

Factors Influencing User Identity from the Perspective of Circle Communication: A Case Study of Douban Groups (Postprint)

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Abstract

On social networks, individuals frequently form circles based on shared interests or aligned values. Such circle-based dissemination exhibits numerous differences from real-life social interaction, interpersonal relationships, and organizational operations. Within these circles, each individual holds equal status, and users can freely express themselves in decentralized Douban groups, with communication transcending spatial and temporal boundaries. In cyberspace, users are more inclined to express facets of themselves not readily revealed in everyday life and to connect with like-minded peers. Consequently, many members in Douban groups develop a strong sense of belonging toward their groups and utilize specific forms of address among themselves. This study examines this phenomenon to investigate the factors influencing users' sense of belonging to Douban groups. The research methodology comprises online participatory observation and questionnaire surveys, primarily distributing questionnaires within high-traffic Douban groups to collect data, collating members' perspectives on entry thresholds and group belonging, and organizing findings into relevant tables for analysis.

Entry into Douban groups is primarily divided into two categories: threshold-based and threshold-free. Among threshold-based entry methods, they can be further subdivided into answering questions based on group rules, talent showcases, and user invitations—this process also serves as member screening. Groups that require screening for entry elicit stronger feelings of group identity than threshold-free groups. This study aims to conclude how these thresholds should be configured to better satisfy users' needs for member screening.

Full Text

Preamble

Factors Influencing User Identity Recognition from the Perspective of Circle-Layer Communication: A Case Study of Douban Groups
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Abstract: On social networks, people frequently form circles based on shared interests or consistent values. Such circle-layer communication differs significantly from real-life social interaction, interpersonal relationships, and organizational operations. Within these circles, everyone holds equal status, and users can speak freely in decentralized Douban groups, with communication transcending temporal and spatial boundaries. In cyberspace, users more readily express aspects of themselves that remain hidden in everyday life and connect with like-minded individuals. Consequently, many Douban group members develop a strong sense of belonging to their groups and use specific terms of address with one another. This paper examines this phenomenon to investigate the factors influencing users' sense of belonging within Douban groups. Employing online participatory observation and questionnaire survey methods, this study distributed questionnaires primarily in high-traffic Douban groups to collect data, organizing members' perspectives on entry barriers and group belonging into relevant tables for analysis.

Douban group entry mechanisms fall into two main categories: those with barriers and those without. Barrier-based entry is further subdivided into methods such as answering questions after reading group rules, talent showcases, and user invitations—processes that simultaneously screen potential members. Groups requiring screening generate stronger identity recognition than barrier-free groups. However, the key question is how to design these barriers to better satisfy users' needs for member screening, which this paper aims to address.

Keywords: circle-layer communication, identity, interest-based groups, Douban

1.1 Research Background

Since the 1950s, the vigorous development of computer technology has propelled tremendous growth in social productivity, gradually forming a network society that influences politics, economy, culture, and other aspects of real society with unprecedented depth, speed, and breadth. As a crucial component of the network society's rise, the transformation of communication modes profoundly affects changes in people's communication behaviors, thinking patterns, and lifestyles. While the development of media technology and the evolution of the communication environment have transformed traditional mass communication, they have also given rise to numerous new communication forms based on existing human communication patterns, among which circle-layer communication represents a significant example. Specifically, circle-layer communication

widely appears in social communication platforms and has become an important function in social networks. Features such as “Find Common Friends” and “People You May Be Interested In” on Weibo, along with “Group Chats” and “Shake” functions on WeChat, aggregate individual internet users from different backgrounds, geographical locations, and social strata onto online platforms, revitalizing this communication form born in pre-industrial society and making it a formidable new mode in the current communication ecology.

Amid countless circle-layer communication phenomena, the question of “Who am I?” consistently runs throughout the entire communication process. In agricultural society, the bonds connecting people were circles formed based on kinship and geographical factors. In industrial society, connections were based on occupational attributes and educational experiences. Today, in network society, participants in circle-layer communication come together precisely through their understanding of shared cultural symbols and recognition of common identity, enabling scattered users to gather in a decentralized, flattened network environment to form social circles and engage in circle-layer communication. Therefore, identity recognition constitutes an essential research category in circle-layer communication studies.

1.21 Literature Review on Circle-Layer Communication

A CNKI search for “circle-layer communication” up to December 9, 2021, yielded 517 journal articles and 262 academic papers, with a significant increase occurring in 2017. In domestic research on circle culture, Peng Lan (2019) categorized and analyzed circle-layer formation from three dimensions: relationship, culture, and technology. The study points out that network technology and products also drive users’ circle formation. Under the combined influence of these three forces, people become “circled” by various groups, with their interest appeals, attitude positions, and behavioral patterns influenced by the circles they inhabit. Douban groups are formed by users based on shared interests, with each group possessing a distinct circle-layer ecology. Users’ posting, sharing, and liking behaviors within these groups are influenced by the group’s ecological environment, making Douban group ecology closely related to user experience.

Bai Xiaoting (2015), building on audience segmentation theory, discussed the trend of media development toward segmentation under the internet and the rise of “circle-layer audiences,” noting that circle-layer communication and culture emerge from this theory. The article argues that media must produce content targeted at intra-circle audiences, and as different circles form and audience scales expand, intra-circle information culture will ultimately influence extra-circle cultural transmission. Due to their concise and incisive expressions, Douban groups frequently become sources of Weibo trending topics.

Foreign research on circle-layer communication began earlier, primarily from a macro social perspective. In *Future Shock*, Alvin Toffler coined the term “demassification,” arguing that as communication media’s service targets trans-

form, audiences will differentiate from the masses into groups with special interests and hobbies. Consequently, social demassification is forming “multi-circle” characteristics, with media audience interests divided by circles, making target audience profiles increasingly concentrated and clear. In *Being Digital*, Nicholas Negroponte elaborated on the various impacts of digital technology on human life, work, education, and entertainment, proposing “narrowcasting” point-to-multipoint and point-to-point communication models.

1.22 Literature Review on Group Identity

Currently, communication studies research on group identity primarily proceeds from two aspects. On one hand, from psychological theories, focusing on identity in terms of nation, race, belief, ethnicity, and ideology from an international communication perspective. On the other hand, from sociological and anthropological theories, examining social groups, group activities, and interpersonal interactions to study the characteristics, influencing factors, processes, and functions of group identity formation.

Some scholars study group identity from the perspective of group psychological mechanisms. Key viewpoints include: Qi Jinyu (2006), taking Tu community as the research object, studied internal ethnic identity. The research found that community residents’ psychology and behavior are closely linked to group identity, with intra-group identity and belonging gradually constructed through members’ interactive processes.

From a subculture perspective, group identity exerts tremendous influence on members’ behavioral patterns. Yang Yanping (2012), in studying college students’ online shopping behavior, discovered that this behavior contains group identity. She argued that the characteristics of online shopping align with college students’ psychology of seeking others’ recognition, transforming their online shopping behavior from a simple consumption act into an expression of group identity. Therefore, college students’ online shopping behavior has numerous connections with group identity.

From a virtual space perspective, Xu Huan (2014), from a psychological disciplinary background, analyzed adolescents’ self-identity and identity recognition in online games. During the research process, she provided relatively balanced evaluations of online game players’ identity and belonging, helping the public view online game players’ self-identity and group identity correctly. Zhang Rui (2019) studied game fan culture content and group identity. Through observation and analysis, he pointed out that fans utilize various technical means to transmit and exchange game text content, with connections and exchanges among fans also promoting group identity. When necessary, group members also engage in consumption behaviors. In virtual space, their interaction and fantasy constitute important pathways for self-identity, while they achieve group identity through various links, thereby clarifying concepts of “Who am I” and “Who are we” and strengthening overall group identity cognition.

1.31 Questionnaire Survey Method

The questionnaire survey method serves as this paper's primary research approach. A questionnaire, or survey form, is a research method that systematically records investigation questions in question format. This paper utilizes questionnaires to directly understand the factors influencing Douban group users' sense of belonging within their circles during usage. The questionnaire was distributed in both barrier and barrier-free Douban groups, receiving 168 responses, all valid.

Among the surveyed Douban group users, 117 individuals (69.64%) were aged 18-26, while a smaller portion (20.24%) were over 30, with the remaining age groups representing a minority. Female users accounted for a significant majority at 80.95%, nearly four times the number of male users. Regarding usage habits, 77.98% of respondents reported using Douban for over one hour daily, representing the vast majority, with heavy users exceeding three hours daily comprising 8.93%. From the perspective of user behavior, 80.36% of users had applied to groups with entry barriers, and the same percentage (80.36%) believed that group entry barriers were necessary. However, users expressed different preferences regarding entry methods for barrier-protected groups. In terms of self-perception, 89.29% of users reported joining barrier-protected groups to post and communicate with members, seeking resonance and like-minded friends. Regarding whether joining barrier-protected groups enhanced their sense of belonging, 39.88% reported frequently feeling this way, 49.4% occasionally, and only 10.71% never. Based on questionnaire data, this paper conducts in-depth analysis from three aspects—audience habits, audience behavior, and audience self-perception—to explore the factors influencing Douban group users' sense of belonging within their circles and how to better enhance this belonging and increase user stickiness. (The questionnaire is attached at the end of this paper.)

1.32 Participatory Observation Method

This paper adopts participatory observation to study Douban group users' sense of belonging in circle-layer communication. The researcher personally used the studied Douban groups, participating in the research as a user, engaging alongside other users in circle-layer communication activities, observing their behavioral trajectories through group discussions and participation in both barrier-protected and barrier-free groups to obtain relevant evidence and materials.

2. Douban Group Belonging Influencing Factors

As a product of Web 2.0, Douban provides a literary “utopia” for book, film, and music enthusiasts. Its subordinate Douban groups function as all-encompassing virtual communities with diverse themes, attracting users of different identities and ages.

In 1989, American sociologist Ray Oldenburg, from an urban and social research perspective, proposed the concept of “the third place” in his book *The Great*

Good Place. He divided living spaces into three types: the first space is residence; the second space is workplace; and the third space is a place for leisure, entertainment, and social gatherings—a field distinct from the previous two points of life. It possesses eight attributes including neutrality, inclusiveness, fairness, emphasis on communication, and provision of psychological comfort and emotional support. Similar theories include Habermas’s “public sphere,” referring to spaces where people can freely express opinions, meet like-minded friends, and pursue personal interests and social pleasures. In physical terms, third spaces are often coffee shops, bookstores, and bars. However, as Anderson notes, geographical boundaries are not necessary conditions for forming and maintaining communities. “Cyberspace,” as an initial spatial metaphor for the internet, provides a theoretical basis for the emergence of third spaces online. With internet technology development, shared interests have replaced geographical proximity, transcending physical spatial boundaries. In Douban groups, people online form communities through interest-based friendships and affinity, which can be regarded as a special type of “third space.”

In the questionnaire survey, responses to “Can you find resonance in Douban groups? [Single choice]” showed that over half believed they could frequently obtain resonance through Douban, with only a minimal 6.55% reporting never obtaining resonance. The distribution was: frequently 64.88%, occasionally 28.57%, and rarely/never 6.55% (valid responses: 168). This demonstrates that in the “third space” Douban provides, most users can find emotional support and resonance.

Categorized by audience, there are groups like “Overseas Returnee Waste Recycling Mutual Aid Association” composed of overseas students, “Do I Really Need This Diploma?” for college students, and “This Work Thing” for professionals. Categorized by content, there are groups focused on fashion (“What to Wear Today”), shopping (“I’ll Fight You for It”), and food (“Douban Snack Comparison Group”). Douban group classification essentially uses audience needs as indicators for segmentation. In different groups, audiences’ needs for seeking resonance can be satisfied. Douban group formation creates an echo chamber within the group, where users can freely express viewpoints and receive responses from members. Even niche hobbies can quickly find like-minded individuals—a distinctive feature differentiating Douban from other social media platforms.

2.2 Entry Barriers Construct Taste Distinctions, Enabling Content Sharing Within Circles

During communication processes, online interest-based groups form certain norms for internal members to collectively follow. Explicitly specified group norms can ensure the achievement of internal group goals and align activity purposes. As interest-based groups gathered in cyberspace, Douban groups’ norms manifest in two aspects: entry barriers and operational group rules. Entry barriers screen members, while operational group rules provide standards for members’ self-supervision. Entry barriers directly determine who

constitutes users' communication circles.

Group norms' formation and compliance help members complete group-targeted behaviors in an organized, planned, and orderly manner. Simultaneously, they restrict members from engaging in behaviors detrimental to group goal achievement.

In 1992, American communication scholar Henry Jenkins proposed “participatory culture theory,” elaborated in his work *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. Participatory culture refers to a new media cultural form in the Web 2.0 era where netizens, driven by emotional identification with cultural products, actively adopt “poaching” methods to produce, process, transmit, and interact with texts using open internet platforms. Interest-based Douban groups essentially constitute a participatory culture platform where members continuously provide content, co-constructing a surplus knowledge supply library without knowing who the users are during sharing.

In the questionnaire survey, responses to “Do you care about group members' opinions on your posted content?” showed that most people frequently or occasionally cared about others' attitudes, with only 14.29% reporting rarely or never caring. The distribution was: frequently 41.07%, occasionally 44.64%, and rarely/never 14.29% (valid responses: 168). This reveals that information providers do not expect actual benefits from sharing; rather, they anticipate “social support” that makes members feel needed, generating a sense of self-efficacy. Praise and encouragement subsequently convert into motivation for continuous output, strengthening community identity over time.

3. Conclusions on Factors Influencing Douban Group Belonging

3.1 Appropriate Entry Barriers Enhance Intra-Group Activity

Group norms can ensure internal harmony, but overly rigid and inflexible norms may lead to group “inactivation.” Therefore, appropriate entry barriers are necessary to maintain member flow and topic vitality.

In the questionnaire survey regarding “Which entry methods do you prefer?”, the highest-ranked method was “filling in the correct password,” while the lowest was “talent showcase.” The distribution was: filling correct password 67.26%, reading group rules then answering questions 52.98%, no entry barrier 38.1%, user invitation 28.57%, and talent showcase 4.17% (valid responses: 168). “Filling in the correct password” refers to groups hiding entry passwords within group rules, requiring careful reading to obtain answers. “Talent showcase” requires writing an entry declaration matching the group's style—for example, the top-ranked entertainment group “New Market Gathering Place” once required writing celebrity “cross-pairing” fiction before entry. Since entry applications can only be reviewed by group administrators, subjective standards like “talent showcase” lack objective criteria, creating greater difficulty for non-members.

Over time, this can foster internal members' doubts about administrator fairness and rule transparency, ultimately harming long-term group ecology development.

3.2 Timely Content Moderation Maintains Normal Group Operation

The “Qinglang” Special Campaign for Minors’ Summer Online Environment is an initiative launched by the Cyberspace Administration of China to create a healthy online environment for minors and promote continuous improvement in the online ecosystem. Due to Douban groups’ lagging moderation and primarily autonomous nature, content review is often incomplete and untimely. Taking the top 10 most active groups on December 25, 2020, as examples, by December 25, 2021, after the “Qinglang Campaign” rectification, only Life Group, Douban Goose Group, Douban Korean Kimchi Group, and Cat Lovers’ Life remained. As entertainment groups blindly pursued discussion volume, treating fan circle disputes as traffic passwords and sarcastic tones as linguistic characteristics, they created a toxic public opinion ecology within groups.

Currently, to address this issue, Douban has implemented a dual approach combining official supervision with group autonomy. In terms of pre-event prevention, both the platform and groups maintain sensitive word databases, preventing posts containing sensitive words from being published. During-event supervision requires group administrators to delete posts promptly, while Douban officials also ban discussions on harmful content based on manual review results. In post-event review, Douban permanently bans accounts that repeatedly post harmful messages and closes groups that damage healthy online public opinion.

3.3 Creating Circle Cluster Effects to Attract Audience Consumption Participation

As a circle-layer communication platform, Douban groups attract audiences with similar interests through online affinity bonds, making it easy to reach consensus within groups, including consensus on preferences. Different interest groups all feature popular “group items” welcomed by members—for example, the “group cup” in the “Did You Drink Coffee Today?” group, the “group hair” in the “Failed Perm Group,” and the “group skirt” in the “What to Wear Today?” group. These recommendations form spontaneously from member evaluations, creating a cluster effect within groups that influences members who haven’t tried these items, prompting them to voluntarily join in the purchasing behavior. When group identity translates into actual purchasing behavior, connections become even closer.

Currently, Douban has capitalized on this characteristic by launching official shopping groups like “Dou Shop” while distributing group purchase coupons, making the buying process more convenient and increasing user stickiness.

Douban groups, as interest-based communities formed in the Web 4.0 era, possess both traditional communities’ cohesion and modern communities’ freedom.

Each interest group adheres to “autonomy” principles, constructing invisible walls to separate from the outside world through entry methods and group rules. Users enjoy shared identities and unique group appellations, obtaining group feelings and implementing collective behaviors that enhance cohesion. While members share resources and exchange emotions within groups, they also increase community stickiness.

This paper argues that although Douban groups’ platform nature inherently facilitates user identity recognition, unreasonable systems and inactive management affect users’ construction of authentic digital selves.

However, alongside identity construction, some non-negligible problems have emerged. While users join groups based on interests and interact with similar individuals, experiencing joy from meeting confidants, they also encounter drawbacks caused by “echo chambers.” Too many similar viewpoints and scenarios within communities obscure diverse information, hindering access to truth. This situation resembles an “information cocoon,” where a larger world becomes hidden from view. Therefore, how to construct harmonious and equal dialogue spaces outside various communities represents a problem that future online communities need to solve. Undeniably, establishing good interpersonal relationships with others has always been a human instinct. Thus, regardless of technological changes or spatial boundary divisions, we constantly need to seek our own identity recognition within circles. (Anderson, 2011)

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