

# ***“I don’t discriminate but.....”: Legitimation Strategies of Covert Online Hate Speech against Homosexuality in China***

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**Keywords:** Homophobia; legitimation; hate speech; discourse

**Abstract:** Internet provides an enormous space for free speech, especially for hate speech. Recent years have witnessed the increasing discriminating speech against homosexuality, which sounds righteous with the strategies of talk in China because the major opinion in online space is homophobia, which is not benefit for the equal rights and living circumstances for homosexuality. Therefore, it’s necessary to probe into how these covert hate speeches are legitimized and how they create a more profound homophobic atmosphere. In this study, comments, which are hate speech to homosexuality, under 5 videos on Bilibili are collected, classified with the assistance of corpus. Then, the results are analyzed under the legitimation strategies, proposed by Van Leeuvan. Finally, it showed that three strategies are used and the incitement of covert hate speech are more powerful than overt hate speech. The study could provide a discursive angle for the problems of civil rights and equal social status of gay community.

## **1. Introduction**

The official account of the United Nation on Bilibili, a Chinese version of Youtube, posted a video about giving the equal civil rights to hay community on may 19th 2023, which is also known as the International Day against Homophobia. The video for quality with over 500 thousand views has more than 16 thousand comments, most of which, ironically, are supportive of homophobia and critical of homosexuality and UN.

It’s not a single case. In fact, on China’s Internet, the hate speech on homosexuality outnumbered the voice for gay community. The pattern mostly used to legitimize their discrimination is that “I don’t discriminate but don’t support, neither. Just hide in the dark and no one would judge you. It’s such a shame and to expose yourself under the sun.” Seemingly, this inhumane idea has spread swiftly and been accepted by most of people. This kind of covert discourse for discrimination are way more powerful then the type with direct cursing words because it can incite people’s negative emotion and achieve mental manipulation. Therefore, this study will delve into the strategies of legitimation of covert hate speech on homosexuality and the power of incitement.

This paper has 5 sections. In the following section, the literature review on hate speech will be presented. Then the strategies of legitimation and the design of the study will be introduced. The fourth section will demonstrate the results and then, the power of incitement, quantified by numbers

and proportion of negative sub-comments, and the fallacy of the discourse proceed. Last, it's the conclusion and some shortcomings of the paper.

## 2. Hate Speech

The term “hate speech” was created by American legal scholars in the late 1980s for the purpose of tackling and addressing domestically problematic racism at the lexical level. Public discourse used to be the main corpus of hate speech based on the fact that the Internet has not prevailed yet. In other words, the advent of social media drew scholars' attention on lexical cyber-hate. The underlying rationales behind the changed impetus are the phenomenon that cyberspace triggered a massive upsurge of hate speech due to its distinctive qualities, which are anonymity, community, invisibility and instantaneousness, of online hate speech, compared to offline type, and its detrimental impact that no society and country could immune from it. Those studies are related to broad categories, ranging from racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, bigotry against the disabled, political hatred, rumor mongering, promotion of terrorism, cyber bullying, harassment, stalking, and the sale to promotion of online products. Such a large number of societal aspects embeds hate speech that continuously massive harm have already been done to the objects of hate speech. What's even worse is that the forms and platforms of hate speech are so various nowadays with the leaps and bounds of technology. For example, law articles, random talk in daily life, public speech, cyber comments and etc. Accordingly, the increasing scholars throw lights on detecting and itemizing hate speech. Jonathan Culpeper<sup>[1]</sup> made a comparison between impoliteness and hatred for revealing the mislabelization of hate speech and other offensive kinds through the lens of metapragmatics. Teresa Marques<sup>[2]</sup> also adopted the view of pragmatics and categorizes different methods of lexical legitimation of hate speech Katharine Gelber<sup>[3]</sup> developed a systemic discrimination approach to defining a narrowly construed category of ‘hate speech’, as speech that harms to a sufficient degree to warrant government regulation.

The harm of hate speech in public is formidable. However, the advent of internet not only enable netizens the unfair right of free speech without ant restriction due to anonymity provided by many social media platforms or other websites, which means that individuals can use hate speech online with little fear of offline consequences<sup>[4]</sup>, but also accelerate the spreading of those toxic discourse. Websites, spontaneously, become the major resources of hate speech in modern times. The rationals underlying the phenomenon rely on more anonymity than community, invisibility and instantaneousness<sup>[5]</sup>. The harm, aligned with deeper social problems, is multiplied with the use of online communication (ibid). Chekol et al<sup>[6]</sup> employed the quantitative method to demonstrate the influence of hate speech in the walk of Ethiopian political reform by analyzing its nature and severity. Soudeh Ghaffari<sup>[7]</sup> endeavored to analyze the hate speech targeting on female Instagram celebrities to expose online misogyny and sexism via a case study of Lena Dunham, who portrayed herself. Vahid Parvaresh<sup>[8]</sup> focused on covertly communicated hate speech on Afghan immigrants in Iran. . In this respect, the study indicates how a number of recurring discursive patterns provide the foundation on which covert ways of expressing hate are based with the assistance of corpus.

Nevertheless, despite much scholars' attention on it, the international consensus that there's no agreement on the conceptualization of hate speech seems to be accepted. Baider<sup>[9]</sup> concluded this view after the comparison among various previous scholars' definitions and legal understandings and claimed that it defied standardized definitions. Spontaneously, seeking an united understanding of hate speech is substituted by exhumed its essence and cores. Here, Baider's conclusion through the lens of speech acts is taken into consideration. He found that hate speech's stance, which is equal to illocutionary act in speech is negative, and the influence, which is perlocutionary act, is hurting the target and incitement for a larger scale of bullying. The locutionary act, which is the discourse itself,

has two types and they directly forms the type of hate speech. The discourse with direct assulting words is overt hate speech and the one with indirect is known as covert hate speech. He also pointed out that there is also the possibility that seemingly overt hate speech at the locutionary level may not be a hate speech act at the illocutionary level (the intention level), nor at the perlocutionary level (the reception level), as the speech act's meaning depends on contextual and societal parameters. For example, in some communities of practice, the words nigger and bitch do not always convey an insult or offense. It's important to discern the context and the illocutionary act then.

China's Internet censorship with tight reign on words<sup>[10]</sup> decided that only covert hate speech could be published. Therefore, we need to covert hate speech is the main source of corpus.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Theoretic Framework

According to Berger and Luckman<sup>[11]</sup>, legitimation has been defined as follows: Legitimation provides the “explanations and justifications of the salient elements of the institutional tradition. It explains the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its meanings and justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives”.

In this study, Van Leeuwen's legitimation strategies<sup>[12]</sup> and his postulated grammar of legitimation based on Halliday's systematic functional grammar is taken into consideration. His strategies encompass four broad categories and each of these categories also has its subtypes: authorization (personal, expert, role model, impersonal, tradition, conformity); moral evaluation (analogies, evaluation); rationalization (instrumental rationality by means, goal, effect, and theoretical rationality by definition, explanation, predictions)

Authorization involves gaining legitimation of one's action from authoritative individuals, thus answering the question “Why should we do this?” with “because I say so”.

Moral evaluation is grounded in moral values and only stated implicitly or hinted at. What is or is not moral depends on “our common-sense cultural knowledge”

Rationalization is legitimation through instrumental purposes which explains “why social practices exist” and “why they take the form they do”. What's more, according to Van Leeuwan, there are two kinds of rationalization, which are means-oriented rationality and goal-oriented rationality. The formal one is based on the proposer's basic and concrete actions whereas the latter one is more relevant to agent's purposes and minds.

#### 3.2 Data

The comments under 5 videos about homosexuality or homophobia with over 100000 views and 1000 comments are collected. Then, the covert hate speech against homosexuality or supporting homophobia with strategies of legitimation are selected, with a total number of 935, input into corpus and categorized in according to the strategies. After classification, the number and proportion of sub-comments under the selected will be calculated to test it's incitement, with the comparison of the subcomments under other type of discourse, like overt hate speech and supporting sentences.

In next part, all example comments will be showed as their English version for a better revelation.

### 4. Three Legitimation Strategies Used in Comments about Homophobia

In this part, different strategies of legitimation in discourse to realize the justification of homophobic discrimination will be discussed. The seemingly correct logic of the comments are basically related to three categories: authorization's approval, immoral behavior with existing damage

and potential damage in society. Those logical loopholes will be pointed out during the discussion.

#### 4.1 Authorization

As is mentioned above, the legitimation of authorization depends on public figures with tremendous social impact or impeccable professional expertise and official groups such as government, institutions or world-level organizations. The following comments justify their homophobia via quoting from some powerful persons and clarifying China's government attitudes and policies to gays.

(1) Eliminating all the differences solves the diversity doomed, as Merkel says.

This comment is quoted from former German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose assertion is to eliminate all the diversities and keep the monologue pace, that most of people stand for, of society so that all the unnecessary problems could be fixed. Whatever it's a national policy or a politician's statements, the entitled power of the authorizers by people allows those far-right people to imply that discrimination is officially certificated. Readers', who are not familiar with the whole situation, trust to those authorizations will convince them to accept those wrong conceptions, which will triggered a larger scale of homophobia.

#### 4.2 Moral evaluation

Moral evaluation is grounded at society-stipulated morality. The norms regulating our social practices are the one of the principles to judge. Violation of morality would be condemned by others, even punished if the behave or phenomenon cross the line. In the following extracts, the major strategy to inciting people's distaste to homosexuality is classifying gay itself as sin and propagation of equality as crime based on the moral rules made by themselves.

Many people have no self-knowledge. Those who say no, support, or object are clear enough: you keep yourself the same secret, no one cares about your sexuality, and treat you as a normal person. You're really going to tell yourself. Don't blame everyone for isolating you.

This suggests that it's never people's fault to criticize those who get out the closet, implying that being a gay can solely be a secret due to it's a shame.

The comment above just defines homosexuality as amoral. The next extracts evaluate gay man as negative social role in terms of behavior and their malign impact.

Gay people are the main communicators of AIDS, they are not clean, why should we respect them.

The comment judged homosexuality in respect of the influence in children, spreading AIDZ and surrogacy. Their presupposition that ascribe some common but vicious circumstances in society to gay man will reinforce people's stereotype. Hence, the people will be convinced that each one of the group is scourge to the development of the world. The image of slut is absolutely a stereotype to gay men since part of this group with exceeded hormone is always the center of people's focus. That is to say, judging all the members in this group by the features that some show is wrong, not to mention the double standard underlying this problem that heterosexual people have countless betrayal in marriage is working. Therefore, it's a wrong accusation.

Some expressed their disapproval attitudes by sharing their personal experience.

If there are more normal people than gays in our country, I don't think so many people will discriminate against them. You will never know what they can do.

Apart from the discourse with seemingly righteous tone, some comments wield analogy to unfold sarcasm to gay, constructing a hilarious vibe in the whole intensified atmosphere.

CAI Xukun's brainless fan said that you can like my idol, you can also be a pure passers-by, but you can't hate him. Hate means craziness, for a time I do not know who discriminates against who

It is combined with Cai Xukun, a superstar and musician with pretty face who is always mocked

online due to his poor musical talent. His insane fans, who stand for him everywhere, are so annoying. Therefore, they are also the target being laughed at. Here, Cai Xunkun is a metaphorical representation of homosexuality and those supporting equality are thought of as crazy fans. The link between Cai Xukun and homosexuality is engraved in people's minds so they would hate gay.

### 4.3 Rationalization

In the corpus, goal-oriented rationality is solely found and there's no existence of means-oriented one.

Homo is the product of the political correctness of Europe and the United States. What is the problem? We should resolutely resist homosexuality and let political correctness stay away from us.

It expressed that their homophobia is reasonable and just in order to resist all children turning into gay and the influence of western political right since they define homosexuality as a mental means of Capitalism to destruct the development of China. In other words, they are convinced that they do it for justice and it's for nation's best. Their stance will evoke people's patriotism and readers will posit homosexuality on the opposition of nation's benefit.

### 5. Conclusion

This study discussed the discursive legitimation of covert hate speech on homosexuality in China with the assistance of corpus. Four strategies are presented here and the fallacy of the comments also has been indicated. One of its functions, which is incitement, are quantified and visualized by concrete numbers and statistics of sub-comments under those comments to identify the power of incitement. The fallacy underlying the comments are presented.

What is worth to notice is that despite the wrong logic, a large of homophobic discourses are so inciting that more comments on agreement has followed. Each covert hate speech has 3.45 sub-comments on average, higher than overt hate speech with 1.37 sub-comments and other types of discourse with 0.68 sub-comments. What's more, 2.14 out of 3.45 sub-comments are supportive of homophobia and law regulation. The type of agreement sender can be categorized into two: the one with homophobia finding their base and fortress, and the other being neutral with informational gap just being brain washed. The latter one, clearly, is incited by the usage of strategies of legitimation so they would follow the idea and enlarger the field of anti-homosexuality. Therefore, the logic loopholes in those comments with incitement are needed to be pointed out to prove that all the covert hate speech on homosexuality are unreasonable.

During the classification of corpus, the feature that one comment may have two or more strategies of legitimation has not been counted and included here due to the lack of time. The further study may have a more comprehensive explanation on the combo or combination of strategies.

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