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Digital Resilience in Social Media Feminist Activism: Reactance Theory Applied to Weibo and Zhihu

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Abstract

Past studies have shown the value of social media for feminist activism in China. Yet, activists encounter strict censorship, negatively impacting their mobilization efforts. Existing studies have documented the strategies activists use to circumvent censorship by analyzing digital trace data but have not yet examined their censorship experiences. To fill this gap, the present study draws on reactance theory to investigate the experiences of social media feminist activists in China through 19 in-depth interviews. Following calls to examine digital resilience in the era of polycrisis, this study also contributes to rethinking digital resilience as not only resistance to censorship, but as an adaptive capacity to maintain agency and continuity in activism. We conducted a cross-platform comparison contrasting activists' censorship experiences across Weibo and Zhihu. We found a hierarchy of concerns underlying censorship mechanisms. We identified five types of cognitive reactance: ambiguity, disagreement, unfairness, believing in a lack of control, and critical questioning of the positive energy motto. Affective reactance manifested through feelings of anger and irritation toward haphazard censorship enforcement. Digital resilience was visible in both cognitive and affective reactance, which motivated participants to restore their freedom. Participants used two types of direct means to regain their lost freedom: seeking and disseminating censored information. A few participants engaged in indirect restoration by reinterpreting the state's motto of positive energy. The findings suggest activists developed different forms of digital resilience on Zhihu and Weibo that reflect unique platform affordances and regulations. We outline implications for reactance theory and future research.

Keywords

affect; censorship; China; digital resilience; feminist activism; reactance theory; social media; Weibo; Zhihu

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1. Introduction

In China, social media has become an important space for feminist activism (Luqiu & Liao, 2021), paralleling its uptake for feminist causes in other regions of the world (Quan-Haase et al., 2021). Yet, China represents a unique case because of the state's widespread and strict censorship practices (Fu et al., 2013). These practices are adaptive and dynamic as platforms are constantly implementing novel techniques (T. Sun & Zhao, 2022), approaches (King et al., 2013), and criteria (Chen & Xu, 2017). They have led to a polycrisis (Lawrence et al., 2024; Morin & Kern, 1999) wherein activists encounter not a single threat, but a complex system of antagonism from other users, uncontrollable algorithmic processes, unpredictable regulations from platforms, and general oppression from the government. With social media censorship becoming increasingly sophisticated and ubiquitous, Fu et al. (2013) found that it reduced how often activists read and post information. Yet censorship has not had a uniform effect on feminist activists' online engagement. Roberts (2020) found that it could backfire, with some feminist activists showing digital resilience by increasing their engagement after encountering censorship. This shows the relevance of understanding digital resilience to censorship as an adaptive capacity that sustains digital feminist activism over time. Digital resilience is an understudied topic (Craig et al., 2015; Esteve-Del-Valle et al., 2022) and has not been applied to examine how feminist activists appraise censorship threats and adapt to them over time.

Past studies have focused on how feminist online activists react to censorship by analyzing data harvested from social media (Liao, 2019; Zeng, 2019). This body of work is important, as it shows that social media feminist activists are not passive but rather actively resist censorship mechanisms (Liao, 2019). It also shows that there is an ongoing negotiation and adaptation process occurring between feminist activists' engagement and censorship mechanisms (Y. Sun & Yin, 2022). Yet, so far, studies have mostly relied on digital trace data or investigated a single platform, limiting our understanding of how feminist digital activists perceive censorship and how they develop digital resilience over time to stay motivated to implement countermeasures. We define digital resilience, following Tomkova (2020), as how groups adapt to threats and crises by using digital technologies for mobilization efforts, collective efficacy, and collective identity.

A few studies have interviewed feminist activists to learn about their perceptions and responses to censorship. For example, Shao and He (2024) focused on a single type of censorship (i.e., account bombing) and found that activists used various strategies to cope with state interference. L. Han and Lee (2019) also used interviews, but examined a single campaign known as the "nude photos" anti-domestic violence campaign. They found that activists' creative use of images allowed certain posts to evade censorship. These two studies, which draw on interviews with feminist activists, expand our current understanding of censorship by describing activists' experiences and opinions. Yet, in both cases, the focus was limited by looking at only one type of censorship or examining a single campaign. They also disregarded how digital resilience develops over time as an adaptive capacity.

The present study expands past studies by investigating activists' perceptions of not only one type of censorship, such as account bombing (Shao & He, 2024), but also examining censorship more holistically. Drawing on reactance theory (Brehm & Brehm, 1981), our study investigates how feminist activists perceive censorship, their reactance to it, their development over time of digital resilience, and the countermeasures they employ. We examine two social media platforms: Weibo and Zhihu. Rather than assuming that all social media operate uniformly, the comparative lens helps to understand activists' nuanced experiences of

censorship across platforms (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2023; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). Supporting the need for a comparative lens, scholars have found differences in terms of censorship criteria, techniques, sanctions, and users' perception of and response to censorship (MacKinnon, 2009; Tai & Fu, 2020). We chose Weibo (microblogging) and Zhihu (question-and-answer platform) because feminist activists have utilized both for their cause (Mao, 2020; Xiong & Ristivojević, 2021) and the affordances and regulations of these platforms have shown to influence feminist activism (Bao, 2024). We selected Weibo because of its centrality to how feminist campaigns emerge, circulate, and spread, and also the high prevalence of censorship (Tai & Fu, 2020). Zhihu was selected because it is a platform where feminist debate occurs, and past studies have documented widespread censorship, including user banning which restricts, suspends, or bans users who have violated the platform's rules (X. Zhang et al., 2022). While our analysis is limited to two platforms, the findings reflect broader activist practices observed across other Chinese social media sites. We investigate three research questions:

RQ1: What are the perceptions of feminist activists toward social media censorship?

RQ2: What is the cognitive and affective reactance of feminist activists to censorship on social media, and what factors lead to cognitive and affective reactance?

RQ3: How does digital resilience develop over time as an adaptive capacity and what countermeasures do feminist activists use to regain their lost freedom?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Feminist Activism

Prior research has documented how feminist activists have embraced the opportunities and affordances of social media to voice personal narratives of sexual violence and create awareness of systemic injustices (Linabary et al., 2020), form feminist communities, foster solidarity and collective identity (Gudhlanga & Spiegel, 2021), and mobilize connective and collective action (Suk et al., 2023). Scholars have critiqued the narrow approaches taken in these studies as they lack diverse voices and mostly represent the perspectives of White, middle-class, cisgender women (Trott, 2021) despite digital activism being a global phenomenon. Responding to this critique, a body of literature is emerging that investigates digital feminist activism across varied geographical, socio-cultural, and political landscapes with the goal of uncovering nuanced and context-specific activist practices (Hou, 2020), a range of participant experiences (B. Wang & Driscoll, 2019), and a multitude of socio-political implications (Y. Sun & Yin, 2022). The present study contributes to this growing body of work by examining digital feminist activism in China, where state censorship exercised through social media platforms and their algorithms limits and frustrates the engagement of activists.

2.2. Digital Feminist Activism and Social Media Censorship

Social media censorship describes the practice of controlling, regulating, and/or restricting content (Hintz, 2015; Tai & Fu, 2020). While it is effective in filtering out harmful posts such as hate speech, threatening language, and misinformation (Bronstein & Vinogradov, 2021), it limits how individuals and groups can express opinions freely (Dal & Nisbet, 2022). Feminist activists have experienced a range of censorship mechanisms

and state censorship has been a real barrier for feminist activists, limiting their mobilization efforts (Yin & Sun, 2021).

In China, social media censorship has targeted feminist content, making it difficult for activists to disseminate activism-related information and limiting solidarity building among activists (G. Yang, 2018). Studies have described a range of censorship mechanisms, ranging from content deletion to account suspension (Yin & Sun, 2021; Zeng, 2020). Studies have also found that censorship aimed at digital feminist activists is ambiguous, with no clear set of criteria (Yin & Sun, 2021). This inconsistency in censorship practices creates a significant obstacle for those involved in digital feminist activism.

Feminist activists are not passive recipients of censorship measures (Liao, 2019); rather they have demonstrated great digital resilience to these threats. We define digital resilience following Tomkova (2020) as "individuals', groups', or organizations' ability to maintain, change, adapt to, or recover their social capital mobilization, sustenance of social cohesion, and collective efficacy, collective identity—using ICT and the online space to do so" (p. 414). Digital resilience is not static; it is a dynamic and transformative process and continuously adapts to the changing nature of existing threats (Esteve-Del-Valle et al., 2022). Digital resilience consists of not only assessing current threats but also developing effective and adaptive measures to mitigate them.

Most of the existing research on social media censorship and feminist digital activism has relied on digital trace data (L. Han & Lee, 2019; L. Han & Liu, 2023; X. Han, 2018; Zeng, 2020). Digital trace data offers valuable insights; however, it lacks rich details about the social context in which the trace data is generated. This limitation underscores the need for approaches that offer in-depth understandings into the experiences and perspectives of feminist activists. Taken together, the literature shows how censorship is a part of the experience of feminist activists mobilizing in China. The literature also demonstrates the need to investigate feminist activists' experiences and countermeasures through directly engaging them rather than relying solely on digital trace data.

2.3. Theoretical Framework

To examine activists' nuanced responses to censorship in the context of feminist activism, we draw on reactance theory and digital resilience. According to Brehm and Brehm (1981), a threat to, or loss of, freedom can elicit reactance. Reactance is conceptualized as a motivational status that cannot be directly measured, but can only be inferred from the response to the threat. This leads to ambiguities in applying reactance theory in research, as it relegates reactance to "a proverbial black box" (Reynolds-Tylus, 2019, p. 3). To address this shortcoming, Dillard and Shen (2005) proposed an intertwined model that conceptualizes reactance as "an amalgam of anger and negative cognitions" (p. 164), providing a workable representation of reactance and operational means to study it (Quick et al., 2013). In this model, the affective component of reactance involves varying degrees of anger while the cognitive component consists of negative cognitions resulting from the perceived threat to a person's freedom. We draw on Dillard and Shen's (2005) intertwined model because it has found support in studies across multiple fields (Rains, 2013; Richards & Banas, 2015; Shen, 2015) and it allows us to assess reactance directly from self-report data rather than inferring it from a person's restorative response to a threat to freedom. Reactance theory is described as a motivation theory because its key premise is that a threat to a person's freedom will motivate

them to restore that freedom. As a motivational state, reactance has "energizing and behavior-directing properties" (Brehm & Brehm, 1981, p. 98). While reactance itself is not actionable, reactance can lead to action. For example, Miller's (2022) study of Turkey's March 2014 ban on Twitter (now X) showed that banning social media triggered existing users' reactance, motivating them to circumvent the Twitter ban and intensify criticism of the authorities in Turkey.

Reactance theory is applicable to the present study because it provides a framework to examine censorship on social media. Social media censorship undermines the formation of connective and/or collective action that relies on spreading and exchanging information broadly (Youmans & York, 2012) and with close, trusted allies (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011). Social media censorship aligns with Brehm and Brehm's (1981) understanding that "any event that makes it more difficult for a person to exercise a freedom constitutes a threat to that freedom" (p. 392). Scholars (e.g., Miller, 2022; Zhu & Fu, 2021) have applied reactance theory to the study of backfire effects on social media, where censorship invokes reactance in users, motivating countermeasures. Studies have also examined censorship targeting digital feminist activism and identified various mechanisms utilized to hinder activists' freedom of expression and participation (Shao & He, 2024; Zeng, 2020). Also relevant is that reactance theory provides an approach for scholars to conceptualize feminist activists' reactance as both cognition and affect (see Figure 1). Finally, the framework links reactance to action—to a range of countermeasures aimed at restoring freedom and coping with negative cognition and affect. While past research has drawn on reactance theory to investigate countermeasures (Dal & Nisbet, 2022; Miller, 2022), to our knowledge, this is the first study to apply it to the investigation of censorship in feminist activism in the Chinese context. A key strength is that it can contribute to our understanding of how activists perceive censorship and what countermeasures they develop.
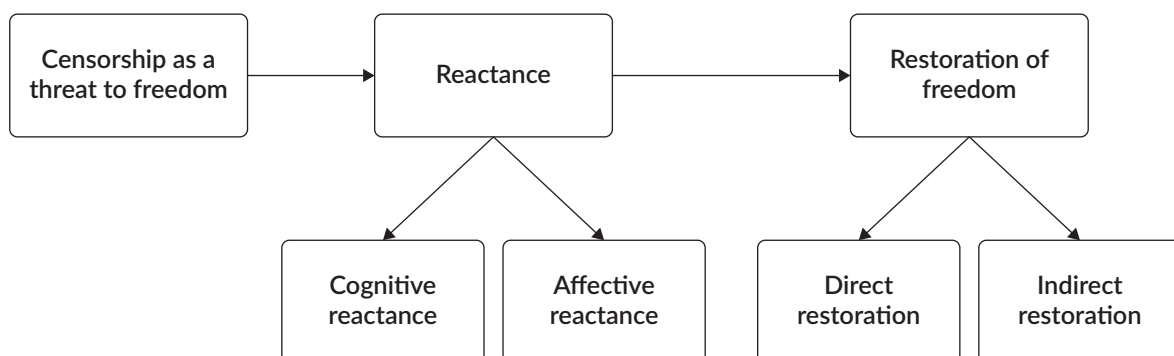
Figure 1. Reactance theory: censorship, reactance, and restoration of freedom. Note: Adapted from Brehm and Brehm (1981) and Dillard and Shen (2005).

Existing studies have drawn on the concept of reactance in exploring individuals' responses to censorship. However, this research missed the opportunity to directly measure the reactance manifested in the negative cognitions and affect of individual users (L. Zhang et al., 2022; Zhu & Fu, 2021). Instead, they infer the existence of reactance from the potential behavioral outcomes motivated by reactance, such as users going against censorship to speak up. For example, Zhu and Fu (2021) investigated how different layers of social media censorship exposure influence users' opinion expressions, including the intention of staying silent or rebelling against it. However, the study does not directly assess the reactance as the bridge between perceiving censorship as a threat and making an effort to regain the freedom threatened, relegating reactance to "a proverbial black box" (Reynolds-Tylus, 2019, p. 3). What constitutes the reactance as the

motivational status that leads to the effort to regain freedom of speech threatened by censorship is still not known.

Reactance theory proposes two modes as central to the restoration of freedom (see Figure 1; Brehm & Brehm, 1981). Direct restoration of freedom refers to direct efforts such as engaging in an admonished behavior or resisting a behavior one is coerced into (Reynolds-Tylus, 2019). Indirect restoration can be achieved "by exercising another freedom that would imply that they continue to have the one that was threatened" (Brehm & Brehm, 1981, p. 116). We investigate not only direct restoration efforts, but also indirect efforts when direct restoration efforts bear a higher risk or are not an option. The theory of digital resilience can expand reactance theory. For example, Roberts (2020) found that censorship could backfire with some feminist activists showing digital resilience by increasing their engagement after encountering censorship. This shows the relevance of understanding digital resilience to censorship as an adaptive capacity that sustains digital feminist activism over time.

3. Methods

After obtaining the Research Ethics Board's approval (Western University, #12108), participant recruitment on Weibo and Zhihu took place between July 1, 2022, and September 3, 2022. Data collection followed purposeful sampling, which is used in social media research to select information-rich cases with desirable characteristics (Hollingshead et al., 2022). Our operational definition of feminist "activists" followed work by Bobel (2007) that questions the idea that the activist identity is linked to a "perfect standard" that "few even self-described activists could satisfy" (p. 156). Following this work, we used the term activist more loosely and recruited individuals who self-identified as activists. Our inclusion criteria were: (a) users actively involved in feminist activism on Weibo or Zhihu; (b) Mandarin- or English-speaking users; and (c) adults (18+). All participants recruited from Weibo were engaged through a feminist non-governmental organization that assisted in disseminating the recruitment material to their follower base. Participants from Zhihu were recruited via direct messaging on the platform. The final sample comprised 19 participants: 17 women and two men. Ten participants were recruited from Weibo and nine from Zhihu. To determine the sample size, we followed the approach proposed by Guest et al. (2020), which is considered a refinement of other approaches to data saturation. Saturation is reached when there is a low proportion of new information being added as evidence during data collection, ranging from >5% new information to no (0%) new information (Guest et al., 2020).

Semi-structured interviews were used for data collection because of their flexibility and unstructured nature. Interviews are well-suited for engaging with participants about their diverse perceptions and opinions of censorship (Cridland et al., 2015). Open-ended interview questions encourage participants to provide rich narratives about sensitive topics such as anti-sexual violence activism and experiences of censorship (Barriball & While, 1994). We also included a question on the concept of positive energy to learn more about how online feminist activists perceive its role in censorship. Interviews lasting from 40 to 90 minutes were conducted through Microsoft Teams. The interviews were recorded to check the accuracy of the automatic transcriptions. Each participant was assigned a unique ID and a pseudonym that they chose. Thirteen participants were compensated ¥25 (~ CA$5.00) for their time and six declined the compensation.

We conducted a qualitative content analysis of the 19 interview transcripts which were coded using the qualitative analysis software NVivo (QSR International, Version 12). A qualitative content analysis is "a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns" (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). Following Elo and Kyngäs (2008), our analysis consisted of three main phases: preparing, organizing, and reporting with the goal of conducting a systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes. In the preparation phase, the first author conducted a close reading of the interview transcripts to get familiar with the data. The organizing phase consisted of deductive coding based on reactance theory and digital resilience (Table 1). While our study draws upon reactance theory and digital resilience, by integrating inductive and deductive coding, we can capture the complexity of the participants' experiences without constraining them within predetermined categories. Intracoder reliability helped assess the consistency of the coding and yielded a rate of 0.71, which falls within an acceptable level (above 0.67; Krippendorff, 2004). The final phase comprised the reporting of the findings.

Table 1. Final coding frame.

Main categories	Sub-categories
Perceptions of censorship	Type of censorship
	Visibility of censorship
Reactance to censorship	Cognitive reactance • Ambiguity • Disagreement with censorship • Unfairness • Believing in a lack of control • Critical questioning of the concept of positive energy
	Affective reactance • Anger • Irritation • Fear • Worry • Powerlessness
Restoration of freedom	Direct restoration • Seeking information that censorship targets • Disseminating information that censorship targets
	Indirect restoration • Reinterpreting positive energy
	Digital resilience

4. Findings

4.1. Perceptions of Censorship

To address RQ1, we examined participants' perceptions toward censorship. We identified two subcategories: type and visibility of censorship. The former is defined as the types of censorship mechanisms enacted by the platform that activists either experienced or observed. The types reported by both Weibo and Zhihu participants included: post removal ($n = 7$, 6 Weibo and 1 Zhihu), keyword filtering ($n = 5$, 2 Weibo and 3 Zhihu), and limiting the visibility of content through algorithms ($n = 3$, 2 Weibo and 1 Zhihu). Three types were only reported by Weibo users: blocking hashtags by disabling the indexical function of the hashtag ($n = 3$), account suspension ($n = 3$), and image breaking—the replacing of user uploaded images with a placeholder ($n = 2$). One Weibo participant reported that his account was suspended, and two other Weibo participants described observing the large-scale suspension of other users' accounts during the Xianzi trial in December of 2020 when Zhu Jun was accused of sexual harassment. The trial represents the landmark Chinese #MeToo case and can be considered the equivalent of the Harvey Weinstein case in the US. By contrast, Zhihu users did not report having experienced or observed the suspension of accounts. Post removal and keyword filtering were the most frequent types that participants described across both platforms, yet they reported being most concerned about the possibility of their accounts being suspended. This suggests that there is a hierarchy of concern related to censorship, with participants reporting being the most concerned about their accounts potentially being suspended either temporarily or permanently.

The second category identified was visibility. All 10 participants from Weibo and seven from Zhihu reported having been exposed to targeted censorship, either as something they had experienced directly or had observed. Seven participants ($n = 7$, 3 Weibo and 4 Zhihu) reported they had received a message through the platform, notifying them that a specific post had violated the platform's policy and, therefore, had been deleted. Two participants from Zhihu, Emma (Zhihu10, W, 33) and Paul (Zhihu05, M, 18), reported that their posts had not been deleted, but rather had been algorithmically demoted to reduce the post's exposure. Emma said that it was incredibly frustrating because the platform did not notify her when the algorithm had manipulated the circulation of her post. This has led her to speculate about the reasons behind the algorithmic intervention and to worry about the consequences, such as the impact on her Zhihu Yanzhi, which is the platform's credit score. Zhihu Yanzhi is a credit system based on a user's reputation, content creation, friendly interaction, compliance with laws and policies, and effort in community building (Zhihu, n.d.). A reduced Zhihu Yanzhi can have consequences for losing access to certain actions, such as editing content or receiving priority when reporting issues. It also affects how a user is perceived by others as well as the circulation of messages a user posts.

Participants ($n = 10$, 7 Weibo and 3 Zhihu) reported that censorship was most visible when it was deployed on a large scale, targeting content that their social media connections had posted. Emma described observing what she referred to as an "acute situation," where the platform suddenly erased numerous posts from feminist influencers, targeting feminist activists broadly including posts unrelated to anti-sexual violence or feminist causes. In those cases, the censored content was not simply demoted, but it was permanently removed. These tactics served as a means to frustrate feminist activists and to signal that they could be censored at any time. Participants reported that they became aware of the removal of content because of the after-effects, which included numerous user grievances reflecting discontent with the repressive approach. Activists often

expressed their discontent on social media with the unfair and wide-reaching censorship mechanisms and did not remain silent despite the potential consequences for their accounts.

4.2. Reactance to Censorship

To address RQ2, we examined reactance to censorship, focusing on cognitive and affective reactance. Thirteen participants ($n = 13$, 7 Weibo, 6 Zhihu) described cognitive reactance, which we define as encompassing both evaluative and behavioral-intent components. Cognitive reactance did not only arise due to the censoring of anti-sexual violence content but also from how platforms deployed censorship. We found evidence of five types of cognitive reactance: ambiguity, disagreement, unfairness, believing in a lack of control, and critical questioning of the concept of positive energy.

Participants ($n = 12$, 7 Weibo, 5 Zhihu) described the ambiguity surrounding the platforms' censorship criteria. We found no differences between Weibo and Zhihu users in terms of how they described their negative cognitions concerning the ambiguous censorship criteria. For example, Xiao Juan (Weibo01, W, 25), who had actively engaged in anti-sexual violence activism since #MeToo launched in China in 2017, expressed confusion and disagreement with the double standards often observed with how platforms applied censorship criteria. Xiao Juan explained how the platform consistently censored words like rape, but allowed content that directly targeted feminist activists: "Some verbally abusive remarks targeting women and victims can survive censorship. However, if you share an experience of sexual violence with explicit words like "rape" in the text, it may not be able to pass it."

Participants also discussed how they learned from past experiences that the censorship criteria were unclear and illogical, which could help them adapt to avoid being censored. Xiao Juan evaluated the criteria as ridiculous and absurd:

> It is ridiculous and absurd because while the term "qiang jian" [rape] is forbidden, yet its acronym is allowed, even though the alternative is not unknown, and everybody knows what it refers to....It's more like a reminder of the existence of censorship to users who want to post content related to sexual violence.

Moreover, participants questioned censorship due to the perceived unfairness of ambiguous criteria. Yummy (Zhihu07, W, 22) had published a post on Zhihu during the #MeToo movement inviting users who had experienced sexual violence to join a WeChat social support group. Following the post, she faced "unreasonable" and "unfair" censorship that consistently targeted her posts related to sexual harassment: "Inappropriate posts made by male users or content promoting patriarchy, such as slut-shaming comments, are not always censored, yet posts that challenged or refuted those comments would be censored because of them 'inciting gender antagonism.'"

Past research has already described how the state has hijacked the positive energy motto as a control mechanism (P. Yang & Tang, 2018). Ten participants in our study (7 Weibo, 3 Zhihu) reported negative cognitions around the state's use of positive energy as a soft tool to justify their deployment of censorship. Participants believed that the positive energy concept was misappropriated as an ideological tool to control contentious discourses in public spaces. Instead of uncritically endorsing the concept, participants

questioned its use as a tool for censorship that threatens their engagement in digital activism. As Yilan (Weibo06, M, 29) stated: "I was disenchanted by this term years ago. Why are those misconducts not counted as negative, but speaking out against them is seen negatively? It does not make sense."

Participants also articulated believing that they lacked control when using social media, which was often as a result of the unpredictability of censorship measures. Participants emphasized that both information flows and account security were beyond their control. For example, Yingying (Weibo09, W, 23) noted that the platform could remove trending topics "at any time." Yifan (Weibo05, W, 35) similarly emphasized the unpredictability surrounding potential account deletion or suspension, noting that bloggers' accounts could be abruptly terminated ("炸号") without warning. Overall, we identified five dimensions of cognitive reactance which ranged from disagreement with the censorship mechanisms to perceptions of their unfairness.

When looking at affective reactance, we found that anger was the most reported affective reactance: two participants (Weibo) expressed anger toward censorship. One participant, Zhaozhao (Weibo04, W, 25), reported having used Weibo for 10 years, starting when she was 12 years old. She became involved in activism against sexual violence after the emergence of the global #MeToo movement. Despite being familiar with Weibo's policies, Zhaozhao was still enraged by the pervasiveness of censorship and the ambiguity surrounding its implementation:

> I once posted something in the form of a poem, and the content was not explicit, yet it was still removed. This made me furious, and it was then that I realized that even mentioning anti-sexual violence was considered taboo, even if it was in the form of a subtle poem.

Zhaozhao described how anger "fueled" her intention to remain engaged with the movement. She stated: "Censorship does not discourage me from following and participating in relevant discussions. If anything, it fuels my desire to express myself even more fiercely due to the anger towards this restricted space."

Although anger was identified as the primary affective reactance to censorship, participants showed a broader emotional range. In addition to anger, they described irritation, fear, worry, and a deep sense of powerlessness when encountering censorship. Ceci (Weibo07, W, 23) recounted instances of censorship targeting images with anti-sexual violence content and these images being substituted by the platform for alternate images. She became aware of this practice because of scattered discussions regarding the censored images within her network. Ceci expressed her irritation, stating: "It can be quite exasperating, as you are aware that something is happening, but you are denied access to the details and reasons. This made me determined to uncover what was concealed."

These more nuanced responses reflect a complex affective component shaped by censorship and platform governance. For instance, Yingying (Weibo09, W, 23) reported feeling powerless when watching feminist-activism hashtags being removed from the trending list. We found evidence that anger was linked to activists' resolution to counter censorship and restore freedom, whereas emotions such as fear or powerlessness attenuated rather than intensified reactance motivation, resulting in more cautious and restrained expressions among participants. Thus, not all affective reactance has the same effect on long-term activism.

4.3. Direct and Indirect Restoration of Freedom

To address RQ3, we examined the direct and indirect restoration of freedom that participants engaged in and how they developed digital resilience. Two types of direct restoration of freedom were identified: seeking and disseminating censored information. Common strategies used to seek censored information were using VPNs and conducting keyword searches on different platforms. Participants reported using VPNs—which they described as "climbing over the wall"—as particularly helpful and effective in accessing blocked sites like X and Facebook. This strategy did not directly circumvent censorship on Weibo or Zhihu but rather allowed participants to go elsewhere—an adaptive means to meet their information needs.

We found that participants used creative strategies as a direct restoration of freedom with the aim of disseminating anti-sexual violence-related information. For example, participants reported "hijacking" trending hashtags, desensitizing posts by replacing terms like "rape" with its acronym "qj," and using other genres and forms of expression, like a poem, to convey euphemistically or sarcastically their message and evade being detected by automatic keyword filters. In addition, participants reported that under-the-radar communication was also an effective strategy for the direct restoration of freedom; they often disseminated anti-sexual violence information via their social media connections despite the limited reach of this approach. For example, Yilan (Weibo06, M, 29), a man in his late twenties, often archived news articles from blocked websites and then forwarded screenshots to his close personal circle via Weibo or WeChat messaging as well as other private channels. We found that participants' dissemination of anti-sexual violence-related information was contingent upon the features of the specific platform. Participants reported that hijacking "safe" hashtags was easy on Weibo but was not possible on Zhihu because hashtags are not a built-in feature.

We also identified one type of indirect restoration of freedom. Four participants (2 Weibo and 2 Zhihu) reported indirectly restoring their freedom by reinterpreting the concept of positive energy on their own terms. One example is how Paul (Zhihu05, M, 18) reinterpreted the positive energy concept and used it to amplify narratives of sexual violence rather than silencing and censoring them. On Zhihu, Paul was able to connect with survivors of sexual violence and serve as a witness to their experiences. After obtaining their consent, Paul, together with a group of friends, utilized the shared narratives from the survivors and organized an offline exhibition to raise public awareness regarding the pervasiveness of sexual violence in China. Paul developed his own way, a survivor-centered perspective, to interpret and exercise positive energy:

> When reaching out to survivors, I often check every word I use, and I am mindful of the tone, avoiding a biased perspective as someone who has not experienced sexual violence….To me as a young man, being mindful about the vulnerability of this group and showing a caring attitude is what I think means to embody positive energy.

We also observed digital resilience in the way participants transformed the official discourse of "positive energy" into a tool that supports them to continue their activist practices. Similar to how Paul reinterpreted the "positive energy" slogan—originally intended to constrain mobilization—into a survivor-centered perspective within his activism, Ceci shared that she reinterpreted the positive energy term to align with her activism goals:

According to the propaganda, whatever you do must align with mainstream expectations and government policies, supposedly as a way to promote "positive energy" [弘扬正能量] But I don't think this has anything to do with "positive energy" at all. If we really have to label things in terms of so-called positive and negative energy in this world…engaging in a discussion of emerging sexual violence cases will increase the visibility of the issue and this is positive. Movements like #MeToo are positive. Although it may only bring change on an individual level, this cumulative process can bring change to society in the future.

Ceci's perspective showed that rather than adhering to the perspective of positive energy the authorities have widely promoted, the participants reinterpreted the concept to fit their own goals. By transforming the "positive energy" slogan from a top-down censorship mechanism into a motivator for activism, the activists adapted to this type of censorship. In this way, "positive energy" was reinvented as a strategy to continue and legitimize their anti-sexual violence activism. Thus, it became a driver for mobilization and a means of indirect restoration of freedom.

5. Discussion

The present study is the first to investigate, through 19 in-depth interviews, the censorship experiences of activists engaged in digital activism against sexual violence and their cognitive and affective reactance. The understanding of how affective and cognitive reactance motivate activists to restore their freedom and develop digital resilience is important for sustaining long-term activism in tightly censored digital environments. A key contribution of the present study consists of applying Dillard and Shen's (2005) reactance theory to the unique context of feminist activism in censored environments. Our findings suggest that reactance operates as a key psychological mechanism underlying participants' behavioral responses to censorship. Cognitive and affective reactance, manifested through negative cognitions and emotional anger, motivated individuals to restore their perceived freedom by continuing engagement and developing creative strategies to circumvent censorship. This process demonstrates how reactance translates into agency and resilience within constrained online environments. These findings resonate with the strategies employed across different activist communities in China, such as queer, environmental, and labour groups. Feminist activism navigates the same tightly controlled digital environment as other activist groups, but also contends with gender-specific pressures that shape how feminist actors respond. By placing feminist digital resilience within this wider activist landscape, we can better see both the structural constraints shared across movements and the distinct strategies feminists develop in response.

When addressing RQ1, a new finding is the hierarchy of concern underlying censorship mechanisms. Participants were most worried about the platform suspending their account for an unknown timeframe or indefinitely, as this would disconnect them from their online activist networks. The concern of potentially being suspended functions as an effective censorship mechanism because it leads to activists constantly monitoring and adjusting their engagement to be below an imagined threshold that could trigger sanctions. This process suggests that, rather than simply conforming to censorship, activists appear to have learned from past experiences, a key aspect of the adaptive capacities that define digital resilience (Tomkova, 2020). This leads them to explore alternative ways to share and access information related to anti-sexual violence activism.

In relation to RQ2, we found that participants' cognitive reactance primarily resulted from how the platforms enforced censorship. Activists experienced a range of cognitive reactance: ambiguity, disagreement, unfairness, believing in a lack of control, and critical questioning of the concept of positive energy. They often reported disagreeing with censorship criteria that lacked clarity, were unfair, and illogical. We found that participants expressed disagreement with the ambiguity of the criteria that guide the enforcement of censorship. Moreover, participants reported cognitive reactance in the form of their unwillingness to comply with the authorities' misappropriation of the concept of positive energy. This suggests that the pursuit of positivity, achieved by endorsing optimism and discouraging critical discourse whilst censoring and stifling dissenting voices that expose gender injustice, has paradoxically resulted in a backfire effect among feminist activists.

Our study makes a valuable contribution to the literature on the politics of anger in feminist studies. We found that participants reported that their anger motivated them to counter censorship and continue their activism. This finding complicates the view of anger as morally problematic and politically counterproductive (Nussbaum, 2016). As Lorde (1997) noted, when "focused with precision," anger can be "a powerful source of energy serving progress and change" (p. 280). Although anger in the form of affective reactance to censorship may not be as conspicuous as the collective and mediated anger expressed in feminist movements like #MeToo, it nonetheless has the potential to inspire political action aimed at countering censorship that targets activists' work. Moreover, the fact that affective reactance manifested in the feelings of anger and irritation unveils an additional facet of the emotional toll associated with censorship, which often remains hidden but persistently weighs on activists in the Chinese context.

In examining RQ3, we learned that activists engaged in two types of direct means of freedom restoration: They sought and disseminated censored information. We found that keyword searches and the use of VPNs were effective strategies for participants to seek censored information. This is important, as it suggests that feminist activism in China is attuned to the global feminist movement. There exist real risks in employing VPNs, as Chinese authorities have sanctioned users in the past (China Digital Space, n.d.). Nonetheless, activists continue using VPNs to restore their freedom, as they see value in the information they gain from the global feminist movement. This contributes to our understanding of the importance of global interconnectedness within feminist mobilization networks.

This study also highlights digital feminists' digital resilience developed within a censored digital space. Feminist activists transformed the state-promoted discourse of "positive energy" into a tool that reinforced their activist commitments. Rather than allowing this narrative to constrain feminist mobilization, they strategically redefined it to align with their own values and goals, transforming a restrictive ideological framework into a source of empowerment and resilience for their continued digital activism. These insights can inform the analysis of other types of activism—queer, environmental, and civic—as they navigate similar constraints under the broader "positive energy" framework that shapes online regulation.

Our study also makes an important contribution to understanding indirect restoration of freedom as an adaptive capacity developed over time in the context of feminist activism in China. The concept of positive energy as presented by the state stifles activists' engagement with anti-sexual violence activism that exposes deeply rooted gender injustice within society. Instead of passively endorsing the concept, participants provided alternative meanings to the concept to support their participation in anti-sexual

violence activism. While prior studies discussed indirect ways that activists engage in activism under surveillance and censorship, such as mitigating the radicalness of feminist discourses and actions (Y. Sun & Yin, 2022), our study calls attention to activists' indirect efforts at a cognitive level. This involves deconstructing the mainstream ideology that promotes societal harmony at the cost of suppressing public discourse on gender injustice. The study findings underscore the adaptive strategies used by the activists and their resilience within a heavily censored environment where direct countermeasures may entail significant risk. This echoes scholars' calls for greater recognition of emerging feminist practices that move beyond traditional forms of resistance within digital spaces that are often subjected to ambiguous and evolving censorship (Shao & He, 2024). By examining the adaptive strategies feminist activists developed over time, this study also contributes to understanding the digital resilience feminist activists developed over time—a broader capacity to maintain their agency, sustain engagement, and ensure the continuity of feminist activism within a highly restricted and surveilled digital environment.

Also, our investigation on the indirect restoration of freedom through interviews expands existing literature on counter-censorship practices relying mostly on digital trace data. More importantly, the restoration achieved by reinterpreting positive energy raises a significant question for future research: how can feminist activists drive social change without explicitly opposing the "default operating principle" (J. Wang, 2019, p. 18) of harmony that guides internet policy in China?

Our study makes an important contribution to cross-platform comparative research (Matassi & Boczkowski, 2023; Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). First, we found that the high level of ambiguity participants described was not unique to a specific social media platform. This suggests that despite variations across platforms in what criteria are used and how, the high level of ambiguity is part of the authorities' strategy across the entire platform ecosystem in China. Our findings suggest that the authorities use ambiguous censorship criteria as a strategic tool that offers flexibility in how the platforms implement censorship dynamically. Second, we found that participants developed different countermeasures on each platform that are a result of unique platform features. For example, activists on Weibo often hijacked safe or uncensored hashtags to disseminate anti-sexual violence-related information as a countermeasure, which is not possible on Zhihu. The comparative lens shows the need to look at the range of countermeasures employed and how they link to platform features.

6. Limitations and Future Research

While we identified various censorship mechanisms, we did not systematically examine how different censorship mechanisms are associated with different types of reactance and variations in countermeasures. Future research could examine, via survey research, the nuances of activists' reactance to specific censorship mechanisms and also link reactance types to various restorations of freedom. Second, the process of identifying types of cognitive and affective reactance in the data relied on the subjective judgment of the coder. Because this process is based on the interpretation of the activist responses, it is unclear if participants intended a specific reactance. To address this, future research could incorporate participant coding as an additional layer in the data analysis process to discern their actual intention (Reynolds-Tylus et al., 2021). Third, we focused on feminist activists, but did not measure their degree of commitment. Future research could further examine how degrees of commitment shape digital resilience in terms of types of reactance, strategies of coping, and adaptation. Finally, we limited our study to two social media platforms. Considering China's polymedia environment, future studies could expand our approach to include other

platforms such as Douyin, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat, which are also central to everyday feminist activism, each with distinct demographics, social affordances, and governance mechanisms.

Conflict of Interests
In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Marc Esteve Del Valle (University of Groningen) and Ansgard Heinrich (University of Groningen).

Data Availability
Please contact the corresponding author for anonymized data access.

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