Social Inequality: Considerations Concerning The Diaosi Meme

Introduction

The term “Diaosi” has become very popular and it is a meme among the young people in mainland China. I have heard the term firstly from my favourite band Mayday from Taiwan in 2012 from an interview. They claimed themselves also a “Diaosi” after they are off stage. I was curious about the term and I think that this meme is very similar to the term “useless youth” ????in Hong Kong which has caught my attention. I decided to choose this empirical example for the study in this paper. This term “Diaosi” is evolved from the internet and it is representing the situation of the young generation which reflects culture, emotions and reality in their lives. In this paper, I would want to analysis this phenomenon with the help of reading “The ‘losers’ of China’s Internet: Memes as ‘structures of feeling’ for disillusioned young netizens” written by Marcella Szablewicz to find out inequality in China. The paper will first give the definition of “Diaosi” followed up by the discussion of the inequality behind, and give some discussion on how Szablewicz argues on the meme and ending up with some comments on how she thinks.

The definition of Diaosi“Diaosi” is a playful,humorous Internet meme that has flooded the Chinese-language internet since 2012. “The Chinese character of Diao (?) is a particularly a crude term describing the male genitalia. The term Si (?) is literally translated as ‘threads’”. The meaning of the meme can be translated into loser and opposite of “tall, rich and handsome“(???). The genealogy of “Diaosi” is complicated. The origin of the term is from an online dispute between two sub-forums of the BBS Baidu Tieba in October 2010. The members of the Leiting Sanjutou (?????)has ridiculed the Fans of the Chinese footballer Li Yi (??) as Diaosi. However, the young “Diaosi” think the name is cool and have self-mockingly adopted the label. After this, there are web series called Diorsman and the Chinese translation of a German television comedy, Knallerfrauen (????) which the media has broadly used and promoted. The definition of Diaosi culture then continues to evolve. There are more young netizens declared on SinaWeibo accounts that they are also Diaosi while news stories about Diaosi flourished.

There are some traits that Diaosi have includes they may be poor, short and ugly; are of rural origin; and have a low education level, low income, blue-collar job, no house, no car, and no girlfriend. Their leisure activities include playing video games, spending a lot of time online, and excessive masturbation. There are also some characters that most male Diaosi do not have much girlfriends and living standard are low. At the same time, they are described as nerds who rarely leave the house (??). There are many sources that describe Diaosi but the constant definition of Diaosi are not ‘tall, rich and handsome’; he is not ‘the second generation of wealthy families’ (???); he does not enjoy the privileges of ‘the second generation of officials’ families’ (???). she cannot date, or even successfully converse with who he liked. It can be simply said that the Diaosi are opposite with popular representations of the successful, heteronormative male. The meme is then not restricted to male that there are also female Diaosi who are superficial in their appearances and fashion. They are also in contrast with white, rich and beautiful girls(???).

The cartoon has circulated widely on China's Internet is a caricature of Diaosi in this sense. The height is 1.68m which is relatively short, with no girlfriend, scores 2 points for looks meaning ugly, 'monthly salary of 2,000 RMB, 'cheap product from Taobao and and 'fake gadget'which is cheap. There is also a term of 'Goddess"refers to those 'perfect' girls" who are meant to be the partners of are the tall, rich and handsome guy. They remain the unreachable idols for these Diaosi (Yang, Tang & Wong, 2015).

The inequality behind

The meme is not simply a playful meme on the internet. There are scholars suggested that Diaosi may be indicative of a growing awareness of income inequality within urban China. Li Bin and Tang Qiufen argued, "It is not merely a form of self-mocking, the term is more likely to be an expression of the growing rigidity of social class, the widening gap between the rungs of society, or an indicator of increasing class friction." That is refecting a class difference and perceived disparity. The increasing income gap between entitled upper-class youth and the struggling middle class has created a comparison in the aspect of wealth. "The disparity comes about through comparisons with the second generation of officials' families, the second generation of wealthy families and the tall, rich and handsome successful person in the society," Jin argued.

Szablewicz has linked up the meme to the social movement "Occupy Wall Street" in 2011 started in America. A Canadian anti-consumerist and pro-environment group Adbusters has initiated the call for a protest against social and economic inequality. Their slogan was "We are the 99%" which means the income and wealth inequality in the USA between the wealthiest 1% and the rest of the population. The 99% of the population has come to protest to point out the income disparity and economic inequality. Szablewicz thinks the 99% and the Diaosi meme do share a similar spirit that both groups mobilized the Internet as a means through which to give voice to the disenfranchised majority. Diaosi uses humour to points out the disparities between the lives of average Chinese youth and privileged youth who is inheriting the wealth of family and corrupt government back channels while the 99% go on streets to fight for equality. Szablewicz thinks that the target of the meme is not wealth itself but rather the sense that the dream of upward socio-economic mobility is increasingly out of reach for the majority of people. The disenfranchised majority of youth are willing to embrace the 'loser' label in online forums that adds emotionally persuasive elements to the meme and helped to build a structure of feeling from same group of people shared the same experience. Although there are many differences between the two memes, both of the cases provided a space or a platform which a sense of group solidarity is established.

Diaosi meme is likely to reflect the gender issue at first that it emphasizes the difference between "Short, poor, and ugly " and "tall, rich and handsome" male in the society. The meaning of Diaosi has evolved that disenfranchised majority had identified themselves as losers on the internet. The meme has more likely to reflect class and income inequality that classified the middle-struggling class from the upper privileged. According to Li Bin and Tang Queen, Diaosi meme at the same time has reflected the hardening of social structure, the power imbalance between individuals and the social whole, and a reflection of individuals' increasing feelings of helplessness. The widening of the income gap and lack of avenues for upward socio-economic mobility are the inequality lies behind the meme.

The main argument of Szablewicz

According to Szablewicz, she thinks that Diaosi meme signals the lack of avenues for upward socio-economic mobility. It aimed at accusing the privileged upper echelon of Chinese youth who inherit wealth and power from their parents. As meme is a product of culture and the use of the internet, it involves active participation like making and sharing of memes. According to shenry Jenkins, this online participation is a new form of “participatory politics” which are “‘politics that often stretch beyond our institutional understanding of what constitutes the political, that involve kinds of cultural activities that invoke the production and sharing of media”.

It is also important that the Internet serves as a space for the production of new desires, and the Diaosi meme is an excellent example of the ways in which such desires are given voice online. Youth are using digital media to imagine and articulate alternative identities that pose a challenge to mainstream visions of what success entails high educational achievements and material wealth. The active online participation can play a role in the rise of counter-publics however the meme Diaosi seems to alternately reject normative definitions of success while also reifying existing sexist and consumerist ideologies.

More than the meaning of “counter-public”, Szablewicz gives the angle on how Raymond Williams thinks of “structures of feeling”. This is not a world view but it is “concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt”. she thinks that “emergent or pre-emergent, they do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action”. Structure of feeling refers to the different ways of thinking vying to emerge at any one time in history. It appears in the gap between the official discourse of policy and regulations, the popular response to official discourse and its appropriation in literary and other cultural texts(Oxford Reference,2019). In the case of China, it is the affective identification which present in the case of young people who so readily identify themselves as Diaosi. “Diaosi” has reflected the structure of feeling which is gaining currency with young Chinese and is helping young people to rearticulate the kinds of lifestyles that are desirable and achievable in the face of economic uncertainty.

On the other hand, Diaosi as an emergent form of affective identification through which alternative desires and forms of mobility may be enacted. The society has a certain norm of determining success. For example, they have to earn a high salary that enough for marriage, attaining respectable living standards, be competitive on the marriage market, save money to purchase a house in the city, provide their own children with expensive education, or support to the retired parents and grandparents. These expectations on the young generation had made them faced heavy pressure. On the internet, they embracing their status as Diaosi, young people are explicitly acknowledging the unfair and sometimes impossible standards of success by which they are being judged. They have disillusioned about their place in the hierarchy of Chinese society and they empower themselves by embracing their lowly status and creating a sense of community. According to Li Bin and Tang Qiufen, they argued that “The meme of Diaosi emphasis on material wealth, physical appearance and sexual stereotypes may ultimately reinforce many of the norms and values that it seemingly intends to mock.” This has reflected that they might have a desire to redescribe what is determined to be true happiness in the society and challenge the social norm. The diaosi meme takes aim at these conventional and socially sanctioned models of success and questioning the extent to which such models are achievable in the context of contemporary China. As adopting the identity of Diaosi cynically,

even the working within the confines of a dominant ideology that would frame them as losers, it is still effectively challenging the notion that their lifestyle is something of which to be ashamed.

The appearance and evolution of the meme of Diaosi are complicated. It is not simply a playful meme but rather the agreement on the identity of Diaosi has revealed the social and class inequality. This proliferation of new identities online and the critique levelled at privilege and corruption through humour are cornerstones of China's burgeoning civil society. This is a kind of participation that at times seems pregnant with political possibility, one that thrives off 'indecorousness' in the face of a government and society relentlessly concerned with image and ideal citizenship. As the Internet may serve as a location in which notions of 'ideal citizenship' and 'patriotic leisure' are cultivated and reinforced, the complicated picture of the new online identities can simulate political contestation in Chinese online spaces reinforced and challenge the conventional norms.

There is also comparison between Ah Q and Diaosi. Ah Q is a traditional story which is a spiritual victory that they use self-belittling in order to come to terms with reality and to reconcile social reality and their own place within it. They use their self-mocking attitude as a means of declaring "psychological victory" over their wealthy and privileged counterparts which is the tall, rich and handsome in the modern world. Ah Q denies reality and deceives himself into thinking that all of his humiliations and defeats are actually victories. This is similar to the diaosi that they are both victims of their own unrealistic expectations about the nature of revolutionary change. The diaosi has also accepted their lowly fate and kneel before the tall, rich and handsome. However, it must be pointed out that Ah Q and the diaosi respond to disappointment in sharply different ways. Ah Q was blind to his low status while diaosi have emerged out of a vibrant Internet culture that is sharply attuned to and critical of the goings-on of the Chinese state. Diaosi has no illusions about their place in the hierarchy of Chinese society that they empower themselves by embracing their lowly status. Ah Q was a loner and isolated from his peers while the young people who are using social media to embrace the diaosi label are doing so in such a way as to create a sense of community, a point of affective identification that crystallizes through the power of online address and creating a sense of community.

On the other hand, the meme of diaosi has encouraged sexism, cynicism and exclusivity.

For example, the meme focuses mainly on money as a source of a man's power and attractiveness while women are ranked in terms of sexual experience and physical attractiveness. To distinguish the pretty girl goddesses from the female diaosi, the meme of 'pink wood ear' and 'black wood ear' have been used to describe a woman's sexual experience referring to pink wood ear referring to a virgin's genitalia and black wood ear to the genitalia of a woman who has had numerous sexual partners. With regard to the male diaosi, it is said that the women whom they often marry have been previously used and discarded by the tall, rich and handsome which has encouraged sexism. The meme of diaosi has also evolved with different living attitude and changing the culture. A popular motto often expressed in conjunction with the diaosi, 'sincerity equals defeat' meaning it is not good to be serious on matters and it encourages young people to keep a cynical distance from these things and to treat everything as a joke. Although the loser label seems to challenge the system and attain such materialistic success, its twisted humour, in fact, reproduce the consumerist and object-oriented culture that it targets.

Overall speaking, the meme of Diaosi is a cultural product that being produced on the Chinese open space on the internet. Szablewicz thinks that apart from the new identity that the netizens agreed on that they could have an emotional community to express their disillusion and disappointment to the society. It has to come to terms with the fact that the lifestyle of the so-called tall, rich and handsome is neither fully desirable nor generally achievable in the contemporary urban landscape of China.

Critical analysis on the reading

Szablewicz has explained the phenomenon clearly and gives a comprehensive review on the issue and has analysed the social situation by pointing out the increasing awareness of the inequalities in the market system. she uses theories and real-life example for comparison to explain the meme. She may still not sure whether the netizens are truly desired to name themselves as Diaosi, she can give more explanation on the class inequality and the reasons for these struggle to understand the meme is resonated with widely shared sentiments in contemporary Chinese society.

As suggested by Szablewicz, Diaosi reflects the desire to change the traditional social norm and the awareness of income and social inequality, Yang, Tang and Wang suggested that

Diaosi is how a vast number of relatively young urban Chinese citizens currently see themselves: the underprivileged and the losers in a society that is undergoing rapid economic growth but also treacherous social stratification. They coded another scholar pointing out that “China’s fait accompli embracing of capitalist mass consumerism (and all its associated cultures) together with the highly unequal distribution of wealth makes for a society of conspicuous consumption, money-worship, pride and haughtiness of the ‘haves’ and envy and discontent in the ‘have-nots’ (Liu, 2011; Yan, 2009a)” which is the root of the problem. With the comparison online that the privileged young generation love to show off their materials and wealth on social media, the majority of people have suddenly become conscious of what they have and have not compared to others. (Yang, Tang and Wang, 2015). This is why Diaosi is affects the society so much which it had widely shared sense of discontent and dispiritedness rooted in having no wealth, no privilege, no security and no hope in society. This gives more angle on the phenomenon Diaosi and it not only reflects the inequality of income but also the inequality in social power and the uneven distribution of wealth.

Conclusion

To sum up, the Diaosi meme is not simply an internet playful meme but a reflective cultural product which reveals the class and income inequality in China. Szablewicz suggested that the meme also acts as structures of feeling that helps to construct an emotional community and express alternative desires and forms of mobility. The reading has gone through the definition and evolution of diaosi and has come to the conclusion that there are the desire for more avenues for upward socio-economic mobility at the privileged upper echelon of Chinese youth who inherit wealth and power from their parents. This new form of identity serves as cultural power that has the ability to question the conventional social norm that the youth are unsatisfied with the impossible standards of success by which they are being judged. It is looked forward that how the meme could influence inequality and voice out for the majority of young people in contemporary urban China.

Reference

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