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# Collective Identity and Ethical Dilemmas Among College Students in Chinese Anonymous Online Communities: Sensory Stimulation and Media Effects of Online Exposure Discourse

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the dynamics of viral social media exposure posts within anonymous online communities in China, specifically concentrating on college students. Based on theories of effervescence and collective frenzy, this research probes into the emotional triggers and functions of group polarization and social identity reconstruction in the digital sphere. Adopting a mixed-methods approach that integrates semi-structured interviews and surveys, it evaluates participants' interactions with online exposure. The anticipated findings are expected to shed light on how factors like group identity, anonymity, and virality cultivate a carnival-like ambiance in social media exposure. These posts function as instruments for mobilization, provide support for social and political causes, and act as platforms for community building and identity formation. They also offer psychological and emotional outlets, aiding users in processing and expressing personal and societal grievances. The paper aims to deepen people's understanding of how digital interactions influence collective identities and social behaviors.

**Keywords:** social media exposure; online communities; collective frenzy; identity reconstruction

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Topic and Justification

Social media platforms, forums, blogs, and news websites offer unprecedented access to information and avenues for expressing opinions, significantly expanding public discourse and participation (Koltay, 2019). Social media exposure posts that reveal undisclosed or lightly discussed information about individuals, organizations, events, and issues have become widely popular on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These posts are crucial in bringing vital information to the forefront and shaping public awareness and debate (Rijo & Waldzus, 2023) .

Researchers like Moussa et al. (2020) highlight the role of online exposure in enabling individuals to voice dissent, critique authority, and uncover injustices. The enthusiastic participation of young people in these discussions is particularly significant, demonstrating the breadth and impact of such movements.

However, not all online exposures are accurate or just. Often, sensational content crafted to attract viewers can lead to widespread public discourse that, while engaging, may only sometimes be reliable. This phenomenon can snowball, spreading virally through texts, presentations, videos, and other digital media, amplifying discussions

across various online communities and leading to significant social impact—both informative and misleading (Gibson et al., 2014; Schmid et al., 2024).

In communication studies, social media exposure posts sometimes pose challenges, particularly when rapid increases in participant numbers lead to a collective frenzy. In such cases, discussions can escalate, inciting verbal confrontations among groups and showcasing the intense group behaviours that emerge in digital interactions (Rimé & Páez, 2023).

This study employs theories of effervescence and collective frenzy, which are well-established in analyzing the dynamics of online communications. These theories will be applied to deeply explore the collective emotions and behaviours that arise when individuals and groups engage with shared online events or information, providing a comprehensive understanding of online exposure's social and psychological effects.

### 1.2. Theoretical Significance

Online exposure articles use sensitive vocabulary to trigger strong emotional reactions from the public towards certain phenomena, leading to widespread scrutiny in society (Abraham, 2022). Azzaakiyyah (2023) supports online exposure articles have become an undeniable phenomenon in information dissemination and social interaction. From a communication studies perspective, the rapid spread and emotional engagement triggered by online exposure articles represent the application of communication theories in the digital media context.

This study aims to analyze online exposures by applying theories of effervescence and collective frenzy. Applying the theories of collective frenzy and effervescence to the analysis of online exposures helps explore power structures in the online environment (Sanjna Sebastian, 2024), the modes of interaction between individuals and the collective, and potential risks, providing different perspectives for understanding social change in the digital media environment (Bandura, 2009). Furthermore, by focusing on college students as a specific group, this study further refines the analysis of the online exposure phenomenon. Overall, the theoretical significance of this study lies in its enrichment and deepening of existing theories of collective behaviour and effervescence, as well as providing a new theoretical framework to understand and analyse the complexities of online exposure phenomena in a digital society.

### 1.3. Practical Significance

This study contributes to theoretical understanding and has significant practical implications for improving the online environment, guiding policy formulation and enhancing public participation. The college student demographic, as digital natives, is especially active on social media and anonymous platforms, making their engagement with online exposure narratives particularly noteworthy.

By delving into the behavioural patterns, emotional responses, and ethical considerations of college students within anonymous online communities, this research aims to analyse the communal frenzy induced by online exposures and provide empirical foundations and strategic recommendations for managing information dissemination in the digital society. The study highlights the potential positive impact of online exposure activities in promoting social justice and public participation while acknowledging the accompanying risks and challenges.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Evolution of Online Exposures

In today's rapidly advancing information technology landscape, online exposure, as a means of information dissemination, is undergoing unprecedented changes in form and platform. Greer and Mensing (2013) support that the formats of online exposure have become increasingly diverse with the evolution of internet technology, from simple text

posts to complex presentations containing multimedia elements. The ways of exposure changes in form reflect technological advancements and illustrate the evolution of user expression and participation methods (Nazeer et al., 2024).

Initially, online exposures primarily relied on text dissemination, taking the form of text posts on forums and social media, similar to the traditional "big-character posters"(Lee, 2024). The "big-character poster" exposure mode, originating from social movements in mid-20th century China, involved displaying large, hand-written or printed sheets of paper to reveal issues or criticize policies, showcasing traditional forms of public critique and social oversight, which is "big-character poster" is straightforward and conducive to rapid information transmission (Ye et al., 2017).

The rise of self-media further propelled the shift in information dissemination agents from traditional authoritative platforms to individual self-media entities (Sun & Zhao, 2022). Exposure tactics have evolved from traditional methods, such as the "March 15th exposures" conducted by official media, to the more decentralized and personal avenues provided by social media platforms. Platforms like "Weibo" and "Little Red Book" have empowered individuals to share their insights and experiences through "confession walls" and public accounts, marking a significant shift towards voluntary public discourse. Introducing multimedia content on these platforms, including PDFs and PPTs, has further enriched self-media, introducing a new facet known as online exposure (Oh et al., 2018).

### 2.2. Motivations and Forms of Online Exposure

Online exposure activities display complex motivations, encompassing actions aimed at justice and social change and those driven by personal motives. On the one hand, some online exposure activities are motivated by the pursuit of justice and the desire for societal transformation (Jost et al., 2018). Individuals or groups publicize political corruption, business fraud, or social inequality through online platforms to arouse public attention. In this aspect, Online exposure can enhance transparency and public oversight and instigate policy changes or shifts in societal attitudes (Brezzi et al., 2021). Southerland (2023) support online exposure are considered a form of "citizen oversight" in the digital age, reflecting the modern civic spirit of engaging in societal issue discussions and advocating for change using digital technologies. For example, the "315 Exposure Evening" uses television to spotlight consumer rights violations, leveraging media power to stimulate public participation in oversight, promote corporate integrity, and improve product quality. For instance "315 Exposure Evening" highlighted fraudulent practices within the milk tea in 2024.

Secondly, online exposure can also stem from more personal motives, revealing how digital platforms, while amplifying individual voices, can also become a way for deception, such as personal revenge, reputation disputes (Dym & Fiesler, 2020). For instance, a well-known internet celebrity in China, Xiao Huijun, falsely accused her boss of obscene. .These exposure activities involve public disclosure of personal private information without sufficient evidence or posting unverified accusations based on personal emotions. Such online exposures can quickly gain attention on the internet, spark public discussion, and raise ethical and legal issues related to privacy infringement and defamation (Sun & Zhao, 2022).

### 2.3. Online Exposure and Effervescence Theory

Effervescence theory, initially proposed by the sociologist Emile Durkheim in his study of collective behaviour and social cohesion, is used to describe the collective emotions and behaviours that emerge within social collectives under specific circumstances (Pizarro et al., 2022). In certain social events or rituals, the interaction and resonance among individuals can produce a solid shared emotion, which can cause collective behaviours in effervescence, displaying an intense vitality and unity not typically seen in everyday life (Pizarro et al., 2022).

The group euphoria triggered by online exposure articles, especially within social media and online communities, can be seen as a form of virtual Effervescence in modern society (McCaffree & Shults, 2022). Although the collective emotional experience occurs within virtual space, the sense of community identity, collective cohesion, and recognition of shared values it inspires are similar to the effervescence experience described (Chen, 2022). Nonetheless, when collective's emotion hugely increases, individual recognition of values may overweigh the pursuit of truth.

### 2.3.1. Collective Gathering

Collective gathering emphasizes that the foundation of collective emotions lies in people's physical or psychological coming together (Von Scheve, 2020). In such gatherings, individuals transcend their everyday selves, experiencing resonance and connection with others. The collective gatherings triggered by online exposure events within virtual communities embody effervescence theory's core elements, namely the group's psychological aggregation through shared emotions and goals (Hamann et al., 2024).

In virtual spaces, individuals can form a solid collective sense around specific topics or events through social media and forums. Online interactions serve as a bridge for the spread of emotional resonance, allowing individuals who may not be directly connected to come together over shared emotional responses through actions like "posting" and "replying," ultimately facilitating the formation of virtual communities (Kádár, 2024).

### 2.3.2. Shared Focus or Activity

The shared focus or activity in effervescence theory refers to how collective emotions and behaviours often revolve around a common interest or goal. Within virtual communities, this concept manifests as online exposure events or social movements, which provide a common topic that elicits widespread attention and emotional response from group members (Rimé & Páez, 2023).

An issue or injustice revealed through online exposure can quickly gather the attention of many internet users through certain symbols. People engage in discussions, sharing, and actions around this shared focus, creating a virtual collective gathering around a common point of interest.

### 2.3.3. Emotional Resonance

Emotional resonance highlights how individual and collective emotional responses to online exposure content are not merely personal reactions but part of a broader public experience. Public experience allows participants to feel intense emotion and social cohesion distinct from ordinary experiences (Rimé & Páez, 2023).

Within the realms of online exposure, individuals partake in virtual collective gatherings that serve as platforms for expressing support, exchanging personal viewpoints, and disseminating additional information (Allen, 2012). Such dynamic group interactions amplify empathy and support, drawing the community's focus and commitment to shared concerns or objectives. This participative framework encourages virtual community members to delve into comprehensive discussions and undertake collective actions centred around mutual interests or causes (Yadav et al., 2023). The culmination of these engagements is a profound emotional resonance, characterized by the mutual acknowledgement and bolstering of community spirit among participants, which stands as a testament to the transformative power of shared digital experiences in emotional resonance (Ellefsen & Sandberg, 2022).

### 2.3.4. Research Gap

Online exposure has become an important place to promote emotional resonance and collective gathering (Rijo & Waldzus, 2023). Users can not only share and diffuse infor-

mation but also build a sense of community and collective identity through shared interests and emotional experiences. These dynamic online interactions demonstrate how individuals in modern digital societies construct social relationships and collective identities through shared digital culture and symbolic practices. However, Academic exploration of its impact has focused on public opinion, social justice movements, and privacy protection. This research on specific groups, notably university students deeply engaged with digital culture, is scarce. This study aims to address this gap.

To achieve the research objectives mentioned above, the following research questions need to be addressed:

Influence on Social Norms and Behavioral Change: How does online exposure influence social norms and behaviours within university student communities?

Impact on Academic and Social Life: How does engagement with online exposure content affect the academic performance and social lives of university students? Such as why students are willing to share online exposure with friends.

Psychological Impact on Individuals: What are the psychological impacts of participating in or being the subject of online exposure for college students? Such as enjoy, anxiety, stress, or reputational damage.

Role of Anonymity in Online Interactions: How does anonymity communication affehe dynamics of interaction and discourse within online exposure events?

### 3. METHOD

The research design employs a mixed-methods approach, combining semi-structured interviews with questionnaire surveys to comprehensively understand the impacts of online exposure.

### 3.1. Philosophical Stance

This study will adopt a mixed philosophical stance, combining elements of constructivism and positivism, aimed at fully understanding and explaining how the phenomenon of online exposure is constructed and experienced across different social, cultural, and individual backgrounds (Denicolo, 2016) while also seeking to identify and quantify its universal laws and patterns.

The constructivist philosophical stance emphasizes that knowledge and reality are constructed through social interaction among individuals and communities. This viewpoint suggests that the phenomenon of online exposure and the collective emotional resonance it triggers are formed within specific socio-cultural backgrounds and individual experiences, meaning that online exposure is not merely a simple process of information transmission but is deeply rooted in the participants' social practices and cognitive frameworks (Andrade, 2009).

### 3.2. Research Design

This study aims to provide deeper insights into collective emotional resonance, social cohesion, and the structure of power and identity within virtual communities in the context of online exposure. The research design employs a mixed-methods research strategy, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively analyse the impacts of online exposure, ensuring that the phenomenon's complexity is captured from multiple dimensions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Initially, in the quantitative research phase, data will be collected through online surveys to assess the general attitudes, emotional responses, and levels of engagement of college students towards online exposure content. The quantitative data will be analysed using the statistical software SPSS to identify the effects of online exposure on college students' emotional reactions and social interactions (Field, 2013).

In the qualitative research component, the study will utilize semi-structured interviews to reveal how individuals find resonance and belonging in online exposure events

and how these experiences influence their social perspectives and willingness to act (Clarke & Braun, 2013).

### 3.3. Participants

This study is divided into two parts for paticipants: the first part delves into individual experiences through interviews, and the second part gathers broader data support through questionnaire surveys (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

For the interview portion, the study plans to employ a snowball sampling method to collect 100 questionnaire surveys and invite 20 participants aged between 18 and 26. These participants are typically active social media users with a keen interest and extensive experience in online exposure events. Recruitment methods include postings on social media and university bulletin boards and utilizing existing online platforms and communities, encouraging participants to recommend suitable candidates (Noy, 2008).

### 3.4. Semi-Structured Interviews

This study arms to conduct semi-structured interviews in a snowballing manner. These interviews are designed to unearth the nuanced personal experiences of participating in online exposure discourse. The semi-structured format ensures flexibility, allowing the exploration of emergent themes while addressing a series of predetermined questions (Kallio et al., 2016).

## 4. Expected Outcomes

By applying theories of effervescence and collective frenzy, the study expects to unveil nuanced understandings of how digital interactions foster collective identities and influence social behaviours. The expected outcomes are discussed under several key themes:

### 4.1. The Causes of Social Media Exposure Posts Carnival

#### 4.1.1. Amplified Visibility and Accessibility

One primary cause of the carnival atmosphere surrounding social media exposure posts is the amplified visibility and accessibility these platforms provide (da Silva, 2021). Social media breaks down traditional barriers to information dissemination, allowing posts to reach a global audience instantaneously. This accessibility means that information, whether verified or not, can be spread widely and quickly, catching the attention of vast audiences and creating a snowball effect as it gets shared across multiple platforms (Lavi, 2020).

#### 4.1.2. Emotional Contagion

Social media platforms are fertile grounds for emotional contagion, where emotions expressed in posts, especially those involving exposure or whistleblowing, can spread rapidly among users (Brady et al., 2020). The collective experience of outrage, amusement, or support contributes to a heightened emotional state that mirrors the effervescence seen in physical gatherings. This emotional contagion can escalate user engagement, turning individual reactions into a collective experience that feeds into the cycle of sharing and commenting, further fueling the carnival atmosphere (Bakir & McStay, 2023).

#### 4.1.3. Group Identity and Solidarity

Exposure posts often tap into shared group identities based on political, social, or cultural affiliations. When such posts go viral, they can reinforce group solidarity and differentiate insiders' from 'outsiders, creating an 'us versus them' scenario (Gonzalez,

2020). This delineation can intensify the collective frenzy as group members rally to support their stance, defend their allies, or attack opponents, contributing to the carnival-like engagement on social media.

### 4.1.4. The Role of Anonymity

Anonymity on social media can significantly contribute to the carnival atmosphere of exposure posts. It allows individuals to express opinions or share information without fearing direct personal repercussions (Sinanan, 2017). The anonymity can encourage more open and sometimes more aggressive communications, which might not occur if identities were disclosed. Anonymity catalyzes more dramatic interactions and engagements, adding to the overall intensity of the social media carnival (Murray & Weber, 2017).

### 4.1.5. Sensationalism and the Pursuit of Virality

The intrinsic nature of social media favours sensational content that is more likely to become viral. Posts that expose, shock, or entertain are more likely to be shared, liked, and commented on, thus gaining rapid traction (Mekawy, 2020). Pursuing virality among users and content creators fosters an environment where sensationalism is rewarded, contributing to the frenzied participation that characterizes these social media carnivals (Lavi, 2020).

### 4.2. *The Multifaceted Functions of Social Media Exposure Posts*

### 4.2.1. Mobilization for Social and Political Causes

Social media exposure posts can function as a rallying point for mobilisation. These posts can galvanise public sentiment and encourage collective action by highlighting issues that require action, such as political corruption, environmental disasters, or human rights violations (Brady et al., 2020). They often catalyse organising protests, fundraising campaigns, or petition drives, demonstrating the power of digital platforms to initiate real-world actions (Mekawy, 2020).

### 4.2.2. Community Building and Identity Formation

These posts are also crucial in community building and user identity formation. Users can find and connect with like-minded individuals by engaging with content that resonates with their beliefs or experiences (Brady et al., 2020). This shared engagement helps to foster a sense of community and belonging, strengthening collective identities and offering a space for users to express solidarity and support for each other.

### 4.2.3. Psychological and Emotional Outlet

Social media exposure posts provide individuals with a psychological and emotional outlet (Mekawy, 2020). For some, sharing experiences, especially those involving personal or societal grievances, serves as a catharsis. These posts can help individuals process their emotions and find community support, which can be crucial for mental health and emotional well-being.

## 5. Conclusion

This study clarifies the complex dynamics of online exposure posts and their impact on the digital society. It highlights that social media platforms expand public discourse by providing access to information and avenues for expressing opinions. Online exposure posts, especially those revealing unmentioned or rarely discussed information, shape public awareness and debate, allowing individuals to express opposition, criticize authority, and expose injustice.

However, the study also notes the dual nature of online exposures. Sensational content aimed at attracting viewers can lead to widespread but unreliable discourse. The viral

spread of such content can have significant social impact, both informative and misleading. The theories of effervescence and collective frenzy are important for understanding the collective emotions and behaviors from these posts, revealing intense group dynamics in digital interactions.

The findings emphasize the motivations of online exposure activities, ranging from pursuing justice and social change to personal motives such as revenge or reputation disputes. The study also explores the evolution of online exposure formats, from text to multimedia, reflecting technological changes and user expression.

Focusing on college students, the research provides insights into how digital natives engage with online exposure narratives, highlighting implications for improving the online environment, guiding policy, and enhancing public participation. The study concludes that while online exposure activities can promote social justice and engagement, they also bring ethical and legal challenges related to privacy and defamation. Ultimately, this research deepens the understanding of the social and psychological effects of online exposure and offers a new theoretical framework to analyze its complexities in the digital society.

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