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## **CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN CHINA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN WECHAT AND DOUYIN AS A DEMOCRATIC ARENA**

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Online media platforms have become an arena for activists to engage with political discourses. Since COVID-19, an increasing number of citizens have begun to actively participate online to express their ideas towards political issues. Various types of user-generated content were circulated on various social media platforms: they wrote textual content on Wechat with various metaphors and created user-generated videos on video-streaming platforms to express their opinions. After an apartment fire in the city of Urumqi, an increasingly number of citizens actively engage with political issues and national events. As social media platforms in China are highly censored by the government and have followed the state's internet regulations (Chen et al., 2021), how does democratic civic participation develop in the Chinese media landscape? This question needs to be answered because the 2022 witnessed the most active political participation among citizens in the new media era.

To answer this question, this study examines how citizens express democratic opinions against dominant interpretations, what role social media platforms play as an arena for activists' participation, and what social media factors facilitate active online civic participation and influence it to be translated into offline activities. Many existing studies have concentrated on civic participation on a single social media platform, overlooking the patterns of cross-media use that shape, motivate, and limit political participation among citizens. For example, Jonathan Hassid (2012) examined the effect of microblogs on political participation. Hua Pang (2022) suggested that WeChat usage (a social networking platform equivalent to Facebook) is positively related to people's online and offline civic engagement. and Chen et al., (2021) concentrate on Douyin to examine how the government playfully engages the public. However, insufficient studies assess the role of media multiplicity, which refers to using multiple types of online media for social interaction and political participation. Although some researchers have evaluated the relationship between media multiplicity and online expressive political participation (Xenos & Moy, 2007), these studies analysed the role of social media platforms in civic participation as a whole instead of comparing how different digital social media platforms contribute to resistant participation to the state discourses. Indeed, each platform exhibits

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particular effects that influence people's online participation through different technological features (Pearce, et al., 2020). Thus, this study adopts a cross-platform perspective to compare how users resist the mainstream discourse and express counter-narratives on different platforms.

The comparative study focuses on WeChat and Douyin. National statistics demonstrate that most people are likely to consume news and political content on Douyin in a playful way. In this sense, citizens are likely to be influenced by dominant discourses from the state because Douyin has become used by the government as a crucial tool to promote state ideology and express mainstream discourses. They may also release their anger and give up resistant behaviours towards the government because Hassid (2012) suggested that if newspapers and the mainstream media set the agenda, the internet can serve as a "safety valve" to ease anger. However, active civic participation still arises and some have been translated into the large offline political participation. It seems that although more people participate in political content on Douyin, they are less likely to accept ideological propaganda but to take actions to resist these state interpretations. In this sense, media multiplicity should be examined because citizens do not adopt one social media in political participation. Before on-street political participation, there were a great number of videos to mourn victims on Douyin and plenty of articles on Wechat to criticise the government, from strict top-down policies to centered power. Thus, this article investigates how Douyin and Wechat facilitate civic participation differently and how people engage with political content differently on these two different media platforms.

I employed digital ethnography, augmented by the walkthrough method (Light et al., 2018), and qualitative content analysis to examine how WeChat and Douyin play different roles in civic participation. I began this study by using the walkthrough method, engaging directly with the interfaces of two appliances to examine how their technological features affect and shape the way citizens engage with political content (Light et al., 2018). Then, focusing on activities rather than just technologies (Pink et al., 2016), I observed two platforms, each for three hours over the course of two weeks, to investigate the various modes of citizen participation. Besides, qualitative content analysis was used to compare users' comments with articles on WeChat and with video content on Douyin. This is because qualitative content analysis pays attention to the meanings underlying the physical messages, and activists often use metaphors to express resistive comments and counter-dominant expressions, making messages obscure for censorship mechanisms to detect (Wasserstrom & Perry, 2018).

This study argues that the social networking platform WeChat provides more in-depth participation and has more democratic forms than Douyin, especially for expressing counter narratives to mainstream discourses. It found that users are more likely to express opposite views from mainstream discourses on WeChat than Douyin. From a technological perspective, one of the reasons for this is that WeChat allows people to express longer words than Douyin, according to the walkthrough method. Another reason for this is algorithms. As the two platforms adopt different systems to censor content, the moderation of content is quicker on Douyin than on WeChat because Douyin uses algorithmic filter bubbles to censor content and eliminate sensitive words immediately, whereas WeChat takes some time to detect sensitive metaphors and underlying meanings. After analysing the content of over 500 accounts on each platform, the

resistant comments associated with WeChat articles are more insightful and critical than comments on Douyin. When comparing various types of democratic participation on these two platforms, sharing articles written by official accounts on WeChat is a prominent resistive action among activists. When engage with political issues, many people shared "no-word articles" on WeChat to call for free speech on the Internet. By contrast, users of Douyin can merely express ideas through comments which can be easier moderated by the algorithmic system.

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