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The Cases of Burner Accounts on Weibo: Do Burner Accounts Really Hide Your True Identity?

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Abstract: A burner account refers to “an often-temporary social media account that is created for the purpose of remaining anonymous”. On the one hand, Burner account users hide their private information, and on the other hand, they carry out bold self-disclosure in many aspects such as emotions and interests. Such user behavior research may be of great significance for us to understand the emotions and interests suppressed by acquaintances in the relationship society. Burner accounts are likely to continue to be a typical aspect of online communication for the foreseeable future as social media sites continue to struggle with the trade-offs between transparency and privacy. Meanwhile, the use of burner accounts also highlights the potential risks in the context of government supervision.

Keywords: Burner Accounts; Private Information; Weibo.

1. Introduction

Having multiple accounts on the same platform seems to have become the norm in people's Internet lives today. According to a survey conducted by Uscasinos in 2022, one in three people in the United States have at least one burner account on social media in addition to their real one. Most of them (41%) admit they use burner accounts to avoid being judged when they share their opinions on the Internet. In China, Weibo is one of the most widely used social media platform. Monthly active users reach the number of 582 million in March 2022. As with any social media platform, Weibo provides a platform for users to express their opinions and engage in discussions, users want to use burner accounts to protect their privacy and avoid being judged for their views. Hui Jia mentioned that "the truth of people nowadays is hidden in the ‘burner accounts’". Users can freely express the side of themselves that doesn't align with their normal social appearances in a place where they thought is private enough. However, Weibo's identity rules are at odds with how people actually want to use the platform. Although Weibo pushes for transparency by limiting anonymity, users continue to seek ways around these restrictions to craft different versions of themselves, which is the use of burner accounts. While some users employ burner accounts solely to explore alternate identities anonymously, others use them as a means of selective self- presentation to different audiences. Weibo's identity rules, which require real-name registration for users, create a conflict between transparency and privacy that has led many users to turn to burner accounts as a way to express themselves more freely. In 2011, Beijing Microblog Development Management Regulations was carried out. It says “Any organization or individual registered micro-blog account, who produces, copies, publishes and disseminates information content, shall use real identity information, shall not be false, fraudulent resident identity information, business registration information, organization code information for registration” (Beijing Microblog Development). Thus, Weibo's identity rules require users to provide their real names and phone numbers when registering for an account. This push for transparency is intended to reduce the spread of false information and promote a more civil online community. However, it also means that users who want to express opinions that may be unpopular or controversial are at risk of being identified and facing potential consequences in their personal and professional lives. Weibo's efforts to enforce real-name registration have led some users to create burner accounts as a way to maintain their privacy and express themselves more freely.

2. Burner Accounts on Weibo

Despite Weibo's efforts to promote a transparent online environment through real- name registration, many users find ways to create anonymous burner account. Burner accounts on Weibo take many forms based on users' different motivations and needs for anonymity. At a basic level, a burner account refers to “an often temporary social media account that is created for the purpose of remaining anonymous” (“burner account"). Users use anonymously or under an alias in order to express opinions freely without being associated with one's main identity. Users create burner accounts to protect some aspect of their privacy while still participating in the online community. On Weibo, burner account is usually called by “Xiaohao (小号)”, literally translated as “small account”. The term “small account” is relative to the term “big account”, as well as “Dahao (大号)” or main account. The main account is the one that is registered with the real name.

Burner accounts on Weibo come in many forms, depending on users' motives for anonymity and selective self-presentation. The following cases illustrate how burner accounts enable different types of expression and communication and how Weibo.

2.1. Csae Sutdy 1

The first case will be discussed is the burner account of Shuxin Yu, a Chinese singer and actress. She had her burner account when she just started her career. Unlike those who are trying hard to hide their identities, Shuxin Yu used the photo of herself as the portfolio photo. And the name of her burner account is “Yu Tou Xing Xing Esther (鱼头星星 Esther)”, which also indicates that this account belongs to her since “Yu

(鱼)" is her last name and "Esther" is her English name.

It was no surprise that this burner account was discovered by netizens and fans. This burner account stopped updating in July 2020 and set a permission of her posts that is only visible for half a year. According to the screenshots and the archive that are documented by her fans, this burner account was used to to chat and interact with fans. Unlike the well-edited copywriting and perfectly exquisite photos posted on the main account, the contents of the burner account were more nature and approachable. Also, when Shuxin Yu was involved in public opinion, she would also respond in her burner account with a more personal tone rather than formally responded in the main account.

However, the public attitudes toward the burner account of Shuxin Yu are polarized. Some people think that it's a good way to learn about celebrities' lives and see the morereal side of them. The existing of celebrities' burner accounts make them feel like there is no big difference between them and celebrities. While other think that it's weird that Shuxin Yu wants a private account but she makes it public at the same time. They think Shuxin Yu is just hyping.

2.2. Csae Sutdy 2

The second case is the burner account of an ordinary people. I interviewed an active Weibo user who use Weibo everyday and has two burner accounts except the main account. With her permission, I compared the contents of the burner accounts and the main account.

Her first burner account only focuses on fandom contents. And the users interacted with this account were also from the same fandom group. The second burner account focuses more on the personal expressions. Lots of news, including political events, were reposted with her comments. Emotional venting is also a very important part, most of which are negative emotions. I use the words, such as "bad", "annoying", "stupid" and "damn", to distinguish bad emotions. On the contrary, the contents on the main account are mostly about positive self presentation. As the basic sign of the user's "existence", the account is a part of personal online impression management, shaping its social influence and interaction network (Jin 158). She said that she had tried her best to hide her real identities in burner accounts, including not showing any personal feature, not posting pictures and using totally random username. She said the reason why she wanted these burner accounts is that she wanted to express her real feelings without the worry about being judged and to distinguish her different social circles.

These two examples illustrate two different ways of people using burner accounts on Weibo. Shuxin Yu's burner account shows how celebrities use anonymity to interact more casually with fans while also maintaining some semblance of privacy. Though her identity was eventually discovered, her burner account allowed her to communicate in a more personal and less formal manner that connected her to fans. In contrast, the anonymous burner accounts of the ordinary Weibo user reveal a desire for complete separation between identities to freely express controversial or negative views without judgment. Her burner accounts serve distinct social circles and allow her to vent emotions she deems inappropriate for her main identity. While Shuxin Yu leveraged partial anonymity for personal branding, the ordinary user pursued complete anonymity to separate her different interests and emotions from her real-life identity. Both cases demonstrate how burner accounts on Weibo enable users to control the self-presentation and privacy aligned with their needs, circumventing Weibo's identity rules that privilege transparency over privacy.

Generally speaking, the establishment of burner accounts is based on relatively strong personal factors, and its users also tend to avoid too many social connections (Xie and Kang 405). For celebrities like Shuxin Yu, her fans regard stopping updating on her burner account as the cost of fame. She stopped updating because more and more people who were not her fans started following her. Similarly, although Weibo is easier to achieve large-scale dissemination than WeChat Moment, for ordinary users, the social network in Weibo still highly overlaps with the social network in real life, which can be said as the virtualization of offline social network. The private sphere of Weibo gradually public, which leads the users to explore new private "territory". Thus, more and more burner accounts are created. The presentation of self-image depends on the clues of interpersonal context and situational context. People will adopt different impression management strategies according to different communication objects and social environments (Marwick and boyd 122). On Zhihu, a Chinese version of Quora, there is a question asking why people like to have burner accounts. One answer is: "

A Weibo without friends Is a person's world
In this world, people become wild horses
Throwing lonely red into the lonely river All darkness is exposed to the sunny hillside The roses here no longer bloom quietly
All flowers and plants are vibrant You indulge in joy, laugh wildly Reflect quietly, persist silently
A stranger accidentally breaks in You open your eyes, indifferent And lazily say
'Bello, welcome to my world.'"

From this answer, it's not hard to tell people's desire to express themselves freely. And when close friends, family members, classmates, and even strangers who were originally divided into distant and close relatives become "fans" without distinction, the clues of the interpersonal context are blurred. In this case, users are often tired of making too many trade-offs and coordination, so they simply divide the burner account and the main account.

In China's context, the government's surveillance and censorship practices have created a sense of limited privacy for its citizens. This explains why the interviewee specifically would like to make comments about political issues on the burner account. However, it also underscores the potential risks and consequences that users may face for expressing dissenting views, even under the guise of anonymity. While burner accounts offer a way for users to protect their privacy and express themselves more freely, they may not be entirely foolproof in the face of government surveillance and monitoring.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the contradiction between online transparency and privacy in social media is best illustrated by the use of burner accounts on Weibo. Weibo's real-name registration policy restricts users' freedom of expression and exposes them to potential repercussions in their personal and professional lives, even while it attempts to foster a more polite and trustworthy online community. Burner accounts give users the freedom to experiment with different personas,

express divisive or unfavourable opinions without fear of repercussion, and manage their privacy settings according to their needs. Burner accounts provide a mechanism for users to traverse the complicated social dynamics of online communication, whether for personal branding or total anonymity. Weibo users may be looking for novel ways to safeguard their privacy and express themselves more freely in the wake of escalating online scrutiny and surveillance, as suggested by the rise of burner accounts on the platform. Burner accounts are likely to continue to be a typical aspect of online communication for the foreseeable future as social media sites continue to struggle with the trade-offs between transparency and privacy. However, the use of burner accounts also highlights the potential risks and consequences that users may face for expressing dissenting views, even under the guise of anonymity, in a context were government surveillance and censorship practices limit privacy.

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