

Digital Vigilantism in China's Media Industry: The Intersectional Risks for Women Job Seekers

Zining Zhu

University of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

Abstract

This study looks at how digital vigilantism and participatory surveillance make gender inequality worse in journalism jobs in China. It focuses on women job seekers and uses intersectionality theory to show how gender, age, and class together increase career risks. Through real cases and academic research, the paper shows that women often face more online checks, self-censorship, and unfair treatment from platform algorithms. Young women may be seen as “too outspoken”, while older women may be ignored for not using social media enough. The study also explains how platform rules and job standards push women to stay quiet and follow expected norms. This removes diverse and critical voices from the media. The paper ends with suggestions for fairer hiring and better digital rules that care about gender issues.

Keywords

Digital vigilantism, participatory surveillance, intersectionality, gender inequality in media hiring.

1. Introduction

In the digital age, social media has become an indispensable tool in the hiring process, especially in the Chinese journalism industry, where a job seeker's online behavior is often used as a key indicator in assessing his or her career suitability. Platforms such as Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and Tik Tok are not only spaces for personal expression, but also venues where a job seeker's past remarks, comments, and even personal image may have a direct impact on employment opportunities. In the case of journalists, as their role as public communicators requires “professional ethics” and “industry norms”, many news organizations review candidates' social media content during recruitment to ensure that their values are in line with the company's position.

However, there are significant gender inequalities in this screening mechanism. Studies have shown that female job seekers tend to face stricter screening criteria. Not only do they need to prove their professional competence, but they must also maintain an “expected” professional image on social media. If they have expressed feminist views, supported the LGBTQ+ community, or criticized social issues on social media in the past, they are likely to be perceived by employers as “radical” or “potentially risky,” which could affect the outcome of the recruitment process. In contrast, male candidates have more freedom of expression, and even if they express strong political views, this will not necessarily affect employment opportunities. This phenomenon can be understood as digital vigilantism, whereby the public or institutions “regulate” the behavior of certain individuals by exposing, reporting, or pressuring them through social media [1]. In the recruitment environment, digital vigilantism can come not only from employers, but also from social media users, peers, and even the culture of the whole industry.

Intersectionality theory provides us with an analytical framework for understanding how gender, age, and other identities intersect to collectively shape career risks for female job

seekers [2]. Intersectionality theory focuses not only on gender but also on the overlapping effects of other social identities [3]. For example, young female job seekers typically have richer social media histories, but this also means that their past statements are more easily mined, analyzed, and scrutinized. A controversial comment from a few years ago, a radical viewpoint, or even something seemingly innocuous shared about their personal lives can be grounds for rejection during the hiring process. For middle-aged female practitioners, the dilemma they face may be the opposite - when the industry equates “social media activity” with “career adaptability”, those who are less active on Twitter and not good at making short videos may be labelled as “stubborn” and “difficult to innovate” even if they have solid journalistic skills. This kind of judgement criterion essentially reveals a double dilemma in the industry: young women are seen as risky for “over-expressing”, while middle-aged women are accused of lacking competence for “under-expressing”. The root of the problem is not how women use social media, but the fact that the hiring system is turning digital skills into a new kind of gendered gateway - one that requires women to keep up with technological trends while denying a fair window of opportunity to learn for practitioners of all ages and backgrounds. When ‘being able to play social media’ becomes the only measure of professional value, women who are slower on the digital bandwagon are forced to bear the double squeeze of both gender and age.

By analyzing specific cases and reviewing relevant literature, this study aims to illustrate how digital vigilantism shapes recruitment practices in the Chinese news industry. It explores how female news job seekers find a balance between maintaining an authentic online presence and meeting the expectations of potential employers, while examining the role of platform technology and industry culture in amplifying or mitigating these risks. Ultimately, this study aims to reveal the broader impact of digital vigilantism on gender equality in China’s workplace and provide policy recommendations for a more equitable hiring environment in the future.

2. Understanding Intersectional Vulnerability in the Age of Digital Vigilantism

In today’s society, digital recruitment is reshaping the criteria for talent assessment, and social media has become an important window for judging the professional ethics of job seekers. For Chinese journalism practitioners, their social platform speech records, interaction preferences, and content orientation are often systematically analyzed by employers as an outward manifestation of their professional stance and values. This phenomenon reflects a recruitment culture known as digital vigilantism, in which organizations or individuals seek to regulate or discipline those who “departure from mainstream thinking” by exposing, reporting, and ostracizing the speech or identity of others through online means. This mechanism began as crowd-driven opinion-correcting behavior, but in professional settings it has often evolved into informal background screening, particularly for job applicants who display a strong stance on social media [1]. In addition to digital vigilantism, another implicit form of surveillance is “participatory surveillance”, in which users seemingly voluntarily share content and maintain an image on digital platforms but in fact participate in a form of “self-censorship” under the influence of social expectations and platform logic. The behavior of female job seekers, who often voluntarily delete sensitive content or hide their positions in order to avoid being labeled as “radical”, is the embodiment of participatory surveillance in the recruitment environment. It emphasizes that individual expression is not entirely free but rather passively adjusted in a continuous process of being seen and judged [4]. For female journalism job seekers, this mechanism is particularly damaging. Not only are they expected to be professionally competent, but they are also expected to present an “appropriate professional image” and “controlled manner of expression”, and the slightest “transgression” can result in them being labeled as the

slightest “overstepping of boundaries” can lead to them being labelled as “aggressive” and “unstable”, which can affect the outcome of the recruitment process.

To understand this inequality, we must bring in the perspectives of intersectionality theory. Individuals’ multiple social identities (e.g., gender, age, class) do not exist in isolation but rather are superimposed on one another in a given context, constituting complex inequalities of treatment [2]. Intersectionality theory helps us understand the multiple inequalities that women face in the workplace [5]. In China’s journalism industry, young women are often more exposed to “digital censorship” due to their high social media activity and openness of expression, while middle-aged women may be perceived as “not adapting to new media trends” due to their unfamiliarity with platform norms and lack of online “visibility”. In addition, geography and educational background also play an important role in digital recruitment. For example, female job seekers from first-tier cities may adapt to new media trends more easily than those from second - and third-tier cities, while highly educated women may be considered “difficult to manage” because of their “over-education.” The superposition of these factors further intensifies the career risk of female job seekers.

Using social media to check job applicants (called screening) often doesn’t work well. It can even unfairly hurt women’s chances of getting jobs [6]. For example, platform algorithms often amplify controversial content, and women’s voices on gender issues are more likely to be labeled as “sensitive”, which in turn affects career opportunities. Checking social media and global data tracking put women at a bigger disadvantage in job searches [7].

Although a middle-aged female journalist has rich experience in journalism, she is not familiar with the current network media platform and rarely expresses her views on social platforms. The recruiter believes that her social media performance is “not active enough” to adapt to the communication needs of the new media era. This case reveals another dilemma Chinese women face in the digital recruitment environment: even if they choose to remain silent, they may be marginalized for being “too invisible”. This double standard makes it difficult for female job seekers to find the balance between “expression” and “silence”. This standard of judgement is essentially a male-centered norm of professional rationality that marginalizes women from the legitimacy of public expression.

At the same time, the structure of China’s social media platforms themselves amplifies this inequality. Increasingly, job seekers’ “digital footprints” are the “basis of assessment”, and the platforms’ algorithmic mechanisms emphasize visibility, retweets, and frequency of interactions, exposing job seekers to high-stakes scrutiny. Numerous studies have shown that female candidates’ expressions on social media are more likely to be perceived as “risk signals” by employers, especially when it comes to gender issues. In order to avoid potential damage, female job seekers often adopt self-censorship strategies, such as deleting feminist, political or emotional content, hiding traces of their personal lives, or even setting up “professionally-specific accounts” to meet the expectations of recruiters. This kind of participatory surveillance, although active in form, reflects a passive conformity to industry gender norms, a “dilemma of conformity” created by both the digital environment and gender structures. Gender issues on social media platforms are often packaged as “irrational” and “emotional,” while the public and employers depoliticize women’s expression through “neutral” language. This gender blindness has led to institutionalized exclusion being rationalized as “professional judgement” [7]. In 2020, a young female job applicant was rejected for a job at a news organization because of comments she made on Weibo several years earlier in support of the LGBTQ+ community. remarks and was rejected. Although the recruiter did not specify the reason for the rejection, internal sources said that her social media posts had been considered “not in line with the company’s values.” The case shows how a female candidate’s past social media comments can be mined by employers and used as a basis for evaluation, even if they have nothing to do with her professional competence. The platform algorithms tend to amplify controversial content, which

makes the expression of female job candidates more susceptible to misinterpretation and censorship [8]. Male job applicants, by contrast, tend not to receive the same level of scrutiny when they express similar views.

Overall, digital vigilantism, intersectional inequalities and platform algorithmic mechanisms constitute the triple vulnerability for women journalism job applicants during recruitment. Under the circumstances, “being oneself” is dangerous, while “hiding and conforming” yields prospects. This not only limits women’s typical expression in the public sphere but also excludes the journalism field from diverse and critical voices. Understanding this phenomenon, thus, is not so much an issue of protecting individuals’ rights, but equally of revealing the gender politics beneath the recruitment procedure and the novel discursive domination patterns in the age of information.

3. Tracing Digital Judgement in Hiring: Cases-Based Analysis of Gendered Risk in China’s Industry

As digital recruitment becomes more and more commonplace, social media behavior is becoming a key criterion for recruiters to assess “career suitability.” This trend is particularly evident in China’s news and media industry. The digital risks faced by female job seekers are not only rooted in algorithms, rules, or platform structures, but are also closely related to their gender identities, habits of public expression, and gendered expectations of “professional image” within the industry. In order to reveal how these risks are constructed, amplified, and transformed into actual career barriers, we focus on two real-life, widely reported gender-related incidents in China to analyze how digital vigilantism creates tensions between public expression and career opportunities.

The first case was a commercial endorsement of Yang Li, a famous Chinese stand-up comedian, who became popular in 2020 for her joke “Men are so ordinary but so confident,” which sparked a lot of controversy, especially among the male population. In October 2021, e-commerce platform Jingdong launched a business partnership with Yang Li, inviting her to be a brand promotion guest. However, shortly after the partnership went live, it was met with a collective boycott and cyberattacks from male consumers, and was eventually terminated by Jingdong due to public pressure. Although Yang is not a journalist herself, this incident clearly demonstrates the typical logic of digital vigilantism, in which women lose professional opportunities because of their “stance” in public expression. The incident illustrates that women’s expression of gendered positions that challenge the gender order, even in humorous contexts, can be considered “unacceptable” by certain groups, leading to professional sanctions. Feminist expressions in everyday life are often misinterpreted as “offensive” or even “attack” in Chinese social media contexts, especially when they are made by women, and this misinterpretation is likely to trigger a strong backlash. This mechanism explains why “humorous expressions” in the Yang Li case were equated with “dangerous positions” [9].

The second case is more directly related to the news and communications industry: the banning of the social media account of the Chinese feminist organization Gender Watch Women’s Voice, which was founded in 2010 to advocate for gender equality and oppose sexism in the media. This group started in 2010. It works for women’s equality and fights sexism in the media. It also teaches about women’s rights. In March 2018, its Weibo account (with 180,000 followers) was suddenly closed. The government did not say why, but most people think it was because the group often posted about women’s rights and issues like #MeToo [10]. The incident not only deprived the organization of an important public communication channel, but also had a chilling effect on the community of female journalists, editors-in-training, and media researchers associated with it. Many women practitioners have since adjusted their social

media behavior to avoid retweeting content related to feminist issues, in order to avoid public attacks or “sensitive labelling” in the workplace.

These two cases together show a clear trend: in the current digital recruitment and career screening environment, women are easy targets for digital vigilantism when they express a strong gender stance on social media or engage in public issues. In a field like journalism, which is highly sensitive to the requirements of “neutrality” and “professional image,” such expressions are often seen by recruiters as “risk signals” rather than “professional attributes”, “professional qualities”. At the same time, the over-interpretation and amplification of women’s expressions by the public further promotes employers’ preference for “non-controversial candidates.”

These two cases not only reflect the vulnerable position of women in public spaces of expression but also reveal how social media has become an invisible mechanism for gender screening in the workplace. Under this mechanism, female job seekers are forced to self-censor, clean up their content, and reduce their presence in exchange for a “safe image”. This is the result of the platform’s algorithmic logic, recruitment culture, and gender norms. Through these real-life cases, we have been able to depict the operation mode of digital vigilantism in the recruitment context, which also provides a solid analytical basis for the in-depth discussion in the following section.

4. Constructed Compliance: Digital Self-Censorship and the Reproduction of Gendered Power in Media Recruitment

With the increasing normalization of digital recruitment mechanisms, social media has become an important tool for recruiters to assess the “professional suitability” of job applicants. In practice, however, this tool has evolved into an implicit screening mechanism, especially in the journalism industry, where screening criteria often appear in the name of “professional image,” “political security,” “emotional stability,” and so on. In the journalism industry in particular, screening criteria often appear in the name of “professional image”, “political security”, “emotional stability”, etc., but in fact they hide a profoundly gendered logic of discipline. Under this mechanism, female job seekers are pushed to the margins of “digital conformity”, not only facing the risk of expression, but also being deprived of the possibility of freely constructing a professional identity in the public sphere.

Firstly, “digital reputations” in social media are no longer actively shaped by job seekers themselves, but are more often “constructed” through a triple interaction between recruiters, public opinion and platform algorithms. Recruiters browse social media for signs of “risk”, which are not based on specific behaviors or assessments of competence, but rather on stereotypical perceptions of women’s expression. For example, women’s retweets on Weibo on topics such as feminism, #MeToo, and social injustice are often seen as “taking too strong a stance” or “prone to provoking controversy”. Such judgements are not only ambiguous but also highly subjective, obscuring employers’ demands for conformity to social norms.

Secondly, the demand for “political neutrality” or “image integrity” in recruitment is not value-neutral, and often serves the goal of maintaining the existing professional order and ideological stability. The journalism industry ostensibly promotes “neutrality” and “professionalism”, but in actual recruitment, this criterion is often interpreted in a gendered way - men are allowed to express their opinions and are seen as having “ideas”, while women express their positions, especially in the media, and are considered to have “ideas”, while women express their positions, especially in the media. Men’s opinions are often seen as thoughtful, but women’s views-especially on gender or rights-are seen as risky [7]. This double standard is not only unfair in terms of the scale of judgement, but also fundamentally restricts the space for women to play independent, critical roles in the journalism profession.

To avoid unfair checks, women looking for jobs often hide their social media posts, use private accounts, and avoid talking about gender issues [11]. These behaviors are ostensibly rational choices motivated by professional self-preservation, but from a structural point of view, it is actually a kind of passive, constructed compliance - women are forced to adapt to a male-dominated, risk-averse oriented hiring culture, and even begin to domesticate themselves before they enter the workplace. Even before entering the workplace, women begin to domesticate themselves. This process of conformity can also be understood as a result of “participatory monitoring”. Individuals “self-management” on social media platforms is not entirely subjective, but rather a passive response to the pressure of public visibility and potential surveillance. The deletion of posts, the creation of private profiles, and the concealment of stances by female job seekers is a strategic reshaping of their digital identities in response to perceived professional risks. This “passivity in the midst of activism” reflects how structural discipline is internalized into everyday behaviors through platform mechanisms [12]. Instead of actively shaping their professional image, they strive for a relatively ‘safe mind’ by constantly “cleaning up” their original diversity of ideas. They must strategically present an acceptable self-image to avoid unfavorable interpretations by the public and platform algorithms [13].

More critically, this conformity does not mean that there is a chance of being treated fairly if one adapts. Discussions on gender topics on Chinese social media platforms are often constrained and regulated by the public with “rational” and “de-emotional” standards, and such seemingly objective judgements have actually exacerbated the suppression of women’s expression, which ultimately constitutes a structural contraction of the space for expression [7]. As we saw in the earlier case of the middle-aged female job seeker who was deemed “not comfortable with new media” due to her social media silence, even if a woman does not express herself, she may still be seen as lacking competence because she is “too invisible” and be seen as lacking competence. This suggests that the demands placed on women in the digital recruitment environment are in fact highly contradictory: they must be neither too “out there” nor too “quiet”, and they must be both active and standoffish. In such a structural paradox, it is almost impossible for female job seekers to establish a truly secure and complete professional identity. At the same time, some of China’s platform mechanisms exacerbate this paradox. Algorithms reward retweets, affective intensity, and scandal-the very features of women’s speech most prone to being amplified and misinterpreted. Recruiter decisions are regulated by the logic of visibility of the platform, further solidifying the unspoken norm that “it’s safer to talk less”. Ultimately, this norm influences individual choices as much as it does the overall cultural ecology of the journalism industry as a whole-a work base increasingly susceptible to “harmless expression” and “submissive expression”.

More broadly speaking, this hiring mechanism is neither random but rather a power machinery created by an interaction of digital technology, professional culture, and gender structures. Not only does it determine who enters the profession, but it also determines what voices can reside there. If women have to hide their true selves before they even set foot in the workplace, then that implies journalism’s critical, pluralistic, and socially reflexive potential is being lost, and journalism is, instead, becoming increasingly closed. Changing this structural logic of conformity requires rethinking the boundaries of legitimacy of recruitment practices, the value orientation of platforms, and the industry’s gendered imagery of what it means to be a “qualified journalist”.

This vetting logic in the name of “neutrality” and “objectivity” essentially builds a recruitment environment that is de-gendered on the surface but deeply gendered in reality. It conceals structural screening criteria through pseudo-neutral language, amplifies the misinterpretation of women’s expression through the platform mechanism, and reinforces the perception that “risk is women’s expression” through the industry’s culture. This not only excludes female job

seekers who are truly capable of independent thinking and aware of social concerns, but also makes “silent women” the preferred image of practitioners in the industry, weakening the critical power, diversity of discourse, and diversity of thought that should be present in the entire journalism industry. If we don’t break this “so-called right” discourse structure, fairness in recruitment will always remain at the surface level of justice, without touching the root of the system.

5. Conclusion

The intersection between participatory surveillance and digital vigilantism in journalism practice in China is a complex and gendered terrain that imposes difficulties on job-seeking women especially with regard to social media censoring during employment seeking. On the basis of the analysis set against the perspective of intersectionality theory, the study reveals that gender, as well as other social positions, intersecting with each other, results in more vulnerabilities facing women in contemporary digital times. Younger women are subject to tighter surveillance for their wealthier social media histories, while older women can be punished for their presumed digital vulnerability. This double bind of exposure and concealment highlights the structural disparities built into digital hiring practices.

In order to know intersectionality in digital vigilantism or participatory watching, it should be noted that there are numerous social identities intersecting, such as gender, age, and professional, in certain areas and, at the same time, creating together the professional vulnerabilities of female candidates. From case studies, such as Yang’s endorsement advertising and Feminist Voice’s social media account suspension on social media, we can see that women’s gendered or socially critical public participation can be interpreted by employers and the public as “risk signals” and will lead to lost career opportunities. This can lead to a loss of career opportunities. These cases not only illustrate women’s vulnerability in the public articulation space but also the way social media has become an unseen tool for filtering gender at the workplace. Female job applicants are forced to employ self-censorship methods, such as deleting tweets, hiding their accounts, and downplaying their positions, in exchange for a “safe image”. But this “constructed conformity” is not an indication that they have equal career prospects. Far from it, in fact: the standards to which women are held in the virtual hiring process are themselves highly contradictory: not to “express too much” and not to “show too little”; not to “have a presence” and not to “take a stand”. It is a structural contradiction which keeps women from “having a presence” and simultaneously “taking a stand”. It is this structural contradiction which keeps women from constructing a complete and secure professional identity. This identity-based technical performance double standard also adds to women’s disadvantaged status in recruitment.

To address this, firstly, social media platforms need to modify their algorithmic systems to reduce over-polarization of sensitive information so that it will not lead to misinterpretation of women job seekers’ expression. Secondly, the media sector should institute clear recruitment guidelines and prohibit gender-sensitive censorship from the basis of a social media posting. Thirdly, the government and NGOs have to strengthen women job seekers’ digital skill education to enhance protection against online recruitment. To shatter this logic of structural silence and conformity, there is a need to revisit the limits of recruitment assessment criteria, define the roles of platforms, and redefine the industry’s gendered imagery of what it is to be a “qualified journalist”. The journalism industry needs to acknowledge that diversity of voices and critical expression is a significant aspect of its social value. It can only be achieved by promoting fairer and more representative recruitment processes that we can ensure equal opportunity for women in the media and introduce greater diversity and representation into the profession.

In conclusion, online digital vigilantism not only presents a career danger to women job candidates but also has a very big impact on the social critical function and public worth of the journalism profession. Only through reform can this mechanism truly be eradicated so that women can openly speak in the digital space and contribute more dynamism and innovation to the journalism profession.

References

- [1] Trottier, D., 2017. Digital vigilantism as weaponisation of visibility. *Philosophy & Technology*, 30, pp.55-72.
- [2] Crenshaw, K., 2013. Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *Feminist legal theories* (pp. 23-51). Routledge.
- [3] Collins, P.H. 2015, "Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas", *Annual review of sociology*, vol. 41, no. 1, pp. 1-20.
- [4] Albrechtslund, A., 2008. Online social networking as participatory surveillance. *First Monday*.
- [5] Davis, K. 2008, "Intersectionality as buzzword: A sociology of science perspective on what makes a feminist theory successful", *Feminist theory*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 67-85.
- [6] Van Iddekinge, C.H., Lanivich, S.E., Roth, P.L. & Junco, E. 2016, "Social Media for Selection? Validity and Adverse Impact Potential of a Facebook-Based Assessment", *Journal of management*, vol. 42, no. 7, pp. 1811-1835.
- [7] Qin, Y., Duan, W., Wu, Q. & Lu, Z. 2024, "Dismantling Gender Blindness in Online Discussion of a Crime/Gender Dichotomy", *Proceedings of the ACM on human-computer interaction*, vol. 8, no. CSCW1, pp. 1-31.
- [8] Mao, C. 2020, "Feminist activism via social media in China", *Asian journal of women's studies*, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 245-258.
- [9] Deng, Y., Chen, Z., He, C., Lu, Z. and Li, B., 2024, May. Persuasion or Insulting? Unpacking Discursive Strategies of Gender Debate in Everyday Feminism in China. *Proceedings of the 2024 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 1-19).
- [10] 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*, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 734-749.
- [11] Zhou, Z., Wang, Z. and Zimmer, F., 2022. Anonymous expression in an online community for women in china. *arXiv preprint arXiv:2206.07923*.
- [12] Albrechtslund, A., 2008. Online social networking as participatory surveillance. *First Monday*.
- [13] Duffy, B.E. and Hund, E., 2019. Gendered visibility on social media: Navigating Instagram's authenticity bind. *International Journal of Communication*, 13, p.20.