

Chinese People's Perception and Opinion of Feminism -- A Comment Analysis

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Abstract. As the global economy moves towards the direction of gender equality, feminist movements have also become more predominant worldwide, including in Chinese society. The purpose of this research is to explore perceptions and opinions about feminism and women empowerment on feminism-related articles posted on Chinese media sites. This qualitative study looks into four articles on feminism-related topics and developed a codebook to analyze the comments of each of the four articles. The findings show that anti-feminists expressed beliefs that women are not a vulnerable group and that women receive more tolerance, assistance, and care in society. Also, according to the analysis of data, anti-feminists show the tendency of overgeneralizing feminism while pro-feminism comments present clarification or de-stigmatization for feminism. However, overall 49.5% of comments were positive, suggesting an overall positive view of feminist issues.

Keywords: Feminism; Prejudice; Essentialism; Integrated Threat; Collectivism; Filial Piety.

1. Introduction

To understand the public perception of feminism in China, and to find out the rooted reasons for potential stigmatization for feminist movements, this study analyzes positive, neutral and negative comments from multiple topics, and concludes trends of generalization to feminism in China. The research was conducted by developing a codebook and coding selected comments under each category. Further, the statistics and qualitative opinions were analyzed through the lens of essentialist view, integrated theory and cultural values, concluded the ignorance of female's gender disadvantage and stigmatization of feminism. The analysis can provide reference for future studies on promoting feminist movement in China, and de-stigmatization of feminism in China.

2. Literature Review

Are women and men born with different social roles? Why do some people show repulsion and prejudice towards feminism? To understand the potential causes of prejudice towards feminism, the following passage reviews two topics: gender essentialism (which discusses how essentialists views contribute to prejudice) and integrated threats (which talks about how perceived threats predict prejudice).

2.1 Gender Essentialism

Gender essentialism is an attribution of innate differences between man and women's qualities. Previous research that supported this theory presented that women are more sympathetic compared to men who are more capable of building systems (Baron-Cohen, 2005). Such attribution presents a fixed essence to both genders, assuming feminine qualities for women and masculine qualities for men. Common descriptions of femininity include adjectives like emotional, nurturance, and non-competitiveness (Coleman & Hong, 2008), which covers multiple aspects from women's psychological and physical development, from career paths to social roles.

Compared to essentialists views which indicate genders are inherently different and display homogeneity, Simone Beauvoir (1995) suggested that "...one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (pp.283). In her theory, the construction of gender is based on the development of identity, which differentiates between sex and gender. The concept of gender was argued to be socially

constructed or performed. In Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the formation of gender depends on how people present or perform gender traits in society (1988).

The systems that define women's essence put biological restrictions on women's psychological and social development opportunities (Grosz, 1995). This attribution of gender differences was argued as an enhancement to the gender binary and the fixed role of women in society (Grosz, 1995). Prevalent essentialist opinions include comments on women's career decisions, domestic roles, and social status, for example, "women are not competent enough for political leaders because women are born to be more emotional and less radical than men," "women should take care of domestic issues like doing the chores or taking care of children because women are more careful and handier", or "women are biologically weaker than men, which makes them less superior than men." The binary perception of gender and the fixation of women's roles caused by gender essentialism can further influence people's opinions on women or feminism. According to Gordon Allport, the belief in essence generally brings prejudice and bias (1954):

There is an inherent 'Jewishness' in every Jew. The 'soul of the Oriental,' 'Negro blood,' Hitler's 'Aryanism,' 'the peculiar genius of America,' 'the logical Frenchman,' 'the passionate Latin'—all represent a belief in essence. Mysterious mana (for good or ill) resides in a group, all its members partaking thereof. (pp. 169)

Indeed, multiple studies have presented the correlation between essentialism and prejudice (including ingroup bias, implicit or explicit prejudice or stereotype) (e.g., Keller, 2005; Ching & Xu, 2017; Chen & Ratliff, 2018; Haslam et al. 2002; Coleman & Hong, 2008, etc.). Opinions based on a genetic determinism view can make sexism a reasonable interpretation, or cause the normalization of gender prejudice, as gender traits are assumed to be innate. Coleman and Hong's study (2008) found that women who hold a biological theory of gender endorse more stereotypically feminine traits (especially negative traits like being vulnerable, childish, or neurotic) and present more self-stereotyping opinions. The prejudice and stereotypes projected from either society or themselves can affect people's views on feminism. Further, it is proved that exposure to essentialist views increases people's tolerance towards sexism, and essentialism can be used as a strategic approach to protect higher social statuses and thus preserve social hierarchy (Morton, 2009).

2.2 Integrated Threat Theory

Integrated threat theory suggests that new ideas or outgroups can trigger the feeling of threat or fear in a social group. These threats are driven by four factors: symbolic threats, realistic threats, intergroup anxiety, and negative stereotypes (W. Stephan & C. Stephan, 2000). We will mainly discuss the symbolic threats and realistic threats in the following passage.

Symbolic threats refer to fear or concern of change in morals, values, beliefs, attitudes, or standards caused by outgroups (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Examples of symbolic threats could be concerns of losing or changing local culture due to immigrants (eg. Stephan et al., 1998; Ramsay & Pang, 2017; Gonza'lez et al, 2008) or discord of values from LGBTQ communities (Miller & Stack, 2014). The outgroups' worldview is disliked or rejected by the dominant group as a consequence of such threat.

Realistic threats are threats to the existence of the group, including the menace of political status, social welfare, or personal well-being, and are originally caused by competition for sacred resources (Stephan & Stephan, 2000; LeVine & Campbell, 1972; Sherif & Sherif, 1953). For example, a previous study found that sharp increases in immigration, a downturn in economic fortunes, and contagion processes all raise rates of ethnic conflict (Olazk, 1989). The causes of realistic threats for a modern society could be resources like houses, jobs, social status, or salaries.

Many previous studies have suggested the correlation between perceived threat on the part of the dominant group and prejudice towards the subordinate one (e.g., Kinder & Sears, 1981; Sherif, 1966, Ramsay & Pang, 2017; Gonza'lez et al, 2008). In Kinder and Sears's study of symbolic racism, they argue that the hostility of white people in the U.S. towards African Americans is due to a common belief that African Americans violated traditional values that are shared by most white people (1981).

This is a typical example that illustrates how perceived (symbolic) threat acts as a predictor of hostility and prejudice.

Feminism, as a concept, specifically indicates equal benefits of women, constructs groups and rights based on gender. Under such circumstances, women are seen as the outgroup to men. And as a "belief" or "moral" of women, feminism might also trigger integrated threats to the group of men or the patriarchal-politic realm. It could cause realistic threats, e.g., "as more women are employed, fewer men will be able to get a job" or "if more women participate in the political decision, men will lose their discourse power," and also symbolic threats, e.g., "feminism is undermining the society's value" or "feminism is destructing the system that men are used to". Furthermore, these fears and concerns can develop into prejudice towards feminism or sexism in the same way as racism, transprejudice, or homophobia. Current studies suggest people should avoid referring to these topics as challenges to the social hierarchy (Ching, 2020).

In addition, Morton's study on essentialism also proved a connection between people's will of preserving social hierarchy and essentialists beliefs (2009), which also presents an interrelation between essentialism and integrated threats.

2.3 Cultural Value

As mentioned above, feminism may create symbolic threats to social or cultural values and thus receive prejudice. For example, the promotion of feminism alongside the birth rate drop in China could trigger symbolic threats. Below is a review under a more specific cultural context (filial piety and collectivism).

Filial piety, as a traditional Chinese value, requires obedience, respect, and care for parents and ancestors (Luo & Zhan, 2011). People in Chinese communities are expected to see marriage with an other-sex partner and give birth to children as a responsibility (Das Gupta et al., 2003). And under the collectivist culture in Chinese society, violating such expectations can bring prejudice to feminists. Previous studies about transprejudice have indicated that because of China's strong collectivistic cultural standards, being a transgender person may also bring stigma to the entire family, assuming that the binary view of gender is the recognized norm in Chinese communities (Liu and Chan 2003; Szymanski and Sung 2010). Celibatarian or DINK pursuits are commonly associated with feminism and can be considered as threats to the collectivistic filial piety system in Chinese society.

To better understand the potential for perceived symbolic or realistic threats of feminism in China, a comment analysis was conducted. By analyzing comments from four selected articles discussing feminist topics, the current study aims to achieve a more comprehensive view of public perceptions towards feminism.

3. Methodology

To better understand Chinese people's opinions and attitudes towards feminism (in China), a codebook was developed to code each of the top 50 most relevant comments of four chosen articles. Coding comments for relevant articles provide an understanding of commenters' opinions and most frequently presented attitudes towards feminism in China.

3.1 Codebook

The codebook was developed to categorize comments from the selected articles. The codebook contained three broad categories:

A: Negative: Anti-feminism, not supportive of feminism movements or related policy changes, or misogynistic (e.g., "Feminism is a conspiracy!" or "Women are born less competent").

B: Neutral: Partially agree with either side, show an indifferent attitude or generally rational (e.g., "Women's rights need to be achieved, but not in an aggressive way" or "men and women should both reflect on themselves").

C: Positive: Show a supportive attitude towards feminism, women or related policy changes/ disagree with negative (section A) opinions (e.g., "Women should get united and fight against prejudice towards women" or "women are as strong as men").

Under these three categories, there are more specific branches grouped by number. For example, Code A1 is "Unfair financial pursuit benefits women more than men." Under that category, Code A1.1 is "High-price betrothal gift/bride price to men/ purchase cars and houses as a requirement to get married." Each comment is coded by one or more codes depending on its content and opinion. See the codebook in the Appendix.

3.2 Valence Rating

The comments' valence and arousal are evaluated as an additional factor to discover the relationship between opinions and emotional arousal. Valence (or sentiment) represents the polarity of the affective content in a post, rated on a nine-point scale from 1 (very anti-feminist) to 5 (neutral/objective) to 9 (very pro-feminist). Arousal (or intensity) represents the intensity of the affective content, rated on a nine-point scale from 1 (neutral/objective post) to 9 (very high) (Preot, iuc-Pietro et al., 2016).

3.3 Articles/Comments

Four articles were chosen for the coding process. Article 1 and 2 were selected as "neutral" articles. They are both critical about "fake feminism"/ "aggressive feminism"/ "Chinese feminism." Article 3 and 4 are selected as positive articles, which present positive attitudes towards feminism or women. There are no negative samples because most anti-feminism opinions are not completely based on misogyny or women-hate (most acknowledge the fact that women should have equal rights/gender equality should be achieved), but are based on the commenter's perception of what applies to feminism. All articles were written within the last 2 years. The top fifty comments in each article were coded (excluding completely irrelevant comments).

Article 1. is "中国式"女权主义", 正在被污名化" (translated: "Chinese "Feminism" is Being Stigmatized"), published on May 18, 2020, on Baidu.

Article 2. is " 蒋方舟用两个字解读当下的"女权", 真可谓是一针见血, 发人深省" (translated: "Jiang Fangzhou Uses Two Words to Interpret Current "Feminism," it Hit the Nail on the Head, and is Thought-Provoking"), published on November 27, 2019, on Baidu.

Article 3. is "从造谣母狗事件想到的" (translated: "From the Slut Rumor"), published in WeChat Public Account.

Article 4. is "被妖魔化的女权主义" (translated: "Demonized Feminism"), published in WeChat Public Account.

The platforms that these articles are published both have a large range of audience, but compared to Baidu, WeChat Public Accounts are more selective, as most of the viewers are followers of that account, which may create potential selection bias.

Differentiation

As mentioned, article 1 and 2 criticize "fake feminism"/ "Chinese feminism"/ "aggressive feminism" in particular, so to understand overgeneralizations of feminism, a color-coding system for differentiation was developed. The color-coding specifically applied to comments that mention "feminism"/ "women's rights."

Comments were coded in green when the respondent differentiated between what they deemed to be "real feminism," "women's empowerment" or "gender equality" and what they viewed as "fake feminism" or "inappropriate feminism." Comments were coded in orange when the comment showed a tendency of overgeneralization or stigmatization (e.g. showed no differentiation between extremist feminism and general equality).

4. Results

Out of the 200 comments selected from four articles, three of them were excluded from the coding process because the content was irrelevant or incomprehensible, but their valence and arousal were still evaluated; nine of them were not coded for any specific categories but given a code of a broad category (A, B or C) because the content was too vague or broad to be included.

Table 1. The distribution of comment type.

	Number	Percentage out of total	Valence Mean	Arousal Mean
A(negative comments)	64	0.32	2.859375	5.40625
B(neutral comments)	53	0.265	5.264150943	5.12755102
C(positive comments)	99	0.495	5.497487437	5.125628141

(This table reflects the number and percentage of comments in each category, and the valence mean and arousal mean for each section)

The data shows that 49.5% of comments expressed positive attitude to feminism, 32% showed negative attitude and 26.5% show neutral attitude.

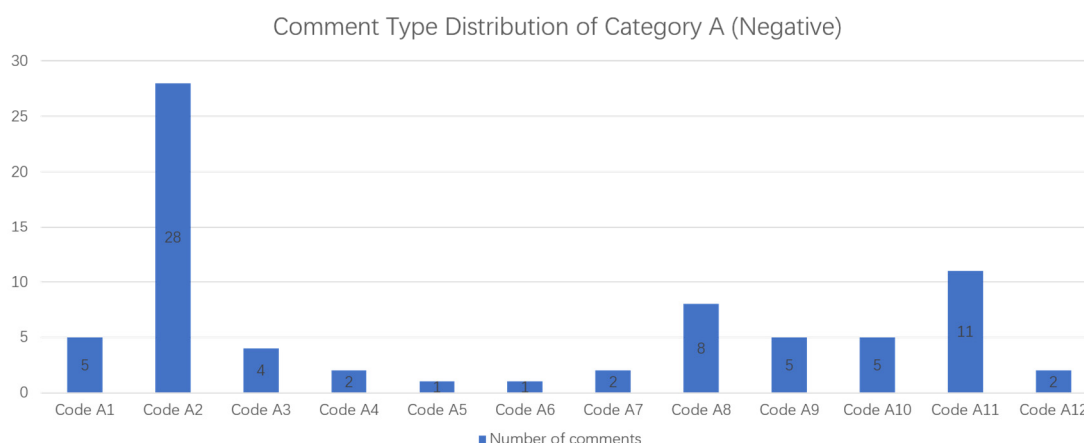


Figure 1. The distribution of comment type in Category A (negative)

The most frequently discussed topics in 64 comments that expressed negative opinions were Code A2, “Opposition of the idea that women is a vulnerable group/women take advantage of their sex” (28) and Code A11 “Feminism is an extreme approach” (11). The most frequently expressed opinions under the category of Code A2 is code A2.1, “Women ask for more tolerance/help/women have dominance in family” (11) and code A2.4, “(Women) Use pregnancy/menstruation as defense or excuse for not doing chores/asking money from men/refusing to take care of the family/insulting men” (5).

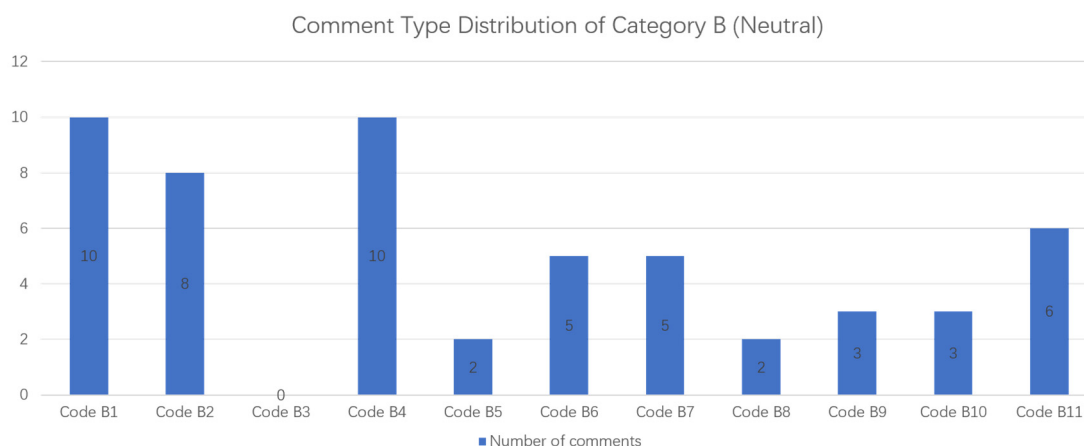


Figure 2. The distribution of comment type in Category B (neutral)

The most frequently discussed topics in 55 comments that expressed neutral opinions were Code B1, “Partially acceptance” (10) and Code B4 “‘Feminism’ or such arguments should not exist/it is better not to stress “gender” (10). More specifically, the most frequently expressed opinion is Code B1.2, “Criticize aggressive or fake feminism & show acceptance or support to rational feminism” (8).

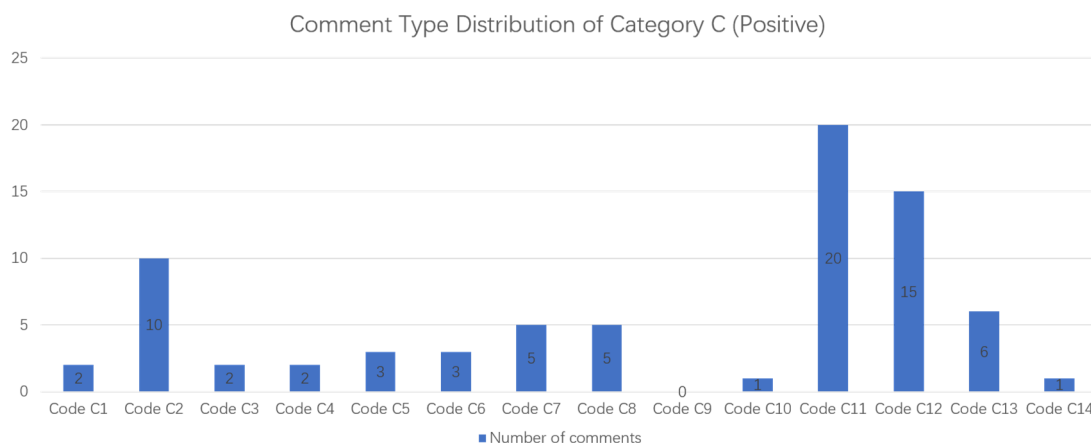


Figure 3. The distribution of comment type in Category C (Positive)

The most frequently discussed topics in 99 comments that expressed positive opinions were Code C11, “Interpretation of feminism” (20) and Code C12 “Comments on how men are against feminism” (15). More specifically, the most frequently expressed opinion is Code C11.2, “People falsely conclude things as “feminism” (like asking for more rights than men)/feminism is stigmatized” (14).

Table 2. This table displays the number and percentage of comments that overgeneralized or differentiated feminism

	Number	Percentage out of group	Percentage out of total
Shows overgeneralization of feminism	12	38.7097%	6%
Shows differentiation of feminism	19	61.29%	9.50%

The “group” indicates all selected comments (negative and neutral) that discussed “feminism”. Positive comments were not included because positive feminism generally either show differentiation nor present overgeneralization or stigmatization.

5. Discussion

5.1 "The Women are not Disadvantaged" Belief

According to the results (Figure 1), the negative comments towards feminism concentrated at code A2 (43.75% of negative comments are under code A2), "Opposition of the idea that women are a vulnerable group/women take advantage of their sex." Frequently mentioned topics under this category include code A2.1, "Women ask for more tolerance/help/women dominate family" and code A2.4, "Use pregnancy/menstruation as defense or excuse for not doing chores/asking money from men/refusing to take care of the family/insulting men."

Even with presented data and evidence that proves women are more disadvantaged in society compared to men (World Economic Forum, 2020), many people still doubt the premise of feminism, arguing that women are equal to men or women have had high enough status. And in this study, comments of this kind argued that women ask for more tolerance, help, and financial assistance from men, taking advantage of their gender. The idea that women take advantage of their gender can be more specifically concluded from two perspectives: financial and emotional.

5.1.1 Men as Breadwinners

Men are considered to be financial providers by Americans even though women's status has improved (Parker & Stepler, 2017). Similarly, the masculine role of men in China also indicates that men are expected to be the breadwinners of the family. In traditional Chinese values, men are seen as the "pillar of the family." A Chinese saying that goes "Men are breadwinners; women are homemakers" also stresses a binary gender role. With a perceived expectation of being a provider, men that support code A2 "Opposition of the idea that women are a vulnerable group/women take advantage of their sex" complain about how women reap the economic benefits earned by men. Code A1 ("Unfair financial pursuit benefits women more than men") more specifically includes such complaints. For example (from the selected sample), "...If gender equality is true, would men be allowed to ask for a house or a car from women? Why is everyone dumb when it comes to this? When I was in Beijing, I asked women if they would pay off house mortgage with me if we get married. None of them would, because they didn't see it as their duty. So equality is a joke" (translated).

More precisely, the debate on the inequality of financial effort focuses on betrothal price (bride price). Betrothal price is a Chinese marriage tradition where the groom's family offers an amount of money to the bride's family as a sign of respect. In modern China, the betrothal price ranges from 30,000 to 200,000 yuan, and sometimes also includes estates or cars. Negative comments that support code A1.1 "1.1. High-price betrothal gift/bride price to men/purchase cars and houses as a requirement to get married" express the idea that the betrothal price brings pressure to men and acts as evidence that women are financially dependent on men. For example (from the selected sample), "If that fact that women ask for bride price and houses from men changes, I will admit that women are equal to men!" (translated). And such complaints also have been extended to a stereotype or prejudice that women are gold-diggers or women only fall for rich men. An example selected from the sample would be, "Women nowadays can do anything for money! I know a woman who divorced right away after she found a richer man, leaving her children. And that is what they called feminism!" (translated).

5.1.2 The "Overprotected Women"

Besides the point that women receive financial assistance from men, anti-feminists also stress that women are more tolerated by people when they are in relationships, even when it comes to abusive behavior. Women are crafted into an image that is emotional, neurotic, or irrational. "Try to reason with a woman is to bring yourself the trouble!" (translated) is one typical example in the sample. And further, an example under code A2.1 "Women ask for more tolerance/help/women have dominance in the family" extended from the stereotype of women being emotionally unstable, "I cannot get into a fight with her. Every time we fight, it develops into a cold war. I will need to talk sweet to her and ask for forgiveness, yet she still says that I am terrible to her"(translated).

People point this out to suggest that society deemed that men act as the caregiver of a relationship and they need to be tolerant to women. And when it comes to abusive behavior, they suggest that women are not blamed for what they do. An example from the sample suggests, "My wife often says don't reason with her. Sometimes because of a quarrel, she would slap me, and if I push her once, she would say that men shouldn't hit women and that women are to be spoiled! Feminism is horrible" (translated).

The culture of "qiguanyan," which means "hen-packed husband" in Chinese, refers to a husband that is submissive to his wife. This is seen as a symbol of a successful marriage, yet this could also present ignorance to the feelings of some husbands, causing their opposition towards their deemed feminism.

Comments are also concentrated under the category of code A2.4 "Use pregnancy/menstruation as defense or excuse for not doing chores/asking money from men/refusing to take care of the family/insulting men." This belief indicates that women use their perceived biological weakness as an excuse for getting out of things or defense for themselves. The most frequently mentioned example is "Whatever we try to argue, women say that they can give birth to children and I can't" (translated).

5.2 Overgeneralization and Stigmatization to Feminism

According to the color-coded system's results, about 38.71% percent of negative or neutral comments show a tendency of overgeneralization or stigmatization towards feminism, which indicates common problem feminism faces in China. An example of the overgeneralization of feminism can be the previously mentioned one, "My wife often says don't reason with her. Sometimes because of a quarrel, she would slap me, and if I push her once, she would say that men shouldn't hit women and that women are to be spoiled! Feminism is horrible" (translated). An example for the stigmatization can be, "Premarital cohabitation is the black box of the feminist movement. Because of the proliferation of premarital sex, leads to a series of problems, such as abortion, economic entanglement, degradation, blasphemy of marriage, and so on. A woman changed countless boyfriends before marriage and live with her boyfriend's multiple times, will get her karma" (translated).

Such overgeneralization and stigmatization push sexism and anti-feminism further. However, there are people that differentiate between what they see as true or fake feminism.

5.2.1 "Women Rights" or "Women's Fists?"

The 61.29% of all negative or neutral comments differentiated between what they deemed to be "real feminism," "women's empowerment" or "gender equality" and what they viewed as "fake feminism" or "inappropriate feminism". In Chinese, the word that refers to feminism is "女权" (women's rights), and the word for fake or aggressive feminism is a word with the same pronunciation. "女拳" (women's fists) and different meanings.

The definition of "women's fists" is women who are overly aggressive on gender issues or insult men or women who financially depend on men and claim to be feminists. Although it is not specifically discussed in the comments as most that mentioned it included insults, it is still an important component of how prejudice towards feminism or even women is formed.

Among all traits that are seen as "women's fists," male-bashing is a frequently mentioned one. It is coded as A11.1 "Feminists (verbally) attack/depreciate men within the country" in the codebook (see appendix). Anti-feminists use this point to suggest that feminism is an extreme approach. Feminists' attack on men is defined as "male-bashing," indicating that women can publicly criticize, make fun of or insult men holding a feminist attitude. The previous study argued, none of the existing kinds of feminist thought in the legal literature required male-bashing (Williams & Williams, 1996). In the sample, some positive comments express their perspectives on radical feminism differently, "To say that women's rights are equal is not accurate and ignores the fact that it is women who need to fight for rights. There's no need to soften it" (translated). The male-bashing or radical approach of feminism is seen as a way to fight for rights. Either way, we can see the trend of anti-stigma among feminists, as most of the positive comments concentrate under category code C11 "Interpretation of feminism" and C12 "Comments on how men are against feminism."

6. Conclusion

Overall, the comment analysis presents a positive result that most people (68%) hold either a positive or neutral attitude towards feminism. The majority of people recognize the importance or goal of feminism and we can see the trend of anti-stigma among feminists. However, the negative comments also display a common belief of anti-feminists that women are not disadvantaged or gender equality had been achieved. There is also a trend of overgeneralizing and stigmatizing feminism, which leads to the interpretation that feminism is an extreme approach.

Most research on feminism focused on a general discussion on a feminist topic, but ignore how feminism could be applied differently under a specific cultural context. This research looked at feminism from multiple culture-specific perspectives like filial piety, "qiguanyan" (hen-pecked husband), and "women's fists versus women's rights," and tried to interpret how people perceived feminism.

Although this research presents a different view of studying feminism's public image, there are several limitations that should be addressed. The comments selected were not reflective of an accurate estimation of the distribution of people's opinions because the articles all hold their specific points that might attract readers to make related comments. Also, this paper only includes an analysis but lacks a practical solution to support feminism under a specific cultural context, which future research can work on.

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