

A War against Men and the State: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Stigmatization in Social Media of Chinese Context in "MeToo" Era

Oujin Zou^{1,*†}, Taozhe Xu^{2,†}, Yue Pei^{3,†}

¹School of Public Administration and Humanities, Dalian Maritime University, Dalian, Liaoning Province, China, 116000

²Jigang Senior High school of Shandong Province, Jinan, China, 250000

³Sociology Department, School of Public Administration, South China Agricultural University, Guangzhou, China, 510642

*Corresponding author. Email: guanghua.ren@geccacademy.cn

†These authors contributed equally.

ABSTRACT

This paper prepared to solve what kinds of stigma suffered by victims in the MeToo movement in China. Through analyzing texts selected from Sina Weibo according to an incident of Xianzi, we concluded four types of stigma affected individuals and showed the dilemma in asking for women's rights. Victims were under pressure from rape myth, feminist, profit and politics when the regulations of Weibo about reporting did lead to the negative outcome of stigma on wealth or mental health.

Keywords: #MeToo, stigma, sexual harassment, feminism.

1. INTRODUCTION

#MeToo movement is a global social movement against sexual harassment. It called upon all victims who have experienced sexual harassment to disclose their personal experiences on social media with the hashtag "MeToo", tens of thousands of women responses to the campaign. #MeToo movement cause a huge impact on social media around the world, including China.

American feminist jurists represented by Catharine MacKinnon classify sexual harassment as gender discrimination; Catharine MacKinnon defines sexual harassment as "unreasonable sexual demands made by men against women in the circumstance of unequal social power," and she asserts that men's use their power to sexually harass women is a manifestation of male hegemony. Sexual harassment violates women's right to their bodies and degrades women's gendered status, prevents them from gaining equal status compared to men in society, and pursues gender equality [1].

Social media plays an important role in launching this movement and also explodes its disadvantage [2]. It empowered women to speak for themselves. Then the key opinion leaders are driving forces to promote the action

in the MeToo movement [3]. Individual and collective narratives are successful in dismantling the stigma surrounding disclosures of sexual violence. However, the MeToo movement requires a certain level of knowledge, press and public opinion resources, so victims have been screened, and many of them cannot speak out. One empirical study showed that barriers to self-disclosure for children in China which is suitable for other ages include a severe lack of sexual knowledge among children and their families; children's fears (of revenge, family involvement and damaging kinship relationships); children's shame due to sociocultural stigmatization of sexuality; lack of timely support and help; and negative feedback to children trying to disclose [4].

At the same time, the victim women will face various moral pressure and life risks when they expose their own experiences [5]. Similar to Chinese circumstances, in other Asia countries like Japan and South Korea, women continue to face a powerful backlash that includes victim-blaming and social and professional sanctions for speaking up [6]. A rape culture model has been clarified, including traditional gender roles, sexism, adversarial sexual beliefs, hostility toward women, and acceptance of violence [7]. A work revealed seven stable and interpretable components of rape myth acceptance

labeled (1) She asked for it; (2) it was not really rape; (3) he did not mean to; (4) she wanted it; (5) she lied; (6) rape is a trivial event, and (7) rape is a deviant event [8]. A Chinese study has analyzed the comments on sexual assault cases and found that these comments evaluate the dress, status, wealth, attitude, and even the time of the incident of female victims to come up with the conclusion that the victimized woman is indecent, which is a kind of slut-shaming [9]. Due to it, the female victims who speak personal experiences publicly will be stigmatized to a great extent.

Overall, these studies highlight that those victims in the MeToo movement have been under dilemma. The main weakness of the current study is the failure to put forward an integral and specific mechanism. What remains unclear is how the stigma of victims occurs and the outcome in the MeToo movement of China.

This paper aims to explore stigmatization in the MeToo movement. We prepare to collect and analyze the discursive interaction between victims who disclose their experiences and public from a micro perspective, revealing the tension in the MeToo movement, which makes full use of discourse strategy, digging into deep power relation in speaking, so that understand the circumstance of female in the digital feminism movement.

2. METHOD

2.1. Theoretical framework

Researching into stigma from a labeling theory perspective can be tracked into H.S. Becker. Labels in there contain two key elements, which respectively are norms and stereotypes. According to certain social norms in social interaction, people classify normal and socially expected behavior and deviant. If the subject is labeled, whose behavior will be scrutinized, analyzed, and punished by society with stereotypes, and the subject will gradually identify on one's own with the label and finish the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Going against the traditional norms, individuals who hold feminist views from a power perspective to analyze the phenomenon of sexual violence will be exposed to attack and even negative labeling, which activates the process of feminist identity.

This research utilized qualitative critical discourse analysis, a suitable method for studying the women's movement with a deep tradition of discursive politics to explore the stigma with rich materials. The MeToo movement has generated many digital discourses and texts, including victims' narratives, news reports, and public opinion on specific cases, one of the main sources of stigmatization of victims and feminist activists. In theory, Fairclough launched a three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis, which had three classes: text production, discursive practice, and social practice to

interpret the relation between text and society. Wang&Yang developed it and created a dynamic model, adding ideology as the mediate variable to reveal that not only discourse is limited by social construction but also can maintain, destroy or reform it [10].

2.2. Participants

This research searched information on Sina Weibo (hereinafter called Weibo), a social media platform where users can post a long or short article, pictures, video, and live to make instant sharing come true. According to the User Development Report in 2020, amount of daily active users reached 511 million in September 2020. The 90s and 00s reached 78%, and women accounted for a higher percentage of users. There are more than 140,000 government-certified accounts, and half of their followers are the 90s generation, which shows that Weibo is an important platform for the government and young people to communicate.

The study conducts a case study that focuses on Xianzi. A girl revealed in 2018 that one of the most famous CCTV hosts, Jun Zhu, had molested her when she was an intern 4 years ago. The case against Jun Zhu first began a judicial court session on December 2, 2020. Xianzi's Weibo account has been banned since May 2021. This case raised much attention rapidly and has been heated debate from the public. According to Xianzi, it was such torment for her to speak repeatedly about the encounter that labeled her a victim of sexual harassment.

Since then, Xianzi has kept fighting for her rights through legal measures and provided support and assistance to other victims who have similar experiences, promoting the spread and development of the #MeToo movement in China. This study explores the process and specific ways of stigma as victims of sexual harassment and as feminist activists.

2.3. Procedure

This study utilized qualitative data from social media, mainly Weibo, to analyze the type of stigma. The researchers browsed through the context of microblog and comments of Xianzi's account named Xianzi with her friends and searched the user-generated content from 2018 to 2020 when the case of Xianzi received great attention based on keywords like Xianzi, Jun Zhu, etc. Self-reported content from Xianzi about incidents also would be considered. Then saved textual materials and finally formed a self-constructed corpus to analyze.

Taking the theoretical basis above, this research found stigmatization of victims and summarized mechanisms about how stigma operates through the discourse constructed in cyberspace with heated debates about the case of Xianzi, aiming to understand the power in digital

feminism movement in China with a dynamic discursive process.

3. RESULTS AND CASE STUDY

After a typological analysis of different social identities for Xianzi, it was concluded that four main ideal types of stigmatizations in the MeToo movement of China are rape myth as the victim, killjoy role as feminist, for-profit and political pressure.

3.1 Victim

As a victim of sexual harassment, the main stigma is rooted in the wide rape myth. Burt (1980) defined rape myths as "prejudicial, stereotyped, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, and rapists" and theorized that they serve to create the circumstance of "hostile to rape victims" [11]. In the case of Xianzi, these myths included body shame, lack of strength of evidence, and absolving the perpetrator.

Unlike many victims who choose to remain hidden in cyberspace, Xianzi has shown her true face, appearing in videos and posting selfies on social media, which has led to attacks on her looks by netizens who have the imagination of beautiful victims. It implied that only women with perfect appearance deserve to be a sexual resource. Due to it, her testimony has been declining of trustworthiness because she was ugly, and no one would like to bother her. The saying goes like this: "Can you change to a quiet place to film the video? Forgot to say: You are too ugly to be harassed."

"Look at the gaunt face and blank stare. She is totally a psychopath."

"I am literally confused why the woman with such looks slandered the man and said he molested her."

At the same time, some people think that Xianzi, as a victim, is too relaxed and happy, actively posting about her daily life on social networks with another account, and does not seem to be devastated by the sexual assault. That narrative of Xianzi cannot be trusted revealed that verdicts in sexual harassment were tough.

According to Xianzi, she has been harassed, which had not been instrumented in Chinese present law, so it was difficult to verify. However, in most incidents, it was stressful for victims to prove the sexual behavior was non-consent in front of law-enforcement officers according to the present law, which is unfriendly to women. And it was unreasonable to require victims to perform to accord with the image that filled with sorrow which mostly existed in people's imagination.

She always said how painful and suffering she was, but someone found another private account of her. She kept watching the football game all night and yelling on Weibo just another day after the event, then she kept

starstruck and traveling, posting many selfies more than stars. How painful she is!

Without evidence but just yelling unreasonably, or delaying the trial, what else she can do? Four years have passed since this matter happened. If she has any significant evidence, she cannot be just posting Weibo.

Because the perpetrator was a celebrity with reputation and power, someone denied the narration of Xianzi and held the opinion that perpetrator Jun Zhu has suffered a career setback and embarrassing stigma due to false accusations. This reflects the social and cultural awareness linking sex and power, which men with social status and fame can use in exchange for female sexual resources.

I did not like Zhu's hosting style in the past, but it is unfair to let him leave his job without trial of sexual harassment. His work hard to become a host of CCTV is counted as the experience of grassroots counterattack. I did not know the ins and outs of this matter after reading Liji's article, and I felt normal people could not harass her in that kind of environment. Hope the truth will be revealed soon.

Xianzi said winning or losing is not important. She has won history and set an example. Even if Zhu Jun finally wins the lawsuit, he will probably not be able to back to the stage of CCTV, indeed regrettable.

Stand by Mr. Zhu; a clean hand wants no washing, let all the bad show their true intention, for her benefit, a good and highly respected person was sacrificed.

However, sexual harassment in the case of Xianzi was based on the difference of power.

There are posts to show the struggle and how Xianzi survived the great pressure: "From 2014 to the present, I have told the police and the court several times about what happened. Repeating it is a torment for me. No matter how many efforts I did to evade, the process of being sexually harassed still gives me a kind of sexual shame—— in the society that everyone has known me. I always worry that they will recall my embarrassment and weakness in the dressing room when people see me. The label of the victim of sexual harassment will not be going away for me" [12]. "At that time, as an intern and a junior student, I was too afraid that if I were impolite, I would offend him, the host and chief producer of Art Life. Then I would be expelled from the internship group and lose the opportunity to complete my final assignment. I wanted to leave there, even though I was in a stressful state, wanted to cry but could not stop trembling and lost my voice, and my head was full of shame and fear. Even in such a situation, I still did not give up on trying to leave." Be opposed to sexual violence from a feminist perspective, as a critique of current patriarchy, challenged existing norms in many ways, such as the definition of sexual harassment. The definition is vague in the Chinese

context, and the related cultural views are facing rapid reformation. Shen (2004) gave a narrow definition of sexual harassment that an act of sexual connotation committed by a relatively strong person against weak one, not for a normal intimate or sexual relationship, that causes the weak person to resent or resist, thinking explicit definition is the only way to find a solution in the current social culture [13].

In the case of Xianzi, there are still common myths about sexual assault, and victims will be under fire and be accused. Female victims face slut-shaming if their sexual behavior deviates from traditional gender expectations, reflecting deep misogyny in cyberspace.

3.2. Feminist

"But then she keeps punching." Some people condemned Xianzi as she was a feminist whose actions about helping other victims in sexual violence were criticized. The implication is that it is acceptable for her to be a victim of sexual assault, but not a feminist who advocates gender equality generally.

"I had been following her for a long time and sympathized with her. But later, she became a feminazi somehow, punching fists in Weibo every day. That is so disgusting. And think twice about her evidence, 40 minutes, 40 minutes! LOL~" This social media user's comment is very representative.

Feminists are also heavily stigmatized in the Chinese media surrounding. Because the Chinese words for "right" and "fist" are homophonic, some people think they are "punching their fist" when advocate women's rights, meaning they do not ask for proper rights and fulfill obligations but only chase benefit and consistently degrade male. There is also the word feminazi in English, which blends Feminist with Nazi and describes an extreme and militant feminist. Differentiated from "normal feminism," which also has a vague definition, the expression of Xianzi will not be welcomed into social media.

"I mean feminazi, not feminist." It is difficult for the public to tell the difference.

In traditional media, feminism has been the subject that received considerable stigma, regarded as radical, biased, and unobjective [14]. There has also a severe stigma in today's Chinese social media. A study attributed it to the still deeply rooted traditional patriarchal ideology, the not-yet localized western feminism, and the symbolic carnival of cyberspace [15]. Some scholars holding similar views with stigmatization also attributed this to the growth of extreme feminist organizations. The description of extreme feminism as "an overemphasis on women's rights in judging gender inequality" has led more readers to misunderstand the core of feminist ideology [16]. It reflected that the debates about feminism

in Chinese public opinion or scholarly context are chaotic and stigmatized. If someone speaks out that the world is not equal and there are still many gender discrimination, violence and oppression, he or she will be a killjoy, which is the daily life experience of feminists [17].

Feminist perspectives can be accused of creating gender hostility. The newest study concentrated on the heated topic of Weibo revealed that the ideology of patriarchy in cyberspace is generated by a combination of factors such as the transformation of modernization and a media that is filled with male-centered discourse [18]. A case study said that digital feminist activism has brought about the increasing problem of misogyny online rather than social change [19].

3.3. For-profit

At the same time, with these two identities, Xianzi was stigmatized as an overnight sensation who deliberately chased the benefit. The public exposure and rapid dissemination of the MeToo movement have been interpreted by some netizens as profit-seeking behavior, meaning that they can become famous and make a living from the followers and public attention they receive. Behind it are the rise of the Internet celebrity economy and the phenomenon of fans consumption.

The Chinese Internet has only seen a spurt of feminist issues and debates in recent years. But the subjectivities in such conversations were not individuals who held rational thinking but more like the key opinion leaders and followers. Under this premise, it is understandable that netizens are cautious and resistant to icons with high attention. But the fact that feminist topics are considered as publicity tricks indiscriminately removes the possibility of intervening in any serious matter to some extent.

Let the bullets fly for a while is a comment that comes up with many sexual assault incidents. It means waiting for the truth, waiting for more information to come to light, and implying the victims' narrative is most probably false accusation, shifting the responsibility of determining the truth or false in space and time.

Social media is frequently used, and information dissemination is somewhat decentralized, and it is also the main place for Internet users to participate in public discussions. But this exposes the media literacy of Internet users. Netizens speak with sexist and bigoted emotions and only think about exporting their positions without effort to reach a consensus. "Do you know her if without this incident? Where are her fans? What are the spiritual leaders and god-making movements in the internet age for?" "She looks like dreaming of being famous!" "Just want to catch people's attention." These are the most common judgments for Xianzi.

3.4. Political pressure

Xianzi exposed that she has been unjustifiably repeatedly delayed her trial sessions, which made her receive attacked comments about her “suspicious of national law system”. “I F**king got that you are right all the time and its fault of the court and legislation. Did it show the darkness of our country, right? Was it a suitable reason to attack the government, right? You F**king disgusting.” “Bring shame on the chief judge before the trial, confusing right and wrong, and faking an accident to claim for compensation in public opinion. What a vicious trick!”

Xianzi as a feminist, also was stigmatized as unpatriotic power who tried to launch the revolution against the present institution. In general, the identity of feminists is taken as a hostile foreign force. From the point of view of some netizens, feminist activists make a great profit from separatist forces which want to evoke the internal strife in China, who should be intervened and arrested by the official power. “#Xianzi with her friends# Be a feminazi and spread gender conflict, which one do you earn? The US dollar, the Japanese yen, or the Taiwan dollar?” “Xianzi with her friends, this whatever with his friends exactly is the signal of foreign media.” If someone has a question about existing laws and the law enforcement process in sexual violence, it is seen as an act of distrust and political slander, reflecting politicization in most public issues. When ordinary people can accuse victims of sexual assault and feminists of being unpatriotic, strong patriotic nationalism can be seen.

Then, the victims may face an official crackdown on Internet freedom. Chinese censorship has impacted discussions on Weibo, and users also adapted to avoid censorship [20]. The worst outcome is that the narrative of victims is deleted, and the incident cannot be spread. To maintain order and stability, critical debates like accuse of sexual violence for powerful celebrities will be limited online. There has not been enough rational space for victims to express themselves, and those who have accounts in cyberspace may face banned from the official censorship.

3.5 Media: the censorship of Weibo

Media provide technical methods for stigmatization as the main platform for victims to expose experience. Weibo is not a transparent and liberal platform that sifts through all the information.

Weibo has strict rules to control users' information, and the latter has less right in managing tweeting content. According to the Service Usage Agreement of Weibo, the operators have the right to censor, monitor, and tackle users' behavior and information, including personal account information, tweeting content, and

communicating with other users. If users are discovered or complained about violations, the operators will take necessary measures, including (1) editing, deleting, or blocking relative content; (2) warning, banning or canceling the account; (3) limiting or prohibiting some or all of the functions of the account; (4) reporting to relevant regulatory authorities or state agencies [21].

To avoid "improper speaking", Weibo also has a reporting mechanism that users can inform others' content. The offending content includes information harmful to current affairs, irregular and so on [22]. The laws added two new forms in February 2021, respectively, “malicious marketing” and “promoting hatred” [23].

When an account is banned, Weibo will send a private message pointing out that the account user has violated the convention but will not specify the details of the violation. In the case of Xianzi, the governance of Weibo has created a black box that is not transparent and open in which all kinds of "offending information" are included. There was a meaningful movement that feminist activist Liang Xiaomen sued Weibo in April 2021 for her blocked account and aimed to reveal the dilemma of feminists [24].



Figure 1 Xianzi’s private message shows that her account is banned.

Giving the power of reporting speech to the people required carefulness, leading to stigmatized ones facing crackdown and suppression. Philip A. Kuhn wrote in *Soulstealers* that:

“Without a workable alternative, leaders can manipulate mass fears and turn them with terrible force against the deviants and scapegoats of our day-anyone vulnerable to labeling, either for his social origins or his exotic beliefs-with none to stand between [25].”

3.6. Discussion

As a global feminist movement against sexual harassment, the #MeToo movement is women’s opposition to physical harassment and violations, protection of their own body ownership, and fighting for

gender inequality of women in the context of patriarchal society. It spread the thought of feminism like “sex is power” “personal is political” and made many obvious disputes that definition of sexual harassment and the awareness of gender violence issue of public.

We can conclude the stigmatization of victims and feminists in MeToo. The victims will be under severe various blaming due to the rape myth, while feminists are seen as the role of a killjoy. Creating gender hostility and fighting against the existing institutions are important stigmas suffered by someone who has two labels simultaneously, and deeper stigma is that who take actions to gender issues profit from many followers or foreign organizations, which are particularly evident in the MeToo movement. In total, Chinese women are subject to a significant degree of slut-shaming and political stigma in public opinion of the MeToo movement and are condemned as provoking a war against men and the state. Behind the local MeToo movement in China reflects an Internet space shrouded by a commercialized atmosphere, highly intense political management, and a pervasive misogyny culture.

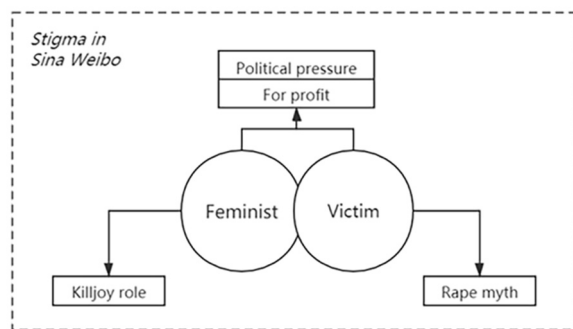


Figure 2 The stigma of the MeToo movement in Sina Weibo

The digital space provided an opportunity for victims to speak out about their experience with less stress and shared inspiration and established a community for women who have similar encounters [26]. However, the anonymous in cyberspace makes virtual violence easier and reduces the cost of spreading stigma, which is harmful. The experience of sexual harassment, cyber violence, blocked or forbidden in social media, all lead to a terrible mental health condition, which is a negative outcome of stigma. Therapist Zhang Chun said that women might internalize extensive agony, which did not result from specific trauma but due to patriarchy [27].

To individual activists in the MeToo movement, clinic therapists must provide psychological concealing with feminism perspective, taking the individual experience of rights protections in sexual violence as important key events. However, it is no fault of victims or deviates performance need to be corrected, which the

kind of therapy is friendly to them and can remove political depression or fatigue to some extent.

This finding will also help us to think about the change of institutional level. The MeToo movement needs to connect or contradict with wider social structure and power system[28]. Greater efforts are needed to ensure policies. For policymakers, it is necessary to promote the education of comprehensive sexuality and media literacy education, integrate gender awareness into media governance system building, better regulate interactions online space, and make citizens understand deeply equal gender relationships.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that the mechanism of stigma against victims in the MeToo movement occurred in social media by researching the discourse including narrative, comments and regulations of Weibo in the case of Xianzi. The most obvious finding to emerge from this study is that victims were under pressure from four types of stigma, respectively rape myth, feminist, profit and politics, when the regulations of Weibo about reporting made stigma did lead to the negative outcome on wealth or mental health. The major limitation of this study is that the research mostly focused on the perpetrator of stigma but ignored the response of victims. Further research could explore how activists live and keep the movement in the stigma to understand the interaction of different subjectivities better.

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