Play and playfulness on the Chinese social media platform Weibo

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INTRODUCTION

Social media platform is arguably the most dynamic space where users can 'play' in authoritarian China. Drawing on Sutton-smith's (1997) analysis of the seven often-encountered rhetorics and different foci in the scholarship of play, I am conducting a multidisciplinary investigation to capture and critically analyze the diverse playful practices among different types of users on the Chinese microblogging platform Weibo.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this project mainly stems from three bodies of literature: play and game studies (Frissen et al. 2015; Glas et al. 2019; Huizinga 1955; Sutton-Smith 1997), social media and platform studies (Bucher and Helmond 2018; Poell et al. 2019), and context-specific scholarship in Chinese studies (Schneider 2019; Yang 2009).

If we take the traditional approaches in game studies as object-specific, then the study of play extends the research agenda to a broader social realm. Frissen et al. (2015) argue that digital media constitutes ludic experiences because it affords users with interactivity, multimediality, virtuality, and connectivity, while these ludic experiences allow users to experiment with their identities. Glas et al. (2019) provide insightful observations on how citizens engage in contemporary politics by play. Research in China has also termed 'playful resistance' (Huang and Liu 2022) in engaging in contentious politics and highlighting the empowering potential of play for netizens. However, limited research has scrutinized the imbalance of power relations among different players and the fragility of engaging in politics through play. Play is not only channelled as bottom-up resistance but increasingly becomes part of the Chinese state's 'ludic governmentality' (Wong et al. 2021) and 'fandom nationalism' (Liu 2019) to achieve its political goals.

RESEARCH DESCRIPTION

My main research question is 'What is play and playfulness on Chinese social media?' To answer this question, I use three empirical case studies to shed light on how different types of social media users perceive play and playfulness, and how they play with each other when playing by or with the rules.

Based on the evidence from the project, I will critically reflect on the political, economic, and cultural implications of play in digital China and the concept of play itself. By conceptualizing the social media platform as a 'playground', I also reflect on the technical affordances and how the 'playground' is co-reshaped by the platform operators and regulators ('game masters') and the various types of users ('players'). The latter refers to individual users, content-producing KOLs (Key Opinion Leaders) and influencers, and other organisational users such as state and government users.

The PhD project in progress features three case studies. The first case study explores the Chinese state's emerging 'ludic governance' strategy during the coronavirus crisis. It consolidated national identity through capitalizing play and initiating a fandom voting competition for animated construction vehicles. The second case study collects audience responses to the humorous sketch comedies on the national most-watched TV program and discusses the playful practices surrounding this media event. It demonstrates how state-produced playfulness is received among the audience and how social media users playfully engage in the re-production of mass media content.

In the third case (not yet carried out), by scrutinizing social media celebrities, I aim to establish the analytical framework of human playing with multiple dimensions of 'rules' in a platform society. It entails playing with the algorithmic rules of the platform, the socio-political and socio-cultural rules of Chinese internet 'participatory censorship' (Luo and Li 2022) and gaining popular appeal in cyberspace where diverse values coexist, and the cultural-economic rules of profiting from being internet celebrities. The conceptualization will help us understand how individual agency interacts with political-economic interests within a technological architecture in the Chinese post-socialist cultures.

The case studies cover diverse contexts of play ranging from free-form language, identity, and cultural play to rule-bounded organized and instrumental play in specific events or within certain online communities. The various forms of play take place in the same playground, and each one of them is highly attractive for their interactivity, fun, and semi-serious implications to real life. By focusing on these case studies, we can gain a better insight into what play means and what role the platform plays in the current Chinese society.

METHODOLOGY

Methodology used includes document study and interface study of the social media platform Weibo to understand its business model, its social and public functions, and general design features. For the empirical case studies, I employ digital ethnography and social media web scrapping. Drawing on Hine's (2015) conceptualization of virtual ethnography and following Taylor's (2022) reflection on the parallel of playing/doing ethnography, I have performed extensive participant observation for years on Weibo, collecting textual, visual, and informational data of public posts and account information from various types of users, and will conduct in-depth interviews with selective users.

TENTATIVE CONCLUSION AND CONTRIBUTION

Play can be disruptive (Sicart 2014), but play can also be incorporated and appropriated by the powerful to dismiss the disruption and to appeal to the audiences, although it is also risky as play defies authoritative power structures. I come to the following tentative conclusions based on current progress.

The playful mechanism (technological affordances) and playful practices (vibrant online communities and proactive prosumers) together contribute to the playful digital cultures. The playful cultures demonstrate a shift in the Chinese state-citizen relationship and enable emerging power relations on

social media. It needs careful examination regarding to what extent these emerging power relations challenge, reiterate or change the existing ones in the increasingly hybrid Chinese society that integrates online and offline lives.

Besides contributing to Chinese studies, the research also aims to contribute to social media studies through the lens of the 'ludic turn' (Raessens 2014) and to add to the game studies scholarship regarding extending the boundaries further to include research of play in non-game contexts (Gekker 2021).

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