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Digital Literacy in Chinese Young People's Engagement on Weibo

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Abstract

This study identifies the digital literacies generated from Chinese young people's engagement with Weibo (one of the major Chinese social media platforms). These literacies, manifest as widely accepted community practices on Weibo, extend the prevalent understanding of digital literacy as a set of functional skills or competencies. This extended understanding of digital literacies underlines the importance of their social and cultural dimensions, showing how young people experience them as meaningful and relevant to their digital life. By drawing attention to the constitutive nature of young people's everyday online practices, and their role in defining digital literacies, this study also highlights the significance of digital literacies for the formation of their identity as a member of digital communities, and for their practice of citizenship in digital spaces.

Keywords

digital literacy – digital citizenship – young people – China – Weibo

1 Introduction

Digital literacy has become an important competence for people to function well in the majority of contemporary societies. However, while discussion of the new meaning making practices enabled by digital technologies has been facilitated by the concept of digital literacies, it has nevertheless proven challenging to define digital literacy due to the changing nature of people's digital

practices and the highly diversified spaces and texts in which these practices can be contextualised (Pangrazio, 2016). For the sake of being able to operate successfully in different settings, digital literacy is often defined on an instrumental/functional level (Buckingham, 2006). Along this proficiency line (Pangrazio, 2016), digital literacy normally involves the awareness, attitudes, skills and abilities of using digital tools and facilities to access, evaluate, synthesise digital resources, generate digital content and communicate with others (Eshet-Alkalai, 2012; Eshet, 2004; Gilster, 1997).

However, this way of understanding digital literacy is incapable of accounting for the contextual nature of literacy which is rooted in the social and cultural practices generated and functioning in different digital communities. Some of the definitions of digital literacy, though still following the line of proficiency, have started to take the specific digital context into consideration. Martin (2008) defines digital literacy as a degree of mastery and operational proficiency "in the context of specific life situations, in order to enable constructive social action, and to reflect upon this process" (p. 166). In a similar vein, Jones and Hafner (2012) understand digital literacy as a social phenomenon involving the ability to effectively use digital tools and to "adapt the affordances and constraints of these tools to particular circumstances" (p. 13).

Some scholars are more critical about defining digital literacy on a functional and operational level. Erstad (2015) argues that digital literacy should not be bounded by technologies and treated as something pre-described. He proposes to study digital literacies by examining what people are doing with digital technologies and texts. Similarly, Buckingham (2006) maintains that digital media exist to us not merely as technologies or tools, but as 'cultural forms' (p. 22). Understandings of digital literacy therefore should not be preoccupied simply with individuals' ability to gain and generate quality information which can lead them to the 'true facts'. Rather, it should be more concerned with the political, economic and social context which shapes the texts we generate and access in our everyday lives, or in Buckingham's words, the 'symbolic or persuasive aspects of digital media' and the 'emotional dimensions' of our uses and interpretations of digital media (*ibid.*, p. 24).

Following this vein, this study adopts a bottom-up approach to understand the social and cultural dimension of digital literacies. In literacy studies, literacy is regarded as a family of practices which stand for the socially recognised ways of generating, communicating, and negotiating meanings through the medium of encoded texts (Street, 1984). These practices are shaped by and also modulate people's socially evolved and patterned activities within specific contexts and for certain purposes (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). In this study I explore the social and cultural dimension of digital literacies through

examining Chinese young people's online practices embodied in their engagement with the Weibo community. Drawing on data collected from interviews and online observation of Chinese young people's everyday activities on Weibo, I provide insight into the social and cultural aspects of the digital literacy which enable them to engage effectively and responsibly in the Weibo community. In so doing, I contend the necessity of acknowledging the value of young people's online practices in constituting the content of digital literacies, and propose to understand digital literacy not merely a set of functional skills but defining factor of young people's learning and practice of social and cultural citizenship.

2 Digital Literacy beyond the Line of Proficiency

Literacy studies proposes a framework which deems literacy as a meaning making practice specific to cultures. It is about how meaning is shared, negotiated and contested by readers' uses of the text in different social and cultural settings (Snyder & Prinsloo, 2007). Lankshear and Knobel (2006) define literacy as "socially recognized ways of generating, communicating and negotiating meanings" through the medium of encoded texts (p. 39). It goes beyond proficiency level, and is concerned more with engaging in cultural activity that constitutes meaningful living which involves 'acting within and as part of an ordered social reality that one's activity carries or modify' as members of Discourses (ibid., p. 39). This Discourse approach underlines the sociocultural dimension of literacy which focuses on the complexity and richness of the relationship between literacies and the meaningful practices through which we do our lives as members of social and cultural groups, (Bélisle, 2006; Gee, 2015).

Despite these understandings of literacy, the view of digital literacy as a cognitive process or a set of operational skills still persists (Auld, Snyder, & Henderson, 2012). This means of understanding digital literacy is problematic in several ways. First, it is incapable of considering the digital literacies generated from young people's engagement with a highly diversified digital landscape in their everyday lives. These literacies are arguably more relevant and meaningful for their experience of membership in various digital communities than those taught in formal school setting which are more likely to be divorced with the contexts they are used (Pangrazio, 2016). Secondly, restricting digital literacy on an operational level, such as information retrieval, assumes the existence of a single version of truth, and leaves limited space for critical understandings of digital media texts within their broader social, economic, and cultural context (Buckingham, 2006). Finally, with this notion of digital

literacy, young people can only appreciate the personal, social and cultural benefits afforded by digital media to a limited extent, and are thus unlikely to be empowered to use digital media for self-expression, communication and social participation (Hobbs, 2010).

Acknowledgement of the social and cultural dimension of digital literacies can not only prepare young people to be efficient users of digital media and productive workforce in a digital and networked economy (Buckingham, 2006; Pangrazio, 2016), but also has deep implications for young people's social engagement and wellbeing. At present an increasing number of young people are engaged in generating and maintaining cultural communities online (Jenkins, 2006). Their digital literacies manifest in their understandings of the cultural practices in these communities are essential for their effective participation which is, in turn, the means through which the Discourses in these communities are carried or modified (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Through this process, young people form their identity by being recognised by other members, by claiming their citizenship in these communities, and by drawing a sense of belonging from their interactions with others (Buckingham, 2008; Johns, 2014). Moreover, digital media have transformed people's civic and political participation and enabled the generation of new forms of social and political engagement (Vromen, Xenos, & Loader, 2015). As a result, digital literacy on a social and cultural level can help contemporary young adults to develop a critical edge by understanding how digital media represent their society, as well as the broader social, political and economic powers at play in this process of representation. Digital literacy of this type is thus crucial for them to become informed, active and responsible citizens in today's digitized society.

Informed by this understanding, this study examines the digital literacies which are intrinsic to the everyday participatory activities of Chinese young people on Weibo. By identifying the social and cultural elements of the digital literacies which underpins their online participation, this study highlights the significance of young people's everyday digital practices in constituting and defining digital literacies and practicing their digital citizenship.

3 Methodology

This study investigates digital literacies by examining young people's everyday activities on Weibo. Qualitative data about these activities were collected using online observation and internet mediated audio interviews. Thirty-one participants (16 female and 15 male) were recruited using snowball sampling. Participants' ages range from 19 to 33, averaging 25.6. All participants were

from urban areas of China (the majority located in south and eastern regions). Twelve participants had a bachelor's degree, 11 had a master's degree; five were college students; two had professional college degrees; and the 33-year-old participant held a PhD. Apart from the five undergraduates and the two first year PhD students, all the rest of the participants had just started their careers in a wide range of private or government sectors such as schools, hospitals, banks, government, and all sorts of private companies.

The data collection was conducted in two steps, beginning with online observation of participants' homepage on Weibo. I collected 20 pages (20 entries on each page) of Weibo posts in reverse chronological order from the day I received the address of the Weibo homepage of each participant. I then analysed these Weibo entries within the social and cultural context of the Weibo community, and identified the original Weibo posts made by participants which were *Liked* by other Weibo users, as well as the posts endorsed by the participants through *Liking* or re-posting.

The second step was synchronous online audio interview. The interview had two parts. The first half collected basic contextual information such as demographic information, participants' work and current life situations, and their internet habits. The second part of the interview sought to gain participants' perspectives on the way in which they formulated their posts and engaged in ongoing dialogues on Weibo, the norms and practices they tended to identify with and those they thought were more likely to be recognised by other Weibo users.

The interviews were conducted using WeChat (a mobile text and voice messaging service in China). The interviews took place between April and July 2015 and each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes. The interview transcripts were coded in Nvivo following the coding process established by Strauss & Corbin (1990). All the codes generated from open coding were merged into four themes which outlines the norms and practices of participants' engagement with the Weibo community. I elaborate on these practices in the next section.

4 Findings

Young people learn and shape the cultural practices of online communities through their engagement. These practices in turn constitute the digital literacies specific to different online communities. They can be embodied as explicit elements such as "language, symbols, regulations, and contracts", as well as tacit elements such as "conventions, untold rules, recognisable institutions, underlying assumptions, and shared world views" (Wenger, 1998, p. 47).

The way users understand, follow, and contribute to shaping these practices in their engagement with a specific online community demonstrates their digital literacies in performing effective and meaningful engagement with the community, and further determines their sense of and claim to digital citizenship in relation to this community. The following data about participants' activities on Weibo demonstrate four aspects of their digital literacies in the Weibo community.

4.1 *Shared Repertoire of Online Language*

The Chinese internet represents an alternative space to government-dominated traditional media such as television and newspapers (Yang, Tang, & Wang, 2014). Users have created a unique language practice for expression in this space (Yang, 2009) which represents an essential part of the digital literacies in the Weibo community and is crucial for users' effective engagement with the community. This practice is partly embodied as a set of evolving lexicon with tacit meanings that are shared among internet users (Latham, 2012; Meng, 2011; Yang et al., 2014). Words and expressions of this lexicon, such as *shenma*¹ (神马), *fuyun*² (浮云), are extensively used in participants' online posts on Weibo, showing that the ability to use this online lexicon is an important and meaningful element of digital literacies in the Weibo community.

Apart from the competency of understanding and using online lexicon, digital literacies on Weibo were also manifest in participants' shared perceptions about "good" language practice in this community. A 25 year old producer at a television station in Guangzhou stated that good and effective online expression should "provide a distinctive view in refined and incisive language", or "examine things from a different perspective". "Be interesting" is another characteristic of good language practice on Weibo. Zhangguai is a 31 year old entrepreneur who runs a media studio with his business partners in Beijing. He emphasises humour as an essential ingredient in "good" language practice in the Weibo community. Expressing things in a humorous way has become "a subconscious habit" in his online expression. He said that "You simply feel it is

1 Internet slang for *shenme* (什么, what), which literally means mythical horse. It is adopted by internet users due to its similar pronunciation to the word *shenme*.

2 Literally meaning floating cloud, it is used to refer to things not worth worrying about or unreachable. Put together with *shenma*, it makes one of the most commonly used online phrases "*shenma doushi fuyun*" (神马都是浮云, everything is nothing or not worth mentioning). A typical sentence using this phrase could be "*zhiyao neng kuaile de shenghuo, qita shenma doushi fuyun*" (只要能快乐地生活, 其他神马都是浮云. Everything else is nothing as long as we can live happily).

very tedious and boring if you say something as it is without a bit of teasing or bantering". Another participant who is a primary school Chinese teacher in Ningbo also noted that she likes online content that is written in a witty and humorous manner, but that is also direct and rational.

Participants' perceptions of "good" language practice as part of the digital literacies on Weibo reflect plain language, flexible usage of online colloquial/internet slang, and humorous and sarcastic narratives. These perceptions are consistent with other studies of Chinese internet culture which have highlighted the uniqueness of online expression created and reproduced by internet users in the cultural and socio-political context of China (Latham, 2012; Yang & Jiang, 2015; Yang et al., 2014). This informal, accessible and entertaining manner of online language casts the Chinese internet as an alternative space for information communication and public expression, different from mainstream mass media which are strictly regulated by the authorities and dominated by rigid and formalised rhetoric. This language practice has become a definitive factor in the digital literacies which enable users to engage effectively with the Weibo community.

4.2 *Community Expectations for Content Generation*

Aside from linguistic practices, digital literacies on Weibo also involve making sense of the community expectation for the mutual engagement of members. This engagement yields tractable norms and practices on which the coherence of a community is predicated. In the Weibo community, all participants spend a considerable amount of time browsing and generating content. Through these activities, they learn the collective expectations of the Weibo community for the contributions of its members and use what they have learnt to regulate their content generation activities.

Participants' perceptions of the collective expectations of the Weibo community for user-generated content can be summarised as *Youyingyang* (有营养), literally meaning nutritious, and here can be understood as beneficial or practically useful. Content which can enrich their knowledge and understanding of their society or is of practical use for their daily life is deemed to be *Youyingyang*. Examples of this kind of material given by participants include a short video teaching new traffic rules, news reports or comments based on sound evidence and rational analysis, and opinion pieces which offer fresh perspectives and can help them to gain a comprehensive picture or informed understanding of an issue.

The user-generated content which aligns with the expectation of the Weibo community for the engagement of its users provides a source of identification with the community. These communities arise when people can align their content contribution with the community expectation and help to build

shared knowledge (Biscontini, 2016). Participants' understandings of the expectations, rights and responsibilities of the Weibo community in relation to their content generation is the outcome of their learning of the practices on Weibo. This learning occurs as they engage with this community as both content consumer and content generator. Their contribution, which enriches the Weibo community, also enriches themselves. The establishment of this mutually enriching relationship between them and the Weibo community in turn supports the belief that they can and should be part of this enriching process (Pring, 2016), and lays the foundation of their digital citizenship in the Weibo community.

4.3 *Mutual Engagement—Attitudes and Values*

A vibrant and well-operating community is maintained by the mutual engagement of its members, and underpinned by a set of shared beliefs and values which constitute a crucial part of the digital literacies on Weibo. Participants' comments about their perceptions of these beliefs and values demonstrate that productive mutual engagement in the Weibo community is "as much a matter of diversity as it is a matter of homogeneity" (Wenger, 1998, p. 75).

All of the participants shared the idea that even though the public discussion on Weibo would not necessarily lead to ideal solutions to social issues, it could at least make the different perspectives on a social issue visible. The visibility of competing perspectives was crucial to their informed understanding of Chinese society. The participants showed how a belief in tolerance is essential to the Weibo community in several different ways. Cimi was a sophomore who was studying at a university in eastern China. She had the habit of participating in Weibo discussions of social events through placing her own posts or re-posting other people's comments, with which she agreed. When asked if she would refute opinions with which she disagreed, she stated that "everybody is unique, so everybody can express their own opinion, you do not have to post your opinion under their post to refute". This tolerance for different opinions on Weibo is also shared by Shihou, a 23-year-old senior student studying urban planning at a university in Guangzhou (a metropolitan city in southern China). He explained the importance of tolerance when engaging with the Weibo community by stating:

Different opinions are valuable, even for those that are hard for me to take. Because when a social event happens, we need different voices to help us to form an unbiased judgment. So, I will not follow or avoid certain people intentionally, I still mainly want to extend my horizon on Weibo, try my best to hear from different voices, and then to form my own judgement.

This attitude of tolerance was also endorsed by Xiaomeng, a 28-year-old product manager from a state-owned company in Shenzhen. In commenting his experience of being attacked on Weibo by extreme nationalists for his comments disagreeing with their hostility toward Japan, he showed his tolerance by saying that these people are probably very young, or may have limited information, knowledge and life experiences, stating “after all, we all have been young before”.

As well as tolerance, participants also tried to manifest rational and reasonable attitudes within the Weibo community. This intent is shown in participants’ descriptions of a valid discussion on Weibo. Shihou described a valid discussion, stating:

...It shouldn’t involve too much of participants’ personal factors, shouldn’t be about one defeating another with their argument. It should be about achieving mutual understanding and agreement. It should be based on facts and reasons, on rational analysis of pros and cons; only in this way, can a discussion produce something valuable, or reach an agreement. Only the discussions like this are valuable.

Posts and discussions based on facts and evidence were also valued by Zeqin, a 26-year-old public relations manager at an advertising company in Shenzhen. In response to my question about his participation in online discussions, he commented:

Sometimes discussion is necessary for finding the truth, but I wish we could base our discussions on evidence, facts, and proper reasoning, do not bring strong personal biases into it, or express personal opinions solely based on some personal political ideology, this is not right.

Aside from developing rational and tolerant attitudes, participants also learn about the values underpinning the practices of the Weibo community to which they have contributed. These values were described by participants in this study as reflecting equal right of expression in online communities and responsible contributions to these communities. Xiaomeng said in the interview:

Everybody has his/her right and freedom to express their opinion, ..., I’ll never attack others even if their opinion is entirely against mine because people come from different ages, family backgrounds, and have different learning and working experiences, it is just the points of their main concern are different.

While the value placed on equality in online expression suggests the rights that the participants felt entitled to claim as online citizens, they also shared a view that this right should be used responsibly, as shown in their efforts to be responsible content generators and distributors. Zeqin said he only *Likes* or reposts information and opinions which are “faithful, well-grounded, and make a clear point”.

The value of making responsible use of the right to online expression was also stressed by Yanyu, a 27-year-old TV journalist at a county-level broadcasting and TV station in Guangdong Province. In the interview, she said that a Weibo user “should be able to identify right (information) from wrong, and to choose to distribute that right or true information”. Zeqin indicated that he tries to post content which is different from that of others and to minimise repetition of information on Weibo. A few of the participants also stated that they only expressed their opinion when their view was absent on Weibo. It is evident that the attitudes and values for mutual engagement on Weibo as learned by the participants are strictly applied in their engagement with the Weibo community. In this sense, their mutual engagement on Weibo is a reciprocal process of learning and defining the digital literacies in the Weibo community.

4.4 *Joint Enterprise in an Online Community*

In addition to the shared repertoire and mutual engagement, the sense of embarking on a joint enterprise is another definitive element of the digital literacies. This sense is negotiated in the process of mutual engagement between the members of this community. Taken together, participants' perceptions of expectations of Weibo community for their content contribution, and their attitudes, values, and repertoires for effective participation, point to the joint construction of an equal, engaging, accountable and tolerant space for information-sharing and opinion expression. This enterprise, when placed in the general Chinese social context, can be described as the construction of an equal and tolerant space which can nourish informed, active, and fruitful public discussion. It is rich in reliable information and diversified opinions which can support one's learning about Chinese society.

This joint enterprise is illustrated by participants' statements about the significance of Weibo as a source of reliable information and diversified opinion. Lingzi is a 27-year-old news reporter located in Foshan.³ In commenting on the significance of the Weibo community for her, she stated that “Weibo could

3 Foshan is a prefecture-level city in central Guangdong Province in southeastern China.

expand the information I can see". This view is widely shared by other participants. Shihou shared in the interview that:

On Weibo, because you can follow people of a different kind, from all walks of life..., the more you follow, the more you see..., in this process, you can broaden your horizons, and things related to your values will gradually mature. I feel Weibo is beneficial for this process because if you know how to screen and reflect on the content generated by others, it is actually a process in which you can acquire different life experiences.

Similarly, Shijie who was an undergraduate student from Shandong province said that "Weibo can help me understand the ins and outs of a social phenomenon or event, know more opinions, possibilities, and get a deeper understanding". Cimi also commented that the feedback from other internet users on her posts helped her to develop her opinions about certain social issues. Zhangguai said the reason he shares his views online is that he wants to make his followers aware of the existence of an opinion or a voice about a particular issue, to find out how they think about this issue, and to discuss it with them.

As mass media are still largely regulated by the government despite the marketisation of the media sector in China (Zhao, 2008), the joint enterprise of constructing Weibo as a source of high quality information and a space for exchanging opinions is essential for Weibo to continue operating as an alternative space for news and public discussion. This joint enterprise can shape Weibo into a supportive community, enabling its members to learn the norms and practices of Chinese society, and to explore possible identities in relation to the society. It produces relations of accountability and mutuality, enriching relationships between individuals and their online community (Pring, 2016). This enterprise internalises participants' learning of "the normative behaviours, cues, and rituals" that generate the active informal mode of interaction on Weibo (Wang, 2013, p. 373), that is, the practices by which the digital literacies on Weibo are defined (Gastil, 2004). It structures participants' dynamic practice of their digital citizenship in the same way that rhythm structures music (Wenger, 1998).

5 Discussion

As shown in the literacies identified from participants' activities on Weibo and their account of engaging in these activities, a large part of these literacies is beyond the level of proficiency and is rooted in the unique cultural practices of

the Weibo community. These practices, which are shaped by the mutual engagement of Weibo users, function as the definitive source of the digital literacies in this community. Users learn these literacies through their participatory activities on Weibo. By doing so, they form their identity as a legitimate member of the community, experience a sense of belonging, and claim their digital citizenship in this community.

The literacies discussed in this study are only a snippet of the vast landscape of the digital literacies generated from highly diversified online communities. These days, with the flourishing of social media, young people have created highly diversified digital cultures through their engagement with different online communities (boyd, 2014; De Kloet & Fung, 2016). These cultures, manifested as norms, practices, values and joint enterprises, represent the ways of meaning making recognised by their respective online communities (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). These ways of meaning making define the digital literacies which are essential for and evolve alongside people's effective engagement with these communities. They also shape young people's participatory activities through which they form their identities and claim their digital citizenship in relation to these communities. In this sense, cultural and social aspects of literacy are essential for our discussion of digital literacies in enabling young people to become active and effective digital citizens.

The social and cultural dimensions of digital literacy can also bring new insights for us to reflect on some of the approaches and practices in digital/media literacy education which are found by the students in formal school settings to be not engaging or relevant. Adopting a functional competency view of digital literacy, these practices tend to divide information and communication technology into a separate school subject with the purpose of cultivating effective users of digital technology. Little attention is paid to young people's everyday experiences with technology, and as such their contribution to shaping cultural practices in online communities and defining the digital literacies which are directly relevant to their everyday online activities were not acknowledged in the classroom. As a result, school approaches to digital/media literacy education have become less capable of helping young people acquire relevant and meaningful digital literacies and enabling them to be active and effective participants in the online communities they choose to engage with. Hence, an alternative approach to digital literacy education could start with examining young people's online activities and understanding the digital literacies which are meaningful for their experiences of technology both inside and outside school (Buckingham, 2007).

The sociocultural dimension of digital literacy is crucial for young people's practices of citizenship in both the virtual and physical spaces. This was

showcased by the digital literacies identified via participants' activities on Weibo in this study. On the one hand, by shaping and learning the language, practices, and values in the Weibo community through their daily engagement, young people become a legitimate member of the community. Their participation in this community is a form of citizenship practice through which they learn about their digital citizenship in relation to the Weibo community. On the other hand, digital media (Weibo in this study) as a representation of the world mediate young people's engagement with the general society. In this sense, their digital literacies also enable them to learn about the general society and empower them to practice their citizenship in a broader scale.

6 Conclusion

This paper has examined the social and cultural elements of the digital literacies generated from young people's everyday engagement with the Weibo community. In doing so, I intend to draw attention to the constitutive nature of young people's digital activities in defining digital literacies. These literacies are essential in order for them to pursue digital activities which are meaningful to them and practice their citizenships in both virtual and physical spaces. This is also a way to acknowledge young people's hard work in constructing the diversified online culture and generating new forms of social and political participation which have shaped new identities and citizenships (Wood, 2014).

The social and cultural elements of digital literacies underlined by the findings of this research problematises the narrow understanding of digital literacies as a form of proficiency. These elements also provide insights for studying digital literacies from a bottom-up approach and re-constructing our digital literacy education by first investigating young people's online digital practices and the digital literacies generated from these practices. Only by understanding digital literacies contextually, can our digital literacy education be helpful in enabling young people to become confident citizens in their everyday engagement with digital technology.

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