The Virtual Jail: Content Moderation Challenges Faced by Chinese Queer Content Creators on Douyin

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Abstract

Queer users of Douyin, the Chinese version of TikTok, suspect that the platform removes and suppresses queer content, thus reducing queer visibility. In this study, we examined how Chinese queer users recognize and react to Douyin's moderation of queer content by conducting interviews with 21 queer China-based Douyin content creators and viewers. Findings indicate that queer users actively explore and adapt to the platform's underlying moderation logic. They employ creative content and posting strategies to reduce the likelihood of their expressions of queer topics and identities being removed or suppressed. Like Western platforms, Douyin's moderation approaches are often ambiguous; but unlike Western platforms, queer users sometimes receive clarity on moderation reasons via direct communication with moderators. Participants suggested that Douyin's repressive moderation practices are influenced by more than just platform policies and procedures – they also reflect state-led homophobia and societal discipline. This study underscores the challenges Chinese queer communities face in maintaining online visibility and suggests that meaningful change in their experiences is unlikely without broader societal shifts towards queer acceptance.

CCS Concepts

• **Human-centered computing** → **Human computer interaction (HCI)**; **Empirical studies in HCI**; **Collaborative and social computing**; **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**; • **Social and professional topics** → **Sexual orientation**; **Cultural characteristics**.

Keywords

Content moderation, social media, Chinese queer people, Douyin, user-generated content, state-led homophobia, heteronormativity, folk theories, LGBTQ+

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1 Introduction

The term "queer" has recently been introduced to China from Western language contexts, and describes diverse and non-normative ways of viewing gender, sexuality, love, and social cultures [24]. Traditional Chinese values, however, inform the culture's societal view of queerness as abnormal and deviant, and as involving alternative ideologies, activities, and lifestyles that challenge dominant social structures. The Chinese state highly values maintaining a harmonious society, and thus sexual minorities are often viewed as trouble-makers who pose a challenge to state-established social norms and expectations [24, 82].

Queer content creators in China frequently post on mainstream social media platforms, often hoping to gain visibility or fame. By "queer content," we mean content that intentionally features non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender imagery, and is often considered to be outside of mainstream cultural norms [18]. Queer content challenges dominant representations of sexuality and gender and provides alternative perspectives [44]. However, social media platforms can restrict such content's visibility based on the platform's values and norms, and those of the culture they are part of. Platforms', policy managers', and coders' values, which often represent normative worldviews (e.g., homophobia or heteronormativity), become embedded in the policies and algorithms they produce, even if unintentionally [51]. In addition, platforms shape users' perceptions of acceptable LGBTQ+ expression and reinforce heteronormative values and traditional social institutions like marriage and family [66]. From users' perspectives, social media algorithms appears to privilege visibility for some users while suppressing visibility for others [16]. Specifically, vloggers [1] who label or tag their content with LGBTQ+ keywords such as "lesbian," "gay," or "queer" may find their content hidden or restricted [7, 34]. In general, content removal and suppression substantially impacts social media users, leading to negative feelings and perpetuating social disparities [41]; for marginalized users, these impacts can be even more damaging.

Queer content creators on Douyin, the Chinese counterpart to TikTok, are subject to more stringent censorship and moderation policies due to the authoritarian government's strict control of online platforms. According to participants' and our observations, no video can be found when searching for hashtags like #gay and #les [2] on Douyin. The government and the mainstream public demonstrate homophobia and cissexism by deeming anything falling outside of cisgender and heterosexual genders and sexualities to be inappropriate for public audiences [65]. We sought to examine

[1] A person who creates and maintains a blog consisting mostly of videos rather than text or images
[2] In China, the terms "gay" and "les" refer to individuals who are homosexual, and they are used frequently in the Chinese online environment.

queer content creators' experiences in the face of this contentious environment for online expression. The following research questions guide our study:

- **RQ1.** How do queer users realize moderation of queer content on Douyin?
- **RQ2.** What types of queer content are moderated on Douyin?
- **RQ3.** How do queer users on Douyin navigate and attempt to overcome moderation of queer content?

To address our research questions, we conducted interviews with 21 queer Douyin users in China to gain insight into their experiences with content moderation. We found that queer users are acutely aware of Douyin's moderation of queer content and have developed various strategies, such as purchasing promotion tools or comparing video traffic data, to verify when content suppression[3] has occurred. Additionally, Chinese queer users develop folk theories to explain how Douyin handles queer topics, and implement strategies to reduce moderation risk. For instance, creators cover intimate images using blurring due to concerns that Douyin may lower the visibility of or even delete videos containing queer intimacy. They also add explanations on their videos, stating that they do not promote particular values, and avoid cross-dressing and transgender identity presentation to conform to binary gender norms. Finally, we learned that participants view censorship of queer content as being primarily driven by deeply rooted homophobia and transphobia entrenched in Chinese society and further enabled by the government.

With this work, we make several important contributions to the HCI and Social Computing literature. First, we contribute an empirical account of how queer content creators experience content moderation and suppression in a non-Western context, in which the government has substantial oversight into social media platforms' regulation decisions. In this way, we expand on prior HCI research that has examined moderation of LGBTQ+ content in Western contexts [16, 17, 29, 31, 34, 46–48, 57, 64, 69, 70, 72, 73], content moderation in Global South contexts without an explicit focus on LGBTQ+ users [15, 60], and LGBTQ+ social media users in Chinese and other Global South contexts without an explicit focus on content moderation [3, 13, 14, 39, 49, 50, 54, 61, 75, 79]. Specifically, we depart from prior work by studying how content moderation and suppression occurs when decision-making stems from restrictive government and societal values, rather than determined only by the platform. Interestingly, according to participants in our study, Douyin's unique mechanisms for regulating queer content, while ambiguous and inconsistent, typically enable more transparency and communication than similar Western platforms. We contribute a conceptualization of queer Douyin content creators' experiences as existing in a *virtual jail*, in which some queer content creators – those who are considered unacceptable according to dominant Chinese family values – are walled off from other users and have limited reach, especially when they fail to follow Chinese societal norms that tolerate queerness only when it is neutral and non-sexual.

[3]also known as shadowbanning, meaning that content is made less visible rather than being removed

2 Related Work

2.1 Moderation of queer content on Western social media

Unlike in China, American law and culture dictate that social media companies, not the government, regulate what kind of content is acceptable or not on their platform [58]. However, the hegemonic norms in Western society influence how platforms determine what is considered acceptable or unacceptable to post [64, 66] in ways that often privilege heterosexual and cisgender users [25, 29]. In many cases social media platforms use algorithmic content moderation systems to define who and what has value, which decreases individuals' agency to present themselves and manage how they appear to online audiences [63].

Social media content creators in Western contexts are acutely aware of and impacted by moderation algorithms, and often find platforms' moderation decisions ambiguous and inconsistent [33, 34, 57, 64]. In fact, empirical evidence shows that algorithmic content moderation decisions are often arbitrary – especially those related to anti-LGBTQ+ speech [28], which LGBTQ+ content is often misclassified as [31]. Often, marginalized content creators including queer and trans people are especially likely to have their content removed or suppressed, even when they have not violated the platform's policies [4, 20, 31, 46, 57]. Creators have developed mechanisms to respond to content suppression [4, 5]. One way is to re-create removed accounts and repost removed content [64]. However, this increases the chances that accounts will be removed permanently, so queer creators sometimes operate multiple accounts as backups [76]. In addition, creators use online platforms' affordances to resist silence and misinformation. For example, TikTok users use Duets to challenge homophobic and transphobic videos while showcasing creators' own creativity, wit, and self-reflection on identity ([21]. As a form of support, viewers may intentionally engage with content about or from creators with social identities that they perceive the algorithm to suppress through actions such as upvoting, commenting, and sharing [34]. Double entendres allow an in-group to speak freely in ways that an outsider would not comprehend so that the queer content can escape algorithmic manual review and spread [43, 79] – similar to what Marwick and boyd have called social steganography [45]. Increasingly, queer content creators self-censor, which substantially limits their visibility and potential for online self-expression [22]. When creators feel that a platform is no longer accommodating, they may transfer to a different platform with a relatively looser policy [79].

In our study, we extend this prior work by examining how content creators perceive moderation of queer social media content, yet in a substantially different context: a non-Western culture where social media platforms are influenced by a robust governmental presence. Furthermore, our analysis highlights the strategies Chinese queer users adopt to adapt to content suppression. While some of these strategies align with those employed by their Western counterparts, others are distinctly novel, reflecting the unique characteristics of the Chinese online environment.

2.2 Online queer identity in non-Western and Chinese contexts

A number of scholars have examined queer technology users in non-Western contexts, uncovering the myriad ways that people work within the constraints of their culture's values to present their queer identities online [3, 9, 13, 14, 49, 50, 54, 56, 61, 62, 75, 79]. For instance, Park et al. [56] studied queer women and online dating experiences in South Korea, finding that dating platforms' affordances proscribe a normative version of queerness. In the Singaporean context, gay Instagram users sometimes opted not to use gay hashtags when they posted content related to traditionally masculine roles (e.g., military) or family photos, signaling a tension between traditional Singaporean values and gay visibility online[13, 14, 83]. Thus, we see that some of the challenges queer Douyin users face have parallels to other, particularly non-Western, geographical contexts.

In China specifically, queer individuals and communities navigate complex online landscapes where social media and other digital platforms can provide supportive spaces, but these spaces are often shaped by censorship, harassment, and heteronormative societal norms [2, 13, 14, 40]. For instance, while Chinese lesbians use online platforms to connect with similar others and explore alternative approaches to family, dominant societal norms emphasizing heterosexuality often restrict these expressions [40]. Platforms like Douyin illustrate the delicate balance queer users strike between selective visibility and identity presentation [3]. This phenomenon is part of a broader trend in non-Western contexts, where queer communities seek platforms that enable what Miao and Chan [50] describe as "community-based media affordances," fostering a sense of belonging. However, such supportive affordances are often constrained by pervasive censorship and societal pressures. For example, Ding and Song [19] highlight the role of "digital sexual publics" in enabling Chinese users to embody queer desires, offering transformative opportunities for identity exploration, yet always constrained by state-imposed restrictions. On Douyin in particular, content suppression further complicates these dynamics [2], with algorithmic practices that are opaque, inconsistent, and dehumanizing [84]. Beyond external censorship, Chinese queer people sometimes limit and censor their own communities through what Wang and Tan [77] call "participatory censorship," underscoring the internalized limitations faced by users. Together, these studies paint a nuanced picture of how queer individuals in China navigate the affordances and limitations of online expression amidst intersecting structural and cultural constraints. While queer community-building and identity exploration can be possible in private online communities, more public expressions of queer identity often become contentious, as we will describe next. Our work extends this prior research by examining how Chinese queer Douyin creators actively navigate these constraints through creative strategies for visibility and self-expression, highlighting how platform moderation, state influence, and societal norms shape online experiences for this marginalized group.

2.3 Chinese state influence and queer content strategies

Since 2012, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has consistently promoted "traditional cultures," which highlight the importance of social interdependence and heteronormative family values [36]. To promote a society deemed normal and moral, the CCP elevates views that gender is binary and that heterosexuality is the only acceptable expression of human sexuality. Given the country's aging population and low birth rate, the Chinese state is highly motivated to maintain stable and heteronormative notions of family [74]. Within this construct, in mainstream Chinese media queer identities are either erased, misrepresented, or deemed as "abnormal" or "perverse" [65].

While the Chinese government does not outright ban queer identities, it also does not view queer individuals as deserving of visibility and equal rights. For example, after Chinese social media platform Sina Weibo mistakenly categorized homosexuality alongside pornography and graphic violence as undesirable online content, *People's Daily* (a mouthpiece for the CCP) reaffirmed the importance of non-discrimination and "the diversity of sexual orientations" among Chinese citizens. The CCP has even worked with gay social app Blued to promote health education [49]. However, *People's Daily*, echoing the CCP's stance, also requested that queer people refrain from seeking greater visibility and participating in community organizing. This ambiguous stance requires queer individuals to carefully navigate when to accept these limitations and when to advocate for their rights and identities [12, 80]. Queer advocacy invariably leads to further censorship: one study found that when queer users used a hashtag translating to #IAmGay to voice their collective discontent about Weibo's characterization of homosexuality as equivalent to pornography, roughly one fourth of the posts were either censored by the platform or later self-censored [38].

Despite the ways the CCP's oppressive ideologies and policies have impacted and sometimes limited queer digital culture, queer people in China nevertheless create their own unique digital cultures [6]. Yet Chinese online platform moderation logic, and thus queer Chinese online self-expression, is heavily influenced by the principle of being a "good" and "positive" queer person: one that is non-political and non-sexual. Typically, apolitical topics like lifestyle, relationships, and celebrity culture are more likely to avoid censorship, whereas Douyin restricts queer individuals from questioning the lack of institutional support for Chinese queer communities [76]. Douyin entices queer creators with popularity in exchange for presenting an image of urban, middle-class, cosmopolitan, yet sexually neutral life on the screen, thereby promoting a homonormative environment [75]. In contrast, what Douyin regulates as "bad" queer people, those who choose not to hide their political and sexual selves, calls to mind queer theorists like Warner [78], Edelman [23], and Halberstam [32] who illuminate and resist how Western societal norms expect queer people to strive towards domestication and reproduction in the same ways that straight people do. Perhaps in response to restrictive norms, Zhou [88] shows how Chinese queer content creators, rather than constructing online personas related to queer identity, instead gain visibility by performing playful and sometimes absurd personas. Importantly,

when we refer to queer content and people as "good" and "bad" in this paper, we do not mean to imply that queer people and their content should truly be viewed in such a simplistic and potentially stigmatizing manner. Instead, this language draws from a long history of queer theory and trans studies work that critiques binary and moralistic framings of identity and the imperative for queer and trans people to consistently portray themselves in a positive light [23, 35, 42, 52, 59, 67, 78]. We use "good" and "bad" to critique the reductive and pathologizing way that the CCP – and by extension, Douyin – views queer people, a perspective that fundamentally shapes how Douyin regulates queer content.

Creators' beliefs regarding how algorithms evaluate their social identity influence their decision-making in how they present themselves in their videos to increase the probability of their videos being amplified [34]. To maintain and please their followers and moderators, creators in both China and the US often ensure that their content aligns with perceived mainstream opinions and avoid actively engaging in sensitive topics [34, 86]. Avoiding censorship is especially difficult on Chinese platforms though, because as Li and Zhou [37] argue, these platforms moderate content (short form videos in particular) in especially slippery ways: rather than making decisions based on a video's content, moderators instead consider the "ambient elements" – the video's context and "overall character and impact" as determined by the types of people and interactions the video attracts. To strike a balance between visibility and public perceptions of sexual diversity, queer content creators must learn how to navigate ever-changing social media, political, and moderation landscapes in attempts to ensure that their content does not run afoul of censors or mainstream values [3, 12, 61].

Prior scholarly inquiries have delved into the manner in which creators align themselves with societal norms to attain popularity [34, 86]. In contrast, we highlight the strategies Chinese queer content creators employ in creating and posting video content, specifically when purposefully embracing a "negative" (i.e., political or sexual) queer persona to address contentious topics such as equality or the challenges faced by the Chinese queer community. Additionally, we examine how the short video format and the strategies creators devise to avoid censorship can only sometimes afford greater freedom for queer individuals to articulate their desired expressions.

3 Methods

To address our research questions, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with 21 self-identified queer Douyin users. In our data collection and analysis, we drew heavily from Charmaz's constructivist grounded theory approach, which encourages an iterative and adaptive approach to interview data collection and analysis [10].

3.1 Participant recruitment

For recruitment, first, we directly messaged creators on Douyin whose content aligned with our understanding of queer content to identify potential queer participants. After explaining the research goals and methods, we successfully recruited 12 participants through purposive sampling [8]. They provided their email or WeChat accounts via Douyin chat for follow-up contact. Second, we used a snowball sampling approach, incentivizing previously recruited participants with CN¥50 ($8 US) to refer their queer friends who were also Douyin users. Through this method, we recruited an additional nine participants. All participants were compensated with a CN¥200 (approximately $30 US) incentive for their time and participation in the study.

3.2 Demographics

Participants were required to meet specific eligibility criteria, including being 18 years or older, using Douyin daily, and identifying as queer. We categorized participants as either "creators" or "viewers." Creators were those who consistently generated and published videos on Douyin. The sample consisted of 15 creators and 6 viewers, with creators' ages ranging from 20-40 years (M = 23, SD = 5.25 years) and viewers' ages ranging from 22-26 years (M = 23, SD = 0.71 years). The study included nine cisgender men and six women (five cisgender and one transgender) participants on the creator side, and four cisgender women, one cisgender man, and one nonbinary participant on the viewer side. The study included a diverse range of sexual and romantic orientations, with almost half the participants identifying as gay, and the remaining half as lesbian or bisexual, with one participant each identifying as trans-heterosexual and pansexual.

Creators in this study had follower counts ranging from 946 to approximately 700,000 (M = 99,719, SD = 186,586), with the peak views of their most popular video ranging from 131,000 to 19 million (SD = 4,899,600, SD = 5,709,819). Thus, the study included both emerging creators and established creators with significant followings. The number of accounts viewers followed ranged from 98 to 1,196 (M = 340, SD = 658). All participants lived in China, and all but one were Chinese citizens; one was an Indonesian Chinese person.

3.3 Interviews

We conducted interviews via Zoom, with video/audio recording, in the fall of 2022. Prior to each interview, we obtained informed consent from the participant. Interviews ranged from 27-96 minutes (M = 59, SD = 19), and were conducted in Chinese. The first author translated and transcribed the interviews into English.

Prior to the interviews, we strongly encouraged participants to review their Douyin accounts for 5-10 minutes. Interviews were semi-structured; while conversations primarily focused on moderation and censorship participants experienced while creating and viewing content, interviews began with discussions of participants' Douyin usage patterns and frequency. We periodically revised and customized questions based on participants' responses and initial data analysis; because data collection and analysis happen concurrently in constructivist grounded theory, researchers typically adapt interview questions as they deepen their understanding of the phenomena [10]. After conducting preliminary data analysis, we conducted follow-up conversations (max 30 minutes) with three participants via WeChat to seek clarification and validation of our interpretation of their data [4].

[4]We followed up with only these three participants because we felt that our analysis would benefit from additional clarification on specific aspects of their initial interviews. This decision aligns with our constructivist grounded theory approach which emphasizes iterative and adaptable interview procedures [10]

3.4 Ethical considerations

Because our study involves a marginalized group living in a repressive regime, we took a number of steps to ensure participants' privacy, confidentiality, and safety. This research was reviewed and deemed exempt from oversight by our university's institutional review board. Regardless, we took substantial precautions to practice ethical research and ensure that we protected participants' data and identities. We de-identified all participant data and replaced their names with anonymized participant numbers for audio recording and data analysis files. Next, we restricted interview data access to the research team. Additionally, we stored data on the research team's secure password-protected computers and servers, and deleted all interview audio recordings once transcripts were created and verified.

3.5 Data analysis

We began the analysis with an open-coding process that involved both line-by-line coding and focused coding methods. Line-by-line coding helped us comprehend the significance and ideas conveyed in each participant's statements, while focused coding enabled us to determine which codes were most relevant to apply to the data [10].

During the axial coding stage, the first author and a research assistant reviewed the data and consolidated codes during twice-weekly meetings. Through code collapsing, persistent interpretation, and explaining and discussing to reach consensus in the meetings, we identified connections between codes and integrated relevant themes [10]. By this process, we ultimately developed a coherent narrative about participants' recognition and comprehension of queer content moderation on Douyin and their strategies for responding to it.

3.6 Positionality

The authorship team includes both cisgender queer and trans individuals, from both China and the US. The first author's positionality as a Chinese queer individual and an active Douyin user since 2017 allowed him to establish rapport with participants quickly and gain valuable insights into their perspectives on queer content moderation on Douyin and in Chinese society. Moreover, his involvement in the Chinese queer community enabled him to connect and interact with participants who share similar cultural backgrounds, providing a deeper understanding of their experiences.

4 Results

4.1 Recognizing moderation of queer content

During our interview, P3 expressed a mixture of anger and sadness, stating, *"Queer content is not welcomed to Douyin!"* This perception exemplified many queer Douyin users' experiences and emotions when they searched for explanations for the restrictions they faced in queer content dissemination. In this section, we address RQ1 by describing how queer users determine that their content has been moderated by Douyin.

4.1.1 Ambiguity and clarity in reasons for moderation. We learned from participants that Douyin's moderation practices are often ambiguous and unclear. Participants reported that Douyin either deleted some of their queer content or set it to private, broadly citing community guidelines violations as the reason for moderation (see Figure 1). This aligns with previous findings that content related to gender and sexuality on Douyin is frequently subject to guideline violations without a clear explanation of the violation [81]. The notifications participants in our study received about these violations were ambiguous and varied. As P10 mentioned:

> *I find there are three models of the [violation] announcement. The first one is that Douyin provides over 40 guidelines, the second one is Douyin specifies one or two guidelines violations, and the third one is Douyin may indicate the specific part of the video in question.*

Yet in comparison with Western platforms, participants described how Douyin actually provided substantially more direct communication with moderators, and thus more clarity on reasons for content removals. Several participants (P3 and P13) noted that Douyin provided more specific moderation reasons after a user appealed the decision – and these reasons were likely to clarify that the content was removed because of the its queer nature. *"After my appeal, the Douyin reviewer circled the rainbow face mask on the videos and gave me a screenshot where one male asked for another male's contact information,"* P3 said. P13 also received a more specific reason after appealing (see Figure 2):

> *The first reason they gave me when my video was defined as inappropriate to spread is very general. After I appealed, they gave me the specific reason: that my video mentioned sensitive words like "tongxinglian" (homosexuality) and "chugui" (coming out).*

While learning the reason for the removal was helpful to reduce ambiguity, it was also frustrating for participants to experience such blatant censorship related to their queer identity.

Although appeals are a good way for users to gain clarity on the platform's content moderation boundaries, appeals are unlikely to be successful. Instead, appeals were helpful for creators to determine how to self-censor their queer content to pass review. Participants received varying responses from Douyin's customer service, but in all cases, the responses conveyed negativity toward queer content. For example, P10 was advised to change topics rather than posting about queer topics, P11 was informed that queer content was inappropriate to show on Douyin, and P13 was told that queer topics are permitted but that he needed to avoid sensitive words such as "gay" and "formal marriage." [5] While all anti-queer, these inconsistent responses highlight how responses from Douyin moderators provide both ambiguity and clarity in tandem regarding moderation guidelines.

Additionally, hashtags can help us further understand how queer content is moderated on Douyin. Hashtags promoted by the platform increase visibility [81] and help people to find content they are looking for, while unwelcome hashtags are often heavily suppressed and reduce people's access to important information [20]. Participants observed that when a user searches for hashtags such as "gay," "les," "txl," and "tongxinglian" [6], they appear inactive and

[5] "Formal marriage" refers to the practice of gay men and lesbians getting married to each other for practical purposes.

[6] "Tongxinglian" is the pinyin (phoenetic interpretation of Chinese characters) for "homosexual" in Chinese, and "txl" is the acronym for the first letter.

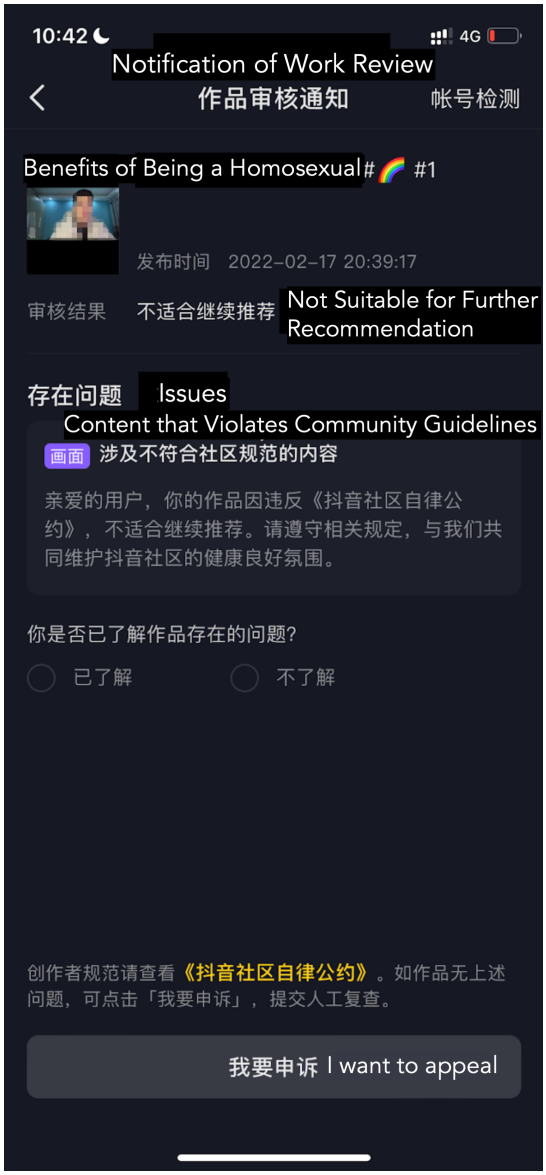

Figure 1: A screenshot of Douyin's announcement that the creator's work has been moderated. (English translation provided in the image by the first author)

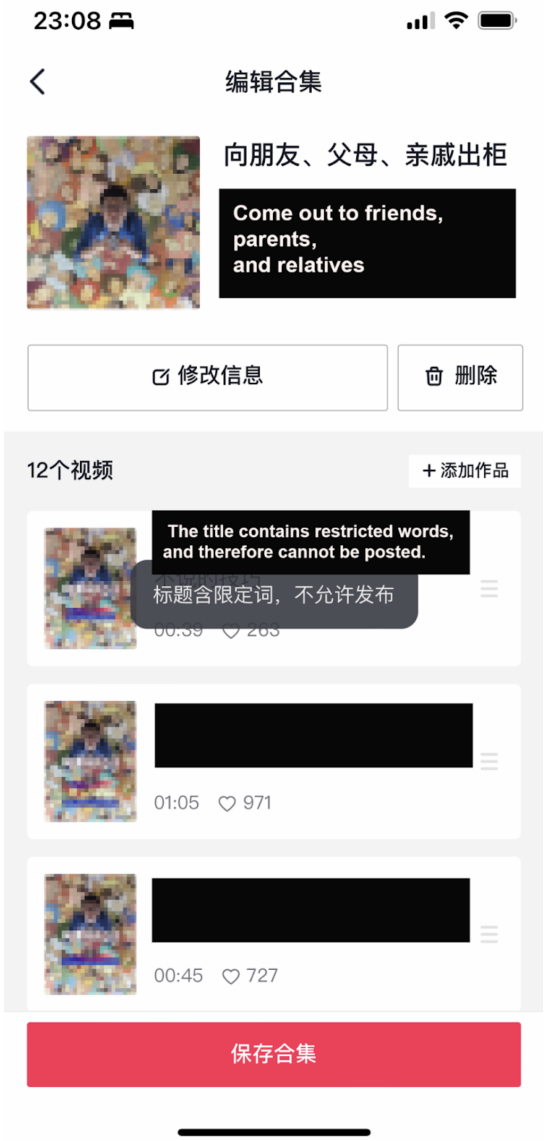

Figure 2: A screenshot in which Douyin alerted the creator that the video was not acceptable to post because there was a forbidden word in the title. (English translation provided in the image by the first author)

do not lead to any related content, unlike other hashtags. P16 reported that the hashtag "les" seemed to be banned, and lesbian creators had to switch to using "le," which was also temporarily banned.

In summary, participants found that Douyin's moderation practices toward queer content have negatively impacted queer content's visibility and distribution. Content moderation procedures that disproportionately censor queer content, including content removals, content suppression (colloquially known as shadowbanning), and limiting hashtags substantially decrease queer content's visibility and popularity, sometimes leading queer creators to give up on producing and posting content entirely.

4.1.2 Theorizing about shadowbanning. Shadowbanning is a colloquial term referring to a type of content moderation in which rather than being outright removed, content is either limited in reach or made invisible to other users [53]. Creators often suspect shadowbanning as their engagement decreases [16, 20]. We found that queer users often discern potential shadowbanning by comparing their queer content with non-queer Douyin content. P17 compared

her account's visibility during and after a queer relationship as an example:

> *When I was in a relationship, each video showed my mate, and I had low traffic. However, after we broke up, the traffic was generally better than during our relationship. I think the [content] reviewers can identify the queer accounts and then limit the spread of the content from these accounts.*

P17's decrease in views indicated to her that behind the scenes at Douyin, the platform was intentionally detecting and suppressing queer content. Though we have no way of confirming this folk theory, we heard similar speculations from many interviewees, and prior work has detailed similar suspicions [16, 47]. Though these folk theories cannot be "proven," users often use collaborative practices to attempt to confirm their folk theories [16].

Despite the evident decrease in engagement for some queer content, it was difficult for P6 and P9 to confirm whether their videos had been shadowbanned. The lack of transparency in how recommendation systems and user flagging work makes it challenging for users to determine whether their videos have been impacted by algorithmic systems or flagged as inappropriate by other users [53].

"I suspect Douyin has a list recording queer accounts that it assumes to have a higher risk of violation," P3 told us. Some participants suspected that Douyin regulates queer creators' videos and pays special attention to their accounts. Participants mentioned noticing a trend in which queer accounts with a violation history face more censorship and manual review, resulting in longer review periods and higher chances of content removals. P14 shared her understanding of Douyin's review process for videos created by queer accounts that receive attention:

> *If the previous video is in violation, the following videos will have a more extended review period, like one hour. Regular accounts usually undergo machine censorship first and only go to manual review if reported or if the volume of views is significant. However, for queer accounts with a violation history, videos are first reviewed by machine and then manually, increasing the likelihood of the video not being posted.*

Participants suspected Douyin was biased against them because Douyin categorized their accounts as likely to violate policy by posting queer content, and thus implemented heavier reviews as a result of the unwanted queer content. Targeting queer users' accounts in this way not only keeps their content from spreading but also can lead creators to close their accounts due to a lack of traffic.

After experiencing a sense of invisibility as a result of moderation, participants attempted various methods to confirm whether shadowbanning had occurred. Douyin's Creator Service Platform offers a channel for creators to review all of their videos, and notifications are sent for videos with concerns. P6 shared her understanding and interpretation of the procedure:

> *When I suspect my videos are shadowbanned, I will go to the creator service platform and ask [that they] review my videos again. After [that], all videos will be gone through, and I can learn about which videos were shadowbanned before, and whether the content is inappropriate to publish or to continue to recommend.*

This approach works well, especially when creators suspect that more than one video has been shadowbanned – yet it requires substantial extra labor that non-queer Douyin content creators may have the privilege to avoid.

The Dou+ official promotion tool on Douyin serves as an additional means for users to discern shadowbanning on the platform; this tool can be used both proactively during the posting process and reactively when users suspect they have been shadowbanned. On one hand, creators can benefit from direct manual review during the posting process through the Dou+ promotion tool, which quickly provides them with valuable feedback to revise and improve their content (see Figure 3). P14 remarked, *"Dou+ leads to a manual review without the involvement of algorithm censorship, and the process can take longer than half an hour. Users receive a notification indicating the success or failure of their promotion."* P13 described using Dou+ routinely to assess their content: *"I always buy Dou+ to determine if my content violates the guidelines, not for popularity. If I receive the moderation result quickly, I can make necessary changes and repost my video."* On the other hand, if users suspect their content has been shadowbanned without explanation, they can also attempt to purchase Dou+. If the videos are indeed shadowbanned, the system will inform them that they cannot buy Dou+ for the violative videos, as noted by P3. Multiple creators communicated to us their theory that Douyin presents obstacles by making validating shadowbanning opaque, but that Douyin does offer more detailed explanations to creators who are willing to invest time and money into the process.

Douyin's vague criteria and anti-queer moderation approach pose difficulties for queer creators in selecting topics, posting videos, and presenting their queer identity online. As a result, users theorize about what types of video content trigger moderation and how to verify whether their content has been shadowbanned.

Despite queer content creators' efforts to avoid censorship, many theorized that Douyin's algorithms enforce "safe zones," in which they separate marginalized groups from the wider society. When trapped in such "virtual jails," moderators restrict the type of content queer individuals can view and the audiences they can reach. 20 of the 21 participants in our study recognized that the content on their FYP ("For You Page," an algorithmically-curated video feed) was different from that of straight people and assumed that most heterosexuals do not have access to queer content on the platform.

4.2 Queer topics that receive heavier moderation, and creators' reactions to overmoderation

In this section, we answer RQs 2 and 3 by showing how Douyin (and the government behind it) designates certain queer content as "good" and other queer content as "bad:" that is, queer content related to humor, lifestyle, and celebrity topics are considered acceptable and usually allowed to circulate, while anything political, intimate, or departing from traditional values and gender roles is considered unacceptable and removed. Yet despite facing ongoing moderation challenges, queer content creators did not stop their efforts to post content. Instead, they developed strategies based

Figure 3: Dou+ informs a user that the purchase failed because the content review is not approved, signaling potential shadowbanning. (English translation provided in the image by the first author)

on their experiences and folk theories to increase their content's visibility and popularity, even though doing so primarily involved avoiding posting explicitly queer content.

4.2.1 Queer intimacy. Like other couples, queer couples often wish to showcase their love in front of the camera. However, given Douyin's restrictions, they are unable to express their intimacy in the same manner as heterosexual couples. Participants reported witnessing content being removed or recommended less on videos featuring intimacy between same-gender individuals on Douyin. Both P8 and P21 observed that heterosexual intimacy is prevalent on the platform but queer intimacy is rare. P21 expressed concern that *"same-sex couples often have to conceal their affection or avoid it altogether to avoid potential account bans."* P21 continued, *"A small intimate behavior may attract a potential shadowban or even a ban on accounts."* Participants perceived that this invisibility creates a sense of inequality for queer users and makes them feel that their relationships and love are not valued by society.

Participants theorized that queer intimacy is not acceptable to post on Douyin, especially when one wants their videos to be visible to others, and assumed this content suppression related to traditional family values. P16 explained her understanding: *"Along with the development of the Internet, especially with the rise of short-video platforms, people can easily be exposed to a different lifestyle.... The government believes queer cultures will prevent people from bearing [children], which is not good for the population increase."* That is, Chinese "family values" include doing one's part to help increase the Chinese population, and queerness is seen as oppositional to that goal. Thus, queer intimacy on social media can be seen as threatening to societal values. Similarly, P2 noted that *"The society is conservative and believes that queer content will change minors' sexual orientations. Being gay is still viewed as a disaster for a family."* Because queer intimacy is viewed as a threat to China's dominant family structure, queer love is continually removed or stigmatized on Douyin.

In response to Douyin's suppression of content showing queer intimacy, participants described strategies that primarily involved avoiding and self-censoring queer intimacy. As P17 said, *"I have to cover our intimacy with blurring... to allow our videos to pass the review."* Using less intimate terms like "partner," "roommates," and "bestie" to refer to a romantic partner is also a common practice among queer creators to avoid visibility reduction. However, participants described how these measures can make queer creators feel inferior and feel that they are abnormal because of their sexual orientation. Further, this type of self-censorship reinforces the dominant societal view that "good" queer people are non-sexual and non-intimate.

4.2.2 Queer topics and ideology. Despite the increasing popularity of new media, which may suggest a degree of pluralism under authoritarianism, dissenting thoughts and cultures, such as those associated with the queer community, remain vulnerable to censorship and repression by the Chinese government. The current political climate in China, marked by rising nationalist sentiment and a hostile attitude toward the West, has led to increased suppression of queer ideas on platforms like Douyin because many view queerness as imported from the West. Participants conveyed that Chinese creators are well aware of the control that Douyin exerts over information and ideologies. They view Douyin as a heteronormative platform whose administrators are wary of non-normative content, given the prevalent belief in China that promoting queer cultures online will reduce family values and the next generation's viability.

The rainbow symbol serves as a recognizable icon for the LGBTQ+ community and is frequently used by queer individuals globally to express their identity through videos and blog posts. However, this form of queer self-expression is frequently removed by Douyin, as demonstrated by P2's remark: *"The video was restricted from*

spreading after including a rainbow icon in the description, but once the icon was removed and the video was reposted, it was able to circulate freely." In later videos, P2 used fewer rainbow icons, as they understood that the platform would restrict queer-coded content. P2's experience shows how Douyin's censorship of queer content eventually leads queer people to engage in self-censorsing their own future content.

At the same time, despite restrictive moderation efforts, queer content persists on Douyin. P20 said, *"Douyin does not heavily moderate the daily lives or humorous videos of queer individuals, but discussions of political topics like equal rights and same-sex marriage are not tolerated."* Beyond political discussions, Douyin also considers promoting queer culture as violating traditional Chinese values. Video creators who aim to share knowledge on queer cultures or relationships often receive notifications that their content is being censored for *"promoting non-mainstream values of marriage and love."* P5 used himself as an example:

> *Douyin emphasizes reviewing content where people talk directly on video because it is easy to hear about creators' own opinions while talking. The videos with direct discussion will be reviewed first before posting to others. However, the videos where I am sharing [non-political aspects of] my life can be posted without any restriction at the beginning. Of course, when they become popular, the review is unavoidable.*

Participants realized that Douyin appears to be categorizing queer topics into "good" and "bad" queer content, allowing some to be disseminated and shared within queer communities while prohibiting others, even within these circles, due to their political nature and misalignment with traditional Chinese values.

In response to Douyin's overmoderation of queer topics and ideology, participants' primary strategies involved avoiding and downplaying their promotion of this type of content. For instance, to avoid being perceived as attempting to influence the public, P2 described their hedging strategies: *"I will use 'I assume' at the beginning of my sentence, emphasizing it is only my own opinions, and I do not want to persuade anyone to accept my opinions."*

Queer creators on Douyin, faced with censorship regulations, often try to communicate to the platform's moderators that they are a "good" queer person who only wants to share funny and innocuous content rather than queer ideology, in an effort to ensure their content is not deleted. They achieve this by adding notes to their videos, emphasizing the humorous or entertaining nature of the content, and clarifying their intentions. For example, P3 shared: *"I added a sentence, '...please do not take our video seriously, because the video is just for the sake of drama' on my video, and then this video passed the review without any following moderation."* P20 also observed that many queer creators add explanations to their videos to avoid the possibility of their content being deleted due to misinterpretation by reviewers. These efforts to downplay queer content's influence and seriousness demonstrate how queer creators must self-censor to work within the constraints of Douyin's censorship regulations, while also making sure to communicate their unobjectionable intent to moderators. Yet these strategies further entrench societal ideas of queerness as okay only if it is non-political and limited in spread.

4.2.3 Transgender and cross-dressing content. Douyin strives to conceal the presence of transgender individuals and others who defy gender norms, particularly those who do not conform to societal norms regarding their assigned gender at birth. Current Chinese laws lack provisions to protect transgender individuals on social media, leading to widespread ignorance and transphobia [71]. In 2021, a controversy in China surrounded the feminization of people assigned male at birth. Government-controlled media outlets published articles condemning transgender women and cross-dressing men and advocating for increased masculinity. Next, the cross-dressing influencer "康雅雅" (Kangyaya), who had 2 million followers on Douyin, was permanently banned. Participants in our study connected these two events and expressed their concerns about potential bans. As noted by P11, a transfeminine person, *"When I dress up as a female, my videos always suffer from shadowbanning."* With regard to feminine presentation, participant P1 also observed that *"Douyin is hostile to individuals who present as overly feminine."* Participants suggested that transgender and cross-dressing content challenges binary gender ideology rooted in Chinese social values that those assigned male at birth should be masculine and those assigned female at birth should be feminine.

In response to these restrictive policies, P11, the only participant who identified as transfeminine, reacted by avoiding presenting as transgender or cross-dressing in her Douyin videos. Instead, she presented herself in videos with a buzz cut and androgynous-to-masculine clothing. She reported experiencing harassing comments and direct messages when she posted videos in which she dressed in feminine clothing. To avoid such conflicts and ensure that her videos would not be removed, P11 gave up dressing feminine in her videos, stating:

> *I now present myself as male in my videos. I have realized that videos where I present myself as my biological sex are better accepted than those where I dress femininely. My priority is to keep my videos available, so I have had to make compromises.*

Although Douyin does not explicitly prohibit transgender content, creators often conform to social norms of binary genders in order to gain popularity, while sacrificing their desired self-presentation.

4.2.4 Additional reactions to overmoderation of queer content. Creators in our study employed several additional reactions to their queer content being removed and suppressed by Douyin: social steganography, and queer disclosure by fans. Participants stated that both of these strategies are relatively successful, in that they enable queer creators to communicate queer content to their audiences while avoiding content removal or suppression; yet both tactics require extra work and substantial coordination to ensure that viewers understand the coded language and the social norms around disclosing a creator's queer identity.

Social steganography. Marwick and boyd introduced the term social steganography to describe how people use encoded messages to restrict access to their content's actual meaning [45]. Queer creators on Douyin also employ social steganography, using coded language and terms that are comprehensible only to individuals familiar with Chinese queer culture. Prior work has documented how queer users on Weibo and TikTok also evade moderation through coded language [20, 79]. We found that homophonic words

– words that have a similar sound but a completely different meaning – are frequently used as a means of evading censorship. As P4 said, *"Homophonic words like tongxunlu (contact list)*[7] *is a popular word to help the queer community recognize the queer content while avoiding target key words censorship."*

Furthermore, as mentioned briefly in Section 4.2.1, queer users often give words unrelated to queer cultures a different meaning, collectively forming agreed-upon code words in the community. For instance, gay creators often refer to their romantic partners as "roommates" in their videos. Over time, when two men consistently refer to each other as roommates in a video, viewers in the comments section assume they are a gay couple. A similar phenomenon occurs among lesbians, where the word "bestie" has taken on a different meaning. As P9 described, *"I use Guimi [bestie] to refer to my girlfriend, and my fans all know our actual relationship. When you go to the hashtag Guimi, you will see the videos under it are mostly related to lesbians."* Through these social steganography tactics, queer Douyin creators can post queer content while evading censorship.

Faced with the tactics employed by queer communities, Douyin responds by continually updating its moderation approaches. P2 discussed how the platform's moderation team and users are locked in an ongoing cycle of chasing, in which queer content creators continually develop new coded language to replace prior coded language that the platform becomes aware of. As long as queer individuals seek to express themselves on the platform and Douyin continues to censor queer content, this cycle of restriction and adaptation will persist.

Queer disclosure by fans. Queer creators who have a substantial following often refrain from explicitly including references to queer themes or hashtags in their videos. Instead, they rely on their loyal fans to share their sexual orientation with new followers in the comments section. As P16 described to us, some queer creators initially do use queer-related hashtags to attract their target audience, particularly when Douyin has not yet implemented strict moderation on these hashtags. But once their accounts have established a stable fanbase, they create online chat groups where their fans can build social connections and eventually help to increase the creator's audience without the creator needing to use queer tags. P17 further explained:

> *The mature accounts with a stable fan group will not add the queer tags in the videos' description. As a viewer, I have found that old fans will expose the creators' sexual orientation to the new fans, especially when the commenters mistakenly assume the creators are straight.*

Through this process, fans form a sense of collective queer identity, and old fans assist creators in bringing new fans on board. Further, fans help the creator by (consensually) disclosing the creator's queer identity, which protects the creator from censorship because they no longer need to use queer hashtags in the video description. Douyin has so far not intervened in the queer information exchange within these small communities formed by creators.

[7]The pronunciation of 通讯录 (tongxunlu) is similar to that of homosexual 同性恋 (tongxinglian).

5 Discussion: The Virtual Jail

By examining queer Chinese users' experiences on Douyin, we respond to Taylor et al.'s [68] call for HCI researchers to study "highly particular, intersectional experiences" rather than queer populations broadly (which tends to default to Western contexts). Studying this particular context is important because, as Sam Lik Chan [9] argues, how queer people use technologies "may not be able to translate well across geographical contexts." We uncovered unique insights that apply to the Chinese context, primarily related to Douyin's deference to the CCP and traditional Chinese values when determining content's appropriateness. Queer content creators we spoke with tended to attribute Douyin's disproportionate moderation of queer content to societal norms rather than blaming the platform itself. With more than six billion daily users, participants understood that it must be challenging for Douyin to strike a balance between mainstream values and marginalized groups. Because the Chinese public values traditional binary genders and heterosexual family structures, participants recognized that videos promoting traditional heteronormative content, or neutral content, are more likely to reach large audiences than explicitly queer content. Participants interpreted Douyin's censorship and demotion of queer content as a compromise that the platform made to align with mainstream social norms and values; they understood that Douyin's algorithms and moderation must sacrifice the interests of its marginalized users in part to avoid public criticism. In this way, Douyin's algorithm acts as an identity strainer [34], granting privilege to welcomed identities while further marginalizing non-normative identities. Our results align with Liu's [39] observation of Chinese online forum Baidu Tieba, which found that Chinese traditional heteronormative values led to online homophobia and stigmatization of LGBTQ+ people. While Douyin administrators likely want to allow people to create queer content freely because it may drive profits, if they were to do so, they may face criticism from the public (and thus suffer lost revenue) and more serious consequences from the CCP.

By examining content moderation at the intersection of queerness and China, we contribute insights that extend beyond findings from prior content moderation research. This novel context allows us to uncover the unique ways state-mandated platform policies restrict marginalized users, but at the same time provide these creators with a sense of clarity about content restrictions that Western platforms leave obscure. Douyin's unique content restriction practices construct what we call *the virtual jail*: the digital place on the margins of a platform like Douyin where queer content that does not align with mainstream values is allowed to circulate, albeit separate – with invisible walls – from the rest of the platform. While shadowbanning is a useful way to consider queer content suppression on Western platforms, it is quite different from the virtual jail. Shadowbanning, as a concept and in practice, is slippery and unclear; those who experience it are never quite sure whether or not they are actually experiencing it, and platforms commonly deny its existence [16]. Relegation to the virtual jail, on the other hand, is much more clear cut: as described in our Results section, Douyin moderators often communicate with queer content creators to let them know exactly why their content is not allowed to circulate widely.

Many research papers about content moderation call for increased platform transparency. Interestingly, we learned from participants that Douyin's relatively transparent enforcement of traditional Chinese values may in some ways be preferable to the opaque, frustrating content suppression often seen in Western contexts. For instance, shadowbanning and content removals on platforms like TikTok rarely provide rationale or even confirmation of existence, allow no appeals, and offer no revisions [16, 47]. Douyin, on the other hand, contacts users directly to let them know why their content was removed and how to adjust it to meet the platform's standards. Further, on Douyin, content creators can interact directly with moderators – who typically moderate based on structural constraints coming from Douyin leadership and the CCP, but do also have some agency to make decisions depending on context [85] – which is rarely possible on Western platforms. With regard to transparency, Douyin is doing something right here. Though censorship is not celebrated, clear communication is appreciated. Western platforms likely remove and suppress queer content just as readily as Douyin does, but rarely admit it. The unique Chinese political climate and its explicit stance against overtly queer content provides clarity and transparency, while many Western platforms quietly suppress queer content while simultaneously celebrating Pride Month with performative rainbows.

In Western contexts, freedom of speech and expression based on the US's First Amendment, along with Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, enables social media platforms to operate relatively independently from governments [1]. This means that platforms can attempt to eliminate discrimination or bias against marginalized groups (though their attempts are often insufficient or ineffective [46]). However, in China, the situation is different. The state exerts control over the entire online space by conducting regular meetings with platform executives and even shutting down unruly platforms that may not follow the state's values, such as humor app Neihan Duanzi [26]. Thus, the government's attitude greatly influences platforms' policies, moderation, and algorithms.

Despite some limitations, queer individuals are not entirely restricted from expressing themselves on Douyin. There remains a gray area where they can voice their opinions and display their queer identities as long as they avoid crossing various unclear boundaries [84]. Therefore, as we have shown, queer creators develop folk theories to test the limits and determine the appropriate boundaries in order to maintain an online presence. Faced with censorship on Douyin, queer creators devise strategies to maintain visibility that are both similar to and distinct from strategies their peers employ on Western platforms and even Douyin's Western counterpart, TikTok. Mitigation strategies uncovered in prior work involve reposting, recapping, and recreating removed accounts [64]. However, participants in our study found these methods to be largely ineffective. Instead, they drew from their experiences on text-format platforms, morphing words into alternative forms of contentious pre-existing words or phrases [11, 13]. During the content creation process, participants engaged in self-censorship, adapting their content based on their understanding of societal expectations. They avoided controversial topics such as same-sex marriage and obscured intimate scenes with their partners, using self-censorship to lessen the fear and anxiety of potential state-imposed restrictions [87].

In some ways, despite Douyin's government-driven censorship, users' experiences are not entirely dissimilar from people's experiences on Western platforms that determine their own moderation policies and practices. Many platforms resort to a "puritan politics" stemming from American asceticism in which social media community standards dictate that "what some users, somewhere, may find offensive is removed from the sight of all" [55]. There is little space on social media for content that is queer, sexual, political, about oppression, or any combination of these [30, 47]. That is, whether moderating decisions are left to Meta, X, or the CCP, the standards will always correspond to some version of a culture's traditional societal values. After all, as Gillespie [27] argues, content moderation decisions always depend on standards, norms, and laws in the platform's societal context, and the boundaries of what is deemed acceptable are ever shifting. In the current contentious anti-queer US political environment, we trust Zuckerberg to moderate our queer content more than we trust the politician authors of the Kids Online Safety Act (KOSA), because we believe that Zuckerberg is not explicitly queer- or transphobic; in contrast, KOSA, if passed, would put social media content policies in the hands of US states' attorneys general, which is widely believed to lead to curtailed LGBTQ+ content on social media. Yet no matter who is pulling the moderation and policy levers – the CCP, US state governments, Musk – queer content creators' experiences posting online will always involve ambiguity, precarity, and marginalization.

In contrast to Western TikTok users' dissatisfaction with algorithmic paternalism – a folk theory in which marginalized users think that the platform suppresses their visibility to reduce their risk of harassment [17] – participants in our study understood and sometimes accepted Douyin's reasons for moderation policies, and recognized that they were in place, at least in part, to protect queer content creators. This understanding echoes a quote from the *People's Daily* (the CCP's official newspaper) as cited by Song [65]: "Regardless of the legal status of LGBTQ individuals in society, they must conform to heterosexist social conventions and refrain from disrupting established social harmony, even if it means sacrificing their own rights and entitlements." Queer content creators' narratives reveal that their objectives on Douyin are not about resistance but rather about survival. Some participants, despite the heteronormative environment, believed that as long as they were "good" queer people who followed social rules set by heterosexuals, they would eventually be accepted by society. Meanwhile, they conveyed their view that queer content creators who courageously engage in discussions about controversial topics – "bad" queer people – hinder society's acceptance of queer people.

As we have seen in this study, Douyin does not censor queer content and accounts entirely; the queer community is still able to access and encounter queer content and individuals on Douyin in limited and often coded ways. As we described in Results, participants theorized that queer content on Douyin existed in an entirely different world than mainstream content (content aimed at heterosexuals). In this way, this marginalized group is literally pushed to the margins of the platform. While Douyin does not have *walls* per se, in the way that some private online communities on sites like Reddit and Facebook do have boundaries, Douyin's moderation policies and algorithmic logics in effect placed walls between queer users and the rest of the platform. When queer content did break

through to broader audiences, it was invariable "good" queer narratives – content neutral and non-sexual enough to be approved by the government. Meanwhile, any "negative" queer content, such as intimate content or political topics like discrimination or struggles for equality, if allowed on the platform at all, is relegated to small audiences on the margins of Douyin, behind the wall. Other times, this type of content moves to smaller, more private online communities on different platforms [13]. Douyin, as a platform that has been delegated censorship powers by the authoritarian political regime, contributes to the government's effort to suppress freedom of expression and ideology in society. It does this by building virtual walls, which hold people within what we conceptualize as *the virtual jail* – the digital place where the platform relegates "bad" and "negative" queer content.

The virtual jail is tenuous, as its restrictions may grow or shrink depending on the government's whims. Through this research, we have shown how queer people, who are socially marginalized in China, yearn for a secure and stable refuge. Yet they realize that permanent and unconditional digital sanctuary is unavailable to them in their own country, even on their social media platform of choice.

5.1 Limitations and Future Work

We note several limitations of our work. First, our results rely on self-reported interview data, which may not represent events completely accurately. We attempted to mitigate this limitation by collecting screenshots from participants when possible. While using self-reported data is common in studies examining personal and sensitive topics, future work could incorporate observational or trace data to complement self-reported accounts. Second, the study focuses on a single platform (Douyin), within one country (China), and focused on one context (queerness). This specificity limits the extent to which our results may also apply to other platforms, geographies, and user groups; yet it is also important to understand this particular unique context [68]. Future work can extend our work in several ways. Conducting algorithmic audits of Douyin's content moderation systems and comparing them with the folk theories we uncovered here may provide important insights into platform algorithms and marginalized groups. Next, future studies could compare different identities and communities on Douyin to understand potential differences in their experiences with content moderation. Finally, investigating the differences between queer users' experiences on Douyin vs. its Western counterpart TikTok could reveal how differing sociopolitical and cultural contexts shape marginalized groups' experiences on social platforms. These promising future directions will expand our understanding of platforms' implications for marginalized users, contributing to broader conversations about digital equity and inclusion.

6 Conclusion

In this paper, we described how queer Douyin creators realize that their content is being moderated, what types of content is more heavily moderated, and how they respond. This work has made clear the distinctions that Douyin, influenced by the Chinese government and Chinese societal norms, makes between what it considers acceptable or "good" queer content (i.e., non-political and non-sexual) and unacceptable or "bad" queer content (i.e., overtly queer, political, or sexual). Queer content creators told us that while the platform allows more neutral queer content to circulate, "bad" queer content is often removed or suppressed. We conceptualize these content moderation practices as constructing a *virtual jail*, in which some queer creators are virtually restricted from expressing themselves and interacting with others online. The virtual jail not only limits queer creators' visibility; it also reinforces societal and governmental control over queer expression, ultimately shaping the boundaries of what it means to be visibly queer online.

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