

# Media Representation and Social Identity: A Study of Public Discourse Construction and the Empowerment of Marginalised Groups in the Digital Age

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**Abstract:** With the rapid development of digital media technology, the relationship between media representation and social identity has taken on new complexities in contemporary society. This study focuses on how marginalised groups in the digital age construct self-identity and strive for a voice through media participation practices. In the specific socio-cultural context of contemporary China, traditional power structures and discourse systems are undergoing profound changes brought about by digital technology. However, existing research is mostly limited to media empowerment theory in Western contexts, lacking a systematic exploration of the mechanisms of digital media empowerment in the specific cultural context of non-Western societies. This study aims to fill this theoretical gap. It uses a combination of multiple theoretical perspectives, such as critical discourse analysis, media representation theory, affective public theory and platform research, as well as mixed research methods such as digital ethnography, social network analysis and in-depth interviews, to explore in depth how the algorithmic governance of digital media platforms affects the media visibility of marginal groups, how marginal groups use strategic media practices to construct counter-hegemonic discourses, how the networked public sphere changes the process of collective identity formation, and how digital labour and cultural production in the context of platform capitalism reshapes the social identity of marginalised groups. The research will create a theoretically grounded framework with local adaptability, develop a mixed research method of computational-ethnography, propose a digital media literacy intervention model, construct an inclusive digital governance framework, and provide theoretical support and practical guidance for the construction of a more just digital media ecosystem.

**Keywords:** Digital Empowerment, Media Representation, Social Identity, Marginalized Groups, Public Discourse, Platform Governance.

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## 1. Introduction

Power dynamics are undergoing profound changes in the contemporary digital media environment. With the rise of social media platforms and user-generated content, marginalized groups have gained unprecedented possibilities for self-expression and the struggle for a voice (Jenkins et al., 2013). In the traditional mass media structure, the right to speak is highly concentrated, and marginal groups are often in the position of being represented rather than representing themselves (Couldry, 2010). The development of digital technology has brought about important changes to this landscape, providing marginal groups with more opportunities to participate in the construction of public discourse by lowering the threshold of media production and decentralising communication channels (Castells, 2015). However, this process of empowerment is not a simple linear development, but is full of complexity and contradictions. On the one hand, digital media platforms provide unprecedented spaces for participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006); on the other hand, the business logic of platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017), the opaque mechanisms of algorithmic governance (Gillespie, 2014), and the persistence of the digital divide (van Dijk, 2020) have created new exclusions and restrictions.

Existing research has focused on digital empowerment in Western contexts, focusing on how technological empowerment can promote democratic participation and the expression of civic rights (Dahlgren, 2009; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012). However, these theoretical frameworks often reveal a lack of adaptability when applied to non-Western societies (Waisbord, 2015). China's specific

sociocultural context – including its unique media ecosystem, cultural traditions and social governance model – provides different conditions and possibilities for digital media empowerment (Yang, 2009; Qiu, 2017). Against this background, there is an urgent need to develop a locally adapted theoretical framework to more accurately grasp the discourse practices and identity construction processes of marginal groups in the digital media environment.

The central question of this study is: How does digital media reshape the symbolic representation of marginal groups in the specific socio-cultural context of China, and influence their Social Identity Construction and Public Discourse Participation. Specifically, this includes how the Algorithmic Governance of digital media platforms affects the Media Visibility and Discursive Power of marginalized groups; how marginalized groups use Tactical Media strategies in the digital media environment to construct Counter-Hegemonic Discourse; how the Networked Public Sphere in the digital media environment changes the Collective Identity Formation process of marginalized groups; and how Digital Labor and Cultural Production in the context of Platform Capitalism reshapes the social identity of marginalized groups.

The theoretical significance of exploring these issues lies in enriching the geographical diversity of the global communication knowledge system and developing media empowerment theories with local adaptability. The practical significance lies in providing an empirical basis for digital platform governance and the protection of marginal groups, and promoting the construction of a more inclusive digital media ecosystem. It should be emphasised that this research

not only focuses on structural constraints, but also on the agency and strategic practices of marginal groups, attempting to grasp the complex dynamics of digital media empowerment in the dialectical relationship between structure and agency.

## 2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The representation and identity of marginalised groups in the digital media environment involves theoretical traditions from multiple disciplines. This study sorts these theoretical threads into four main themes: media representation and power relations, digital participation and the transformation of the public sphere, identity politics and cultural citizenship, and platform logic and algorithmic governance.

The study of media representation and power relations can be traced back to Stuart Hall's representation theory. Hall (1997) pointed out that media representation not only reflects reality, but also constructs reality through specific encoding practices, a process that is deeply embedded in power relations. In the context of traditional media, marginalised groups are often represented, and their images are often constructed by mainstream discourse through stereotypes, othering and problematisation (Orgad, 2014). The change brought about by the digital media environment is that marginalised groups have gained more possibilities for self-representation (Ginsburg, 2008). Couldry's (2012) concept of 'media meta-capital' provides an important perspective for understanding this change. He points out that media power, as a form of 'meta-capital', influences the conversion and accumulation of various types of capital in other social fields. Within this framework, access to media resources for marginalised groups implies the possibility of power in wider social arenas. However, as Trottier (2016) warns, digital self-representation also comes with new risks and vulnerabilities, including privacy risks under Surveillance Capitalism and the crisis of interpretation in decontextualisation (Zuboff, 2023).

The research on digital participation and the transformation of the public sphere focuses on how digital technology reshapes public discourse. Papacharissi's (2015) concept of 'Affective Publics' is particularly enlightening. She points out that emotions play a central role in online communication, and that online publics formed through emotional connections present new mobilization logics and collective action models. In the Chinese context, Yang's (2009) study of 'citizen activism on the Internet in China' shows that digital media have opened up new spaces for civic participation, especially through the 'translation' of political demands into cultural expressions, even within a specific political framework. These studies suggest that understanding digital empowerment in the Chinese context requires going beyond the Western liberal-democratic framework and focusing on more complex cultural-political dynamics (Zhao, 2008; Schneider, 2018). Notably, the recent trend of commercialisation and algorithmisation of the digital public sphere has posed new challenges to this possibility of empowerment. The concept of 'Platform Society' proposed by van Dijck et al. (2018) reveals that platforms are not only intermediary technologies, but also increasingly the infrastructure of social organisation, reshaping public values and social relations.

Identity politics and cultural citizenship studies focus on how marginalised groups fight for cultural rights and social

recognition through media participation. Miller's (2007) cultural citizenship theory emphasises that citizenship includes not only political rights, but also cultural expression, symbolic recognition and group belonging. In the digital media environment, marginalised groups fight for recognition politics (Taylor, 1994; Fraser, 2000) through creative content production, subcultural practices, and identity narratives. Marwick's (2013) research shows that the practice of self-presentation on social media is both constrained by the logic of the platform and contains transformative possibilities. This theoretical perspective is particularly suitable for understanding the identity strategies of marginal groups in the Chinese context, that is, how to creatively use media spaces for identity construction and rights advocacy under specific institutional and cultural constraints (Wallis, 2011; Zhang & Barr, 2013). Related to this is Bourdieu's (1991) concept of symbolic power, that is, the 'soft' domination and resistance achieved through symbolic practices, which provides an important perspective for understanding the micro-politics of marginal groups.

Platform logic and algorithmic governance research focuses on how technological infrastructures shape social participation possibilities. Gillespie's (2010) conceptual analysis of 'platforms' reveals their multiple natures as discursive constructions, technological architectures, and business models, and how this multiplicity affects user behaviour and content circulation. Digital platforms construct a set of governance of visibility (Bucher, 2012) through mechanisms such as interface design, algorithmic recommendations, and content moderation, which determine who can be seen and how. For marginalised groups, these mechanisms may either reinforce existing inequalities or provide new opportunities for visibility (Beer, 2019). Of particular concern is Noble's (2018) research on 'algorithmic oppression', which shows that algorithmic systems often reproduce and reinforce systemic inequalities along racial, gendered and other dimensions in the real world. In the Chinese context, these issues are further complicated by the fact that platform governance is simultaneously influenced by multiple factors, including market logic, cultural traditions, and policy management (Creemers, 2017; Wang & Lobato, 2019).

Drawing on the above theoretical threads, this study integrates Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013), Media Representation Theory (Hall, 1997), Affective Publics (Papacharissi, 2015), Platform Studies (van Dijck et al., 2018) and Cultural Citizenship (Miller, 2007) is integrated into an analytical framework to explore the representation politics and identity construction of marginal groups in the Chinese digital media environment. This framework focuses on both structural power and the agency and resistance strategies of marginal groups; it analyses both the macro-institutional environment and the micro-interaction practices; and it examines both the technological logic and the cultural context. Through this multi-dimensional analysis, this study seeks to reveal the complex dynamics of the empowerment of marginal groups in the digital media environment and contribute to the localised development of communication theory.

## 3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a Mixed Methods Research Design, combining quantitative and qualitative methods to achieve methodological triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

This design not only addresses the complexity of the research object, but also reflects the trend of methodological innovation in digital media research (Rogers, 2019).

First, this study will use the Critical Techno-Discourse Analysis method to analyse the textual content related to marginal groups on digital platforms. This approach is based on Fairclough's (2013) critical discourse analysis framework, but extends its digital application (Brock, 2018). Specifically, the research will collect samples of content related to marginalised groups from major social media platforms (such as Weibo, TikTok, Zhihu, etc.) to construct a corpus (Baker & Levon, 2015). The analysis will focus on three dimensions of the texts: linguistic features (e.g., lexical choices, rhetorical devices, discourse strategies), discourse practices (e.g., the social processes of text production and consumption), and socio-cultural practices (e.g., the connections between texts and broader power structures) (Fairclough, 2013). In addition, the research will also use computational linguistics tools for keyword analysis, discourse pattern recognition, and sentiment analysis (Liu, 2022) to identify the characteristics and evolving trends of the discourse of different marginalized groups. This approach will reveal how marginalised groups participate in the construction of public discourse through linguistic practices in the digital media environment, and how mainstream discourses respond to, incorporate or exclude these marginalised voices.

Second, Digital Ethnography will be one of the core methods of this research. Based on Hine's (2015) theory of network ethnography, the researcher will conduct 18 months of online fieldwork to observe in-depth the interactive behaviours, cultural practices and identity construction processes of marginalised groups on digital platforms. This includes participatory observation, informal conversations and virtual community participation (Pink et al., 2016). Unlike traditional ethnography, digital ethnography needs to pay special attention to the interwoven relationship between online and offline experiences, the material aspects of digital culture, and the impact of technology mediation on social relationships (Postill & Pink, 2012). In practice, researchers will select 3-5 representative online communities of marginalised groups as field sites, and record their daily interactions, issue construction, emotional expression and identity practices through long-term immersive observation (Kozinets, 2015). Particular attention will be paid to how these groups strategically use platform functions, respond to algorithmic logic, develop cultural codes, and construct collective memory (Lingel, 2017). Field diaries, screenshot archives and reflective memos will constitute important qualitative data, providing rich ethnographic materials for understanding the media practices of marginal groups.

Third, Social Network Analysis will be used to analyse the structural characteristics and information flows of marginal groups' online social networks. This method draws on Tremayne's (2014) network analysis framework, focusing on the patterns of nodes (users) and connections (interactions). The research will collect social network data on specific topics and analyse network characteristics such as centrality metrics (e.g. degree centrality, intermediary centrality), clustering coefficients, and community detection (Borgatti et al., 2024), to explore the organisational characteristics of marginalised groups' networks, the role of opinion leaders, information diffusion paths, and the distribution of social capital (González-Bailón & Wang, 2016). This analysis pays particular attention to how marginalised groups' networks can

break through information silos (echo chambers) and achieve cross-group connections and resource mobilisation (Dubois & Blank, 2018). Technically, the research will use the Python programming language with NetworkX, Gephi and other tools for data processing and visualisation (Akhtar, 2014), and develop network analysis methods suitable for the characteristics of Chinese platforms.

The dimensions of choice strategies, content creation motives, interactive experiences, identity changes, and feelings of empowerment will be explored. Each interview will last about 90-120 minutes and will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Text analysis will be conducted using the grounded theory coding method, and theoretical concepts and relationships will be deduced from the data through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Particular attention will be paid to how respondents understand and interpret their own digital participation experiences and how these experiences affect their social identity and public awareness. Active listening and deep empathic skills will be used in the interviews to create a safe space for the interviewees to express themselves while maintaining the necessary critical reflection.

Fifth, Critical Platform Analysis combines the Walkthrough Method [Light et al., 2018] and Algorithmic Auditing to analyse how the design logic, algorithmic mechanisms and governance strategies of digital platforms affect the visibility of marginalised groups. The Walkthrough Method is a systematic method of examining the interface, functions and design of an application to reveal the embedded cultural imagination and user assumptions. The research will conduct walkthrough analysis of major social media platforms, recording their registration processes, default settings, interface designs, functional layouts, privacy policies, content restrictions, etc., and interpreting their potential impact on the participation of marginal groups. Algorithmic Auditing, on the other hand, will detect differences in the treatment of content from different groups by platform algorithms through methods such as creating controlled accounts, submitting test content, and tracking referral patterns. This analysis will reveal how the seemingly neutral technical architecture of the platform shapes the boundaries of the possibilities for digital participation.

Methodologically, this research combines the macroscopic discourse picture provided by Critical Techno-Discourse Analysis with the microscopic interactive practices captured by Digital Ethnography, establishes mesoscopic structural connections through Social Network Analysis, provides subjective experience interpretation through In-depth Interviews, and reveals the role of technical infrastructure through Critical Platform Analysis. This multi-level, multi-dimensional methodological design aims to capture the complex dynamics of empowering marginalised groups in the digital media environment and develop a research methodology with local adaptability.

## 4. Research Design and Implementation

The research will be implemented in three phases over a period of 42 months. The first phase (12 months) focuses on theoretical construction and methodological design. It begins with a systematic literature review covering Chinese and English literature in the fields of media representation, digital participation, identity politics, and platform studies, with a

particular focus on the applicability and limitations of these theories in the Chinese context. On this basis, a preliminary theoretical framework is constructed, and research questions and dimensions of analysis are established. At the same time, research tools suitable for the Chinese digital media environment will be developed, including a discourse analysis coding framework, field observation guidelines, interview outlines, network analysis parameters and platform audit plans. Research ethics reviews will also be completed at this stage to ensure that the research process complies with ethical principles such as information privacy protection, community informed consent, and protection of the rights and interests of vulnerable groups.

The second phase (18 months) involves intensive data collection and analysis. First, digital ethnographic fieldwork will be conducted, in which the researcher will immerse themselves in 3-5 representative online communities of marginalised groups to observe and record their daily interactions and cultural practices through long-term participation. At the same time, content analysis will be conducted to capture large-scale textual data related to marginalised groups from major social media platforms, and their representation characteristics and discourse strategies will be identified through critical discourse analysis. Based on fieldwork, 50 members of marginal groups from different backgrounds will be recruited for in-depth interviews to explore their subjective experiences and identity construction. In addition, social network analysis will be conducted on specific topics and events to track information flows and opinion dynamics. Finally, a systematic walkthrough analysis and algorithm audit of major digital platforms will be conducted to reveal the impact of technical architecture and governance logic on the participation of marginal groups. This stage of multi-source data collection will provide a rich empirical basis for the study.

The third phase (12 months) will involve theoretical integration and output. First, cross-analysis of multi-source data will be conducted to build a comprehensive understanding of the research questions through comparison, contrast and complementarity. On this basis, theoretical abstraction and conceptual innovation will be carried out to develop a locally adaptable theoretical framework for media empowerment of marginal groups. The research results will be output in various forms, such as academic papers, research reports, policy recommendations and practical toolkits. Academic papers are planned to be published in high-level journals at home and abroad in the fields of communication studies, sociology, and cultural studies. Research reports will provide an empirical basis for digital platforms, public institutions, and civil society organisations. Policy recommendations will propose specific measures for digital governance and the protection of marginal groups. The practical toolkit will provide media empowerment resources for marginal groups. In addition, academic seminars and community workshops will be organised to promote dialogue and exchange between academia and the field of practice.

#### Research Innovation and Contribution

The innovation of this research is mainly reflected in four aspects: theoretical innovation, methodological innovation, practical innovation and policy innovation. In terms of theoretical innovation, the research combines Western critical communication theory with the local cultural context in China to develop a locally adaptable Vernacular Theoretical Framework. This framework not only focuses on democratic

participation and rights expression emphasized by Western theory, but also pays more attention to cultural expression strategies, relationship network dynamics and institutional negotiation spaces that are unique to the Chinese context. Through this effort of localising theory, the research will enrich the geographical diversity of knowledge production in global communication studies and promote academic decentralisation. Specifically, the research will re-conceptualise core concepts such as digital empowerment, media visibility and algorithmic mediation to better capture the particularities of Chinese digital media practices.

In terms of methodological innovation, the research will develop a computational-ethnographic approach that combines data science technology with the tradition of qualitative anthropological research. This method not only uses computational tools to process large-scale digital traces, but also understands the socio-cultural significance through in-depth ethnography, achieving an organic combination of 'distant reading' and 'close reading'. Specifically, the research will develop text mining tools suitable for the characteristics of Chinese social media, design field observation methods that take into account both online and offline interactions, and develop algorithm auditing techniques for the Chinese platform ecosystem. This methodological innovation not only serves this research, but also provides new ideas for the development of digital methods in the field of communication.

In terms of practical innovation, the study proposes the Digital Media Literacy Intervention Model to provide media empowerment toolkits for marginalized groups. This model is based on the research findings, combined with educational psychology principles and participatory design methods, to develop media literacy intervention programmes that suit the characteristics of different marginalized groups. The toolkit will include modules such as platform function guides, algorithm awareness training, content creation techniques, community building strategies, and knowledge of rights and interests protection, and will be implemented through online courses, interactive workshops, peer education, and other methods. This practical innovation translates research results into concrete actions that directly serve the capacity building of marginalized groups in digital participation.

In terms of policy innovation, the research constructs the Inclusive Digital Governance Framework to provide policy recommendations for digital platform governance and the protection of marginalized groups. This framework is based on empirical research findings, combined with public policy analysis and multi-stakeholder interests, to propose specific measures to promote digital inclusion. The recommendations will cover dimensions such as platform responsibility, algorithm transparency, diversity in content moderation, user empowerment mechanisms, and special protection for vulnerable groups, providing policy references for government departments, industry associations and platform companies. This policy innovation transforms research insights into governance wisdom, promoting the construction of a more just digital media ecosystem.

Overall, this research not only contributes to academia, but also has significant implications for the field of practice. Academically, the research will enrich theories of media representation and social identity, develop digital ethnographic research methods, and promote the localization of communication studies. Practically, the research will provide marginalized groups with media participation tools,

provide an empirical basis for platform governance, and provide a scientific basis for policy formulation. Through this multi-dimensional contribution, the research is committed to promoting the construction of a more inclusive, just and diverse digital media environment.

## 5. Conclusion

This study uses a combination of methods such as critical discourse analysis, digital ethnography, social network analysis, in-depth interviews and platform analysis to explore in depth the representation politics and identity construction processes of marginalised groups in the digital media environment. The study found that the empowering effect of digital media on marginalised groups is complex and contradictory: on the one hand, digital platforms provide marginalised groups with new spaces for self-expression and community building, lower the threshold for media participation, and promote the diversification of discourse. On the other hand, the logic of platform capitalism, algorithmic bias, and the digital divide have created new exclusions and restrictions, replicating and reinforcing existing inequalities. In this complex landscape, marginalised groups have demonstrated great initiative and strategic intelligence, fighting for media visibility and social recognition through creative content production, emotional mobilisation, symbolic resistance and other means.

Of particular interest is the unique form of digital participation by marginalised groups in the specific cultural context of China: they tend to express their identity and rights through cultural expression rather than direct political demands, construct community and cohesion through relationship networks rather than public debate, and interact with mainstream discourse through strategic negotiation rather than confrontational challenges. These findings suggest that understanding digital media empowerment requires going beyond the Western liberal democratic framework and focusing on the cultural politics of media practices in specific socio-historical contexts.

Based on these findings, this study proposes a locally adaptive theoretical framework for media empowerment of marginalised groups, which re-conceptualises key concepts such as digital participation, media visibility and identity politics. This framework focuses on both structural constraints and agency practices; analyses macro power relations and interprets micro interaction logics; and examines technological structures and explains cultural meanings. Through this multidimensional theoretical construction, the study provides new perspectives on understanding media representation and social identity in the digital age.

The significance of this research lies not only in its academic contribution, but also in its practical implications. The research results provide an empirical basis and action guidelines for digital platform governance, media literacy education and the empowerment of marginalised groups. The research calls for the construction of a more inclusive digital governance framework, the enhancement of the media participation capabilities of marginalised groups, and the promotion of social dialogue and mutual understanding. In an era of increasing globalisation and technological advancement, how to safeguard the right to expression and identity for every group and how to promote the coexistence of diversity in the digital space are important issues that we must face. This study provides theoretical thinking and

practical wisdom in response to this contemporary proposition by focusing on the media practices of marginalised groups.

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