

# *The Influence of the Male Gaze on Women's Careers on Social Media in China*

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**Abstract:** The male gaze is a concept that has always existed in society and has been gradually recognized and discussed by Chinese people in recent years. On Weibo, there are plenty of cases and topics about the male gaze. Researchers have found that the male gaze on Weibo can affect women's careers in some way. Therefore, this paper analyzes and summarizes the cases and comments on Weibo to explore how the male gaze on Weibo affects women's careers. The article found that the male gaze has characteristics: extreme, aggressive, and double standard on Weibo, and these characteristics show the means of the male gaze affecting women's careers, affecting women through negative comments, and causing a blow to women's careers. These characteristics come from men's desire for power and oppression of women under the patriarchal social structure. Therefore, if women want to get rid of this kind of influence, they need to be encouraged to make bold resistance to the oppression of the whole patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Male gaze, Women's career, Patriarchy, Weibo

## 1. Introduction

The male gaze is a universal social and cultural phenomenon. It was initially proposed by British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" [1]. In this essay, the male gaze refers to the objectification of female characters through a male lens with erotic elements and patriarchy. After its first presence in movies, people realized the universality of this concept, not just on screen, but in every aspect of life, in all women. The male gaze is everywhere, and this gaze is the entire patriarchal society's surveillance of all women, and women are regarded as objects to observe, conquer, possess, and use to achieve their goals [2].

Nowadays, because of the worldwide resurgence of authoritarianism and the backlash of patriarchy, the repression of women is getting worse, especially in some more authoritarian and less liberal environments. Therefore, women must fight for their rights and freedom. However, it is difficult for ordinary women who do not have much access to government power and do not work in related occupations. They are not able to claim and expand their power in policy making and law enforcement. Many have been seeking ways to fight for a voice on some social platforms. Social platforms are filled with state media, mainstream media, and self-media, among others. These platforms maximize exposure to the world and make changes, but stare at women through a male lens. If women want to make changes, protest, and correct the male gaze, they must first recognize and understand the male gaze in the media and know the negative consequences of this gaze on women.

This essay mainly discusses how the male gaze in social media happens and affects the careers of women in China.

## 2. Methods

Weibo is one of China's largest social media platforms, like Twitter. According to statistics, by the end of the first quarter of 2022, the monthly active users of Weibo reached 582 million [3], and the number of Chinese netizens in 2022 reached 1.032 billion [4]. That is, more than half of Chinese netizens are using Weibo. In addition, Weibo is a place where men and the male gaze dominated the discourse and topics that are more serious and salient. Given the popularity and representativeness of Weibo, this paper chooses Weibo as the social media for research.

The author follows and searches for hot events about women who were involved in a bad situation and may have been subjected to cyber-bullying and slut-shaming on Weibo. The sources used in this paper also include online posts, comments and blogs, reports and comments about events in the media, marketing ID, and some well-known individual bloggers on Weibo. The paper analyzes the tendency, inducibility, and the male gaze of these comments and reports and explores the reasons behind it. It further highlights how the male gaze ultimately affects these women's careers and jobs.

## 3. Findings

By querying and browsing various cases on Weibo, several characteristics and occurrences of the male gaze on Weibo can be roughly summarized.

### 3.1. Extreme

In the process of male gaze, men, as the subject of the gaze, project their fantasies and desires onto women and get pleasure from them. Pleasure, however, is bound to be transient and unstable. On Weibo, Wang Bingbing took off, Wang Xinling staged a comeback and other similar events were all explosive and almost overnight. This kind of wave is coming with great momentum, almost sweeping the whole country. All the users who use Weibo may have relevant posts on their home pages. In this phenomenal explosion, male fans dominate the mainstream. A large number of male netizens almost blindly pursue them, although they did not know them before. The appearance and temperament of the two women have pure and sweet characteristics in the first impression. In popularity, male netizens almost fanatically emphasize and pursue these characteristics. Therefore, they give these women who meet the characteristics of extreme love, even almost all male netizens defend and support such women. They virally bring this kind of fanatical support everywhere that they leave comments.

These have indeed helped the careers of these women to a certain extent, but this kind of admiration is temporary. Once these women get out of the images that they have presented to the public, there will be a strong backlash. They may first be denounced and opposed by male netizens on a large scale to force them to return to their original image. If women ignore or explicitly oppose their demands, there would be dramatic changes, from extreme pursuit to disgust and abuse. They are subjected to intense resentment and shaming for a very long time. This undoubtedly impacts on any woman working on the Internet, and further damages her popularity and image, and decreases their commercial value.

A typical case happened recently. CCTV reporter Ms. Wang Bingbing has been mired in the vortex of public opinion. At first, she was exposed to being in a relationship with swimmer Xu Jiayu. On July 25, Xu's ex-girlfriend slandered Wang Bingbing for being a mistress which caused a public opinion explosion on Weibo. Hence, Wang Bingbing suffered serious cyberbullying and was suspended accordingly. It is now suspected that she has been removed from CCTV. This strong

woman who worked hard step by step from a small place has to return to her original place. Moreover, it is not clear whether her position is still there. Ironically, she was a CCTV reporter who unexpectedly became famous due to the pursuit of male netizens, and now she has been brought down because of their comments.

### 3.2. Aggressive

Most of the male netizens on Weibo are full of aggression. They like to maliciously patrol and darkly speculate on women, especially attractive, famous, and successful women. Once a woman gets involved in the scandal, many male netizens would excessively indulge in her private life, and attack and humiliate her as a “slut”. For women who are caught up in the “little three” storm, which means a woman getting involved in someone else’s relationship, this will lead to a “grander” situation like a “Carnival” in a certain sense. Getting involved in someone else’s relationship often is the fastest, the most first impression, and the easiest way to destroy a woman’s reputation. They will be affected by this simple word easily and quickly change the view of a woman, and then attack women. More men, on a larger scale, engage in obscenity, abuse, spread rumors, and attack these women. They do not accept, acknowledge, or believe in women’s explanations and clarifications and paranoid belief in the so-called truth of their fantasy.

Moreover, such insults and attacks are persistent and widespread. They will always have such an impression of this woman and persistently publicize the so-called truth that they believe in the comments of every post related to this woman, even if the storm has passed for a long time. They search the users on Weibo who speak for these victims and send messages or comments to these ordinary users to publicize their so-called truth. If the user responds and refutes them, they will attack these users. If these users are female users, they also humiliate them as “sluts”. Then, many people, including men and women which are tamed by a patriarchal society, are accustomed to and willing to stigmatize and blame a woman who is caught up in such a situation, whether true or not, thereby completely denying her whole life, including her achievement in her field.

In the above case, both Wang Bingbing and Wang Xinling have been involved in the mistress scandal. And the malicious, inferior remarks also brought great influence on them. Wang Bingbing was forced to suspend her duties and Wang Xinling’s first concert since her debut 10 years ago was canceled [5]. They were innocent victims, not involved in other people's relationships, but simply being involved in an emotional dispute cost them the first pinnacle of their careers.

### 3.3. Double Standard

On Weibo, there is another obvious manifestation and occurrence of the male gaze, that is, double standards. Including news media, marketing ID, and netizens’ comments and views, there will be consciously or unconsciously double standards. When reporting, the news media will focus on female victims, especially criminal cases, domestic and gender violence, and traffic accidents. The practice of blurring the focus and shifting the focus is not only found in China, on Weibo, but also the whole world. Jackson Katz once put forward a simple example, which comes from the research of Julia Penelope, a feminist and linguist. A very simple English sentence “John beat Mary.” If used in a passive tone, it would become “Mary was beaten by John.” The change from active to passive has shifted our attention from John the beater to Mary. If omitting John again at this time, it will become “Mary was beaten” [6]. In this way, the attention of the viewers is transferred to Mary, and everything about her is enlarged. People look at her experience, her appearance and figure, and her private life, and the real perpetrator John will disappear. It is worth noting that people often expect a perfect victim, but this is impossible, so people begin to condemn her, and even some men will criticize her private life, her emotional experience, her personality, and her work achievement.

Such examples can also be found everywhere on Weibo. In the news media's reports on traffic accidents, they often report and emphasize the accidents of female drivers, which over time has created a stereotype of women, that is, women are more dangerous to drive. Therefore, in the professional fields such as taxi driver, designated driver, bus driver, and truck driver, women are often not welcome, and the employment of women is much less. When looking for a designated driver, they cancel the order if they see a female driver. However, the fact is that in China, the male-to-female ratio of drivers is 7:3, and the male-to-female ratio of traffic accidents is 17:3. Among the defendants of traffic accidents, 94.60% were male and 5.40% were female [7]. Therefore, the argument that female drivers are more dangerous to drive is untenable. However, the discrimination and blows that women have suffered in the driving-related industries are indeed enormous.

In the entertainment industry, the impact of women's infidelity and men's infidelity on their careers are also very different. Female stars, such as Li Xiaolu and Meng Meiqi, have been subjected to extraordinary cyberbullying, and their performing careers have also been blocked. And look at those male stars, such as Chen he, Luo Zhixiang, and some other male stars who have even done more extreme things. They are still working smoothly today and have not affected their earnings. Moreover, females start tending to bear greater responsibilities, more malicious peeping and speculation, and slander. From the perspective of some male netizens, every step of the female celebrity's previous work or career achievements and every resource may be obtained by selling their bodies. If they did not think so before or thought about it but did not dare to say it, after the news, they would brazenly make insulting remarks and dark sexual fantasies to these female celebrities on Weibo. As for male pop stars, some netizens criticize them, but most of them are female netizens. Many male netizens tend to treat it like it is normal and even envy them. Many female netizens who are deeply influenced and domesticated by the patriarchal concept also hate these female celebrities and tolerate these male stars. Most of these male stars' careers have not been affected, or there is a possibility of their comeback. Most of female stars are stopped in their careers, and there is almost no possibility of their comeback. Otherwise, they are facing intense and unbearable humiliation.

#### 4. Discussion

Analyzing these characteristics of the male gaze on Weibo, extremely emotional, aggressive, and double standard. Psychologically, the root reason is that men think they have lost control over women. In Michel Foucault's theory, gazing is inseparable from discourse or power. Gazing is not only pure viewing but also the top-down authority of the viewer over the targets. The relation between the viewer and the observed is subject and object, suppression and being suppressed. At the same time, this top-down gaze not only expresses power but also produces power [8]. The male gaze more specifically reflects this power. Because from the perspective of social mainstream thoughts and traditions, discourse, that is, power, usually belongs to men. The male gaze more directly and concretely reflects power and desire, and male control over women [9]. This is a kind of long-term control and oppression. On Weibo, it is reflected in the control of mainstream aesthetics and the discourse power that can determine the direction of women's careers. Once women are out of their control, men have extreme protests because they feel that their authority status has been challenged. They tend to keep women under their control.

However, many women do not feel that they need to care for men's desires. They believe that females should be independent and strong. The opposition of male netizens cannot affect their decisions and their life. Therefore, when men find that they cannot control women, they become anxious and resent this kind of woman. They sometimes even make up rumors to slander women and humiliate them as "sluts". Today's Chinese society is still mostly dominated by male, although independent and powerful women pose a threat to authoritarian leaders [10]. Therefore, this kind of means against women can usually succeed, which threatens and blows women's careers.

## 5. Conclusion

This article describes the characteristics of the male gaze on Weibo, which are extreme, aggressive, and double standard. It also demonstrates how these characteristics are displayed on Weibo, for psychological reasons, and how they affect women's professions. In essence, the male gaze is the product of patriarchal society and male control over women. Dai Jinhua, a Chinese feminist cultural critic, once commented on the Biography of Marie Curie, "once she was caught up in some kind of scandal, the world reduced her to a woman again," no matter how many achievements she achieved as a scientist [11]. Social media like Weibo facilitates and intensifies this phenomenon, making women's life, reputation, psychology, and career bear more gaze than before and more vulnerable to threats.

However, with the awakening of women's self-consciousness, women are more eager to resist the long-standing male oppression of women and subvert the patriarchal system and male gaze. More and more women dare to express their voices and desires, claim the right to discourse, and ultimately gain more power and freedom. With the development of the feminist movement in China and the increased awareness of women's rights, the male gaze will become less and less of a threat to women's professional careers.

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