Where is a safe online home? Challenges Faced by Chinese Queer Communities in Speaking Out on Douyin

By

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A special thanks to the participants in my study and every queer creator like my participants. Without their unwavering voices, even in the face of unfriendly speech and heavy moderation, the LGBTQ+ community would not be visible like now. The road may be challenging, but the future is bright. I always believe that a single spark can ignite a prairie fire as long as we never say ever.
ABSTRACT
Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, is suspected of muting queer creators and reducing the visibility of queer content on its platform. In this study, the author explored the recognition and perception of Chinese queer users regarding Douyin's moderation of queer content. The author conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 China-based Douyin queer users, during which the users shared their observations, feelings, and thoughts both during their content creation or viewing, and after its moderation. The findings indicate that queer users can clearly discern the moderation of queer content by both the platform's algorithms and human moderators. Some users developed strategies to evade or minimize such censorship by interacting with Douyin's promotional tools and moderators to gather information on the highly sensitive queer topics and words. However, the participants believed that the moderation of queer content is not solely the result of Douyin's individual behavior but is instead a reflection of state-led homophobia. Queer creators face challenges in finding a safe and stable environment for content creation, given that most online platforms impose restrictions on queer content to varying degrees. Our study suggests that the online living situation for queer people in China may not improve until the government becomes more inclusive and the heteronormative condition in the whole society is alleviated.
1. Introduction

"Queer" often is a political ideology or intent based in part on a decision to confront what is experienced as discrimination and to commit to a collective identity based on the marginalization felt because of one's sexuality (Dilley, 1999). The term "queer" has been recently introduced to China from Western language contexts and is defined similarly as an unconventional way of imagining gender, sexuality, love, and social cultures (Engebretsen et al., 2015). This definition of queer in Chinese society's comprehension highlights the abnormality, deviance, and alternativeness of ideologies, activities, and lifestyles that challenge the social structure and formation controlled by the governing body and dominant groups. Given that the Chinese state places a high emphasis on maintaining a harmonious society, sexual and non-sexual minorities are often viewed as trouble-makers and noise-makers in that these marginalized communities pose a challenge to the state-established social norms and expectations (Engebretsen et al., 2015; J. J. Zhao, 2020). Building upon queer theory (Dilley, 1999), I define "queer content" on Douyin as works that intentionally feature non-heterosexual imagery and are often considered to be outside of mainstream cultural norms. These works challenge the dominant representations of sexuality and gender and aim to provide an alternative perspective on these topics (Martin, 2018).

While queer content may not feature traditional heterosexual images, creators keep posting their works through mass social media platforms for the sake of visibility or fame. However, platforms have the right to determine the visibility of such content based on their own values and guidelines. It is important to note that the biases of platform developers and coders can become embedded into the algorithms they produce, even if unintentional, because of their normative worldviews (Monea, 2022). For example, if coders hold misogynistic and anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments, this bias may manifest in the structure of the algorithms they create (Monea, 2022). In addition to determining the visibility of queer content, platforms seek to shape users' perceptions of acceptable LGBTQ expression rather than challenge heteronormative distinctions (Southerton et al., 2021). For instance, platforms like YouTube often encourage creators to participate in and seek validation from traditional social institutions like marriage and family, which reinforce heteronormative values (Southerton et al., 2021). TikTok's algorithm appears
to give privileged visibility to users with amplified social identities while at the same time suppressing the visibility of others. Specifically, vloggers who label or tag their content with LGBTQ keywords such as "lesbian," "gay," or "LGBT" may find their content hidden in restricted view, limiting their visibility on the platform (Bishop, 2018; Karizat et al., 2021).

Douyin, the Chinese counterpart to TikTok, is subject to more stringent censorship and moderation policies for queer content as a result of the authoritarian government's strict control of online platforms. According to participants’ and my observations, no video can be found under the hashtags like #gay and #les\footnote{In China, the terms "gay" and "les" are commonly accepted as referring to individuals who are homosexual, and they have a higher frequency of use in the Chinese online environment.} on Douyin. A previous study found that state-led homophobia is demonstrated in the ways that the government and the mainstream public deem anything falling outside the hetero-familial model of genders and sexualities to be inappropriate for public audiences (Song, 2021).

In the face of an unfriendly expression environment, creators in the Song (2021) study employed a range of strategies to survive restriction, including using verbal techniques such as homophones, coded language, and puns, as well as engaging in self-censorship and moving to other platforms when moderated on text-based platforms, headed by Sina Weibo (also known as Weibo; Cui et al., 2022; Yang, 2019). Building upon previous research on the folk theory of moderation among queer users on Western video-format platforms (Bishop, 2018; DeVito, 2022; Karizat et al., 2021; Simpson & Semaan, 2021) and censorship on Chinese text-format platforms (Cui et al., 2022; Liu, 2021; Shaw & Zhang, 2018; S. Wang & Zhou, 2022; Yang, 2019), this study investigated the folk theory developed by Chinese queer users when they encounter moderation on Chinese video-format platforms, with a particular focus on Douyin. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do queer users realize moderation of queer content on Douyin?
- RQ2: In what ways do queer users on Douyin navigate and attempt to overcome moderation of queer content on the platform?
- RQ3: How do queer users perceive the reasons why queer content is moderated on Douyin?
In this study, I conducted interviews with 21 queer Douyin users to gain insight into their experiences of being moderated on the platform and their understanding of the underlying reasons. I found that queer users are acutely aware of Douyin's moderation of queer content and have developed various strategies, such as purchasing promotion tools or comparing video traffic data, to verify the existence of shadowbanning (when content is made invisible to users rather than being removed). Additionally, Chinese queer users have developed their own folk theories to learn about sensitive queer topics and elements of Douyin and have implemented their own methods to reduce the risk of moderation. For instance, creators have blurred intimate images with mosaics due to concerns that Douyin may lower the visibility of or even delete videos containing same-sex intimacy. They also have stuck explanations on their screens stating that they do not promote negative values, and have avoided cross-dressing to conform to binary gender norms.

Through discussion with participants, I delved into the deeper reasons behind the persistence of queer content moderation from the text-format age to the video-format age. The results uncovered that the prevalent witch-hunting of queer content on Chinese social media is primarily driven by deeply rooted homophobia and transphobia that are entrenched in Chinese society and are further enabled by the government’s facilitation of such behavior. This finding also indicates that algorithm improvements and solo platform design could not address the queer bias within the contemporary Chinese online environment effectively.

This study extends prior research on social media's moderation of queer content, as well as the queer resilience of such moderation, and the online living environment of queer individuals in Chinese society. Through an empirical understanding of content moderation in the context of queer Douyin users, I argue that the moderation policy of online platforms reflects both the societal ideology and governmental will, and often results in marginalized groups being passively subjected to limitations, especially in less-democratic societies. The interview findings suggest that Chinese queer individuals, similar to their Western counterparts, perceive that video-based social media platforms implement both visible and invisible moderation of their content through manual and algorithmic filtering. Furthermore, this study highlights the belief also held
by Chinese queer users that Douyin—as a moderation delegate of the authoritarian government—caters primarily to the heteronormative and binary gender ideologies that are prevalent among the social majority and government in the design of its recommendation and moderation mechanisms. The findings also demonstrate that Chinese queer creators on Douyin are employing various strategies to increase the visibility of their content by actively predicting and assessing the acceptability of the platform and the government. However, faced with homophobia and heteronormativity ingrained in Chinese culture, most participants in this study held negative expectations of online and offline living environments for queer citizens in future China, especially considering the authoritarian government's substantial support for the propagation of these prejudices and heavy control of mass media to self-media platforms. Hence, the design implications usually provided for a single platform by Western researchers would be insufficient to improve the queer online living environment in China until there is state-led reform on queer and gender issues.

2. Related work

2.1. Role of social norms in platform moderation

Social norms refer to individuals' beliefs about how others in a social setting behave and their evaluation of those behaviors (Wallen & Romulo, 2017). They are unwritten rules or guidelines for behavior in a given social context, based on what is perceived as normal, typical, or appropriate (McLeod, 2008). People living in the physical world bring the prevalent social norms under their physical living context into the digital world. Users tend to view themselves as citizens instead of consumers on social media platforms when discussing online platforms’ governance (Zarsky, 2014). The social majority may uphold dominant ideologies and values in the digital world to maintain their privileged position with greater access to resources in social, cultural, political, and economic domains (Cotter, 2019).

Users on platforms tend to avoid direct confrontation when they encounter norm violators because imposing sanctions can have social costs for them. Instead, they may rely on platform-mediated interactions with agencies to enforce social norms and deter violations (Rashidi et al., 2020). Myers West (2018) found that users might flag another
user’s content because they hold a desire to take part in upholding community norms and values, to remove content they see as offensive, to protect other users, or to target and silence another user whom they dislike. The mechanism of anonymous reports obstructs creators from verifying whether someone has flagged their works and protects the reporters from confrontation with the person who was flagged.

Moreover, while platforms have access to and can manipulate information about their algorithms, they cannot be the sole authority on all knowledge claims related to algorithms (Cotter, 2021). Researchers have argued that platforms must act as moral authorities that prioritize their users’ best interests in order to continue developing; they should have both the incentives and the ability to promptly meet the social preferences of the majority of their users and adapt their governance models accordingly (Duffy & Meisner, 2022; Zarsky, 2014). This approach would benefit users with normative social identities, who would receive algorithmic privilege and face less risk of suppression (Karizat et al., 2021; Petre et al., 2019; Zarsky, 2014). The misalignment of values between online platforms and marginalized users who prioritize productive, safe, and inclusive group membership can lead queer users to feel unwelcome and may prompt them to withdraw from the site (DeVito et al., 2021; Minina et al., 2022). Overall, when platforms impose requirements on defending absolute positions on social norms or restrictions of subcultures, it can be seen as paternalistic; this imposition may come from a more powerful entity, such as the government or mainstream society (DeVito, 2022).

In the eyes of the marginalized, however, algorithmic paternalism is often read less as a positive desire to protect and more as the inappropriate placing of blame and the onus of responsibility for harassment on the harassed (DeVito, 2022). People may feel unaccepted at a fundamental level when they see only certain parts of their identity represented, while other parts are excluded (Simpson & Semaan, 2021). Thus, users may assume that their expression of social identities or politicized genres in their work is resulting in platform punishments, while mainstream voices and content genres that are considered normative are escaping such measures (Duffy & Meisner, 2022). For this reason, marginalized people sometimes cater to social norms just so their voices can be heard.
2.2. Social systemic homophobia in China

Since Xi Jinping became the highest leader of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and state in 2012, “excellent traditional cultures” have been consistently emphasized in the official discourse of the CCP. These traditional cultures, as interpreted by the CCP, highlight the importance of social interdependence and the practice of filial piety as a socially moral code (Kubat, 2018). The CCP has reimagined Confucianism and the ancient Chinese concept of the ruler–subject relationship through extensive government advertising, extending filial piety to national loyalty, creating a filial nationalist population, and promoting a morality centered on heterosexual familialism (Jeffreys & Wang, 2018; Kubat, 2018; Song, 2021; D. Wang, 2020). To promote a society deemed to be normal and moral and with traditionally held Chinese and socialist values, the CCP elevates the idea of binary gender and institutionalizes the view that heterosexuality is the only acceptable and conventional expression of human sexuality for the entire society and nation. Homosexual groups, who are unable to have children and continue the bloodline, are seen as unfilial and, therefore, unacceptable (Whyke, 2022). Given the challenges of aged care and a low birth rate, the Chinese state has a greater motivation to invest in managing and maintaining the family as a stable and heteronormative unit (D. Wang, 2020). The heteronormative family, as commonly understood in Chinese mainstream society, consists of only two genders that align with biological sex and are identified as heterosexual (Kitzinger, 2005). Within this construct, only sexual attraction between these two genders is deemed acceptable and considered natural (Kitzinger, 2005).

Similar to the strict family planning and hukou policies implemented during the one-child policy, Chinese laws now legislate traditional family values and create sanctions for those who fail to perform their duties. However, the law does not explicitly include LGBTQ rights and provides no place for LGBTQ+ rights groups to register for official status (Chia, 2019). Socially, work performance and promotion in China are linked to one's moral integrity, and entitlements such as adoption and housing allowance are only granted to individuals in monogamous heterosexual relationships.

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2 “户口” (hukou) is a household registration system used in China. It is a record of a person's place of legal residence, which is typically the location of their birth or their parents' legal residence.
To further reinforce a heteronormative vision, homosexuality is either completely erased from mainstream media or severely misrepresented. For example, the set guidelines issued by China’s official censorship body, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television, in 2016 employed pathologizing language to categorize same-sex relationships essentially as “abnormal” and a “sexual perversion” (Song, 2021).

The system's impact on the queer community and related issues is enduring as rigid heterosexism is formally translated into personal homophobia (Song, 2021). Liu (2021) found that homophobic people in Chinese online forum “Tieba” justify their homophobic values with nationalist values, cementing and legitimizing antigay values as “knowledge” via discursive practices. Nevertheless, traditional values related to marriage, reproduction, and filial piety create an invisible wall that isolates queer individuals from heteronormative society and exacerbates their identity concerns (Wong et al., 2019). At the same time, in contemporary China, queer individuals are pressured by both the state and society to conform to heterosexist norms, even if doing so means sacrificing their own rights and entitlements, such as pursuing same-sex relationships and advocating for their needs in public discourse. Failure to perform their expected duty within the heteronormative social framework can result in social shame, familial rejection, and accusations of disloyalty to the state (Chia, 2019; Song, 2021; Whyke, 2022). Indeed, the government rarely speaks out for queer groups. For example, after Sina Weibo categorized homosexuality alongside pornography and graphic violence as undesirable online content, People’s Daily (a mouthpiece for the CCP) reaffirmed the importance of non-discrimination and “the diversity of sexual orientations” among Chinese citizens. However, it also requested that queer people stay within political boundaries, not seek greater visibility, and not undertake community organizing in the physical realm. The government and society are unlikely to support tactics that would harm their reputation or disrupt social stability. This ambiguous stance requires queer individuals to navigate when to accept these limitations and when to advocate for expanding their space based on their own observations and discernment (Chia, 2019; Yu et al., 2023).
2.3. Queer people striving for expression space online

Compared to state and mainstream media, the Internet offers the queer community in China a greater degree of freedom to network and express themselves, despite the limitations on freedom of speech within Chinese cyberspace (Shaw & Zhang, 2018). Resonating with the previous research on Western online platforms that the marginalized take advantage of the affordance of online platforms like Tumblr to create an agreeable bubble where queerness is moved from the periphery to the center and is demanding not only recognition but also comprehension (Cavalcante, 2019; Haimson, Dame-Griff, et al., 2021), online communities in China also provide a more affordable space for queer individuals to connect with others, share experiences, and find support. They offer a space where individuals can alleviate boredom, relieve life pressures, interact with like-minded individuals, and gain knowledge about the queer community. This online space empowers queer individuals by giving them a sense of security and enabling them to form collectives (Han et al., 2019; L. Zhao & Chu, 2022). However, this environment is intentionally created through moderation intervention. Typically, apolitical topics such as lifestyle, relationships, and celebrity culture are more likely to survive censorship, whereas Douyin restricts queer individuals from questioning the lack of institutional support for Chinese queer communities (Y. Wang et al., 2020). Douyin utilizes popularity as a means to entice queer creators to present an image of urban, middle-class, cosmopolitan life on the screen, thereby forming a homonormative environment (S. Wang & Zhou, 2022). Creators' beliefs regarding how the algorithm evaluates their social identity influence their decision-making in how they present themselves in their videos to increase the probability of their videos being amplified. To maintain and please their followers, creators—either in China or in the United States—often ensure that their content aligns with the perceived mainstream opinion and avoids actively engaging in sensitive topics (Karizat et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2022). Thus, to strike a balance between public visibility and challenging public perceptions of sexual diversity, queer activists must learn how to navigate the ever-changing social, media, and political landscapes, ensuring their content is not running afoul of censors or public security (Chia, 2019; Shaw & Zhang, 2018). In this way, individuals lose agency in setting boundaries for how they present themselves or
wish to be perceived by others due to the defining influence of the algorithms. The algorithms manipulate individual experience, constructed by numerous data points (Simpson et al., 2022).

With their understanding of social values, government attitude, and the platforms’ characteristics, queer creators implement one or multiple measures to enhance the visibility of their videos. Individual producers often conduct self-censorship, including avoiding branding content as overtly LGBT-related and reframing queer words with other keywords, to reduce the possibility that the platforms deem their videos as illegal or unhealthy content (Y. Wang et al., 2020; Yang, 2019). For the sake of successful expression, netizens (participants, or citizens, of the Internet) have developed a rich culture of using humor, puns, and coded language to avoid potential censorship. The double entendres allow an in-group to speak freely in ways that, to an outsider, make no sense so that the queer content can escape algorithmic and even manual review at times (Manuel, 2018; Yang, 2019).

In addition, creators can use the affordances of online platforms to resist silence and misinformation. For example, TikTok users use Duets to play side-by-side and facilitate calling out homophobic and transphobic videos while showcasing creators’ own creativity, wit, and self-reflection on identity (Duguay, 2023). Viewers may intentionally engage with content about or from creators with social identities that they perceive the algorithm to suppress, through actions such as upvoting, commenting, and sharing (Karizat et al., 2021). For example, faced with the announcement of the elimination of all queer content on Sina Weibo, Chinese netizens launched a collective response by rallying behind Weibo’s hashtag “I am Gay.” They engaged in discursive activism by sharing personal and highly specific narratives through storytelling (Liao, 2019).

Because the moderation standard on queer topics is always ambiguous and keeps changing on various platforms, creators have developed three steps to correspond to the suppression from one platform. The simplest way for creators is to re-create removed accounts and repost or recap removed content (Simpson & Semaan, 2021). However, this makes it likely that the accounts will be removed permanently, so LGBT self-media producers sometimes need to operate multiple accounts as backups.
When producers feel there is no place to accommodate them to create, they transfer from one platform to another that has a relatively looser policy. For example, Qiu found her articles relating to the LGBTQ+ campaign could not be viewed anymore on Weibo, so she reposted the links to her WeChat account (Yang, 2019). This measure takes more energy and leads to the loss of followers, so it is usually viewed as the hold card when responding to the continuous moderation of queer content.

Building upon prior research on the Western video-format platform TikTok and Chinese text-format platforms Weibo and WeChat, this study centers on the Chinese video-format platform Douyin. Specifically, I investigated how queer users comprehend Douyin's moderation policies, the reasons behind the suppression of queer content, and the novel methods queer users employ to navigate the platform's restrictive online environment. This study sheds light on queer content moderation on Douyin and contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by marginalized communities on social media platforms.

3. Methods

To address the research questions, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 21 self-identified queer Douyin users. This research was approved by the University of Michigan's institutional review board.

3.1. Participant Recruitment

I employed two methods to recruit participants for this study. First, I directly messaged creators on Douyin whose content aligned with my understanding of queer culture to identify potential queer participants. After explaining the research goals and methods, I successfully recruited 12 participants through purposive sampling. They provided their email or WeChat accounts in my Douyin chat box for follow-up contact. Second, I used a snowball sampling approach, incentivizing previously recruited participants with ¥50 ($8) to refer their queer friends who were also Douyin users. Through this method, I recruited an additional nine participants with whom I had no prior
connection. All participants were compensated with a ¥200 (approximately $30) incentive for their time and participation in the study.

3.2. Demographics

In the present study, participants were required to meet specific eligibility criteria, including being 18 years or older, utilizing Douyin daily, and identifying with queer groups. Participants were further divided into two distinct cohorts, namely the "creator group" and the "viewer group." The creator group had an additional criterion other than using Douyin to view videos, which was to continuously generate and publish videos on Douyin, thereby identifying themselves as creators on the platform. The sample consisted of 15 creators and 6 viewers, with creators' ages ranging 20–40 years (mean [M]=23, standard deviation [SD]=5.25 years) and viewers' ages ranging 22–26 years (M=23, SD=0.71 years). The educational qualifications of the creators varied significantly from completing junior high school to pursuing a PhD, with most participants having received more than 15 years of formal education. The study included nine male and six female participants on the creator side, and four female, one male, and one non-binary participant on the viewer side. The study included a diverse range of sexual and romantic orientations, with almost half the participants identifying as gay, and the remaining half as lesbian or bisexual, with a few participants identifying as trans-heterosexual or pansexual.

In terms of participants' Douyin connections, the creators in this study had a range of followers from 946 to approximately 700,000 (M=99,719, SD=186,586), with the peak views of their most popular video ranging from 131,000 to 19 million (M=4,899,600, SD=5,709,819). These figures suggest that the study included both emerging grassroots creators and established creators with significant followings. The number of accounts followed by the viewers ranged from 98 to 1,196 (M=340, SD=658), with variations possible because of varying personal usage preferences. Although the majority of participants were Chinese citizens, I also included one Indonesian Chinese individual who had lived in China for more than 3 years. Demographics are described in Tables 1 and 2.
### Table 1

**Creators’ demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sexual orientation</th>
<th>Education level</th>
<th>Followers</th>
<th>Peak view</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P1</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>946</td>
<td>403,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>1,700</td>
<td>131,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P3</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>200,000</td>
<td>19,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>110,000</td>
<td>8,120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>2,000,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>700,000</td>
<td>16,000,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>P7</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>8,000</td>
<td>2,300,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>College</td>
<td>300,000</td>
<td>1,280,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>22,000</td>
<td>1,020,000</td>
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<td>P10</td>
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<td>Gay</td>
<td>Junior high school</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>780,000</td>
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<td>P11</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female and</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>17,000</td>
<td>8,000,000</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>transfeminine</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>33,000</td>
<td>4,500,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>P13</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>19,000</td>
<td>4,650,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>P14</td>
<td>24</td>
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<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>PhD student</td>
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<td>2,000,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>P15</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>7,137</td>
<td>3,310,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2

**Viewers’ demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sexual orientation</th>
<th>Education level</th>
<th>Following</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P16</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P17</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P18</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lesbian</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P19</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P20</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Non-binary</td>
<td>Pansexual</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P21</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>1,196</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3. Interviews

The preliminary interviews were conducted via Zoom, video, or audio recording between Sept. 11 and Nov. 4 in 2022. Prior to the interview period, I obtained informed consent from the participants. The initial interviews varied in duration, ranging 27–96 min (M=59, SD=19 min), and were conducted in Chinese. Subsequently, I translated and transcribed the interviews into English.

Prior to the interviews, participants were strongly encouraged to review their Douyin accounts for 5–10 min. During the interviews, I employed a semi-structured approach. While the study primarily focused on moderation and censorship, I began the interviews with discussions of participants' Douyin usage patterns and frequency and gradually transitioned to the moderation they experienced while creating and viewing content. Throughout the interview period, I revised and customized questions based on participants' responses and feedback.

After conducting a preliminary analysis, I engaged in follow-up conversations with three participants via WeChat to seek clarification and validation of my interpretation of their theories. The conversations lasted for a maximum of 30 min each.

3.4. Data Analysis

The primary data were in Chinese, and I utilized a combination of Google Translate and my own language proficiency to transcribe them into English. The interview transcripts were subjected to an open-coding process that involved both line-by-line coding and focused coding methods. Line-by-line coding can be a valuable tool for comprehending the significance and ideas conveyed in each participant's statements. Meanwhile, focused coding can assist in determining which codes are most relevant for categorizing data with precision and completeness, which reduces the follow-up analysis burden (Charmaz, 2006).

During the axial coding stage, a second researcher joined my study, and we held a regular twice-weekly meeting when reviewing and consolidating the codes. Through code collapsing, analysis, and persistent interpretation and explain and engage to reach
consensus in the meetings, we identified connections between codes and integrated relevant themes, ultimately developing a coherent narrative and theories about participants' recognition and comprehension of queer content moderation on Douyin, as well as their strategies for responding to it.

3.5. Positionality

As the principal investigator and author of this study, my position offers both advantages and limitations. On one hand, my personal experience as a Chinese queer individual and an active Douyin user since 2017 allow me to establish a rapport with participants quickly and gain valuable insights into their perspectives on queer content moderation on Douyin and in Chinese society. Moreover, my involvement in the Chinese queer community enabled me to connect and interact with participants who share similar cultural backgrounds, providing a deeper understanding of their experiences. On the other hand, my position as a cis-male limits my ability to fully comprehend the experiences of women and transgender individuals on Douyin. Therefore, my research findings may not be representative of the experiences of all queer Douyin users in China.

4. Findings

4.1. Recognition of moderation of queer content

One of the participants expressed a mixture of anger and sadness in the interview, stating, “Queer content is not welcomed to Douyin!” This perception was based on the experiences and emotions of queer users searching for an explanation for the restrictions they have noted on the dissemination of queer content on the platform.

4.1.1. Moderation with clear explanations and observations

Participants reported that some of their queer content was either set to private or deleted by Douyin, which cited violations of community guidelines as the reason for moderation. (Image 1) This aligns with previous findings by Zeng & Kaye (2022) that content related to gender and sexuality on Douyin is frequently subject to community
guideline violations without a clear explanation of the violation. The announcements of these violations received by participants are also ambiguous and varied. As P10 mentioned:

I find there are three models of the announcement. The first one is that Douyin provides over 40 guidelines, the second one is Douyin specifies one or two guidelines violations, and the third one is Douyin may indicate the specific part of the video in question.

Image 1

A couple participants noted that moderation reasons were disclosed more fully if they chose to appeal the decision. P3 and P13 had that experience. “After my appeal, the Douyin reviewer circled the rainbow mask on the videos and gave me a screenshot where one male asked for another male's contact information,” P3 said. P13 also got a more specific reason on appeal:
The first reason they gave me when my video was defined as inappropriate to spread is very general. After I appealed, they gave me the specific reason that my video mentioned sensitive words like “tongxinglian” (homosexuality) and “chugui” (coming out). (Image 2)

Image 2

Although videos that have been moderated are eligible for appeal, and the appeal becomes a good way for users to estimate the platform’s boundary, the appeal process is unlikely to be successful, as P6 noted. Participants in this study received varying responses from customer service, but all expressed more or less negativity toward queer content. For example, P10 was advised to change topics rather than focusing on queer topics, P11 was informed that queer content was inappropriate to show on Douyin, and P13 was told that queer topics are permitted on Douyin but that he
needed to avoid sensitive words such as "gay" and "formal marriage." These inconsistent responses from customer service highlight the ambiguity of the moderation guidelines for queer content on Douyin.

Additionally, the moderation of queer content on Douyin can be understood through the usage of hashtags. Trending hashtags promoted by the platform increase visibility (Zeng & Kaye, 2022), while unwelcome hashtags result in severe shadowbanning of content under these tags (Duffy & Meisner, 2022). The study participants observed that hashtags such as “gay,” “les,” “txl,” and “tongxinglian” are inactive and do not lead to any related content, unlike other hashtags. P16 reported that the hashtag “les” was banned, and lesbian creators had to switch to using “le,” which was also temporarily banned but later released.

In summary, participants found that the moderation practices of Douyin toward queer content have resulted in a negative impact on the visibility and distribution of queer content to the public on the platform. The limited and inactive hashtags available for queer content limit the visibility and popularity of such content, leading creators to give up production.

4.1.2. Shadowban theory

Shadowban is where content is (a) made invisible to other users rather than being removed or (b) limited for some reason (Myers West, 2018). Previous research found that creators can recognize shadowban as their engagement goes down (Duffy & Meisner, 2022). Through the interviews, I found that queer users can discern the shadowbanning effect more clearly by comparing their queer content and non-queer content on Douyin. P17 took herself and another creator as an example.

When I was in the relationship, each video showed my mate, and I had low traffic. However, after I broke up, the traffic was generally better than during her relationship. I think the reviewers can identify the queer accounts and then limit the spread of the content from these accounts. For example, one of my following producers’ videos could receive good attention when she was single. After she

3 Tongxinglian is the pinyin for "homosexual" in Chinese, and txl is the acronym for the first letter.
had the girlfriend and showed some intimacy in front of the screen, the videos were shadowbanned.

Despite the evident decrease in engagement on some queer content, it was difficult for P6 and P9, who are content creators, to confirm whether their videos had been shadowbanned. The lack of transparency in the workings of recommendation systems and red flags makes it challenging for users to determine whether their videos have been impacted by these systems or flagged for inappropriate content (Myers West, 2018).

“I suspect Douyin has a list recording queer accounts that it assumes to have a higher risk of violation,” P3 told me during the interview. Some participants experienced that Douyin regulates the videos and pays attention to the accounts of queer creators. Queer accounts with a violation history face more censorship and manual review, resulting in longer review periods and higher chances of being unable to post a video. P14 shared her understanding of Douyin’s review process on the videos created by queer accounts that receive attention:

If the previous video is violated, the following videos will have a more extended review period, like one hour. Regular accounts usually undergo machine censorship first and only go to manual review if reported or if the volume of views is significant. However, for queer accounts with a violation history, videos are first reviewed by machine and then manually, increasing the likelihood of the video not being posted.

Participants in the study suspected Douyin was biased against them because Douyin categorized their accounts as having a high risk of violations and implemented heavier review as a result of the unwanted queer content. Targeting the account not only keeps the specific work from spreading but also accelerates the death of the account.

After experiencing a sense of invisibility during moderation, study participants attempted various methods to confirm the presence of shadowbanning. On Douyin, the Creator Service Platform offers a channel for creators to review all videos, and notifications are sent for videos with concerns. One participant, P6, shared her understanding and interpretation of the procedure:
When I suspect my videos are shadowbanned, I will go to the creator service platform and ask [that they] review my videos again. After [that], all videos will be gone through, and I can get a notification on the videos shadowbanned that the work is inappropriate to publish or to continue to recommend. This measure works well when content has been posted or when creators suspect that more than one video has been shadowbanned.

The Dou+ official promotion tool on Douyin serves as an additional means for users to discern shadowbanning on the platform; this tool can be utilized both proactively during the posting process and reactively when users suspect they have been shadowbanned. On one hand, creators can benefit from direct manual review during the posting process through the Dou+ promotion tool, which provides them with valuable feedback to revise and improve their content in a timely manner. (Image 3) This aligns with Myers West’s (2018) observation that users may turn to other places on the platform where they feel they would be more likely to get a human response. P14 stated her observations: “Dou+ leads to a manual review without the involvement of algorithm censorship, and the process can take longer than half an hour. Users receive a notification indicating the success or failure of their promotion.” P13 described this as a routine: "I always buy Dou+ to determine if my work violates the guidelines, not for popularity. If I receive the moderation result quickly, I can make necessary changes and repost my video." On the other hand, if users suspect their content has been shadowbanned without explanation, they can also attempt to purchase Dou+. If the videos are indeed shadowbanned, the system will inform them that they cannot buy Dou+ for the violative videos, as noted by P3. Creators have generalized a theory that Douyin presents obstacles in the form of a lack of transparency regarding the validation of shadowbanned content but that Douyin does offer more detailed explanations to creators who are willing to invest time and resources into the process.
Douyin’s vague criteria and potential biases pose difficulties for queer creators in selecting topics and presenting videos, resulting in users theorizing on what content in videos triggers the moderation and how to prove their work is shadowbanned.

4.2. The queer topics undergoing heavier moderation

4.2.1. Queer Intimacy

The participants, both creators and viewers, reported experiences of forced removal or recommendations to stop on videos featuring intimacy between same-sex individuals on Douyin. Both P8 and P21 observed that heterosexual intimacy is prevalent on the platform but that homosexual intimacy is rare. P21 expressed concern that “same-sex couples often have to conceal their affection or avoid it altogether to avoid potential account bans.” P21 continued, “A small intimate behavior may attract a potential shadowban or even ban on accounts.” Participants perceived that this
invisibility creates a sense of inequality for queer users and makes them feel that their relationships and love are not valued by society. As P3 noted: “Douyin will try all efforts to control the spread of your videos touching upon the affection displayed between the same sex. It seems Douyin does not allow creators to produce anything related to same-sex love, viewing it as a bad influence on social values.”

P16 cited an example supporting her formation of the theory that Douyin does not welcome intimacy between the same sex, saying, “Once, my friend found she failed to post the video including the kiss of two same-sex individuals, but when she deleted this part, the video passed the review successfully.” Participants theorized that queer intimacy is not available on Douyin, especially when one wants their videos to be visible to others, and assumed this was a result of deliberate efforts by Douyin to hide this material.

4.2.2. Queer topics and ideology thoughts

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—state has maintained a focus on ideological unity since the time of Mao Zedong through its educational institutions, corporations, and media outlets, despite the high costs associated with this approach (Ma & Lewis, 2020).

Despite the increasing popularity of new media, which may suggest a degree of pluralism under authoritarianism, dissenting thoughts and cultures, such as those associated with the queer community, remain vulnerable to censorship and repression by the government.

The rainbow symbol serves as a recognizable icon for the Chinese LGBTQ+ community and is frequently used by queer individuals to express their identity through videos and blog posts. However, this form of self-expression is subject to moderation by platforms like Douyin, which censors content associated with queer culture, including the use of rainbow icons. This was demonstrated in the example from P2, who said, “Their video was restricted from spreading after including a rainbow icon in the description, but once the icon was removed and the video was reposted, it was able to circulate freely.” Thus, in later videos, P2 reduced the use of rainbow icons and understood that the platform would restrict it.
At the same time, participants acknowledged that despite moderation efforts, queer content persists on Douyin. As noted by P20, "Douyin does not heavily moderate the daily lives or humorous videos of queer individuals, but discussions of political topics like equal rights and same-sex marriage are not tolerated." Beyond political discussions, Douyin also considers the promotion of queer culture as a violation of traditional Chinese values. Video creators who aim to share knowledge on queer cultures or relationships often receive notifications that their content is being censored for "promoting non-mainstream values of marriage and love." P5 used himself as an example:

Douyin emphasizes reviewing oral broadcasting because it is easy to have creators’ own opinions while talking. The videos with oral broadcasting will be reviewed first before posting to others. However, the videos where I am sharing my life can be posted without any restriction at the beginning. Of course, when they become popular, the review is not avoidable.

Participants realized that Douyin appears to be categorizing queer topics, allowing some to be disseminated and shared within queer communities while prohibiting others from being mentioned, even within these circles, due to their sensitivity.

4.2.3. Transgender content

Current Chinese laws lack provisions to prevent media platforms from stigmatizing and slandering transgender individuals, leading to widespread ignorance and transphobia in the general public (Veres & Liu, 2018). Despite being a relatively new short-video platform, Douyin strives to conceal the presence of transgender individuals, particularly those who do not conform to societal norms regarding their assigned gender at birth. As noted by P11, who identifies as a male-to-female (MTF) transgender individual, “When I dress up as a female, my videos always suffer shadowban." With regard to female presentation, participant P1 also observed that “Douyin is hostile to individuals who present as overly feminine, as the platform may believe that these individuals have a negative impact on society.”
4.3. Reaction

Despite facing ongoing moderation efforts and the risk of shadowban, queer content creators have not stopped their efforts. Instead, they have developed strategies based on their own experiences and theories to increase the visibility and popularity of their work.

4.3.1. Coded language

There is a tradition among queer creators to create coded languages that are only understood by those familiar with queer culture. In 2015, when Douyin was not yet available, queer users on Weibo, the large text-based online community, began using coded language to avoid moderation (Yang, 2019). Similarly, queer users on TikTok, Douyin's Western counterpart, have also developed methods to evade moderation through coded messages to those familiar with the community (Duffy & Meisner, 2022). Through our study, we found that homophonic words are frequently used as a means of evading censorship. As P4 said, “Homophonic words like tongxunlu (contact list) is a popular word to help the queer community recognize the queer content while avoiding target key words censorship.”

Furthermore, queer users often give a word that is unrelated to queer cultures a different meaning and form a convention in the community. For instance, gay creators often refer to one another as "roommates" in their videos. Over time, when two males refer to each other as roommates in a video, viewers in the comments section often assume they are a gay couple. A similar phenomenon occurs among lesbians, where the word "bestie" has taken on a different meaning within the community. P9 said that "bestie" is an established lesbian word: “I use guimi [bestie] to refer to my girlfriend, and my fans all know our actual relationship. When you go to the hashtag guimi, you will see the videos under it are mostly related to lesbians.”

Faced with the tactics employed by the queer community, Douyin responds by continually updating its moderation tactics. As noted by P2, the platform's moderation team and users are locked in an ongoing cycle of chasing. As long as queer individuals

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4 The pronunciation of 通迅录 (tongxunlu) is similar to that of homosexual 同性恋 (tongxinglian). The pronunciation of 给 (give) is similar to that of “gay” in Chinese.
seek to express themselves on the platform and Douyin continues to moderate queer content, this cycle of adaptation and restriction is likely to persist.

4.3.2. Queer disclosure by fans

Queer creators who have a substantial following often refrain from including any references to queer themes or hashtags in their videos. Instead, they rely on their loyal fans to share their sexual orientation with new followers in the comments section. As stated by P16, some queer creators use queer-related hashtags to attract their target audience, particularly when Douyin has not yet implemented strict moderation on these hashtags. Once their accounts have established a stable fanbase, they create online chat groups for their fans, where they can build social connections with others. P17 further explained:

The mature accounts with a stable fan group will not add the queer tags in the videos’ description. As a viewer, I have found that old fans will expose the creators’ sexual orientation to the new fans, especially when the commentors mistakenly assume the creators are straight. The quality of those big accounts is always guaranteed, so sometimes I share them with my friends, and they also become the fans of those creators.

Through this process, the fans form a sense of identity, and old fans naturally assist creators in bringing new fans on board. Douyin has not taken action to intervene in the exchange of information within these small communities formed by creators.

4.3.3. Avoidance of intimacy

Like other couples, queer couples wish to showcase their love in front of the camera. However, given the restrictions imposed by the Douyin platform, they are unable to express their intimacy in the same manner as heterosexual couples. As P17 said, “I have to cover our intimacy with mosaics in our videos to allow our videos to pass the review.” As mentioned, use of terms such as "partner," "roommates," and "bestie" to refer to their partners is also a common practice among queer creators to avoid visibility reduction by being excluded from the algorithm rankings and recommendations (Gillespie, 2022). However, these measures can make queer creators feel inferior and
they are abnormal because of their sexual orientation, as highlighted by the participants in our study.

4.3.4. Avoidance of being viewed as promoting queer ideology

Chinese creators are well aware of the control that the Douyin platform exerts over information and ideologies. Douyin is a heteronormative platform whose administrators seem to be wary of non-normative content given the prevalent belief in China that promoting queer cultures online will result in the loss of the next generation. To avoid being perceived as attempting to influence the public, P2 indicated, “I will use ‘I assume’ as the beginning of my sentence, emphasizing it is only my own opinions, and I do not want to persuade anyone to accept my opinions.”

Queer creators on Douyin, faced with censorship regulations, often try to communicate with the platform's moderators in an effort to ensure their content is not deleted. They achieve this by adding notes to their videos, emphasizing the humorous or entertaining nature of the content, and clarifying their intentions. P3 shared his experiences:

I added a sentence “Maintain public order and good costumes, please do not take our video seriously because the video is just for the sake of drama” on my video, and then this video passed the review without any following moderation. P20 also observed that many queer creators add explanations to their videos to avoid the possibility of their content being deleted by mistake due to misinterpretation by reviewers. This demonstrates the effort made by queer creators to work within the constraints of the censorship regulations and to communicate with moderators effectively.

4.3.5. Avoiding cross-dressing

P11, the only participant who identified as a transfeminine, presented herself in videos with a buzz cut and androgynous-to-masculine clothing. She reported experiencing harassment in the form of comments or direct messages when she posted videos in which she cross-dressed. To avoid such conflicts and ensure that her videos would not be deleted, P11 gave up cross-dressing in her videos, stating:
I now present myself as male in my videos. I have realized that videos where I present myself as my biological sex are better accepted than those where I cross-dress. My priority is to keep my videos available, so I have had to make compromises.

4.4. Developing folk theories to explain Douyin’s unfriendliness to queer people

Most participants did not blame Douyin for its heavy moderation of queer content. Instead, based on participants’ understanding of their living environment, they generalized the interrelated theories involving traditional family concepts, the binary gender and heteronormativity, minors’ safety, and social stability, which were thought to play crucial roles in shaping Douyin’s moderation policies. As P19 said: “If moderation is only platform choice, there should be a platform friendly to LGBTQ+. However, the fact is that no Chinese platform dares to remove the moderation of LGBTQ+ content. It must have some reasons.”

4.4.1. Traditional family concept

In traditional Chinese families, it is expected that the next generation will fulfill their filial duty by having children, and failure to do so is perceived as a failure on the part of the parents (Whyke, 2022). As a result, queer individuals often face a conflict between the pressure from their families to continue the bloodline and their personal pursuit of life. As of August 2022, more than 45% of Internet users in China were older than 40 years (CNNIC, 2022). Douyin, as a popular platform, is widely used by middle-age and older people who view queer content on the platform as a challenge to traditional values and filial duties. P16 expressed her understanding of the moderation on the platform in this context:

Traditional values emphasize the importance of having children, and this belief has been deeply ingrained in parents for a long time. Changing these beliefs is difficult, and they may report queer content, as they see it as a threat to their values.
Besides the existing social view that succession is a duty for family members, the Chinese government plays a key role in suppressing or facilitating the popularity of traditional values. During implementation of the one-child policy, when the Chinese struggled to sustain a huge population, the government made use of promotional slogans like “晚婚晚育” (Delayed marriage and childbearing) to encourage people to decrease the birth rate. Thus, the obligation to have children as dictated by Confucian ethics was criticized and suppressed at that time. However, now a pro-birth ethic is being promoted again because of the low birth rate in China, as demonstrated by the recent announcement by the CCP leader Xi Jinping introducing a three-children quota for each nuclear family in summer 2021 (Whyke, 2022).

This has caused more pressure on the queer community in two ways. On one hand, participants expressed that they have been experiencing more social media censorship since the three-child policy was introduced in 2021. As P3 recalled, “The moderation on queer content on Douyin [was] loose before the three-children policy.” However, P3 said, “after the three-children policy … my content is shadowbanned more frequently.” On the other hand, the government’s elevation of a traditional culture related to Confucius's theories and filial piety has in turn increased family pressures on the queer community. P19 told us her thoughts on the government's plan to encourage higher birth rates:

Although the younger generation is not interested in the government sayings, their parents' generation still believe the government. Through the promotion to the parents’ generation online, the parents’ generation will put stress on the younger generation. Some queer people cannot endure the pressure and struggle of inescapable family obligations, concealing their identity to their heterosexual partner, and entering into a fake marriage. I feel the government wants an increase in the marriage rate and birth rate for the country's future, regardless of the happiness of the marriage. In essence, the government does not consider the right of the queer group at all.

P16 also explained her interpretation of the government's role in Douyin’s moderation of queer content: “Along with the development of the Internet, especially with the rise of short-video platforms, people can easily be exposed to a different lifestyle. … The
government believes the queer cultures will prevent people from bearing [children], which are not good for the population increase.” In a one-party dictatorship like China, the popular online platform Douyin is subject to the influence of traditional social values and the government's policy promotion requirements. This is one reason, participants believed, that the platform implements heavy moderation of queer content.

4.4.2. Binary gender and heteronormativity

In August 2021, there was a controversy in China surrounding the feminization of men. Government-controlled media outlets, such as *Guangming Daily* and *People Daily*, published articles condemning the aesthetics of cross-dressing men and advocating for increased masculinity. This was followed by the permanent ban on the cross-dressing influencer 康雅 (Kangyaya), who had 2 million followers on Douyin. Creators connected the two events and expressed their concerns about potential bans. P6 mentioned, “Some of my following drag queens deleted all cross-dressing content because they are worried about being banned totally.” In addition, P8 suggested that the suppression of queer content was rooted in binary gender ideology “with the government promoting the traditional view that men should be masculine and women should be feminine.” But, P8 continued, “queer culture challenges this notion.”

Based on P15’s observations, this heterosexual family style is considered the norm in Chinese society and is based on the belief that men and women complement each other. P15 explained that traditional Chinese culture views the male–female relationship as a balance of yin and yang, and any deviation from this balance is seen as disruptive. In contrast, same-sex families are considered heterodox and go against the Confucian value of filial piety (Qiu, 2022). Despite the decriminalization of homosexuality in 2001 and its removal from the list of mental illnesses, social stigma persists. P12 found that public discussions on queer topics are still taboo, while P6 believed that homosexuality is still perceived as a mental illness by the general public. Further, P21 supposed that the government perpetuates the social stigmatization, saying: “As long as the Chinese government does not face up to the existence and needs of the queer community and acknowledge the legality of same-sex marriage, it is indirectly allowing the discrimination and suppression on the queer groups.” Similar to
the physical world, where participants found that society in general is consistently trying to mute queer voices, they found no reprieve in the online world, where they said they experience a projection of offline biases. “You may see the intimacy of heterosexuality around you in the street, but have you ever seen any same-sex couples hugging or even holding hands in public areas?” P21 asked rhetorically. The mainstream views of the online world and the physical world are to some extent synchronized.

4.4.3. Influencing minors

Participants who experienced a ban on their content were often cited with the reason ”Content not suitable for minors.” Views on this issue varied among participants. P19 stated that Douyin is easily accessible to minors and that queer content on the platform could influence teenagers who might find it appealing. P11, however, argued that censoring material for minors’ safety is unreasonable: “The minors can be exposed to hetero and homo content, but why can they only be influenced by the homo content? Why do homosexual people not become straight since they have seen heterosexual content during their growth?” Most participants, though, believed that the public generally agrees with P19, viewing minors as vulnerable and easily influenced. This belief, researchers have found, leads parents to reject their children's homosexual identity, rationalizing instead that their children are too young to understand their responsibilities as good Chinese sons or daughters (Whyke, 2022). Even those who accept LGBTQ friends or colleagues struggle to accept their own children's queer identity (Wang et al., 2020). Both parents and the government put a great deal of effort into keeping minors away from queer content, both online and offline, as noted by P2: "The society is conservative and believes that queer content will change minors' sexual orientation. Being gay is still viewed as a disaster for a family."

4.4.4. Social stability

The history of homosexuality in China dates back thousands of years, but modern queer culture, including the rainbow icon and legalization of same-sex marriage, has only recently been introduced to mainland China and is seen as a cultural import from the West. From a homophobic perspective in China, the rejection of
homosexuality and queer culture is a defense of Asian traditions (Liu, 2021). P14 asserted that the acceptance of queer thought is a component of Western thought: “The queer group will challenge the social stability because most people in our society are heterosexual. The gradual visibility of the queer group challenges the heterosexual’s absolute right to a voice.” The current political climate in China, marked by rising national sentiment and a hostile attitude toward the West, has led to increased suppression of queer ideas on platforms like Douyin because queer theory is comprehended as a typical product imported from the West, as noted by P13:

The former Chinese government maintained a better relationship with Western governments, being more [tolerant] of queer topics discussion. The current government has become more conservative and strict on thought control in the 10 years since Xi Jinping came to power.

4.5. Queer users’ understanding of moderation on Douyin

Nearly all participants, particularly creators, reported experiencing moderation of queer content on Douyin. According to the participants’ accounts, Douyin provides some space for the LGBTQ+ community to post their work—as long as they do not attract widespread attention or delve into sensitive topics like politics or intimate relationships between same-sex individuals. As P20 explained, "Entertainment videos that contain some queer elements can be uploaded and shared on Douyin, but discussions of politics or human rights remain taboo topics." Similarly, P19 observed that videos depicting the daily life of same-sex couples are not heavily moderated but acknowledged that the content they see might have already been reviewed and defined as acceptable. According to the participants, Douyin assumes the role of a discerning Chinese parent, carefully selecting appropriate content for their children and rigorously filtering out any material deemed unsuitable.

When considering systemic homophobic issues in society and the state, some queer users believed that Douyin was actually supportive of them. As P20 explained: “I feel Douyin does not suppress the queer content. Instead, it is inclined to send queer content to queer groups directly, which benefits them by attracting diverse users and
expanding their user pool." P21 gave a similar interpretation of the government intervention in online platform moderation:

I think the government has a baseline for all platforms, but each platform has some freedom on the moderation strictness formulation. It is acknowledged that the present government dislikes the queer group, but Douyin has already strived for more space for queer groups compared to other platforms.

P21 then considered this in analyzing his own understanding of the platform:

Maybe Douyin gives me a wrong assumption that there are so many queer people and content on the platform because Douyin can recommend these works directly to me by learning my interests and identity. It circles everyone in their comfort zone through smart algorithms, which may explain why I assume Douyin is friendly to queer groups.

Through attempts to develop their informal and intuitive theories to explain the outcomes or consequences of technological systems, users often express various opinions and attitudes on algorithms and platforms (DeVito et al., 2017). Study participants were able to infer the causal models of how their assumptions about algorithmic functioning affect their perceptions of algorithms.

Overall, participants expressed disappointment and pessimism about the Chinese government's and society's attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community. For example, P12 stated, "Chinese culture is dominated by traditional values and is patriarchal, so I have little hope for the future of LGBTQ+ groups." Despite attempts to ignore the government's hostile actions toward the LGBTQ+ community, such as its vote against a gay rights issue at an Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) meeting in 2018, participants found ways to adapt by taking advantage of Douyin's algorithm-created cocoons. As P2 stated, "Compared to other sensitive topics, the government at least allows the LGBTQ+ community to create content and accounts on platforms, even if our works are limited in expression." P11 noted the benefit of connecting with others in the community through Douyin, stating, "Although not all LGBTQ+ content is allowed, I at least know that there are others like me on the platform."
The sentiment expressed by P13 is reflective of the attitudes held by many queer content creators in the study. In response to suppression, P13 was determined to continue elevating his voice:

Despite the restrictions on producing queer content on Douyin, I will continue to use more nuanced language and expressions to ensure that my voice is heard. I believe that what I am doing is of value to my community, and I will not give up until the official entity, whether it be Douyin or the state government, completely prohibits queer content online.

5. Discussion

Participants in the study tended to attribute the moderation of queer content on Douyin to social norms rather than the platform itself. With more than 6 billion daily users, participants understood that it must be challenging for Douyin to strike a balance between mainstream values and the visibility of marginalized groups. The participants agreed that Douyin is primarily viewed as an entertainment platform, much like TikTok in the United States, which is its sibling platform under the ownership of ByteDance (Vaterlaus & Winter, 2021). However, with such a large user base, the two platforms have transformed into a virtual society where nearly all topics in the physical world are present. Short-video-format platforms like TikTok and Douyin, unlike text-focus platforms like Twitter and Weibo, which were more popular decades ago, can better engage users and have improved content retention (Lim et al., 2020), thereby elevating and drawing attention to important and pressing topics. Because the Chinese public values traditional culture and family concepts over queer culture, the participants in the study recognized that videos promoting traditional culture and heteronormative content have a higher possibility of showing on their and their friends' For You Page (FYP) feeds than queer content, and they interpreted this phenomenon as a compromise between the platform and social norms. Participants understood that for the sake of business development, Douyin would need to cater to social norms through algorithms and moderation, sacrificing the interests of its marginalized users in part to avoid public criticism. As described by Karizat et al. (2021), the algorithm acts as a strainer, granting privilege to welcomed identities while marginalizing disliked identities on FYP feeds; the
Identity Strainer Theory was developed to explain this phenomenon on TikTok, but it is equally relevant to Douyin. In China, social norms cling to traditional binary gender views and heterosexual family concepts, which are sustained persistently by the conservative and older generation. This is in line with Liu's (2021) observation of Baidu Tieba in 2017 that the homophobia stigmatized the LGBTQ+ group through their interpretation of Chinese traditional heteronormative values. According to one participant (P19), Douyin administrators likely want to allow people to create content freely and cover more groups, bringing more profits to the company. However, if they were to do so, they may also face criticism from the public and suffer losses of other revenue.

The Chinese government, in placing a strong emphasis on traditional cultures, promotes these traditional values by suppressing subcultures on online platforms. Freedom of speech and freedom of expression based on the First Amendment relationships between online platforms and governments in the US to be relatively independent on the legal level (Abbasi & Sharqi, 2015), meaning that platforms have a degree of freedom to eliminate discrimination or bias against marginalized groups. However, in China the situation is different. The state exerts control over the entire online space by conducting regular meetings with platform executives, removing unruly platforms, and even shutting down platforms such as Neihan Duanzi (Gallagher & Miller, 2021). Thus, the government's attitude greatly influences the direction of the platforms. This is evidenced by the understanding of participants P6, P7, P8, and P12, who asserted that Douyin administrators are subject to the Chinese government and even fear state power. As P13 noted, the platform moderators' unfriendliness toward queer groups is a result of the government's increased conservatism in recent years.

The participants in the study identified that the Chinese government's promotion of traditional Chinese values and censorship of queer cultures are driven by its concern for potential social instability resulting from low marriage and birth rates. This is rooted in Confucianism's state–family project, which regards the nation as a larger family and pressures citizens to act in the state's interest (Wang, 2020). The CCP sees the abstraction of Communist theories as being too far removed from the public and instead envisions itself as the natural guardian of Chinese cultural heritage. In concert with the
patriarchal family structure, this helps to maintain its authoritarian legitimacy (Kubat, 2018; Wang, 2020). According to the participants, the promotion of diverse and non-normative family models by queer cultures is perceived as a threat to the stability of the CCP’s regime. To thrive within the dictatorship system, Douyin must comply with the government's guidelines and limit the representation of user groups that are viewed as heterodox by the state. Despite some limitations, queer individuals are not entirely restricted from expressing themselves on this platform. There remains a gray area where they can voice their opinions as long as they avoid crossing various unclear boundaries. Therefore, queer creators must develop their folk theories to test the limits and determine the appropriate boundaries in order to maintain a presence.

Faced with censorship on Douyin, queer creators have devised strategies to maintain visibility that are both similar and distinct from the strategies of their peers on TikTok. These strategies mainly involve reposting, recapping, and re-creating removed accounts (Simpson & Semaan, 2021). However, the participants in the study found these methods to be largely ineffective. Instead, they drew from their experiences on text-format platforms, using morphs as an alternative form of pre-existing words or phrases (Chen et al., 2013). Additionally, P13, for example, compiled a manual that includes sensitive topics and words that may be moderated, based on previous observations and experiences. During the content creation process, participants engaged in self-censorship, adapting their content based on their understanding of societal expectations. For example, they avoided controversial topics such as same-sex marriage and obscured intimate scenes with their partners; in this way, the fear and anxiety of potential state-imposed stress prompted the participants to intentionally adopt self-censorship mechanisms to avoid more significant issues (Zhou, 2017). In contrast to the dissatisfaction of TikTok users with Douyin's algorithmic paternalism (DeVito, 2022), the participants in the study displayed a high degree of understanding of Douyin's protection system. This understanding echoes a quote from the People’s Daily as cited by Song (2021): "Regardless of the legal status of LGBTQ individuals in society, they must conform to heterosexist social conventions and refrain from disrupting established social harmony, even if it means sacrificing their own rights and entitlements.” The narratives of queer participants reveal that their objectives on Douyin
are not about resistance but rather about survival. Some participants, despite the heteronormative environment, believed that as long as they were "good" homosexuals who followed social rules set by heterosexuals, they would eventually be accepted by society. Faced with the challenges posed by censorship on Douyin, members of the queer community have had to adopt a range of strategies to make themselves visible to a wider public. Despite their efforts, many participants expressed feelings of insecurity that the algorithm-enforced "safe zones" created by Douyin are dividing marginalized groups from the wider society and effectively trapping them in a virtual jail. Twenty of the 21 participants recognized that the content on their FYP was different from that of straight people and that most heterosexuals do not have access to queer content on the platform. The impact of this situation leads the wider public to be influenced only by the narratives pushed by the government. Douyin, as a platform that has been delegated censorship powers by the authoritarian political regime, contributes to the government's effort to suppress freedom of expression and ideology in society; however, the platform also possesses a certain degree of autonomy in its operational practices (Sun & Zhao, 2022). The queer community may still be able to access and encounter queer content and individuals on Douyin in limited pockets of the population. However, this virtual jail is tenuous, and its restrictions may shrink or disappear altogether depending on the whims of the government. Through my research, I discovered that the participants in my study, all socially marginalized individuals in China, yearn for a secure and stable refuge. Despite this, they realize that permanent sanctuary is yet unavailable to them in their own country and even on their social media platform of choice.

5.1. The reason we cannot give design implications

The study findings indicate that Chinese queer communities face challenges to those documented in previous research focused on Western social media (DeVito, 2022; Haimson, Delmonaco, et al., 2021; Karizat et al., 2021; Simpson & Semaan, 2021). The platform's susceptibility to societal norms and ruling party pressure results in the suppression of visibility for socially marginalized groups, such as the queer community. This suppression is often motivated by concerns about the groups’ influence
on minors and their promotion of values that run counter to societal norms. In the Western context, scholars have attributed such suppression to the models of algorithms used by the platform and the design limitations of the platform itself. However, my research in the Chinese context suggests that moderation of queer content is not just an issue with a single platform but rather a reflection of the state's control over the promotion of ideology. My findings extend the conclusions from previous research conducted on Chinese text-focus platforms such as Sina Weibo (Liu, 2021; Yang, 2019; Zheng et al., 2022), suggesting that this systemic homophobic and transphobic bias has existed in Chinese online platform since the rise of text-focus platforms and continues to be present in the current short video-format platforms.

Thus, discussing the design implications for Douyin in relation to queer issues may be irrelevant given that the platform acts as a delegate of the state government's moderation. The Chinese state's control over queer content is subject to change based on its development and political regime, but the state is expected to retain its dominant influence over societal ideology. Regardless of the evolution of social media platforms, my research indicates that the platform administrators' attitude toward queer communities and the visibility of queer content will remain largely consistent with the attitudes and policies of the ruling Chinese party and that any design implications would only be effective if the government changed its attitudes and approach to managing queer issues.

5.2. Limitations and future work

Given the constraints of resources and time, my research was limited to 21 participants who were either creators or viewers of Douyin. As a result, the conclusions made in my study may be biased given that the participants may share similar experiences and perspectives when using the platform. Further research is needed to examine the perspectives of social media platforms in China in regard to the pressures they face from society and government. As delegated information moderators, these platforms play a crucial role in shaping the relationship between marginalized communities and the wider public. A better understanding of these platforms' views and negotiation strategies with the state on queer topics could aid the queer community in
developing more effective and rational strategies for creating the content they desire in an otherwise hostile environment.
6. References


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