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Tactics of Disconnection: How Netizens Navigate China's Censorship System

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Abstract

This article explores the complex, multi-layered mechanisms of internet censorship in China, emphasizing its role as both a tool of control over public engagement and a mechanism for elites to disconnect themselves from spaces of public scrutiny, and avoid potential threats such as doxxing by bottom-up populist online movements. Through in-depth interviews with social media users, this study investigates how individuals perceive, assess, and navigate the boundaries of internet censorship, focusing on their awareness of censorship practices, the assessment of sensitive content, and the tactics they employ to circumvent restrictions. We further examine how a sophisticated censorship mechanism—comprising self-censorship, platform censorship, and physical enforcement—works to disconnect netizens from grassroots collective actions. The findings reveal that internet censorship in China not only regulates online populist activism but also serves as a protective shield for elites, allowing them to curate a controlled digital space that suppresses critical discourse. By highlighting the ways in which both ordinary users and elites navigate the challenges of digital engagement in this heavily regulated environment, this study provides theoretical insights into the practice of disconnectivity as an elite privilege. It enhances our understanding of the interplay between connectivity, censorship, and disconnectivity in shaping the digital landscape and its implications for social change and political engagement in China and beyond.

Keywords

activism; China; disconnectivity; internet censorship; populism

1. Introduction

Digitalization has fundamentally transformed collective mobilization and collective action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Liu, 2020), which is exemplified by the emergence of Chinese online and bottom-up populism (He et al., 2023b; Zhang & Schroeder, 2024). In Chinese online bottom-up populism, internet users, covered by the semi-anonymous character of the internet and digital platforms, form a connective and collective body (netizens) to express concerns against elites who are perceived as rich, powerful, and morally corrupt. Digital platforms serve as arenas for the amplification of people's voices, which allow them to orchestrate collective activities against perceived corruption, societal inequities, and political injustices in ways that would not be possible offline (He et al., 2023a). However, these digital forms of populist activities have not gone unnoticed by state actors. In response to online and grassroots connective action, state apparatuses and media companies deploy a technologically advanced censorship mechanism that filters, deletes, and curates content (Roberts, 2018), managing "what is or is not visible in Chinese information and communication networks" (Schneider, 2023, p. 1). As a form of "communication governance" (Schneider, 2023, p. 2), censorship in China attempts to disconnect expressions of grassroots dissent to preserve social harmony and political stability.

Censorship as a top-down disconnecting mechanism has been widely discussed (King et al., 2013; Roberts, 2018; Schneider, 2023). However, there is little research on how citizens experience internet censorship and respond to it, particularly in the context of China. We address this gap by studying how citizens perceive the omnipresence of censorship, and how they develop tactics of disconnection to avoid being censored and stay under the government's radar (de Certeau, 1984). Building on in-depth interviews with Chinese citizens ($N = 22$), our research shows how netizens perceive and assess the risks of internet censorship, and how they develop tactics to circumvent it. We further investigate how elites (often the targets of bottom-up populist protests) use these mechanisms to shield or disconnect themselves from online threats, including public doxxing and digital surveillance, thereby safeguarding their autonomy within a highly surveilled and regulated information landscape. We argue that a thorough exploration of dynamic practices of (dis)connectivity and censorship is vital for understanding the lived experience of so-called netizens, defined as engaged internet users in China who operate at a collective, grassroots level.

Situated within the broader context of online bottom-up populism, connective action, and censorship in China (He et al., 2023b), we argue that sophisticated censorship mechanisms, including self-censorship, platform control, and physical enforcement, collectively disconnect netizens from grassroots digital activism in China. Our research offers both empirical insights and theoretical advancements in the study of the dynamic interplay between (dis)connectivity and internet censorship in China.

2. Online Bottom-Up Populism and Online Activism in China

Populism is a concept plagued by conceptual diversity (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017). Scholars have grappled with its various dimensions, describing a critique of established power structures manifesting itself in a binary appeal to "the pure people" against "the corrupt elite" (Canovan, 1999; Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), with a specific rhetorical style (Laclau, 2005) across both left-wing and right-wing orientations (Rama & Santana, 2020). This has resulted in multiple frameworks for understanding populism, including, but not limited to, populism as ideology (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017), strategy (Weyland, 2001), discourse (Laclau,

2005), political style (Moffitt, 2016), and social movement (Aslanidis, 2018). This has led some to describe populism as having a chameleonic nature, able to adapt and change its character in different settings (Taggart, 2000). It spans a wide range of political, social, and economic landscapes, resonating within diverse local contexts as a people-centered response to specific grievances (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017; Taggart, 2000). In democratic contexts, populist parties and populist leaders mostly appeal in the name of "the people" against elites and established systems which are described as no longer representing the general will of the people. To account for this conceptual diversity and ambiguity, this study works with a minimalist definition, proposing populism as "an appeal to 'the people' " against corrupt elites or "the established structure of power" (Canovan, 1999, p. 2).

While a top-down understanding of populism is most prevalent, global grassroots movements such as the global Occupy Movements have also embraced populism. Rather than being orchestrated by hierarchical structures or charismatic leaders, these movements apply a collective, bottom-up populist framework (Aslanidis, 2018). The Occupy slogan, "We are the 99%," for example, strongly echoes the central node of a populist "the people versus the elite" rhetoric. This is also the orientation of populism in China, which can be defined as bottom-up and online (He et al., 2021). In the context of Chinese online and bottom-up populism, netizens align themselves with "the people" and utilize digital platforms to voice their grievances against elites and established power structures they perceive as failing to represent the public's interests. Netizens are a specific category of citizens, defined as digitally engaged individuals who use the internet as a platform to express collective dissatisfaction, critique power structures, and appeal for change (He et al., 2021; Yang, 2009). These individuals are often semi-anonymous, leveraging the relative protection of the digital space to challenge perceived corruption and societal injustices without facing the immediate consequences that physical protests or offline activism might provoke. "The elite," on the other hand, is defined as those who hold political, social, or economic power in China. In the context of online populism, elites encompass government officials, influential public figures, and those at the top of the social hierarchy. Due to their elevated status, they are often perceived as corrupt or disconnected from the general populace (He et al., 2023a). These elites become targets of netizens' protests when they are viewed as benefiting from the established systems while ignoring or suppressing the will of the people.

Bottom-up populism relies on the self-motivated collaboration of individuals united by common grievances or aspirations. Decentralized, online platforms afford this collaboration, facilitating the rapid spread of narratives that critique elites and established power by highlighting issues of corruption, inequality, immorality, and injustice. Under these collective frames, dispersed individuals are rallied, fostering a sense of collective agency among netizens, who see online platforms not only as providing a loudspeaker to aggregate individual and marginalized voices, but also as an emotional resonator (Yang, 2009). This is particularly the case for emotions of sympathy, playfulness (Yang, 2009), and anger (Xie, 2012).

Despite digital platforms' affordances for expression, online and bottom-up populist protests inevitably encounter the formidable barrier of internet censorship in China. Such confrontations are not incidental but a predictable consequence of the disruptive potential that these connective protests hold within Chinese society. In their efforts to maintain control, social harmony, and national security, central and local governments often view the unfettered flow of information and online collective action as threats that need to be mitigated (Miao et al., 2021). This leads to the implementation of various censorship mechanisms aimed at monitoring, controlling, and blocking digital activities associated with bottom-up populist

movements. The question, then, is, when confronted with strict internet censorship, what tactics do netizens employ to maintain connection and ensure the visibility of information related to populist protests?

3. Censorship Techniques and Proactive Discourse

China has developed a complex mechanism of internet censorship and internet governance (Han, 2015; King et al., 2013; Schneider, 2023). According to Miao et al. (2021), China has issued 129 internet policies from 1994 to 2008. This number increased to 229 from 2009 to 2017. Roberts (2018) argues that internet censorship, as an information and communication management strategy, constitutes three mechanisms: policy, social norms, and technical censoring. At the policy level, governments and regulators formulate media policies or legislative frameworks to discipline the practices of media companies and internet users. Social norms represent an informal but powerful form of regulation that complements and extends beyond policy mechanisms of control. By leveraging the weight of social expectations, they influence individuals to self-regulate their information consumption, serving as an effective tool for maintaining conformity and suppressing dissent within societies. Technical censoring describes an array of techniques employed to regulate and control the access, publication, and exchange of information on the internet.

Between 2009 and 2017, China saw a remarkable increase in the scope and scale of censorship technologies. This enabled the government to extend its surveillance and control mechanisms across virtually all digital platforms. This expansion covered a wide array of online spaces, from social media platforms like WeChat and Weibo to live streaming services, online meeting platforms, facial recognition software, and short video applications such as Douyin. The technical development of internet censorship can be broadly divided into three stages. The first stage involved the building-up of a Great Firewall from 1998 to 2008. This serves as a digital panopticon (Crandall et al., 2007), automatically blocking, filtering, and censoring content deemed unacceptable (Clayton et al., 2006; Xu et al., 2011). For instance, Weibo (the Chinese version of Twitter/X) blocks content that contains sensitive keywords (Ng, 2013). However, the effectiveness of automated censorship was constrained by its inability to adapt to a constantly evolving set of approaches to circumvent censorship. This led to the development of a second stage of censorship, a hybrid model integrating both automated and manual censoring in which human reviewers who can understand sarcasm, satire, and the shifting meanings of words, images, and videos reinforce keyword censorship (Ng, 2013). Finally, in the third stage, the government adopted a more proactive internet censorship mechanism. Rather than deleting or blocking anti-elite and anti-establishment posts, thousands of "commentators," also referred to as "Little Pink" (K. Fang & Repnikova, 2018) and "Fifty-Cent Army" (Han, 2015), were hired to influence or manipulate online public discourse by publishing pro-government comments on digital platforms (Sullivan, 2014).

Internet censorship in China reflects the combination of two dominant models of control: repression and production (Chen, 2022). The repression model captures active and deliberate efforts by authorities to suppress certain forms of speech that are perceived as undesirable or threatening to prescribed social norms (Freshwater, 2004). The production model, drawing on Foucault (1976, 1995) and Bourdieu (1991), understands "censorship as forms of discourse regulation that are omnipresent" (J. Fang, 2024, p. 5). Also referred to as "new censorship theory" (Müller, 2004), central to this theory is *wenming* discourse (Yang, 2018), meaning both "civilization" and "civility." While *wenming* (as civilization) operates "as an ideological discourse of legitimation," *wenming* (as civility) functions "as a strategic technology for internet governance" (Yang, 2018, p. 1945).

The integration of the repression and production models demonstrates a shift in the government's approach to censorship from exclusively using repressive measures like content blocking, or harassing dissenting voices, to efforts at shaping public discourse. Together, they allow authorities to implement both proactive and preventive strategies that limit critical expressions while actively encouraging the generation of online content that promotes "positive energy" and supports and advances government policies (Yang, 2018). Repression and production models have primarily been studied from the perspective of government authorities' censorship techniques (Ng, 2013) and strategies (Qin et al., 2017), the effect on online activism (Lee, 2016; Roberts, 2018), or how central and local governments reinforce power structures through "selective" (King et al., 2013) online surveillance (Schlæger & Jiang, 2014). Current literature on internet censorship highlights its top-down implementation, exploring how the technological development of censorship allows authorities to implement nuanced control over digital spaces. However, less research has explored how conscious individuals are of censorship, how they assess the risk of internet censorship, and their circumvention tactics. This study addresses this gap by exploring netizens' personal experiences with censorship.

4. Disconnectivity

Disconnectivity, as defined by Hesselberth (2018), refers to "the tendency toward voluntary psychic, socio-economic, and/or political withdrawal from mediated forms of connectivity" (p. 1995). Disconnection can either come as a response to experiences of internet censorship, or alternatively as a means of "shielding oneself from dissonant views" (Zhu et al., 2017, p. 113). Bozdag (2020) distinguishes between visible and invisible forms of disconnection. Visible forms include actions such as unfriending and blocking, which clearly articulate a desire to disconnect. In contrast, invisible forms such as muting, unfollowing, and ignoring allow individuals to disengage without fully severing ties or causing harm to the other party (Bozdag, 2020).

In their examination of intentional practices of disconnection, John and Gal (2018, p. 2971) conceptualize unfriending as "exercising sovereignty over one's personal public sphere while also acknowledging that everyone else has their own personal public sphere too." Their findings suggest that behaviors such as unfriending, unfollowing, and blocking are primarily concerned with disconnecting from affiliation and relationships, rather than content alone (p. 2984). John and Agbarya (2021) examine what triggers unfriending behaviors, positing that such actions are "sometimes about punching up and sometimes about stepping away" (p. 1063). Similarly, Zhu and Skoric (2022), in a study of the implications of unfriending from a political perspective, focus on its effects on political expression and information consumption after social movements. They argue that politically motivated unfriending is a strategy to distance oneself from contentious opinions in order to create a digital "safe place." This space is curated to protect those marginalized by "shielding them from words and acts perceived as threatening and by excluding disagreeing others" (p. 2673).

Previous studies have demonstrated disconnectivity as a mostly personal choice that influences the dynamics of digital interaction and community building. Research has shown how individuals voluntarily disconnect to create a safe space during periods of conflict. This leaves underexplored how elites, particularly in the context of online bottom-up populist protests, strategically leverage internet censorship as a tool to enforce disconnection. This dimension of elite-driven disconnectivity forces disengagement within populist protests while simultaneously allowing elites to retreat from potential scrutiny and public pressure. Addressing this gap,

this study investigates how social media users perceive internet censorship in China. By examining how social media users navigate internet censorship, we explore how elites use disconnection to insulate themselves from grassroots protests. This analysis considers perspectives from both those in power and those who cannot disconnect—such as individuals facing censorship, surveillance, and social media manipulation. In doing so, we shed light on how censorship not only suppresses public discourse but also serves as a privileged tool for elites seeking to disengage from critical online voices and digital collective action.

5. Methodology

China, a country with high internet penetration and a large number of internet users, is an interesting case to study the relationship between practices of connectivity, experiences of internet censorship, and perceptions of elites' disconnectivity. Chinese internet users became even more connected during the pandemic (Hou et al., 2020), when the internet became the principal conduit through which individuals could maintain connections with the external world in periods of isolation. However, this increased reliance on the internet and digital platforms inevitably intersected with China's censorship regime, triggering a cascade of surveillance and control actions aimed at mitigating potential threats to social harmony (Chang et al., 2022). Given the ubiquity of the censorship mechanism, these contexts offer a unique setting to examine the awareness, motivations, and strategies of netizens to engage online, balance the connection and disconnection, and avoid being censored. The following research questions guide this study:

1. How do Chinese netizens perceive and experience the mechanisms of internet censorship, and how do they assess the sensitivity of content within the context of their online activities?
2. What tactics do Chinese netizens employ to circumvent censorship?
3. How do netizens perceive elites' tactics of disconnecting themselves from public scrutiny?

To answer these questions, this study employs semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Kvale, 1996) with Chinese internet users inside and outside China. Semi-structured interviews allow this research to explore the complex perspectives, experiences, and tactics of individuals navigating internet censorship in China. Interviewees were asked about their daily social media use, behaviors of interaction with others, awareness of internet censorship, impacts of internet censorship on their behaviors, experiences of being censored, motivations and strategies of censorship circumvention, and opinions and expectations towards internet censorship. By using a semi-structured approach, follow-up questions were asked when needed to build clarity or further explanation, so as to gain an in-depth understanding of interviewees' awareness of internet censorship and their motivations and tactics to navigate internet censorship. Overall, this method facilitates a nuanced understanding of the subjective realities of participants, enabling the extraction of rich, detailed narratives that are essential for comprehending the multifaceted dynamics of censorship in China.

Interviewees fit within three distinct age groups (18–30, 31–55, and above 55), with individuals residing both within and outside China to gain a broad set of perspectives. We adopted a strategy that combines purposive and snowball sampling techniques that began with identifying initial respondents who met our predefined criteria of age groups by using a "friends-of-friends" measure to ensure analytical distance (Goodman, 2011). These participants facilitated connections to further potential respondents within their own networks. For the interviewees outside China, we asked whether their online behavior had changed compared to when they were in China, and whether they used different platforms when outside China.

The sample size of 22 participants aligns with the qualitative nature of this research and its aim of capturing in-depth personal experiences of internet users in China. The analysis emphasizes in-depth understanding of individual experiences, strategies, and behaviors rather than aiming for broad generalizations. This approach helps identify patterns in users' adoption of specific tactics, which could be tested in future studies, such as through surveys with a representative sample. Given the topic's sensitivity, snowball sampling within a qualitative framework is advantageous, allowing researchers to reach individuals who are aware of internet censorship but may be cautious about participating in research. To mitigate ethical concerns, interviewees are pseudonymized, referred to by I+Number in this study. An overview is presented in Table 1.

Interviews were conducted in Chinese in March and April 2024. They were transcribed verbatim to ensure a nuanced examination of responses, and then analyzed using inductive and deductive coding. The deductive analysis focused initially on determining participants' awareness of internet censorship. We first analyzed the diverse and innovative tactics deployed by users to potentially circumvent the censorship apparatus. Second, we coded for the methods individuals employed to voluntarily and intentionally disconnect or curate safe spaces within the digital environment, as described by Bozdag (2020) and Zhu and Skoric (2022). These strategies include actions like blocking unwanted contacts, modifying privacy settings, engaging in

Table 1. Demographic of interviewees.

Interviewee	Age	Current / highest level of education	Vocation
I1	18–30	Undergraduate	Student
I2	18–30	Undergraduate	Student
I3	18–30	Postgraduate	Student
I4	18–30	Undergraduate	Student
I5	18–30	Undergraduate	Student
I6	18–30	Undergraduate	Student
I7	18–30	Postgraduate	Student
I8	31–55	Undergraduate	Journalist
I9	31–55	Bachelor	Public servant (officer)
I10	18–30	Postgraduate	Student, outside China
I11	18–30	Postgraduate	Student, outside China; previously, publishing
I12	18–30	Postgraduate	Student, outside China
I13	31–55	Postgraduate	Content creator, studied outside China
I14	31–55	PhD candidate	Previously, media worker, outside China
I15	above 55	College	Partially retired, state-owned corporation
I16	above 55	Middle School	Individual business, member of Communist Party
I17	above 55	High School	Retired from state-owned company
I18	above 55	High School	Retired, public servant
I19	18–30	PhD Candidate	PhD candidate
I20	31–55	Master	Lawyer
I21	18–30	Bachelor	Internship at legal firm
I22	31–55	Master	Media and technology professional

self-censorship of speech, and the creation of anonymous "throwaway" accounts to preserve personal security and privacy. Based on this, inductive coding was done to uncover the motivations driving users to navigate censorship barriers, their subjective evaluations of internet censorship, and the broader implications of how the elite in China navigate the challenges posed by widespread digital mobilization and dissent.

While providing valuable insights into the dynamics of internet censorship and user strategies in China, our study also comes with limitations. First, the small sample size, combined with the overrepresentation of highly educated individuals, limits the broader applicability of the findings. Additionally, despite assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, respondents may withhold information or portray their actions in a more socially acceptable light (Bergen & Labonté, 2020), particularly participants who work for the government. Finally, the sensitive nature of discussing censorship and online behavior might lead to a further social desirability bias, where participants modify their responses to conform to perceived social norms or expectations at the heart of the research under study here (Bergen & Labonté, 2020). Despite these limitations, the findings offer valuable insights into how Chinese internet users perceive and navigate censorship, providing a foundation for future research that could involve a larger and more diverse sample.

6. Findings

6.1. The Awareness of Internet Censorship: A Multi-Layer Mechanism

Awareness of internet censorship within China varied across different age groups, further influenced by factors such as educational background, digital literacy, and individual experiences with the internet. Interviewees between the ages of 31 and 55 were particularly attuned to the nuances and evolution of internet censorship. Having lived through the internet's nascent stages to its current expansive and highly regulated state, "as a [child of the] 80s, I am acutely aware of the omnipresence of internet censorship" (I20). Experiences of either being censored or being "invited to drink tea" (an idiom for being asked to report to the police) were common among interviewees in this demographic, who witnessed firsthand the transition from an era of relatively unbridled digital exploration to one of stringent control and censorship. This left little room for dissent or deviation from official narratives, and "letting all people have only one voice, one doctrine, one behavior, one action" (I20).

Younger interviewees (aged 18–30), who became internet users when mechanisms of censorship were already in place, gained a clearer sense of censorship during their college years, because, due to "the heavy study loads in high school, the internet is not too close to our lives" (I7). For most of them, their awareness of internet censorship was first awakened by reminders from tutors in universities: "During the new student orientation, tutors always end with a caution to be mindful of what you post online, illustrated by cases where students have been punished for inappropriate comments on the internet" (I7). Meanwhile, many people are occasionally reminded by family members or friends to caution their posts. I19 mentions that relatives tell them to "not get involved in politics or social hotspots," "not post negativity," "be sunshine, positive," and "spread positive energy." Finally, interviewees over 55 years old reflected a relatively vague perception of internet censorship. Their understanding of censorship is both less defined, shaped more by official discourse of "spreading positive energy" (I17), and more familiar, shaped more by word-of-mouth than by personal experiences with digital controls.

While many interviewees are cognizant of the general presence of internet censorship, the intricate details and specific technologies underlying this extensive system remain largely unknown to the broader public. This is encapsulated in the response from one interviewee, who said, "although I am often censored, I have little understanding of its mechanics" (I21). Drawing on the literature above, and individuals' practices to navigate the regulation and control of the digital landscape, we found that internet censorship is perceived as a multi-layered mechanism of self-censorship by individuals, automated and manual censorship by platforms, and physical enforcement from the state.

6.1.1. Self-Censorship

Self-censorship refers to the act of an individual voluntarily evaluating, withholding, or moderating information that might be deemed sensitive or controversial by authorities and/or social norms (Bozdag, 2020). Interviewees described a pervasive sense of surveillance which, along with the broad scope of what might be considered sensitive, results in netizens being cautious. All interviewees reported practices of self-censorship before posting online. Although one outlier said they were not aware or knowledgeable about internet censorship, they believe in "following the party" and "spreading positive energy," a somewhat implicit form of self-censorship. By evaluating and balancing the desire for expression with the perceived risks, individuals who engage in self-censorship describe three choices. The first option, adopted by nearly all interviewees, is withdrawal from participation, and remaining silent (e.g., to read not speak). This was described not only as a strategic retreat based on the assessment of risk, but also a desperate choice because they realized that "it is useless to speak" (I11) because "the authorities do not care about the voices from the grassroots anymore" (I22). The second option is moderation, modifying content to render it less sensitive before posting. In doing so, respondents are able to navigate the thin line between self-expression and compliance with social or political norms, ensuring that their posts do not attract unwanted attention or provoke censure: "You never know when what you post might be brought to light," I3 said, highlighting the caution people have towards content moderation. The third option is candid expression, expressing one's thoughts and feelings openly without any modifications. This is done strategically, including by I4, who operates a throwaway account on Weibo. They said, "being banned is an honor," because "if they are afraid that people know," then "we are doing the right thing to post."

6.1.2. Platform Censorship

Platform censorship refers to the actions taken by digital platforms to monitor and regulate the content posted by users on specific sites or services (King et al., 2013; Lee, 2016). This involves automated blocking, filtering, and flow control, or shadow-banning and manual deletion (Roberts, 2018): "All platforms are legally responsible for the content they host, which incentivizes them to enforce strict moderation policies to avoid penalties," said I22, who has worked on one such platform. Each digital platform employs its own continuously expanding filtering lexicon: "It would astonish people if these platforms released banned words" (I22). From the user's perspective, keyword banning or filtering is perceived as a rigid and inflexible form of censorship. I22 explained this with a typical example, that the sentence "the night will pass and the dawn will come" (黑夜总会过去，黎明终将来临) could not be published on Weibo for a while, because it contained the blocked keyword "night club" (夜总会). They said that, "for the platforms, their logic is 'better to be wrong than miss'" (I22). While automated censorship plays a crucial role in the initial identification and flagging of potentially problematic content, it struggles to keep up when netizens adopt circumventing

tactics (Lee, 2016). As noted above, in order to review content that automated censorship missed, or that requires nuanced judgment to interpret, digital platforms hire human censors. The integration of human censors into platform censorship processes signifies a move towards more sophisticated and nuanced approaches to content moderation, explored further below.

6.1.3. Physical Enforcement

Physical enforcement is an indispensable complement to internet censorship, serving both as a deterrent and a method of reinforcing digital controls. This aspect of enforcement involves real-world actions taken against individuals who spread content that potentially threatens the stability of society (Roberts, 2018), such as warnings, reprimands, police visits, arrests, interrogations, and, in some cases, imprisonment. I8 described such an effort, having been visited by local police for forwarding a message from a victim who experienced side effects after vaccination. I20 was also reprimanded for complaining about quarantine policies during the pandemic. Another case of physical enforcement happened after the A4 Movement in 2022, when police requested to inspect mobile phones and delete any photos and videos related to the A4 Movement on the Shanghai Metro. Said I21: "This was the first time I've encountered censorship through direct mobile phone inspections."

6.2. What Constitutes Sensitivity: A Vague Boundary

Interestingly, all interviewees assert that they have a clear understanding of the "boundary" between sensitive and insensitive topics, enabling them to navigate discussions online carefully. However, their definitions of this boundary differ. The interviewees aged over 55 unanimously recognize that "politics" constitutes a highly sensitive subject. As I16 articulated, "for us ordinary people, national politics, general governmental guidelines, etc., are definitely sensitive." Others in this age group typically refrain from engaging in political discussion, opting instead to "follow the party" (I18) or to post and share content that promotes "positive energy" (I17).

Younger interviewees (aged 18–30), on the other hand, demonstrate a broader understanding of what constitutes sensitive content. Beyond political issues, they are acutely aware of the sensitivity surrounding topics like feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and any narratives that counter the state narrative or threaten social stability. As I7 observed, "in the last five years, topics related to gender have become more sensitive, and platforms have responded with increased censorship." I13 had a similar observation, saying that, now, "images of two men, even if just a somewhat intimate post, are instantly deleted." This group is more engaged in discussions on these topics, both privately and publicly, (7 out of 12) seeking ways to circumvent censorship to keep these discussions alive.

The middle group (aged 31–55) exhibits a certain flexibility in their perception and assessment of sensitive topics. They possess the ability to analyze and reflect on the evolving nature of sensitivity, drawing on historical perspectives to inform their understanding. I22, a former manager at a major Chinese social media platform, emphasized that "the vast majority of people have a mistaken understanding of what constitutes a sensitive topic," which they attribute to the pervasive effects of internet censorship. This group's experience, including instances where three participants were warned by the police for crossing these "boundaries," highlights their nuanced engagement with sensitive topics.

Despite all interviewees claiming they know where the "boundary" is, none of them can clearly draw the line, nor do they draw the same line. This results in practices of overly self-censoring their online activity: "A vast majority of people are overly self-censored," I22 argues, when in fact, for most users, "you are not as important to the authorities as you might think." However, because platform censorship is non-transparent, and because there are no clear rules about what is allowed and what is not, over-caution results. For example, when I8's WeChat account was blocked, they appealed to the WeChat team more than 20 times: "They only tell you that you are breaking the rules, but they can't tell you exactly what the rules are, or what I am posting that is breaking the rules."

6.3. Circumvention and Disconnection Strategies

In response to stringent internet censorship measures, netizens have developed a diverse array of innovative tactics to circumvent restrictions and maintain content visible. These circumvention tactics can be broadly categorized into five groups: wordplay, visualization, decontextualization and recontextualization, throwaway accounts, and link-sharing. These tactics were the ones most used by the interviewees or most often observed in their daily media usage.

The first class is wordplay, which represents the most common and culturally rich strategy employed by Chinese netizens. Wordplay leverages the unique characteristics of the Chinese language and character-based writing systems to create layers of meaning that are difficult to be detected by automated systems or even human censors. These methods include:

1. Homophones: Users replace sensitive words with others that sound similar but are not identifiable by automatic censors. For instance, "和谐" (harmony), often associated with censorship, is replaced by "河蟹" (river crab), as when 18 complains about "content posted often being harmonized" (被河蟹).
2. Initialism: Users create abbreviations from pinyin, or use the Latin alphabet to spell out Chinese phrases. A famous example is "YYDS" for "永远的神" (eternal god).
3. Coded words: Used by netizens to establish a shared lexicon with online communities to convey politically sensitive meanings.
4. Language-playing: Other languages are used or combined with Chinese characters to express sensitive topics, particularly English, Japanese, and Korean.
5. Martian language ("火星文"; or brain-disabled characters, "脑残体"): Characterized by combining non-standard characters with numbers, symbols, and components of Chinese characters. This allows users to bypass keyword filters, as unconventional character combinations are not included in standard censorship databases. For instance, the standard phrase "文革" (cultural revolution) can be written as "纹哥."

In addition to the above-mentioned methods, other methods include numeronyms, neologisms, etc., all of which seek to avoid automated censorship.

The second category, visualization, involves converting textual information into visual formats, exploiting the limitations of text-based censorship algorithms. Since textual information is more easily detected, filtered, and banned by algorithms, social media users often convert text into images. Various methods are employed under the category of visualization, such as screenshots (I8), creating text-as-image posts (I5), and

embedding text in images. However, visualized text can still be detected and identified through manual censorship efforts. To counter this, netizens have developed increasingly sophisticated and convoluted visualization techniques that add an additional layer of complexity to the censors' tasks, making the content more difficult and time-consuming to moderate. These methods include 180-degree rotation (flipping them upside down), and watermarking (adding subtle visual elements that disrupt optical character recognition systems while remaining readable by humans). To avoid being censored, "we will convert the text to an image and then watermark it," I4 said. Creating exceptionally long images represents an alternative way of protest that circumvents manual censorship. As one interviewee (I13) reported, "I once created a one-meter-long image."

Decontextualization and recontextualization, as the third category, transforms a sensitive topic into an allegory. It strips a topic of its immediate context (decontextualization) and then embeds it with a new, often fictionalized, setting (recontextualization). While the figures, contexts, and details have been changed, the core storyline and narratives remain the same. This often occurs in discussions involving high-profile figures, such as celebrities and government officials. As I12 noted, "topics involving female celebrities and officials from the top are usually sensitive and are not allowed to be discussed." However, by recontextualizing these figures within an allegorical framework, netizens can subtly critique without directly naming the elites who are involved. For instance, I10 observed that "allegorical stories set against the backdrop of their situations are quite popular online."

Fourth, using throwaway accounts—a temporary or disposable account (Leavitt, 2015) created for a short-term purpose—is a tactic that is often employed by social media users to engage with sensitive topics while minimizing the risk of identification: "When it comes to sensitive topics, I use a throwaway account to post," I6 said. The anonymous feature of throwaway accounts, which reduces the risk of identification, empowers netizens to express themselves more freely: "I can freely express myself without the fear of being identified," I6 further explained. By disconnecting their real identities from their online activities, netizens can push the boundaries of what is discussable.

The fifth circumventing tactic involves sharing sensitive content through the use of external drive links. By storing content on cloud storage services, such as Baidu Cloud and Xunlei Cloud, netizens can bypass direct internet censorship. This approach not only enables cross-platform sharing, but also enhances the resilience of sensitive content against censorship efforts. As I14 explained, "even if a post with a link is removed, the content remains accessible to those who have the link." As those who have the link can continue to view and share, they create a network of information sharing that is less susceptible to interruption by censorship mechanisms.

6.4. Elites' Disconnecting Tactics

Facing online populist protest, netizens highlighted several tactics that they saw elites adopting as they sought to avoid being doxxed. The first tactic is self-anonymization, disconnecting themselves by removing personal identifiers in digital spaces. This includes deliberately deleting online traces of a person's involvement in a news event or activity to limit the exposure of their personal information on social media: "Deleting posts is the most common operation," I21 reported. This tactic was, for example, utilized when the hashtag #DrivingIntoThePalaceMuseum took off after an incident in 2020. Two luxury cars were

photographed inside the grounds of the Palace Museum in Beijing, an area where cars are typically prohibited. The photos were posted on social media and quickly sparked public outrage, as netizens saw this as an abuse of privilege by wealthy elites. Those implicated in the incident deleted all their Weibo posts once they had been doxxed (He et al., 2023a).

However, elites also disconnect by hiring crisis management teams. These teams try to steer public opinion in favor of the elites by contacting platform companies to prevent further public scrutiny, debate, or backlash. This includes persuading those platform companies to ban specific keywords, shadow-ban certain users, and remove relevant hashtags from trending searches. For instance, as I19 explained, "when celebrities face negative publicity, their teams contact platforms to request the removal of the topic from trending or hot search lists." This tactic is especially prevalent in cases where governmental officials are involved, as noted by I12, highlighting a disparity in individuals' ability to disconnect: "The celebrity's team will report to Douban, requesting to delete the posts or block the group discussion," and "normal people do not have that power." By "removing from trending," elite individuals can control the information flow, slow down the dissemination of information, and reduce its impact on public opinion. In some extreme cases, fan groups may serve as informal crisis management teams, acting swiftly when they perceive "their" celebrity to be under threat. Fan groups can try and control the online narrative, and organize online defense campaigns to overwhelm negative posts with positive ones, thereby reducing the visibility of negative content. Nevertheless, as I13 said, despite being an influencer and having their own fan base to defend them from negative criticism online, they began to "place more emphasis on protecting personal information after experiencing several instances of being subjected to 'human flesh search' by other celebrities' fan groups."

The third tactic identified is turning to legal measures, as a response to doxxing and attacks. Celebrities, for example, file lawsuits for invasions of privacy, seeking to compel individuals or platforms to retract or delete harmful information. As I21 remarked, "legal means can act as a deterrent," signaling to the broader public that such behavior will not be tolerated. However, I21 also noted its limitations: "It is not always possible to identify a specific individual." Another tactic is silence, where elite individuals choose to remain silent to avoid further public attention on specific disputes. Since online attention tends to be short-lived, by being silent, individuals allow the controversy to naturally fade away. In cases where elites or established institutions *must* respond to the public, they often use a "low-key approach" that minimizes the impact. For instance, in the case of #DrivingIntoThePalaceMuseum, the Palace Museum responded to the public at midnight, which allowed the museum to fulfill its obligation to address public concerns while minimizing public attention. However, this low-key approach can backfire, particularly when the public feels their voice is being ignored. When this occurs, as it did following the Palace Museum's response, popular resistance can escalate, leading to larger collective actions and greater attention on the negative story (He et al., 2023a).

7. Discussion

7.1. Connectivity and Disconnectivity: A Dilemma

Our findings demonstrate that censorship in China goes beyond suppressing content; it actively shapes user behavior and engagement online. In the context of online and bottom-up populist protests in China, netizens strive to maintain the visibility and connectivity of their protest messages (He et al., 2023a). Despite internet censorship, netizens employ innovative tactics, such as wordplay, coded language, and throwaway accounts

to circumvent restrictions, reflecting their strong desire to maintain connectivity and ensure their voices are heard. As the censorship mechanisms evolve, so do the tactics employed by netizens to bypass them. This ongoing "cat and mouse game" spirals into a technological contest that drives innovation on both sides, resulting in an ever-changing digital landscape, while further intensifying the antagonism between "the people" coordinating at a grassroots level, and corrupt "elites" seeking to avoid scrutiny.

However, the threat of facing real-world consequences discourages netizens from crossing regulatory boundaries. The increasingly broad and strict censorship mechanisms—marked by sophisticated information and digital surveillance and the threat of physical enforcement—instill a climate of fear and uncertainty among netizens. As several interviewees highlighted, "we are transparent" (I4) and under "comprehensive" (I20), "real-time surveillance" (I8), where "eliminating internet traces seems unlikely" and "this pervasive surveillance is horrible" (I4). This climate of surveillance discourages open participation and leads to disconnection and withdrawal from online public spaces where bottom-up populism might flourish.

Disconnectivity, in this sense, becomes a protective strategy, safeguarding personal safety (Zhu et al., 2017) and privacy. But it comes at the cost of silencing potential collective voices against elites, or those perceived as elites. Such withdrawal reflects a loss of faith in the digital platforms' ability to serve as a free space for democratic engagement and activism. Furthermore, these physical enforcement actions from the authorities often receive public attention and serve as a clear signal to society about the seriousness with which the state views certain violations, as, for example, demonstrated through the case of Dr. Wenliang Li (de Kloet et al., 2021). In essence, disconnectivity in grassroots populist protests highlights a dilemma: the need for self-preservation versus the desire for collective action.

7.2. A Multi-Layer Internet Censorship Mechanism: An Elite Privilege to Disconnect

The multi-layered mechanism of internet censorship in China not only enables state authorities to regulate what is visible and invisible within the digital sphere, especially in relation to online grassroots populist protests, it also functions as a tool for elites to shield themselves from public scrutiny and digital activism. This becomes particularly pronounced when information surveillance is exploited by elite groups, such as celebrities, to disconnect themselves from online doxxing and potential reputational harm.

This privileged deployment of internet censorship by elites, as a strategy of self-protection, reflects a different dynamic of disconnectivity from existing literature. Here these practices are conceptualized as a voluntary and intentional process (Bozdag, 2020; Zhu & Skoric, 2022), curating a safe space through visible and invisible forms (Bozdag, 2020) of blocking, unfriending (John & Agbarya, 2021), and selective avoidance (Zhu et al., 2017). However, our findings demonstrate that elites are perceived as capable of utilizing internet censorship to disconnect themselves from online bottom-up populist connective actions and suppress dissenting voices. They do so, for example, by hiring crisis management teams that contact social media platforms, leveraging internet censorship mechanisms to monitor, suppress, and steer public opinion in a direction favorable to the elites. When netizens see this occurring, it highlights an unequal application of internet censorship. On the one hand, it is applied as an elite tool by those with privilege to shield themselves from critique by disconnecting themselves from negative online attention. On the other hand, it is used against those who might seek to draw attention to abuses of power and privilege.

This allows us to understand the different ways that disconnection is executed. First, through a layered combination of self-censorship, platform censorship, and physical enforcement, enforcing the disconnection of bottom-up populist networked collective actions. These forms of censorship practices strategically and selectively target the digital infrastructures and communications that facilitate collective organizing, thereby hindering the ability of groups to coordinate, share information, and seek support through online networks. This is a source of anger for I8, whose WeChat account has been permanently blocked. They said, "I cannot send and read group messages, and the only remaining function is one-to-one chat." I8 elaborated with personal experiences that if people send a file containing a banned word through WeChat, it will be shadow-banned (i.e., making content invisible to everyone except the user who posted it.) This results in the user being unaware of the extent to which their posts and activities have been tamped down (Savolainen, 2022).

At the same time, for those among the elites, disconnection reflects how they have developed power in their favor by engaging in alternative means of disconnection, including by cultivating *wenming* (civilization or civility) as a discourse (Yang, 2018) or the strategic employment of friction and flood tactics to manipulate public opinion (Roberts, 2018). The effectiveness of this discourse-driven control is apparent: 19 of 22 participants in this study believe internet censorship is necessary. While this finding may not be generalizable, it does provide some insights into the prevalence of the acceptance of censorship. Particularly interviewees over 55 understand internet censorship not only as something necessary, but also as key for spreading positive energy and maintaining national stability.

8. Conclusion

By focusing on users' perspectives of practices and tactics of disconnectivity, this study provides unique insights into the subtleties of digital interactions and how power dynamics that are often obscured in broader analyses are perceived by internet users. This provides further insights into the interstitial spaces where netizens interact, situated between areas of overt control and covert resistance. It is within these spaces where we observe the dual purpose of digital platforms, functioning concurrently as avenues for grassroots connective dissent and as a "pressure valve" that state apparatuses can use to selectively manage discontent and maintain control, doing so in a more nuanced manner than total censorship would afford (He et al., 2023a, p. 13). However, the recent tightening of internet censorship policies has led to a transformation of the role of these platforms. As the policies became more stringent, digital platforms have increasingly lost their capacity to act as a "pressure valve" (He et al., 2023a). This shift is largely due to the disinterest of elite groups in addressing or engaging with grassroots appeals. The elites' disregard for the concerns raised through these platforms reflects a broader move towards more restrictive and controlled digital environments.

To answer our first research question ("How do Chinese netizens perceive and experience the mechanisms of internet censorship, and how do they assess the sensitivity of content within the context of their online activities?"), we found that the awareness and experiences of censorship varied across age groups. For the younger group (18–30), their awareness of censorship was first awakened by reminders from tutors in universities. The middle-aged group (31–55) is particularly attuned to the nuances and evolution of internet censorship. Finally, those above the age of 50 reflect a relatively vague perception of internet censorship. Grounded in users' different personal experiences with it, internet censorship in China can be understood as

a multi-layered mechanism of self-censorship by individuals, automated and manual censorship from platforms, and physical enforcement from the state. While it is broadly understood that censorship constrains the sharing of sensitive content, what constitutes "sensitive" also differs between different age groups. While older participants (above 50) are more familiar with political sensitivities, the younger group (18–30) demonstrates broader awareness of sensitive topics such as feminism and LGBTQ+ rights. The middle group (31–55) exhibits a certain flexibility in their perception and assessment of sensitive topics. They possess the ability to analyze and reflect on the evolving nature of sensitivity, drawing on historical perspectives to inform their understanding.

When faced with censorship or the risk of censorship, netizens interviewed here describe a variety of innovative tactics to maintain their connectivity. In answering our second research question ("What tactics do Chinese netizens employ to circumvent censorship?"), we found users employ wordplay, visualization strategies, recontextualization, throwaway accounts, and the use of external drive links, each of which allows individuals to continue engaging in online activism while avoiding detection or punishment by the state censorship regime. However, the very existence of these tactics highlights an ongoing tension between the need for netizens to stay connected and the looming threat of censorship, creating an ongoing "cat and mouse" game between users and the state.

In response to our third research question ("How do netizens perceive elites' tactics of disconnecting themselves from public scrutiny?"), this study revealed a striking contrast between grassroots netizens' attempts to stay connected and elites' perceived ability to disconnect themselves from digital scrutiny. On the one hand, we found ordinary netizens employing innovative tactics to circumvent censorship and observed how this is driven by their desire for free expression and collective action. These efforts reflect grassroots resilience against top-down control, as has been demonstrated in online and bottom-up populist protests. In contrast, elites are able to leverage their privileged access to power and technological controls. The censorship mechanism allows them to shield themselves from public scrutiny. This occurs not only when elites are able to use these tools to suppress critical voices, but also when they apply these to curate their digital presence, such as by manipulating trending topics and silencing unfavorable discussions. This elite-driven tactic of disconnectivity demonstrates how censorship in China is not just a top-down, state-imposed system, but a nuanced tool that can be wielded by the rich, powerful, and privileged elite for personal benefit.

In closing, this study shows that despite difficulties in navigating the sometimes-opaque regime of internet censorship, a regime that has developed into a privileged means for elites to avoid scrutiny, grassroots netizens continue to engage online in ways that challenge this privilege power by circumventing censorship restrictions through their use of multiple tactics of connecting and disconnecting. This ongoing resistance to control highlights a critical aspect of online and bottom-up populism in China. Future research should delve deeper into how a sensitive consciousness develops among users, how they manage the risks associated with circumventing censorship, or how they balance the need for free expression with the need to minimize exposure to potential risks. By addressing these questions, this and future studies could offer valuable insights into the resilience of grassroots populist protests in the face of internet control. They could foster a broader understanding of the power dynamics between the people and the elites, and the role of digital technology in Chinese online and bottom-up populism.

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Conflict of Interests

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