

Analysis of the Reasons for the Stigmatization of Feminism in Virtual Chinese Society-psychological Perspective

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Abstract: The flourishing of feminism in modern China has brought more vitality to the thought of a new era in China, especially today when Internet technology is highly popularized and women's self-awareness is further awakened. However, a large volume of observations and studies have pointed to the severe stigmatization of Chinese local feminism on the virtual society. While previous studies have shed light on the causes of such a social phenomenon, explanations of each individual's psychological mechanism in this phenomenon have yet to be added. This study used Zhihu, China's popular universal question-and-answer platform, as a community to collect and code responses on the causes of Chinese feminist stigmatization, and conducted an analysis of internal and external factors leading to the causes of stigmatization based on the general public's perceptions of feminist activities in the virtual society, and found that the general public's responses on Zhihu all converged to point to seven causes, namely: feminist behaviors are radical and there are internal disagreements that are difficult to reconcile, misunderstanding or stereotyping of the original intent of feminism by the general public, deterioration of the relationship between feminists and outgroups by the media, the herd effect among feminist outgroups leading to wider stigmatization of feminism, the constraints of traditional attitudes, and the conflict of social interests between feminism and outgroups. Ultimately, the psychological mechanisms behind the causes of stigmatization were found to be intertwined and interacting.

Keywords: feminism, stigma, social psychology, psychology, sociology

1. Introduction

In the context of an escalating virtual societal conflict between genders, a growing body of research has been dedicated to uncovering the intricate challenges men and women face in China. Notably, the emergence of Chinese feminism has been a pivotal factor contributing to the ideological divergence between the genders. Contemporary discourse has witnessed an increasing marginalization of feminism due to its perceived contrarian and nonconformist narratives. Scholars have extensively probed into the reasons underpinning this phenomenon, which poses a hurdle to social cohesion. However, it is noteworthy that most of these investigations have predominantly centered around the communication domain, relying primarily on literature reviews and discourse

analyses. These explorations have delved into theoretical constructs rooted in emerging professional dynamics [1], consumerist tendencies, ideological shifts, and subcultural propagation [2].

Building upon the methodologies employed by prior researchers, this study undertakes a comprehensive examination of one hundred responses about the stigmatization of feminism within the popular user-generated content (UGC) Q&A platform “Zhihu,” treating it as a community. Through an amalgamation of literature analysis and discourse scrutiny, the research endeavours to elucidate the latent psychological mechanisms that underlie the marginalization of feminism in the Chinese context. By adopting this approach, the study aspires to bridge the gap in psychology concerning the determinants of feminist stigmatization in China. Moreover, it seeks to offer novel insights that may reshape contemplation regarding the trajectory of feminist stigmatization’s evolution within the Chinese context.

2. Background Information

Spanning millennia, Chinese ideology bears the imprints of Confucianism, exemplified by the “Three Guides and Five Constant Virtues” [3]. This philosophical framework reinforced a male-centric orientation that reverberated through China’s feudal dynasties, a legacy that still persists. However, the tide shifted during the New Culture Movement of the 1910s and 1920s, when China’s socio-economic and cultural landscape transformed global interactions. This period saw the infusion of progressive Western ideas into China, subsequently influencing the consciousness of Chinese women within the societal milieu. A shift towards self-awakening and liberation became evident [4]. The late 1950s to early 1960s marked a phase wherein women actively participated in the workforce and acquired new technical skills [5]. Even the Great Leap Forward in 1954 introduced gender equality principles into the constitution [6]. Despite these advancements, women’s societal status remained unchanged, with wage disparities persisting vis-à-vis male counterparts. Consequently, women were often confined to traditional familial roles [5].

In tandem with temporal progression, feminists pursued women’s emancipation and autonomy, with the turn of the century witnessing the establishment of network-based feminist organizations in China [7]. However, offline feminist movements encountered multifaceted limitations [8], prompting a shift towards leveraging the expansive and cost-effective realm of the internet to galvanize action [9].

2.1. New Opportunities for Feminism on the Internet

Chinese women stand on the flood of the era of technological development, finding new opportunities for empowering Chinese women. With the development of the times and the propaganda and voice of feminism in China also unfolding on a large scale on the Internet [10], Chinese women’s self-awareness is gradually awakening. Taking the context of comments on Weibo, a popular platform for self-expression and social interaction in China, as an example, under the advertisements related to feminism, 30.20% of people shared their personal experiences of “anti-social norms”, while 24.50% shared their personal experiences of “anti-sexism” [11], this suggests that contemporary netizens not only perceive social norms and biases in the rights of men and women but also that they seek group identity by publicizing their personal experiences. In addition, China’s mainstream social media platforms are now largely equipped with eye-catching hot headline columns, which has contributed to the ability of hot events to be widely exposed to the public and spread rapidly; Chinese feminism, on the other hand, has used those highlight events that include women’s limited or stigmatized identities as a position to give women a voice and justice to females.

2.2. New Challenges for Feminism on the Internet

However, the advent of new opportunities often means new challenges as well. After several stages of feminist development, feminist supporters and feminist stigmatization have grown in parallel [2]. For instance, a sample of questionnaires revealed that for the two typical feminist stigmatized words on social media platforms (“Cynical feminist” and “radical feminist”), 38.85% of respondents had used them, and more than 79.64% of people deemed that these words are insulting to feminism [12]. This also means that the proliferation of insulting terms against feminism on social media platforms is not the result of a herd mentality, but rather a negative labeling that implies a backlash of negative sentiment against feminists from groups outside of feminism, specifically targeting feminists. Liu’s Weibo-based study of the term “leftover women (unmarried women past marriageable age)” suggests that, in the general perception of the Chinese public, women’s independence and pursuit of personal value is due to the fact that they are the ones who are “left to be chosen” in the Chinese marriage market, that is why some women who are not favored by men using personas such as new age independent women or highly educated or elitist to arm themselves [4]. Therefore, women who wish to use their own capacity to narrow the unequal status between men and women in an attempt to fight against sexual discrimination, objectification, stereotypes, and traditional social norms and concepts are once again drawn into the center of the eddy of patriarchy.

3. Analysis of the Reasons

3.1. Internal Factors: Radical Feminist Discourse/Behavior and Internal Feminist Divisions

Based on the feedback provided by Zhihu users, a noticeable trend emerges where the expression of emotional outbursts and grievances is predominantly directed towards radical feminists. Some users even go as far as characterizing radical feminism as a form of hegemony, asserting that “extreme feminists” are seeking privileges rather than equality. There are also observations highlighting the exploitation and degradation of men for profit by what are labeled as “pseudo-feminists.” It’s worth noting that inaction from the conservative side in addressing radical practices further contributes to their negative association with feminism. The failure of conservatives to effectively curtail the indiscriminate targeting of males by radical elements reinforces the perception of them being aligned with feminism. Despite the conservative faction’s attempts to distance itself from the radical wing, this separation has not succeeded in altering the prevailing stigma surrounding local Chinese feminism.

Drawing from the framework of social identity theory, individuals possess an inherent inclination to categorize their surroundings into distinct “in-groups” and “out-groups” based on various dissimilarities [13]. Such categorization alone can foster prejudice and potentially escalate into conflicts [14]. Individuals within a group instinctively measure themselves against the out-group. To bolster their own self-esteem amid social competition, they tend to elevate their own group, underscoring its superiority. Intriguingly, Tajfel’s research suggests that, even when a mutually beneficial scenario is plausible, group members often opt not to maximize their group’s advantages if it means reducing the benefits attainable by the out-group [15]. This underscores the tendency to marginalize and suppress out-groups to secure advantages and enhance one’s own group’s self-esteem.

In the context of the online feminist movement, certain expressions and behaviors have escalated to group-based attacks. Some feminists deviate from the foundational principles of feminism, which prioritize equality. Instead, they strive to validate their group’s ideology, leading to a division between those who disassociate themselves from the movement upon disagreement. This division,

coupled with the absence of a coherent and unified guiding framework within feminism, accounts for the internal fragmentation of the feminist community.

As divisions deepen, feminist groups with contrasting attitudes and shared interests gravitate towards two opposing poles: radical and moderate stances. People typically exhibit a predisposition to endorse ideas aligned with their own [16-18]. This tendency underpins the Echo Chamber Hypothesis, which posits that individuals tend to engage more with ideas that mirror their own, while selectively disregarding divergent viewpoints [19]. Strikingly, even within a network characterized by decentralized and diverse information, research demonstrates that exposure to opposing viewpoints often prompts individuals to reinforce their preexisting beliefs, rather than fostering counter-arguments [20,21]. This dynamic perpetuates the polarization of attitudes within the heterogeneous network.

Moreover, in an environment where feminist groups and out-groups engage in mutual criticism, the negative discourse propagated by individuals on social media serves as a pivotal predictor of the polarization of attitudes [22]. Regardless of the specific group affiliation, individuals who express discontent with out-groups through their language tend to exhibit a heightened degree of attitudinal polarization. Be advised that papers in a technically unsuitable form will be returned for retyping. After returned the manuscript must be appropriately modified.

3.2. External Factors

3.2.1. Misunderstanding of Women's Rights Due to Stereotypical Anti-male, Radical and Emotional Attitudes

In the context of the virtual Chinese society, where negative information proliferates and individuals are predisposed to absorb such negativity [23], the extremist and adversarial statements propagated by certain factions of feminists on online platforms hold a higher likelihood of being imprinted upon the minds of those external to their group. Consequently, this gives rise to the construction of stereotypes, which serve as cognitive shortcuts enabling individuals to formulate judgments concerning unfamiliar groups or individuals. These stereotypes create a predisposition that associates the majority of feminism supporters with the characteristics attributed by these stereotypes. Once a stereotype takes root, information aligning with it tends to be more effectively retained and fortified [24]. This is due to the fact that information congruent with preconceived notions is more easily assimilated into memory and harmonized with existing cognitive frameworks. Conversely, information contradicting these stereotypes triggers cognitive dissonance, an uncomfortable mental state [25]. To circumvent this discomfort, a strategy often employed by those external to the feminist sphere involves adhering to the prevailing stereotype by accentuating the anti-male, radical, and emotionally charged expressions of select feminists.

Furthermore, to avoid the unsettling effects of counter-stereotypical information, individuals choose to limit their exposure to other facets of feminism that do not align with their preconceived notions. For instance, they might avoid acquainting themselves with relatively moderate branches of feminism. This selective exposure mitigates the dissonance stemming from cognitive mismatches. Nonetheless, it's important to acknowledge the existence of moderate feminists whose perspectives differ from the radicals. These moderate voices actively seek to elucidate the tenets of feminism when confronted with criticism. However, the perpetuation of stereotypical influence tends to obstruct or mitigate the impact of counter-stereotypical messages. This phenomenon partly elucidates the challenge conservatives face in attempting to reverse the overarching perception of feminism held by the majority. The mechanism of maintaining stereotypes works to hinder or attenuate the influence of counter-stereotypes. This observation provides insight into the difficulties conservatives encounter when endeavoring to reshape the prevailing public perception of feminism.

It's conceivable that this challenge is exacerbated by the perception that conservatives themselves are often relegated to the same category by virtue of shared attributes.

3.2.2. Media Amplification/Misinformation

China's feminist activities have predominantly found their platform on the digital landscape. This cyber environment, coupled with the direction of public sentiment, plays a dual role. On one hand, it fosters the awakening of feminist consciousness; on the other hand, it magnifies group conflicts and obstructs the positive progression of feminism. Concurrently, the media adeptly exploits human emotions to achieve commercial gains through increased exposure and public discourse.

In the reporting of societal occurrences, media deliberately attaches labels such as "female driver" or "female boss" to women involved. This ostensibly factual representation inadvertently contains the seeds of gender-based disputes. Consequently, comments pertaining to these events often witness men challenging the qualifications of women in certain roles, and subsequent counterarguments from women, thereby igniting disputes.

Social media offers the public a conduit to channel their emotions and propagate their thoughts and feelings, blurring the lines between personal sentiments and the public domain. The media capitalizes on pivotal incidents as emotional triggers, cultivating public sentiments and augmenting discussions. Notably, adverse emotions tend to evoke more pronounced reactions, fostering a greater inclination to share. An analysis of 70 million tweets encompassing 200,000 users on Sina Weibo, a prominent Chinese social platform, demonstrated that anger is the most prevalent and transmissible emotion in the digital realm [26]. This indicates that negative emotions effectively drive engagement within virtual societies, rendering them more contagious than positive counterparts. Moreover, the intensity of an emotion directly correlates with its likelihood of being shared [26]. Echoing this sentiment, a Zhihu response underscores that "social media invariably amplifies individuals' emotions."

Simultaneously, as individuals navigate the influx of information on the Internet, their intrinsic negativity bias steers them towards negative information. This psychological inclination, rooted in survival instincts, primes individuals to respond to potential threats. Consequently, this bias shapes the selection of news content in the digital age. Trussler and Sorok's research contradicts participants' stated preference for positive news, revealing a predisposition towards negative content [27].

In cases where a social platform predominantly accommodates feminist and anti-feminist voices, media outlets are inclined to exploit contentious subjects that fuel negative feminist sentiment. By doing so, they capture attention and maximize dividends from heightened discussions.

3.2.3. Traditional Concepts and Disciplines

The presence of an unconscious gender bias, seemingly inherent and independent of the feminist movement itself or the actions of feminists, has been highlighted in a Zhihu comment. This underlying bias is intricately intertwined with societal perceptions and stereotypes of women. In societies shaped by patriarchal norms, gender bias often takes the form of hostile sexism, where women are subjected to unfair treatment. Instances include the assertion that women possess lower IQs than men or are unsuited for certain professional roles. Paradoxically, even as men disavow women's capabilities, manifestations of "male chauvinism" frequently emerge when interacting with women, subtly relegating women to a subordinate position unconsciously [28].

The Ambivalent Sexism Theory (AST) offers a framework that comprehensively addresses this ambivalence in gender bias. It supplements the notion of benevolent sexism, positing that bias can also manifest by internalizing women's identities and conforming them to traditional social roles.

This is achieved by “endorsing” women who conform to conventional feminine stereotypes. Notably, these instances of benevolent sexism often escape the attention of women, resulting in their insufficient recognition [29]. Consequently, this shift from a societal construct to an individual perspective has conceivably contributed to the contemporary surge in misogyny at a conscious level [30].

The contemporary feminist movement inherently challenges the established structure of gendered division of labor within patriarchal systems. The recent narrative asserting that “many feminists seek authority without shouldering responsibilities” contradicts this established structure. However, this perspective emerges as an outcome of the collision between the awakened feminist consciousness and deep-rooted societal norms. Individuals exhibiting higher psychological entitlement tend to display their views more publicly. Among them, women from regions where gender equality remains less pervasive tend to be more amenable to the advantages of benevolent bias [31]. Such biases are rooted in the perception of women as a vulnerable group in need of safeguarding.

Consequently, the ambivalence often observed among feminists—particularly women—who denounce hostile sexism while simultaneously desiring benevolent sexism [32], emerges as pivotal in the criticism and stigmatization directed towards them. This intricate interplay of biases and desires underscores the complexities within the larger discourse of gender bias, traditional roles, and the evolving feminist movement.

3.2.4. The Will of the Group Affects the Will of the Individual Within the Group

The impact of collective influence on individual volition has been a topic of interest, as highlighted by Gustave Le Bon’s observations. In his work, Le Bon delineates two key dimensions characterizing group dynamics: the erosion of individuality and the amplification of emotions within groups. According to his perspective, the amalgamation of numerous individuals into a collective entity engenders a distinct group psychology [33]. This shared mentality can erode the sense of individual self by facilitating a reciprocal contagion of emotional states among members, ultimately leading to a submergence of personal agency. Evident manifestations of this phenomenon include the diminished capacity for objective assessment of group decisions and an increased propensity to uncritically adopt the group’s values and behaviors. Consequently, an unconscious assimilation of the group’s attitudes, thoughts, and actions transpires among individuals.

While Le Bon’s theory presents a generalized framework, its objectivity remains subject to contention. An illustration of this concept can be gleaned from a Zhihu discussion where the statement “The radical female became a meme, and the meme itself is not there to make people think” underscores the impact of initial impressions on subsequent perceptions (Zhihu post). This phenomenon aligns with the principles of social perception, wherein the perceiver’s initial encounter with the perceived subject shapes the recipient’s social interpretation [34].

Consider a scenario where individuals possessing limited familiarity with feminism and its advocates are exposed predominantly to negative perspectives within their own social group. Consequently, these individuals would cultivate a predisposition to view feminism through a negative lens. This cognitive bias results in skewed judgments of feminism, influenced by an already established adverse mental framework. This subset of the population unwittingly conforms to prevailing trends, inadvertently contributing to the marginalization of feminism in China. Their viewpoints on feminism, coupled with their indifference to and misappropriation of derogatory terms associated with feminism, mirror a meme-like propagation of anti-feminist sentiments characteristic of out-groups.

In summary, Le Bon's notion of collective psychology shaping individual behaviors and perceptions resonates in the context of social phenomena such as the stigmatization of feminism. The interplay between group dynamics and personal volition elucidates how shared mentalities can obscure individuality and impel individuals towards unconscious alignment with prevailing group attitudes. This dynamic underscores the power of initial impressions and the consequential perpetuation of such impressions within social networks, resulting in the inadvertent propagation of biased viewpoints and counterproductive stigmatization.

3.3. Conflict of Interest Between Group

In a conventional patriarchal society, male influence and control wield significant sway over allocating social resources. Over time, the feminist movement has gained momentum, garnering many adherents. This movement has ushered in unprecedented shifts in the perspectives of most women, with some advocating for dismantling the patriarchal framework in favor of a matriarchal societal structure. While these advancements are insufficient to mark the culmination of the ongoing journey towards women's emancipation, the effects of feminist activism on the future distribution of resources are now under renewed scrutiny within the persistent backdrop of ideological discord between genders.

A case in point is the domain of marriage and parenthood. According to China's 2023 Population Forecast, the nation's population has been experiencing a continuous decline in recent years. In fact, last year marked the first instance of negative population growth in nearly six decades, coupled with an eight-year consecutive decline in registered marriages [35]. Beyond the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, a contributing factor can be discerned: a subset of women, particularly those with higher education, are gradually recognizing the non-obligatory nature of adhering to traditional roles [36].

The "2023 Survey Report on the Status of Chinese Women's Workplace," released by the prominent Chinese recruitment platform Zhilian Hiring, underscores the reasons behind disparate marriage inclinations among genders. Approximately half of the women surveyed view marriage as non-mandatory, with 37.5% expressing concerns about the potential diminishment of their quality of life due to marriage. Among men, 20.3% openly cite a reluctance to shoulder the responsibilities associated with marriage and family. Moreover, the survey reveals that 68.8% of women engage in over an hour of household chores daily, a figure significantly higher than the 47.2% reported for men [37]. This divergence illustrates that in the present landscape where educational opportunities are nearly evenly accessible to both genders, women are increasingly realizing that life's trajectory need not be confined to the conventional path of marriage and child-rearing upon reaching a certain age. Consequently, if women in the contemporary era opt not to fulfill traditional obligations ascribed to them, the burden of these duties might be displaced onto individuals and families adhering to more conventional norms. This shift has the potential to jeopardize the long-standing interests of certain feminist or anti-feminist groups, challenging their entrenched social identities.

Feminism, a movement advocating for women's autonomy and advancement, furnishes the ideological foundation for modern women to deviate from the customary course of action. Consequently, those negatively affected by these changes find themselves grappling with heightened stress and a propensity to resist the destabilizing factors. In essence, as feminist ideals diverge from the tacit acceptance of gender inequality, proponents of traditional institutions and ideas face an uncertain future. This evolution in feminist thought has prompted a rejection of the subjugation that women's groups have historically endured under the feudal system. This, in turn, has led to a view of out-groups adhering to traditional patriarchal notions as oppressive and anachronistic [38]. Predictably, the well-established dominant group responds to this defiance with hostility.

As the feminist movement distances itself from the implicit endorsement of gender disparities, the rejection of subordination by women's groups inheriting feudal traditions encounters resistance from the prevailing power structures. The clash of these contrasting viewpoints nurtures a fertile ground for group conflict. The proponents of entrenched traditional norms perceive their interests at risk, thus escalating the potential for discord. This dynamic underscores the emergence of prejudices and discriminations from varying standpoints [39]. However, this tension also reflects the transformative power of feminist discourse, challenging traditional hierarchies and fostering a more equitable society.

4. Reflections and Suggestions

In the contemporary era of information proliferation, individuals are consistently exposed to a deluge of unorganized information, encompassing a wide spectrum that includes emotional content, all of which can be disseminated at an unprecedented pace. Undoubtedly, the internet stands as a potent tool for propagating feminist ideologies, yet a cautious approach is imperative in light of the potential adverse consequences that can emanate from the digital realm and media platforms within the feminist movement. In the midst of external criticism, the importance of introspection cannot be underestimated. It is incumbent upon advocates to transcend the confines of dichotomous perspectives, and instead, earnestly endeavor to forge a path that aligns with the distinctive fabric of China's national circumstances and social structure. This pursuit should be expedited to facilitate the harmonization of varied feminist paradigms indigenous to China, thereby enabling the collective endeavor to counteract the marginalization of feminist principles.

Furthermore, the trajectory of affirmative action transcends the sole purview of feminist activists; its realization hinges on the collaborative endeavors of the entire societal tapestry. As such, it is imperative that a synergy is cultivated wherein both feminists and broader society engage in a harmonious endeavor. The collaborative spirit should be underscored, emphasizing that the sustainable advancement of feminist goals necessitates the active involvement and understanding of society at large. This interconnected approach will inevitably magnify the efficacy of efforts geared toward rectifying gender-related imbalances.

In summation, the contemporary digital age has ushered in a realm where information, including emotions, permeates swiftly and widely. While the internet emerges as a potent avenue for promulgating feminist ideals, vigilance against potential pitfalls is warranted. In the face of external reproach, introspection becomes a linchpin for progress. The urgency of reconciling diverse feminist tenets within the context of China's unique sociopolitical landscape is underscored, serving as a bedrock for combating the relegation of feminism. Moreover, the realization of affirmative action transcends the boundaries of feminist circles, necessitating a symbiotic collaboration between feminists and society at large. This symbiosis, grounded in shared purpose, amplifies the potency of endeavors aimed at fostering gender parity.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study delved into the stigmatization of feminism in the context of the Zhihu platform, employing discourse analysis and drawing upon traditional psychological theories to unveil its underlying causes. While the gender distribution of Zhihu users is relatively balanced, attempts to inquire directly about the sources of feminist stigmatization often elicited emotional reactions from male users, potentially introducing bias into the data. Future research could incorporate techniques like web crawlers to accurately capture female perspectives to attain a more comprehensive understanding.

Acknowledging the impact of Zhihu's push technology, this study identified a recurring pattern of responses that sometimes overlooked key social and emotional factors. As such, it advocates for deeper investigations by disciplines such as psychology and sociology into the multifaceted reasons behind feminism's stigmatization in China.

Examining psychological factors, this study dissected both in-group and out-group dynamics. It highlighted the polarization of attitudes leading to disunity within feminist perceptions and out-group reactions. External factors like media bias, ingrained gender prejudices, and group conflicts contributed to the stigmatization. Despite the diversity in causative factors, a core psychological logic emerged, suggesting significant overlap between the mechanisms driving stigmatization.

By exploring a less-trodden path in psychology and sociology, this study adds novel dimensions to the discourse surrounding feminism's predicament. Notably, it advocates an interdisciplinary approach for mitigating the stigma attached to feminism, casting a new light on its future trajectory in China.

The study's outcomes bear relevance for community organizers, psychological practitioners, and web administrators. Community organizers can draw inspiration from the findings to devise inclusive strategies for countering stigma. Furthermore, the study bridges a gap in psychological research, offering valuable insights to counsellors addressing cyber violence and providing a basis for fostering positive social interactions and shaping public opinion.

Considering the collaborative effort required, regulatory bodies and social media platforms also play a pivotal role in mitigating feminism's stigmatization. They can adopt measures like content moderation to quell conflicts and irrationality. By aligning with the study's conclusions, these stakeholders can contribute significantly to reshaping perceptions and attitudes surrounding feminism in China.

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