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Borrowed Tactics, Shared Imaginaries: Hashtag-Centred Action in the 227 Controversy on Weibo

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Abstract

This article investigates hashtag-centred action during the 227 controversy on Weibo following the 2020 blocking of Archive of Our Own in China, focusing on Chinese Boys' Love (BL) fans' participation in this episode of digitally mediated contention. Through participant observation, interviews, and secondary source analysis, it traces BL fans' development of sophisticated algorithmic imaginaries: shared understandings of how platform algorithms function and can be contested. The study reveals three-layered algorithmic imaginaries: participatory visibility, commercial manipulation, and institutional authority. These imaginaries circulated across adjacent user communities, showing how algorithmic knowledge accumulates and adapts within China's co-regulated platform environment. The analysis advances scholarship on digital contention by demonstrating how, under authoritarian constraints, everyday users collectively negotiate algorithmic power, making hashtags as infrastructures for learning and tactical adaptation.

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Keywords

Algorithmic imaginaries, hashtags, digital contention, platform governance, visibility tactics, Boys' Love fandom

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Introduction

When algorithms shape what becomes visible in digital spaces, how do ordinary users learn to navigate and contest these systems of power? This question took on urgent significance in February 2020, when a fan reporting incident precipitated the blocking of Archive of Our Own (AO3) in mainland China. The AO3 is a non-profit, volunteer-run archive that hosts fanfiction and other transformative works under an explicit ethos of free expression. Because AO3 is internationally hosted and not subject to China's routine platform pre-screening, it has long served Chinese users (Feng, 2020) – particularly Boys' Love (BL) fans, whose practices are frequently restricted on domestic platforms for depicting romantic and erotic male–male relationships. Its sudden inaccessibility, therefore, represented not merely the loss of a website but the collapse of a fragile yet vital space for cultural production and community life.

The immediate trigger for AO3's blocking was a fan-reported incident involving BL-related work associated with the celebrity Xiao Zhan (Xiao), who had gained a large BL following after starring in an adapted BL web series. After some of his fans reported the content to China's regulatory authorities, access to AO3 was cut-off nationwide on 27 February 2020. This rapidly escalated into a large-scale online controversy known as "227," named after the date of the block. What began as mourning for a lost creative sanctuary evolved into a sustained contention encompassing both a visible struggle for freedom in cultural content creation and harassment and retaliation against the celebrity involved and their fans. The controversy drew in heterogeneous participants – fan creators, free-expression advocates, critics of "toxic fandom," and digital natives attracted by participatory spectacle – and persisted in cycles for roughly two years.

Within this heterogeneous controversy, this research focuses on hashtag-centred actions during 227. Over time, hashtag campaigns expanded from opposing AO3's blocking and defending subcultural boundaries to intersecting with other contentious publics and repertoires. Even aims and motives have varied, but hashtags have always functioned as key sites where participants articulated grievances, coordinated tactics, and attempted to force issues into public attention through algorithmically mediated ranking systems. Yet these visibility-seeking efforts were repeatedly disrupted by content moderation, hashtag disappearance, and uneven amplification, producing cycles of frustration, reinterpretation, and tactical adjustment: the moments through which algorithmic imaginaries became articulated and revised. Rather than treating 227 as a unified "movement," this study examines how participants engaged in visibility contests through hashtags, and how these engagements became sites for collective learning about algorithmic power under platform governance.

Meanwhile, this study focuses on BL fans as the primary participant group, while the 227 controversy involved heterogeneous publics. For one thing, BL fans were among the most directly affected by AO3's blocking, given their long-standing reliance on the platform as a creative and communal refuge amid intensified censorship of BL-related content on domestic sites. They were also among the earliest and most sustained participants in hashtag-based actions following the block. On the other hand, for BL fans, the

irony was profound: a celebrity who had benefited from BL culture had fans who destroyed one of their few remaining creative sanctuaries. This context shaped how BL fans understood the subsequent contention – not merely as an entertainment industry conflict but as a battle over creative freedom and the right to alternative cultural expression.

Existing scholarship has approached the 227 controversy from multiple perspectives. Some studies define it as the intra-fandom conflict between Xiao's fans and anti-fans, who both internalise punitive reporting as a norm of legitimacy in consumer culture, thereby perpetuating heteronormativity and censorship (Wang and Ge, 2022). From a linguistic perspective, Wang (2021) analyses posts and comments on Weibo, showing how Xiao's supporters use linguistic avoidance to manage their rapport with non-fans and the wider public. Tan and Li contend that the reporting used by both Xiao's fans and supporters of the 227 is a form of "cancel culture with Chinese characteristics." Whilst the events themselves originated from demands for social justice, their execution became intertwined with heteronormativity and cyber-nationalism, prioritising state ideology over societal righteousness (Tan and Li, 2025). Among studies that generalise about participants, some view this incident as a concentrated eruption of the rift and misunderstanding between fan culture and the outside world (Ji, 2020) or an instance of fan public attempting to gain social influence and participate in agenda-setting, even when such participation devolved into factional struggles over celebrity interests (Sun, 2023).

These studies offer a rich understanding of 227 controversy, yet they sometimes risk equating participants' means with their intentions. Another gap is the lack of analysis of the context in which events unfolded alongside patterns of participation. This research seeks to address these limitations by focusing on BL fans as participants who simultaneously embody multiple identities. Employing hashtag-centred action as the primary analytical lens, it integrates platform-based power dynamics into contextual analysis. On the other hand, focusing on BL fans does not imply that they represent all 227 participants. Rather, by examining a participant group situated at the intersection of cultural marginalisation, platform dependency, and tactical expertise (Zhang, 2024, 2025), this research contributes a new perspective to understand the hashtag-centred actions during 227 beyond the above studies: how participants collectively made sense of algorithmic power under censorship, commercialisation, and co-regulated platform governance. To analyse these processes, the article adopts the theoretical framework of algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017), and raises the three interrelated questions that probe the relationship between algorithmic systems and collective action: First, how do algorithmic imaginaries – users' beliefs about how platforms' algorithms function – emerge and circulate across different communities? Second, how are these imaginaries transformed when borrowed tactics encounter the specific affordances and constraints of platform governance? Third, what happens to users' understanding of algorithmic power when their established tactics fail, and how do these moments of frustration reshape collective strategies for digital resistance?

Through participant observation, nineteen in-depth interviews, and analysis of platform documents and media coverage, this research examines how the 227 hashtag

campaigns became sites for collective learning about algorithmic power. Beyond this specific case, it reveals how algorithmic imaginaries emerge collectively, evolve temporally, and adapt to complex power structures involving platform economics, institutional authority, and state control – illuminating the dynamics through which Chinese internet users navigate increasingly restrictive digital environments while pursuing creative expression, cultural autonomy, and political voice.

The article begins with the theoretical framework, followed by essential context on platform governance in China's distinctive setting. The methodology section details the multi-method approach and a reflexive discussion of the researcher's positionality as a supporter of fan creation. The analysis proceeds through three interconnected sections, each examining a distinct algorithmic imaginary. The first explores how participants mobilised around the belief that collective data labour could influence algorithmic outcomes, drawing on accumulated knowledge from Weibo's history, digital activism, and fandom practices. The second illustrates how frustrated encounters with platform governance – particularly when hashtags disappeared despite intensive data manipulation – prompted more sophisticated understandings of how platform economics and commercial relationships shape visibility. The final section shows how encounters with institutional authority revealed that state power can ultimately override both user tactics and commercial interests.

Algorithmic Imaginaries, Visibility, and Hashtag-Centred Contention

Hashtags have become a prominent way of collective expression in platform-mediated publics. Hashtags enable dispersed users to aggregate attention, articulate grievances, and co-ordinate action by competing for visibility within algorithmically organised information environments (Clark, 2016; Jackson et al., 2020; Yang, 2016). Their efficacy depends on platform architectures where ranking, recommendation, and trending systems mediate who see what (Bishop, 2019). Studies highlight algorithmic bias, affordances and governance, and commercialisation as key to visibility (e.g., Caldeira, 2023; Mendes et al., 2019; Trott, 2021).

Scholarship on online contention that uses hashtags primarily concerns hashtag activism, such as #MeToo or #BlackLivesMatter, that possess clear political agendas and more legible forms of coordination. Those movements have emphasised how marginalised voices leverage hashtags to contest dominant narratives and mobilise publics (Jackson et al., 2020; Mendes et al., 2019). Yet these studies are largely situated in liberal-democratic contexts where platform governance, despite its inequalities, allows relatively stable space for public contestation. Less attention has been paid to how hashtag-based contention unfolds under conditions of public activism not being allowed and platform governance being intensified by state intervention, where visibility as a platform affordance is precarious and unevenly distributed (Zhang, 2025). In such contexts, collective action does not merely use algorithms; it is continuously reshaped by users' evolving

understandings of how algorithmic systems work, fail, and intervene. Therefore, this study does not seek to strictly define the hashtag-centred actions during 227 as organised hashtag activism with a unified agenda. Rather, it examines a specific aspect of the event that resonated with participants, discerning the collective understanding of algorithmic power hidden behind the hashtag's common form.

To analyse these processes, this research employs the framework of algorithmic imaginaries (Bucher, 2017) to examine hashtag-centred action during the 227 controversy. Algorithmic imaginaries refer to the ways users imagine, feel, and reason about algorithmic systems in everyday life. These imaginaries are not merely reflections of technical processes; they actively shape how users interact with platforms, how they interpret outcomes such as visibility or suppression, and how they adjust their expectations and practices. Drawing on Stewart's model of ordinary affects (Stewart, 2007), Bucher emphasises that algorithmic imaginaries become most visible in moments of encounter – when algorithms frustrate, surprise, or disappoint users, producing affective responses such as anger, hope, or resonance that exceed technical explanation. Apart from the algorithmic imaginary, folk theory (DeVito et al., 2017) and perceived knowledge (Eslami et al., 2015) also strive to explain users' understandings of algorithms. In DeVito's later refinements of the framework (DeVito, 2021), folk theories are also bridged with algorithmic imaginary as a pathway to algorithmic literacy. Although DeVito's work also takes users' self-presentation concerns as its entry point, it focuses on causal machine diagnosis, whereas algorithmic imaginaries foreground the affective, collective, and normative dimensions of sense-making – how users think about what algorithms are, what they should be, and what kinds of power relations they embody. 227 began with mourning AO3's blocking – emotions that persisted throughout the contention and fundamentally shaped participants' engagement. Moreover, participants' shared frustrations with disappearing hashtags, sudden account suspensions, and asymmetric visibility did not merely generate pragmatic explanations; they crystallised into collectively circulating orientations towards platforms as participatory systems, commercial infrastructures, or instruments of institutional authority. Because the analysis begins with these affective encounters and traces how they shaped collective expectations and coordinated practices over time, algorithmic imaginaries provide the appropriate framework for this study to capture the ways in which technical speculation, emotional response, and political interpretation coalesce into shared horizons of action.

Meanwhile, China's party-state has developed a sophisticated co-regulatory model that delegates "primary responsibility" for online content to platforms while maintaining ultimate control through campaigns, rectifications, licencing requirements, and escalating penalties (Lin and de Kloet, 2019; Schneider, 2018; Wang and Lobato, 2019). As a result, governance has been embedded in platform products, algorithms, and moderation workflows. Such a model complicates algorithmic imaginaries in the non-Western context, which needs to be addressed carefully.

For users, this means that "the algorithm" is experienced not as a merely technical mechanism but as a condensation of multiple power relations. When hashtags disappear,

when accounts are suspended, when certain content trends while other content remains invisible – these outcomes are interpreted through accumulated memories of platform behaviour, commercialisation, and censorship. Algorithmic imaginaries in this context therefore encompass understandings of platform economics, celebrity–platform relations, and institutional authority, as well as technical metrics.

By situating the 227 hashtag action within this co-regulated environment, the article treats visibility as a contested and unstable resource rather than a neutral outcome of engagement. Hashtags functioned as sites where participants experimented with tactics, shared interpretations, and collectively recalibrated their expectations of what visibility could achieve. These processes were neither linear nor uniformly progressive. Instead, they unfolded through repeated moments of frustration and adaptation, revealing how algorithmic imaginaries are layered, historically accumulated, and shaped by sustained engagement with platform governance.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multi-method design to examine how participants collectively interpreted and navigated algorithmic governance during 227. Rather than seeking representativeness, the approach captures processes of sense-making: how algorithmic imaginaries emerged and evolved through encounters with visibility, suppression, and intervention. Data was collected through three methods: (1) participant observation on Weibo; (2) semi-structured interviews; and (3) secondary source analysis (media reports, platform policies, and regulations). This triangulated design connects participants' interpretations of algorithms with their actions in moments of contention, situating these practices within broader structures of platform co-regulation.

The study spans from 27 February 2020 to 27 February 2022, a window that captures multiple cycles of mobilisation and platform intervention before collective action largely dissipated. It focuses on Weibo as the principal arena where hashtag contests and platform–user encounters unfolded most visibly and was the primary platform for engagement among interviewed fans.

Data Collection

I conducted participant observation of public Weibo content from February 2020 to February 2023, though analysis is restricted to the active 2020–2022 period; observations in 2023 informed contextual understanding but fall outside the core dataset. Observation proceeded in two stages. Initially, I broadly tracked accessible aspects of the controversy. After completing interviews, I narrowed my focus to BL fans and hashtag-centred actions identified through interview data, tracking hashtag pages (approximately the first ten pages per tag), high-engagement posts, comment threads, and platform responses. Sampling combined hashtag tracing with snowballing from influential accounts frequently cited within the movement. I concentrated on moments of disruption – when expected visibility failed to materialise, hashtags vanished, or accounts were suspended.

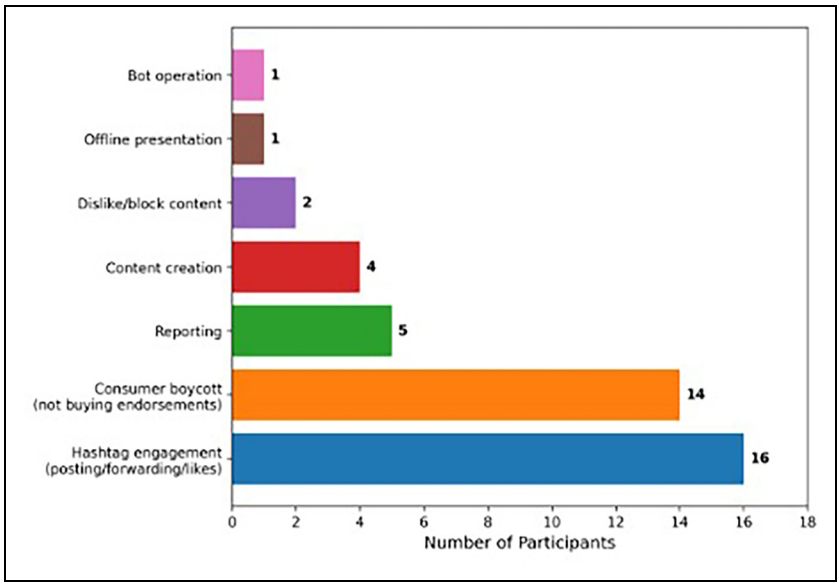

Figure 1. Primary participant modes of interviewed Boys' Love (BL) fans in the 227 controversy.

These moments, which interviewed fans described as confusing or unjust, serve as key analytical entry points for tracing algorithmic imaginaries.

Between May and June 2021, I conducted 19 in-depth, semi-structured interviews (via WeChat audio) with adult women who self-identified as both participants and BL fans. Recruitment combined social media outreach and personal networks. The guide covered participation/motivation; interpretations of 227; tactical knowledge and sources; perceived obstacles and platform responses; and goals and outcomes. Interviews prioritised analytic depth over representativeness.

As shown in Figure 1, participation in 227 ranged from low-intensity engagement (e.g., liking and voting) to high-intensity practices such as content creation, reporting, and account operation. Categories are non-exclusive: many participants engaged in multiple modes of participation simultaneously or sequentially. Figure 1 shows that hashtag engagement and consumer boycott were the dominant participation forms. I further clarify that the forms of consumer boycott discussed by interviewees encompass not only rejecting products endorsed by Xiao in offline settings but also forwarding and commenting on Weibo posts about such products, using hashtags expressing opposition. Therefore, in terms of form, consumer boycott is also part of hashtag action.

Meanwhile, the participants demonstrated significant connections to other fan communities and cultural groups, beyond BL fandom. As illustrated in Figure 2, participants were embedded in multiple fandoms and issue publics, including fan creators, popular celebrity fans, gaming community members, media fandom participants, and various

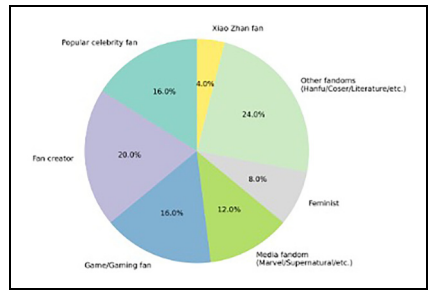

Figure 2. Cross-Group identifications among interview participants.

specialised fandoms. One participant identified as a former Xiao fan. The figure maps overlapping cultural and community identifications reported by participants. These identifications reflect the multiple publics through which participants navigated the 227 controversy. Thus, participants acted according to their individual interpretations of the situation and their expectations of the effectiveness of tactics. It is precisely on this basis that the tactical knowledge they shared whilst navigating across platforms and communities (Zhang, 2025) emerged as the subject of this research.

All materials used are public during the observation or are unrestricted in access. Interviewees received full information about the study's academic purpose and data use. Participants were anonymous, and any potentially identifying details were altered or removed.

I also incorporated analysis of secondary sources, including media coverage of the contention, relevant government regulations, and platform governance documents. Particular attention was paid to how societal factors manifested in algorithmic visibility and imaginaries. These forces were also explored in the interviews, examining how participants understood the workings of these forces on the platform and how hashtag tactics were influenced.

Analytical Framework and Positionality

I use "moments of frustration" as entry points (Bucher, 2017): when expected visibility does not materialise or vanishes, participants narrate why, revealing imaginaries; I then trace subsequent adaptations. I also examine knowledge origins, including fandom techniques, prior activism, platform history, and governance memory, to show imaginaries as collective, cross-community, and cumulative.

My position as a long-term BL fan and AO3 user enabled early engagement with the field and fluency in fan-specific genres such as tactical guides and coded expressions. Meanwhile, it required careful reflexive attention to the risks of interpretive affinity. This research treats it as an epistemic condition that shapes problem definition and interpretation. To mitigate over-identification, I sought participants with diverse motivations,

especially those who expressed ambivalence about the movement's tactics or who participated for reasons other than ideological commitment to creative freedom. The analysis consistently examines gaps between stated goals and actual tactics, internal tensions among participants, and contradictions in their algorithmic imaginaries.

Moreover, the two-year, extensive observation allowed me to track changes in participants' rhetoric and tactics over time, revealing complexities and contradictions that might not emerge in shorter studies or if I had simply accepted initial self-representations. By combining longitudinal observation with reflexive analysis, the study interprets BL fans' participation in 227 not as a morally unified stance but as a situated process of navigating algorithmic governance under constraint.

The Participatory Visibility Imaginary: Data Labour as Digital Resistance

This section examines the foundational algorithmic imaginary that enabled the initial mobilisation of hashtag actions: the belief that collective user data labour could influence algorithmic outcomes and achieve visibility for resistance messages. I define this as the participatory visibility imaginary – a shared understanding among participants that platform algorithms operate as open, programmable architectures where users' input shapes visibility outcomes. This imagination was historically accumulated through Weibo's platform evolution and users' experiences across different online communities, particularly digital fandoms. Tracing how this imaginary was constructed, shared, and mobilised, this section demonstrates how algorithmic understandings travel across communities and become resources for digital contention.

Weibo's Visibility Architecture and the Participatory Imaginaries

As the battleground for the 227 controversy, Weibo occupies a distinctive position in China's digital ecology. With 598 million monthly active users as of December 2023 (ScienceandTechnologyNice, 2024), it remains a central site for public contention, despite increasing competition from short-video platforms. This historical role is crucial for understanding why participants approached hashtag-centred actions with confidence in visibility manipulation.

Unlike visibility games (Cotter, 2018) on platforms such as Instagram, where influencers consciously adjust their behaviours in response to opaque algorithmic signals (O'Meara, 2019), Weibo's early development followed a different trajectory. During its ascendancy phase (2009–2013), the platform actively promoted journalists and opinion leaders to stimulate traffic, using visibility as a reward for participation in public contention (Bucher, 2012; Li, 2023). Through trending rankings prominently displayed on users' homepages, Weibo presented a seemingly transparent visibility architecture in which collective participation appeared capable of shaping public agendas and even influencing policy outcomes, as illustrated by the Yihuang incident (Lam, 2010).

This history left a lasting imprint on users' algorithmic imaginaries. Even as Weibo later shifted towards entertainment-driven commercialisation, its earlier openness established a durable belief that visibility remained responsive to collective user input (Turkington, 2022). This belief – that algorithms could still be "worked" through participation – constituted the historical foundation of the participatory visibility imaginary that participants later mobilised during the 227 controversy.

Cross-Community Data Manipulation Tactics

While Weibo's platform design created the conditions for participatory visibility, tactical knowledge about manipulating algorithmic outcomes was developed through sustained engagement by different user communities. Two communities were particularly influential: digital activists and entertainment fandoms.

Chinese digital activism has long relied on creative tactics to circumvent censorship, including homophony, word separation, romanisation, and visual substitution (Yang, 2009). During the Chinese #MeToo campaign, for example, activists used "RiceBunny" (米兔, *mitu*) as a substitute hashtag after the original tag was blocked (Zeng, 2020). Such practices reinforced the belief that algorithmic filtering could be negotiated through collective ingenuity rather than simply endured.

From 2013 onwards, as Weibo intensified commercialisation following its NASDAQ listing and reduced its involvement in public issues (Jia and Han, 2020), entertainment fandoms became central actors in the platform's visibility economy. Traffic celebrities and their organised data fandoms developed sophisticated data inflation tactics – multiple accounts, repeated liking and voting, standardised posting formats, and automated tools – to push content onto trending rankings (Yin, 2020; Zhang et al., 2023). Through continuous experimentation, fans accumulated practical knowledge about timing, formatting, and interaction patterns that maximised visibility. As Yin (2020) observes, this "data-isation of online fandom" normalised algorithmic manipulation as everyday practice.

The participatory visibility imaginary thus emerged through the circulation of activist and fandom tactics across community boundaries. Boys' Love fans were situated precisely at this intersection. On the one hand, BL culture had been subjected to regulatory scrutiny, framed by external discourse as politically subversive or morally suspect (Yang and Xu, 2016). On the other hand, the commercialisation of BL content cultivated a fanbase deeply familiar with the entertainment industry and the digital labour (Zou, 2022). This dual positioning enabled participants in hashtag-centred actions during the 227 controversy to share a common assumption: despite platforms' economic advantages, users could still exert influence through collective data labour.

The Programmatic Guide: Mobilising Cross-Community Tactical Knowledge

In the days following AO3's ban, a programmatic guide authored by an influential fan creator circulated widely among those mourning the loss of AO3 and expressing anger

towards those who reported the site. This guide is a crucial artefact for understanding how the participatory visibility imaginary was operationalised during the 227 controversy, as it explicitly coordinated cross-community tactical knowledge while proposing hashtag-centred action as a core mode of contention.

The guide proposed a consumer boycott targeting Xiao and his endorsements, arguing that although fans had initiated the reporting, Xiao – as a celebrity sustained by fan-generated data traffic – should be held accountable. The post quickly gained traction, receiving 38,000 likes and 74,000 forwards.

Its effectiveness lay not only in tactical coordination but also in discursive framing. To distinguish the boycott from reporting or harassment, the guide emphasised consumer choice: "…boycotting a celebrity's endorsed products is a matter of consumer choice, fundamentally different from reporting or cyberbullying. We are legitimate consumers, and we have the right to make statements about brands….What's wrong with consumers expressing their purchasing decisions?"

This framing aligned resistance with consumer-rights discourse – one of the few forms of activism consistently tolerated in Chinese digital culture (Yang, 2009). Reinforced by state-endorsed events such as the annual 3.15 Consumer Rights Day and frequently repurposed in feminist hashtag campaigns (Chen, 2019), this discourse provided political cover for visibility-oriented contention.

The guide's concluding statement reveals the strategic appropriation underlying this framing: "…to ensure that the entire fan community remembers one thing: Do. Not. Report." Here, consumer boycott functioned as a means to an end – protecting creative freedom from reporting and censorship. Participants recognised this tactical compromise, as reflected in one interviewee's explanation:

> …in practical, Xiao is, of course, not the root of the problem. But he is a star, a commodity, a commercial symbol. It is reasonable to declare war on these things. (Anonymous 1, 2021)

Beyond discourse, the guide articulated concrete tactics grounded in the participatory visibility imaginary. Suggested practices included flooding comment sections (控评, *kongping*), tagging brand accounts, and collecting information on data fandom operations. Competing for trending rankings was framed as essential, since "…pushing a hashtag to the trending list is more effective than anything else," a lesson drawn from observing various contentions on the platform.

The guide frames these visibility tactics as "voice out" and emphasises its necessity:

> I understand if you think 'I just silently do not buy goods he (Xiao) endorsed', but it will not work. Let the brands know if you do not buy. The resistance will be less effective if you do not voice out…. your voice must, must, must let the brand know…. let brands know by @them on Weibo.

Visibility was imagined not merely as symbolic expression but as a resource with material consequences:

> It (the tactics) makes sense…to make our boycotting posts less visible, (Xiao's) fans have to spend more time making other content visible…All these efforts deplete Xiao's annual marketing budget, leaving him with little (to spend on other marketing promotions).

One interviewee articulated how hashtag-centred action connected visibility tactics to broader political concerns:

> Hashtags have become distorted over time; the field has grown exceedingly complex, attracting all manner of unsavory elements…But I believe all hashtag usage is essentially data manipulation. The relentless flooding aims to inflate metrics, make him (Xiao) on trending, amplify the scale, and ensure even those uninterested in the entertainment industry become aware and engage in debate. When discussing the 227, Xiao was merely a symbol. The core debate centered on whether censoring such BL works was fundamentally justified. Is it justified to use authority to castrate (restrict) creative expression? The further you expand the discussion, the more it touches upon the censorship system itself. Discussing censorship inevitably leads to the political institution. This issue has ripple effects; it's not just about Xiao anymore; it radiates to many… (Anonymous 2, 2021)

These accounts reveal how participants understood visibility simultaneously as economic leverage and as a pathway towards political debate. While recognising structural inequalities, they maintained that algorithms remained responsive to collective input. As the guide stated, "The more effort we put in, the more they suffer."

The participatory visibility imaginary thus positioned algorithms as contested terrains rather than closed systems. It provided both tactical knowledge and political hope, enabling the rapid coordination of hashtag-centred actions during the early phase of the 227 controversy. Yet, as subsequent sections show, this imaginary proved insufficient when confronted with platform governance and state authority, prompting participants to expand further and revise their algorithmic imaginaries.

The Commercial Manipulation Imaginary: Encountering Platform Economics and State Power

When participants deployed familiar tactics to push hashtags onto Weibo's trending ranking, they encountered suppression that could not be explained through technical understandings of algorithms alone. Hashtags disappeared despite intensive data manipulation; accounts were suspended without warning; meanwhile, content favourable to Xiao maintained persistent visibility. These frustrated encounters undermined reliance on data labour and prompted an expansion of algorithmic imaginaries. I use the commercial manipulation imaginary to describe this shift, which developed along two interconnected lines: interpretations of platform economics and perceptions of platform–stakeholder relationships.

Figure 3. An example of voting.

The Initial Deployment of Data Inflation Tactics

At the beginning, the primary focus was on getting various hashtags reflecting the demands of 227 onto the trending ranking. Participants confidently drew on data inflation tactics commonly used in digital fan communities (Yin and Xie, 2021). They also relied heavily on voting, where repeated "vote-cancel-revote" cycles could generate traffic more efficiently than posting. Instructions circulated widely – often with screenshots and step-by-step guidance (see Figure 3) – demonstrating the tactical repertoire participants brought from fandom practices.

Because similar techniques had repeatedly succeeded in pushing entertainment hashtags to trending rankings, participants expected these practices to work again. Yet early hashtags not only failed to reach the trending ranking but also struggled to survive content moderation. This gap between expected and actual visibility became a key trigger for reinterpreting algorithmic power.

The Frustration: Hashtag Disappearances and Algorithmic Failure

Early failures revealed that political content was treated differently from entertainment content, even when participants used identical data manipulation tactics. Hashtags that directly challenged political authority vanished quickly. For example, #TearDownTheWall – explicitly targeting state censorship that enabled AO3's blocking – survived only for hours.

Similarly, #HeartFireNeverDies, #CreationNeverEnds, and #FreedomToCreate, which expressed dissatisfaction with cultural censorship more broadly, also disappeared rapidly.

Even hashtags focused on the AO3 incident without direct challenges to censorship – such as #227GreatUnity and #227HistoricalMoment – survived only for several months. Their disappearance coincided with intensified state intervention, suggesting that survival time correlated more strongly with political sensitivity than with user data labour. This destabilised the participatory visibility imaginary's core assumption that sufficient data labour could secure visibility.

Weibo's suppression intensified in July 2020, when the Cyberspace Administration of China launched the 2020 "Clean-Up" (清朗, *qinglang*) campaign to improve the online environment for minors. One stated goal was to "rectify harmful information and behaviours that induce minors to irrationally pursue celebrities and engage in fandom disputes" (The Office of Cyberspace Administration of China 国家网信办秘书局, 2020). Weibo subsequently held a meeting with Xiao's company, urging the "celebrity and management team to strengthen their positive guidance and restraint over the fandoms" (ChinaEconomics, 2020). In its public announcement, Weibo framed both Xiao's fans and 227 participants as equally disruptive, attributing "phenomena disrupting the order of online communication" to the "failure of the celebrity to effectively manage fandoms." The announcement concluded with a list of suspended accounts across both sides, implicitly recasting the controversy as intra-fandom conflict rather than public dissent. Shortly thereafter, the hashtags #227GreatUnity and #227HistoricalMoment vanished.

Participants experienced these interventions through interface-level consequences: hashtags became unsearchable, followers disappeared without notification, and accounts were suspended with vague or absent explanations. The opacity of these governance processes contrasted with the platform's visible trending systems, which had previously provided feedback about collective data labour. As participants shared experiences and explanations for what was happening "behind" the interface, they incorporated additional parameters into their imaginaries.

Expanding Through Understanding Platform Economics

The first expansion involved a more explicit reading of platform economics. The disappearance of 227 hashtags, while entertainment content remained highly visible, led participants to question Weibo's claims of neutrality, including its statement following a meeting with Xiao's team about "upholding the platform's neutral and transparent nature." (Wang, 2020). One participant explained:

> …Weibo is not a very fair and impartial platform. It favors whoever spends more money on it. I also think Weibo enjoys seeing both sides tear each other apart because it brings a lot of traffic and, consequently, more profit. (Anonymous 3, 2021)

This interpretation shifted attention away from purely technical mechanisms towards the platform's profit incentives. It also challenged the participatory visibility

imaginary's assumption of relatively equal participation in visibility contests: if visibility could be purchased, then collective data labour was structurally disadvantaged from the start.

Expanding Through Commercial Stakeholder Relationships

The second expansion focused on perceived relationships between platforms and commercial stakeholders, especially celebrities. Observing asymmetric treatment of content, one participant stated:

> During the protest, many of our trending hashtags were removed, while trending hashtags favorable to Xiao kept appearing. Weibo and Xiao are definitely in shared interests… (Anonymous 4, 2021)

Here, platform governance was interpreted not simply as censorship or neutral enforcement but as selective moderation shaped by stakeholder relationships. Participants also questioned whether Weibo's suspensions of accounts on "both sides" were symmetrical:

> It's said that the accounts (of Xiao's fans) that were banned were run by Xiao's team, and the bans were agreed upon beforehand. It was merely a superficial act. However, the banning of protestors' accounts was real and sudden. Fairness? It simply cannot exist here. (Anonymous 5, 2021).

Whether these claims were accurate or not, they show how participants developed political-economic interpretations of moderation as performative and uneven. Given Weibo's opaque rules, the commercialisation of visibility, and documented reports that trending positions can be purchased for 200,000 to millions of yuan (Liu, 2021), the commercial manipulation imaginary reflects experiential inference rather than mere conspiracy.

Tactical Adaptation: The Surviving Hashtag

Algorithmic frustrations also produced strategic adaptation. Participants updated their perceptions of power dynamics and adjusted their tactics accordingly, as exemplified by the last surviving hashtag #IAmAnOrdinaryPersonIHateXiaoZhan.

As the longest-lasting hashtag following a series of disappearances, it reflected participants' expanded understanding of the power structure they faced. #IAmAnOrdinaryPerson signalled a non-fan stance, attempting to distinguish participants from intra-fandom conflict targeted by governance campaigns. By self-positioning as "ordinary people," participants sought to reduce political sensitivity. Meanwhile, #IHateXiaoZhan could be linked to documented misbehaviour by Xiao's fans, such as reporting AO3, aligning with behaviours targeted by the "Clean-Up" campaign.

The survival of this hashtag, in contrast to the other disappeared hashtags, clearly illustrates the limitations of the original participatory visibility imaginaries validated by fan

experiences. When user and platform interests diverged, when state authority perceived content as politically sensitive, even excessive data labour made it difficult to compete for visibility. Only by integrating understanding of all power dimensions into their tactics could participants achieve even temporary visibility.

The expansion of algorithmic imaginaries from participatory optimism to commercial-political sophistication was not merely a fleeting individual learning experience. Rather, it reflected accumulated knowledge drawn from multiple sources that participants brought to bear on their current situation.

First, understandings of platform commercialisation drew on knowledge about Weibo's business transformation since 2013, when the platform shifted from promoting public engagement to monetising attention. Users had observed this transformation over the years, watching as trending rankings became increasingly commercialised and entertainment content dominated public discourse. The hashtag action of 227 did not generate new knowledge about commercialisation; rather, it activated and applied existing knowledge to interpret new experiences. Further, participants were aware of how previous digital contentions had been suppressed, how platforms responded to state pressure, and which discursive frames proved more viable than others. The rapid adoption of consumer-rights defence discourse and the modification of hashtag rhetoric reflected this accumulated political knowledge.

This accumulated nature of algorithmic imaginaries reveals their collective and social character. Participants did not develop these understandings in isolation but through mutual participation across different user communities. Entertainment fans, digital activists, and casual users all contributed experiential knowledge about how Weibo's systems functioned. This knowledge circulated through informal channels, embedded in tactical guides, shared through cautionary stories, and transmitted through observed patterns.

The initial participatory visibility imaginary had positioned users as potentially equal actors in visibility programming, while the expanded commercial manipulation imaginary revealed a more complex reality: visibility was shaped by interactions among user tactics, platform economics, and commercial relationships. This expansion did not represent disillusionment but rather participants developed a more realistic understanding of the constraints they faced while simultaneously identifying new tactical possibilities. However, the challenge of competing visibility extended beyond hashtag discourses. The next section explores another moment of algorithmic frustration and reveals a further complicated understanding of algorithms.

Institutional Authority Imaginary: Verification, Privilege, and Power Hierarchy

Beyond hashtag discourses and collective data labour, participants also attempted to enhance their individual account influence through Weibo's account rating system, believing that higher "account weight" would amplify their voices within the movement. These efforts introduced them to yet another dimension of platform visibility architecture: the hierarchical verification system that explicitly privileged certain institutional accounts by providing them with traffic support from the platform.

The encounters with verified accounts – particularly institutional "Blue V" accounts that appeared to support Xiao while enjoying platform-endorsed visibility advantages – catalysed a third crucial expansion of algorithmic imaginaries: offline power structures are systematically reproduced and amplified in digital spaces through ostensibly neutral technical systems so that state authority can trump both user tactics and commercial interests. This imaginary emerged not from a single frustrated moment but through persistent experiences across the entire movement, as participants' accounts remained invisible despite data efforts, while institutional accounts effortlessly maintained visibility through platform-granted privileges.

This section examines how the institutional authority imaginary developed through participants' encounters with Weibo's account rating and verification systems, revealing the limits of both data labour and commercial power when confronted with institutionalised authority. It demonstrates how participants came to understand that algorithmic imaginaries must account not merely for technical metrics or commercial transactions but for complex interactions between platform economics, institutional authority, and state power. The failed competition with Blue Vs particularly highlighted how Weibo's once-trusted role as a space for democratic contention had transformed into a system that reproduced authoritarian power structures.

The Account Weight Imaginary: Attempting Individual Visibility Enhancement

The idea that account weight is crucial in visibility competition represents another algorithmic imaginary shared across different user communities, particularly digital fandoms. Although the platform has never officially confirmed it, users have long speculated that Weibo operates an invisible rating system to score accounts. In this hypothesised visibility architecture, accounts with higher ratings – or higher "weight" – have their posts, comments, and likes receive greater algorithmic visibility, making them more likely to appear on trending rankings and reach wider audiences.

This account weight imaginary originated from the opaque platform systems. Weibo provides limited official information on how visibility is determined, forcing users to infer it from observed patterns and experimentation. The persistence and widespread acceptance of the account weight concept across different communities suggests it effectively explains users' experiences, regardless of whether it accurately aligns with Weibo's actual technical systems.

Weibo has three account-rating mechanisms that shape users' account-weight imaginaries. First is the Weibo Level, which scores accounts based on length of use and activity levels. Second is the Sunshine Credit, which represents users' "credit footprint" and is calculated based on posting history, activity levels, violation records, commercial activity, real-name verification, and social connections (Weibo, 2021). These two mechanisms contain overlapping metrics with notably vague definitions. For instance, the Sunshine Credit evaluates users' "consumption behavior tendencies" without specifying which tendencies are encouraged or result in downgrades. The opacity creates uncertainty: users know these metrics exist but cannot precisely determine how to optimise them.

Moreover, neither mechanism explicitly promises higher visibility as a reward for accounts achieving high ratings, though users imagine this connection exists. This

imagined connection reflects users' attempts to explain observed patterns: why do some posts gain traffic while others disappear? Account weight provides a satisfying explanation that positions visibility as potentially achievable through individual effort.

The third type, account verification, differs fundamentally from the first two. Account verification is the only one that Weibo explicitly acknowledges as directly related to visibility. This acknowledgment transforms verification from imagined to observable privilege, making verified accounts particularly significant in participants' evolving algorithmic imaginaries. Account verification operates on two levels. The first is real-name verification, which any individual or organisation can obtain by providing proof of identity. At this level, Weibo verifies the authenticity of submitted documentation. Accounts verified as experts or specialists can then apply for tiered verification. For example, when a verified account accumulates more than 1,000 followers and over 1 million reads in 30 days, it can apply for "Orange V" (橙V, *chengV*) verification (indicated by an orange "V" beside the username). Accounts with higher metrics can pursue higher-level verification.

Additionally, enterprises, social groups, government departments, media outlets, and non-profit educational institutions can apply for professional organisation verification ("Blue V") with an exemption from administrative fees. Weibo explicitly provides "traffic support" for high-quality content posted by Orange Vs and Blue Vs, effectively guaranteeing them higher visibility than normal accounts. This hierarchical verification system, which now primarily serves Weibo's advertising business – essentially selling verified users' followers as traffic to advertisers – creates systemic visibility inequality.

However, this commercial function represents a historical transformation from verification's original purpose. In Weibo's early days, verification was far more selective, primarily targeting individuals directly involved in contentions, such as passengers in train accidents, victims of police brutality, or, at times, representatives from responsible authorities (Li, 2023). Encouraging these individuals to open accounts and share real-time updates was one of Sina's top priorities at the time. Weibo verified their accounts, marked them with a "V," and described them according to the event in which they were involved. Through this verification programme, Weibo helped establish the authenticity of these users while also highlighting itself as a credible and objective news source.

This history is crucial for understanding participants' frustrated responses to Blue Vs' behaviour during the 227. The verification system was historically associated with Weibo's role as a democratic platform for citizen voices during contentions. The transformation of verification from tool for amplifying marginalised voices into commercial product and institutional privilege represented a betrayal of Weibo's founding promise – a betrayal that participants keenly felt when Blue Vs appeared to side against their movement.

"Warming Accounts": The Futility of Individual Data Labour

Regarding the complexity of the verification system, participants of 227 employed various methods of Weibo Level and Sunshine Credit to "warm their accounts" – improving supposed account weights to increase the visibility of their posts. These warming

practices continued the participatory visibility imaginary's logic: that sufficient individual effort could influence algorithmic outcomes.

Besides posting 227-related content, they also posted "positive energy" (正能量, *zheng nengliang*) content with hashtags such as #SunshineCredit and #DailyGoodDeed (日行一善, *rixing yishan*) that they believed were welcomed by algorithms. The discourse of "positive energy" itself originates in official discourse that promotes optimistic, socially constructive content. By posting such content, participants attempted to signal algorithmic alignment, expecting to avoid being categorised as problematic accounts while building credit scores.

However, perceptions of "positive energy" varied widely, revealing deep uncertainty about what algorithms rewarded. Some participants posted content aligning with the authorities' ideological agenda, such as "core socialist values" (社会主义核心价值观, *shehui zhuyi hexin jiazhi guan*); others shared generic inspirational content; some even posted Buddhist scriptures. Participants were experimenting – throwing various content types at opaque algorithmic systems, hoping something would work.

Furthermore, participants believed that interacting with users with high Sunshine Credit Scores – by commenting, forwarding, and liking each other's posts – could improve their own scores. This led to posts like "Come to warm my account," inviting followers to engage in mutual interaction. In the comment sections of these "warming account" posts, participants frequently expressed uncertainty: "Does doing like this really increase account weight?" or "Is it true that Sunshine Credit below 600 results in shadow banning from trending posts?" Such algorithmic imaginaries, despite their uncertain rewards, motivated the persistent effort precisely because the ambiguity harbours chances.

The Frustration: Privileged Accounts and Systematic Inequality

What frustrated participants more deeply than the uncertain efficacy of warming efforts were verified accounts that enjoyed Weibo's explicit traffic support – particularly when these accounts appeared to support the targets of the hashtag action. One participant articulated this frustration:

> At that time (during 227), many Blue Vs were endorsing Xiao. Weibo's Blue V verification requires government-related or official procedures. So, I think Blue Vs should not hastily endorse any side in conflicts among the public. They are responsible for clarifying the entire event, finding the truth, and then probably making a fair judgment based on laws and regulations, rather than joining the fray in a partial way. (Anonymous 3, 2021)

This statement reveals multiple layers of the development of the algorithmic imaginary. First, it demonstrates awareness of verification's institutional nature: Blue Vs "require government-related or official procedures," meaning they represent institutions connected to state authority. Second, it articulates expectations about institutional responsibility: verified accounts "should" remain neutral arbiters rather

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杂志报刊（26）	媒体网站卫视（32）	教育领域（17）	消防（20）	App（12）	共青团及省市发布（23）	司法机关（26）
今晚报 16:15	央视网青年 15:14	武汉大学 15:30	江苏消防 16:24	知乎 14:08	青海共青团 16:54	十堰市人民检察院 16:63
意林杂志 17:03	中国电影报道 15:25	重庆工商大学 16:19	安徽消防 17:08	淘票票 15:49	山西共青团 16:26	中国禁毒在线 16:12
半月谈 20:37	新文化网 16:52	浙江大学 19:02	宜城消防 17:10	腾讯视频 10:36	西藏共青团 13:11	湖南公安 15:46
检察日报 14:07	网易电影 12:06	华中农业大学 16:36	湖南消防 16:08	央视影音 20:14	广西共青团 18:48	江油公安 18:04
鄂尔多斯日报 15:42	1905电影网 16:04	江苏警官学院 17:13	遂宁消防 15:33	知乎 09:00	黑龙江共青团 18:22	杭州公安 16:30
温州都市报 20:02	精品购物指南 16:05	伊犁师范大学微博协会 16:42	遵义消防 16：:3	Ohwhat 16:00	青羊共青团 16:27	福检在线 19:39
读者 21:09	新浪重庆 16:13	南宁师范大学	永州消防 15:53	CATTI译路通 19:10	成都共青团 23:17	陇南成县烧沙司法所 23:42
钱江晚报 22:16	芒果娱乐 15:23	北大新媒体 23:00	郑州消防 22:25	火锅短视频 18:45	三秦青年 22:52	南京i法院 21:12
天府早报 23:09	MusicRadio音乐之声 20:20	云南省学生联合会 15:46	江西消防 15:58	饭爱豆 17:48	长沙共青团 18:58	鼓山公安分局 21:58
贵州都市报 22:00	河北广播电视台 21:32	中山大学 19:22	天津消防 15:37	腾讯电影 16:21	南昌铁路 19：09	湖南高速警察 18:59
楚天都市报 21:03	新浪新闻品牌馆 18:00	湖中农业大学 16:36	大同消防 27:21	腾讯综艺 10:44	昆明市总工会 22:41	都匀检察 15:41
意林杂志 13:28	青岛交通广播FM897 17:15	郑州市教育局 17:09	揭阳空港消防 17:26	寻艺 22:30	浦东发布 22:57	娄底公安 17:16
意林杂志 23:05	天山网 18:45	苏州博物馆 21:29	天津滨开消防 15:40		临沂临港发布 22:12	益阳市公安局交警大队 19:10
长江日报 23:00	影视星版图 22:26	杭州图书馆 20:39	眉山消防 22:07		西安发布 22:51	高密普法 18:01
武汉晚报 23:01	第十四届全运会 19:00	呼和浩特校园 16:19	洛阳消防 18:32		上海奉贤发布 18:07	丹江口市人民检察院 19:18
人民日报传媒海南 23:52	郑州音乐广播 20:02	中国地质大学	清远消防 16:38		平安绵阳 23:28	山东高速交警莱城大队 20:43
无锡日报 23:10	大陆桥传媒 18:43	成都校园 15:08	四川消防 16:49		东港地铁 22:00	宝鸡检察 22:39
生活周刊 16:32	江西卫视 19:30		广西消防 22:05		平安蚌州 16:16	昆明市中级人民法院 22:52
贵阳日报官方微博 16:39	福布斯中文网 15:13		肇庆消防 16:32		书香江苏在线 17:32	延安检察 23:04
北京晚报北晚新视觉网 23:00	梵天音乐广播 18:59		黄山消防在线 18:43		重庆同城 18:45	天津红桥交警 16:59
意林小说女 16：29	新浪江苏 20:59				重庆健康 17:30	重庆大足法院 20:11
武汉晨报 23:23	网易娱乐频道 11:20				内蒙古交警 12:43	长沙交警 18:13
三湘都市报 22:20	926梁溪之声广播 22：23				自贡共青团 18:56	正定交警大队 22:11
中国共青团杂志 23:09	腾讯视频VIP 23:46				密山共青团 19:32	隆回公安 18:25
中国新闻周刊 16:32	新浪圈子 18:00					殷州市人民检察院 16:30
今日女报	贵客星榜样 21:32	备注：混清		公众号（3）		正义泸西 17:34
	新余文化 20:38	菏泽中院 未发布		钱江晚报		
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	新浪Fan娱乐 16:18			知乎日报		
	微博热视频 15:20	思想聚焦非蓝V				
	搜腾娱乐 15:23	4K大视界 非蓝v				
	观察者网 16:24（2-26）					
	南海网哪视频 23:09					

Figure 4. Blue Vs that reposted content supporting Xiao (a total of 161 entries).

than partisan participants. Third, it reveals disappointment that these expectations were violated: Blue Vs were "joining the fray in a partial way" (Anonymous 3, 2021) by endorsing one side.

Further, this statement shows how participants understood verification as a mechanism that should translate social authority into digital responsibility. The verification mark was not merely a technical indicator but a social contract: platforms granted institutional accounts visibility privileges in exchange for serving the public interest through the provision of objective information. When Blue Vs appeared to violate this contract by taking partisan stances, participants perceived this as an abuse of their privileged position.

Participants compiled a list of institutional accounts (Blue Vs) that supported Xiao and opposed the 227 hashtags (see Figure 4). One such compilation recorded 161 Blue V accounts, including state-party-owned newspapers, magazines, TV stations, radio channels, and organisations such as the Communist Youth League, universities, and fire stations. The list also included non-state but influential institutions, such as Tencent Video and other commercial platforms.

Participants' accusations of partiality by these verified accounts constituted, without doubt, a call to resurrect Weibo's former role as an impartial and reliable news platform. This was particularly evident when they mentioned that Weibo's account verification "requires procedures" – implying that the procedural requirements should entail responsibilities, not merely privileges. Therefore, although techniques for manipulating algorithmic visibility – warming the account and compiling statistics – are commonly seen in digital fandoms, the expectations driving the application of these originated from outside the fan community. They drew on historical memory of Weibo's democratic era, when verification served to amplify marginalised voices during contentions rather than consolidate institutional power.

Expanding Imaginary on the Commercial-State Power Nexus

Upon seeing the compiled list of Blue Vs supporting Xiao, one participant reported feeling "shocked that so many Blue Vs were involved, realising their overwhelming power." She explained that "their power" referred to the forces behind Xiao – not merely the celebrity himself but the cultural industry apparatus he represented. The involvement of so many institutional accounts was interpreted as evidence that Xiao had purchased data service through the platform, using commercial power to mobilise institutional visibility.

Although these Blue Vs likely just followed trending topics – a standard practice that reflected Weibo's business transformation towards entertainment content, participants expanded their algorithmic imaginaries to attribute algorithmic outcomes to complex interactions between commercial and institutional power. The commercial manipulation imaginary identified earlier now intersected with recognition of institutional authority: visibility advantages could be purchased not merely through direct payment for trending rankings but through mobilising institutional accounts whose verification already guaranteed platform traffic support. Participants understood that institutional accounts operated within overlapping systems of state authority and commercial incentives. Blue Vs representing state-party organisations needed to maintain alignment with official ideology, but also participated in the platform attention economy by following popular topics. Blue Vs representing commercial entities like Tencent Video pursued business interests that might align with protecting valuable intellectual property (celebrities) while maintaining relationships with platform companies. The "overwhelming power" participants perceived thus encompassed both material resources (commercial capital) and symbolic authority (institutional status).

To counter such "overwhelming power," one interviewee (Anonymous 5, 2021) created a fan art themed "Oppose the Abuse of Public Power" and initiated a corresponding hashtag. The creation received considerable reposts among participants. However, she described how during the creation stage, she and others debated whether to use the term "power" or "right." She ultimately chose "power" because "what we are calling for is for those Blue Vs not exploiting the name of the state to seek personal gain."

By choosing "power" over "right," participants explicitly named what Blue Vs possessed: state-derived authority that translated into visibility advantages. The term "abuse" positioned this visibility advantage as legitimate only when exercised in the public interest. When Blue Vs used their platform-granted traffic support to endorse commercial entities or take partisan stances in public conflicts, this constituted "exploiting the name of the state to seek personal gain" – transforming legitimate authority into illegitimate advantage.

In other words, participants imagined that the visibility advantage of Blue Vs should align with their social roles and responsibilities. Correspondingly, verification was expected as a device capable of translating offline authority into the digital world – but this translation should maintain the accountability and public service obligations that theoretically constrain state authority offline. The complaint was not that institutional accounts had visibility advantages but that these advantages were exercised without corresponding responsibilities.

The dissatisfaction and suspicion towards accounts with visibility privileges persisted throughout the entire movement. Concerns about the platform engaging in improper data transactions were particularly acute when participants' accounts remained "cold" despite their efforts to warm them. When participants imagined these visibility advantages being sold as data services to the cultural industry – Blue Vs mobilised to support commercial entities like Xiao – it indeed constituted an abuse that produced profound expectation gaps. This reveals another crucial aspect of evolved algorithmic imaginaries: what users consider legitimately marketable versus what should remain outside commercial exchange. Platform companies commercialising trending rankings through direct sales seemed, while frustrating, at least transparent. Companies and celebrities could purchase visibility; ordinary users could attempt to compete through data labour; the rules, though favouring the power bloc, were knowable. But Blue Vs represented a different category of accounts whose visibility advantages derived from representing state or social institutions. These advantages should not be marketable because they are derived from public trust and authority rather than commercial value.

Notably, the inherent injustices of offline authority structures went largely unexamined in these discussions. Participants accepted that state-party organisations, universities, and government departments possessed legitimate authority that should be recognised in digital spaces. The frustration focused on perceived misuse of this authority rather than questioning the authority itself. This reflects the constrained nature of political critique in authoritarian contexts: participants could challenge actors' behaviour but not the hierarchical system that granted those actors' power.

The experiences with account warming and verified accounts clarified the third layer of expanded algorithmic imaginaries developed by participants: a hierarchy of visibility on Weibo. While commercial power and institutional authority often operate in concert, institutional authority, when necessary, determines algorithmic outcomes. Although participants recognised that the "algorithm" encompasses not merely technical code or commercial mechanisms but the entire political-economic system over which state power holds ultimate supremacy, this perception did not paralyse their action. Instead, it guided more strategic tactical choices, as evidenced by the surviving hashtags' careful navigation of political sensitivities.

Conclusion

This research examined hashtag-centred action during the 227 controversy through the lens of algorithmic imaginaries, using BL fans as an analytical entry point. It identified three interconnected imaginaries that evolved through sustained engagement with Weibo's visibility systems. The participatory visibility imaginary framed algorithms as responsive to collective data labour, drawing on historical experiences from fandom and digital activism. Frustrated encounters with moderation and suppression gave rise to a commercial manipulation imaginary, through which participants interpreted visibility as shaped by platform economics and stakeholder relationships. Encounters with verification systems and institutional accounts

further generated an imaginary of institutional authority, revealing how state power ultimately overrides both user tactics and commercial interests by embedding offline hierarchies into platform infrastructures.

These imaginaries did not replace one another but coexisted as layered understandings. Participants continued to invest in data labour while recognising its structural limits under commercialisation and state authority. This layered configuration reflects a sophisticated form of algorithmic understanding characteristic of platformised environments where multiple power structures intersect.

Extending Bucher's (2017) framework beyond single-moment encounters, this study shows how algorithmic imaginaries are collectively constructed, historically accumulated, and transferable across communities. The circulation of tactics between digital fandoms, activist repertoires, and non-politicised user practices challenges rigid distinctions between "political" and "entertainment" domains, suggesting that sustained engagement with platform systems produces shared algorithmic knowledge regardless of users' initial motivations. Crucially, the expansion of algorithmic imaginaries represented sophistication rather than disillusionment: participants developed more realistic understandings of constraints while identifying new tactical possibilities. This knowledge drew on diverse sources – digital fandom, internet activism, and users without explicit political agendas – contributing a novel perspective on lateral solidarity for understanding digital resistance and state–society relations in contemporary China.

Furthermore, this research highlights the political potential of hashtag infrastructures in constrained environments. Rather than treating hashtag-based action as merely symbolic or "lazy activism" (Anschuetz, 2015; Rho and Mazmanian, 2019), the algorithmic imaginary lens reveals hashtags as repositories of tactical knowledge. Each episode of contention contributes strategies and experiential learning that persist beyond immediate outcomes, enabling future mobilisations to draw on accumulated resistance capacity even under repeated suppression.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgement. By focusing on specific groups and patterns of action, this study does not capture the full heterogeneity of the 227 controversy, and the findings should not romanticise the movement while overlooking online harassment, exclusionary practices, and cancel culture. Additionally, the study relies on publicly accessible data, interviews, and secondary sources inevitably shaped by platform moderation and censorship; deleted, shadow-banned, or private interactions remain inaccessible. As a qualitative, interpretive study, the findings also reflect both participants' situated sense-making and the researcher's positioning. Future research could extend this work by incorporating additional participant groups, cross-platform comparisons, or diverse positionings.

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Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was not required for this study as it involved analysis of publicly available social media data without collection of sensitive personal information. All data was anonymised and stored in secure method to protect user privacy. The research was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines for social media research and data privacy principles.

Consent to Participate

All interviewees provided verbal informed consent before participation. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without providing reasons.

Consent for Publication

All interviewees provided verbal informed consent for the use of their interview transcripts in academic publications.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability

The interview transcripts and field notes generated during this study contain personal information that could potentially identify participants involved in protest activities. Therefore, the full dataset cannot be made publicly available. Anonymised excerpts and coded data that support the findings can be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author, subject to participant privacy constraints.

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