

At the Intersection of Ecology, Queer, and Feminism: A Digital Voyage of Female Queers' Alternative Living Initiatives in China

Abstract

Stemming from observing Chinese urban queer females' assemblage through online communities and digital platforms in pursuit of rural living and alternative social initiatives. This working paper follows the tradition of Consumer Culture Theory and draws on intersectionality theory to explore consumer resistance toward capitalist patriarchy.

Introduction

Grounded in the intersectionality theory, this research explores how countervailing power relations are imposed on queer females within ecovillages in China who are celebrated for their sustainable ethos and anti-capitalist stance. The paper examines a series of queer female-led social initiatives taking place in ecovillages in rural China. This demographic has fled from urban cities in search of peaceful, communal, and alternative ways of living. Such a phenomenon provides fertile ground for heterotopia practices (Chatzidakis et al., 2012), where capitalist logic intersects with green, feminist, and queer ideologies within the oppressive political context of China, particularly regarding sexual minorities. The current paper focuses on queer female-led social initiatives that arise in the digital domain, examining how individual queer females emerge, express and connect with other eco-queer women on various online platforms in China. We enquire: how do green, queer, and feminist values intersect through platform economy? What new power relations, marginalisations, hegemonic actors, and ideologies are connected from those digital platforms?

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Our research focuses on eco-queer-female consumers' resistance to capitalist patriarchy. It follows the tradition of Consumer Culture Theory's viewpoint on consumption (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) and is grounded in the sociological field of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989). The study examines the intersecting power dynamics among green identities (e.g., eco-living lifestyle), gender identity (e.g., women), and sexual identities (e.g., queer individuals) of these eco-queer women. Through an intersectional feminist queer lens (Pirani and Daskalopoulou, 2022), these issues remain largely underexplored in existing sexuality studies on eco-communities, especially concerning social minorities in a Global South country (Coffin et al., 2022) – China, whose broader political context imposes heavy

oppression and silencing to queer social movements in the digital realm (Liao, 2019; Song, 2022).

The Intersectionality of Queer and Feminism in China

The adoption of intersectionality theory in marketing serves as a theoretical framework to explore power structures in the marketplace. This approach stems from the understanding that individuals occupy multiple societal positions influenced by factors such as gender, race, sexuality, and class (Gopaldas and Fisher, 2012). In the marketing discipline, Ger (2018) emphasises that the objective of intersectionality theory is to unveil and scrutinise power dynamics in areas such as subjectivity (e.g., Arsel et al., 2022), knowledge (e.g., Rosa-Salas and Sobande, 2020), resistance (e.g., Verman and Belk, 2009), and social structures (e.g., Peñaloza and Barnhart, 2011). Originating during the post-second wave feminist era, intersectionality emerged to address racial discrimination against women. Social theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) played a pivotal role in its development, describing the oppression faced by Black women as akin to being at the crossroads of gender and race, simultaneously experiencing racism and misogyny. This highlighted the significance of social structural arrangements of power (Crenshaw, 1989).

Scholars such as Collins (1999, 2000, 2016) later expanded the theory to discuss multiple identities and forms of oppression. Intersectionality has since evolved into a "both/and" approach, transcending identity projects. For example, Steinfeld et al. (2019) advocate for shifting the research focus from micro-level identity to meso- and macro-level ideologies. This perspective connects structural and experiential dimensions of individuals' lives and integrates material and discursive dynamics (Ger, 2018). Previous studies have explored neglected axes of beauty norms as sites of resistance. For instance, Scaraboto and Fisher (2013) examined gender and body size intersections to resist size stigma, while

Sandicki and Ger (2010) explored class and gender intersections to counter stigma. These studies demonstrate that consumption can be a form of resistance (Smith et al., 2023), making intersectionality a vital framework for understanding multifaceted societal experiences. Beyond being an epistemological tool, intersectionality also operates as an ontological project (Collins, 2019) and a political strategy for challenging hegemonic ideologies and promoting social change (May, 2015). However, the marketing field often overlooks this resistance-oriented foundation and instead misuses intersectionality to reinforce patriarchal systems, creating further exclusion and inequality. Rosa-Salas and Sobande (2022) critique this phenomenon as the "illusions of intersectionality," where actions and narratives misrepresent the theory's intent.

This paper revisits the resistance roots of intersectionality through a queer theory lens. It extends beyond identity politics to address calls for research that moves from identity to ideological resistance (Peñaloza, 2018; Steinfield et al., 2019). Specifically, it examines the role of platformed queer feminist communities in resistance practices, addressing gaps in intersectionality research that focus predominantly on subjectivity and identity. By utilising intersectionality as an ideological framework, this study challenges patriarchal structures in digital culture. The paper also seeks to expand intersectionality research beyond its Global North focus. For example, while Luedicke (2015) explored race and class intersections among Turkish immigrants in Austria, research on intersectionality in China remains limited. Recent studies, such as Liu and Kozinet's (2022) work on "leftover women" in China, highlight the intersection of gender, class, and age in countering stigmatisation. This paper builds on such scholarship to explore how female queers in China use digital platforms to challenge dominant power structures and advocate for change.

Queer feminism in China presents unique complexities due to its sociopolitical context. Capitalist patriarchy significantly shapes consumption patterns. Bao (2024) explored

how queer feminist movements, though shorter-lived and more oppressed than broader feminist movements, still resist patriarchal norms. Li (2014) emphasised that lesbian activism plays a critical role in Chinese feminist movements, bringing attention to issues such as domestic violence and same-sex marriage rights. However, as Bao (2020) highlights, lesbian activism often faces marginalisation within broader feminist and LGBTQ+ movements, with homonormative tendencies overshadowing queer identities. Guo (2015), a lesbian activist from the China Lala/Lesbian Alliance, also underscores the "double marginalisation" lesbians face. Previous queer feminism studies in China have aligned with current research advocating for the power of marginal female consumers to challenge patriarchal systems. However, they lack the theorisation from marketing scholarship, particularly regarding the marketing logic that contributes to the escapism of female queer consumers, and what alternative perspectives on consumer culture theory those female queer migrants in China may offer.

Chinese Consumers' Resistance and Escape to Anti-Structure

Affected by the currents of immigration, urban expansion, industrialisation, feminism movements and corporate capitalism started in the late nineteenth century, the dominance of elite heterosexual white men in urban spaces was problematised, herding them to the wilderness in which they reclaimed heteronormative superiority via activities such as family camping (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson, 2010). Simultaneously, urban spaces are regarded as natural habitats for LGBTQ+ consumers. A wide range of marketing scholarships studied LGBTQ+ consumer behaviours in urban consumption sites, such as television shows (Herold, 2024), cosmetic medical treatment (Rosenbaum et al., 2022) and pride events (Kates, 2003). LGBTQ+ consumers also allegedly tend to express their resistance *through* the market by creatively appropriating market resources and leveraging purchasing power to gain social legitimacy (Jones and Bradshaw, 2023).

Differently, this paper attends to a countercurrent of the bond between queers and urbanism, arguing that leaving the cities is Chinese eco-queer female consumers' resistance *to* consumption and markets (Jones and Bradshaw, 2023) and an escape from the structure of urban life and civilisation at large (Cova et al., 2018). Consumer resistance is accepted by marketing scholars as a “resistance against a culture of consumption and the marketing of mass-produced meanings” (Peñaloza and Price, 1993), and it is often concerned alongside anti-consumption, which refers to consumers' distaste and even resentment of consumption (Cherrier et al., 2011).

While enquiries around consumer resistance and anti-consumption have been ongoing in the West for over 30 years, these subjects have only gained significance in China's public sphere lately. Having benefited from the country's rapid economic growth in the past decades, Chinese consumers were once famous for their opulent consumption of luxury goods in global markets (Zhan and He, 2012). Initiatives to revolutionise conventional consumption practices, such as the low-carbon economy, the circular economy and “cradle-to-cradle” practices, are primarily institutionally led and regulated by the government (Shao, 2019). There remains a gap in the marketing literature regarding how anti-consumption and consumer resistance are carried out by the consumers.

Brossard (2022) sheds light on this in an article concerning the “lying flat” attitude among young Chinese netizens after the COVID-19 pandemic, which is seen as a resistance to the intense competitiveness of the education system and labour market in China. These lying-flatters escape from structured lifestyles determined by social classes, working positions and education into “anti-structure” (Cova et al., 2018), where the stress of conformist daily lives is elevated. Such anti-structure may either be quitting jobs to live with monks in the mountains, staying unemployed and depending on parents, or selling handmade items while

roaming the country (Brossard, 2022). The Chinese eco-queer women concerned in this paper also appear to have escaped to anti-structure, though their motivations await to be explored.

The Role of Digital Platforms in China's Queer Feminism

Under the platform marketing logic, digital platforms have emerged as transformative tools in facilitating and amplifying queer feminist social movements in China. The genesis of Chinese queer feminism can be traced to the digital sphere, particularly around 2015, coinciding with the rise of “made-in-China feminism (Zhao, 2020)”. These feminist movements, characterised by “entrepreneurial” and “non-cooperative” strands, actively challenge the hetero-patriarchal structures of the party-state, critique the commercialisation of familial and marital institutions, and oppose entrenched (neo-)Confucian values (Zhao, 2020). Within this context, digital platforms enable norm-defying gender expressions and relationships that often “disidentify” from traditional LGBTQ+ identities and politics, creating distinctly Chinese expressions of feminist and cosmopolitan agency. This dynamic is evidenced in the emergence of queer media as a form of “soft activism” (Ding, 2024). Here, platforms do not merely act as a marketing tool from top to down but foster the grassroots queer feminism social movement in China.

Specifically, platforms such as Douyin (Chinese TikTok) and Weibo have been instrumental in providing unique spaces for identity expression and activism. Ai and Song (2024) highlight how Douyin's ambiguous regulatory environment allows users to experiment with queer identities through performative acts and “traffic chasing,” a strategy that underscores the tension between state censorship and creative self-expression. These platforms, thus, serve as counter-public spaces where marginalised voices can foster inclusive discourses and confront issues like online gender-based violence and LGBTQ+ exclusion (Zeng and Engebretsen, 2024). In addition to challenging patriarchal norms, digital feminism

critiques the intersection of capitalism and state-imposed gender expectations. Wang and Chang (2024) document how digital feminists in China resist the commodification of familial and marital institutions, although this resistance sometimes alienates more conservative stakeholders, such as mothers and younger girls.

Methodology

Aligned with the platformisation of consumer culture (Caliandro et al., 2024), we adopt a multi-method approach, including podcast review, and online data collection to investigate community- and individual-generated content on various online platforms that document these eco-queer women's experiences of eco-living. The content includes publicly accessible social media posts, podcast series, and blogs. We also plan to utilise art forms (Downey and Rojas-Gaviria, 2024) (e.g., collaborating with illustrative artists) as a vivid yet ethical approach to present our findings, portraying eco-queer-female consumers' heterotopia experiences with the seemingly utopian impression of rural, communal living.

Conclusion

This paper situates intersectionality as a counter-hegemonic framework for understanding how queer feminist communities in China leverage digital platforms to resist oppression. By analysing the interplay of gender, sexuality and resistance, it illuminates the multifaceted strategies the female queer communities employ to challenge patriarchal and capitalist structures. Digital platforms, thus, not only act as tools for activism but also as spaces for reimagining agency and solidarity in a uniquely Chinese socio-political context.

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