New media, especially social media, has become an essential platform for publics to discuss social issues and facilitate the development of social issues (e.g., Bruns et al., 2013; F. L. F. Lee et al., 2017; Xiong et al., 2019). In digital activism, individuals, media, and activist organizations cooperate to co-create meanings of issues (Botan & Taylor, 2004), spread information to different groups, and mobilize sources (Taylor & Das, 2010), thus ultimately contributing to social changes. For example, social movements such as the Arab Spring (Bruns et al., 2013), the #MeToo movement against sexual abuse and sexual harassment (Xiong et al., 2019), and the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong (F. L. F. Lee et al., 2017) all relied heavily on publics’ discussion and participation on social media.

In digital activism, social media users who participate in the discussion and information dissemination play a key role in determining the development and social impacts of issues. Thus, it is pivotal to understand who are involved in online communication and how they contribute to these issues. Therefore, this study aims to segment and analyze publics in digital activism. Since digital activism is issue-driven and closely related to activism and advocacy in public relations research, the theoretical framework of this study is primarily based on public research in public relations.

### Literature Review

**Publics and Public Segmentation**

The concept of public is discussed and conceived as a collective being with a shared interest. Dewey (1927) regarded a public as a group of people who face a similar problem, recognize it, and organize themselves to address the problem. Thus, it is pivotal to understand who are involved in online communication and how they contribute to these issues. Therefore, this study aims to segment and analyze publics in digital activism.
identifies a similar problem and works together toward a problem resolution. These scholars’ definitions of publics underline the situational nature of publics.

Besides the situational perspective, other scholars emphasized the communicative nature of publics and understand publics from meaning co-creation. For example, Botan and Taylor (2004) defined publics as an ongoing process of agreement wherein they create shared interpretations of stimuli within a social space. On social media, issues, discourses, meaning co-creation, and communicative actions intertwine in a comprehensive process. Thus, in this study, the concept of public is defined in the context of social media (social-mediated publics) as a collective group of individuals who rise with an issue, participate in the issue discussion and meaning creation, and take communicative actions on social media. The next part will review several important perspectives of public research and analyze how these perspectives can converge and evolve to a new perspective to help scholars understand publics in digital activism in the social media world.

Vasquez and Taylor (2001) classified public research into four main perspectives: (1) the mass perspective of publics, (2) the situational perspective of publics, (3) the agenda building perspective of publics, and (4) the homo narrans perspective of publics. Among these four perspectives, the former two perspectives focus on the social-psychological state of publics, and the latter two perspectives emphasize the communicative nature of publics.

The Mass and Situational Perspectives of Publics. The mass perspective of publics regards publics as collective-level entities, in which individuals are self-informed about civic issues and have stable characteristics. Publics identify civic issues, express their judgments about political issues, and take collective actions responding to these issues. Studies of publics from the mass perspective mainly focus on investigating the composition and characteristics of people who participate in civic matters. From this perspective, early representative studies are research on people’s voting behaviors in elections.

The mass perspective of publics preludes to the emergence of the situational perspective of publics. Rooted in social-psychological concepts, the situational perspective of publics views publics as groups of individuals rising in response to an issue. Similar to the mass perspective of publics, the situational perspective views publics from their social-psychological variables. However, different from the mass perspective, the situational perspective includes broader sociological concerns for human relations and investigates the underlying social-psychological mechanism in response to issues. In the situational perspective, a public does not have enduring characteristics; instead, a public is regarded as a situational developing social entity. As a result, publics’ social-psychological variables lead to differential responses to situations, which allow scholars to identify, segment, and target publics. Grunig (1997) developed a situational theory of publics to identify publics, which segmented publics based on problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement. In the following years, scholars elaborated on this perspective and segmented publics based on variables related to the situational theory, such as media exposure (Aldoory & Grunig, 2012), communitative actions in problem-solving (Ni & Kim, 2009), media consumption habits and trust in information sources (S. Lee & Rodriguez, 2008), cultural identity (Sha, 2006), and knowledge and involvement (Hallahan, 2000).

The Agenda-Building and Homo Narrans Perspectives of Publics. The agenda-building perspective views publics from their involvement in issues and focuses on the degree of a public’s effort to expand the issue. Thus, the understanding of publics in this perspective depends on individuals’ participation in social issues. For example, Cobb and Elder (1983) proposed four types of publics based on their characteristics in political participation: (1) a specific public-identification group, who has persistent empathy with a particular group, (2) a specific public-attention group, who has an interest in specific issues, (3) a mass public-attentive group, who serves as opinion leaders, and (4) a mass-public general public, who is less active, less interested, and less informed. The agenda-building perspective of the publics emphasizes the role of communication as a critical part in agenda building (Vasquez & Taylor, 2001), thus offering a fourth perspective of publics, the homo narrans perspective of publics.

The homo narrans perspective of publics focuses on the communicative nature of publics and the dynamics in publics. This perspective admits the situational origin of the emergence of publics, while it conceptualizes a public as a rhetorical community. Different from the situational perspectives of publics, which identifies and segments publics by the publics’ social-psychological variables, the homo narrans perspective defines publics from their communicative behaviors in an issue, such as debate, discussion, and argument. Vasquez (1994) claimed that a public is created by the communicative process in which individuals create, develop, and sustain a group consciousness around a problematic issue. However, research on publics from the homo narrans perspective of publics tends to be contextualized and scholars have not identified specific dimensions to articulate the typologies and characteristics of publics.

Comparisons Between Perspectives of Publics and the Limitations. There are differences and similarities between these two clusters of public research (i.e., mass and situational perspectives, and agenda-building and homo narrans perspectives). These two clusters conceptualize publics from different focal points. The mass and situational perspectives examine publics’ social-psychological states and the process of publics responding to a certain issue, while the agenda-building and homo narrans perspectives investigate how
individuals become publics in the process of communication and make an issue prominent by meaning co-creation. Meanwhile, these two clusters of public perspectives overlap with each other. For example, studies from the situational perspective also depend on publics’ communicative actions to examine publics (e.g., Kim & Grunig, 2011; Ni & Kim, 2009), which resonated with the homo narrans perspective. Besides, scholars may examine variables in the mass and situational perspectives of publics to identify and analyze publics in the homo narrans paradigm (e.g., Vasquez, 1994).

However, these perspectives of publics studies show their limitations facing the rise of social media. Because of the connectedness and what Poell (2014) calls the “technological architecture” of social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Instagram), individuals can express their viewpoints publicly and freely. Thus, publics have gained more power to co-create meanings and rewrite dominant narratives than ever before. However, the social-psychological foundation to study publics in the mass and situational perspectives can hardly depict the meaning creation and public formation processes on social media. Besides, the homo narrans perspective of publics has not provided a generalizable method to specify publics in their rhetorical communities. Thus, these two perspectives face limitations to investigating publics in digital activism. In recent years, with the emergence and popularity of social media, more research has tremendously supplemented the perspectives of publics discussed above.

Publics in Digital Activism

In studies researching publics on social media, the concepts of issue publics and hashtags publics have inherited important notions (e.g., issue and involvement) from the mass and situational perspectives of publics. Issue publics are defined as groups of people with an intense interest in specific issues (Bolsen & Leeper, 2013). Scholars have been exploring predictors in both messages and individuals to explain issue publics’ formation (e.g., Bolsen & Leeper, 2013; Schünemann, 2020; Tremayne et al., 2006). More recently, due to the unique characteristics of social media platforms (e.g., Twitter), issue publics are commonly identified by hashtags. Twitter hashtags were originally created to classify messages and make them searchable, but this enables the formation of hashtag publics, who are groups of social media users forming in response to an issue and participate in the public discussion (Bruns & Highfield, 2015; Bruns et al., 2016; Rambukkana, 2015). In these studies, publics are studied in the emergence of hashtags, and the use of hashtags indicates their interest and involvement in a certain issue. However, the overemphasis on hashtags has made it unclear whether these studies are more about hashtags or about publics. Thus, Bruns et al. (2016) suggested that scholars should “continue to explore opportunities for expanding our analysis beyond hashtags themselves” (p. 38). Responding to Bruns’ call, social-psychological concepts in the mass and situational perspectives of publics can be examined in digital activism. For example, Chon and Park (2020) incorporated the situational theory of problem solving (STOPS) and related factors to predict social media activism on three social issues and found publics’ situational perceptions to be effective predictors of their communicative actions in digital activism.

The agenda-building and homo narrans perspectives of publics are typically applied and developed in the research on counterpublics and networked publics in the social media context (e.g., Jackson & Welles, 2015; Kuo, 2016; Wonneberger et al., 2021). Fraser (1990) defines counterpublics as “parallel discursive arenas” where marginalized groups develop “oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 81). The connectedness of social media has made individuals, discourses, and meanings unprecedentedly linked and empowered publics to co-create and rewrite dominant narratives (Jackson & Welles, 2015). In this process, various counterpublics participate in meaning creation and circulation, which has unpacked the traditional public sphere into “a series of public sphericles and micro-publics” (Bruns & Highfield, 2015) and diverse voices are expressed in online contestation (Adam et al., 2019; Chan, 2018). At the same time, with the availability of computer-assisted research methods, publics’ agenda-building and meaning co-creation processes on social media are unpacked, quantified, and visualized using large-scale data. Thus, these recent studies have not only operationalized the communicative nature of publics’ political participation (i.e., agenda-building and meaning co-creation) (Jackson & Welles, 2015; Li et al., 2020; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012; Xiong et al., 2019), but also examined the influence of the “technological architecture” (e.g., hashtags, actor mentions, retweets) on the debate intensification of special social issues (Wonneberger et al., 2021). However, most studies in this area are still descriptive and issue dependent. Besides, research on networked publics has primarily built the network based on the co-occurrences of words (e.g., hashtags) or the retweeting paths. In the studies analyzing retweeting networks, scholars are interested in users that obtained the most attention, while ignoring other less visible force that facilitates the information dissemination, which is essential to the agenda-building in digital activism.

This study proposes a network approach to identify and segment publics. In an information sharing network, it is not only important to identify who obtain the most attention, but also essential to reveal who meaningfully contribute to the information dissemination, thus involving more individuals to the issue discussion. The network approach in this study follows the agenda-building and homo narrans perspectives of publics. Besides, different publics in the network will be analyzed for their characteristics and the relationship with the issue, in the tradition of the mass and situational perspectives of publics.
Social-Mediated Publics and Social Network Analysis

On social media, individuals create social networks with others that they have never met in real life, and share information and seek others’ opinions about specific issues (Weeks et al., 2017). In such a space, some social media users are more powerful than others to influence users on social issues, depending on the position in the network. Besides, a piece of information generated by a user can only reach the user’s followers if there are no social mediators to connect those who are not followers of the same user (Himelboim et al., 2014). A mediator occupies a unique position in the network since they can link users across clusters (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). To describe one’s position in a network, one of the most common measurements is centrality. Centrality explains the extent to which a node is connected to others in the environment (Freeman, 1978). There are several types of centralities in social network analysis (SNA), and two of them are relevant to this study: degree centrality and betweenness centrality.

Degree centrality is a measure that counts how many neighbors a node has (Freeman, 1978). In an information-sharing network, the flow of information has a specific direction. In a directed network, there are two types of degree centrality: in-degree centrality and out-degree centrality. In this study, in-degree centrality refers to the times that one shares information from another user, and out-degree centrality measures the times one’s content is being directly shared by others. In the information flow, users’ influence on information dissemination is directly determined by how many others share their content, which is, the out-degree centrality in the network. In addition to the out-degree centrality, a user’s influence in an information dissemination network depends on the betweenness centrality. Burt (1992) examined nodes in unique positions in a social network, where they connected other nodes that otherwise would be much less connected. These nodes are called structural holes. A good indicator to measure the strength of structural holes is betweenness centrality. Betweenness centrality is a measure of the shortest paths in a network, implying the degree of a node to stand between each other. In communication, betweenness centrality can point to key members in the network that facilitate communication flows (Doerfel & Taylor, 2017). Hence, a high betweenness centrality indicates the user’s ability to facilitate the information dissemination among individuals in this network.

According to the literature above, the two important dimensions to determine individuals’ influence on digital activism are their out-degree centrality and betweenness centrality in the information flow of the issue. The out-degree centrality describes one’s power to directly send information to others, and the betweenness centrality indicates one’s influence on information diffusion to more people, those who otherwise would not engage in the discussion. Thus, the first research question is as follows:

*RQ1.* What types of social-mediated publics are there, based on their position in the information flow in digital activism?

After segmenting publics into several categories based on their position in the information flow, we are interested in understanding the characteristics of each segment of publics. By analyzing and comparing the characteristics of publics in these theoretically meaningful segments, we can confirm whether the segmentation is practically meaningful. The analysis of these publics can explore indexes to identify different types of publics. Relying on these indexes, activists and involved organizations can strategically navigate the development of digital activism on social media:

*RQ2.* Who are in each public segment and what are the characteristics of each segment of social-mediated publics in digital activism?

To answer these two research questions, we analyzed the information flow of a social movement, which started and developed on social media, the #MeToo movement in China in 2018.

The Chinese #MeToo Movement as a Case

With the development of the #MeToo movement on Twitter in 2017, this social movement aroused international repercussions and resonance. On 1 January 2018, a female scientist posted on Sina Weibo (a Chinese social media similar to Twitter), claiming with evidence that when she was a PhD student, she was sexually assaulted by her co-advisor. On the same day, the university responded on Sina Weibo, confirming that they had suspended the involved professor’s job and started to investigate this issue. This interaction between the scientist and the university triggered a discussion on social media. In the next few days, this issue kept fermenting on social media. On 11 January, the university released the result of the investigation through Sina Weibo, admitting the existence of the sexual assault and announcing their decision to fire the professor. Subsequently, this issue kept fermenting and produced tremendous social influences. Later, more similar reports emerged, involving more individuals, educational institutes, and other social sectors. This series of social movements urged various institutes to set regulations to prohibit and prevent sexual harassment.

This issue on Sina Weibo was chosen to analyze publics in digital activism for several reasons. First, this case was the trailblazer to start the series of anti-sexual harassment movements in China, and it turned into a triumph. Thus, publics involved in this social movement were important digital activism actors to analyze. Second and more importantly,
currently, most research on publics in digital activism studies publics from Western democratic countries, while the visibility of those from highly controlled societies, with strict social norms and censorship, is still low. The analysis of this case can make unique contributions to the understanding of publics (especially, counterpublics) in many authoritarian societies. Thus, with the data of the Chinese #MeToo movement on Sina Weibo, this study expands the research scope to a relatively less explored area and population.

**Method**

To segment publics in the social media information flow in the Chinese #MeToo movement and depict their characteristics, we utilized the methods of SNA and content analysis.

**Data Collection**

To obtain the propagation path of these posts and understand publics’ positions in this network, we designed a web crawler for data mining. This Sina Weibo web crawler could trace the routes of these posts being shared and record the users who shared them. Since the crawler started mining data from specific social media posts, we manually searched for posts about the Chinese #MeToo movement on Sina Weibo. We used keywords in this event to identify influential Sina Weibo posts. These keywords included the name of the female scientist, the name of the opponent, the name of the involved university, and sexual harassment-related terms. We manually collected vital posts shared a relatively large number of times among these posts. Since the number of sharing times with a specific post is accumulative, we believed that if the number was low, this post should not have spread to many other users in the information network, indicating this post less significant to be analyzed. Thus, we set a criterion for the original post-selection. We only collected the original posts and added a post into the sample if the original post was shared more than 20 times. We chose the number 20 because our observation and preliminary analysis revealed that when a post was shared fewer than 20 times, the post was almost shared only once by other Weibo users and would never be shared by a second-degree user. We searched the posts with the keywords and stopped screening until no more qualified original posts came from the Sina Weibo search results. Posts with the keywords as hashtags but whose content was irrelevant with the issue were excluded from the sample. Finally, we obtained 73 meaningful original Weibo posts from 1 January to 8 March 2018. The data were collected from 8 to 15 March. We cleaned the data by deleting edges referring to users sharing their own posts. Finally, we obtained 39,659 nodes (i.e., Sina Weibo users) and 112,516 edges (i.e., times these posts being shared). In addition to the information-sharing network data, we collected and analyzed public information on some users’ Sina Weibo accounts in April 2018. The public information consisted of users’ profile information, the number of posts they created on the account, the number of their followers, and their 100 most recent public posts on the Sina Weibo account. The content of their recent posts indicated these users’ interest and identity, which reflected their relationship with this issue. All the social media posts, the routes of these posts being shared, and the posts on selected users’ Sina Weibo account, were public. This study was identified as “Not Human Subjects Research” by the Institutional Review Board of the institute. Thus, the data collection process meets the ethical standards of collecting and using social media data.

**Network Analysis**

In the SNA, each Sina Weibo user who shared one of these posts was a node in the network, and each time a post being shared was an edge in the network. In the networks of the 73 posts, many individuals shared more than one post out of 73, and this made subnetworks of the information flow connected. Thus, we combined the 73 subnetworks into one network to analyze the information network flow on this issue. We used Gephi 0.9.2 to visualize the network and analyze the nodes. As discussed above, one’s out-degree centrality reflects a user’s ability to disseminate information to others. Hence, a user’s direct influence on the information infusion is measured by the out-degree centrality in the network. At the same time, a node’s betweenness centrality implies the user’s potential to spread the information to a broad range of people and connect subgroups. Thus, one’s out-degree centrality and betweenness centrality in the information-sharing network are the key factors to segment publics into different types.

**Content Analysis**

To scrutinize these publics, we selected a manageable sample from each segment to conduct the content analysis. We relied on judgemental sampling to select around 100 users to represent publics in each segment, who had the significance in their special position (i.e., out-degree centrality and betweenness centrality). Each account was evaluated by two coders to determine whether it could represent individuals in a specific segment. The account was included into the sample if both coders agreed. Finally, we identified a sample of 304 Weibo users in this network, in which 113 users’ out-degree centrality was significantly high, but the betweenness centrality was low; 103 users’ betweenness centrality was high, but the out-degree centrality was low; 88 users’ out-degree centrality and betweenness centrality were both high. We designed a codebook to quantify the characteristics of these publics. Items in the codebook include (1) the type of the Sina Weibo account, (2) the number of the user’s followers, (3) the total number of the user’s posts, and (4) whether the user is an all-issue public or a single-issue public. There are generally two types of users on Sina Weibo: verified and
non-verified users. A verified user has a premium membership, with a mark “V” beside the account name. Sina Weibo classifies verified users into two primary categories: organizations and individuals, and each category has several subcategories. In this study, we classified users into four subcategories: media, organization, verified individual, and unverified individual. We set media as a separate type because of the special role that media played in this event. This issue started on social media and was reported by many media immediately and widely. The number of followers was the index to imply the user’s ability to present information to others. The total number of a user’s posts measured one’s amount of Sina Weibo usage. The last variable in this codebook was developed to measure publics’ relationship with this issue. Grunig (1997) divided publics around issues into four types: (1) all-issue publics, who are active on all issues, (2) single-issue publics, active on a small subset of the issue that only concerns them, (3) hot-issue publics, who are active on a single issue that involves nearly everyone and which has received a lot of media attention, and (4) apathetic publics, who are inattentive to all issues. In the Chinese #MeToo movement, many people participated in the discussion, but not all of them were involved in this issue to the same degree. Some users were active in discussing all types of social issues on social media, and the #MeToo movement happened to be one of these issues. Some other individuals were particularly active on the specific issue which directly concerned them. For example, in this case, mainstream media and internet celebrities could be regarded as all-issue publics. However, some users frequently created or shared posts about gender equality or expressed concerns about this issue because of their own identity (e.g., female college students, individuals who had similar experiences), so they were single-issue publics. We read each selected user’s profile and the 100 most recent public posts to determine whether this user was a single- or all-issue public. The results of the first three items were objective and publicly available on the Sina Weibo account. Two coders were trained to code the fourth item, and the Krippendorf’s Alpha for this item was .87.

**Result**

We visualized the 39,659 nodes and 112,516 edges in Gephi to have an overall impression of the structure of the information flow network (Figure 1). In this graph, each color represented one cluster in this network. A cluster referred to a group of people who were positioned closely together. In this network, 37 clusters were detected. Overall, the average degree of the network was 2.837, which means, on average, the total number of times that each user shared others’ information and their own information being shared was 2.8. The average path length of this network was 3.499, meaning that the average shortest path between two users in this network was about 3.5. The density of this network was 0. The density was low because there were many nodes in this network but few ring networks because a user usually shared a single post only once and tended not to share the same information from multiple users.

**Three Types of Social-Mediated Publics**

As discussed above, two essential measures are out-degree centrality and betweenness centrality. Figures 2 and 3 show users’ out-degree centrality and betweenness centrality, respectively. The size of the nodes implies the magnitude of centrality. To make the network visually clear, we have hidden some nodes from the graphs whose out-degree centrality or betweenness centrality was low.

These two graphs revealed that these users played different roles based on the out-degree centrality and betweenness...
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centrality. Specifically, some users had both high out-degree centrality and betweenness centrality. In contrast, some users had high out-degree centrality and low betweenness centrality, or low out-degree centrality and high betweenness centrality. At the same time, most users' out-degree centrality and betweenness centrality were both low. Thus, to understand their different roles and characteristics in the information flow, we extracted three meaningful segments of publics: (1) users with high out-degree centrality and low betweenness centrality, (2) users with low out-degree centrality and high betweenness centrality, and (3) users with high out-degree centrality and high betweenness centrality. Users with low out-degree centrality and low betweenness centrality were not specially analyzed in this study, considering their limited actual influence on the information flow.

Social media users in the first segment (high out-degree centrality and low betweenness centrality) directly sent the information to many other users, and others widely shared this information. At the same time, since their betweenness centrality was low, these individuals usually did not share information from others. A typical situation to create this type of public was that when an influential user created a post, many social media users shared this information, but the user's betweenness centrality would be zero or very low. This type of publics provoked the information-sharing process. These users can be called a provoking public. The second segment of publics (low out-degree centrality and high betweenness centrality) did not disseminate the information directly to many people. However, they played a role as a bridge to send the information to different subgroups. One explanation was, while these users were not as influential in terms of times of their posts being shared as users in the other two segments, they were deeply concerned with this issue and shared information from trustworthy sources with their comments or opinions. Thus, their followers with the same concern would share their posts on the Sina Weibo account. This group of users can be called a bridging public. Social media users in the third group (high out-degree centrality and high betweenness centrality) played an essential role in disseminating the information in the network widely and deeply. The high out-degree centrality meant many individuals shared information directly from these social media users. The high betweenness centrality indicated that they also played the role of a bridge between different groups of users. Hence, this group of users can be called a powerful public. These three publics are not strictly exclusive because the powerful public has the strengths of both the provoking public and the bridge public.

Characteristics of the Three Types of Social-Mediated Publics. Content analysis revealed some interesting characteristics of these three publics. Regarding the types of accounts in different public segments (Table 1), a chi-square test revealed significant differences ($\chi^2 = 44.80, p < .05$). First, the majority of the provoking public was verified individuals and media. Most media accounts fell into this segment because they were usually the information source but seldom shared others' content. Thus, in the #MeToo movement in China, media and verified users played a role in creating the original information and initiating the public discussion. Second, most users of the bridging public were unverified individuals. This phenomenon implied that the information dissemination across various groups was mainly facilitated by unverified users or grassroots individuals on Sina Weibo instead of media or verified users.

Regarding the numbers of followers of these different publics, analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed significant differences in the mean number of followers. The Tukey honestly significant difference (HSD) post hoc test revealed that the provoking public had significantly more followers than the bridging public, with the mean difference of 1,685,446 ($p < .05$). However, there was no such significant difference between the other two pairs. This result confirmed the previous deduction of these publics. The provoking public had a high level of out-degree centrality because they were originally influential due to a large number of followers. The bridging public had fewer followers. Thus, their posts are presented to and directly shared by fewer people, leading to a lower out-degree centrality. In regard to the total number of posts, ANOVA also showed a statistically

| Table 1. Types of Social Media Users in Three Publics. |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
|                | Media Organization Verified Individual Unverified Individual |
| Provoking Public | 15 2 56 40 |
| Bridging Public  | 0 0 29 74 |
| Powerful Public  | 1 2 41 44 |

Figure 3. Betweenness centrality of users (part). The node size refers to the betweenness centrality of each node.
significant difference between the means \((p<.05)\). The Tukey HSD post hoc test identified the significant difference between the provoking public and the bridging public, with the latter having on average 12,088 more posts than the former. This result indicated that the bridging public was more active on social media than the provoking public. Although the bridging public had fewer followers than the provoking publics, they facilitated the discussion across various groups of people through higher social media activities.

From the aspect of the user’s relationship with this issue (Table 2), a chi-square test showed significant differences \(\chi^2 = 44.62, p<.05\). Table 2 showed that in the powerful public segment, the numbers of all-issue publics and single-issue publics in this issue were balanced. However, most users of the provoking public segment were all-issue publics, while most users in the bridging public segment were single-issue publics. This difference demonstrated that users interested in all types of issues were more likely to initiate the discussion, but those who had a special interest in the specific issue had significantly contributed to passing on information to others and facilitating the discussion in a broader range of groups.

In summary, from social media users’ position in the information-sharing network, we proposed three important segments of social-mediated publics by their influence on the information flow (i.e., out-degree centrality and betweenness centrality) and analyzed their characteristics in the content analysis. The provoking public is mostly verified users and media, who have a large number of followers and interest in all types of issues and can directly send information to many other users. The bridging public seems to be less powerful than the provoking public in terms of the number of followers and the status on this social media platform, but they usually have a special interest in the specific issue and are active in using social media, hence facilitating the discussion of this issue in various clusters. Besides, the powerful public tends to have many followers, high social media status, particular interest in the issue, and more social media activities. The powerful public has both advantages of the provoking public and the bridging public.

### Discussion

By applying social media analysis and content analysis to public segmentation, with empirical evidence from large-scale social media data, we have provided a relatively new perspective to classify social-mediated publics based on their position in the information flow in the Chinese #MeToo movement and reveal characteristics of publics in digital activism from a society with strict social norms and media censorships.

The public segmentation in this study has explored the network paradigm of public research, considering the connectedness of social media communication. The network paradigm in public relations research is promising while studies highlighting publics are still rare (Zhou, 2019). This study proposed a network approach to segment publics, highlighting the connectedness of social media communication and individuals’ influence on the information flow. Although network analysis is not a new approach in public research or public relations research, most networks using SNA studies focus on the co-occurrences of words (e.g., hashtags, usernames, and retweets) or social media users who obtain the most attention. However, the network analysis in our study also investigates those who are less visible regarding the attention obtained but still contribute to the information diffusion. In addition, the content analysis of the characteristics of these segments of publics demonstrates the effectiveness of this segmentation approach, by empirically revealing the uniqueness of each segment of publics. The result in the content analysis is consistent with earlier research findings of public relations from the social networks perspective (Himelboim et al., 2014), in which scholars identified informal actors on social media (e.g., nongovernmental organizations and individuals) to be important social mediators between different groups of people. Besides, we have combined concepts from earlier public research perspectives (e.g., single-issue publics, all-issue publics, and agenda-building) into the discussion of the proposed publics’ characteristics and found them compatible, thus reaching a convergence between our new segmentation approach and previous research.

Besides, our study has gained interesting research findings of digital activism from a society with strict social norms and media censorships. The content analysis of publics reveals that, although individuals have obtained the power to make their voices heard on social media, mainstream media and privileged users (e.g., internet celebrities) still dominate the meaning and discourse creations of the issue. Not many issue-related organizations (e.g., NGOs) are detected in the information dissemination process. This finding is consistent with Li et al.’s (2020) study about the #MeToo movement in China. Thus, the power structure remains unequal among different entities. However, counter-publics may still make their voices heard. Facing the existing power structure and social control, grassroots individuals and activists (the bridging public) can amplify the importance of the issue by selectively sharing the discourse with others and spread the information to a broader range of people, thus achieving the goal of agenda-building under the media censorship. Sharing, instead of meaning creation, may be an effective communication strategy for less powerful individuals (i.e., counterpublics) to build the agenda regarding a controversial issue in a highly controlled environment.
From the practical perspective, our new segmentation of publics can help communication practitioners, social activists, and activist organizations (e.g., NGOs) identify publics and navigate the discussion. Specifically, media and internet celebrities are more likely to initiate an influential discussion and dominate the narrative. Individuals with a special interest in the specific issue and active on social media are an important force to spread the information and amplify the influence of the issue. Those who are originally influential on social media and have a special interest in the specific issue are most powerful in initiating and facilitating the social movement on social media. Based on the understanding of the influences and characteristics of these three types of publics, activists and related organizations can target and mobilize them strategically.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study has some limitations. First, we could not obtain the complete dataset of this Chinese #MeToo movement because of Sina Weibo’s users’ privacy settings and possible censorship. However, the case we analyzed in this study was the first attempt to discuss the sexual harassment issue in China, when this issue was not politically sensitive, and it turned out to be a triumph. Therefore, important information in this event should not have been heavily censored. Also, considering that some content might have been censored, we chose not to analyze the discourses and meanings generated by social media users but focused on the information sharing process, which should not have been systematically impacted. To deal with this limitation caused by social media users’ privacy setting and censorship, social experiments that simulate the process of issue formation may be applied to further scrutinize individuals’ influence in digital activism. Another limitation is that we selected 304 users for content analysis. This part of users was a small proportion of the population. Due to the limited capacity of the manual content analysis and the exploratory nature of this study, it was impossible to analyze all the users involved. However, with our sampling method, we believe that these 304 users can represent the publics of these three segments. To analyze each type of publics more accurately, future scholars can conduct social media content analysis using computer techniques with public data in the future.

Conclusion

In this study, we analyzed the publics who participated in the Chinese #MeToo movement, which started, developed, and was discussed on social media. To better understand these publics and their influences in the information dissemination, we conducted an SNA to segment publics based on their positions in the information flow network and a content analysis to reveal the characteristics of publics in each segment. We have segmented these publics into three primary categories: users of high out-degree centrality but low betweenness centrality are the provoking publics; users of low out-degree centrality but high betweenness centrality are the bridging publics, and users of both high out-degree centrality and high betweenness centrality are powerful publics. These publics have their characteristics but share some overlap between each other. Particularly, the characteristics of the bridge public in this digital activism have shown the power of information sharing on social media by grassroots activists and counterpublics, which has greatly contributed to the issue formation and development. Thus, the findings of our study contribute to the public (especially, counterpublics) research in authoritarian societies, where meaning creation may be hard, but the power of sharing can be strong.

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