



The Dilemma of Women's Voices in the Post-Epidemic Era: Misconceptions of Feminism on Digital Media Platforms — the Example of Sina Weibo

Yuewen Liu

Zhou Enlai School of Government, Nankai University, Tianjin, 300000, China

Corresponding author email: 2352707307@qq.com

Abstract. Weibo, one of China's largest digital media platforms, has become a major platform for women's voices to fight for equality. However, misconceptions of feminism on Weibo have become obstacles to women's voices, for which the platforms didn't post women's views prominently. From the perspective of women themselves, this paper adopted a questionnaire to study the misunderstanding of feminism and its impact on women's expression on Weibo.

Keywords: Feminism; Women's Voices; Digital Media Platforms; the Post-Epidemic Era

1 Introduction

On April 12, 2022, a Chinese media outlet showed respect for revered figures in Communist China's history by posting pictures on Weibo. Some female users posted to the site, complained that the article and its photos had entirely overlooked the contributions of women in Chinese history and culture and asked that the site rectify that omission and include the stories and pictures of women. Rather than responding by updating their celebration of great moments and great leaders in China's past and including images of women who have been essential players, the media outlet attacked the women who had complained. The outlet called them fake feminists who provoked gender confrontation aiming at social unrest.

The incident immediately sparked widespread discussion. Many women who dared to speak out were attacked. The platform blocked and banned the women, while some netizens came after them with cyber violence and physical threats. Behind this incident was the misunderstanding of feminism which has hindered the contemporary women's movement for equality.

This study explored the phenomenon of Chinese women's difficulties in fighting for their rights and equality online in the post-epidemic era, and examined the misconceptions of feminism on China's most popular social media platform.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The Digital Media and Feminism

In May 2014, Twitter exploded with the #YesAllWomen, with many female users posting tweets of stories of discrimination, harassment, and violence they had experienced, sparking widespread concern about sexism, misogyny, and violence against women. After this incident, research on feminism in digital media gained widespread attention [1].

In recent years, some prior research questioned the roles of digital media in feminist movements. Digital media have become an essential channel for women's voices, but there has been growing hostility toward women and feminism growing in digital media [2]. Social platforms can be an essential window into feminist advocacy, but people can also use social platforms to promote misogyny and vent gender violence [5].

Overall, previous studies highlighted the vital role of digital media in feminist advocacy and the feminist movement while critiquing the negative stereotypes of feminism that exist on digital media platforms, but how to eliminate those adverse effects needs further study. Most existing research findings take international social media — such as Twitter and Facebook — as their research platforms. However, because women have had a challenging time in China, and have long been subjected to Confucianism, a masculine culture, Chinese feminists have used digital platforms to fight for equality and respect [4]. Therefore, Weibo, one of China's largest digital media platforms, deserves to be investigated as a case study to fill the research gap.

3 Methodology

This paper used questionnaires to study the dilemma of female fighting for women's rights on Weibo, how the misconceptions of feminism affected them and what role COVID-19 played.

This study is based on a questionnaire survey, one of the most basic and commonly used methods in research [8]. A questionnaire with 19 multiple-choice questions was purposefully designed, focused on perceptions of feminism, feelings of female users when expressing their opinions on Weibo, and the impact of COVID-19.

Questionnaires were posted on Weibo for 2 days, from May 28 to May 29. There were 214 questionnaires completed, 183 by respondents identifying as women. As this study examines the difficulties of women in expressing their opinions on the Sina Weibo platform, and seeks the perspective of women themselves, the findings analyze those 183 questionnaires.

4 Findings and Discussion

More than half of respondents said they had encountered limited personal ability, pressure from traditional attitudes, physical threats and cyber violence, or misunderstandings from the outside world. A small percentage said they had experienced personal emotional outbursts and limited message distribution.

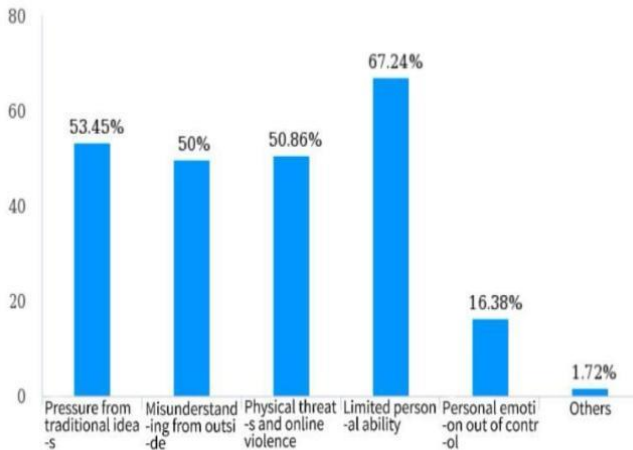


Fig. 1. What difficulties have you encountered in expressing views?

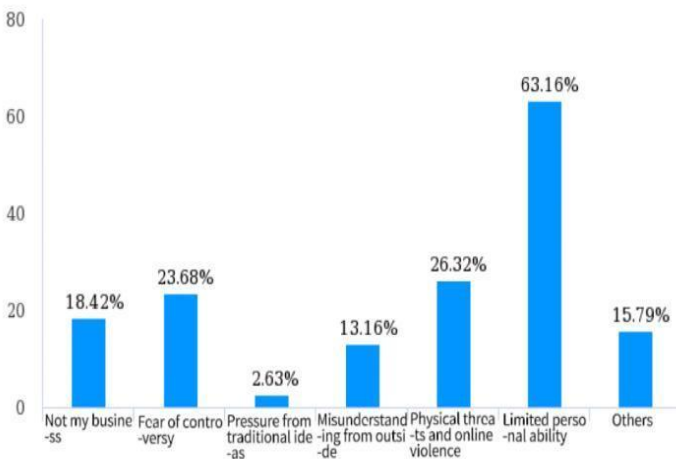


Fig. 2. Why are you reluctant to express your views?

The study further queried respondents who said they were reluctant to speak out about their reasons: 63.16% attributed their reluctance to their limited personal capacity. Others said they were reluctant to voice their opinions for fear of physical threats, cyber violence and causing controversy. Still others said they did not engage because they

believed similar incidents had nothing to do with them or that responding to the attacks on other women would lead to verbal aggression. Pressure from traditional beliefs, not knowing the whole picture, barriers from social media, and the perceived meaninglessness of speaking out on social media platforms also contributed to their reluctance to speak out.

Most female users, — both those who reported difficulties expressing their opinions and those who said they were reluctant to do so — cited their limited ability to think and express as one of the main reasons. On the one hand, this phenomenon reflected women's growing awareness of self-reflection and self-growth. On the other hand, that also reflected women's concern about the consequences of voicing their opinions. Women have developed an inferiority complex due to the long-standing notion of male superiority over women and the attacks on feminism on the Internet [6]. An inferior complex may be why some women were reluctant to express their views on Weibo or support other women when they have been attacked on the site.

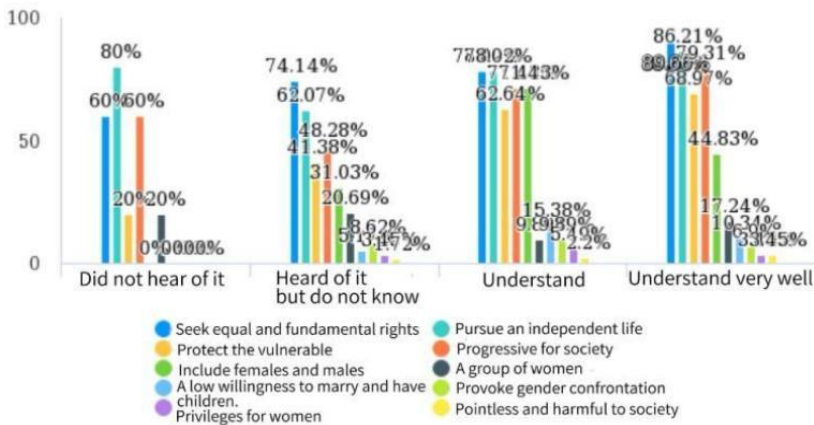


Fig. 3. X: Do you know about feminism? Y: Which of the following do you agree with regarding feminism?

An interesting phenomenon was found in this study. The majority of respondents who said they had not heard of feminism were more optimistic about feminism. However, some respondents who said they knew or knew a lot about feminism had deeper misconceptions of feminism than those who said they had not heard of or had heard of but did not know about feminism.

For example, 14 respondents who thought they knew about feminism labeled feminists as having a low willingness to marry and have children (14/91) — a much higher proportion than those who had not heard of feminism (0/5) and those who had heard of feminism but did not know about it (3/58). These responses showed that some Weibo users' understanding of feminism has inherent misconceptions.

According to scholars who have studied women's views on feminism, many women have misunderstandings of feminism — often misunderstandings at the two extremes. Some women believed feminism meant asking feminists to be radical in the struggle

for rights, so they did that. However, their radical words and actions made people think feminism was bigoted and hostile [10]. On the other hand, some women were afraid to speak out and be perceived as feminists because they believed feminism had negative connotations [9].

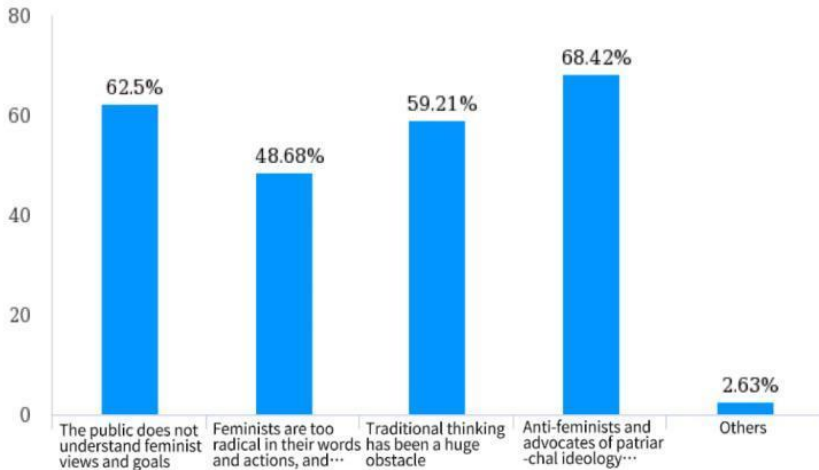


Fig. 4. What do you think are the main reasons for the misconceptions of feminism?

In this study, among the respondents who believe that feminism is misunderstood by Weibo users, 68.42% believed that the deliberate smearing of feminism by anti-feminists and advocates of patriarchal ideology were the main reasons for the misconceptions of feminism. With the development of new media, anti-feminists have continuously modified their attack strategies on feminism in response to the changing digital environment, and taken actions to further intensify public misconceptions about feminism [3].

It is worth noting here that the interpretation as well as popularization of feminism in China has ironically been dominated by men, often those heavily influenced by patriarchal ideology. Perhaps not coincidentally, the stereotypes of feminism have been deepening. The lack of positive coverage and scientific popularization of feminism in the main media on Weibo has led to a lack of understanding of the views and goals of feminism among the general public [9].

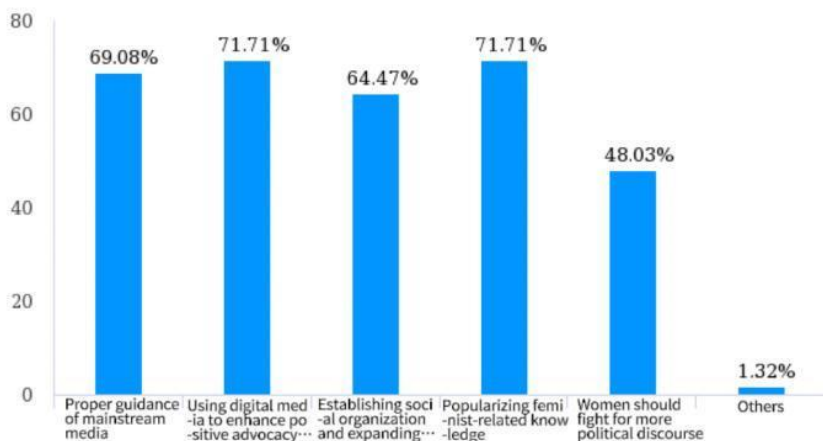


Fig. 5. What do you think are the important ways to resolve the misconceptions of feminism?

According to the study, more than 70% of respondents thought using digital media to strengthen positive propaganda about feminism and popularizing knowledge about feminism would help resolve misconceptions of feminism. Almost two-thirds of the respondents thought proper guidance from the main media could help resolve the misconceptions of feminism. More than 60% of respondents believed it was necessary to establish social organizations about feminism and expand more channels for women's voices. The idea that feminists should strive for more political rights also received 48.03% of respondents' support.

5 Questionnaire

1. Please choose sex.
 - A. Male.
 - B. Female.
 - C. Prefer not to say.
2. Do you know about feminism?
 - A. Did not hear of it.
 - B. Heard of it but do not know.
 - C. Understand.
 - D. Understand very well.
3. Which of the following do you agree with regarding feminism?
 - A. Seek equal and fundamental rights.
 - B. Pursue an independent life.
 - C. Protect the vulnerable.
 - D. Progressive for society.
 - E. Include females and males.
 - F. A group of women.

- G. A low willingness to marry and have children.
 - H. Provoke gender confrontation.
 - I. Privileges for women.
 - J. Pointless and harmful to society.
4. Have you ever fought for rights or helped women in their fights for rights on Weibo (including comments, retweets, etc.) ?
- A. Yes.
 - B. No.
5. What difficulties have you encountered in expressing views?
- A. Pressure from traditional ideas.
 - B. Misunderstanding from outside.
 - C. Physical threats and online violence.
 - D. Limited personal ability.
 - E. Personal emotions out of control.
 - F. Others _____
6. Why are you reluctant to express your views?
- A. Not my business.
 - B. Fear of controversy.
 - C. Pressure from traditional ideas.
 - D. Misunderstanding from outside.
 - E. Physical threats and online violence.
 - F. Limited personal ability.
 - G. Others _____
7. Do you think feminism has been misunderstood by Weibo user?
- A. Yes.
 - B. No.
8. What do you think are the main reasons for the misconceptions of feminism?
- A. The public does not understand feminist views and goals.
 - B. Feminists are too radical in their words and actions, and it is difficult to win the hearts of people.
 - C. Traditional thinking has been a huge obstacle.
 - D. Anti-feminists and advocates of patriarchal ideology deliberately discredit feminism.
 - E. Others _____
9. What do you think are the important ways to resolve the misconceptions of feminism?
- A. Proper guidance of mainstream media.
 - B. Using digital media to enhance positive advocacy for feminism.
 - C. Establishing social organizations and expanding voice channels.
 - D. Popularizing feminist-related knowledge.
 - E. Women should fight for more political discourse.
 - F. Others _____

6 Conclusion

Today, digital media platforms, such as Weibo, have become an essential way for women to fight for their rights in China [9]. However, women's voices have been caught in a dilemma. Women who speak out on social media platforms to fight for rights may suffer from online violence. On the contrary, they will lose their rights if they give up speaking out because they fear harm.

Therefore, this paper studied the dilemma of women's voices through a questionnaire survey. The main conclusions can be found from this work as follows.

Most women felt oppressed on Weibo, and many fought back for themselves or others. Some women did not speak out: some because they felt they had a limited personal ability to do so, some additionally for fear of being targeted.

Several women didn't understand some of the basics of feminism because of traditional patriarchal ideology, public misunderstanding, and feminists' radical behaviors.

Based on the available data, this study made a clear analysis. That is of great value in filling research gaps and addressing social issues. Although the findings of this investigation completed previous studies, it's not enough. With the development of social media platforms, according to the new situation of women's voices and the change in public attitudes toward feminism, more in-depth research can be continued based on richer data and other perspectives. For example, in the future, it could study men's views on feminism, how they differ from women's and the impact of men's views, etc. It will be fascinating to see a study of men to support the findings.

References

1. Barker-Plummer, B., & Barker-Plummer, D. (2017). Twitter as a Feminist Resource: #YesAllWomen, Digital Platforms, and Discursive Social Change. In J. Earl & D. A. Rohlinger (Eds.), *Social Movements and Media* (Vol. 14, pp. 91–118). Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/S2050-206020170000014010>
2. Claudia Wilhelm. (2020). Gendered (in)visibility in digital media contexts. *Studies in Communication Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.24434/j.scoms.2021.01.007>
3. Gina Kruschek. (2019). Stigma in the Comments Section: Feminist and Anti-Feminist Discussions Online. *Computers and Composition*, 54, 102515. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compcom.2019.102515>
4. Han, X. (2018). Searching for an online space for feminism? The Chinese feminist group Gender Watch Women's Voice and its changing approaches to online misogyny. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 734–749. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1447430>
5. Lopez, K. J., Muldoon, M. L., & McKeown, J. K. L. (2019). One Day of #Feminism: Twitter as a Complex Digital Arena for Wielding, Shielding, and Trolling talk on Feminism. *Leisure Sciences*, 41(3), 203–220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2018.1448022>
6. Ma Chenyu. (2020). The Chinese dilemma of feminism (Master's thesis, Huazhong Normal University). <https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CMFD202101&filename=1020126485.nh>

7. Meraiah Foley, & Cooper, R. (2021). Workplace gender equality in the post-pandemic era: Where to next? *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 63(4), 463–476. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221856211035173>
8. Reuben Bihu. (2021). Questionnaire Survey Methodology in Educational and Social Science Studies. <https://doi.org/10.31124/advance.14742819.v1>
9. Wan Jun. (2020). The stigmatization of "feminism" in the context of microblogging (Master's thesis, Hainan Normal University). <https://kns.cnki.net/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CMFD202101&filename=1020340562.nh>
10. Wang Lan. (2017). Feminist communication in the new media environment. *Western Radio and Television* (01), 11-12.
11. Xie Wanying, Liu Xiaomei & Yin Mingzhu. (2021). Media convergence under the new coronary pneumonia epidemic. *News Communication* (01), 39-40.
12. Zhang Chenyu. (2020). An Exploration of Radical Feminism Based on Microblogging Platform - Taking the Blue Book on Social Mindset Released by Chinese Academy of Sciences as an Example. *Sight and Sound* (07), 183-184. doi:10.19395/j.cnki.1674-246x.2020.07.096.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

