

Ten-Year Look Back: Participatory Observation on the "Coming-out Episode" from the "Let's Talk" Show

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Abstract

The research highlights the importance of representation using language, which operates as a representational system. People communicate their feelings, opinions, and thoughts by using language, and based on shared knowledge, mutual understanding can be achieved. With language, we not only represent ourselves or others but also create meanings, which are produced and circulated within the culture.

Keywords

"Let's Talk" Show; "Coming-out Episode"; Media Production.

1. Background

In some countries, mostly Western nations, gay marriage is legally approved and recognized by governments and society, and the awareness of multiple sexuality and sexual orientation has been widely accepted. In countries such as Afghanistan and Iran, ¹however, homosexuality is against the law, and gay males and lesbians would be imprisoned. The situation for this minority group in China is in between. The related issues remain in a gray zone as it has not been accepted by society, nor have homosexuals' rights been protected by law. ²Consequently, this minority community conceals itself in the dark corner.

According to Foucault (1978), the stereotypes and stigmatization of homosexuals are not natural at all. Instead, they are the result of categorizing objects of knowledge. There is abundant research in the intersectional field of media and homosexuality regarding different genres and forms of media (Calzo et al., 2009). Those studies show that the amount of media coverage generates society's awareness and acceptance of gay males and lesbians. However, though mainland China has witnessed a proliferation of queer images in mass media, the media content disappeared before more regulations in China has been announced to erase the previous queer images. Therefore, the scarce media coverage in China appears to be valuable to be closely studied and may help to understand the Chinese audience's perception towards the minority group and how did media represents "people in the closet".

In China, approximately 30 million gay men and lesbians remain in the closet and are struggling with self-identity. Some researchers have argued that people's acceptance of homosexuality depends on their access to relevant information about homosexuality and the number of contacts they have with this minority group (Cao & Lu, 2014; Tu & Lee, 2014). However, as homosexuality remains a sensitive and taboo topic in China, most media content avoids touching upon contraindicated topics. Moreover, homosexuals often are depicted as criminals, prostitutes, drug addicts, and people who spread acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS; Neilands et al., 2008).

¹ "77 countries where homosexuality is illegal." Retrieved from: <https://76crimes.com/76-countries-where-homosexuality-is-illegal/gay>.

² "China's LGBT community still fighting for their rights." Retrieved from: <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/17/opinions/china-shanghai-pride-lgbt-rights/>

However, in 2014, the online video provider Ai Qiyi produced a talk show called "Let's Talk". It quickly became young people's favorite show as the themes for each episode mainly focused on young adults' most concerning problems, and it tries to convey ideas and information in an entertaining way that is more welcomed by young people. Among all episodes from the seven seasons, the theme of one episode was "Should you come out to your parents?".

1.1. Introduction to the "Coming Out" episode.

"Should you come out to your parents" was the topic for episode 6 of season 2. In the show, six debaters were divided into two camps, among them, four debaters were homosexual. Another special guest, a transgender, was invited to be the judge with three resident hosts, among which, one is a gay person who publicly came out.

The episode was banned by SARFT after being online for two months. The episode has generated online discussion on Weibo with the official hashtag #Let's Talk#. That is the episode not only engaged debaters in the studio to discuss this topic but also created a public discursive forum around the topic. Although the prohibition of this episode indicates a severe situation regarding homosexuality in China, the effort made by this episode to have homosexual issues on the public agenda should not be ignored and is worth attention.

1.2. Research questions

The thesis proposes to research the media discourse of the "coming-out" episode from the "Let's Talk" show, and the online Weibo posts of the episode to examine how viewers engaged in this public discussion. In this way, as public discussion reflects an audience's real-time responses to the specific episode they are watching, it forms public opinions toward the episode's media discourse. To meet those goals, three questions will be answered in the paper: RQ1.What is the discourse of the episode concerning how and what people talk about "coming-out" issues on the stage?

RQ2.How could we understand the discourse on the stage through the theoretical perspective of cultural visibility?

RQ3.How could we understand the audience's reception of the media discourse through the lens of the public sphere?

2. Theory

2.1. Cultural visibility as the political rights of homosexuals

Gross (1994) views the representation of the mediated "reality" of our mass culture as power itself, and people with high invisibility are going through symbolic annihilation. Hall (1997) also argues that representations are in themselves political. A view that has been clarified by Hennessy (1994/95, p.31) is that 'Cultural visibility can prepare the ground for gay civil rights protection'.

Also, according to Butler, visibility is not a mere presentation of empirical bodies' knowledge, by which identity is constituted (ibid). In this way, Fejes and Petrich (1993) argued that the top goal of the gay movement is to achieve affirmative visibility in mainstream media while sustaining alternative community media. Thus, media coverage of homosexuality is an important index number to measure the achievement of visibility. But we should also pay attention to what Gamson (1998) problematized in the process of realization of cultural visibilities of lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT) people through talk shows that the representations of them on talk shows enlarged class divisions among the LGBT population. Through content analysis of talk show transcripts and videos, he argues that the tolerance of visibility of homosexuals is achieved through the further stigmatization of bisexuality and

gender nonconformity. In other words, the realization of a special group's visibility usually risks another group's social identity.

2.2. Talk show as mediated public spheres

For Habermas, institutional and personal interests are constantly undermining the ideal model of the rational critical public sphere in which deliberation is an essential requirement (Lunt & Stenner, 2005). Deliberation leads to consensus, and to reach consensus and certain agreements by breaking the wall of differences requires both individuals and institutions to put aside their interests and give up control to public discussion; in other words, consensus is achieved by disinterested participation and rational, critical discussion. Based on this argument, the skeptical stand by Habermas (1989) toward media participation is reasonable, that is, 'the deprived province of interiority was hollowed out by the mass media pseudo-public sphere' (p.162). Therefore, examining the possibilities of discussing issues spontaneously and genuinely in the media is necessary if one is to find out the existence of deliberation in the mediated public sphere. More than keeping the emphasis on interest-free participation and rational criticizing, commentators argue that talk shows still contribute to public involvement. Nevertheless, talk shows have limitations in open access and institutional or personal control (Lunt & Stenner, 2005). Livingstone and Lunt (1994) hinted that talk shows have the potential to compete to be an oppositional public sphere because they encourage people to express their interesting points of view, aiming at compromise rather than consensus.

Many academic works of literature continue to prove that talk shows, which previously were decided to be meaningless and irrelevant "trash television," also provide context for public participation and debate (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). Nancy Fraser's concept of subaltern counter publics may fit the study of these online comments from digital media that aid people to express themselves in a way opposed to discourses in the mainstream media. This concept of counter-publics has as its historical background that there are many "class-, gender-, and race-based publics outside the liberal male-dominated Habermasian public sphere" (Riegert, 2015). These alternative discursive arenas challenge the cultural, social, and political boundaries that shield the dominant hegemony. Within this process, those subaltern communities can formulate oppositional constructions of their identities, needs, and ethics, and define their social realities that have been ignored or unaccepted by the dominant culture. Dahlberg (2011) has pointed out that 'Digital media is considered as capable of enabling voices excluded from the dominant discourse' (p.861).

3. Method

3.1. Qualitative content analysis in case study research

This research uses the qualitative approach of content analysis as the main method, focusing on social interactions and concerns about words rather than numbers (Bryman, 2012, p.380). This coincides with the research's purpose to study media discourses concerning homosexuals in this episode. Content analysis traditionally has been dominated by quantitative methods since it first was used in the 18th century. At the beginning of the 20th century, quantitative approaches were developed predominantly to analyze newspapers and propaganda during the war.

The quantitative approach has been critiqued for neglecting the quality of texts that is important to reconstruct context. He also thought different possibilities of interpretation of "multiple connotations" could construct the context (Kohlbacher, 2006). Additionally, Cassell and Symon (1994) argued that qualitative research is less likely to impose prior subjectivities on the collection of data, and thus research is not likely to be driven by specific hypotheses but remains more focused on emergent themes and idiographic description. Therefore, qualitative

methods are more suitable to be employed in this research to understand the emergent themes that will be developed in the audience's online posts. In this way, the present study utilizes qualitative content analysis to draw a complete picture of the media discussion of homosexuality and the audience's online discussion of this episode.

3.2. The data collection process

Even though this episode has been banned for untold reasons, I managed to find it from a video provider's website and downloaded it for future analysis. For personal preference in collecting data from printed texts, I transcribed the episode first and printed it out for further reading. I found this process helpful in assisting me to become more familiar with the context of the episode. I later began my first open-coding process. Because I did not intend to employ a deductive approach, I hadn't decided on any themes at the beginning. I instead started with a small amount of data, reading line by line and sentence by sentence to see if it could provide any codes. As my dataset progressively got larger, some open codes became repetitive, which is to be expected (Seale, 2004). I categorized similar and repetitive codes, such as "be true to your parents" and "stop letting them worry about you," into the category of "maintaining family ties" for further induction.

D'heer and Verdegem (2015) suggested that keywords or hashtags (#) can generate discussion on a special program or televised event and enable researchers to investigate viewers' experience watching and reflecting on TV content. As the episode had been aired online, it generated abundant comments with the hashtag #Let's Talk# as well as other hashtags including #should you come out to your parents# and #mom, my partner has the same sex as me#. This study mainly focused on #Let's Talk# as it is the official hashtag promoted by the show to engage audience participation in discussion. With the built-in searching function in Weibo, I collected the online posts with the #Let's Talk# hashtag during the period before the new episode was released, which was from 8 p.m. July 11, 2015, to 8 p.m. July 17, 2015. The search resulted in 49 pages with 382 posts in total. To eliminate the posts that talked about other episodes or were commercial, I scrolled through the pages and selected posts that I recognized as being related to the coming-out episode. This left me with a total of 253 posts, which I copied and pasted into one single file and printed out. Later I read the posts and came up with a few themes summarized from recurring features. I then rearranged the materials under those themes for further analysis.

4. Findings

4.1. Unified attitude in destigmatizing homosexuals

In this show, six debaters were divided into pros and cons. One prominent feature of this episode set was that it enabled homosexuals to go on stage and make their voices heard in the debate. The second prominent feature was the genuine atmosphere that no matter what opinions the debaters held, they could express themselves and receive support without being condemned or trivialized as the minority community. Out of the six debaters in this episode, four were publicly known homosexuals (for protective reasons, participants' names are replaced by the initial letters). The main participants are *Q*, *H*, *J*, and *F*, who revealed their sexual orientations on their Weibo posts and never avoided posting about their intimate lives with their same-sex partners.

The debate lasted several rounds. Generally, the main pro arguments were, firstly, being homosexual is a normal sexual orientation, and it is not necessary to hide it from your parents or it would bring you lots of trouble. Secondly, hiding your sexual orientation from your parents will make them worry. So, you should be honest with your parents and prove to them that you can live a good life. Thirdly, the most responsible way to live is to tell your parents your sexual

orientation, and if they insist on criticizing your sexual non-conformity, you are responsible for updating their knowledge to become respective to the diversity. The pro arguments mainly emphasize gay and lesbian people's freedom to live the lifestyle of their choice, but they should deal with unexpected consequences. Their points of view reflected the historical transformation in the society that has been characterized by rationality, scientific knowledge, and social hierarchies (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992). In this era, traditional ideas and expectations about social relations are being replaced by individuals' free choices of options in the pursuit of their happiness because of the decline in reliance on authorities (Valentine & Skelton, 2003).

On the other side, the cons defended their points of view. *F* took the lead by arguing that parents don't need to know everything about your life and that we should not make them worry more about us. *J* then argued that considering the current unequal social circumstances, as a gay himself, he would rather carry the burden of being in the closet than share it with his parents. Finally, based on teammates' arguments, *M* brought the atmosphere to a climax by stating that it is hard for any single person to come out to China because they are ordinary people:

'Have you ever wondered why gays and lesbians we know around are always either good-looking or talented than heterosexuals? It is not because homosexuals are born to be this, but the social reality is too crucial that only the most extraordinary gays and lesbians dare to reveal themselves... you must be extraordinary enough to be able to enjoy the most basic rights...this is called survivorship bias³.' (*M*, 35:15)

From the discourse of debate, it can be noticed that even though debaters from the two camps fiercely attacked the opposing team, they didn't stigmatize homosexuality by relating it to prostitutes, carriers of human immune deficiency virus (HIV), and sexual perverts as this community has always been portrayed in media. Instead, the debaters openly discussed the inequality and positively shared their opinions and support towards the minority group.

4.2. Struggles between families and self-realization

Emotionality took control after *M*'s speech, and it provoked the therapeutic session of the talk show as judges *J* and *C* revealed their own experiences. *J* is an internationally famous modern dancer and the first publicly transgender person in China. She explained her choice to come out to her parents for the first time in the show.

'They gave me birth, and I see myself as a piece of creation by them. Therefore, I need their understanding and encouragement to keep pursuing my dream... I don't need to come out to anyone except to them...and I must prove to them that my choice is right!' (*J*, 38:37)

C then followed to carry on the therapeutic session. He is a famous Taiwanese host who is well-known in China for his intellectual and refined manner. He came out 16 years ago in a Taiwan television show and is the only celebrity who publicly came out in China. As he recalled the previous experience, he could not help crying:

'I want to encourage them to come out when some gay or lesbian celebrities in the closet asked me to give them some suggestions on whether to come out or not. As the only publicly known gay (crying), I am lonely... And I want them to have a chance to prove to their parents that gays or lesbians are not monsters, they can also be outstanding people... So, it was so delightful to hear that the host of CNN came out and the CEO of Apple came out. But the problem is most of us are just ordinary ones, living an ordinary life and might not be strong enough to deal with those stress and burdens...I am afraid if they took my suggestions, I cannot help them deal with the rest mess (crying)...' (*C*, 47:5)

³ Survivorship bias is the logical error of concentrating on the people or things that made it past some selection process and overlooking those that did not, typically because of their lack of visibility.

C's speech again aroused people's sympathy in the present, especially when he mentioned the repressive reality homosexuals face in China. The audience either was nodding or had tears in their eyes. Considering the severe situation and low social acceptance in China, C expressed their worries about what homosexuals will face if they come out. Coming out in China is not only a personal process, but it can be an indirect process in which the responsibilities for an individual's identity (re)construction is transferred to other.

5. Works to be completed.

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