

Affinity, Agency, and Exclusion: Digital Feminist Pedagogy and Grassroots Empowerment in Douban's *Survival Guide for Ordinary Women*

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This study contributes to the growing body of research on Chinese digital feminist spaces by examining how female users construct and sustain supportive affinity networks and the participatory practices that shape their group culture and power dynamics. Drawing on a yearlong qualitative netnographic observation of the *Survival Guide for Ordinary Women*, a Douban discussion group, this study foregrounds Douban as a rich yet underexplored social media platform within Chinese participatory culture. The findings reveal how grassroots affinity networks challenge dominant neoliberal feminist narratives by fostering anti-elitism, anti-consumerism, and pragmatic feminist pedagogy. Additionally, this study highlights the complex interplay between hierarchical governance and participatory learning, offering a nuanced understanding of power structures within digital feminist communities. By analyzing how women construct their own community rules, enforce ideological boundaries, and prioritize functional empowerment, this study provides critical insights into the diverse forms of feminist resistance and self-organization in China's digital landscape.

Keywords: feminism, China, affinity network, participatory culture, Douban

Amid the expansive digital spaces of the Chinese Internet, the rise of feminist awareness and promotion of gender equity have become pressing social and political themes in public discourse (Chang et al., 2018; Mao, 2020; Yin & Sun, 2021). From feminist discussions sparked by stand-up comedy performances on Douyin (Meng & Literat, 2024) and the soft activism practices of commercially driven beauty influencers on Weibo (Sun & Ding, 2024), to the sisterhood bonding among enthusiastic "mom fans" of the LinaBell fandom (Saiyinjiya et al., 2025) and the heterosexual romantic advice shared within Douban groups (Tan & Liu, 2024), feminist ideas and messages are being mediated, negotiated, and constructed across various online spaces. As Banet-Weiser (2018) states, this is the age of "popular feminism," where highly visible, market-friendly forms of feminism emphasize individual empowerment and self-expression as a prevailing social ideology, amplified by social media and popular culture. The Douban discussion group *Survival Guide for Ordinary Women* (平凡女性生存手册) (n.d.) is a manifestation of such popular feminism in

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the digital sphere. As the group description states, "We are ordinary women (including low-income groups), and we are also a sisterhood of mutual support. We hope this group can help women facing difficulties in life break free from poverty and information cocoons" (Survival Guide for Ordinary Women, n.d.).

Since its inception on October 16, 2023, this women-only group has grown into one of the most active communities on Douban. Clearly positioned as a mutual support online "affinity network" (Ito et al., 2018), the group aims to empower "ordinary" and underprivileged women by fostering collaboration, self-growth, and recognition. It provides an inclusive and intimate space for participation and progression, embodying the grassroots essence of digital feminism.

Douban, often regarded as China's most influential Web 2.0 platform, has been viewed by many millennials as the cornerstone of a new cultural phenomenon within the Chinese Internet landscape (The Paper, 2021). Originally gaining prominence through user-generated content (UGC) focused on books, films, and music, Douban features an IMDb-like rating system and personalized recommendations. In 2006, a year after the platform's launch, Douban introduced the "Douban Groups" feature, a Reddit-like space designed for users with shared interests to gather and interact. To date, more than 72,000 discussion groups have been created, spanning 27 categories and covering an eclectic range of subcultures, with 12 million loyal monthly active users. These groups cater to diverse communities, offering spaces for users to socialize playfully, exchange emotions, and form connections. For example, famous groups like the Social Death group (社死组) (n.d.) allow users to recount embarrassing social moments, while the HaHa Group (哈组) (n.d.) provides humorous material for those seeking an emotional lift. Among these fun groups with quirky names, the Goose Group (鹅组) (n.d.) was the largest and most influential, boasting more than 600,000 members at its peak. It focused on entertainment gossip and trending social issues, often incorporating grassroots Chinese nationalist and feminist perspectives (Feika, 2021). However, the Goose Group (n.d.) was banned in 2022 following contested discussions about feminist issues and the government's handling of the pandemic in Shanghai. Despite their influence, such culturally rich and politically significant online participatory spaces remain unexplored in existing Chinese social media scholarship.

Against this backdrop, the Survival Guide for Ordinary Women (n.d.) discussion group offers a compelling case study of feminist affinity networks within Douban's unique participatory culture. This study examines how female users construct and sustain a supportive affinity network in this space, drawing on Jenkins et al.'s (2009) concept of participatory culture to explore how members collaborate, share knowledge, and engage in informal mentorship within grassroots, feminist-driven digital community. Using a qualitative netnographic approach, this study investigates how grassroots feminist practices shape online affinity networks and foster a pragmatic feminist pedagogical space that prioritizes practical empowerment through collective learning, career mentorship, and mutual support. Additionally, this study highlights the unique power dynamics within the group, where hierarchical rule enforcement by administrators coexists with egalitarian, peer-driven interactions among members, forming what I conceptualize as a "dimensional yet flat" order. By analyzing this representative feminist group, this study contributes to the understudied terrain of Douban's online participatory culture, integrating its vernacular expressions and digital feminist practices into the broader discourse of popular feminism in the Chinese digital landscape.

Literature Review

Social Media as Affinity Networks and Participatory Space

A substantial body of Western research underscores the importance of social media platforms as “affinity networks” (Ito et al., 2018) connecting diverse participants. Numerous researchers (Jenkins et al., 2016; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019; Wargo, 2017) have shown that social media fulfill the critical needs of young people, including belonging, identity experimentation, self-expression, social connection, and political socialization. For instance, studies reveal that U.S. minority youth often use social media as “digital neighborhoods” to build identities, particularly in relation to sexual behaviors. In fandom studies, Ito et al. (2018) conducted a comprehensive analysis demonstrating how various online “affinity networks”—including *Harry Potter* fandoms, gaming communities, and fanfiction writers—create new opportunities for informal learning. These networks enable young people to develop civic, academic, and career connections across different subcultures and geographies. As Du and Chang (2020) note, informal learning is typically driven by users’ personal interests and lived experiences, underscoring the intrinsic motivation that fuels participation in these networks.

In the Chinese digital context, affinity networks have flourished across platforms, fostering a unique participatory culture. Among these, Bilibili is a prominent video-sharing platform catering to ACGN (anime, comics, games, and novels) enthusiasts. Bilibili’s distinctive “bullet chatting” feature, which overlays live comments on videos, enables users to engage in real-time collective meaning making while watching content (Yang, 2022). This mechanism fosters a complex and dynamic participatory culture in which users consume, create, and critique media simultaneously. Drawing on Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, Chen (2021) describes Bilibili as an open and creative site that nurtures new forms of connection and fosters a nuanced, poetic participatory culture. In addition to video-centered platforms, text-based platforms, such as Baidu Tieba, Jinjiang, and Qidian provide affinity spaces for literature enthusiasts. These platforms act as curators and mediators, transforming traditional author-audience relationships into bidirectional, participatory communities in which users collectively create and craft literary content (Feng & Literat, 2017). Recently, Weibo has served as a central space for fandom-based affinity networks. Studies (Saiyinjiya et al., 2025; Yin & Xie, 2024) demonstrate that Weibo allows fans to exchange resources, express emotions toward their idols in communal spaces, and produce and share creative derivative works. Active participation in fandoms often enhances users’ social status within the community, underscoring the social and cultural capital embedded in these interactions.

While existing research predominantly focuses on fandom-centered participatory communities, a gap remains in gender-based affinity networks in the Chinese digital sphere. These spaces are often rendered invisible because of their relative sensitivity compared with mainstream fandom groups (Liao, 2019). Douban, frequently described in news reports as a flagship platform representing Chinese online participatory culture (The Paper, 2021), remains relatively neglected in the academic literature.

Digital Governance and Content Moderation in Online Discussion Groups

Beyond participatory engagement, online discussion groups rely heavily on user-driven governance and peer-based content moderation to sustain community norms and manage participation. In Western

contexts, recent scholarship highlights that governance in online communities is not imposed solely from above but is co-constructed by users themselves, often as a team (Gibson, 2023). Seering et al. (2019) document how moderators/administrators on platforms like Reddit and Facebook develop group-specific rules, onboard new members, and handle conflict through community norms rather than platform directives. Similarly, Matias (2019) emphasizes the emotionally intensive “care work” performed by volunteer moderators who help maintain a safe and inclusive environment. Because of Facebook’s vague governance policies for discussion groups, research shows that moderators often act as mid-level gatekeepers, demonstrating strong ownership over both the communities they manage and the information circulated within them (Malinen, 2024). Jhaver et al. (2019) also find that peer moderation on Reddit reflects members’ affective investment and shared responsibility in shaping content standards.

In the Chinese context, platform governance tends to be more opaque and politically sensitive. Weibo, for example, must constantly balance user engagement with state-imposed censorship, deploying ambiguous content moderation strategies to serve both political and commercial interests (Li, 2023). While platform-led moderation has been well documented, the internal governance dynamics of grassroots discussion groups—particularly those dealing with sensitive topics such as gender—remain underexplored. Yet, such groups often involve layered interactions between administrators/moderators and regular members, creating complex, community-driven governance structures that operate within and beyond platform constraints.

Popular Feminism and Gender Discourse in China’s Online Landscape

The rise of social media has undoubtedly facilitated the spread of popular feminism in China. On a positive note, platforms such as Weibo and WeChat have become crucial arenas for feminist expression. Whether through the #MeToo movement challenging systemic patriarchal oppression (Yin & Sun, 2021), state aligned, soft activism promoting feminist power through beauty influencers (Sun & Ding, 2024), or personal storytelling and emotional bonding in women’s narratives on WeChat (Chang et al., 2018), social media enables diverse feminist voices to emerge and thrive in a country where street activism is prohibited. These fragmented online campaigns and guerrilla activism practices are visible largely because of the unique affordances of social media. In this sense, various forms of Chinese digital feminism (e.g., Mao, 2020; Peng, 2021) can be seen as manifestations of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). However, despite the fundamental promises of China’s socialist gender discourse, which champions female independence and equality in the labor market (Wu & Dong, 2019), many researchers argue that contemporary Chinese gender discourse, since the post-reform era, remains constrained within a neoliberal framework. For example, Liu and Li (2024) applied Foucauldian theory to unpack the pursuit of “pale, young, and slim” (p. 16) aesthetics on Rednote, revealing how these beauty ideals, while ostensibly championing female independence, actually reinforce traditional gender expectations within a male-dominated consumer culture. This framework prioritizes capitalist and individualist logic, while sidelining the collective action necessary to challenge systemic gender inequality and real empowerment (McRobbie, 2013; Peng et al., 2022; Wallis & Shen, 2018). Driven by capitalist logic, digital feminism has become a commodified business aimed at generating online traffic and profits. Increasingly, content creators and influencers monetize feminist sentiments as part of their self-branding and marketing strategies, reducing activism to marketable behavior rather than a transformative agenda (Liao, 2024). This resonates with Kaplan and Illouz’s (2022) analyses of how beauty

and self-care practices are reconfigured as forms of “sexual capital” in the Western context, positioning physical appearance as a key site of feminine value and social mobility within neoliberal economies. Although these practices amplify visibility, they often dilute the focus on genuine social change. This commodification of feminism exists alongside widespread misogyny, with outspoken feminists frequently stigmatized as corrupted Western elites promoting neoliberal consumerist lifestyles (Meng & Literat, 2024). In China’s politically contentious context, such characterizations often trigger state censorship (Huang, 2023). These attacks, intertwined with politics, consumerism, and neoliberal ideologies, have distorted China’s modern gender discourse and sidelined practical and everyday feminist issues.

Despite the persistent challenges of censorship and governance in the digital sphere, emerging research on platforms like Douban reveals how these spaces can also function as arenas for women’s empowerment. For example, Tan and Liu (2024) explored a female-oriented Douban group and highlighted its therapeutic role through shared experiences of consolation, affirmation, and dialogue about navigating romantic lives. Berlant’s (2008) concept of intimate publics, many female-centered groups exemplify how women’s culture is nurtured through “a porous, affective scene of identification” (p. viii). As members exchange personal stories, create emotional attachment, and foster solidarity, they highlight the importance of shared emotional resonance in cultivating community and collective identities (Kanai, 2019; Morrison, 2011).

Tan and Liu (2024) examined the female-oriented Douban group’s girlfriend culture, but concentrated primarily on heterosexual romantic relationships and mediated intimacy. This study seeks to expand on their work by examining the broader cultural significance of Douban’s participatory nature through the lens of grassroots feminist practices. Specifically, I explore how female groups on Douban organize themselves to foster online learning, personal growth, and career development issues that resonate deeply with female grassroots users. The primary objective of this study is to understand how this community constructs itself and how participants engage in feminist discourse to empower themselves. Using the Survival Guide for Ordinary Women (n.d.) group as a case study, this research underscores the potential of these communities to facilitate meaningful participation and empowerment.

Methods

The research site for this study was Douban’s discussion group, a feature integrated into the Douban platform. By 2023, Douban had accumulated more than 200 million users, predominantly college-educated urban youths (Douban, n.d.). Known for its “artsy” intellectual demographic, Douban is often associated with progressive, liberal inclinations, particularly among its community of so-called “artistic youth (文艺青年)” who express a passion for literature, art, music, cinema, and other creative pursuits. This ethos of creativity and progressive thought influenced Douban’s discussion groups, which frequently exhibited feminist and liberal leanings (Feika, 2021). Among these groups, Survival Guide for Ordinary Women (n.d.) stands out as a unique and rapidly growing community for study; it was established in October 2023, and it achieved remarkable growth in members within a year.

A netnographic approach was adopted to explore the lived experiences of the community. Netnography is an online ethnographic method tailored to study online community cultures and digital

identities. Compared with other forms of online ethnography, netnography offers systematic and procedural guidelines that make it particularly suitable for examining online communities and cultures (Costello et al., 2017; Kozinets, 2010). Following the unobtrusive methodology prescribed by Kozinets (2010, 2015), which involves lurking, observing, and community immersion, I conducted participant observation to engage with the group. This process involved observing, noting, and reflecting on the group's daily communication to understand how the participants navigated participatory learning and fostered feminist support in a digital context.

Data collection spanned from the group's inception in October 2023 to December 2024. During this period, the group—whose members often refer to themselves as “big women”—grew from 12 founding members to nearly 40,000 (39,964). Douban's platform currently offers only binary gender options (male/female) during account creation; however, users are allowed to modify their gender identification at any time. In this group's application process, only users whose gender is marked as female on their profile—and whose gender information is publicly visible—can be approved to join by the administrators. This system effectively enforces a self-identification mechanism, aligning with the group's rule that restricts membership to self-identified women, thereby establishing a female-only space. While all Douban users can view posts and comments, only approved members can contribute to the discussion.

Given the platform's gendered access structure and the group's politically sensitive focus, ethical considerations were central to the research process. In line with feminist ethnography ethics (Antunes & Dhoest, 2019; Gajjala, 2002; Stacey, 1988), I approached this group with a commitment to care and empathy. As a long-time Douban user and a feminist researcher with insider cultural knowledge, I was deeply aware of the potential risks participants may face in China's digital environment, where feminist discourse is vulnerable to both misogynistic backlash and political scrutiny. To minimize disruption and preserve the group's internal dynamics, I first adopted an unobtrusive observational stance. Although I formally applied for membership through the group's vetting process, I refrained from interacting, commenting, or disclosing my researcher identity to avoid influencing group norms or trust dynamics, as Stacey (1988) cautions. Second, given the nature of the group as a semiprivate, identity-based community, I did not seek individual consent from users to observe public posts. Instead, I followed ethical guidance from the Association of Internet Researchers (2019), ensuring all data were anonymized, paraphrased, and de-identified to prevent traceability. This decision was informed by the understanding that seeking consent could pose additional risks to participants by drawing unnecessary attention to the group, particularly in politically sensitive contexts (Gajjala, 2002). Finally, I practiced ongoing reflexivity on my dual positionality as both a cultural insider and feminist researcher, continually reflecting on the ethical tension between analytical distance and solidarity (Antunes & Dhoest, 2019). By articulating these decisions, I aim to contribute to ongoing methodological conversations about consent, visibility, and researcher responsibility in digital feminist ethnography.

Specifically, I applied to join the group in December 2023, two months after its founding. Before gaining membership, I conducted observations from October to December 2023 to document the group's early development. During the first six months of observation, the focus was on understanding the narratives, interactions, and functional aspects of the group. This preliminary exploration provided insights into the community's norms, rules, and cultural patterns. Over the subsequent six months, the study

concentrated on the group's evolving practices, interactions among members, and power dynamics between members and administrators. I regularly returned to the digital field to track changes and developments. Notably, I remained a passive observer throughout this process and did not engage in any discussions. The data sources included posts and comments from a wide range of users, including newcomers, long-standing members, and administrators. On average, I spent 14 hours per week accessing and observing the discussion group. Detailed descriptive and reflective field notes were maintained alongside screenshots of posts and comments to preserve ephemeral content.

Like other Douban groups, Survival Guide for Ordinary Women (n.d.) is organized around specific topics and managed by a team of administrators. To accommodate the rapid growth in membership, the group's discussion board was divided into four sections: Experience Sharing, Seeking Advice, Every Sparkle of Women's Empowerment, and Group Affairs (Figure 1). The section "Every Sparkle of Women's Empowerment" is inspired by the Chinese proverb "A single spark can start a prairie fire, (星星之火, 可以燎原)" (Mao, 1965, p. 117), famously used by China's founding father, Mao Zedong, during the revolutionary era for social mobilization. In this context, the phrase symbolizes the significance of small, everyday acts of female enlightenment and empowerment. This section became an emotional exchange space for daily support and encouragement among members. The author devoted equal observation time to the various sections except for the Group Affairs section, as it only contained 10 administrative posts outlining group "speaking rules" and guidelines for new members.



Figure 1. The group's discussion board home page (personal communication, December 15, 2024).

Given the size and activity level of the group, it was not feasible to analyze every post in detail during the yearlong observation period. Instead, I adopted a thematic saturation approach (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012) and systematically reviewed the content to identify recurring themes. Individual threads were selected for close analysis, with particular attention given to posts labeled "Featured Posts" (精华帖) by the administrators. These highlighted posts, marked with a red icon in their titles, were curated by the group's leadership as high-quality or well-organized content based on their high response numbers and likes. While the analyzed data were publicly accessible, usernames were replaced in the analysis and blurred in all images in this article to prevent traceability, and direct quotations were paraphrased to minimize the risk of reidentification, further protecting the privacy of group members in the findings presented below.

Findings

Grassroots Empowerment: Anti-Elitism and Anti-Consumerism in Everyday Practices

The analysis indicated that the Survival Guide for Ordinary Women (n.d.) discussion group provides a supportive space for mutual aid and personal growth with a distinct focus on grassroots women's empowerment. As suggested by its name, the group explicitly centers on "ordinary women," prioritizing their shared intention to foster self-improvement across various aspects of life, regardless of age or educational background. This norm is reflected in the group's overarching narrative, which frequently adopts what I term "anti-elitism" and "anti-consumerism" stances. In this context, *anti-elitism* refers to the group's rejection of dominant feminist narratives in the Chinese digital sphere that often associate popular feminism with elite, urban, and highly educated women who embody neoliberal ideals of individual achievement and social privilege (Huang, 2023; Peng, 2021). Closely linked is the group's *anti-consumerism* ethos, which reflects resistance to neoliberal discourses—present in both Chinese and broader Western literature—that equate female empowerment with commodified self-expression, lifestyle branding, and market participation (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2013).

In the Experience Sharing section, commonly highlighted posts reflect this narrative. For example, "Featured Posts" include titles like: "Those small-town girls who wanted to get away: Living costs in big cities are not as high as you think"; "Girls with modest family backgrounds: Here's some solid experiences on improving your education level"; and "An overview of accessible jobs for women with low educational levels" (personal communication, December 13, 2024). Similarly, in the Advice Seeking section, post titles often explicitly acknowledge the posters' backgrounds and seek useful advice, such as, "What could a 27-year-old woman do for a living without having any professional skills?"; and "Where's the future for educators from the bottom class?" (personal communication, December 13, 2024). Upon reading these posts, participants often describe challenging financial or educational circumstances while rejecting common societal portrayals of the elite style "successful, confident, and independent woman" with a prestigious education and glamorous lifestyle. Instead, they show vulnerabilities and focus on the reality of striving for independence and growth under less privileged conditions.

Looking at the "Every Sparkle of Women's Empowerment" section, personal stories of underrepresented women are widely shared. Within this section, participants vocalize their identity as individuals from "low-class, less educated, and socially disadvantaged families," using the space to celebrate

their daily growing achievements in self-empowerment. For example, a post titled "A Bottom Girl's Anti-Clockwise Life" (personal communication, July 7, 2024) by Moon² evoked significant engagement. In her story, she describes growing up in a poor working-class household with an abusive and violent father, detailing her journey to overcome these adversities with only a high school education. Her narrative highlights her efforts to liberate herself and her mother from a traumatic childhood and their troubled marriages. The post was met with overwhelming support from group members, who applauded her courage, resilience, and determination, with comments expressing admiration and blessings.

These anti-elitism narratives are not limited to titles but permeate the content of posts, covering diverse aspects of life. In a popular featured post, CherryBlossom shared extensive advice on traveling to underdeveloped regions with a limited budget, often referred to as "poor traveling." Her 3,000-word post included practical tips on finding affordable transportation, managing accommodation and meals economically, and preparing budget-friendly travel checklists. Another post, titled "Healing Mental Illness Without Spending Money" by Momo (personal communication, October 18, 2024), shared her journey in coping with OCD and insomnia by reading psychological books and sharing her daily learning with the community. She provided a curated booklist and screenshots of supportive exchanges with fellow members. Using herself as an example, she invited others to use the thread as a "tree hole"—a safe space to share personal struggles without fear of judgment. Posts like these underscore the group's emphasis on collective resilience and solidarity, with participants openly embracing their identities as "ordinary" individuals navigating everyday challenges together.

Moreover, a significant manifestation of the group's anti-consumerism discourse was a campaign titled "#How Do Ordinary Women Fight Consumerism?" initiated by administrators in late 2024. The campaign, strategically launched before the "Double Eleven" Shopping Festival (China's largest online shopping event), encouraged members to critically reflect on consumer culture. Campaign rules set by the group leader urged participants to share their experiences of resisting consumerism and maintaining mindful consumption: "We encourage every ordinary yet extraordinary woman to share your experiences of resisting the shackles of consumerism. More importantly, share how you maintain a clear mind and make wise decisions in this temptation-filled world" (Survival Guide for Ordinary Women, n.d.).

Over the two-week period of the campaign, 91 posts were contributed by "big women," garnering approximately 746,000 views. Many of the posts were lengthy self-reflections, often exceeding 4,000 words, in which the participants shared their personal experiences of combating consumerism through detailed and heartfelt narratives. Common expressions included "buying does not make our ordinary life better," "only buy what you need + keep saving money," and "make the best use of everything; say NO to hoarding" (personal communication, November 28, 2024).

Despite cautionary tales of "blood and tears" stories recounting missteps into consumerism traps, participants also proposed strategies to change consumption habits. For example, in a post titled "Examining Your Consumer Habits in Detail" (personal communication, November 30, 2024), Fiona outlined a series of common, but unreasonable habits that led to impulsive buying and offered practical alternatives to curb such

² As a reminder, all usernames are pseudonyms.

tendencies. Other suggestions include starting a personal expense journal with recommendations for user-friendly applications to track and manage daily spending effectively. Some members have suggested minority platforms, where high-quality, cost-effective commodities can be accessed more affordably. The discussion extends beyond personal self-reflection and behavioral changes. Many participants used the opportunity to delve into the systemic roots of consumerism, contributing long, academically inclined posts that critically examined social structures, patriarchal capitalism, and gender narratives. For instance, the most-liked post in the campaign thread, authored by Nana, provided a comprehensive self-made poster containing a 10-point argument on women's financial empowerment, covering topics such as understanding the value of money, setting financial goals, saving and investing, and cultivating financial discipline. Each argument was accompanied by three detailed bullet points explaining the implementation of these practices. In closing, Nana expressed her hope for fellow big women to achieve "an unbounded life" (personal communication, December 23, 2024). Another notable post by Feminist briefly introduced the term "beauty duty," which was widely circulated within the Douban community. This concept critiques how women are disciplined by the patriarchal gaze to objectify themselves in pursuit of beauty standards that cater to men. The post argued that consumerism is deeply rooted in patriarchal capitalism, driving women to internalize notions such as "women need to dress up to attract men" and "women must be beautiful" as essential living requirements (personal communication, November 25, 2024). Drawing on the phenomenal feminist figure de Beauvoir's (1949/2011) *The Second Sex*, contributors used this anti-consumerism discourse to challenge widespread body image anxieties and reclaim self-definition, advocating for women to be seen as the first sex.

Further posts sought to educate the community about "consumerism traps," with some recommending Bauman's (1998) book *Work, Consumerism, and the New Poor* as foundational texts to understand the harsh realities of consumerism and capitalism. These posts argue that "we, as exploited workers, should resolutely say no to consumerism" (personal communication, December 15, 2024), framing it not merely as a gender issue but also as a form of systemic social oppression demanding collective resistance.

This campaign served as a powerful manifestation of the group's anti-consumerist discourse. However, such expressions were not limited to this campaign thread. In the group's daily threads, similar sentiments were frequently articulated in both the posts and comments, highlighting the ongoing presence and importance of this discourse in everyday conversations.

Building a Pragmatic³ Feminist Pedagogical Space

Unlike other female affinity networks that often center on romantic relationships (Tan & Liu), this group explicitly bans such discussions, as enforced by administrators. Guided by the ethos reflected in its name, "Survival Guide," the group promotes a pragmatic focus on practical and universal life issues, such as job seeking, skill building, money making, and self learning. Topics such as marriage, romantic

³ As used in this study, "pragmatic" refers to a materially grounded, outcome-oriented discourse of empowerment that centers on tangible benefits (job security and financial independence) over aesthetic or identity-based expressions of feminism. This concept draws from feminist critiques of neoliberal feminism (Gill & Scharff, 2013; McRobbie, 2013).

relationships, childcare, and body image are not only absent but also actively discouraged. As stated in a post on group affairs:

Those who post about such topics will be permanently kicked out from the group! This group's aim is to help all women who want to improve and elevate their living conditions. We therefore prioritize highly implementable and widely accessible information in our threads. (Survival Guide for Ordinary Women, n.d.).

In keeping with this mission, the group's discussion board is filled with posts on practical advice, particularly those focused on job seeking. Notably, many posts highlight opportunities in government and public institutions, reflecting the socioeconomic realities of China's socialist framework. In this context, public sector jobs (government institutions) are seen as the most secure and stable options for women, offering strong social benefits and job protection, such as maternity leave, health insurance, housing funds, and pensions. For instance, one of the most popular post series in the group titled "Pan-Institution Job-Seeking Selection" (personal communication, May 17, 2024) consists of three themes offering detailed advice on choosing locations, opportunities in State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs), and opportunities in low-barrier public institutions. The author of these posts, Light, employed an interactive survey-style format unique to Douban. The participants were first prompted to answer multiple-choice, open-ended questions about their job selection preferences and prior work experience. Upon submitting their responses, they gained access to their previous answers and Light's professional insights into career planning. This survey format served as more than just a static Q&A; it functioned as a dynamic, mind-mapping exercise that guided participants through the career selection process in a structured yet engaging manner. By incorporating interactive elements, the post added a layer of reflection and engagement to an otherwise serious topic, making it accessible and thought-provoking. Even after the active survey window ended, the interactive feature remained available, allowing participants to continue answering the questions, viewing others' responses, and accessing the author's expert guidance.

For example, contents in the "Choosing Location" post offered comprehensive analyses addressing small-town opportunities versus metropolitan ambitions, such as "If I'm from a small town, should I aim to take the local test⁴ and join the local government compared to the national one?" or "How should I evaluate the local financial status when considering job prospects?" tailored to the unique socioeconomic contexts of different regions of China (personal communication, May 17, 2024). These posts often adopted a professional and analytical tone akin to advice from a seasoned government expert, which was met with widespread appreciation. Comments often filled the threads, addressing the uploader as "teacher" and saying "Thank you, Teacher Light" and "We are so grateful for teacher Light's opinion," accompanied by heart and loving emojis to express the community's recognition and admiration (personal communication, June 6, 2024).

⁴ In China, passing a unified national civil service exam is required to become a national government official or join any national-level public institution. Because of its stringent requirements, the passing rate is around 1% among the two to three million applicants who take the exam annually (Du, 2023). Therefore, the local test is easier compared with the unified national exam.

In addition to providing job-seeking advice, the group is a rich repository of shared learning resources and skill-building conversations (see Figure 2). Posts frequently offer preparation materials for national civil service exams and share personal success stories to pass them, such as “How I Passed the SOE Test in Six Months While Working Full-Time”; “Bravely Sailing into the Bureaucracy and Reaching the Shoring Successfully⁵”; and “Advice for Everyone Going Through a Period of Unemployment and Uncertainty” (personal communication, October 23, 2024). These discourses reflect the group’s pragmatic spirit and aim to address members’ most pressing career challenges. Beyond public sector opportunities, other posts provided actionable suggestions for generating income and acquiring new skills. Examples include: “Making-Money Psychological Advice”; “Comprehensive Learning Resources for Skill Development,” which included a full spreadsheet categorizing books, courses, and creative tools, each with direct download links (see Figure 2 as an example); “Side Job Recommendation for Those with Leisure Time”; “If You Don’t Have Skills, Learn Clip Editing: That’s How I Make Extra Money” (personal communication, September 19, 2024).

The screenshot shows a WeChat post titled "[learning resources]" with a subtitle "【资源文档】学习资料+高分电影+书籍合集" and a share count of 600. Below the title is a navigation bar with categories: 国产, 动漫, 书籍, 考公, 考研, 办公. The main content is a spreadsheet with 24 rows of resources, each with a title and a direct download link to a Quark cloud storage page. At the bottom of the post, there are statistics: 244 comments, 549 likes, 127 shares, 2267 views, and 3 reposts.

	A	B
1	实用资料分享 (不定期更新, 建议收藏)	
2	【福利】新用户手机注册可以获得1T空间 建议收藏本文档	
3	抖音+剪辑+Premiere短视频制作从新手到高手 2023全彩慕课版	https://pan.quark.cn/
4	网上要钱才能下载的 PPT 模板 500 套	https://pan.quark.cn/
5	电视 TV 应用合集 (免费看电视)	https://pan.quark.cn/
6	电脑游戏合集【45 部 1.42TB】	https://pan.quark.cn/
7	Adobe 全家桶 2023 已解锁【windows +	https://pan.quark.cn/
8	Photoshop 入门到精通 (视频 + 课件)	https://pan.quark.cn/
9	苹果 Mac 电脑软件合集	https://pan.quark.cn/
10	知识星球750篇【PDF】	https://pan.quark.cn/
11	黑科技软件合集 (更新中) (破解版)	https://pan.quark.cn/
12	电脑游戏合集【45部1.42TB】	https://pan.quark.cn/
13	丧心病狂攒钱模板合集	https://pan.quark.cn/
14	「写作能力提升精选电子书」	https://pan.quark.cn/
15	Adobe全家桶 Windows系统 软件+课程	https://pan.quark.cn/
16	知识星球 付费课程 (400篇)	https://pan.quark.cn/
17	迅雷破解版	https://pan.quark.cn/
18	0 基础进阶表格达人	https://pan.quark.cn/
19	小学全套学习资料	https://pan.quark.cn/
20	初中全套学习资料	https://pan.quark.cn/
21	高中全套学习资料	https://pan.quark.cn/
22	300+电子手帐&素材&教程	https://pan.quark.cn/
23	女性主义书单	https://pan.quark.cn/
24	B站付费课程30系列	https://pan.quark.cn/

Figure 2. A spreadsheet with various learning resources and direct download links voluntarily organized and offered by the poster (personal communication, September 19, 2024).

⁵ In recent years, the term “shang’an” (上岸, literally “reaching the shore”) has become widely used to describe young people’s success in exams, particularly in the civil service and public institution sectors.

Participants extended their support beyond words of encouragement by investing time and expertise. For instance, one of the most commonly featured posts was authored by Island Insect, which provides free services to revise resumes, conduct mock interviews, and offer career planning advice. In her post, she introduced herself as follows:

Humanities major with over 10 years of work experience, previously employed at Fortune 500 companies and multinational corporations, and currently working at an AI startup. I have conducted thousands of interviews and reviewed tens of thousands of resumes, and I am fairly knowledgeable about general job application processes. (personal communication, October 23, 2024)

Participants could e-mail her for advice, and in the comment section, they addressed her as “Teacher Insect” for respect. She mentioned that she supported more than 100 individuals before halting the service because of a busy work schedule (personal communication, October 23, 2024). Similarly, Emma, a professional career consultant, offered one month of free consulting services and hosted both offline seminars and online meetings to assist group members in navigating their careers at no cost. Although her services transitioned to the paid model after the initial free period, her contributions extended beyond verbal encouragement and included actionable support.

Forming a Close-Knit and Well-Disciplined Community

Similar to all Douban discussion groups, the Survival Guide for Ordinary Women (n.d.) is managed by an administrative team and operates under a membership system that requires applicants to read and repost group rules to ensure compliance. However, this group is distinguished by its strong leadership and strict enforcement of rules.

The onboarding process is meticulous. Applicants must include a “secret code” in their short applications, which is not explicitly provided, but requires careful reading of the group rules. Applications without the correct code are automatically rejected. Additionally, prospective members must meet specific criteria: their Douban profiles must be active (no trolls and bots); their registration history should extend beyond six months; and crucially, they must exhibit no signs of misogynistic expression on their personal pages, which are carefully scrutinized by administrators.

Administrators wield absolute authority over membership, determining who can stay or leave based on their interpretation of the rules. The regulations extend to both the format and content of posts. For example, post titles must follow a strict template, including the section name, prefix, and recap (e.g., Advice Sharing | What are female-friendly cities to live in and work in?). Content was equally regulated, with certain topics strictly prohibited, including family chores, romantic relationships, childcare, marriage, and entertainment. Other banned behaviors include sarcastic remarks, ambiguous expressions, personal attacks, political commentary, unclear abbreviations, provocative titles, and humble bragging. Criticism by administrators or rules is also forbidden. Administrators are responsible for labeling “Featured Posts,” a designation given to what are considered the highest-quality posts within the thread. However, no clear

guidelines are provided on the criteria for selecting these posts, leaving the process entirely opaque and at the discretion of the administrators.

In total, the administrative team outlined 24 specific rules for posting and commenting on the Group Affairs section. Violations result in escalating consequences: First-time offenders are temporarily banned from posting, whereas repeat offenders face permanent disqualification from the group. These regulations aim to maintain a welcoming and civilized environment, as emphasized in the group rule: "Please help maintain a positive community environment and support more women with simple gestures. If you come across a violated post, you may report it to the group administrators" (Survival Guide for Ordinary Women, n.d.).

However, some rules—such as banning "judging administrators," "using sarcastic tones," or "acting verbally aggressive" (Survival Guide for Ordinary Women, n.d.)—are inherently subjective, granting administrators significant discretion in enforcement. This creates the potential for arbitrariness, as the boundaries of acceptable behavior remain open to interpretation by the leadership. The Group Affairs section contains only 10 posts published by the administrative team, outlining policies on reporting violation posts, deleting content, recruiting administrators, and banning specific topics. These posts are updated periodically in response to observed violations or new "posting standards."

While administrators enforce a hierarchical and disciplined order, interactions among members are characterized by equality and mutual respect. Members communicate on a flat, peer-to-peer level, treating each other as friends, sisters, and peers under the same recognition of "ordinary women." As demonstrated in the previous themes, members openly share experiences, generously offer advice, and form emotional bonds through empowerment stories. The most common comments include expressions of gratitude and respect, such as: "Thank you [heart heart]!"; "I appreciate it!"; "I've learned a lot!"; "Very useful resources"; and "I've added the post into my collection" (personal communication, December 15, 2024).

In addition, members frequently share personal stories that resonate with the post content, fostering a sense of solidarity. Even in pedagogical posts where posters adopt an expert role and are often addressed as "teachers" or "masters" in the comments, they hold no real power over the narratives or discourse, but only respect and appreciation. These dynamics align with the characteristics of the online affinity network described by Ito et al. (2018).

Thus, administrators' strict rule enforcement creates a closed-knit circle bound by clearly defined norms, yet the group exhibits contrasting dynamics. On one hand, the administrators govern the group with hierarchical authority. On the other hand, member-to-member interactions are flat and egalitarian, fostering a unique ambivalent norm—a dimensional yet flat order. This dual dynamic reflects the group's ability to maintain a disciplined structure while simultaneously nurturing a sense of camaraderie and shared purpose among members.

Discussion

This study provides a nuanced understanding of how female users in Douban's discussion group Survival Guide for Ordinary Women (n.d.) construct their own affinity networks within the broader landscape of popular feminism on Chinese social media. Specifically, the findings illuminate how this digital space

serves as a grassroots platform for female empowerment, characterized by dominant anti-elitism and anti-consumerism narratives. Unlike previous scholarship that critiques China's neoliberal feminist discourse for promoting commodified empowerment through consumerism, self-branding, and elite individualism (Peng et al., 2022; Wallis & Shen, 2018), this study reveals how group members are not only aware of these prevailing narratives but also actively resist them. Rather than reinforcing idealized portrayals of economically successful, hyper-independent women situated within a neoliberal framework (Liu & Li, 2024; Pruchniewska, 2018), the group recenters the everyday struggles of women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, emphasizing their aspirations for better life opportunities.

This resistance echoes broader feminist critiques of neoliberalism, which argue that market-based discourses of empowerment obscure structural inequalities and depoliticize feminist politics (McRobbie, 2013; Rottenberg, 2018). As Gill and Scharff (2013) note, postfeminist cultures often conflate empowerment with individual consumer choice, sidelining questions of labor, class, and systemic patriarchy. By contrast, the discourse in this group reclaims empowerment through collective identification and pragmatic strategies rooted in economic survival. The naming of a key section after a Maoist-era socialist slogan, "A single spark can start a prairie fire" (Mao, 1965, p. 117), reinforces an underlying bottom-up mobilization rhetoric. Additionally, discussions about public sector job seeking, including government positions and SOEs, are framed as ideal career paths, making job security and collective progress the focal points of group conversations. This emphasis departs from individualist neoliberal feminist ideals (Wallis & Shen, 2018) and instead draws on state-linked career aspirations that signal an alternative form of awareness tied to socialist time stability and social protection.

Building on Ito et al.'s (2018) concept of affinity networks, this study contributes to the understanding of feminine community culture and participatory practices in the Chinese context. While previous research suggests that online spaces such as Douban groups often function as emotional and therapeutic spaces for romantic relationships, cultivating a unique "girlfriend culture" (Tan & Liu, 2024), the *Survival Guide for Ordinary Women* (n.d.) diverges from this pattern. Instead of centering emotional support around interpersonal relationships, it fosters collective knowledge sharing and peer mentorship aimed at practical perspectives, such as job-seeking strategies, financial literacy, and skill acquisition. The practices observed in this group—free-career coaching, mock interviews, and knowledge/resource sharing—demonstrate that networked support goes beyond emotional affirmation to adopt a pragmatic action-oriented approach. Unlike many online feminist spaces that focus primarily on self-expression and discourse, this group embodies what Harvey et al. (2017) describe as "networked niceness" transformed into real-world problem solving, making affinity-based connections highly functional and implementable.

Finally, this study's findings also highlight an interesting tension between hierarchical governance and egalitarian participation, which can be analyzed through the lens of power dynamics and rule enforcement in participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). While participatory culture is typically associated with open, decentralized, and democratic engagement in many digital communities (Feng & Literat, 2017; Lai et al., 2022), this group relies on strict moderation structures to maintain order and protect enforced boundaries. The administrative team exerts significant control over both membership and content, distinguishing this group from free-form participatory spaces. Administrators dictate which topics are deemed valuable (e.g., career development, skills training, financial independence) and which are strictly

prohibited (e.g., beauty, gossip, romantic relationships). This echoes Malinen's (2024) findings that moderators often function as mid-level gatekeepers, exercising authority over group norms, information flow, and access. Members must meet strict eligibility criteria, including a mandatory application process that requires a hidden code to ensure commitment and alignment with group values. Featured Posts are labeled by administrators but with no explicit criteria, reinforcing their dominant role in shaping the discourse. However, despite this top-down regulation, peer interactions within a group operate under a horizontal, egalitarian model. Participants freely exchange advice, resources, and mentorship, creating a grassroots-learning ecosystem within the boundaries set by administrators. This results in a "dimensional yet flat" power structure, where the administrators govern members hierarchically, maintaining control over group entry, rule enforcement, and content moderation. However, members interact on an equal footing, fostering a participatory learning space in which no individual dominates the discourse. This hybrid governance model both confirms and complicates existing theories of user-driven moderation (see Matias, 2019) as well as our understanding of power, agency, and boundary enforcement in digital feminist affinity networks where exclusionary mechanisms are often necessary to preserve group identity and purpose.

Although this study illustrates how digital feminism manifests in community development and cultural formation on Douban, it has several limitations. As data collection and analysis focused primarily on posts and comments, the study did not fully address questions such as whether the group has faced criticism from other Douban feminist communities or whether its administrators have experienced backlash or negative repercussions within or beyond the group—issues that did not emerge saliently in the observed data. Future research could adopt alternative methodological approaches to deepen our understanding of group dynamics. Interviews with participants and administrators, for example, may offer richer insights into these dynamics, revealing motivations, emotional labor, and ideological negotiations that remain inaccessible through textual analysis alone. Comparative research across feminist groups on Douban could also provide a broader perspective on how digital feminism is articulated across diverse communities.

Given the highly fragmented nature of feminist discourse online (Author, in review), it is important to acknowledge that this group represents only one specific demographic: ordinary women from modest backgrounds. While the core profile of active contributors in the Survival Guide for Ordinary Women (n.d.) group appears to reflect Douban's broader user base—predominantly urban, college-educated women with relatively progressive and feminist-leaning values—a more granular analysis of members' social backgrounds and lived experiences falls beyond the scope of this study and remains an important direction for future exploration.

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