

“Do Not Fight the Swans”: Gender Politics and Moral Norms Across Media

Tonny Krijnen ¹ , Zhen Ye ² , and Qian Huang ³ 

¹ Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

² School of Information and Communication, Meiji University, Japan

³ Research Centre for Media and Journalism Studies, University of Groningen, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Tonny Krijnen (krijnen@eshcc.eur.nl)

Submitted: 26 May 2026 **Published:** 15 July 2026

Issue: This editorial is part of the issue “Gender Politics and Moral Norms Across Media” edited by Tonny Krijnen (Erasmus University Rotterdam), Zhen Ye (Meiji University), and Qian Huang (University of Groningen), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i505>

Abstract

In recent years, we have witnessed a growing body of research focusing on identity politics, public shaming, and social outrage in the contemporary media landscape. Morality is often at the core of these debates. Recent studies show how all media types are rich sources of moral statements, producing an endless stream of moral discourse on all imaginable topics and themes. Yet, how these discourses are shaped in media production and what audiences and societies do with these discourses is not easy to predict. Simultaneously, gender politics are closely involved in these articulations of moral norms. This thematic issue aims to explore the historical trajectory and continuity of the vital role of media in shaping social dynamics and moral norms, particularly through the lens of gender, from a global perspective.

Keywords

cross-medial; gender politics; global perspective; moral norms

We see a park with a pond. Something is happening in the pond: a person is fighting with a black swan. After a few seconds, the presumed attacker's back, marked with large scratches, is shown. The visuals then return to a brief shot of the person and the swan fighting in the pond. Although the video must have been posted with a humorous undertone, the reel is contextualized as “uncivilized behaviour,” accompanied by a warning: “Do not fight the swans!” This short video, found on Douyin, was part of the dataset used in an analysis of platform governance (Ye et al., 2025). Many of the videos in the dataset contained clear moral messages: you should not do this or that, as it is harming others (cf. Rachels & Rachels, 2023). These kinds of regulatory or educational videos circulating on Douyin are often clearly gendered: norms contain a gendered aspect at both the visual and narrative levels. As our expertise varies across media—two of us focus on digital (social) media

while the third focuses on television—and across regions (East Asia and Northern Europe, in particular), we were surprised at how similar the messages on norm violations and gender actually were. More importantly, we see how these messages, conveying a moral undertone of what should and should not be done, circulate widely across different media spheres. This thematic issue is the result of these hunches and questions which arose from an analysis of our previous project (see Ye et al., 2025).

In recent years, we have witnessed a growing body of research focusing on identity politics, public shaming, and social outrage in the contemporary media landscape. Morality is often at the core of these debates. At times, societies are gripped by moral panics (Cohen, 1972/2011) and attribute the cause of such feelings of panic to certain media products, such as TV dramas, reality TV, or advertising (cf. Critcher, 2006; Guo, 2017). Nowadays, we also observe similar sentiments of moral panics associated with the rise of social media platforms like TikTok and the widespread use of (generative) AI. Moral panics are particularly interesting to study, as “they reveal a lot about the workings of power, specifically who has the capacity to define a social problem and prescribe appropriate action” (Critcher, 2006, p. 4). This thematic issue is set against this broader context to trace how morality serves as a pathway to understand social problems.

Morality is a complex concept that is used and defined in very different ways. Some narrow it down to certain philosophical conceptualizations, like utilitarianism or universal values, while others seem to use morality to indicate a mere opinion or judgment about a situation. Grounding ourselves in Rachels and Rachels’ (2023) conceptualization of the “minimum conception of morality,” we argue for a more precise understanding. Statements or questions that could be deemed moral always contain at least three elements: there is an evaluation of good vs. bad, they are aimed at behaviour, and the stakes for all involved are addressed in some way. All media are rich sources of moral statements, producing an endless stream of moral discourse on all imaginable topics and themes. Yet how these discourses are shaped in media production and what audiences and societies do with these discourses is not easy to predict.

Evidence that these media products contribute to audiences’ moral imagination and reflection in a positive sense is increasing (Bilandzic et al., 2017; Krijnen, 2011; Krijnen & Tan, 2009; Krijnen & Verboord, 2016). Moral messages are sometimes direct, sometimes indirect, and show a rich palette of moral issues and topics. Audiences regularly engage with these messages to think about and to reflect on similar issues in their everyday lives. These opportunities for moral reflection are inherently gendered and that is shown over and over again. TV and advertising narratives stipulate quite clearly that “who has the capacity to demarcate moral issues” is gendered, with women and LGBTQ+ communities being especially vulnerable to moral dilemmas and judgement. On social media platforms, the entanglement of morality with actions of gender-based harassment, status-seeking, and intergroup conflicts (Huang, 2021; Marwick, 2021) often dominates public attention. Moralizing actions are the driving force behind contemporary networked affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015). On the one hand, existing moral norms and standards are often used to legitimize individual online practices and even to mobilize collective actions; on the other hand, state and market actors draw on moral norms to regulate and moderate media content under the pretence of protecting public interests within these digital spaces.

However, the core element embedded within these moral narratives, namely, the “stakes for all,” is at times applicable only to certain social groups, thereby sidelining or alienating the “others. The issue presents contributions on social media, journalism, and television, each with a specific focus on how moral norms and

gender cross paths. Following Critcher's (2006) inquiry into the workings of power, we seek to reveal how power, manifested across different media spheres, constructs and shapes moral discourses of and around gender issues.

This issue resonates with Schöppel's (2026) contribution, that coins the concept of "moralized trigger loops" and argues that digital and alternative media spheres present us with repetitive, emotionally charged cycles in which gender-related questions are amplified across these media spaces. A longitudinal panel study traces German alternative media users' meaning-making about everyday media practices, and how this meaning-making evolves over time. Gender issues remain a core trigger for activation in alternative media's networked spaces, which are interpreted by these users based on their own affective reactions and identifications. The moral outrage and fear towards gender politics are mobilized through normative sentiments circulating in right-wing alternative media spheres, resulting in a recursive layering loop that also unfolds within spiritual, progressive, or Christian reformist contexts. These heterogeneous trajectories of gender debates reveal that polarization cannot be reduced to opposing ideological camps. Alternative media users draw on diverse moral narratives as (re)affirmations of their values.

These insights are enriched by two other contributions. Shuchy and Uddin (2026) further nuance the articulation of gender politics on social media by developing the concept of moralized misogyny to examine how Facebook functions as a form of informal patriarchal governance regulating Bangladeshi women's political visibility. In their analysis, they show how political disagreement is reframed as moral transgression. Women's political participation is recoded as sexual deviance and impurity through visual and textual manipulation that renders delegitimizing attacks credible, humorous, and socially acceptable.

Focusing on discussions revolving around gender on Weibo, Guan and Shang (2026) further investigate platform content governance. Adopting a power-sensitive approach, which enables one to balance the interplay between the production of meaning and the allocation of communication resources, Guan and Shang (2026) examine the construction of "gender antagonism" governance discourse among users, platforms, and the state. Their analysis convincingly shows how gender antagonism is a discursive framework that is utilized by users, platforms, and state authorities. They also point to how the continuous employment of this term, in relation to the emerging crisis in China's population reproduction, obscures discussions of gender inequalities and criticism of gender norms in current society.

The linguistic aspects of moral discourse, and how the use of certain terms and concepts helps articulate power dimensions, are further nuanced by Abe's (2026) contribution. Abe concentrates on the intimate relation between gendered discourses and "danger" in newspaper coverage. Employing a longitudinal analysis, Abe zooms in on the national news coverage of mother-child evacuations during and after the Fukushima disaster in 2011. Presenting evacuation after the disaster as a contested space and an evolving social issue, Abe argues that the mother is constructed as carrying the moral responsibility as caretaker within the household, obscuring the responsibilities of the other parent, especially fathers, and public institutions. As such, this contribution advances our understanding of mainstream narratives on evacuation and gender under risk governance. Moreover, this study also shows that the rather old adage that women are the guardians of morality, especially in relation to care, is still as current as ever.

It is tempting to perceive these discursive praxes as one-sided misogyny. Yet Ge's (2026, p. 1) research on "internalized misogyny among women interacting on digital platforms in the context of the pro-woman discourse" convinces us otherwise. Addressing the puzzling question of how a "pro-woman" space not only fosters solidarity but also functions as a way of policing the boundaries of what "good womanhood" entails, Ge engages young women in China and South Korea in conversation about this topic. These intra-woman dynamics become misogynistic in outcome when they deploy similar patriarchal mechanisms (disciplining the feminine through humiliation, surveillance, and exclusion), regardless of the ostensibly feminist framing of this content in the algorithmic and platform-metric environment. Politics revolving around marriage, heterosexual intimacy, and reproduction formulate a script of refusal that is both internalized and infrastructurally networked. More importantly, intra-group disciplining becomes the dominant mode of feminist sociality in both contexts, not because of individual faith, but because of structural societal pressures that narrow the available forms of feminist expression in public spaces.

The role of algorithms in the formation of normative standards is also addressed by Vanlee and De Baere (2026). Looking into a well-researched area—television representations—Vanlee and De Baere employ a fresh lens to dig deeper into the entry of genAI tools in the creation of televisual entertainment. Employing the walkthrough method, the authors investigate Showrunner—an AI-powered "Netflix"—and demonstrate how it operationalizes normative constructs of how to represent social differences like gender, race, or sexuality. Although Showrunner's neutralization of prompts that suggest sexism, racism, or homophobia is successful, this mechanism also prevents storytelling about social injustices around these topics. Hence, Vanlee and De Baere pose urgent questions about genAI's potential simultaneously to democratize and constrict the "means of representation."

The theme of representation is further developed by Hu and Chen (2026). Hu and Chen dig deeper into Chinese bromance drama productions, a genre often viewed as a censored substitute for the representation of "boys' love." Combining a textual analysis with viewers' perceptions, Hu and Chen show how this genre is not merely a weaker substitute, but that bromance ultimately is a productive genre. The authors show how a sense of atmosphere—created by lighting, set-up, acting, etc.—goes in tandem with viewers' active interpretations. As such, Hu and Chen's contribution sheds fresh light on debates on censorship, queer visibility, and the politics of spectatorship. This study provides a nuanced understanding of the ambiguity of morality, which manifests as a negotiation between desire and discipline, and is productive for a certain audience.

The engagement with audiences' perspectives is further taken up by Clément and Krijnen (2026). These authors engage with *The White Lotus* as a deliberately morally provocative TV series and use it as an opportunity to investigate whether and how audiences engage with the moral narratives it offers. Reddit discussions among audience members were carefully combined with a textual analysis that distilled the moral narratives presented in multiple seasons of the show, showing how moral storylines offered by *The White Lotus* were discussed among audience members. Zooming in on class and gender, Clément and Krijnen show how the most privileged group in society—white, heterosexual, rich males—is not granted any moral consideration by audience members. Empathy seems a prerequisite for moral deliberation.

That empathy is an important motor for moral negotiations is also shown by Heldoorn et al. (2026). These authors zoom in on fellow women's perceptions of contemporary #TradWives content. Although this trend is usually considered a backlash against, and as opposing, feminism, Heldoorn et al. (2026) study the

meaning-making processes of “tradwives” among women of various demographics in the Netherlands. Their analysis shows how Dutch women perform nuanced readings of the “tradwives” content, engage in perspective-taking with creators, and conduct internal discussions between their own gendered norms and values and the ideal of (respect for) pluriformity of (gendered) norms and values. Although the negotiation of media content is not surprising, the fact that some women view certain tradwife lifestyle aspects, within specific premises, as fitting a feminist life is striking.

Taken together, the nine articles collected in this thematic issue illustrate a complex mechanism by which gender becomes an anchor point for the insertion of value-based moral narratives. These moral narratives are heterogeneous in nature, drawing on various external forces, including media storytelling, state regulation, social norms, and in-group dynamics, to sustain the workings of power and (re)affirmation of certain values. Attending to these issues enables feminist scholarship to move beyond denunciation towards diagnosis, as Schöppl (2026) advocates in her article.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

References

- Abe, Y. (2026). Making mothers responsible after Fukushima in Japanese media. *Media and Communication*, 14, Article 12072. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.12072>
- Bilandzic, H., Hastall, M. R., & Sukalla, F. (2017). The morality of television genres: Norm violations and their narrative context in four popular genres of serial fiction. *Journal of Media Ethics*, 32(2), 99–117. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2017.1294488>
- Clément, A., & Krijnen, T. (2026). “Eat the rich”: Moral entanglement of class and gender in *The White Lotus*. *Media and Communication*, 14, Article 12007. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.12007>
- Cohen, S. (2011). *Folk devils and moral panics: The creation of the Mods and Rockers*. Routledge. (Original work published 1972)
- Critcher, C. (Ed.). (2006). *Critical readings: Moral panics and the media*. Open University Press.
- Ge, L. (2026). “In the name of pro-women”: Intra-women surveillance and internalized misogyny in digital East Asia. *Media and Communication*, 14, Article 12136. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.12136>
- Guan, Z., & Shang, Z. (2026). Constructing gender antagonism: Moralised platform governance in China. *Media and Communication*, 14, Article 12064. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.12064>
- Guo, S. (2017). When dating shows encounter state censors: A case study of *If You Are the One*. *Media, Culture & Society*, 39(4), 487–503. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443716648492>
- Heldoorn, P., Hendrix, J., Vandeberg, L., & Daalmans, S. (2026). #TradWives: A qualitative meaning-making study of gendered norms, moral appropriation, and feminism. *Media and Communication*, 14, Article 11927. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.11927>
- Hu, P., & Chen, R. (2026). From brotherhood to homo-desire: The (im)moral production of unfulfilled romance in Chinese bromance. *Media and Communication*, 14, Article 11956. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.11956>
- Huang, Q. (2021). The mediated and mediatised justice-seeking: Chinesedigital vigilantism from 2006 to 2018. *Internet Histories*, 5(3/4), 304–322. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24701475.2021.1919965>
- Krijnen, T. (2011). Engaging the moral imagination by watching television: Different modes of moral reflection. *Participations. International Journal of Audience Research*, 8(2), 52–73.
- Krijnen, T., & Tan, E. S. H. (2009). Reality TV as a moral laboratory: A dramaturgical analysis of *The Golden Cage*. *Communications*, 34(4), 449–472. <https://doi.org/10.1515/COMM.2009.027>

- Krijnen, T., & Verboord, M. (2016). TV genres' moral value: The moral reflection of segmented TV audiences. *The Social Science Journal*, 53(4), 417–426. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2016.04.004>
- Marwick, A. E. (2021). Morally motivated networked harassment as normative reinforcement. *Social Media + Society*, 7(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051211021378>
- Papacharissi, Z. (2015). *Affective publics: Sentiment, technology, and politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Rachels, J., & Rachels, S. (2023). *The elements of moral philosophy* (10th ed.). McGraw Hill.
- Shöppl, K. (2026). Moralized trigger loops of gender politics in alternative media spheres. *Media and Communication*, 14, Article 11971. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.11971>
- Shuchy, F. Z., & Uddin, M. A. (2026). "She's that type anyway": Moralized misogyny and Bangladeshi women's political visibility on Facebook. *Media and Communication*, 14, Article 12017. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.12017>
- Vanlee, F., & De Baere, M. (2026). What if we ran our own show? GenAI and the politics of representation. *Media and Communication*, 14, Article 12267. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.12267>
- Ye, Z., Huang, Q., & Krijnen, T. (2025). Douyin's playful platform governance: Platform's self-regulation and content creators' participatory surveillance. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 28(1), 80–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779241247065>

About the Authors



Tonny Krijnen is an associate professor of media studies at Erasmus University Rotterdam. She has published extensively on television, morality, and gender, most notably the co-authored volume *Gender and Media: Representing, Producing, Consuming* (with Sofie Van Bauwel). Currently, she is the chair of the Popular Culture Working Group at IAMCR.



Zhen Ye is a JSPS postdoc research fellow at the School of Information and Communication, Meiji University. Her research intersects gender and new media technology, platformized cultural production, and digital labour. Her work can be found on the *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, *Convergence*, *Feminist Media Studies*, and *Global Media and China*, among others.



Qian Huang is an assistant professor of digital cultures at University of Groningen. She has published extensively on digital visibility, participatory surveillance, and fandom practices in journal articles and books. Currently, she is an associate editor of two journals: *Creator and Influencer Studies* and *Communication and The Public*.