

Digital Feminism in China: How Are Social Media Platforms Contributing to the Activism Trajectory?

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Abstract. Online feminist movements in China are currently witnessing heightened prevalence. With higher levels of speech freedom, social media platforms thus become major arenas for feminists to carry out activism. The restricted media environment in the nation therefore is undergoing transformations regarding what content is exposed to the public. Questioning whether the social media in China are supporting or inhibiting the overall digital feminism trajectory, this article delves into the specific roles adopted by the platforms. Both negative and positive remarks are discussed in order to further investigate impact exerted onto the digital feminist movements. On the one hand, the online movements are suffering from the internalised patriarchal values and norms on platforms, mirroring a top-down tolerance towards misogynistic elements on social media. Meanwhile, surveillance and censorship are further impeding activists from spreading public awareness since feminist contents are perceived as sensitive, if not harmful to the society. However, such setbacks are offset by the masquerading effects brought by the platforms, which allow users to evade top-down censorship via practising less direct discursive rebellions. Furthermore, the community building functions on the platforms also enable activists to trigger bottom-up influences and awareness, thus initiating normalisation of feminist activities online while incorporating into the popular culture. The conclusion further sheds light on the future need to shift focus onto other platforms with different core functions instead of only centring on Weibo. Moreover, future research should also take into account the trend of neoliberalisation of digital feminist activism in recent years.

Keywords: Digital Feminism, Social Media, Digital Activism

1. Introduction

Being in a restricted media environment with high levels of top-down censorship, feminist movements in China have long been limited and controlled [1]. In recent years, the uprising of social media platforms has garnered attention for transforming the conducts of feminist activism by local activists. Digital feminism, overtime, is becoming prevalent on social media platforms and making feminism a concept no longer hidden from the public.

The question of whether the cyberspaces with more freedom of speech is encouraging or hindering the growth of domestic feminist movements has thus been raised. Focusing on roles of Chinese social media platforms, the following sections delve into both positive and negative impact

exerted onto the nation's digital feminist activism. Firstly, the essay review previous scholars' arguments regarding the negative roles adopted by the platforms. In particular, the essay shed light on platforms extending the patriarchal ideologies and imposing surveillance and censorship on users' content outputs. Following this, the essay demonstrate the arguments that support the positive contributions on domestic digital feminism, specifically highlighting the flexibility internalised within social media and the linkages between feminist activities to the realm of popular culture. Finally, the conclusion section discusses what have been omitted in previous works and what should continue to be included in future research.

2. Negative roles

2.1. Patriarchal context

Social media platforms draw attention regarding their roles in the field of digital feminism in China. Considering the macro media environment online, scholars have specified both positive and negative impact that the platforms have imposed onto the feminist activism in general.

From a macro perspective, social media platforms, resembling other forms of traditional media, are embodied with the role of showcasing and entrenching the nation's shared socio-cultural knowledge [1]. In other words, regardless offline or online, the domestic socio-cultural institutions of patriarchal and hegemonic values and norms continue to be internalised in discourses and narratives [1-3]. According to previous research, social media platforms still witness framing effects from the top in terms of being prone to construct favourable discourses and narratives that agree with the government authorities [4,5]. Mainstream media accounts, which are owned and controlled by state authorities, possess the power of defining what values and norms are welcomed in the discursive context by actively showcasing and supporting certain types of contents. For example, patriarchal ideologies are thus further manifested and mainstreamed on the online platforms through the circulation of news. Major media accounts on Weibo are able to publish favourable news for men by framing biased stories. Examples used in their research include male criminals being portrayed as protagonists in incidents, hence shedding light on a patriarchal lens towards societal issues [4].

Overtime, a top-down ignorance towards women's struggles would be constructed and reinforced, thus giving men more discursive power by creating male-dominated discourses and narratives. Misogyny and nationalism are therefore further normalised, if not solidified, as parts of the online mainstream values and norms. Being seen as western and imported, feminist contents have been receiving intolerance for casting threats on the indigenous socio-cultural institutions [2,5,6]. Popular posts and comments often reflect such ideologies without receiving any penalty from above [2,5]. Both Zhihu and Weibo have demonstrated high levels of acceptance of online attacks and hatred towards women and feminist accounts despite the platform censorship [2,5]. Overtime, unbalanced power dynamics between women and men are further manifested and rooted online, weakening and marginalising feminist voices in the realm of online media. A negative feedback loop is created where the platforms adopt the role of not only conveying what the top authorities agree but also strengthen the biased beliefs.

2.2. Surveillance and censorship

Furthermore, scholars suggest that another major setback imposed by social media platforms is rooted in the overall media environment of the nation. Having limited media freedom, the state's

power of enforcing top-down surveillance and censorship that target sensitive socio-political contents has been internalised on social media, including feminist contents that are seen as risky to societal stability [5,7-10]. One of the major incidents in the nation's trajectory of digital feminism is the 2015 arrest of the Feminist Five, where five feminist activists were detained for planning on carrying out feminist protests [5,7,10]. This not only marked the power of the state regarding censorships on offline feminist movements but also signalled a loss of offline realms for spreading feminist voices. However, despite the uprising of other online movements has garnered attention on online platforms, such as the "MeToo" in 2018, top-down censorship and surveillance in cyberspaces still penetrated by deleting online petitions [7]. Chinese social media platforms have internalised the role of ensuring the state government's interest within the digital realm [5,7,10]. Instead of carrying out arrests, less direct measures are adopted, such as limiting circulations of posting and commenting, deleting posts and shutting down feminist accounts [5,10,11]. Contrasting with the prevalence of patriarchal and nationalist voices on the platforms, whether the censorship exerted is biased thus remains a question.

Such reality hence reciprocates with Imbach's [1] arguments that digital media in the nation goes beyond serving people's conveniences but also embodies the role of reassuring the state's ideological preferences. With the controlled freedom of speech, users on the platforms are in fact left with limited spaces to voice themselves, overtime further marginalising feminist activists from the mainstream. Social media platforms have only become tools that reinforce what the top authorities perceive as appropriate, further reinforcing the discursive power of shaping and framing narratives. From a macro perspective, online media arenas have not been differentiated from the offline and the nation's patriarchal regime is continued within the digital realm [1,5,7]. In other words, feminist activists are not facing a more advantageous discursive ecosystem compared to the offline due to the deeply rooted censorship and surveillance within the platforms. Digital feminism, therefore, cannot be benefitted from the higher levels of speech freedom on social media. The fundamental functions of the platforms, such as giving voices to all, have only been diluted by censorship.

Nevertheless, although scholars show the setbacks that social media platforms in China have imposed onto the digital feminist activism trajectory, there are certain facets that have been left out of the overall picture. Since 2024 the traditional forms of media, such as the film industry, in the nation have demonstrated a more welcoming attitude towards women-centred works. For example, movie Yolo garnered popularity not only in theatres but also on social media platforms through discussions triggered [12]. This therefore highlights a possible intertwining effect between the traditional and online media that brings feminist topics to a wider range of audiences. Discursive isolation and marginalisation, consequently, is weakened. It is also worth questioning whether the entry of a popular women-based film hints on a heightened tolerance towards feminism from the above.

3. Positive roles

3.1. Flexibility in digital spaces

Scholars also argued that social media platforms are pushing forward digital feminist activism in the nation. On the one hand, social media platforms have the advantage of offering more flexibility for activists to conduct movements. Differentiating from the offline reality where activism has long been monitored and controlled by the state, the higher levels of freedom of speech experienced online in particular attracts feminist activists' preference. In other words, it is more flexible to conduct activities on social media since more discursive spaces are given. Recognising the macro

context with discursive and linguistic constraints on activists, scholars shed light on the activists' tactic of avoiding direct challenges towards the top authorities [4,8] [11,13,14]. Specifically, users tend to practise "digital masquerading" that allows them to garner publicness and exert collective influence despite the potential criminalisation and punishment from the platform authorities [8]. The combinations of visual images and literal contents on Weibo demonstrates the advantages that social media platforms hold in terms of enabling activists to adopt various forms of mediums to internalise their rebellious voices and agency without being punished [8].

Despite the censorship and surveillance, activists' tactics are implanted with the recognition of risks and desire to negotiate the top-down restraints. In recent years, users also incorporate sarcasm in their content outputs that entrench the effect of masquerading, which cannot be detected as inappropriate by the censorship schemes [4,14]. Such linguistic adaptations thus highlight not only the awareness of embedded top-down control but also the flexible conducts of activism made possible online. Differentiating from the previous forms of masquerading, such acts of rebellion and challenging is able to expand in scale and are infiltrated into mainstreams. Studies of specific terms, such as "nande" and "nanbao", show that the coining of the certain words in the contemporary social media ecosystem is embedded with the ambition to question and confront the patriarchal regime [4,14]. As the mainstream media accounts continuously produce and reinforce narrative and discursive bias towards men, usages of these terms thus showcase bottom-up contests of the patriarchal ideologies and values. Moreover, the adoption of such terms also allows users to escape from heavy censorships and surveillance since the internal satire is not always detected and punished by the platform authorities [1,7]. By adopting mediated expressions, more cyber spaces are hence taken, leading to growing discursive power of feminist activists. Activists are eventually empowered through re-defining the mainstream values and norms via the re-creations of linguistics. Reciprocating to Tan [8], the awareness of risks and the agency of constructing new discursive agendas are further manifested. Despite the failure to transform the overall online environment, social media platforms are offering feminist activism heightened flexibility to negotiate new opportunities of voicing.

3.2. Blending into the popular culture

On the other hand, social media platforms are embedded with functional advantages that could empower activists to further garner public awareness and visibility [1,11,13]. By taking up more digital spaces on social media platforms, feminist activities are thus blended into the realm of popular culture overtime [1,6,7,11,13]. According to Wang and Tavmen [13], social media platforms are productive regarding gathering public awareness of feminist movements online. Specifically, by giving voices to all, the creation of hashtags and posts could fuel the progress of community building while allowing interactions and dialogues to be carried out [7,13]. Using the example of online campaigns during the COVID outbreaks in 2020, it is argued that the hashtags successfully generated public attention by engaging massive amounts of users in online conversations and discussions surrounding women's unseen contributions in pandemic. There are also similar remarks regarding successful digital feminist activism during 2016 Women's Day [11]. The specific hashtag of "fansanqiguosanba" also garnered collective attention and rebelled against the neoliberalisation of Women's Day by adopting slogans and literal posts combined with pictures to attract collective discussions [11]. Community building effects were achieved as the hashtag witnessed popularity and rising public awareness, especially manifested through increasing numbers of users that participated in the conversations [7,11]. Targeting the intangible aspects of biased gender norms and values, the

hashtag “fansanqiguosanba” successfully expands the scale of movement through accumulating discursive power on Weibo overtime [11].

Moreover, both hashtags share the commonality regarding the bottom-up connection to the mainstream authorities. On the one hand, authors specifically highlight the success of “SeeFemaleWorkers” hashtag on Weibo in terms of attracting the government officials’ attention on women workers’ unseen needs, which eventually brought tangible results of massive donations for female healthcare workers [13]. On the other hand, activist groups participated in Women’s Day dialogues were also able to deepen their connections with journalists that belonged to mainstream media organisations [11]. Overtime, social media platforms not only make feminist activism more prevalent in the cyberspaces but also internalise the niche political movements as parts of the popular culture [6,7,11]. With heightened engagement of the audiences, circulation of feminist posts under the hashtags is also normalised as parts of the discursive trends. Such achievements thus tell a different story from the memory of 2015 detention of Feminist Five. Connection to the top authorities also diverges from the knowledge of activists are under constant censorship and surveillance overtime [1,7,11,13]. Whether the public would remain intolerant towards feminist activism should therefore be doubted if taking a long-term perspective.

Despite agreeing that social media platforms have been making positive contributions to digital feminist activism, authors’ arguments are nuanced in terms of how much freedom of speech is granted towards the platform users. It thus remains a question that if the top authorities and the controlled social media are friendly towards, if not open for grassroots political activities. Meanwhile, it is also worth noting that the majority of scholars focused mainly on Weibo. The uprising of other social media competitors, such as Xiaohongshu and Douyin, should be paid more attention as users nowadays prefer the unique functions embedded. Whether the ways of conducting feminist activism in digital arenas, therefore, should also raise questions.

4. Conclusion

China’s strict offline media environment provides preferable conditions for online social media platforms to attract users for the benefit of higher levels of freedom of speech. Despite still suffering from state control internalised within a patriarchal discursive context, such as censorship and surveillance, digital feminism has grown in recent years while activists continue to voice themselves in cyberspaces. If adopting a macro perspective, it could become increasingly difficult to conclude whether social media is inhibiting or promoting feminist activism. In other words, the online media context in China has become more complex compared to the era when Weibo was the single most popular platform in the nation, leaving feminist activists limited choices for spreading awareness. Future research on digital feminism in the nation might eventually need to shift focus to other platforms when looking at overall trajectories. Xiaohongshu, for example, is garnering growing popularity nowadays with lower levels of censorship and surveillance on women-related topics and discussions. Feminist accounts and hashtags prevail on the platform without encountering high risks of being punished or criminalised.

However, it is crucial to take into account the long-existing ideological roots in the patriarchal system. Despite social media has granted activists the empowerment to build communities through heightened discursive power, disagreements and conflicts surrounding feminist contents were still unavoidable [11,13]. Meanwhile, it is important to continue to position, if not to recognise, parts of digital feminism in the field of online popular culture, especially highlighting the internalised commercialisation and neoliberalisation. Online feminist accounts is relying more on profit-driven partnerships, signalling potential risks of commodifying online feminist activism overtime [11].

Being in a consumerism-based context of online popular culture, it is thus necessary to consider the uncertainty regarding the neoliberalisation of online feminism overtime.

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