

Body Narratives Video: Exploring a New Discourse on Gender Power in Mainland China- A Case Study of the #FreeTheChokingGirl Hashtag Action on TikTok

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Abstract

By combining both senders and receivers, self-media development has provided the public with a free voice and an opportunity for female self-expression. Women and girls are increasingly engaging in feminist criticism and activism using digital media technologies to publicly protest misogyny, rape culture, and general sexism (Keller et al., 2018). This study examines two cultural identities, gender and digital, by investigating the #FreeTheChokingGirl hashtag movement that has gained widespread attention recently on Chinese social media platforms. The purpose of this study is to analyse Chinese feminists' activities both online and offline, as well as the controversies surrounding female discourse, using a social semiotics methodology.

Keywords

Culture and Identity, Body Narrative, Short Video Empowerment, Chinese feminist, Female discourse.

1. Chinese feminism after three waves of feminism

From the Enlightenment to the present, feminism has undergone three dramatic changes (Curthoys, 2005). Originally a movement of French women who were seeking political rights, the feminist movement emerged in the second half of the 19th century, accompanied by the struggle for the right to vote, education, and employment in Europe and the United States. By the end of the Second World War, feminism in the West had succeeded in removing many women's legal and political disabilities (Ibiz, 2005). Women of developed countries such as the United States gave birth to feminism's second wave during the 1960s when they fought for economic rights, boldly criticised gender disparities in society, and demanded equal pay for equal work. Feminists such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinern have inspired women around abortion, sexuality, and equality (Shugart, 2001, cited in Parry and Fullagar, 2013). However, the controversial second wave of feminism was perceived as mostly white, middle-class, heterosexual women (Parry and Fullagar, 2013). This has also stimulated different interests in feminist scholarship. The contributors are liberal, Marxist, socialist, and radical feminists (Keohane et al., 1984). Liberal feminism focuses on removing barriers to gender equality and has had considerable success in the legal and political spheres. Radical feminism focused on the fundamental characteristics of gender differences and was more interested in long-term cultural change. Socialist feminism highlights the ways in which capitalism demands and perpetuates women's subordination (Curthoys, 2005). This intellectual debate has continued into the modern era, with socialist feminism having similarities to Chinese feminism in its origins.

Early feminism in China was not the result of Western feminist movements but of the socialist revolution (Wang, 2018). Since the establishment of the Chinese state in 1949, the constitution has provided for equal civil rights for both men and women. It has also motivated women to participate in social labour and production like men. However, the idea of desexualization

encourages women to align themselves with men and even abandon feminization, which is a complete departure from Western feminist thought. Western gender theory emphasises that gender is not biologically determined but culturally constructed to oppose the gender binary (Phillips, 2018). In 1995, the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women was held in Beijing to discuss public issues such as women's political participation and girls' rights to education, employment, and protection against domestic violence, marking the beginning of Chinese women's "liberation of women" movement since the Xinhai Revolution with their own power (Liu and Li, 2005). It also happened at the same time as the third feminist revolution in the world. Influenced by industrialization, this third movement is also described as postmodern feminism. More young women overturned previous genres, rejecting collegiate theory and previous generations' ideas and seeking sexual freedom and individual choice (Kelly, 2005). Rebecca Walker (1995) declared in 1992 that 'I am the third wave', calling for a louder voice for marginalised women of different classes, races, and sexual orientations (Walker, 2001).

Despite this, Chinese feminism was still lagging behind during the Third Wave. Historically, due to traditional Chinese values and the solidity of a patriarchal society, Chinese women sought to develop in harmony with men, subordinating their individual interests to the collective interest (Yang and Liu, 2019). Additionally, feminist thought did not develop into an active political force in the same way as it did in the West and could only be described as a form of consciousness without confrontation (Zeng, 1997). In parallel, after the reform and opening, Chinese women and media studies developed. As a result of the efforts of Chinese women's federations, several women's newspapers and magazines were published, women writers were actively engaged in literary writing, and feminist studies achieved some success, mainly in the written medium. However, the absence of women's roles and narratives in traditional media such as the press, television, and advertising left Chinese women for a long time in the position of the 'other', disenfranchised, gazed at, and consumed (Hoareau, 2021).

2. Women's Issues in Contemporary Chinese Feminism

The 21st century has seen a decline in active feminist political movements in the West, with new issues occupying female activists, from information technology to religious diversity (Curthoys, 2005). However, in recent years, there has been a marked resurgence of feminist debate, discussion, and activism due to the proliferation of digital spaces, with the emergence of a new feminist boom taking place in the online environment. Feminist thinkers claim that this is the 'fourth wave' of feminism, in which digital media is used to address the deep inequalities prevalent in the social, economic, and political spheres (Aitken, 2017). Post-feminism has taken off globally, with large-scale, ground-breaking online feminist movements such as the famous #MeToo movement in 2017, which involved American female celebrities accusing sexual assault and harassment on social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. In less than a week, this movement developed into a feminist revolution that has been sweeping the world over the internet and has finally reached China.

In 2018, the issue of sexual strife in Chinese society was triggered when Luo Xixi reported in real name that her PhD supervisor had repeatedly molested herself and other female students. What then began in universities and developed into a number of areas, including public interest circles, media circles, and religious circles, saw an unprecedented war of opinion in China on gender power issues and other matters. The locus of intense feminism debate was the microblogging platform, which reached hundreds of millions of readers and participants (Li, 2020, cited in Yang, 2022). Despite China's censorship and authoritarian control, social media has enabled feminist language, politics, activism, and sensibilities to cross China's online borders (Huang and Sun, 2021). The #MeToo movement has given rise to a new form of culture

and expression that enables global voices to be heard and change to be made by using the power of online platforms to create real change.

Currently, gender rights in Chinese society are being reshaped by the development of new media, which is breaking the old traditional media paradigm and stimulating the continuous integration of the gender digital divide. Data show that the gender ratio between men and women among Chinese Internet users has decreased from 87.7:12.3 in October 1997 to 51.7:48.3 in June 2022, with the Internet penetration rate of the female population reaching 74.3% and 74.3%, respectively, 17 percentage points higher than the global average (CINIC, 2022). As a result of such circumstances, women are more likely to participate and express themselves online. Through its interactive and low-threshold characteristics, the Internet has broken down the traditional patriarchal relationship of single communicator and receiver and profoundly altered how gender groups are participating in society, facilitating feminism's activation within online communities. Among them, the short-form video platform features a prominent representation of Chinese women. According to the Social Short Video under the Boom: Kuaishou & TikTok User Research Report released by QuestMobile in April 2018, TikTok has 66% female users, much higher than male users (QuestMobile, 2018). TikTok has become a popular medium for expressing oneself for women as well.

In order to further elaborate on this topic, this paper discusses the case of a hashtag campaign called #FreeTheChokingGirl in order to examine the offline and online interactions of digital feminism in China, and how women are positioned in the media field of social short videos.

3. Case and Research Method

#FreeTheChokingGirl is an independent event on 8 March 2023 on Chinese social media by feminist participants in honour of the 113th International Working Women's Day. With the theme of tearing off women's malicious "labels" and removing shackles and chains, the campaign invites pedestrians to help remove stereotypical labels of women stuck on one human-sized standing sign. To encourage women in China to be brave and not be defined by themselves, the project also encourages participants to write responses to the labels on sticky notes and replace them with warm words.

This campaign first appeared on TikTok in China on October 21, 2022, as a video recording of a visual psychology project by three young female students at Zhongnan Forestry University of Science and Technology called "Please help us save the suffocating girls". The students used stealth cameras to record their whole activities, including designing cardboard boxes, handwriting labels, putting up the blockade, creating a cardboard box, etc. (TikTok, online). However, this event did not attract many views last year until early February of this year, when self-publisher @TadpoleMom(小蝌蚪找妈妈) mentioned it again. In her video, she stated that "I found the visual psychology assignment for university students very touching and meaningful weeks ago, and I also wanted to do something". As a result, she used her mobile phone to record the similar activity she carried out in downtown Changsha (TikTok, online). The short video received 1.28 million likes and over 140,000 comments and festered on the Chinese TikTok platform, gaining visibility and spawning imitations. The following video's content creators tagged the hashtag #FreeTheChokingGirl, and more people posted their offline practises on other Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo, WeChat, and Red Book, linking Chinese universities, female organisations, and other offline feminist participants. Even today, the campaign continues to grow in popularity.

The hashtag campaign "Save the Choking Girl" was chosen as a case study for the following two reasons. Firstly, this case represents Gender identity and Digital identity, which is relevant to the current scope of digital feminist research and discussion, and the hashtag movement is also an important theory of digital feminism, thus providing a better understanding of the issues

related to identity and culture. In addition, this case is the latest feminist online and offline movement in China this year, and examining this latest case will also update the cognition of digital feminism in China and allow for a deeper discussion of this emerging feminist culture in a new form of self-media.

Furthermore, in terms of research methodology, due to the emergence of a completely new form of media under the hashtag movement, the short video, as opposed to the previous digital feminist movement that utilised textual media, such as posts and comments. The application of textual analysis to quantitative research lacks specificity in this case. Short videos, as short digital films, present visual meaning through vertical screen narratives. James Monaco (2009) argues that film conveys meaning and that semiotics has the most effective tools to analyse visual meaning-making (Rose, 2016, p. 205). Media are full of signs, both visual and acoustic, that semioticians analyse (Berger, 2020). This research therefore concentrates on symbolic language analysis and uses a multidisciplinary approach to empirical research that is useful for analysing socially shaped semiotic artefacts and unravelling the multiple meanings attached to them (Wong, 2019). In light of this, this paper examines the role of short video platforms in expressing feminism, as well as their role in disseminating offline women's movements, from a visual analysis perspective, using Ledin and Machin's (2018) four semiotic resources for conveying narratives in conjunction with Brdwell and Thompson's (2004) four dimensions of narrative film editing.

4. Symbolic meaning: body narratives, public and private settings, specific characters, and music

Ledin and Machin (2018) suggest four types of symbols: narrative stages, settings, characters, rhythm, and sound, in shaping meaning. By watching 10 short videos with the hashtag #FreeTheChokingGirl, I discovered that they all used similar symbols for their feminist narratives on TikTok.

Firstly, narrative genres and stages have typical characters and settings for communicative purposes (Ledin and Machin, 2018, p. 147). A clear purpose of the #FreeTheChokingGirl campaign is evident; the creators focus on women's issues, fight against feminist stigma, and tell their stories in the first person, including narration from beginning to end and describing the events in chronological order. Creators are mainly TikTok bloggers, participating in spontaneous activities without any specific organisation or criteria. In their videos, they will emphasise that they follow the original feminist blogger. They were also inspired by the content that was posted under the hashtag to raise awareness about online body narratives. Body narratives refer to body narratives in the video era, that is, the body as a textual vehicle used for writing to present oneself (Curti, 1998). From initial female writers exploring female identity through women's stories, breaking down binary cultural boundaries, and advocating female subjectivity and discourse (Haig, 1998). McLuhan (1994) argues that the media is an extension of the person. Using a vertical screen, #FreeTheChokingGirl conveys the personal experience of the female body to enhance perceptions of the body and the sense of female immersion.

Meanwhile, the creators will switch between public and private scenes in the video. In the private sphere that illustrates how the creators write down abuses against women on white paper and make a human standing sign at home, showing the preparation phase of the #FreeTheChokingGirl campaign. In the public sphere, one uses a corner of one's city, sometimes with the city centre in the background, to convey the aim of this feminist activism through online and offline interactions. Through storytelling and a realistic setting, these videos evoke the desire of others to participate if they are interested in being successful feminists and encourage an evolution from online to offline (2019, p. 150).

In addition to the creators themselves, a second key character appears in the clip: the 'girl', who is gagged by the labels and even stigmatised by the words plastered all over her body. In many short videos, this girl appears as a human standing signal, a poster, a bulletin board, or a cardboard cutout with a painted female image. The character plays a significant role in the viewer's understanding of the narrative (Ledin and Machin, 2018, p. 155). In the video, it is designed as a human-like character who cries and smiles on the other side and is named 'Choking Girl'. Representation of the constructed image of a woman in China's patriarchal society through semiotic references and suggestions of gender injustice to combat shaming and discrediting of women online. Even though 'Choking Girl' is unable to speak, she uses her body to engage in offline performances. In addition, there is a certain biological and cultural categorization of the character that is significant (2018, p.157). Some of the short videos with the hashtag #FreeTheChokingGirl include specific characters that emphasise the goal of today's feminists, 'Feminism is for Everyone'. For instance, the characters who tear off the feminist stigma hashtag have various identities, including a girl who delivers for a living, a retired 60-year-old aunt, a young couple, a young girl in a Lolita dress, a little boy with his mother, and an uncle who flies a balloon with one label. The appearance of different groups shows that the feminist movement is not only about women themselves. It also includes men, elderly people, children, and people of different races, genders, ages, and cultural backgrounds.

Also, music plays a big part, choosing specific sounds and rhythms to accompany the images and convey the narrative (Ledin and Machin, 2018, p. 158). As mentioned earlier, the video intro usually mentions that the author is a follower of feminism and details the reason for the parody shoot. There is a sense of difficulty conveyed by the uneven rhythm; a sense of complexity is conveyed by the increased speed of the music; and a sense of heaviness is conveyed by the deep tone (2018, p.158). The creator uses a backing track with a sharp tempo, a fast melody, and a high violin tone to highlight the seriousness of misogyny in China in the intro. From the first shot of the character tearing off the 'choking girl' tag, the music changes to a slow song by Chinese folk singer Zhao Lei, which features an a cappella vocal chorus, lightly rhythmic guitar, and harmonica. Slow and light rhythms create a light and flowing feeling, and the emotion is developed through the music as it builds gradually to the end (2018, p. 159). The song continues until the girl's tags are all torn off, suggesting that the bonds on the girl are lifted, giving a sense of breath. By contrast, the two soundtracks highlight the severity of the feminist issue and the healing that follows its resolution. In addition, some videos use the song Try by American songwriter Colbie Caillat to encourage women not to pander to others and to remain true to themselves.

5. Editing meaning: close-ups, rhythmic control, time, and space contrasts

In addition to the language of the shots, editing and splicing between individual shots also shape or build narratives and meaningful expressions. The four dimensions of narrative film editing proposed by Brdwell and Thompson (2004) are graphic relations, rhythmic relations, spatical relations, and temporal relations. Among them, graphic and rhythmic are more common in editing pieces. Through the ten short videos with #FreeTheChokingGirl, I discovered that they all use similar editing techniques for short video female narratives on TikTok in China.

As a first step, multiple sets of similar shots were used to establish relationships between the frames and enhance narrative continuity (Brdwell and Thompson, 2004, p. 297). In the short video for the # FreeTheChokingGirl hashtag campaign, the creator repeats several or more shots of the torn-off hashtag. In these shots, the overall tone of light is maintained, the angles are uniform, and the close-ups ensure that the viewer's attention remains fixed (Ibiz, 2004). As a result of the continuous images and composition, the viewer's attention is directed toward the label content, re-emphasizing the purpose of the campaign to combat female stigma.

Furthermore, the relationship between shot length and duration in terms of pacing has a profound impact on the pace of the film (2004, p. 303). The longer the shot, the slower the pace will be, and the shorter the shot, the faster the pace will be. As mentioned earlier, the fast-paced music used during the intro narration adds to the sense of urgency, and the use of short shots in the editing of that sequence also adds to this sense of pressure.

In addition, editing can also shape spatial relationships. For example, placing a shot of the tearing off of the bad comment label in the middle of the two shots before and after the tearing off of the label can effectively contrast the characters' attitudes and expressions before and after the tearing off, the angry front and the relieved back, allowing people to infer the correlation between the two screens, highlighting the pleasure of the tearing off of the label, and delivering a signal of the success of the feminist movement. In addition, appropriate clip editing of the plot can help the viewer organise the chronology and frequency of the plot (Brdwell and Thompson, 2004, p. 306). Although not as diverse as film drama narrative techniques, the short video of #FreeTheSuffocatingGirl follows the general temporal narrative technique to fully record the practise of feminist interaction from online to offline, making the story more realistic and convincing. Furthermore, as with the previously mentioned close-ups of the tearing off the hashtag, the constant stacking and repetition of the footage content has a surprising tension, highlighting the importance of the content of the images (2004, p. 308). The repetition of the tearing off and the putting on of the blessing from different camera angles allows the viewer to see it twice or three times and to feel the different effects produced by the contrast between the two images. As a result, it suggests the importance of developing a similar feminist movement for the liberation of Chinese women and the accomplishment of narrative persuasion.

6. Rethinking Short Video Empowerment and Body Narratives

Body narratives and hashtag campaigns have been widely used by foreign digital feminists (Ging and Siapera, 2019), and indeed, their implementation in China has had significant effects, helping to expose Chinese digital feminists. Providing evidence through personal narratives can implement solidarity-based feminist practises (Ibiz, 2019). In the case of #FreeTheChokingGirl the blogger became the voice of a wide range of Chinese women through body narratives that sensually brought to light a world not subjected to male excess, changing the mediated image of women and subverting the male order. Furthermore, the image of women presented by media platforms is somewhat reinforcing and linked, and often has a strong referential effect on the establishment of real-life images of women. Media platforms reinforce and link women's portrayal in real life. Through online viewing and offline practice, the body is used as a symbol for social interaction and building group identity, and more and more women are developing a sense of belonging and presence. However, hashtag feminism generates this new 'emotional intensity' through a dissonant shared emotional experience that has not prompted collective feminist political change in Chinese society (Keller et al., 2018).

As a result of China's control over the digital political environment as well as the ban on discussing whether youth should adopt anti-establishment attitudes, collective political movements such as MeToo are prohibited (Peng, 2020). The #FreeTheChokingGirl hashtag movement only served to attract attention and spread public awareness, although it promoted offline practical activities and did not address the actual problem. In other words, as the heat of attention waned, there was no sustained action to bring about further feminist political engagement and social change. Furthermore, as personal narratives are somewhat subjective, following and imitating them without evaluation can lead to problems such as homogenization of content. Scholars have questioned the professionalism of women's personal narratives,

fearing it could affect feminist image-making and power relationships. (Disch and Hawkesworth, 2016)

Although, it can be seen that in addition to feminist bloggers, some young Chinese people are among the initiators of #SaveTheSmotheredGirls, with universities serving as a base for young Chinese feminists. The anonymity and interactivity of the digital framework provide closed, safe spaces for young girls to express their feminist identities, and young feminists, as well as other feminists locally and globally, are closely connected to each other online and offline through digital media (Jackson, 2018). However, social media does not provide a space for feminist communities free from harassment or disagreement (Ging and Siapera, 2019).

Banet-Weiser argues for popular misogyny to be understood alongside popular feminism as a 'call and response link between them', reminding us that popular misogyny manifests itself as a 'negotiation' (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Online feminists are often subjected to targeted attacks, including trolling, cyberbullying, human flesh searching, and threats of violence (Ferrier and Garud-Patkar, 2018). Contemporary global digital feminism takes place in an era of post-patriarchal misogyny, sexual minority violence, and implicit racism, where 'notions of normalcy and ordinariness are used to discipline, shame, and punish LGBTQ people' (Foucault, 1990, cited in Cavalcante, 2018). This has left minorities and marginalised groups in 'invisibility'. There is a clear difference between the digital media space occupied by female students at Chinese universities and Chinese rural women, and the #FreeTheChokingGirl hashtag movement is rarely organised in small, low-income counties in China, but mostly in large cities and city centres, and focuses on groups of women with digital identities, which can exacerbate internal tensions within feminist groups and produce female "self-loathing" (Ueno, 2015). In addition, under the #FreeTheChokingGirl commentary there are also pleas to 'save the stifled boy', calling attention to the same socially defined and constructed masculinity. Some men also oppose approaches to equality, and support feminism and modern liberalism (Philips, 2018).

In addition to socio-cultural factors, other challenges facing digital feminism in China are the invisible power of algorithms and commerce. Digital platforms create equal and inclusive class mobility, outlining a 'new world' of wealth freedom and rising class that appears to give everyone a voice but is actually a different story (Yang et al., 2019). Algorithm-based Jitterbug can control the number of views of topical events or limit the spread of feminist movements by violating Chinese censorship. In addition, while Chinese feminist content producers are currently in the minority, viewers are still the silent majority. While TikTok gives women an unprecedented voice, onlookers let this voice be heard. As opposed to platforms such as TikTok, which are primarily entertainment-based and have a low level of discussion on public issues, sites such as Zhihu.com and Douban.com are more popular with educated young people (Fan, 2022). Additionally, one study found that when campaigning for feminism, people may divert attention from gender issues for their own personal or business gain (Dejmanee, 2022). It appears that the #FreeTheChokingGirl campaign also includes businesses and brands, including furniture brands, flower sponsorships, and milk tea shop venue sponsorships, all of which serve non-political purposes for branding purposes when feminist activism follows the trend for attention and feminism is marketed and promoted commercially.

Similarly, feminism as a field of academic practise has not been able to keep up with the pace of research output in the new media field (Yang et al., 2019). The temporal nature of social media, its unsustainability, and chronic unpaid activism have left long-standing digital feminists feeling exhausted (Nowak, 2016; cited in Ging and Siapera, 2019). Language is also a major barrier to feminism's transnational spread, with poor translations from Chinese to English may easily misinterpret feminism (Huang and Sun, 2021).

7. Conclusion

Women's status is the best measure of a nation's civilization (Bebel, 1995, p. 105). Whether in the past or present, the emergence of new mediums has not completely destroyed masculinity. This article examines the latest cases of digital feminist practises in China through a socio-semantic analysis. It discusses and reflects on issues related to self-media empowerment and body narratives, as well as attempts to explore new paths for digital feminism in Mainland China.

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