *Communication in China: political economy, power, and conflict*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Md.

- Zheng, M 2017, *A Conceptual Metaphor Account of Word Composition: Potentiality of 'light' in English and Chinese*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, England.
- Zhou, L, Cai, L & Ye, Y 2019, 'Online Emotional Expression in Response to An Emergency: A Sentiment Analysis of Public Discourse on Micro-blogs in Response to A Heavy Rainfall in Wuhan, China', *China Media Research*, vol. 15, no. 1, p. 52.
- Zi, P 2020, 'COVID-19 in Wuhan: How the Red Cross Came Under Intense Public Watch Amid Growing Controversy', *BBC*, 1 February, viewed 9 December 2025, <
<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-51338241>>.
- Zuboff, S 2020, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*, PublicAffairs, New York.

Appendix One: Human Research Ethics Approval



Research Integrity & Ethics Administration
Human Research Ethics Committee

Wednesday, 10 January 2024

Prof Catharine Lumby
Discipline of Media and Communications; Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Email: catharine.lumby@sydney.edu.au

Dear Catharine,

The University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) has considered your application.

After consideration of your response to the comments raised your project has been approved.

Approval is granted for a period of four years from **10/01/2024 to 10/01/2028**

Project No.: 2023/641

Project Title: **Being United While We Are Separated: Rethinking the Connectivity and Interaction on Chinese Social Media during the Pandemic of COVID-19**

Authorised Personnel: Lumby Catharine; Hu Qiyuan;

First Annual Report due: 10/01/2025

Documents Approved:

Date Uploaded	Version number	Document Name
13/11/2023	Version 1	New flyer-CH
13/11/2023	Version 1	V1 flyer-EN
13/11/2023	Version 1	V1 interview questions
13/11/2023	Version 1	V1 PCF-CH
13/11/2023	Version 1	V1 PCF-EN
13/11/2023	Version 1	V1 PIS-CH
13/11/2023	Version 1	V1 PIS-EN
13/11/2023	Version 2	V2 flyer-EN
13/11/2023	Version 2	V2 interview questions
13/11/2023	Version 2	V2 PCF-CH
13/11/2023	Version 2	V2 PCF-EN
13/11/2023	Version 2	V2 PIS-CH
13/11/2023	Version 2	V2 PIS-EN

Special Condition/s of Approval

The Committee approved the application/revised application in the absence of ethical objections and on the basis of satisfactory scientific merit. The special conditions of approval are as follows:

- It is a condition of approval to keep moderator approvals to post on file.

Research Integrity & Ethics Administration
Level 2, Margaret Telfer Building (K07)
The University of Sydney
NSW 2006 Australia

T +61 2 9036 9161
E human.ethics@sydney.edu.au
W sydney.edu.au/ethics

ABN 15 211 513 464
CRICOS 00026A



Condition/s of Approval

- Research must be conducted according to the approved proposal.
- An annual progress report must be submitted to the Ethics Office on or before the anniversary of approval and on completion of the project.
- You must report as soon as practicable anything that might warrant review of ethical approval of the project including:
 - Serious or unexpected adverse events (which should be reported within 72 hours).
 - Unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
- Any changes to the proposal must be approved prior to their implementation (except where an amendment is undertaken to eliminate *immediate* risk to participants).
- Personnel working on this project must be sufficiently qualified by education, training and experience for their role, or adequately supervised. Changes to personnel must be reported and approved.
- Personnel must disclose any actual or potential conflicts of interest, including any financial or other interest or affiliation, as relevant to this project.
- Data and primary materials must be retained and stored in accordance with the relevant legislation and University guidelines.
- Ethics approval is dependent upon ongoing compliance of the research with the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*, the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research*, applicable legal requirements, and with University policies, procedures and governance requirements.
- The Ethics Office may conduct audits on approved projects.
- The Chief Investigator has ultimate responsibility for the conduct of the research and is responsible for ensuring all others involved will conduct the research in accordance with the above.
- The Clinical Trials Support Office has been notified as outlined in the University's Clinical Trials Policy where a clinical trial is being undertaken.

This letter constitutes ethical approval only.

Please contact the Ethics Office should you require further information or clarification.

Sincerely,



Associate Professor Helen Mitchell
Chair
Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC 1)

The University of Sydney HRECs are constituted and operate in accordance with the National



Health and Medical Research Council's (NHMRC) current National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2018) and the NHMRC's current Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research (2018).

Appendix Two: Participant Information Sheet (English and Chinese)



Chief investigator: Catharine Lumby
 Professor, Discipline of Media and
 Communications
 项目首席监理人: Catharine Lumby 教授
 媒体研究与传播学系

Room S216
 (A20) John Woolley Building
 The University of Sydney
 NSW 2006 Australia
 Phone: +61 414897255
 Email: catharine.lumby@sydney.edu.au

Participant Information Sheet 参与者告知书

Research project title: Being United While We Are Separated: Rethinking the Connectivity and Interaction on Chinese Social Media during the Pandemic of COVID-19
 研究课题 暂译: 封城隔离与众志成城: 反思疫情期间中国社交媒体上的联结与互动

Researcher: **Qiyuan Hu 胡启源**
 研究人员 qihu6499@uni.sydney.edu.au

Sample size and expected date: 约 20 人
 样本人数与预计执行日期 2024 年 1 月至 2024 年 3 月

Purpose of the study: This study focuses on the interaction and cooperation on Chinese social media, namely Weibo and WeChat, during the Covid pandemic in 2020 in China, in order to understand media engagement in the Chinese context. This research project aims to understand users' motivations and patterns in following We Media (this project considers every user in their network is an influencer to others) and the criteria they use to select and trust a 'friend'. This project also intends to discover users' expectations and intentions of using social media to manage their friendships online during the pandemic and adjust their habits. Other than that, by analysing the conversation, this study tries to understand the perception of the social norms online when social media users interact with the unacquainted.
 研究简述 本研究关注在 2020 年疫情封城期间中国社交媒体 (如微信和微博) 上用户的互动与协作, 以了解中国特殊政治文化背景下的媒体参与。本项目首要旨在了解用户使用社交媒体的动机, 他们关注自媒体的模式 (此项目定义: 在其社交网络上有能力影响关注者的人群均为“自媒体”, 包括普通用户自己), 以及用于选择关注和信任“好友”的标准。再者, 本项目旨在了解用户如何在社交网络上与“网友”交流的过程中调整个人对这种虚拟交流的期望和参与目的, 以及这种调整如何影响改变个人思考和行为习惯和与“众志成城抗击疫情”的联系。除此之外, 通过采访互动, 本研究期望进一步发掘和揭示用户和网络交流中潜在的社会守则和它所带来的影响。

1. Important information 重要信息

This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the research. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about before you sign the consent form.

阅读《参与者告知书》, 你将了解与本研究项目的相关信息。这些信息将对于你决定是



否参与本研究至关重要。请仔细阅读以下信息，如有疑问，请立即向研究人员提问以获得解答。请不要在完成阅读《告知书》并获得相关疑问解答之前签署《参与者同意书》。

Participation in this research study is voluntary.
参与本项目以自愿为原则。

By giving your consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- 1) Understand what you have read.
- 2) Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- 3) Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- 4) You will be given a copy of this Participant Information Statement (in both English and Chinese) to keep for your records.

若您签署《参与者同意书》并决定参与此项目，即表明你：

- 1) 你已仔细阅读相关信息并已获得满意的解答；
- 2) 你同意参与下文所列的研究项目并听从研究人员的指引；
- 3) 你授权研究项目组使用你的个人信息和提供的数据，如下文所示；
- 4) 你会获得一份《参与者告知书》(中英文)以作存底和参考。

2. What is this interview about?

研究问题

This is an essential part of a PhD research project designed to understand We Media's influence on the interaction and cooperation on WeChat and Weibo during the Covid pandemic in 2020. Other than analysing the content shared publicly on social media, it is important to understand in what role, and how social media works in the operation of the battle against the pandemic. Considering the regulation context, cultural factors and the technical affordance of social media, this project focuses on exploring participants' diverse engagement in their networks in terms of types of content, intensities and motivations, and why using social media can encourage, or discourage, users, in terms of sharing, following, and collaborating, in their quarantine life.

本研究项目旨在了解个体用户作为“自媒体”在2020年新冠疫情期间对于微信和微博的社交网络上的互动和协作的影响和改变，是该研究人员的博士论文课题重要一环。本研究除了关注和分析社交网络上流传的内容之外，还着重了解社交媒体在抗击疫情中扮演的角色和功能。基于对现有的网络规范、文化、和技术背景的思考，本项目将通过着眼于研究用户的内容互动、使用时长和频率、动机等去了解参与方式的多样化，以及发掘社交媒体如何支持/疏离用户，和如何在封城期间协助/孤立用户的分享与发布、关注和协作。

3. Who is running the study?

相关研究人员

The interview is conducted by **Qiyuan Hu**, PhD candidate from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The University of Sydney.

本研究项目由悉尼大学（社会科学文学院）在读博士生**胡启源**执行。

This PhD research is owned and designed by **Qiyuan Hu** under the guidance and supervision of **Prof. Catharine Lumby** (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The University of Sydney) and with the support of **Assoc. Prof. Joyce Nip** (Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, The University of Sydney).

本项目由**胡启源**设计和所有，由悉尼大学（社会科学文学院）**Catharine Lumby**教授作为主导师进行监督管理，**Joyce Nip**副教授（社会科学文学院）提供相关协助。

4. Why should I participate?



参与条件

You have been warmly invited to participate in this project because:

- 1) You are aged 18 years old or older, and;
- 2) You are proficient in Chinese, and;
- 3) You were a frequent WeChat and/or Weibo user during the Covid pandemic in 2020, and;
- 4) You frequently read and/or searched and/or shared (with anyone) and/or participated in any other forms of any online discussion and information circulation related to the pandemic.

如你符合以下所有条件，我们诚邀你参与到本项目研究中：

- 1) 年满 18 岁或以上；
- 2) 中文流利（粤语和普通话不限）；
- 3) 在疫情期间有经常使用微信和/或微博；
- 4) 有经常阅读，搜索，转发（发布动态、分享给某人）和/或以任何方式参与到任何形式的与疫情相关的线上讨论和参与到任意信息传播环节中。

Your insight is crucial to help us to understand your on- and offline experiences in this period. In particular, how you perceived the content, the relationship and the environment on social media, how these elements influenced your understanding of the change in every aspect of life and the responses to those changes.

你的观点将对于我们了解这段时间内你的线上和线下体验有莫大帮助。尤其是帮助我们深入了解你如何理解和看待社交媒体上传播的资讯、人际关系，对舆论氛围的感知，以及这些因素对你生活各方面造成的影响，还有你如何应对这些改变。

5. What will the study involve for me?

参与研究的方式

Participation in this study involves a one-off interview (conversation) that should last not more than 45 minutes (can be in English or Chinese; the Chinese option includes Mandarin and Cantonese). However, we may contact you later via email/preferred contact to ask follow-up questions and/or ascertain your opinion regarding ideas that we have identified as emerging from the data analysis.

你将被邀请参与到一个一次性的采访（对话形式）中，该对话大约 45 分钟或以下。你可以选择使用英语或中文（普通话和粤语）进行作答。若我们在稍后的分析文本过程中发现新的问题，或者希望你进一步解释答案，我们或许会通过电子邮件，或你指定的联系方式（如微博/微信）联系你。

The interview can be conducted online via Zoom or in person based on the participant's preference. The conversation will be audiotaped or recorded (on Zoom) for the use of analysis only.

该采访对话可以通过线上会议 Zoom 或者面对面访谈形式进行。我们会对对话进行录像或录音，以作数据分析之用。

The conversation is about your experiences of using WeChat and/or Weibo (i.e. what do you usually read; where do you get the information; how do you interact with friends) and what those interactions mean to you. Some basic demographic questions may also be collected at the start of the interview for future analysis.

该采访对话将围绕你使用微信与/或微博的体验（比如：你经常阅读的内容，你从何处获得资讯，你与朋友的互动方式等）和这些体验对你的意义。我们也许会采集一些基本的个人背景信息作未来数据分析参考之用。

6. Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?

参与与退出



Being in this study is completely voluntary, and you do not have to take part. You are free not to answer any questions that you are uncomfortable with. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of Sydney.

参与本研究基于自愿原则。你可以忽略你不想回答的问题。如你决定不参与或中途退出，均不会影响你与研究人员和悉尼大学的关系。

If you decide to take part in the study and then change your mind later, even during the interview, you are free to withdraw at any time, and there will not be any consequences. You can also notify the researcher or the Chief Investigator, by email (or any preferred contact) or verbally to withdraw your participation. If you choose to withdraw, we will remove your data (recordings) but it may not be possible to remove all your data, particularly if it has been submitted for assessment or published in a journal article or in a conference presentation. After 30 September 2025, your withdrawal will no longer be possible as the thesis will be submitted for assessment.

如你决定参与，但在过程中改变主意（甚至在采访的过程中）决定退出本项目，你可以随时告知研究人员；你的参与将立即终止，并且不会产生任何后果。你亦可通过电子邮件（或其他联系方式）或者口头通知研究人员退出参与。如你中途退出，我们将抹除你现有的所有数据（包括录音和视频录像）。请注意，若你在论文提交以后或研究结果发表在学术期刊或研讨会演讲以后要求退出，你的数据将无法被完全删除。2025年9月30日后，我们将无法再处理任何退出的请求，因为届时论文已经被提交。

7. Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

参与项目的风险

There are very few, if any, risks involved with your participation in this study because the research has been carefully designed and approved by the university's ethics committee. However, it is possible that the interviews will involve questions about your quarantine/lockdown experiences during the pandemic which could make you uncomfortable. Please note that as this is a conversation you can steer the conversation in a direction you like. If you feel any discomfort at any time, you should let us know immediately and withdraw. For any sign of distress, you will be contacted by the Chief Investigator and reached out by the mental health support team of the University of Sydney.

你有极微的可能（如有）在参与过程中遭遇风险。为了保护参与者的权益，本项目经过多次讨论、推敲与详细设计，并由悉尼大学人类研究伦理委员会审核通过，已把可预见的风险降到最低。然而，由于本研究课题涉及到与新冠疫情相关的内容，采访过程中可能会问及你在封城期间到感受，所以你可能会产生情绪波动。请知悉，本项目的采访以对话方式进行，你有权带领话题到你希望的方向。如果你在对话过程中感到不舒服并希望退出，请立即告知研究人员，你的参与将立即终止。如你发现有任何情绪和精神不适的症状，请及时告知我们。项目监埋人将会与你联系，悉尼大学精神健康中心将会为你提供帮助。

The interview may take 30-45 minutes, and that time commitment may be inconvenient for you. In such situations, you may also choose to withdraw your participation. 采访也许会占用你大约30到45分钟的时间。如果你不希望你的时间被占用，请选择退出本项目。

8. Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

从参与中得益

We cannot guarantee that you will receive any direct benefits from being in the study. 我们无法保证你从参与到本研究中获得任何实际经济上的利益。



**9. What will happen to the information about me that is collected during the study?
数据的储存与管理**

The research will follow the University of Sydney data security framework. The raw data (video and audio recordings) will be stored in a secured cloud drive provided and encrypted by the University of Sydney. Temporary files will be deleted immediately following being uploaded to OneDrive. Any hard copies of the data will be digitalised and stored on the University RDS server at the completion of the study.

研究数据管理会遵从《悉尼大学数据安全指引》。所有原始数据（包括录音与视频录像）将被储存在由悉尼大学官方统一提供、管理并加密的网盘中。所有暂时数据都会在数据被上传到网盘后销毁。任何纸质数据都会被电子化并在研究结束后统一保存到悉尼大学研究数据服务器中。

Other than that, your identifiable answers to the questions and personal information will not be disclosed to any third party or anyone who is not relevant to this project without your permission (except as required by law). We will ensure that participants are de-identified, that information disclosed in confidence is kept confidential, and that the data is used only for research purposes.

除此之外，任何可以辨识到你个人身份的作答和你的个人信息都不会在没有得到你的允许的情况下透露给任何与本研究项目无关的第三方（除非应相关法律要求）。我们保证所有参与者的身份都会被隐藏，所有被要求保密的作答都会保持机密，并且所有数据都不会被用于研究以外的用途。

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to us collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study.

签署《参与者同意书》即表明你同意我们收集你的个人信息并用于本研究。

**10. Can I tell other people about the study?
把本研究项目告知他人**

Yes, you are more than welcome to do so.
你可以把本研究项目告知其他人。我们欢迎之至。

**11. What if I would like further information about the study?
获取更多相关信息**

Once you have read this information, the researcher will be available at the time of consent to discuss the project further with you and answer any remaining questions you may have.

一旦你完成阅读《参与者告知书》，研究人员会在你签署《参与者同意书》前给予你充足的时间进行额外的提问和进行与本项目相关的讨论。

If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact Qiyuan Hu via the email provided above or on +61 424290916 or contact Prof. Catharine Lumby via catharine.lumby@sydney.edu.au or on +61 414897255.

如你希望在本研究的任何阶段了解更多的信息，你可以通过开头提及的电子邮箱或致电+61 424290916（澳大利亚境内）联系研究人员（胡启源）。你也可以通过发送电子邮件到 catharine.lumby@sydney.edu.au 或致电+61 414897255（澳大利亚境内）联系 Catharine Lumby 教授。

**12. Will I be told the results of the study?
告知研究结果**

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. If you wish to



receive feedback, tick the relevant box on the consent form.

你有权利获悉本研究的最终结果。如果你期望收到相关的通知，请勾选《参与者同意书》中的对应栏目。

The final results will be published in the PhD thesis in digital form for open access as part of the graduate thesis collection in the University of Sydney Library database. You will receive a link to the thesis when it is ready online.

本研究的最终结果将会作为博士毕业论文的一部分，以电子文档的方式存档于悉尼大学图书馆毕业生论文数据库并对公众开放查阅。论文发布后，你将会收到该论文的超链接。

13. What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

投诉方式

Research involving humans in Australia is reviewed by an independent group of people called the Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). The ethical aspects of this study have been approved by the HREC of the University of Sydney [Project no.: 2023/641]. As part of this process, we have agreed to carry out the study according to the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). This statement has been developed to protect people who agree to take part in research studies.

在澳大利亚，所有与人类相关的研究都会经由各大学内一个独立的学者团体：人类研究伦理委员会，进行审批。本研究项目的研究伦理审批者为悉尼大学人类研究伦理委员会（注册号：2023/641）。作为审批过程的一部分，本研究项目同意遵守《澳大利亚人类研究伦理守则与规范》（2007版）。此文件旨在保护学术研究中参与者的权益。

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the university using the details outlined below. Please quote the study title and protocol number.

如果你有任何关于本项目执行方面的不满和顾虑，或你希望对研究人员以外的人对本项目进行投诉，你可以使用以下联系方式联系悉尼大学。在联系过程中请引用研究课题与伦理审批注册号。

The Manager, Ethics Administration, University of Sydney:

悉尼大学伦理委员会主任

Telephone 电话: +61 2 8627 8176

Email 电子邮件: ro.humanethics@sydney.edu.au

*This information sheet is for you to keep.
请你保存此《参与者告知书》以作参考*

Appendix Three: Participant Consent Form (English and Chinese)



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

Chief investigator: Catharine Lumby
Professor, Discipline of Media and
Communications

Room S216
(A20) John Woolley Building
The University of Sydney
NSW 2006 Australia
Phone: +61 414897255
Email: catharine.lumby@sydney.edu.au

Project title: Being United While We Are Separated: Rethinking the Connectivity and Interaction on Chinese Social Media during the Pandemic of COVID-19

暂译标题: 封城隔离与众志成城: 反思疫情期间中国社交媒体上的联结与互动

Participant Consent Form 参与者知情同意书

I, [Print Name] agree to take part in this research study. In giving my consent, I state that:

本人..... (姓名全名) 同意并参与本研究项目。通过此《同意书》，本人声明：

1. I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
我清楚了解本研究的目的、内容；明白我将要参与的活动；并且清楚了解参与研究潜在的风险/利益。
2. I have read the **Participant Information Statement** carefully and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
我已仔细阅读《参与者告知书》并已经对相关的内容进行提问和讨论。
3. The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study, and I am happy with the answers.
研究人员已经就我的提问进行解答。我满意相关的答复。
4. I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary, and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of Sydney now or in the future.
我明白参与本项目是基于自愿原则。我知道无论我参与与否都不会影响我与研究人员和悉尼大学的关系。
5. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.
我明白我可以随时退出本项目。
6. I understand that the interview will be recorded in my preferred way (please tick the box below).
我了解我可以按照我自己喜欢的方式参与到此项目（请勾选下文对应栏目）。
7. I understand that I can contact the researcher and the Chief Investigator at any time if I am distressed. And I know the mental health support team of the University of Sydney will take care of me when needed.
我知道如果我感到不快或者不适，我可以随时联系研究人员和项目首席监理事人。我已被告知悉尼大学精神健康中心可以在我需要时为我提供协助。
8. I understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I do not wish to answer.



我明白我无须回答采访中所有问题。我有权拒绝回答任何不想回答的问题，并且无须理由。

9. I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue and that unless I indicate otherwise, any recordings will then be erased, and the information provided will not be included in the study. I also understand that the data may not be completely removed from the research results, particularly if it has been published/submitted. As mentioned, the last date to opt out of the project is 30 September 2025.
我知道如果我不想继续参与采访对话，我可以在中途随时结束并终止参与。我知道除非我另有说明，我所提供的数据都将会在退出的时候被抹除并且从研究中排除。我也清楚了解如果我在研究结果被提交或发布后再提出退出参与，我所提供的数据将无法被完全排除。如《参与者告知书》中所述，提出退出项目的截止日期为 2025 年 9 月 30 日。
10. I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
我知道我在研究项目中被采集的个人信息将会被储存在《参与者告知书》中提及到的网盘中，并且同意这个安排。我了解我的个人信息将不会被用作研究以外的其他目的。我知道我的个人信息不会在没有我同意的前提下，被透露到与研究项目无关的第三方，除非应法律要求。
11. I understand that the results of this study may be published, but these publications will not contain my name or any identifiable information about me (e.g. text/video/audio/photographic recordings of the interviews/any material provided to prompt the conversation in the interview).
我已知悉研究结果有可能被公开发表，但我知道相关的发表内容均不会包含我的真名或其他任何可以辨识到我本人的信息（适用于文本、视频录像、录音、照片、图片，及任何在采访对话过程中用到的资料）。



I consent to (please tick what applies to you):

本人授权研究项目组通过以下方式进行数据采集 (请勾选):

	YES 是	NO 否
Video recording 视频录像	_____	_____
Audio recording 录音	_____	_____
Other material I would like to provide (e.g. text, pictures, videos, audio, links, screenshots etc.) 除以上选项, 我可以提供其他资料 (如文字, 照片, 视频, 音频, 超链接, 截图等)	_____	_____

I would like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study: YES 是 NO 否
我希望知道研究的最终结果:

If you answered YES, please indicate your email address/Weibo ID/WeChat ID below:
如你回答“是”, 请在下面填写你的电子邮箱/微博账号/微信号以便联系:

Print Name:
姓名

Signature: _____
签名

Date: _____
日期

Appendix Four: Sample interview questions



Chief investigator: Catharine Lumby
Professor, Discipline of Media and
Communications

Room S216
(A20) John Woolley Building
The University of Sydney
NSW 2006 Australia
Phone: +61 414897255
Email: catharine.lumby@sydney.edu.au

Project title: Being United While We Are Separated: Rethinking the Connectivity and Interaction on Chinese Social Media during the Pandemic of COVID-19

Interview Questions

Please note that this interview is designed to be semi-structured. The questions listed below are critical questions the researcher intends to use in the conversation centring on the Media Engagement framework (Dahlgren & Hill 2023). Participants are free not to answer all the questions. Different questions and prompts may be asked and used according to participants' responses, and the participants are allowed to steer the conversation.

Media contexts:

1. Which platform (WeChat/Weibo) do you use the most, and why do you prefer to use it? If you're using both, why are they attractive to you? What do you think of the experience of using them?
2. What do you usually use the platform(s) for?
3. Were you aware of any event/issue during the pandemic that impressed you? Where did you know about this? What was the event/issue about?
4. How was the event/issue told? Was the event/issue being told the same on different platforms? Why was it impressive to you?

Modalities:

1. What kind of content do you read/watch the most? For example, articles, posts, videos, etc.
2. Why do you like the specific type (s) of content? What do you think is the most effective way to share the information?
3. Do you usually check the interaction sections, for example, comments and 'likes'? Why or why not?
4. How do you interact with the shared content? For example, 'like', repost/share, comment etc. What do these ways of interaction mean to you? Any thoughts or feelings when you read/respond to the content?
5. Did you also share the information with others during the lockdown? What was the content about? How did you compose the post?
6. What are the crucial elements in composing the post to be shared online? Why are they important from your perspective?

Motivations:

1. If you were posting regularly, what motivated you to post? What was the expectation/purpose



of posting? What does posting mean to you?

2. If there were any responses to your post, what was your reaction to that?
3. When you read/watch shared content on the platform(s), where did that content come from? Why did you pick up information/opinions from that? Besides, who did you usually follow/get in touch with during the lockdown? Any reasons?
4. How do you evaluate the information? Do you believe that reflects the truth? How do you feel when you read them?
5. Would you share/discuss what you found online with your friends/families? Why or why not? What

Intensities:

1. How long have you been using the platform(s)?
2. How often do you use the platform(s) you mentioned, particularly during the lockdown? When did you do that?
3. How do you usually interact with friends on the platform(s) during lockdown? For example, texting, posting, video calls? How often did you do that? About how long for each session?
4. Do you think virtual interaction helps to manage relationships? What do you think of this experience?

Consequences:

1. Have you experienced using jokes or other transformed ways (e.g. funny expressions) in online communication? Where did you find them? What does this mean to you?
2. Do you enjoy these entertaining elements in the interaction? Would you use these elements in your communication? When would you apply these elements? What is the impact on your social experience?
3. Do you rely on referring to data, for example, the number of likes, comments and reposts when you decide to trust a post? If yes, what do they mean to you? If not, why do you think they are not important?
4. During the lockdown, did you hear the call for action: "Stay cohesive, we can defeat the virus"? Did you recognise your personal responsibilities for stopping the transmission and protecting yourself and your loved ones? How did you respond to this idea? How did you cope with your life during this period?
5. Did you hear and join any activities online that you thought would be helpful for someone else, no matter if it is organised by an individual or the government? What made you decide to participate or not?
6. What was your opinion regarding other people's attitudes, discussions and behaviours toward the pandemic, for example, sacrificing a small group's interest for the bigger good, or people in other countries rejecting to get vaccinated?
7. How do you think the interactions on the platform(s) can be related to building a more cooperative and tolerant environment to help and empower people in China?

Appendix Five: Participant recruitment flyer (English and Chinese)



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

PhD Study Participant Recruitment

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences



Help us to understand how 'friends' on WeChat and/or Weibo influence users' response to the changes in life during the Covid pandemic.

This study focuses on the interaction and cooperation on Chinese social media, namely Weibo and WeChat, during the Covid pandemic in 2020 in China. This research project aims to understand users' motivations and patterns in following We Media (this project considers every user in their network to be an influencer to others) and the criteria they use to select and trust a 'friend'. This project also intends to discover users' expectations and intentions of using social media to manage their friendships online during the pandemic and adjust their habits. Other than that, by analysing the conversation, this study tries to understand the perception of the social norms online when social media users interact with the unacquainted.

You are being invited to join this study if:

1. You are aged 18 years old or older, and;
2. You are proficient in Chinese, and;
3. You were a frequent WeChat and/or Weibo user during the Covid pandemic in 2020, and;
4. You frequently read and/or searched and/or shared (with anyone) and/or participated in any other forms of any online discussion and information circulation related to the pandemic.

Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time. You will be invited to an interview around 30-45 minutes with open questions. The interview does not touch any potentially sensitive questions either political or personal. The interview can be in person or through a video/audio call depending on your preference. We are aiming to have about 20 participants.

Thanks for your interest!

Contact details: Qiuyan Hu (PhD candidate), E: qihu6499@uni.sydney.edu.au, WeChat ID: originhu, or T: +61 424290916 (AU)

sydney.edu.au



博士论文研究项目参与者招募

悉尼大学社会科学及文学院



欢迎参与到社交网络资讯传播与文化形成的研究中，帮助我们了解更多微信/微博上的好友互动如何影响人们应对新冠疫情带来的生活转变

本研究关注在2020年疫情封城期间中国社交媒体（如微信和微博）上用户的互动与协作，以了解中国特殊政治和文化背景下的媒体参与。本项目首要旨在了解用户使用社交媒体的动机、互动方式，他们关注自媒体的模式（此项目定义：在其社交网络上有能力影响关注者的人群均为“自媒体”，包括普通用户自己），以及用于选择关注和信任“好友”的标准。再者，本项目旨在了解用户如何在社交网络上与“网友”交流的过程中调整个人对这种虚拟交流的期望和参与目的，以及这种调整如何影响改变个人思考和行为习惯和与“众志成城抗击疫情”的联系。除此之外，通过采访互动，本研究期望进一步发掘和揭示用户和网络交流中潜在的社会守则和它所带来的影响。

我们诚挚邀请你参与到本项目中，如你：

1. 年满18岁或以上；
2. 能流利使用中文；
3. 在2020年疫情封城期间有经常使用微信/微博；
4. 并经常在这些平台上阅读、搜索、与其他用户分享内容和/或者以任何形式参加到任意与疫情相关的在线讨论和信息传播环节中。

参与纯属自愿，并可以随时退出。你将参与到约30–45分钟的采访对话中。该采访对话不会涉及政治敏感和个人隐私问题。你可以按照你的喜好通过面谈或者视频/音频通话进行参与。我们期待约20人左右参与到这个项目中。

非常感谢你的关注和支持！

参与请联系：胡启源（博士论文作者），电子邮箱：qihu6499@uni.sydney.edu.au，微信号：originhu，或请致电：+61 424290916（澳洲境内）

sydney.edu.au

Appendix Six: Interview participants' demographic sketches

Interviewee U	Age:	60s
	Marriage:	Married
	Education:	Diploma certificate done in China
	Occupation/industry:	Retired/former public servant
	Location during the pandemic:	Foshan
Interviewee Z	Age:	60s
	Marriage:	Married
	Education:	High school education
	Occupation/industry:	Retired/former office worker
	Location during the pandemic:	Foshan
Interviewee T	Age:	50s
	Marriage:	Married
	Education:	Bachelor's degree done in China
	Occupation/industry:	Property management
	Location during the pandemic:	Guangzhou
Interviewee M	Age:	40s
	Marriage:	Single
	Education:	Master's degree done in Australia
	Occupation/industry:	English teacher
	Location during the pandemic:	Shenzhen
Interviewee Y	Age:	30s
	Marriage:	Single
	Education:	Master's degree done in Australia
	Occupation/industry:	Lawyer

	Location during the pandemic:	Guangzhou, Shenzhen
Interviewee W	Age:	30s
	Marriage:	Married
	Education:	Bachelor's degree done in China
	Occupation/industry:	Architect
	Location during the pandemic:	Foshan
Interviewee Q	Age:	30s
	Marriage:	Married
	Education:	Diploma certificate done in China
	Occupation/industry:	International trade
	Location during the pandemic:	Foshan
Interviewee C	Age:	30s
	Marriage:	Single
	Education:	PhD done in Australia
	Occupation/industry:	University lecturer
	Location during the pandemic:	Wuhan, Wanning, Ningbo
Interviewee K	Age:	30s
	Marriage:	Single
	Education:	Master's degree done in Australia
	Occupation/industry:	Marketing professional
	Location during the pandemic:	Guangzhou
Interviewee S	Age:	30s
	Marriage:	In relationship
	Education:	PhD done in Australia
	Occupation/industry:	University lecturer

	Location during the pandemic:	Sydney (Australia)
Interviewee D	Age:	30s
	Marriage:	Rather not mention
	Education:	Bachelor's degree done in China
	Occupation/industry:	Property management
	Location during the pandemic:	Guangzhou
Interviewee R	Age:	30s
	Marriage:	Married
	Education:	Master's degree done in Japan
	Occupation/industry:	Sales
	Location during the pandemic:	Fukushima (Japan), Tokyo (Japan), Hohhot
Interviewee E	Age:	30s
	Marriage:	Married
	Education:	Master's degree done in the United Kingdom
	Occupation/industry:	PhD candidate
	Location during the pandemic:	Chengdu
Interviewee X	Age:	30s
	Marriage:	In relationship
	Education:	Bachelor's degree done in China
	Occupation/industry:	Self-employment/freelance insurance agent
	Location during the pandemic:	Foshan
Interviewee J	Age:	20s
	Marriage:	In relationship
	Education:	Bachelor's degree done in Australia

	Occupation/industry:	Student
	Location during the pandemic:	Xiamen
Interviewee A	Age:	20s
	Marriage:	Single
	Education:	Master's degree done in China
	Occupation/industry:	PhD candidate
	Location during the pandemic:	Foshan, Guangzhou
Interviewee H	Age:	20s
	Marriage:	Single
	Education:	Master's degree done in Australia
	Occupation/industry:	Banking professional
	Location during the pandemic:	New York (the United States), Hohhot.
Interviewee N	Age:	20s
	Marriage:	Single
	Education:	Master's degree done in the United Kingdom
	Occupation/industry:	Future PhD candidate
	Location during the pandemic:	London (the United Kingdom), Zhuhai