The Ambivalent Governance of Platformed Chinese Feminism Under Censorship: Weibo, Xianzi, and Her Friends

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This article analyzes comments responding to @XianziAndHerFriends (@弦子与她的朋友们) in the censorship-rich environment of Weibo via BERTopic and examines how emojis may evade surveillance from censors—and algorithmic analysis. A total of 89,597 comments were computed to 38 overlapping topics of conversation that were further interpreted through thematic coding to 6 clusters of discourse and 3 themes. Data reveal how this Weibo account, microblogging a sexual assault case, grew to be a popular civic space for feminist discussion in China on varied topics despite censorship. Emoji analysis offers nuances to how this was enacted. The article expands on the methods available to understand dissent in the shadow of censorship and discusses how the patchwork censorship of Weibo has refracted nationalist and patriarchal tendencies of autocracy in China rubbing against platform prerogatives and feminist expression. It argues the "ambivalent governance" of the space is not defined through vernacular or institution, free speech, or autocracy, but instead all of the above in complex relationships in the platformization of censorship and (anti)nationalist patriarchy.

Keywords: feminism, Weibo, BERTopic, censorship, China, emoji, #MeToo

This article explores the platformization of censorship and feminism on Weibo through user-generated content surrounding the account @XianziAndHerFriends, or @弦子与她的朋友们 (https://weibo.com/u/6640656158). It offers a novel combination of natural language processing (NLP) and emoji analysis to argue that despite heavy censorship, Chinese Internet users produced critical feminist discourse on Weibo. It puts forward the concept of ambivalent governance in Chinese platforms with a twofold empirical contribution. First, the findings offer evidence that the space left after the @XianziAndHerFriends account was censored from making new posts remained an important catalog of social concerns (Qian, Shan, Lyu, & Luo, 2022) and also served to extend generative feminist speech in China despite the shadow of censorship. Empirically, mixed research methods showed the power and limits

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of NLP techniques on Weibo via qualitative analysis of emoji-based paralanguage that otherwise escaped algorithmic vision and access to refract the public presence of the community (Abidin, 2021). This study aims to open a window to consider new research on how digital feminism in China emerges, is made visible (Yin & Sun, 2021), and is tied to complex discourses around nationalism, masculinity, and platform governance in ways that differ from Western assumptions of state-civic dyads of free speech.

The @XianziAndHerFriends account initially diarized the sexual harassment lawsuit brought by Xianzi (Zhou Xiaoxuan) against Zhu Jun, a prominent host at state broadcaster CCTV and a former member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference. At the time Xianzi put her case forward in court, sexual harassment was rarely discussed publicly in China. She used the account to update the lawsuit's progress, and her posts evoked healthy discussion on Weibo, which was noted by state censors. On May 20, 2021, @XianziAndHerFriends was muted by Weibo for 15 days and then was notified by the platform that the account would be prohibited from posting for a year due to violation of national laws and regulations (Gan & George, 2021). It was reported that Weibo was actively blocking related public discussion by muting accounts that voiced support for Xianzi or even simply discussed the lawsuit (Kuo, 2021). However, as our data show, this censorship was a more complex phenomenon than turning off @XianziAndherFriends and the flow of commentary around it.

Zhou's case is considered as a key moment of #MeToo in China (Gan & George, 2021), and previous research has examined Xianzi's case in geospatial terms (Huang & Sun, 2021) and conducted critical textual analysis of media that surround @XianziAndHerFriends (Yin & Sun, 2021). This research builds that work to open questions of how to more systematically study thematic narratives and posts that seem to navigate the feminism, platforms, and politics of a specific case or context. While textual analysis of Weibo and its governance is prevalent in the literature (Deluca, Brunner, & Sun, 2016; Fang &Wu, 2022; Liao, 2019; Ng & Han, 2018), the addition of BERTopic to organize textual reading provides a novel way to support interpretive claims. Yet our data showed that sensitive issues were sometimes written in ways that automated NLP was unable to see. To address this, this research interpreted emojis that were otherwise removed in the BERTopic analysis, which sheds light on how NLP methods might help and hinder sense making of online content as well as aid and limit forms of censorship.

This work adds to the literature by systematically reporting on an emergent feminist discourse in China that has been previously unmapped in English and points to how Chinese netizens and platforms interact with censorship regimes in ways that differ from liberal public-state assumptions. It provides reflective methodological experimentation on the limits of data capture to show how modes of vision and access (Abidin, 2021) refract understandings of what happens online and what it means. We hope to contribute to future research pathways by providing novel insights into how Weibo is used in the shadow of censorship.

The remainder of the article is structured to first explore the "Chinese characteristics" of censorship, platform governance, and digital feminism from the literature review. It then moves to detail the methodology that allows novel access to the discursive space. Discussion follows to explore how what we term "ambivalent governance" transposes the ambivalence of Internet culture (Philips & Milner, 2018) into the complexities of platform governance in China. State control rubs up against actors and interests that

are constantly in flux, shaped by the diverse and often conflicting intentions of users, intermediaries, and regulators—among other actors—that contribute to the governance regimes of the Internet. This forms a patchwork of governance (Duguay, Burgess, & Suzor, 2020) that at times seems ambivalent toward some censored topics.

Literature Review

This section puts three strands of literature in dialogue to contextualize the lived practices of censorship, feminism, and their mediation in platforms in China. At stake is a synthesis of speech, censorship, and platformization that might create a uniquely Chinese ambivalent governance of platforms under the shadow of coercive state censorship. The section begins with theoretical considerations of censorship and then relates these to the precarity of platforms providing governance in the context of Chinese digital feminism.

Censorship Without Liberal Characteristics

Compared with Internet practices in democratic societies, the intrusive role of the party-state is a definitive feature of Chinese cyberspace (Yang & Wang, 2021). This feature is often framed from the dominant Western view of censorship, based on a traditional liberal notion of the will of the people to limit the capacity of the state over their lives (Locke, 1967). Free speech is measured against state capacity— discursive through to coercive—to censor. As Yang (2016) maintained, meaning making in liberal democratic standing has its emphasis on the politics of the state, not the politics of culture. While the politics of the state might offer a precise definition of political censorship against free speech, a more accurate picture of experiences for Chinese Internet users considers multi-actor power structures and contextual histories that make censorship (R. Han, 2018; Yang, 2016; Yang & Wang, 2021).

From one perspective, such censorship is used to monitor and selectively arrest public feedback to improve regime stability. This can help track discontent, curtail collective actions against the central government (R. Han, 2018; Poell, de Kloet, & Zeng, 2014), and check and act on local administration (DeLuca et al., 2016). For Chinese netizens, targeting the authoritarian regime for fuller democracy remains a key agenda (R. Han, 2018) but so too does surviving under censorship: Online campaigns adopt less-aggressive strategies and can exist as satire that escapes detection (Lee, 2016). Examples include mimicking political propaganda and developing cyber-vocabularies that use visuals and videos to craft jokes and compose poems, prose, and parables for online expression (R. Han, 2018). These censorship-evading practices should not be viewed one-dimensionally as creative "digital hidden transcripts" (Yang, 2009, p. 23). Rather, they present part of a fluid and fuzzy interplay between social values, cultural norms, and politics situated within the global wave of consumerism (R. Han, 2018) and the cultures of an ambivalent Internet (Philips & Milner, 2018) that rest on forms of visibility as a cultural response to censorship (Yang, 2016).

Taken together, such practices increase the expense of the state to censor critical messages while increasing the chance to exert pressure on the regime or build alternative knowledge. For example, censoring through deletion can still leave traces of the original topic via comments that enable further discussion (Qian et al., 2022). Qian and colleagues' (2022) work suggests novel methods to make sense of

speech under heavy censorship and opens questions of reflective practice of why netizens might do so, and what they infer from what is left visible. Likewise, the use of code words and images to circulate information that is deemed "sensitive" (Yang, 2016) presents novel ways to interpret uncensored texts. This study limits itself to making sense of @XianziAndHerFriends' latent content and codes.

Platform Governance With Chinese Characteristics

The alternative knowledge under Chinese censorship is mediated by platforms that offer their own complex mechanisms of governance that do not fit within state-public dyads. This section reviews the literature to build evidence of the complex actors involved in our concept of ambivalent governance.

The case of @XianziAndHerFriends suggests there is some autonomy in platforms' own practice as they precariously configure what types of content are censored among multiple hierarchies of interest. This experience differs from how most extant research on platform governance (e.g., Gillespie, 2018; Gorwa, 2019; van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018) portrays the experiences of Western tech giants in a neoliberal reorganization of government. The neoliberal slide has allowed global platform giants to be profoundly under-regulated in local jurisdictions, where the exceptions remain exceptional outside Europe's General Data Protection Regulation regime (Leaver, 2021).

In a highly centralized one-party regime, platforms are scrutinized by the government in ways that require shifts in the analysis of platform governance of speech. As Gorwa (2019) writes, to analyze the power relations and structures underpinning platform governance, it is critical to engage with the host of political forces and variables that influence the platform ecology in a variety of ways. Yang's (2009) multi-interactionism perspective has done this by capturing the multidimensional dynamics and complexity of online activism in China, via culture, the market, civil society, and transnationalism, in addition to state power. Each of those actors simultaneously enables yet constrains online activities in China. For instance, Shambaugh (2007) contended that China's propaganda system has been losing power and information control over time via the commercialization of media, the consequences of capitalist globalization, increased public awareness of digital media filters, and the continued sophistication and distribution of speech-distributing technology. Despite Beijing's ideological resurgence under Xi, the evolution of digital governance trends continues to some extent through services like TOR, VPNs, and E2E encryption-enabled apps that can chart alternative market logics (Heemsbergen & Molnar 2020). As Zhao (2008) foresaw, media commercialization has transformed the relationship between the party and the media, leading not to democratization but an interlocking of party control and market logic. More recent work has mirrored these findings in offline governance experiments in China, which while not Western-democratic, do speak to new forms of participation and participants (Hsu, Tsai, & Chang, 2021). For @XianziAndHerFriends, it is important to signal how these different actors and contexts of censorship in platform power disrupt institutional arrangements and put public values under strain (van Dijck et al., 2018).

In China, this includes platforms that are formally delegated by the Chinese government to regulate online content and become the scapegoats of censorship (R. Han, 2018). For the state such arrangements offer multiple benefits. First, social media platforms like Weibo and WeChat are large in size but small in number and are therefore easier to track through registration and licensing compared with individual

anonymous netizens. Second, as these platforms have firsthand user data, such as Internet protocol (IP) address and account information, they can respond to user deviance more efficiently than the state, through means such as banning IP addresses and content deletion. As such, platforms have developed self-censoring routines in the editorial process, abandoning politically sensitive products, limiting their output (Luqiu, 2017), or obfuscating politically problematic accounts by "bombing" them (Fang & Wu, 2022) with vulgar content. From this perspective, platforms like Weibo are a public screen, rather than a public sphere for activism, fraught with risks (DeLuca et al., 2016) that limit the potential for how ideas—like feminism—that subvert hierarchies can be engaged with.

Yet R. Han (2018) maintains that platforms are not wholeheartedly submissive to the authoritarian political power of the party-state. Instead of open revolt against state-imposed limitations, they have historically shown a position of "discontented compliance," which can tolerate boundary-spanning discussion (O'Brien, 2006). This ambivalence arises from the commercial interests and profit-driven marketization of platforms (R. Han, 2018; Luqiu, 2017; Yang, 2009) requiring user attention and engagement. That is, politically and socially contentious content that might interest the Chinese public can increase user traffic to platforms like Weibo (Yang, 2009).

Digital Feminism in China

This section explains how (online) feminism relates to the economic and cultural attention regimes vis-a-vis ambivalent governance on Chinese social media platforms. It considers the concept of patchwork governance (Duguay et al., 2020) as an apt frame to describe how the issue of online feminism is dealt with in Chinese media, examining censorship without liberal characteristics and platform governance with Chinese characteristics.

Like elsewhere, communicative affordances of the Internet have empowered women in China to bring sensitive issues into the mainstream discourse of class, gender, and sexuality via personal storytelling (Hou, 2020) and in relation to extant social structures (Peng, 2020; Wu & Dong, 2019). Personal narrative allows different feminist identities, practices, and agency to navigate the social system presented in China (Lin & Yang, 2019). On the one hand, this is a familiar story for the promise of digital feminism—the decentralization of activism, to enable individuals to be seen and heard rather than being represented by collective, formal organizations (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016). Extant work suggests digital feminism in China offers a convergence of online activism and innovative media campaigns to critique the dominant masculinist discourse (Fincher, 2021; Liao, 2019; Ling & Liao, 2021). This can be seen in counterculture media themselves like "Yaoi fiction," which subverts the state-backed gender hegemony with technologies, publishing techniques, and content (Chang & Tian, 2021). It can also rub against heteronormativity itself: Wu and Dong's (2019) ethnographic work suggests entrepreneurial feminism (for security) and liberating female sexuality offer thematic cores to Chinese feminism.

However, patriarchal hierarchy remains prevalent in Chinese feminism practice. As a self-conscious "digital masquerading" response to state surveillance and incrimination, the political focus of feminist media shifts from critiques of representation to active setting of public agendas (Tan, 2017). For instance, Fang and Repnikova (2018) suggest labels like "Little Pink" (*xiao feng hong*) reveal how

gender symbols, are used in attempts to reframe the imagery of nationalism in ways that demonstrate the Internet's ambivalence with digital activism and politics.

Moreover, Chinese feminism heavily relies on online interactions for "symbolic equality" (Budgeon, 2015, p. 304), limiting tangible outcomes in sociocultural and political spheres (Liao, 2019). As Hou (2020) argues, Chinese feminism fails to distinguish between "the political" and "the personal" with an overemphasis on individual experiences and self-empowerment that dilutes potential policy prescription. Similar to White-elitist feminism in the Western context where the voices and agendas of non-White and non-cis women were seen to be marginalized (Daniels, 2016), feminist discourse in China is dominated by elite Chinese young feminists. These elites do not reflect the full needs of women in China while privileging the concerns of the tertiary educated and digitally capable (Tan, 2017).

In short, Chinese feminism is both made precarious by and afforded through platform logics. The nuances of history, transnational influences, impact of media and technology, and specific geopolitical factors interface with a reliance on digital media and the Internet for visibility and advocacy (Liao, 2020). Finally, feminism being platformed makes its perceived success a target for exacerbations of misogyny, anti-feminist backlash, and even "feminist phobia" both online and offline (X. Han, 2018). The context makes it easy for digital feminism to be stigmatized as extremism complicit with foreign or Western powers for political purposes (Hou, 2020) or as an expression of "popular misogyny" that Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2016) saw as a patriarchal response to shifts in gender equality.

This complex context reflects the practical governance of Weibo being administered through what Duguay and colleagues (2020) call unevenly "patched, by 'partly complementary' yet partly competing regulatory elements," within the shadow of expected censorship, and experienced attention economies in China (p. 240). The active spreading of the profitable forms of sociality by platforms thus needs some room even as they are against state interests (van Dijck et al., 2018). Scandals like sexual assault provide such engagement as their feminist commenters come into conflict with the conventions of power and history present in platforms. This is why it is pertinent to focus on what is allowed to remain in the shadow of censorship in Chinese digital media. It offers a window into the ambivalence of governing netizens and the complex socio-technical order that does so. In our case, it also allows tracing how a focused #MeToo discussion that was censored nevertheless spread critique to other social issues; it might reveal how emoji utterances allow forms of feminist discourse that are potentially meant to evade censorship.

Methodology

The methodology was designed to discern the themes of discussion around @XianziAndHerFriends that emerged even if original utterances were censored (Qian et al., 2022) and to what extent these themes matched with paralanguages that remain outside computational gaze. We acknowledge the limits of computational processing in the processes of meaning making and manually interpreted emoji paralanguage gestures (Gawne & McCulloch, 2019) that were automatically removed from BERTopic analysis. BERTopic is a language presentation model architecture that has been increasingly applied in NLP (Devlin, Chang, Lee, & Toutanova, 2019). Compared with other popular topic

modeling techniques, such as latent Dirichlet allocation and non-negative matrix factorization, BERTopic has a better contextual representation for digital media texts, addressing the sparsity of co-occurrence patterns in short texts (Alhaj, Al-Haj, Sharieh, & Jabri, 2022).

Data Collection and Processing

Data collection was in September 2021. We scraped first-tier comments of @XianZiAndHerFriends from May 20, 2018 (when the account was set up) to September 12, 2021, two days before the court ruled that Xianzi did not meet the burden of proof. This resulted in 111,213 comments and their associated metadata (e.g., publishing time, number of likes, and number of second-tier comments). First-tier comments for Weibo refer to comments directly under each post by @XianZiAndHerFriends, whereas second-tier comments are further responses to the first-tier comments. Missing values and duplicated rows were removed and to prepare for BERTopic, the Python module "re" was applied to remove excess, unnecessary parts of the texts and metadata, such as punctuation, special characters (e.g., $, //, %), device information (e.g., from iPhone), and (what may be paralanguage materialized via) emojis and emoticons. We did not try to analyze emojis as their integration into BERT results is unclear but noted precursor work (see Li, Guntuku, Jakhetiya, & Ungar, 2019). Python-based open-source toolkit "Jieba"[2] was then applied for token word segmentation. Similar to the elimination of stop words in English (e.g., the), adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and other words with no literal meanings were removed. Together, these steps reduced the data set to 89,597 comments. Data capture, analysis, and presentation were governed by Australia's National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2018). The use of secondary data in this research did not require (nor seek) ethics committee approval, as the collection, analysis, and publication of publicly disclosed comments did not constitute proximate consideration for user harm. We de-identified all data, amending individual posts presented here slightly in translation to avoid potential reidentification. In short, the work cannot reveal details of people or contribute to recombination that would breach the contextual integrity (Nissenbaum, 2004) of the original publication.

Data Analysis

BERTopic uses a series of processes to improve the coherence of clusters to create clusters of semantically similar sentences, c-TF-IDF to extract and reduce the number of topics, and maximal marginal relevance (MMR) to improve the coherence of words among topics.

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[2] In Chinese, text is formed by characters. Two or more characters form one word. Individual words are linked together without natural segmentation.
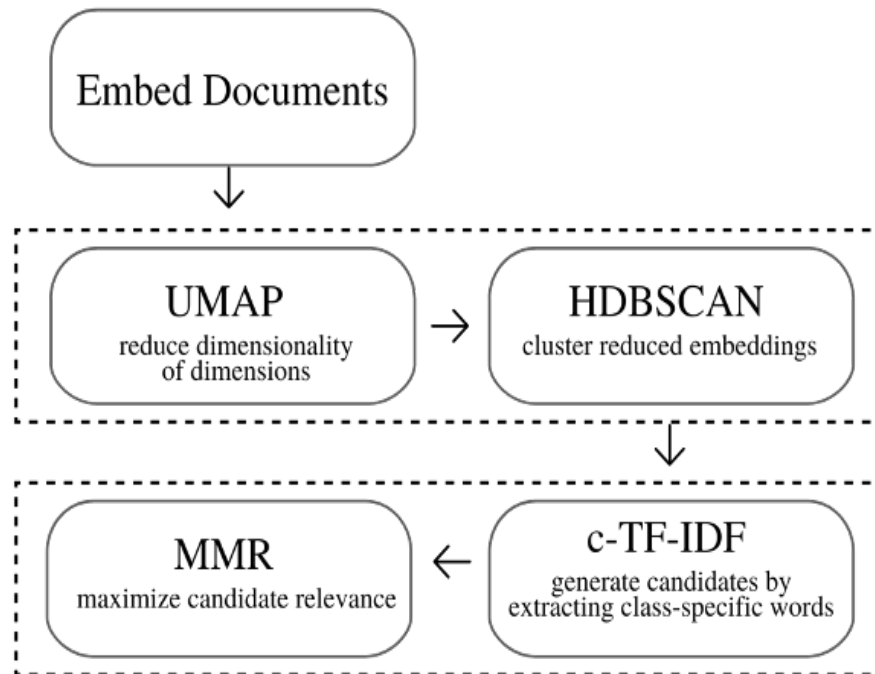
Figure 1. BERTopic Algorithm (adapted from Grootendorst, 2022).
Note. c-TF-IDF = class based term frequency-inverse document frequency , HDBSCAN = Hierarchical Density-Based Spatial Clustering of Applications with Noise, MMR = maximal marginal relevance, UMAP = Uniform Manifold Approximation and Projection .

After rounds of iterative analysis and adjustment, we determined the best number of topics as 38 when the coherence score reached its optimal value at 0.49. Based on the cosine distance matrix between topic embeddings, a ward linkage function was used to perform the hierarchical clustering (Figure 2). The heatmap (Figure 3) presents the similarity between topics. The inter-topic distance map (Figure 4) visualizes topics in a two-dimensional space. The size of these topic circles reflects the quantity of words associated with each topic. These circles show how topics contain unique or shared word combinations, which may then be clustered into themes for further analysis. They are plotted using a multidimensional scaling algorithm that translates multiple dimensions based on the words they consist of. A full list of all 38 topics and their top terms can be found translated into English (by us) in the supplementary data file.[3]
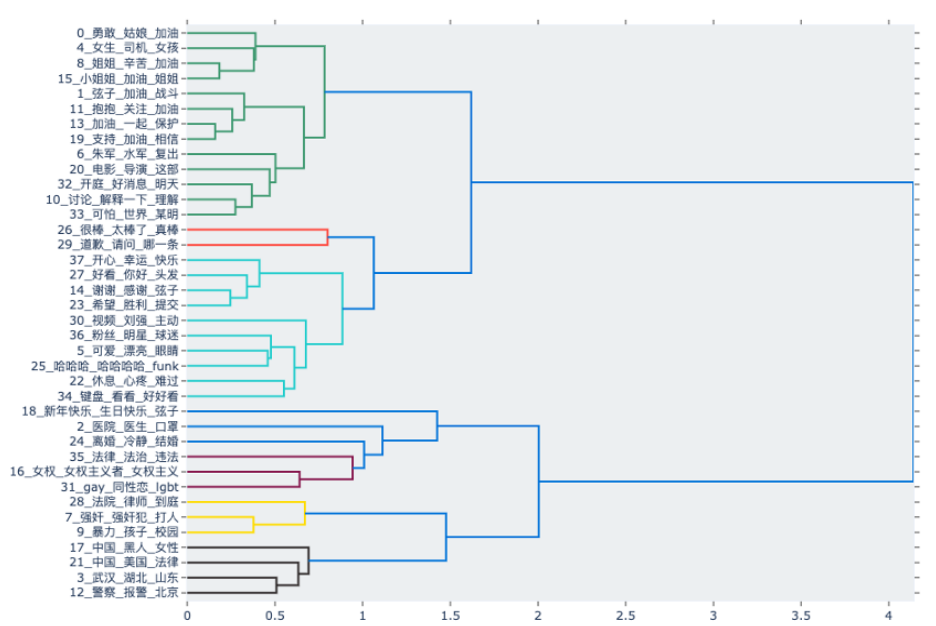

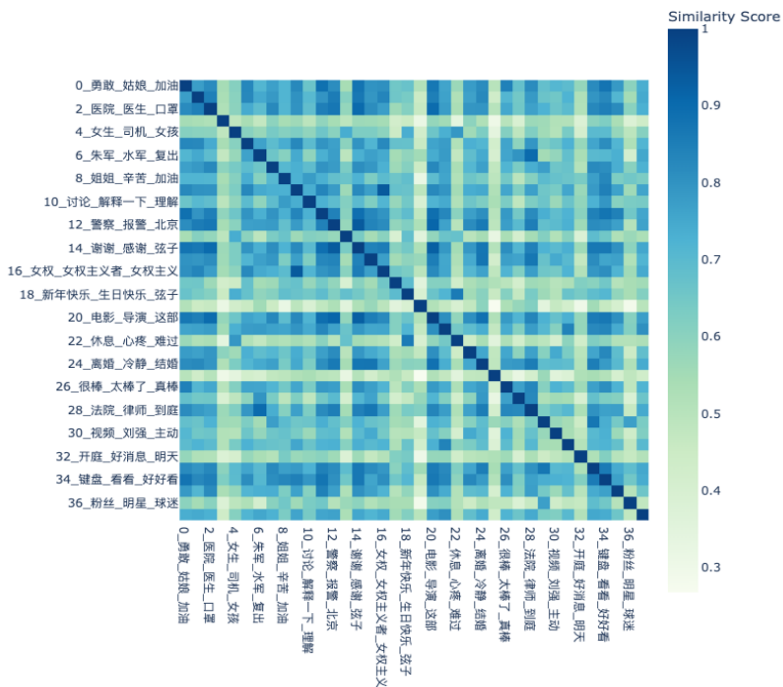[3] https://rb.gy/qy738.

Figure 2. Hierarchical clustering.

Figure 3. Similarity matrix.

Figure 4. Inter-topic distance map.

Emoji Affect Check

Chinese netizens use emojis but BERTopic does not. BERTopic "token" words, documents, and thematic analysis consist in a space defined only by "legitimate" Chinese word dictionaries. The disregarding of emojis also misses the meaning of emoji repetition or beat gesturing for emphasis (Gawne & McCulloch, 2019). That limitation of NLP obscures creative cultural tactics in language and might be designed to move around official censorship techniques; the use of emojis in Chinese social media may be more versatile and influential than similar practices in Western social media (Lu, 2018). Zhang, Wang, and Li (2020) claim that the use of emojis on WeChat resolves the tension between the openness and freedom in social media and the conservative, constraint-bound nature of established social norms. Specific to Weibo, Ge and Herring (2018) suggest that emoji sequences function to evaluate the text posts and elaborate on them.

Thus, while emojis were only used in about 5% of the content scraped, they offered a qualitatively different window into the paralanguages and sentiments tied to @XianziAndHerFriends' responses. As such 4,458 "text + emoji" comments in the corpus were further analyzed outside these limits of BERTopic. Collected emojis were ranked based on frequency, with the top 20 in the original comments investigated in context by the Mandarin-speaking researcher for tone, purpose, and contextual meaning. Sense making of emojis also required considering differences from "baseline" emoji use in (other) social media, and what the emoji data added to BERTopic clusters and themes if anything.

Our approach comes with its own limitations. First, at the time of data capture, censorship had already taken place and this study only analyzed residual conversations that survived surveillance. In this way, those multimedia posts most ripe for high levels of visibility and deletion (Liu & Zhao, 2021) were not the focus of this study. Unfortunately, data processing for BERTopic removed emojis before cluster analysis so we could not compare emojis per cluster or theme. Yet, the combination of methods allows comparative analysis of paralanguage and automated NLP in a significant moment in China's critique of patriarchal society and its censorship, producing new knowledge for the field.

Findings

BERTopic results were used to relate the overlapping topics in six clusters described below (in Figure 4 and Table 1). Further coding was then carried out across the clusters to assess the most relevant themes to our guiding concerns of censorship, feminism, and platforms. In this way, the iterative design employed both inductive and deductive analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) to the NLP-generated clusters in ways that fit the context of the platform and content.

Table 1. Clusters and Topics.

Cluster	Topics Included	Number of Tokens
1. COVID-19	2, 3	2,069
2. Sexual harassment and the police	7,12	1,645
3. Lawsuit-centered support of Xianzi	4, 5, 6, 9, 13, 14, 15, 18, 26, 33, 37	8,980
4. The human right of feminism	16, 17, 20, 21, 24, 31, 35	3,698
5. General and affective support of Xianzi	1, 8, 10, 11, 19, 22, 23, 25, 27, 29, 30, 34, 36	7,707
6. The lawsuit itself	28, 32	834

Cluster 1. COVID-19 related clustering of comments reflected conversations around current global events unrelated to digital feminism. That these conversations happened in a response space to @XianziAndHerFirends is significant. It shows evidence of the commentary around @XianziAndHerFriends on Weibo evolving into a social space for civic discussion for users in some way attached to the censored account. While there were many discussions about COVID-19 on Weibo, these posters had their discussion under the @XianziAndHerFriends banner. We expand on our interpretations as to why below.

Cluster 2. Sexual harassment and the police showed utterances around the act of sexual assault in question, as well as other instances of sexual harassment linked to the police and their responsibilities—and responses—to it.

Cluster 3.: Lawsuit-centered support for Xianzi revealed strong and sustained support for Xianzi, with temporal evidence of the everyday aspect of producing discourses of support including wishes for a happy new year, wellness, and luck on the outcome of the lawsuit. There was also reflexive knowledge of users displayed discussion "being deleted," posts by paid commenters for Zhu Jun within Weibo, and general

commentaries around domestic violence. That these reflexive posts were not censored is notable in the complex governance mechanisms of the platform.

Cluster 4. The human right of feminism was discussed in a separate semantic clustering to the Xianzi case. This cluster dealt with feminism and wider discrimination issues (e.g., sexual orientation, divorce) including the comparative analysis of international jurisdictions and culture (films) by commenters. Here we see evidence of how Xianzi was engaged in public debates around what in the West might be titled "progressive" issues that extended from and were separate from the sexual assault case or even the #Metoo movement.

Cluster 5. General support of Xianzi presented a separate large semantic clustering of comments that touched on aspects mostly outside the case and included discursive cues that were highly affective—from humor to "tears" to explicit calls to keep spirits high in a context of similar sexual harassment claims and other calamities experienced and spoken about on Weibo at that time.

Cluster 6.: The lawsuit itself focused on discussion uniquely on the progress and result of Xianzi's lawsuit, including technical procedures and comments on reported updates.

Discussion

This section outlines the themes that cut across clusters and discusses findings and implications of the emoji analysis. We developed three themes from a process of further interpretive thematic coding (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011) of clusters' content that reflects both the data and our biases toward interests in censorship and feminism on Chinese social platforms.

BERTopic Themes

The first theme is *interest in and supportive comments for Xianzi* through what is framed as *her* trial and related occurrences of sexual harassment (from clusters 2, 5, and 6). This theme presents just less than half the comments analyzed. These comments included ones on the lawsuit's progress, such as the analysis of Zhu Jun's absence in court, the urge for further investigation and evidence, descriptions of Xianzi with tokens that include *brave, sister, strong, beautiful,* her experiences as *hard work* and *suffering*, and communicating affective reactions such as *sad, heartbroken,* and *scary,* but also including affirmative tokens like *support, hug, cheer up, fight,* and *speak up.* These clusters' comments collectively demonstrated a theme of the audience's recognition of and support for Xianzi's situation, including her claims of sexual harassment, and the context that surrounds making such claims in China visible (Yin & Sun, 2021). Yet, the ambivalence of the Internet culture was also evident here, with jokes and humor cutting both ways on Xianzi's predicament and producing misogynist speech. The following are examples of comments in theme 1: "I can't believe this case has been dragged on for so long" (personal communication, May 21, 2021); "Go for it! You've been very brave to stand up for yourself! I hope you win!" (personal communication, May 20, 2021); and "Shows the darkness of the law in this country, doesn't it Ms. Chow? Perfect attack on the government! It's f**king disgusting" (personal communication, May 21, 2021).

The second theme presents reflexive feminist discussion that was disentangled from the case itself. If at an abstract level feminism is about challenging systemic inequalities, this second set of clustering presented evidence toward this in the Chinese context. Commenters on Xianzi's account extended the discussion into other recent sexual harassment cases in China and provided a comparative analysis of the rights and responsibilities of the government, the types of discrimination that pervade Chinese society (e.g., sexual orientation and race), and how structures of inequality are perpetuated in online space. The latter included censorship concerns and the issue of paid commenters/spammers (Fang & Wu, 2022). There were also comparative understandings of how Chinese culture, nationalism, and legal systems are linked to these experienced inequalities in relation to global examples of culture and law.

Discourses on this theme indicated patterns of elite Weibo usership that mirror previous studies on Chinese digital activists. While global knowledge was displayed, it was offered in relation to the local context. Woven into these macro political concerns were the sexual harassment cases of Liu Qiangdong and Bao Yuming and the particular condemnation of school sexual harassment and pedophilia. Commenters' affective language here included tokens of *scary, abduction, imprisonment, isolated,* and *bloody.* The rights and protection of *children*, *boys,* and *girls* were frequently mentioned in these conversations as an affective inclusion to issues that reach back from international comparative policy and into the personal. Why school children were a focus for an adult forum and commenters is a cultural artifact ripe for future research.

Law and regulation were included in this larger feminist discourse. Tokens for *law and regulation, rule of law*, along with the power and responsibilities of government and civic sectors (e.g., *legislation, regulations, develop/formulate, morals*) were prominent in the clustering discussions that made up this theme, separate from the Xianzi case. Some of the typical posts (translated for privacy) in this theme are the following: "Equality is in fact the ability for women and men to get the same job opportunities" (personal communication, May 15, 2021); "Regardless of sexual orientation or gender, how one classifies their affiliation is ultimately a matter of subjective freedom" (personal communication, March 8, 2019); "I believe the law is just" (personal communication, December 22, 2020); "In the end, it's up to the courts to decide what to do" (personal communication, December 25, 2020); and "The key to the prevalence of trafficking in women in a country (region) does not lie in the legalization of, but in the degree of economic development and the government's ability to enforce it" (personal communication, March 4, 2019).

A final theme related to COVID-19, with the then common tokens expressing discussion interest in *hospitals*, *masks, lockdowns*, and the *hell* that was experienced. As above, while feminism or the subject of Xianzi's case defined the comment space, this theme's existence shows how commenters were using the space created by a censored account to reply to comments on social matters. The inclusion of this theme adds to Yin and Sun's (2021) study that saw mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion and backlashes in feminist content around Xianzi's account but did not point to the other "non-feminist" discourse that persisted there. Under an explicit shadow of censorship, posters engaged in conversation about feminism and other topics, finding and making a niche networked public. While censors removed some comments and froze Xianzi's account, netizens continued to discuss the world, under the umbrella of this "banned" feminist discussion. Cynically, this might be seen as a form of disinformation "bombing" to those taking part; nonpolitical content actively replacing the original discourse or allowing monitoring

of citizens. From another frame, however, it is a public space that grows in the shadow of censorship, which might use paralanguages to evade state-based mechanisms of censorship.

To better understand the communicative actions taken by posters in full knowledge of regulations around Xianzi's account, the concept of refracted publics (Abidin, 2021) is useful to analyze the nascent networked public. Refracted publics describe vernacular cultures of circumvention in response to analogue and algorithmic vision and access. Arguably, such circumvention has always been part of online culture (boyd, 2008), where the "agentic and circumventive adaptations of what platforms offer" (Abidin, 2021, p. 3) help define the cultures built amid them. Our research sought access to evidence of vernacular that might be less understood by censors and was excluded from BERTopic: Emojis provided both. Arguably, this shift in research methods to better capture such cultural potential for meaning making allows novel insights into how Weibo is used in the shadow of censorship.

Emoji Themes

Emoji analysis considered how emojis shift emphasis within comments and might provide circumvention to the vision and access of BERTopic and censorship-evading practice. The general frequency of emoji use across Weibo more or less mirrors that on other platforms, while commenters on @XianziAndHerFriends did not share these patterns. Face tears of joy (😂, Unicode U+1F602) is by far the most used emoji globally according to Unicode. Work from Ge-Stadnyk (2021) suggests similar patterns on Weibo and Twitter, also noting that "thanks" or 🙏 speech acts make up only 6% of common emoji utterances. These baselines were not reflected in the data set of @XianziAndHerFriends and suggest a unique set of utterances.
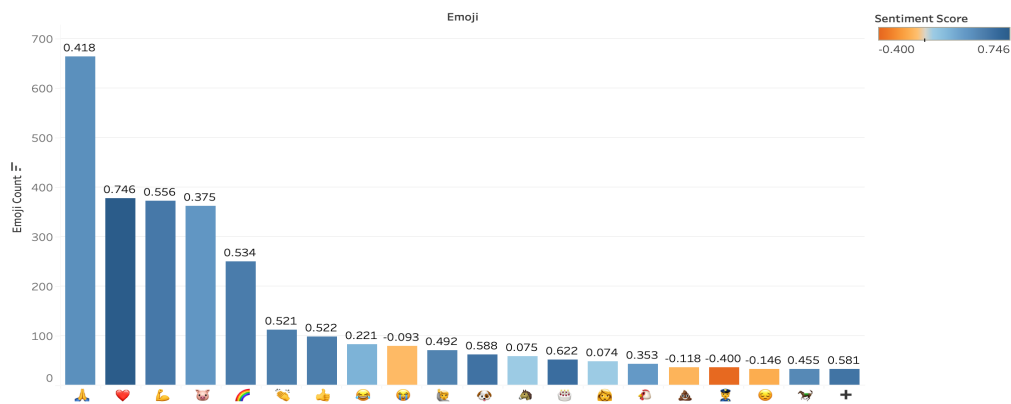

Figure 5. Top 20 emoji and sentiment score.

The top three emoji utterances are 🙏 folded hands (n = 665), ❤️ heart (n = 378), and 💪 flexed biceps (n = 372). At the same time, a smiling face of any kind 😂 (facepalmed, with tears of joy, or otherwise) only showed up as the eighth most used emoji in our data set (n = 82). After these standouts, emoji frequency presents a typical digital longtail of frequency. The high rate of folded hands emoji is exceptional. Measured against English speakers from around 2016, the 10 most common emoji combinations (across

bigrams, trigrams, or quadgrams beat-gestures) do not include 🙏 (Gawne & McCulloch, 2019) and again show either unique frequencies of gestures and beats in support of Xianzi or a significant evolution in emoji use from previous emoji research. The affect of 🙏 is prevalent across the comments in ways that are not readily apparent in the NLP topics, clusters, and themes. While a small subset of total comments used emojis, the importance of such paralanguage in refracting culture is high (Abidin, 2021), and the unique frequency pattern offers insights into BERTopic. Removing them from analysis misses a crucial mode of communication that offers a different facet of sense making. Thus, while automated NLP might be necessary for interpretive work on "big data," it is not currently sufficient in systematic modes of meaning making. In the current case of hands clasped, the missing emojis led to missing the gesturing that occurs to emphasize affect.

Further qualitative evaluation of such signals adds to understanding poster messages as emojis themselves can be ambiguous when their meaning is taken out of context. 🙏 has multiple contextual uses, from thanks to prayer, please, or hope. This study interprets 🙏's use as users gesturing overwhelming support for Xianzi's lawsuit and hope against sexual assault by speaking up for women in the paralanguage available and employed on the platform by its community. At this top level of analysis, the emoji use shows support for Xianzi expressed on Weibo in ways that cut across subject clusters to express "thanks" (🙏), "affect" (❤️), and "power" (💪) in posters' gestures. This sense-making pattern continued in COVID-19 related posts (i.e., for healthcare workers) although they seemed more prominent in Xianzi clusters and themes from our qualitative checks.

In addition to frequency, we also coded emojis for sentiment and surveillance avoidance. As shown in Figure 5, the sentiment score was from the Emoji Sentiment Ranking by Kralj Novak, Smailović, Sluban, and Mozetič (2015), based on the emoji sentiment lexicon (negative, neutral, or positive) in 1.6 million tweets across 13 European languages (unfortunately we could not find a Chinese-language equivalent). As Figure 5 suggests, except for 😥 (−0.093), ⛰️ (−0.018), 👮 (−0.400), and 😔 (−0.146), the majority emojis showed neutral to positive sentiment. The high degree of negativity to 👮 was confirmed in qualitative analysis of random checks to post intentionality: Posters did not appreciate authorities' handling of the case.

In addition to measured sentiment, the research examined some of the more ambivalent emojis in the context they were used. For example, the hand-clapping emoji 👏 was categorized as positive (0.521) from the sentiment analysis but may be interpreted with ambiguous or even negative emotions in specific contexts. Examples from our data corpus below show how it can be used in both sarcasm and support: "May your 🐴 (mom) live a long life! Live forever in infamy! 👏👏" (personal communication, May 21, 2021); and "Xianzi is fantastic 👏   We are women! Proud to be women, proud to pursue gender equality!" (personal communication, March 7, 2021).

These ambivalent uses of emoji gestures make sense making through automated categorization difficult. Emoji sentiment analysis that controls for gesture repetition (Ge & Herring, 2018) would offer a higher positive score for the first example, which is inaccurate. Future automated textual analysis will need to consider relational gestures of emojis in subject texts.

Stenographic Emojis

In addition to the context, this study also identified the patterned linguist-semantic use of emojis representing Chinese characters' pronunciation or meaning. For example, across Chinese digital media, the monkey (*hou*) emoji 🐵 is used to express recognition and agreement as the pronunciation of *hou* (monkey) in Cantonese sounds similar to the pronunciation of *hao* (yes, alright). Likewise, the pill emoji 💊 is an attack word for "ill" comments, which means that the commenters have lost their mind and need to take a pill. We saw examples of this in our data with the comments "go f**k yourself💊💊💊" (personal communication, January 5, 2019) and "even just one 💊, you won't talk sh*t like that" (personal communication, May 21, 2021); these utterances are familiar in the lived experience of emoji use by one of the researchers in Chinese digital media.

These types of utterances also point to the fourth category of emojis not captured in positive, negative, and ambivalent valences. We observed stenographic emojis that carry censorship-evading meanings and functions. In an apparent presentation of folk knowledge of how Weibo meets government guidelines on content and censorship, users employ emojis to discuss words and phrases that are potentially politically sensitive, such as the pig (*zhū* in Mandarin) emoji 🐷 for "Zhu" Jun, the alleged perpetrator in the Xianzi case, the police emoji 👮 for police-related messages, and the forbidden (*jìn*) emoji 🈲 to imply state surveillance and Weibo censorship. The extent to which this is paralanguage play or actual tactics to evade censorship is unclear and indeed remains ambivalent (Philips & Milner, 2018) to censors' grand designs: Censors know that users know that censors know that these emoji exist and persist. Nevertheless, these and other emojis are used by netizens to comment on the situation in creative ways.

For the Xianzi community, commenters combined the character "female (女 /nǚ/)" with the red circle (*quān*) emoji 🔴 or the fist (*quán*) emoji 👊 to replace "feminism (女权nǚ quán)." This was built from similar use of the bunny (*tù*) emoji 🐰, which was used to represent the #MeToo movement and the rainbow emoji 🌈 used in discussions of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and others community. Weibo's regulations around harassing, offensive, abusive, threatening, or defamatory content had commenters employing the two horse emojis 🐎🐴 (implying mothers) and the chicken emoji 🐔 (implying male genitalia) where explicit, textual curses, swear words, or abuses would otherwise be used. The ratio of supportive to insulting emojis showed strong a community focus on support for Xianzi. For instance, iterations of 🙏 (single, bigram, trigram) were used more than 15 times, more often than 🐔 (for a cumulative 14.9% and 0.96% of total emoji use, respectively). Nevertheless, the ability for emoji analysis to show how ambivalent utterances make up part of the discussion allows a mode of analysis different from automated NLP and in some cases seems ostensibly designed to speak of things that might be censored in ways that automated language processing cannot compute.

Conclusion

@XianziAndHerFriends presents an example of the paradox between Weibo's governance, state requirements, and market forces that inform social media platform mechanisms. This pattern for

intermediaries of Internet censorship is prevalent in Chinese media (Yang & Wang, 2021) but can be addressed in our case at structural and cultural levels.

At the structural level, Weibo's formal governance policies and rules (e.g., terms of use) do not address sexuality and gender issues, leaving the appropriateness of these issues more to the judgment of users and other actors as they encounter platform mechanisms to shift course. Users are enabled to watch, flag, or respond to posts and comments based on their own evaluation. In this way, the patched governance of Weibo is complementary yet contradictory to the state's regulatory rules. The resulting space was fluid and fuzzy, somewhat ambivalent to discussions on sexuality, gender, and feminism built under @XianziAndHerFriends after it was silenced.

At the cultural level analysis of posts, Xianzi and Zhu Jun's lawsuit was used as a social event space mediated by Weibo in a way that refracted the particularities of struggles for women in China and beyond. That the discourse on the account @XianziAndHerFriends spread into wider social themes shows how the multifarious forms of feminist discourse in China persist in a complex censorship environment. Audiences' devotion and deviation to the discussion did not seem to merely challenge state surveillance (R. Han, 2018) or engage in consumerist entertainment (Yang, 2009). Before the forced closure of the account, Weibo's tolerance of Xianzi's personalized online expression or personal storytelling (DeLuca et al., 2016; Hou, 2020) helped bring individual experiences of female sexuality and relationships to the societal level and implied the political hierarchy that underpinned it. After its censorship, the mass retweeting, liking, and sharing of feminist discourse gained its own autonomy in deciding the sociopolitical issues of interest for wider societal selection. Here, we can draw on van Dijck and colleagues' (2018) claims about the power of platform commercialism to spread profitable forms of sociality—with Chinese characteristics.

This study also noted an undercurrent across clusters reacting to the visibility of supportive posts. This anti-feminist backlash that mobilized disciplinary forces of social control were more extensive and complex than the state control of platform censorship. This disciplinary force included shitposting and misogynist commentary as reactionary content that itself contributed to governing the Weibo space. Doubts about the evidence provided, name-calling, and general trolling of Xianzi and her claims were all employed in the face of expanding feminist discourse. We do not provide visibility to these specific comments other than to indicate the prolific use of "🐂" in the content. This research considers this mix of comments not so much as evidence of an ambivalent Internet but in the context of Chinese social media as indicating an anti-feminist hostility that reflects misogyny in Chinese popular media and the pervasive and sustained state-endorsed masculinist-nationalist ideal (Liao, 2019; Ling & Liao, 2021). Other scholars have noted similar reactionary governance content to novel user-generated views of masculinity that challenged statist ideologies (Chang & Tian, 2021). A reactionary masculinist-nationalist patriarchy "governing" in this way was interesting considering it was feminist comments extending to international comparisons of law and order and government responses to #MeToo (e.g., "Domestic sexual violence is still violence. Japan has laws for this, but we don't. They are better than us in protecting married women"; personal communication, February 7, 2021) that attracted derogatory, and emoji-rich, responses.

Overall, the discussion around @Xianziandherfirends showed the complex relationships past "state-based" censorship in online communities in China. On the one hand, the party-state monitoring and

controlling of information flows suppressed online expression. On the other hand, ambivalent censorship practice on Weibo let related content continue to expand through the platform's transactions of datafied commodities. The result was an ambivalent governance of the space. This was evident in both BERTopic and emoji analysis though the latter allowed insights into how different the affective gesturing of this community was from social media norms and highlighted stenographic practice missed in BERTopic analysis. This ambivalence mediated relationships among various parties and cultivated the rules and practice of a "platform society" (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 5) by drawing attention and community to the vestiges of censored posts. The work suggests that censored speech allowed generative feminist discourse in China while showing how that digital feminism is tied to complex discourses around nationalism, masculinity, and platform governance that differ from Western assumptions of state-civic dyads of free speech.

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