

Understanding Active Weibo Users as Activist Publics and Their Online Communication Behaviors in China through a Trans-Border Crisis

Abstract

By conducting a qualitative textual analysis of massive Weibo posts in a trans-border Internet incident, Chou Tzuyu Flag Incident, this study uncovers how national identity, fan identity, and Weibo culture enables and constrains active Weibo users' communication behaviors. Also, this study identified that the active Weibo users tend to be the activist publics when it comes to the most of the contentious issues under the influence of Weibo culture and the larger Chinese socio-cultural context. Thus, this study contributes to the culturally and contextually sensitive perspectives in crisis communication field as well as provides practical insights for public relations practitioners regarding profiling activist publics by highlighting the significance of identity management.

Keywords: Weibo, activist publics, communication behaviors, national identity, Internet incidents

It is of prominence to understand activist publics and their communication behaviors in crises since they tend to mobilize the latent and aware publics as well as challenge the organizational legitimacy (Anderson, 1992). Traditional approaches, such as situational theory, considered publics form only in relation to an organization (Grunig & Repper, 1992; Kim & Grunig, 2011). However, increasing scholars emphasized the fluid nature of publics with the sharp rise of the amounts of online activism (Cozier and Witmer, 2001; Curtin & Gaither, 2005; Vasquez & Taylor, 2001). Activist publics tend to be those loosely grouped individuals who frequently involve in online communication on various issues without necessarily clear targets. In this vein, this study argues that the netizens—especially those active Weibo (discussed later) users—with contentious nature are more likely to be the activist publics in most of the online disputes on social problems and governmental as well as corporate misconducts in China.

Sina Weibo (Weibo)—launched in 2009 by the Sina Corporation (Sina)—is the most widely used microblogging platform in China. It now has more than 530 million registered users (Fan, 2015). Although Weibo shares some technological similarities with both Twitter and Facebook (Nip & Fu, 2016), the discourse landscape of Weibo also shows some uniquely Chinese characteristics. As a cultural institution, Weibo enables and constrains the communication behaviors of its users, which highlights the roles of active Weibo users as blasting fuse and active movers in crises (Yang, 2012). For instance, Weibo users tend to engage in online entertainment- and leisure-oriented topics in a political way (Taneja & Wu, 2014; Cairns & Carlson, 2014) due to strict Internet censorship and lack of institutionalized outlets of political participation. Besides, increasing number of issues discussed fiercely on Weibo get evolved into online activism or Internet incidents (*wangluo shijian* in Chinese). Moreover, when it comes to trans-border issues in particular, bottom-up online nationalism quickly emerges among active Weibo users. Their adversarial sentiments of nationalism are

highly concerted and can be easily aroused. These unique features of Weibo cultivate a contentious landscape and reshape the communication behaviors of its users as activist publics.

With the rapid globalization, a growing number of multinational corporations (MNCs) begin to develop their markets in China. Hence, understanding Chinese publics, especially the activist publics, and their communication behavior patterns is of great significance for MNCs in China to cultivate desirable organization-public relationships and reduce conflicts. As Anderson (1992) has suggested, the practitioners should develop their sensitivity to activist publics before they become active. Given the importance of activist publics, this study profiles active Weibo users as activist publics and uncover their online communication behaviors through a qualitative textual analysis of a great quantity of Weibo posts in a trans-border Internet incident.

Literature Review

Weibo as a Cultural Institution

According to Scott and Meyer (1994), institutions consist of formal rules and taken-for-granted cultural frameworks, symbolism, and cognitive schema, which motivate actors to behave in certain ways. When Schudson (1982) studied television in America, he considered it as a cultural institution since how people use television depends on conventions and social relations as well as the new conventions developed in the dynamics of television using. Hence, Schudson (1995) argued that “there is no television as such, but only this television or our television” (p. 54). In this sense, Weibo also works as a cultural institution, enabling and constraining its users’ communication behaviors. The everyday practices of users on Weibo cultivate a distinct culture that has some unique characteristics.

First, Weibo users tend to engage in online entertainment- and leisure-oriented discourses in a political way (Cairns & Carlson, 2014; Taneja & Wu, 2014; Yu, Asur, &

Huberman, 2011) due to the lack of institutionalized outlets of political participation and the strict Internet censorship in China. Li et al. (2015) considered that this feature of Weibo resonates with the social structure in contemporary China. On the one hand, the country's sustaining growth of economy enables people to invest more time and money on leisure and entertainment information. On the other hand, the economic growth also goes hand in hand with substantial social problems, such as government corruption, environment pollution, and wealth inequality, etc., and thereby catalyzing various social contradictions in contemporary China. However, since the institutionalized outlets of political participation like voting are extremely limited in China (Yang, 2009), Chinese publics seek for political empowerment through participating in online civic discourse. Consequently, Weibo becomes the largest public arena. Yet due to the Internet censorship, Chinese netizens are still far from being entirely free in terms of their access to political information and discussion on political issues (Faris & Villeneuve, 2008). And as a result, people prefer to "engage with the seemingly 'non-political' realm like Weibo in politically consequential ways" (Taneja & Wu, 2014, p.298).

Second, Weibo has witnessed increasing number of issues discussed fiercely later get evolved into Internet incidents (*wangluo shijian* in Chinese). Coombs and Holladay (2012) have argued that the enormous amounts of messages and potential social media viewers are critical indicators of para-crisis, forming a potential threat to organizational reputation. Closely related to social media, Coombs and Holladay (2012) defined para-crisis as "a publicly visible crisis threat that charges an organization with irresponsible or unethical behavior," which tends to escalate into a crisis later. The para-crisis normally initiates from stakeholders' public petition, which could be seen by other individuals or groups on social media through either passive exposure or active information seeking process. If others consider the prescribed petition is desirable or appropriate, they will support the call and

thereby strengthening the ability of initiators to influence the organization. In China, this phenomenon is termed as the Internet incidents, which usually start small but go viral quickly (Yang, 2012; Qiu & Chan, 2011). As “Chinese Internet censors allow a fair degree of criticism as long as netizens do not call for collective action” (Yang, 2013, p. 350), the Internet incidents tend to end up as online activism rather than turn into offline actions.

Yang (2012) depicted the major features of Chinese Internet incidents: packs of messages and responses posted on Weibo; rapid diffusion of these messages via repostings; the mixture of text with multimedia with sensational or playful emotional expressions; setting agenda for traditional media. Yang (2009a) considered the contentious nature of Chinese publics as an important contributor to the Internet incidents. Chinese netizens tend to vent frustrations over online disputes to express their internal dissatisfactions considering their suppressed emotions in offline life. Also, Internet corporations themselves actively contribute to the Internet incidents since they aim to increase the strength of their market competition and business interests by embracing controversial media events (Yang, 2009a). For instance, the hot-issue list on Weibo—like trends on Twitter—is displayed in a very eye-catching position to increase exposure as well as to encourage users to click it and join in the discussions. Moreover, like China’s largest Internet search engine Baidu, which made money (300 million Chinese yuan) by censoring negative information over the Chinese milk scandal (Yang, 2013), Sina is also widely believed to have manipulated Weibo posts to get economic profit.

Identity and Emerging Online Nationalism in Trans-Border Crisis

Social identity theorists consider identity as individual’s self-perception of a social group based on their understanding of being a group member together with shared value (Cameron, 2004; Postmes, Haslam, & Jans, 2013; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Literature in the public relations field underscores the critical roles identity play in mobilizing publics

(Henderson, 2005), segmenting publics (Sha, 2006), and increasing organizational identification (Sha, 2009), suggesting that public relations practitioners should value identity management. On the one hand, managing corporate identity has positive impacts on corporate images and reputations, which tend to generate halo effects in crises while on the other, understanding publics' identities contributes to mutual understanding and decreases the conflicts.

Besides, extant literature has also emphasized that identity is multiple, conditional, and fluid (Woodward, 1997; Wu, 2007) as well as “often intersecting and antagonistic” (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Curtin and Gaither (2006) argued that identity depends on “the situational contingencies of any given moment” as it is “formed through relations to others” (p. 69). Thus, publics might hold multiple identities at the same time while one or several identities are more salient in a concrete situation. International public relations studies highlighted the role of national identity in the relationship between local publics and MNCs (Choi & Cameron, 2005; Curtin & Gaither, 2005; Henderson, 2005). As Schlesinger (1987) suggested, “identity is as much about exclusion as it is about inclusion” (p. 235). In this sense, national identity is more likely to be aroused in relation to the MNCs and trans-border issues.

National identity of Chinese publics tends to be politicized-oriented given their contentious nature (Yang, 2012), which emphasizes the process of political struggles for power in the public arena (Kelly & Breininger, 1996). Guo (2004) suggested that there are two kinds of national identity: the cultural one and the political one. The former focuses on an authentic nation-culture community while the latter draws their frontiers based on the conception of the nation-state (Guo, 2004). As a collective identity, the politicized online nationalism can easily emerge (Cairns & Carlson, 2016; Gries, Steiger, & Wang, 2016), especially in the Sino-Japan, Sino-America, and mainland-Taiwan relationships regarding history, sovereignty, and territory (Feng & Yuan, 2014).

Although Chinese nationalism is politicized-oriented, it should not be regarded as “an outcome of government manipulation or official ideology”; rather, it is grass-rooted and bottom-up (Feng & Yuan, 2014), which is highly concerted and can be easily aroused. As the Diaoyu Island Incident¹ on Weibo has shown, active Weibo users actually took the initiative to boycotted Japan and Japanese corporations with screaming adversarial sentiments in the name of defending the nation. Therefore, it is of prominence to understand Chinese publics’ sentiments of nationalism when trans-border public relations practitioners deal with the organization-publics relationship in China.

Active Weibo Users as Activist Publics

Typical Weibo users are young, urban, and with relatively high educational level (Fan, 2015; Feng & Yuan, 2014). Though large in size (over 530 million), Weibo users only accounts for 40 percent of the total Chinese population with the substantial amounts of rural villagers in underdeveloped districts largely excluded. Feng and Yuan (2014) cautiously consider Weibo users as the middle social stratum in China. They are the beneficiaries of ongoing market reforms regarding employment, household income, education, and health care on the one hand while are also “vulnerable to the party-state authoritarian regime” concerning corruption and poor governmental governance on the other (Feng & Yuan, 2014, p. 120). Consequently, most of them are both sensitive to social justice issues and capable and motivated to speak for the less privileged social stratum (Feng & Yuan, 2014; Zhao, 2008). Western literature considers public interest groups, activist organizations, and NGOs as the main civic power against governmental and corporate unethical behaviors (e.g., McCluskey, 2008; Sommerfeldt, 2011). By contrast, Chinese government regards these groups as potential threats to the regime stability and thus tightly monitors them with suspicion (Tang & Li, 2009). As a result, these types of civic organizations are typically

¹ See Cairns & Carlson, 2016; Feng & Yuan, 2014; Gries, Steiger, & Wang, 2016.

underdeveloped in China while the active Weibo users play important roles in constraining the governmental and corporate power as activist publics.

Situational theorists conceptualized publics as people who affect or are affected by an organization (Aldoory & Sha, 2007; Grunig, 1997; Ni & Kim, 2009). Within this definition, organization is regarded as an anchor while publics are identified based solely on their relative significance to the organization (Botan & Soto, 1998). L. A. Grunig (1992) defined activist publics as “a group of two or more individuals who organize in order to influence another public or publics through action that may include education, compromise, persuasion, pressure tactics, or force” (p. 504). Noticeably, activist publics in this definition are still publics in relation to the target organization and committed to particular values, beliefs, and public interests (Aldoory & Sha, 2006).

However, other scholars have criticized this approach for failing to address the fluid nature of publics (e.g., Vasquez & Taylor, 2001) and emphasized that publics should be understood as more dynamic and loosely grouped individuals (Curtin & Gaither, 2005). Cozier and Witmer (2001) considered that communication using the Internet facilitates the emerge of new publics who actively participate in online communication on various issues without necessarily clear targets. Through this lens, the activist publics are likely to be fluid-oriented groups, who might not target specific organization but rather actively participate in those controversial issues to vent their frustrations and express their dissenting. Given the Chinese government forbids offline collective actions (Tang & Li, 2009) and censors online postings that call for collective action (King, Pan, & Roberts., 2013), the organized activist groups with specific missions and clear targets are rare. Even if there does exist some of these groups, they only play limited roles in against misconducts of government and corporations. By contrast, the government allows a fair extent of individual criticism as a way to neutralize direct challenges toward regime (Yang, 2013). Therefore, online diffused contention is the

dominant form of protesting the social problems in China. Under this circumstance, the active Weibo users tend to evolve into the fluid activist publics in most of the hot issues due to their long-time exposure and contentious nature (Yang, 2012).

Communication Behavior of the Publics on Social Media

A sizable body of literature has discussed the roles of communication on social media in changing the mode and the very nature of a variety of collective participation (Fuchs, 2014; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). Basically, three types of role are highlighted: being a way of mobilization (Breuer, Landman, & Farquhar, 2015; Harlow, 2012), a form of protest (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Morozov, 2009), and an organizing principle (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Juris, 2012).

As platforms that facilitate mobilization, social media can be used to call for both online and offline actions (Vegh, 2003). Studies showed that the most common communication behaviors social media users engage in are posting and reposting messages, launching Facebook pages and groups, using hashtags, and having real-time information exchange and discussions (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Lim, 2012; Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2012). These behaviors work to mobilize online activism but do not always turn into offline actions. The protest going from online to offline depends on a variety of factors, such as the nature and the organizational structure of the action and the sociocultural context. Harlow (2012) has identified several key communication behaviors, including the utilization of motivational frames in posts and comments, the inclusion of links connecting to relevant information such as mainstream media's news reports, the interaction through "liking" or respond to each other, and the posting of citizen journalist content .

Regarding communication behavior itself being a form of activism, we refer to activism mediated by social media. Previous research centering on Internet-mediated communication behaviors as activism mainly focuses on hacktivism, ping-storm attack, and spamming

campaign (Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2001; Meikle, 2002; Vegh, 2003). On social media like Twitter or Facebook, slacktivism becomes one of the most salient forms of mediated participation. It refers to “low-risk, low-cost activity via social media whose purpose is to raise awareness, produce change, or grant satisfaction to the person engaged in the activity (Rotman et al., 2011, p.821).” It typically included behaviors such as “liking” or “forwarding” a post or picture, joining a Facebook group, and signing online petitions (Lee & Hsieh, 2013).

Through the lens of recent actions such as Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, Bennett and Segerberg (2013) noticed that communication is becoming a prominent part of their organizational structure. They define this type of action as connective action in distinction to collective action, highlighting the organizational effect of the use of hashtag and hyperlink in the former. They suggested that the users use hashtags to coordinate messages around specific themes and direct them to designated subpopulations while use hyperlinks to point users to external resources such as news sites and activist organizations (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). Similarly, Juris (2012) noted that social media users now employ an increasingly decentralized and leaderless form of organization. Communication behaviors on social media are thus the organizational principle, connecting the publics and coordinating their participation.

However, the landscape of publics’ collective participation in China is largely different from that in Western settings. First, because of the extremely strict policy on offline demonstration and assembly in China, Internet—social media platform like Weibo in particular—is almost the arena of activism. Second, instead of street protest, Internet incident, as discussed in the previous section, is the most common form of activism in China (Yang, 2009a). Yang (2009a) has identified seven types of issues regarding Internet incident in China, including “popular nationalism, rights defense, corruption and power abuse,

environment, cultural contention, muckraking, and online charity” (p. 56). Studies investigating online activism in China showed that it is largely embodied in the communication behaviors of the netizens, which takes either a hard and violent form or a soft form (Qiu, Lin, Chiu, & Liu, 2015). Specifically, the form of hard attacks mainly includes human flesh search and burst-the-bar (i.e., repeatedly posting offensive and meaningless messages on online forums) and cyber attack while soft action mainly refers to massive discussion and large-scale online petition and voting (Qiu et al., 2015). Other research has also addressed Chinese publics’ use of social media to communicate with journalists, mainstream media, trying to capture more attention and promoting the incidents (Harp, Bachmann, & Guo, 2012). These studies offer insights into the diversified communication behaviors involved in Internet incidents of different issues and nature and based on all the discussions above; the following two research questions are proposed:

RQ1: How identity and online nationalism influence the active Weibo users’ communication behaviors over the trans-border Internet incident?

RQ2: How Weibo as a cultural institution influences the active Weibo users’ communication behavior over the trans-border Internet incident?

Method

Case Introduction: Chou Tzuyu Flag Incident

The trigger event: On January 8, 2016, Huang An (Huang), a Taiwan-born singer, posted to accuse Chou Tzuyu (Chou) as a Taiwan independence supporter using a picture where Chou held the flag of Republic of China (Taiwan) in a South Korean show as evidence. Chou was a Taiwan-born contracted entertainer of JYP (South Korean entertainment corporation). This post quickly caught the attention of active Weibo users, who were sensitive to issues of Taiwan Independence.

The lurking period: In the following two days, active Weibo users dig up the previous

videos of Chou's performance in mainland China where she did not claim herself as a Chinese when asked about her nationality. The active Weibo users also noticed that two Chinese provincial Television stations (AHTV and BTV) had invited Chou to perform on their TV programs. As such, some users accused her of gaining economic benefit from mainland China while supporting Taiwan independence without concerning mainland Chinese audience's affection. Therefore, they appealed the boycott against Chou. Later, the keyword "Chou Tzuyu" kept sticking on the Weibo hot-issue list.

The brewing period: From January 10 to 12, active Weibo users protested against both Chou and the firms in cooperations with her, such as BTV and AHTV as well as those employed her to endorse products. Given the desperate appeals of active Weibo users, nearly all corporations suspended cooperation with Chou and JYP.

The explosion period: On January 13, a screenshot of a conversation between the agents of AHTV and JYP was posted, showing "*JYP prefers not to involve in political controversial and cannot make a choice between China and Taiwan,*" which triggered the massive online activism against JYP. This issue evolved into an Internet incident.

First JYP response: denial. On 9 p.m. January 13, *JYPnation* (official Weibo account) posted to *deny Chou had any pro-independence speech and claimed Chou had not formed any political views given her young age (16).* This defensive response escalated the online activism. Active Weibo users appealed to boycott all JYP's entertainers and products in China. Accordingly, the stock price of JYP declined in a straight line. Next morning, the official account of *China Communist Youth League* (an organ of Chinese central government) posted to protect Hong Kong-born JYP entertainer Jackson Wang from protest since he consistently claimed himself as a Chinese. Weibo users regarded this post as the viewpoint of the central government.

Second JYP response: apology. On January 14, *JYPnation* stated that Chou “firmly support One-China policy” and JYP would prevent anything similar from happening with several apologies for hurting Chinese publics’ feelings. Yet, Chinese publics considered the statement as untimely and insincere while Taiwan people holding different political standpoint also irritated Chinese publics on Weibo.

Third JYP response: diversion. *JYPnation* informed the fans that the planned fan meeting of *Nichkhun* was canceled by the organizer as he is an entertainer of JYP.

Fourth JYP response: full apology. On January 15, *JYPnation* released a video where Chou reading an apology letter in a weak voice without any makeup, saying “There is only one China. Both sides of the Strait are one. I’m always proud of being a Chinese...I felt sorry for hurting my company and the netizens of both sides...” Soon after, *JYPnation* also posted an apology letter written by JYP's president, where he apologized for the incident and indicated that he had learned that “MNCs need to respect the sovereignty, culture, history, and people’s feelings of the host country.”

The aftermath period: The stock price of JYP declined to the bottom in recent years on Jan 15 and began to recover the next day—the same day when Taiwan General Election was held. The official mainstream media, like *People’s Daily*, commented that “Chou is an innocent Chinese girl” and *CCTV* began to broadcast her performance video. Sina censored numerous postings given its potential political influence. It was believed that this Incident had impacts on Taiwan General Election (Wikipedia, 2016).

Admittedly, this case is with some unique characteristics—a simple post to report Taiwan Independence supporter sparked an Internet incident in mainland China, which had influenced the official attitudes of both sides of Strait. However, it also presents some typical features of active Weibo users and their online communication behaviors in the trans-border issue under the Chinese socio-cultural context. For instance, Weibo is the main discursive

field where the whole dynamics of the incident took place and active Weibo users as activist publics mobilize this incident. Regarding popular nationalism among active Weibo users, the attitudes and behaviors of Chou and JYP were considered as inappropriate. Once related to the issue of state territorial integrity (especially, Hong Kong and Taiwan), a furious debate will be triggered on Weibo, such as online dissensions on the political stance of Hong Kong actor Wong He (Chan, 2016) and Taiwan actor Wang Ta-Lu (Apple Daily, 2015). Hence, this case has both theoretical and practical implications with regard to the understanding of Chinese active Weibo users as activist publics and their communication behaviors.

Data and Research Method

This study employs qualitative textual analysis to examine the communication behaviors pattern of Chinese active Weibo users over a trans-border Internet incident. From January 8 to 16, 2016, a computer program and relevant scripts on Linux were used to capture real-time² data on Weibo posts by querying the Sina Weibo Open API (Application Programming Interface) once every half an hour. These real-time data were saved in our local computer. To create the data corpus for this study, we first used the keyword “*Chou Tzuyu*” and “*JYP*” as the keywords³ to filter the above saved data. Next, we removed duplicates based on the identity code of Weibo posts considering each post has a unique 16-digit code. As a result, the data corpus consist of 64,926 posts, among which, 37,846 include the keywords “*Chou Tzuyu*” and “*elbow fish*” and 27,080 contain “*JYP*” and “*soy sauce bottle*.”

Analysis and Findings

Nationalism, Fan Identity, and Communication Behavior

² In rigorous sense, they are not genuine real-time data considering there are three-to-five-minute time delay between Sina releasing the Weibo posts to API and Weibo users publishing their posts.

³ From January 13 to 17, Sina censored posts with these two keywords either since Sina worried this issue would evolve into an online collective activism or because Sina was paid. During this period, active Weibo users employed homophones “*elbow fish*” and “*soy sauce bottle*” to stand for Chou Tzuyu and JYP, respectively. Thus, since January 13, we used four keywords for data capture, namely “*Chou Tzuyu*,” “*JYP*,” “*elbow fish*,” and “*soy sauce bottle*.”

Posts and discourses generated by the users constitute a site that embodies various identities of the active Weibo users since identity informs self-presentations and actions (Chrysochoou, 2003; Sha, 2006). Our analyses on the Weibo posts over Chou Tzuyu's Flag Incident reveals that nationalism, as a collective national identity, and unexpected fan identity shape active Weibo users' communication behaviors. The two identities, emerging at different stages, intertwined and negotiated with each other during the ongoing process.

As a collective national identity, nationalism appears to be the key factor in this incident under the increasingly intensified tension between mainland China and Taiwan. The initial trigger is a post published by Huang, an outdating Taiwan-born singer who lives in mainland China taking monitoring and reporting "politically incorrect" celebrities as his "occupation" to capture publics' attention on Weibo. This post directly pointed to the "incorrectness" of Chou's national identity:

"A Taiwanese girl named Chou Tzuyu waved the flag of the Republic of China (Taiwan) at a Korean TV program last year. I had published a post to report her behavior back then. However, her fans sent me a private message, hoping I could show some mercy. After that, Sanlih Entertainment Television (a pro-Taiwan-independence TV station) desperately built her into the pride of Republic of China to win honor for the 'country.' The Korean band with one pro-Taiwan-independence girl and three Japs will perform on AHTV's Lunar New Year's Gala soon. Those who are opposed to their performance, please forward this post."

Clearly shown in Huang's post is a pair of antithetical national identity—the Chinese identity against the Taiwanese one. For a long time, national identity has been a major cleavage between mainlanders and Taiwanese arising from the political rivalry between both sides of Strait. Those who support Taiwan Independence recognizing themselves as Taiwanese only while a vast majority of mainland Chinese stand by the notion of "one

China,” the idea of which has gradually become one important aspect of the Chinese national identity (Harding, 1993). Moreover, the active Weibo users did quickly grasp the implications in Huang’s post with two major voices emerged at the beginning of the incident, both of which are explicitly concerned with national identity:

“The thing about Chou being a pro-independence supporter is a principled matter...For anyone who considers himself a Chinese, the issue should be beyond debate. We live in the land of China. Saying you understand Taiwan independence supporters?!”

“Chou herself did not explicitly state her political stand. It is Huang who tries to confuse the public, labeling Chou as a pro-independence advocate.”

As can be seen, though the publics perceive the issue differently with some go right to the heart of the matter of national identity while others question whether there is a real “problem,” national identity is evidently implied in both voices. Our data shows that national identity shapes the publics’ communication behavior in two prominent ways, one is embodied in the information selection and forwarding process, and another is in the resource mobilizing process. Both are about the official organizations since to some extent they are taken as epitomizing the national identity.

First, although the active Weibo users frequently criticize the party-controlled media for lacking credibility (Lagerkvist, 2010), they tend to trust, consume, and circulate information provided by the accounts of these official media on Weibo when it comes to incidents related to popular nationalism like this incident. Specifically, the most frequently reposted posts over this incident on Weibo were originally published by Blue-V accounts (i.e., verified brand/community accounts including government bureaus, mainstream media, and established corporation, etc.), of which the official media organizations accounted for a large part. Even a large amount of original posts of the active Weibo users providing information

on Chou and the Flag Incident contained similar descriptive keywords that were used by these Blue-V accounts. In other words, the users tend to pick up and circulate the information—by reposting or modeling it—provided by official media organizations on Weibo. National identity shapes this behavior at two levels: first, these media organizations are believed to share the same identity as they are party-state-controlled; second, the behavior of taking official media's side itself embodies national identity as official media is constructed by the nation as an important part of national symbol.

Secondly, it is also worth noting the way that national identity has shaped the active Weibo users' communication behavior regarding resources mobilization. A close examination of accounts that were most frequently mentioned using the @ sign shows that publics frequently resort to official organizations, especially those state-run media. We observed that the official Weibo accounts of CCTV, People's Daily, and Global Times were among the most mentioned ones in the posts published by Weibo users. Apart from using the @ sign to mention the accounts, active Weibo users also leave a large number of messages on the page of these accounts, calling for their response. The behavior of using @ sign and leaving messages in these particular accounts' comment area is clearly also a result of strong national identity, which makes the publics to take nation-controlled organizations as trustworthy backers.

However, although national identity has continuously acted as a dominant factor in this incident, new identity emerged after the agent of AHTV posted a screenshot of a conversation, including a sentence "*JYP prefers not to involve in politics and cannot make a choice between China and Taiwan.*" Following this post, the contentious discussion which was originally only centered on Chou herself began to extend to JYP and other entertainers of JYP with the publics calling for "a complete shut out of JYP." Fan identity, in response, rapidly came into the picture at this stage with two groups of JYP fans—those of Wang

Jackson and Nichkhun—acted most actively in this process as both had their forthcoming activities in China canceled due to the incident. Here is a post published by a fan of JYP entertainers:

“I do not care about the backlash against Chou because I am sick of Taiwan independence too. However, please don’t get innocent people involved, either 2PM (the band Nichkhun belongs to) or GOT7 (the band Wang belongs to). How can you ignore their efforts all these years just because of Chou? Chou does not represent JYP and other entertainers should not be responsible for her behavior.”

Fanship—“an affiliation in which a great deal of emotional significance and value are derived from group membership” (Hirt, Zillmann, Erickson, & Kennedy, 1992, p. 725)—is the core of fan identity. In this incident, fan identity only significantly differs from national identity regarding the group that is being identified with. We noticed that fan identity is not in parallel with national identity; rather forms on the promise that it does not contradict with or have potential threat on national identity. This explains why the fan identity was not strongly shown in Chou’s fan group—many of her fans clearly stated that there is “no idol when it comes to the national issue” since the incident first broke out. Similarly, the fan groups of other JYP entertainers voiced for and tried to protect their idols solely on the basis that their idols did not hurt the national sentiments or go against the collective national identity.

Different from national identity, fan identity shapes the communication behavior by making the fan groups to form a temporarily loosely networked community. These fans connected themselves together through using similar hashtags or keywords in their posts to discursively fight against non-fans. They did not forward each other’s posts or mention each other using the @ sign to form the front since there was no notable center or core accounts of the community. Rather, they use hashtags like #feel sorry for Nichkhun# and #feel sorry for Wang Jackson# or similar keywords to link themselves as a group. Under these hashtags, the

fans, informed by their fan identity, not only collectively criticized non-fans for going too far but also successfully mobilized those who did not actively participate in the incident before to get involved after seeing the hashtag. Finally, an explosion of fan's posts in opposition to anti-JYP movement appeared on Weibo hot-issue list.

Nationalism and fan identity thus have clearly shaped active Weibo users' communication behaviors related to this Incident in different ways. While national identity leads the publics act around the accounts of official organizations, fan identity serves as a basis for the fan groups to self-organize via hashtags and keywords.

Weibo Culture and Communication Behavior

As Weibo embodies some unique cultural characteristics, we conceptualize it as a cultural institution. The specific culture on Weibo is manifested in various online incidents on the one hand, while also inform the active users' communication behavior on the other. To answer how Weibo culture is manifested in this incident, we mainly identified two dimensions. First, the users are sensitive to censorship and able to quickly notice the related posts being censored by Sina; second, the contentious sentiments and the playful spirit of the active Weibo users marks as a prominent part that defines the whole incident.

Specifically, after the relevant hashtags appear on the top of the hot-issue list for more than 24 hours, on January 13, Sina deleted them either because it attempts to avoid the potential collective action based on the Internet censorship policy or out of its economic interests, namely, Sina was paid by corporations. The active Weibo users quickly noticed the disappearance of the hashtags and expressed their angry on Sina:

"#Boycott the actor who supports Taiwan Independence# Ridiculous! Sina! How dare you to protect Taiwan-Independence supporter! The hashtag of 'Chou Tzuyu Taiwan Independent supporter' is deleted. How fast JYP bribed Sina with money! How strong background Chou has! Sina, JYP, BTV, do you declare war against

us? Those Taiwan Independence supporters have already occupied the TV of our Capital (refer to BTV)! Regardless of how many you delete, we will post as many again!”

“Damn it! The hashtag of ‘Chou Tzuyu Taiwan Independent supporter’ ranked top. How dare you to delete them! We should change it to a different hashtag. I cannot believe you deleted them all. What’s wrong with China? Corruption! BTV, you go so far as to go down on your knees to protect Taiwan Independence dog.”

Sina’s censorship has not only been realized by active Weibo users quickly but also activated their sensitivity toward corruption. Boycotting corruption is also a main type of issues among online activism (Yang, 2009a). Active Weibo users believe that if the hashtag is deleted, that is the sign of being censored by Sina due to its business interest. Consequently, the active Weibo users tend to fight against the relevant organizations, like Sina, BTV, and JYP in this post with the long-term dissatisfaction toward corruption in contemporary China. Noticeably, these users developed an acute sensitivity to tell business censorship from political one with their long-time immersion in Weibo. Later, in response, part of active users began to use homonyms like “*elbow fish*” to refer to Chou Tzuyu and “*soy sauce bottle*” to refer to JYP to evade the censorship while other users also located the relevant information using new keywords. This whole process represents an important aspect of Weibo culture and Chinese publics’ activism online.

Secondly, Weibo culture has also embodied in the contentious sentiments and the playfulness of the public (Yang, 2009b). In this incident, these elements can be easily identified in the posts over Chou Tzuyu and JYP with sometimes irrational bad languages and the frequent use of sarcastic words. The following post is an example:

“JYP, you are dead meat! Your president really lacks both IQ and EQ! The entertainers managed by your company got into trouble one by one. Is your

company fucking doomed like this?... The bloody stupid TWICE please also stop implicating other JYP entertainers!”

What behind the strong emotional involvement is not only the dissatisfaction toward the incident but also the collective catharsis and revelry. In other words, other than concerns about the crisis itself, there was playfulness involved in this process of voicing in an incident (Yang, 2012). In fact, even before Weibo had been launched, this kind of “playful spirit” has already been found on blogs in China, which is characterized by a mixture of uncertainty, playfulness, and rebelliousness and imprinted with irony, mockery, and sarcasm (Yu, 2007). This spirit of the Chinese publics is clearly observable in this incident—sarcastic connotations or expressions like “we fragile Chinese” (*bo li xin in Chinese*), “we strong-country people” (*qiang guo ren in Chinese*), or “we mainlanders are all brawn and no brains and always waiting for companies like JYP to earn our money without showing respect” etc. flooded in the posts.

The above discussions have actually already shed some lights on how Weibo culture shapes the active Weibo users’ communication behaviors during this incident regarding the particular content communicated by the publics. Focusing particularly on the pattern of communication behavior, our analysis shows that it has been greatly influenced by both the hot-issue promotion feature of Weibo as well as the political significance the publics have attached to this social media platform.

To start with, we noticed that the publics—as active Weibo users who are familiar with Weibo’s hot-issue list function and its role of agenda setting—made use of Weibo’s hot-issue promotion feature and took it as a channel to make their voice heard. Specifically, the publics did so by using and calling for others to use the uniform hashtag of #Chou Tzuyu Taiwan independence supporter# to make this incident a hot-trend issue on Weibo:

“Though #Chou Tzuyu# is on the hot-issue list, there is no ‘Taiwan Independence supporter’ in the tag. Please use hashtag #Chou Tzuyu Taiwan Independence supporter# to let more people know whom she is.”

“I can finally rest myself for a while as the hashtag #Chou Tzuyu Taiwan Independence supporter# finally gets shown on the hot-issue list.”

Moreover, this communication behavior did manage to mobilize more users to participate in the incident. Posts suggested that a huge number of publics only participated in the discussion because they habitually scan and join in the discussions on hot issues on Weibo:

“#Chou Tzuyu Taiwan independence supporter# Totally have no idea who she is. Anyway, if she really supports Taiwan independence as the hashtag says, I should support this topic.”

“#Chou Tzuyu Taiwan independence supporter# Just see it on Weibo hot-issue list. Indeed, there should be no idol when it comes to national issue. Everyone who is against the greater China should get out of our motherland!”

As suggested, the “hot-issue list culture” on Weibo led the initially active participants to make use of the hashtag to mobilize more publics to participate in the incident on the one hand while also exposed more users to the hashtag as a result of the efforts made by the former on the other. It has thus formed an expanding circle.

The politicized Weibo culture is illustrated in the information sharing and circulating process. First, while we have discussed how the publics’ tendency to resort to the accounts of official organizations is influenced by their national identity in previous section, we also noticed the close relationship between this tendency and the politicized Weibo culture. Closely analyzing the posts, we found that the higher administrative level an official organization is of, the more frequently they tend to be resorted to by the publics. For

example, national level media organizations like CCTV is much more frequently mentioned than provincial level ones. This well demonstrates how Weibo as a social media platform is engaged in by the Chinese publics in a political way: at the basic level, the publics maintain the legitimacy of the authority and official organizations; further, the communication behavior of the publics follow the existing hierarchy of political power. Secondly, influenced by Weibo's political culture, the publics also took communication actions to politicize the incident or stress the political aspect of the incident when sharing information. A prominent example is that when posting or reposting contents introducing Chou and JYP's background or this whole incident, many publics would add external links. Most of the links were news reports or materials published by external sites criticizing Chou's "political incorrectness," that is, her holding of the national flag of the Republic of China. Clearly, these links are added to help users who are unfamiliar with the incident to locate it politically, which well illustrates how the political culture on Weibo has influenced the communication behavior of the publics. In short, the distinct cultural characteristics of Weibo embody in the publics' reaction to the censorship and the contentious sentiments and sarcasm shown in their discourses and concretely shapes their communication behavior patterns with regard to mobilization.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article reveals how national identity and fan identity as well as Weibo culture enable and constrain active Weibo users' communication behaviors over a trans-border Internet incident, namely, Chou Tzuyu Flag Incident. Through examining the dynamics of publics' communication behaviors, this article suggests understanding active Weibo users as activist publics under the Chinese socio-cultural context. Thus, this article addresses the calls for culturally and contextually sensitive perspectives in crisis communication field (Avery, Lariscy, Kim, & Hocke, 2010; Huang, Wu, & Cheng, 2015) and providing practical insights

for public relations practitioners.

First, online nationalism, as collective national identity, is salient and dominant to mobilize the active Weibo users in this trans-border incident involving mainland-Taiwan relationship. Also, the national identity of active Weibo users in this incident is politicized-oriented with clear nation-state notion rather than values of the cultural community. Our analysis shows that national identity shapes active Weibo users' information selection and forwarding as well as their resource mobilization. On the one hand, although these users typically distrust the state-controlled media, they tend to select and forward information provided by the official media on Weibo given their politically correct position. On the other hand, they frequently seek for attention and resources from state-run media by employing @ sign and posting comments.

Second, the unexpected fan identity plays a counter-power role in fighting against the abuse of nationalism in this incident. Admittedly, fan identity is inconsistent with corporate identity, but we cautiously take the halo impacts of fan identity on the idols in this incident as being similar to that of corporate identity in crises. Previous studies showed that a desirable corporate identity—"an organization's central distinctive, and enduring character, expressed through its members' interpretations and actions" (David, Kline, & Dai, 2005, p.292)—cultivates favorable corporate image, reputation, and organization-public relations, which mitigate the negative harm on corporations in crises (Timothy & Holladay, 2006). In this incident, fan groups—motivated by their fan identity—build a loosely networked community without notable center using similar hashtags and keywords to fight against non-fans and mobilize not-yet-active fans. However, it is worth noting that fan identity of users co-exists with their national identity with the latter as the dominant ones.

Third, Weibo as a cultural institution shapes active users' communication behaviors on Weibo. To begin with, active Weibo users are highly sensitive to censorship and are not only

able to realize censorship quickly but also knows how to bypass censorship to consume and spread information, such as using homonyms. Also, they tend to tell business censorship from political one. The former usually activated their negative sentiments toward corruption, which is also one of major types of issue among online activism (Yang, 2009a). If the active Weibo users believe that Sina censors Weibo posts due to their business interests, they prefer fight more fiercely against the relevant organizations with their long-term dissatisfaction toward corruption in contemporary China. Moreover, the active Weibo users are highly mobilized by the Weibo hot-issue list and, in turn, employs this list to set agenda and make their voice heard. For example, they called for using consistent hashtags to make it stuck on the list and thereby mobilizing potential participants. Besides, the active Weibo users are highly involved in the controversial issues not only due to their dissenting toward the issue itself but also due to their contentious nature and playful spirit. In this incident, these elements are manifested in massive Weibo posts with irrational bad languages and sarcastic words.

Finally, by examining the dynamics of active Weibo users' communication behaviors, we conclude that active Weibo users tend to be activist publics in most of the controversial issues in China. They are more likely to discover the contentious issues earlier and mobilize other publics actively through their online communication behaviors. Admittedly, the active Weibo users are a large corpus; this study thus cannot really draw a boundary of them clearly. However, this article does shed lights on their characteristics as a collective actor under the influence of unique Weibo culture and Chinese sociocultural context. Besides, this research also underscores the fluid and non-organized features of activist publics in China. Different from the conventional wisdom of publics in relation to organization, this study argues that the active Weibo users as activist publics do not necessarily form with clear targets in mind; instead, they tend to participate in most controversial issues in China.

Practical Implications

Anderson (1992) suggested that the public relations practitioners should develop a sensitivity to identify activist publics before they become active, concerning their potential negative influence on organizations. This study profiles the active Weibo users as activist publics and uncovers their communication behaviors patterns in China, which benefits public relations practitioners, especially those from MNCs, in terms of their understanding of Chinese activist publics. Also, this study sheds lights on the importance of understanding publics' multiple identities and organizational identity management. Although fan identity is different from corporate identity, it does exert desirable impacts on the idols from JYP. Thus, we suggested public relations practitioners cultivate their favorable corporate identity.

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