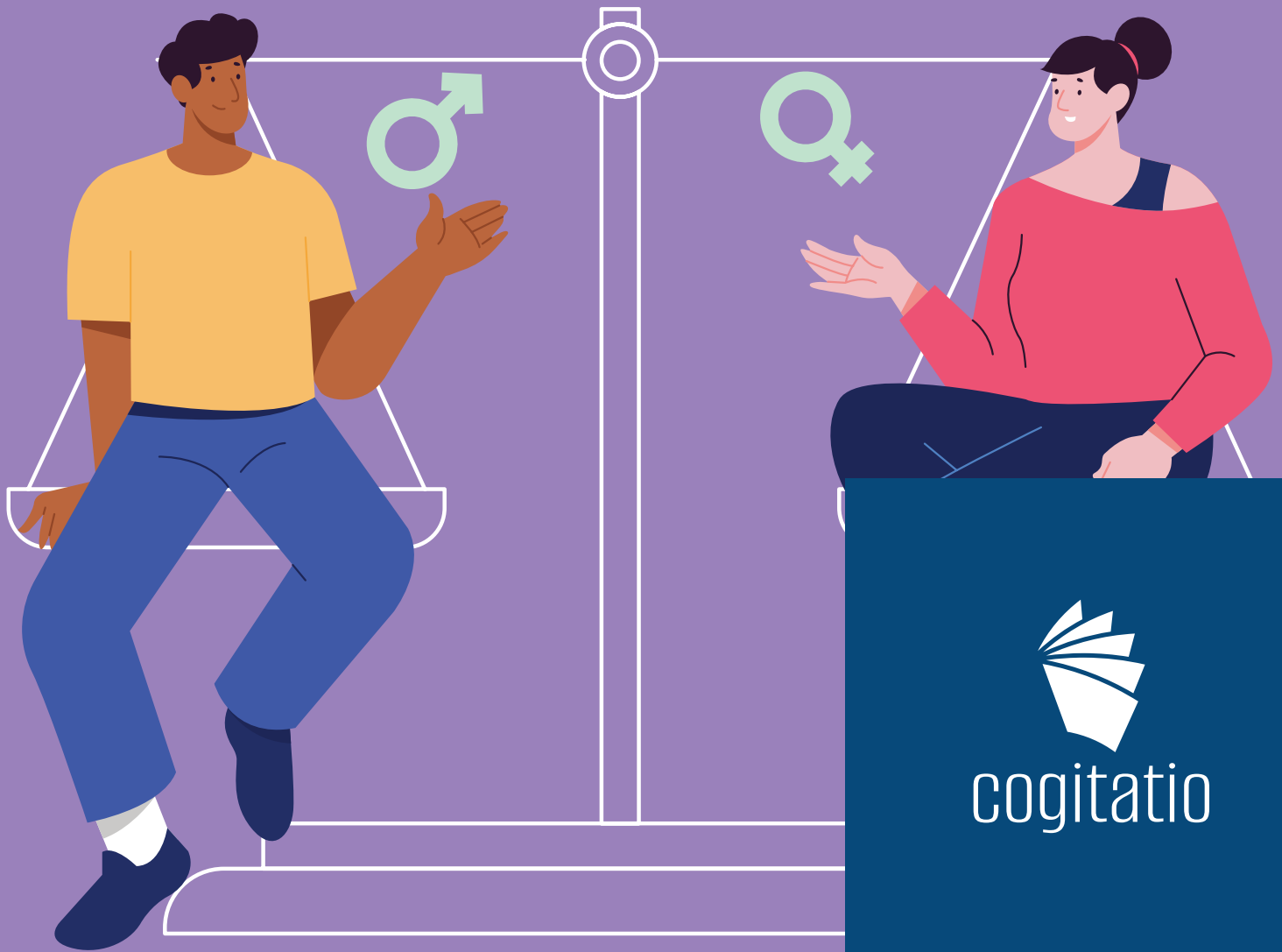




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Academic Editors

Tonny Krijnen (Erasmus University Rotterdam)
Zhen Ye (Meiji University)
Qian Huang (University of Groningen)

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Table of Contents

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

Tonny Krijnen, Zhen Ye, and Qian Huang

Moralized Trigger Loops of Gender Politics in Alternative Media Spheres

Katharina Schöppel

“She’s That Type Anyway”: Moralized Misogyny and Bangladeshi Women’s Political Visibility on Facebook

Farah Zahan Shuchy and Md. Azaher Uddin

Constructing Gender Antagonism: Moralised Platform Governance in China

Zexu Guan and Zheyu Shang

Making Mothers Responsible After Fukushima in Japanese Media

Yasuhito Abe

“In the Name of Pro-Women”: Intra-Women Surveillance and Internalized Misogyny in Digital East Asia

Liang Ge

What If We Ran Our Own Show? GenAI and The Politics of Representation

Florian Vanlee and Mathijs De Baere

From Brotherhood to Homo-Desire: The (Im)Moral Production of Unfulfilled Romance in Chinese Bromance

Pengnan Hu and Rishuai Chen

“Eat the Rich”: Moral Entanglement of Class and Gender in *The White Lotus*

Alba Clément and Tonny Krijnen

#TradWives: A Qualitative Meaning-Making Study of Gendered Norms, Moral Appropriation, and Feminism

Pip Heldoorn, Joël Hendrix, Lisa Vandeberg, and Serena Daalmans

“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)

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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.

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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*.

Moralized Trigger Loops of Gender Politics in Alternative Media Spheres

Katharina Schöppel 

Institute for Media and Communication Studies, University of Mannheim, Germany

Correspondence: Katharina Schöppel (katharina.schoeppl@uni-mannheim.de)

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Abstract

This article explores how gender politics become moralized focal points of conflict within increasingly fragmented, hybrid, and alternative media environments. Drawing on feminist media studies and scholarship on affective polarization, as well as Mau et al.’s notion of trigger points (2023), it introduces the concept of “moralized trigger loops”—repetitive, emotionally charged cycles in which gender-related questions are amplified across digital and alternative media spheres. While earlier research has positioned alternative media primarily as emancipatory counterpublics, recent work shows how new forms of alternative media are actively engaged in the (re)production of anti-feminist, reactionary, and moralized gender discourse. Yet little is known about how users of such outlets themselves negotiate gender issues, how moralization unfolds affectively in their everyday media practices, and how these dynamics evolve over time. Based on a longitudinal qualitative panel study with system-critical alternative media users ($n = 33$) over three years, this article investigates how gender politics emerge as moralized sites of contestation within diverse media repertoires including alternative media. It argues that such processes transform gender-related debates into enduring affective loops that sustain and reshape mediatized publics.

Keywords

affective polarization; alternative media; gender politics; moralization; trigger loops

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, gender politics have become central emotional and moral battlegrounds in public discourse. Debates around feminism, LGBTQIA+ rights, and gender equality repeatedly ignite moral contestation and affective polarization (Iñigo et al., 2024; Lomazzi & Soboleva, 2024; Reinhardt et al., 2023;

Rothermel, 2023; Volk, 2025). This article examines how such issues become moralized triggers within fragmented, hybrid, and polarized media environments (Chadwick, 2017; Van Aelst et al., 2017), focusing on how users of alternative media interpret, reproduce, or resist these moralized narratives in their everyday media practices.

The study explores how gender politics are affectively and morally negotiated among users of alternative media ($n = 33$), a group often characterized by a system-critical stance (Puschmann et al., 2024; Schwarzenegger, 2021, 2023). Building on Mau et al. (2023), these negotiations are conceptualized as “moralized trigger loops”—recursive cycles of moralization that sustain and intensify affective polarization. By examining how these loops unfold within alternative media repertoires, the article contributes to feminist media and communication research by tracing how moral emotions such as anger, irritation, or resentment circulate and accumulate in fragmented affective media spheres (Kay, 2026; Papacharissi, 2014).

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that polarization in contemporary democracies is not merely ideological but deeply affective (Iyengar et al., 2012; Nordbrandt, 2023). Rather than rational disagreement, emotional identification and moral disapproval increasingly divide publics. Feminist and cultural scholars have argued that gender issues are particularly prone to affective polarization, as they intersect with moral and identity-based values (Banet-Weiser & Reinis, 2026; García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023a; Rothermel, 2020). Simultaneously, the media landscape has undergone processes of hybridization and fragmentation (Chadwick, 2017; Heikkilä et al., 2020), in which audiences navigate personalized repertoires shaped by algorithms, ideology, and emotion (Kant, 2020; Schwarzenegger, 2023; Steen-Johnsen et al., 2025; Thorbjørnsrud & Figenschou, 2020).

Within this environment, alternative media occupy an ambivalent position. Once central to progressive counterpublics and feminist activism (Atton, 2002; Fuchs, 2010; Gunnarsson Payne, 2012), they now also host reactionary and anti-feminist actors. A “new type of alternative media” (Müller & Schulz, 2021) has emerged—one that includes manosphere forums, populist YouTube channels, and hybrid online spaces mobilizing affective publics around opposition to feminism and gender equality (García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023a; Kay, 2026; Reinhardt, 2022).

While prior research has mapped anti-feminist networks (Lomazzi & Soboleva, 2024; Reinhardt et al., 2023), explored affective polarization in digital contexts (Nordbrandt, 2023), and traced how gender discourse fuels illiberal and populist politics (Dietz & Roßteutscher, 2024), the audience perspective remains underexplored. Little is known about how alternative media users with system-critical orientations make sense of gender debates and how their emotional and moral negotiations evolve over time. Most existing studies focus on content or discourse analysis (e.g., García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023b; Reinhardt, 2022), without answering how users’ interpretive practices contribute to the persistence of moralized conflicts in hybrid media environments (Chadwick, 2017; Van Aelst et al., 2017).

To address this gap, the study asks how alternative media users affectively and morally negotiate gender politics over time. The article therefore draws on a three-year longitudinal qualitative panel study (2022–2024) with 33 users of system-critical alternative media in German-speaking contexts. This diachronic design captures how moralization, affect, and meaning-making unfold as processes rather than as fixed attitudes. It allows tracing both continuity and transformation: how initial irritations around gendered

topics solidify, fade, or shift toward new moral concerns over time. By focusing on the temporal dynamics of affective polarization, the study conceptualizes “moralized trigger loops” as temporal structures, exploring the repetition and recalibration of moral emotions that perpetuate conflicts surrounding gender beyond specific events.

By tracing these longitudinal negotiations, the article makes three key contributions. First, it brings a feminist perspective to debates on affective polarization, demonstrating how gender operates as a moral and emotional category that shapes societies that recognize and feel increasing levels of societal polarization (Mau et al., 2023). Second, it advances theoretical debates on the hybridization and moralization of media by revealing how alternative and mainstream outlets interact within complex repertoires to co-produce gendered moral conflicts. Third, it proposes the concept of “moralized trigger loops” as a heuristic for analyzing recursive affective dynamics that sustain polarization in digital publics over time. The following sections situate this argument within current scholarship on gender, affect, and media polarization, before outlining the theoretical framework and empirical findings. Together, they demonstrate how gender politics in fragmented media environments become enduring moralized conflicts that both reflect and reproduce affective logics.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gender, Affect, and Polarization

Over the past decade, questions of gender, sexuality, and equality have become deeply intertwined with processes of affective polarization in democratic societies (Iñigo et al., 2024; Lomazzi & Soboleva, 2024; Reinhardt et al., 2023; Rothermel, 2023; Volk, 2025). Political polarization is no longer adequately explained by ideological disagreement or class conflict alone; it has acquired an emotional and moral texture that shapes how citizens perceive “us” and “them.” Affective polarization refers to this process of emotional differentiation and moralized hostility between groups (Iyengar et al., 2012; Nordbrandt, 2023). While early research treated affective polarization primarily as a by-product of partisan sorting, feminist and cultural theorists have highlighted that gender has become one of its most symbolically charged arenas, in which struggles over recognition, morality, and social order converge (Banet-Weiser & Reinis, 2026; Butler, 2024; Dietz & Roßteutscher, 2024; Finlayson, 2023).

Affective polarization manifests through moral emotions—anger, resentment, outrage—that circulate across networked publics and structure how individuals engage with political and social issues (García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023a; Rothermel, 2020). Feminist media scholars argue that gender debates are particularly vulnerable to such affective dynamics because they touch on intimate, identity-defining concerns about sexuality, reproduction, and care (García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023a; Kay, 2026).

Recent studies confirm that attitudes toward gender equality, feminism, and LGBTQIA+ rights now represent an independent ideological dimension of political conflict (Dietz & Roßteutscher, 2024). Anti-gender attitudes form a coherent belief system characterized by moral resentment and the perception that feminist progress constitutes an illegitimate intrusion into traditional social hierarchies. Such findings link gender polarization to what Norris and Inglehart (2019) describe as a “cultural backlash,” where perceived moral threats to identity mobilize defensive emotions and shape partisan affiliation.

2.2. Hybridized Media Environments and Affective Publics

Understanding affective polarization requires attention to the transformation of the media environment itself. Contemporary publics operate within what Chadwick (2017) conceptualizes as a hybrid media system, in which legacy journalism, social platforms, and alternative outlets can interact fluidly (Toivanen et al., 2021; Valaskivi & Robertson, 2022). Yet empirical developments suggest that such hybridization does not unfold uniformly. While some audiences indeed navigate across mainstream and alternative sources, others gravitate toward more internally coherent and ideologically bounded repertoires (Heikkilä et al., 2020). Rather than assuming fluid interactivity as a stable condition, the present study understands hybridization and fragmentation as coexisting tendencies within contemporary information ecologies.

In these environments, audiences assemble personalized repertoires that blend professional and amateur, mainstream and counter-hegemonic sources (Heikkilä et al., 2020). Yet, these repertoires are not only informational but normative and affective. Eldridge (2025), for example, distinguishes between peripheral antagonists and agonists of journalism in a fractured world: While antagonists blur the lines between politics and journalism to promote backlash, fragmentation, and grievances, agonistic actors may also challenge dominant narratives yet articulate more constructive political imaginaries. This distinction underscores ongoing tensions in how we conceptualize counterpublic formations and highlights that not all alternative or critical media practices follow the same logic of escalation.

The result is therefore not merely fragmentation but stratification—different groups access and trust distinct information ecosystems aligned with their values and emotions (Aharoni et al., 2024; Fletcher et al., 2025). Heikkilä et al. (2020), for example, demonstrate how media use in Finland became increasingly stratified between 2007 and 2018: Politically engaged, liberal citizens maintain wide repertoires spanning traditional and digital sources, while disengaged or conservative groups cluster around narrower repertoires and online networks. Importantly, both expansive and clustered repertoires can function as affective confirmation environments. What unites them is less their structural position within a hybrid system than their capacity to resonate with, and reinforce, pre-existing emotional and moral orientations.

This social stratification intersects with affective polarization, as selective exposure fosters emotionally homogeneous publics. Papacharissi (2014) describes such networked spaces as affective publics—collectivities organized through shared feeling rather than shared facts. In affective publics, emotion becomes a connective tissue: It structures participation, identity, and belonging. Within feminist media studies, this perspective reframes digital communication not as rational debate but as affective circulation (García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023a; Rothermel, 2020). Emotions travel through hashtags, memes, comment threads, and alternative media, creating transient communities of outrage or solidarity. As Nordbrandt (2023) notes, social media do not simply cause polarization; rather, polarized individuals use platforms to perform and reinforce emotional identifications. These dynamics provide fertile ground for the moralization of gender debates, where online visibility, affective intensity, and value alignment intertwine—conditions under which moralized trigger loops can emerge and stabilize.

2.3. From Emancipatory to Reactionary Alternative Media

The affective architectures of hybrid media systems are sustained and amplified by particular media actors and infrastructures. Among them, alternative media occupy a central role: They translate diffuse emotions circulating in networked publics into coherent narratives and moral positions. Yet, the meaning of “alternative” itself has shifted—what was once a label for emancipatory counterpublics has, in many contexts, become associated with reactionary and anti-feminist projects (Atton, 2002; Fuchs, 2010; Gunnarsson Payne, 2012). Such outlets embodied ideals of participatory democracy and cultural resistance. However, as digital infrastructures expanded, the label alternative has become politically ambiguous. Today, scholars observe the rise of reactionary and anti-feminist alternative media spheres that appropriate the participatory ethos of earlier counterpublics while advancing illiberal agendas (Banet-Weiser & Kay, 2026; García-Mingo & Díaz Fernández, 2023a; Reinhardt, 2022). Instead of labeling those aggressive, well-resourced formations as counterpublics, Jackson and Kreiss (2023) propose the notion of “defensive publics” to capture actors who frame themselves as marginalized while operating with substantial communicative power.

For instance, García-Mingo and Díaz Fernández (2023b) describe the “Spanish manosphere” as a constellation of interlinked forums, YouTube channels, and Telegram groups where male victimhood and anti-feminist resentment are aestheticized through humor, irony, and “memetic wars.” Similarly, Reinhardt (2022) identifies “discourse coalitions” between radical-right actors and mainstream institutions in Germany, showing that anti-feminism operates as a common denominator that bridges populist counterpublics and conservative mainstream narratives. Banet-Weiser and Kay (2026) conceptualize this phenomenon as a “digital hall of mirrors” in which feminism and reactionary politics reflect and distort one another, producing recursive loops of outrage.

This transformation signifies a broader reconfiguration of what counts as “alternative.” Rather than existing outside power, reactionary alternative media actively participate in shaping cultural hegemony by rearticulating values of authenticity, free speech, and moral truth. They exploit platform logics—visibility, virality, algorithmic reward—to construct affective (counter-)publics centered on moralized anger and resentment (Kay, 2026; Papacharissi, 2014). These spaces not only disseminate anti-feminist content but also cultivate emotional infrastructures that sustain belonging through outrage. Consequently, the study of alternative media must account for both their historical emancipatory legacy and their current entanglement with digital illiberalism. Rather than resolving this debate normatively, the present study approaches alternative media from a bottom-up perspective, examining how participants themselves describe, justify, and morally position the (alternative) media spaces they inhabit. In doing so, the analysis foregrounds the affective and moral dynamics that structure these publics, irrespective of whether they are best described as counter-, defensive, or hybrid formations.

2.4. Gendered Moralization and the Affective Logics of Alternative Media

Across this evolving media landscape, gender issues serve as prime moral triggers. As Banet-Weiser and Kay (2026), as well as Banet-Weiser (2021), argue, digital platforms contribute to transforming feminism into a spectacle of mediated anger—one that is mirrored and inverted by reactionary actors who feed on feminist visibility to generate their own affective economies. This “mirror-world” dynamic creates recursive loops in which feminist and anti-feminist discourses amplify each other, producing what the authors term “vampire

anti-feminism”: a politics that parasitically drains the affective vitality of feminism while reinforcing patriarchal norms (Banet-Weiser & Kay, 2026). Empirical research supports this theoretical claim. Iñigo et al. (2024) show how anti-feminist and anti-LGBTQIA+ discourses circulate among Spanish teenagers through humor, irony, and fear of cancellation, normalizing gendered violence in everyday youth culture. Likewise, García-Mingo and Díaz Fernández (2023a, 2023b) reveal how online misogyny mobilizes affective repertoires of anger and victimhood that migrate from the manosphere into mainstream debates.

Due to their anti-establishment stance and system-critical framing (Holt, 2018; Müller & Schulz, 2021), alternative media are predestined to perpetuate these affective logics, which, however, are double-edged. They offer arenas for moral engagement and identity work, but they also have the potential to lock publics into repetitive cycles of emotional escalation. These cycles, sustained by algorithmic amplification and cultural fatigue, form the empirical and theoretical backdrop for this article’s concept of “moralized trigger loops”—recursive sequences in which moral emotions around gender issues are triggered, circulated, and re-triggered across interconnected media spheres.

3. Theoretical Argument: From Trigger Points to Moralized Trigger Loops

Public debates on gender have become neuralgic points where emotional, moral, and political tensions converge (Banet-Weiser & Reinis, 2026; Butler, 2024; Dietz & Roßteutscher, 2024). To understand how such controversies evolve and persist, this section builds upon Mau et al.’s (2023) concept of trigger points—those contentious aspects within broader societal issues that intensify debate due to their symbolic and emotional weight—and extends it to the notion of “moralized trigger loops.” While Mau et al. (2023) conceptualize trigger points as specific moments where consensus turns into dissensus, this section further argues that in fragmented and hybrid media environments, these triggers rarely remain isolated events. Instead, they are continually and strategically reactivated, circulated, and layered within digital publics, forming recursive affective processes that potentially sustain polarization. Gender, in particular, functions as a paradigmatic site for such dynamics.

3.1. From Trigger Points to Trigger Loops

Mau et al. (2023) developed trigger points as an analytical tool to explain both *why* and *where* consensus collapses into conflict. Their inductive typology distinguishes four typical kinds of trigger:

1. Unequal treatment, which evokes moral outrage over perceived injustices;
2. Violations of normality, where established social norms are perceived as being disrupted;
3. Fears of removing boundaries, reflecting anxieties over the erosion of traditional moral or social limits;
4. Behavioral impositions, referring to perceived restrictions on individual freedom.

These trigger types can also be observed in contemporary debates on gender and sexuality. For instance, right-wing mobilization against drag queen performances is often framed as a response to perceived boundary-pushing and violations of normality (Volk, 2025). However, in the current media landscape, trigger points do not simply appear and fade away. They are continuously revisited, reframed, and re-energized through digital communication. Algorithms favor emotional content; users repeatedly encounter similar narratives across platforms; and alternative media, as “polarization entrepreneurs” (Mau et al., 2023),

deliberately restage and amplify moral conflicts. Through their system-critical stance and anti-establishment framing (Holt, 2018; Müller & Schulz, 2021), alternative media reframe gender equality as moral overreach or ideological imposition, aligning, for instance, with Mau et al.'s categories of *violations of normality* and *behavioral impositions*. This alignment transforms gender politics into recurring “trigger material,” ready to be re-activated whenever outrage potential is needed. To capture this dynamic quality, the concept of *trigger loops* is proposed. Whereas trigger points describe moments of friction, trigger loops emphasize temporality and repetition—the looping of moral emotions, narratives, and media exposure that keeps conflict alive.

3.2. The Loop Machine Metaphor

To explicate this process, the *loop machine* metaphor is instructive. A loop station in music records short sound sequences and plays them back endlessly, allowing multiple tracks to be layered into complex sonic textures. Likewise, in mediatized communication, moral triggers are recorded, layered, and replayed across multiple platforms. Each repetition reinforces emotional intensity and adds new “tracks” of interpretation. (Alternative) media, social media influencers, but also audiences collectively function as loop machines capturing moralized fragments, overlaying them with fresh affect, and re-circulating them into public discourse. Like musicians layering loops, multiple triggers can also be combined to produce rich affective textures. This synthesis turns gender from a single contentious topic into an engine of polarization—a generator of moral energy that can be continuously replayed.

This metaphor illuminates the recursive and temporal nature of “moralized trigger loops.” A single event—say, a feminist campaign, a drag-queen performance, or a political statement on gender-neutral language—acts as an initial trigger. Alternative outlets/actors pick it up, framing it as moral deviation or proof of societal decline (e.g., Volk, 2025). Users respond emotionally, sharing and commenting, which algorithmically amplifies visibility. Mainstream media report on the controversy, further negotiating it as a politicized issue. The cycle may then return to alternative channels with renewed outrage, completing the loop. Over time, such loops potentially produce what Lee and Valenzuela (2024) describe as “self-righteous news circles,” where users gain confidence in their moral correctness regardless of factual accuracy and remain locked within recursive moral universes, reinforcing the perception that the opposing side is not only mistaken but *immoral*. Gender issues, precisely because they intersect with intimacy, identity, and bodily autonomy, become ideal material for such moralization.

4. Methodology

4.1. Qualitative Longitudinal Panel

The methodological framework of this study builds on a qualitative longitudinal panel study on users of alternative media conducted from 2022 to 2024 and comprising three survey rounds. The focus of this study is on how users of system-critical alternative media negotiate gender as a mediatized and moralized issue over time. This approach aligns with a broader epistemological tradition in communication and media studies that treats audiences as *meaning-makers* rather than passive recipients (Edgerly & Vraga, 2020; Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012). By centering on lived experience, the study connects feminist epistemology—particularly notions of *situated knowledge* and *mediated feeling*—with qualitative longitudinal research.

Qualitative longitudinal designs are particularly well suited to explore how affective and moral dynamics evolve rather than simply exist. As Schöppl et al. (2025) note, long-term qualitative engagement enables researchers to trace the continuity and transformation of participants' interpretations, attachments, and distancing processes. In contexts of affective polarization and mediatized moralization, this processual approach enables researchers to capture not only when individuals—and, in this specific scenario, users of alternative media—affectively negotiate gender as a neuralgic point of public discourse (Mau et al., 2023), but also how these emotions sediment and change over time. This epistemological stance treats affect not simply as data but as a constitutive part of meaning-making, echoing feminist media scholarship that sees emotion as an epistemic lens into power relations and identity work (Åhäll, 2018; Lagrange, 2025).

4.2. Panel and Sampling Strategy

The empirical basis of the study is a three-year qualitative longitudinal panel focusing on users of system-critical alternative media in German-speaking countries. The panel comprises 33 participants aged 20 to 52 (19 female, 14 male). While a growing body of research has examined alternative media users as well as predictors of alternative media use (Brems, 2024; de León et al., 2024; Müller & Schulz, 2021; Schwarzenegger, 2021, 2023), it remains difficult to speak of “the typical alternative media user.” This is partly due to the heterogeneous nature of alternative media themselves and the varying conceptualizations employed across studies. Against this background, the aim of the present panel was not to construct a statistically representative sample. Instead, the recruitment strategy sought to reflect a spectrum of ideologically diverse and system-critical positions within alternative media use. Particular attention was paid to including participants with differing political orientations and varying engagements with alternative media outlets and platforms.

The relatively young age structure of the sample reflects the dominant recruitment strategies employed, especially snowball sampling and third-party referrals. Most participants were between 25 and 35 years old. The panel included 33 participants in the first survey round, 32 in the second round, and 27 in the third round. In terms of professional backgrounds and experiences, the sample displays considerable variation. The participants were a mix of students and full-time employees. The latter worked in tourism, journalism, design, mechanics, science, IT, and marketing. Overall, participants tended to have relatively high levels of formal education: At the start of the study, 15 of the 33 participants were studying for a university degree, while several others had already completed higher-level education.

Recruitment combined various online and offline methods, including outreach via alternative social media platforms, postings in relevant online groups, and the distribution of posters and flyers in public spaces. Snowball sampling and referrals from third parties proved most effective. All participants were informed about the study's aims and procedures, and all identifying information has been anonymized.

4.3. Methodological Triangulation

The study employs a methodological triangulation design to capture both routine and reflection in participants' media engagement. Three complementary methods were used during each round: *media diaries* invited participants to document their media activities over one week, also focusing on moments of emotional engagement, irritation, or resonance. Users were invited to fill in PDF documents and share which

offers they had used, when, and how, as well as the topics they had focused on and their thoughts about them. Participants could share links to online articles in the documents. They were also invited to share media content they had consumed directly via email, even between survey rounds, and to share their thoughts on it. This format allowed insights into the mundane rhythms of media use and how certain topics, such as gender, repeatedly emerged as affective triggers (Wagner et al., 2022). Furthermore, a *media repertoire sorting exercise* was integrated into the qualitative interviews to visualize participants' broader media ecosystems, mapping combinations of mainstream, alternative, and social media sources. These cards helped contextualize the diaries by identifying overlaps and gaps within individual repertoires, revealing where affective polarization might take root (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2012). Finally, *guided qualitative interviews* offered a reflective space for participants to articulate how they perceive, evaluate, and emotionally process gender-related debates.

Due to the flexibility of the interview guidelines, there was an opportunity to address current socio-political developments in addition to stable questions on media use, trust in the media, and trust in political institutions. These developments included the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, gender neutrality in the German language, and the Israel–Palestine conflict, among others. Each round included follow-up questions linking back to earlier interviews (for instance, when users deliberately decided to reduce their media use, distanced themselves from certain outlets, etc.), enabling longitudinal comparison and self-reflection.

Across all three rounds, data collection was iterative. Adjustments to the interview protocol reflected emerging insights from earlier phases—a hallmark of qualitative longitudinal design (Schöppl et al., 2025). The first round of interviews took place in the summer and autumn of 2022. The second round was conducted in the summer and autumn of 2023, followed by the third round in the summer and autumn of 2024. All interviews were conducted via Zoom.

4.4. Data Preparation and Analysis

The dataset—comprising approximately 145 hours of audio interview material, 92 media diaries, and 92 sets of repertoire cards—is part of a larger project on users and uses of alternative media and was analyzed using OpenQDA, an open-source software tailored for qualitative data management. Analysis followed a systematic strategy that integrated inductive and deductive category development (Mayring, 2014). This approach enables a comprehensive exploration of the data, allowing themes to emerge naturally while applying established theoretical frameworks to guide the analysis. The analysis began with an open, close reading of the interview transcripts and media diaries, complemented by the media repertoire cards. This initial inductive step served to map participants' salient issue arenas and recurring “trigger material” in their accounts (e.g., gender, climate politics, perceived “wokeness” in journalism). In a subsequent deductive phase, these observations were systematically related to the study's theoretical framework by applying an initial coding scheme derived from the literature. This included, for example, Mau et al.'s (2023) four trigger types, as well as gender-related analytical categories (e.g., gendered stereotypes, gendered discrimination, and different strands of anti-feminist framing such as male-centered anti-feminism, family-centered anti-feminism, anti-genderism, or ethnicized anti-feminism).

Importantly, coding followed an iterative logic: When applying the deductive scheme to the material, categories were repeatedly refined, extended, and, where necessary, adjusted in response to the empirical

accounts. This interplay between deductive structuring and inductive refinement proved particularly productive in the longitudinal design, because participants introduced new topics and references over time that were not always anticipated in the interview guide. The coding process therefore remained open to emergent themes while maintaining a theoretically informed structure.

4.5. Methodological Reflections and Ethical Considerations

Working with politically sensitive topics and participants who often distrusted academia required striking a careful balance between maintaining distance and showing empathy. Reflexivity was crucial, so the interviews were conducted by two interviewers (e.g., a scientific employee and a student assistant) who could then reflect on them together immediately afterwards. This was particularly important for discussions on topics that are negotiated ambivalently in society. Recruitment and retention of *hard-to-reach groups* posed additional challenges (Schöppl & Schwarzenegger, 2025). Many participants were wary of perceived ideological bias in academia, necessitating transparent communication about the project's goals and ethical safeguards. Informed consent was obtained at the beginning of the study, and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. Maintaining participant engagement required flexibility—allowing asynchronous communication and adapting interview schedules to personal circumstances. The funding body also requested several ethical reflections as part of the application process.

5. Findings

Across the three rounds, gender repeatedly surfaced as a neuralgic zone within participants' media repertoires. Rather than appearing as an isolated controversy tied to a single event, gender functioned as a recurring condensation point through which broader concerns about social order, legitimacy, childhood, morality, institutional authority, and belonging were negotiated.

Building on the conceptual discussion of trigger points and temporality, the longitudinal material suggests that these recurring dynamics can be analytically reconstructed along four interrelated processes: *trigger activation*, *media circulation*, *affective resonance*, and *reinforcement through recursion*. These processes are theoretically informed but emerge inductively from the comparison of cases and rounds. They do not unfold in a fixed sequence; rather, they overlap, intensify, stabilize, or shift over time. Importantly, engagement with gender as a trigger was not confined to right-wing alternative media use. The panel reveals multiple pathways: right-wing counterbalancing, progressive activist engagement, reform-oriented Christian negotiation, spiritual reinterpretation, etc. What unites these trajectories is less ideological direction than the mediatized and recursive structure through which gender becomes moralized and repeatedly reactivated.

5.1. Trigger Activation: Gender as a Recurring Moral Fault Line

Trigger activation refers to those moments in which specific events, policies, representations, or institutional practices are experienced as morally salient. Across rounds, such activation often followed identifiable public stimuli, yet what counted as a trigger depended on participants' normative orientations.

In several trajectories, schools and childhood socialization functioned as early sites of activation. For example, Altin (39, mechanic) framed schools in round 1 (2022) as institutions that prematurely exposed children to

debates about sexuality and identity. While distancing himself from explicit hostility, he argued that schools should not “orient” children regarding whether they should find homosexuality normal, emphasizing parental authority and moral autonomy. By round 2 (2023), this concern resurfaced in a more explicitly mediated form. Rather than focusing on schools alone, he described LGBTQIA+ debates as heavily promoted through media, suggesting that public discourse portrayed broad agreement that he did not encounter in everyday conversations. The normative concern remained stable, but the locus of activation shifted.

Legislative developments similarly intensified activation. Otto (21, student in the humanities and social sciences) articulated early skepticism toward feminist politics in round 1 (2022), which became more specific in round 2 (2023) through narratives of male disadvantage and was reactivated in round 3 (2024) following the enactment of the German Self-Determination Act, which allows trans, intersex, and non-binary people to change their legal gender marker and first name(s) through a declaration at the registry office (Federal Ministry of Justice, n.d.). He described contemporary gender debates as continuous “goalpost moving,” suggesting that normative boundaries were repeatedly expanded. Here, trigger activation aligns with Mau et al.’s (2023) categories of boundary removal and perceived unequal treatment.

Other activations moved in a different normative direction. In Maria’s case (24, student in gender and politics), the trigger did not concern moral overreach but perceived exclusion and marginalization. In round 2 (2023), she criticized that queer perspectives received insufficient space in mainstream media and were often inadequately represented. In round 3 (2024), hostile comment sections reacting to a bisexual bachelorette served as renewed activation points. She described being “shocked” that such exclusionary sentiments were still publicly voiced. Here, the trigger concerns unequal recognition and backlash rather than boundary erosion. Similarly, in Astrid’s trajectory (24, teacher trainee), the trigger centered on the exclusion of queer perspectives within the Catholic Church. In round 2 (2023), she framed gender debates as a necessary site of institutional reform, criticizing the Church’s lack of inclusivity while interpreting public discussions on inclusive language as part of a broader responsibility to foster recognition.

Trigger activation also emerged within spiritual reinterpretations. Alexandra (22, jewelry designer), who in round 2 (2023) described herself as part of a spiritual “witch” circle, articulated gender less as a political controversy than as a question of energetic balance. She emphasized that all individuals contain both “male and female energy,” framing gender as a cosmological principle rather than a partisan conflict. In round 3 (2024), this perspective resurfaced in connection with climate-related flooding, which she interpreted symbolically as “female” water energy communicating imbalance. In this trajectory, activation did not arise from legislative change or media controversy but from symbolic events integrated into an existing spiritual worldview. Gender thus became a recurring interpretive resource embedded in cosmology rather than ideology. Across the panel, gender repeatedly operated as a moral fault line. Once articulated, these triggers remained available for renewed activation when new stimuli emerged.

5.2. Media Circulation: Layering Meaning Across Heterogeneous Repertoires

If trigger activation concerns what becomes morally salient, media circulation refers to how these stimuli are framed, amplified, and layered within different media constellations. The panel demonstrates that alternative media use was ideologically heterogeneous and embedded in diverse repertoires.

One recurring pattern involved counterbalancing practices. Participants such as Otto and Jacqueline (35, natural scientist) consulted right-wing alternative outlets alongside mainstream journalism to challenge what they perceived as dominant narratives. In these repertoires, gender debates were reframed as ideological imposition or moral overreach. In contrast, Maria relied on feminist magazines and activist bottom-up media to address what she perceived as insufficient and inadequate representation in mainstream outlets. Here, “alternative media” did not correspond to system-oppositional outlets in the sense described by Müller and Schulz (2021), nor to defensive publics as conceptualized by Jackson and Kreiss (2023). Rather, alternative media were mobilized in a more traditional emancipatory sense, as platforms for marginalized voices and feminist counterpublic articulation.

A similar configuration appeared in Astrid’s case, where reform-oriented religious podcasts advocating for an inclusive and queer-friendly Catholic Church played an important role. These media did not position themselves against democratic institutions or journalism but functioned as emancipatory platforms within religious discourse. At the same time, Astrid did not reject mainstream journalism. Although she noted that mainstream outlets often used gender-inclusive language more consistently than other social actors, she interpreted this not as exaggeration but as a necessary normative impulse. In her repertoire, mainstream and alternative media were not oppositional but complementary in advancing inclusive reform. This constellation underscores the importance of a repertoire perspective: Alternative media engagement does not uniformly imply anti-feminist or anti-systemic orientations but may also reinforce progressive and reformist commitments.

Alexandra drew on spiritual and indigenous sources that reframed gender outside conventional partisan antagonism. These sources functioned as epistemic alternatives to mainstream political discourse, emphasizing harmony, balance, and symbolic interpretation rather than conflict. In her repertoire, media did not primarily circulate outrage but offered cosmological narratives through which gender could be integrated into broader spiritual meaning-making. Alternative media engagement here did not produce counter-hegemonic confrontation but provided interpretive tools for re-symbolizing social tensions.

Platform-centered configurations also shaped circulation dynamics. Across rounds 1 (2022) and 2 (2023), YouTube occupied a central position in Altin’s media repertoire. He referred to narratives encountered there when describing LGBTQIA+ activism as “radically active” and strongly supported by media. While his underlying concern about childhood remained stable, YouTube functioned as a site where such concerns were repeatedly encountered, narrated, and reinforced. While the media repertoires of Otto, Astrid, and Altin remained relatively stable across rounds, Jacqueline and Maria described (alternative) media as becoming less central over time, alongside emerging patterns of news avoidance and fatigue. Across these constellations, media circulation acted as a moral framing infrastructure. Gender-related stimuli were layered with interpretive meaning and rendered reusable across heterogeneous media environments.

5.3. Affective Resonance: Embedding Gender in Moral Worldviews

If media circulation structures interpretation, affective resonance concerns how individuals emotionally engage with these framings. Across ideological positions, gender-related stimuli were rarely processed in a detached manner.

A recurring pattern involved frustration or discomfort regarding perceived boundary shifts. Otto expressed irritation about normative expansion, while Jacqueline described unease with thematic dominance. In contrast, Maria in round 3 (2024) articulated shock and indignation when encountering hostile comment cultures. Stephan-Ludwig (52, lecturer and media professional), in round 2 (2023), characterized certain developments as “overshooting the mark,” reflecting a reflexive but affectively engaged stance.

Resonance could also take non-antagonistic forms. Alexandra emphasized emotional self-regulation and spiritual balance:

But again, it's a personal thing, whether I let myself be triggered by someone calling me he or she. So, if you are at peace with yourself and have healed your emotional wounds, then you don't really care whether someone calls you one thing or another, because you know who you are. (round 2, 2023)

Across trajectories, affective responses personalized the trigger. Gender debates became intertwined with broader concerns about fairness, autonomy, institutional authority, childhood protection, spiritual integrity, or moral responsibility. Importantly, resonance was not always escalating; in some trajectories, emotional engagement cooled into fatigue or reflexive distancing, without fully dissolving the issue's availability for later reactivation.

5.4. Reinforcement and Recursion: From Reappearance to Layered Loops

Reinforcement and recursion refer to the ways in which earlier activations reappear, accumulate layers, and stabilize over time. The longitudinal comparison reveals that gender-related triggers were integrated into evolving narrative structures. In several cases, initial irritation became more specified across rounds. Otto's skepticism in round 1 (2022) was elaborated in round 2 (2023) and reactivated in round 3 (2024) through legislative change. Altin's trajectory across rounds 1 (2022) and 2 (2023) shows a similar pattern: Concerns about childhood remained stable while mediated activism became a renewed source of activation.

Other trajectories reveal recursive stabilization rather than escalation. Maria's critique resurfaced when backlash became visible. Astrid's concern about exclusion within the Church remained a stable reference point across discussions of reform. Alexandra's spiritual articulation in round 2 (2023) reappeared in round 3 (2024) in connection with climate symbolism, demonstrating a different form of recursion. Rather than intensifying antagonism, earlier interpretations were reactivated and extended into new symbolic domains. In her case, looping did not consolidate political grievance but stabilized a spiritual framework through which gender remained meaningful across contexts.

A reflexive dimension also became visible in Stephan-Ludwig's repeated observation that gender is strategically escalated by right-wing alternative media. Here, recursion operates at a second-order level: Not only are triggers reactivated, but awareness of their restaging becomes itself part of the moral narrative.

Across these heterogeneous pathways, moralized trigger loops do not uniformly produce escalation. Over time, affective attention may cool down, be displaced by other issues, or fade into fatigue and distancing, while the underlying interpretive frame remains available and can be reactivated when new stimuli render it salient again. Yet in each case, the trigger becomes embedded as a replayable moral script—available for

renewed mobilization when new events occur. The longitudinal panel thus demonstrates how moralized trigger loops emerge across diverse ideological constellations and media environments, operating through activation, circulation, affective embedding, and recursive layering over time.

6. Discussion

This study set out to explore how gender becomes a moralized focal point of conflict in alternative media environments, not merely as a topic of debate but as a recurring affective formation. Drawing on a three-year qualitative longitudinal panel study of system-critical alternative media users ($n = 33$), it examined how individual negotiations of gender evolve over time within hybrid and fragmented media repertoires (Van Aelst et al., 2017). The findings demonstrate that what initially appears as irritation toward media saturation, moral overreach, or misrepresentation does not simply dissipate. Instead, such irritations are reactivated, reframed, and layered over time, forming what this study conceptualizes as “moralized trigger loops.” These loops describe recursive dynamics in which emotional, moral, and epistemic tensions are replayed and re-anchored under new conditions.

By extending Mau et al.’s (2023) concept of trigger points toward moralized trigger loops, this article contributes an analytical lens that foregrounds temporality and repetition. Whereas trigger points describe moments in which consensus turns into dissensus, trigger loops capture how these moments are medially circulated, affectively embedded, and recursively stabilized. Recursion, however, should not be read as a purely cumulative build-up. Loops may also include phases of cooling, saturation, or displacement, in which moral attention temporarily subsides or is overwritten by other issues, while the underlying interpretive frame remains available for renewed activation. Only by revisiting participants across rounds could it be traced how gender-related concerns were not replaced but layered onto new stimuli, whether legislative changes, comment cultures, religious debates, or platform-centered narratives. In this sense, gender operates less as a discrete policy issue than as a moral metanarrative, a diagnostic framework through which broader anxieties over normality, boundaries, authenticity, and authority are negotiated.

Importantly, the study demonstrates that moralized trigger loops are not confined to right-wing alternative media use. While in some trajectories, such as Otto’s, gender debates reinforced perceptions of marginalization or behavioral imposition through engagement with right-wing alternative outlets, other pathways unfolded within spiritual, progressive, or Christian reformist contexts. These heterogeneous trajectories illustrate that polarization cannot be reduced to opposing ideological camps. Rather, it unfolds as divergent affective economies, distinct ways of converting discomfort, shock, or perceived injustice into meaningful moral narratives.

Alternative media play a pivotal role in this process. Acting as “polarization entrepreneurs” (Mau et al., 2023), they weave together grievances, amplify emotional salience, and provide interpretive templates through which triggers become reusable “trigger material.” In this respect, the findings resonate with Hepp’s (2020) notion of deep mediatization. Emotions are not merely expressed through media but structured by recurring patterns of mediated circulation. Gender becomes a looped resource, repeatedly available for mobilization, reactivation, and moral reaffirmation. This recursive embedding helps explain why certain gendered controversies persist irrespective of policy outcomes. They function as durable affective repertoires rather than solvable disputes.

From a feminist communication perspective, these findings illuminate both the risks and the ambivalences of contemporary media ecologies. On the one hand, moralized trigger loops can entrench affective polarization by stabilizing narratives of crisis and moral decline, thereby inhibiting dialogic engagement. On the other hand, they reveal underlying desires for coherence, recognition, and belonging, even within reactionary or system-critical frames. Attending to these affective undercurrents enables feminist scholarship to move beyond denunciation toward diagnosis. It becomes possible to understand not only what positions individuals adopt regarding gender, but how these positions are emotionally sustained and temporally reproduced in everyday sense-making practices.

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the sample is comparatively young and highly educated, a consequence of recruitment challenges and reliance on snowball sampling and third-party contacts. The low response rate and the anti-system stance of some alternative media users may have limited participation, particularly among more radical actors. Moreover, conducting repeated interviews online (e.g., via video calls) likely facilitated participation for some but may also have posed barriers for others, including older users, and may have affected rapport and depth when discussing sensitive issues. Second, the category of “alternative media user” remains conceptually fluid and context-dependent. Rather than imposing a fixed definition, the study adopted a bottom-up approach; however, “alternative media” is relational and may vary across socio-political and geographic contexts. The findings therefore reflect a German-speaking media environment and should be interpreted with this contextual specificity in mind. Third, longitudinal qualitative research raises particular ethical and relational challenges. Repeated long interviews can foster trust and relational closeness, which is analytically valuable but also requires careful reflexivity and ethical vigilance. These broader methodological and ethical issues are discussed in more detail in separate methodological reflections emerging from this research context.

At the same time, the exploratory and iterative character of the longitudinal and bottom-up research design constitutes its central contribution. By foregrounding recursion, layering, and temporal persistence, moralized trigger loops offer a way of conceptualizing polarization not merely as ideological distance but as an affectively structured and medially sustained process. The longitudinal design was indispensable in revealing how triggers sediment into durable moral repertoires or, alternatively, fade into disengagement. Therefore, trigger loops should be understood as an analytical heuristic, rather than a finalized theory. They provide a framework that invites further empirical testing, theoretical refinement, and methodological innovation.

Finally, the moralization of gender observed here reflects a broader cultural condition. In societies marked by information abundance and epistemic fragmentation (Bartsch et al., 2024; Neuberger et al., 2023), feeling right increasingly substitutes for being right. Moralized trigger loops may thus function both as a symptom and as a structure of contemporary hyperpolitics (Mau et al., 2023), transforming fleeting emotional reactions into durable moral worlds. Yet even within these recursive dynamics lies ambivalence. Repetition can harden divisions, but it may also invite reflection and recognition. Understanding these loops, rather than dismissing them, is therefore essential for grasping how moral meaning is produced, sustained, and potentially transformed in mediatized societies. Ultimately, the temporal perspective also speaks to a broader “so what.” If trigger points mark moments of friction, longitudinal research can illuminate what happens after activation: where escalation occurs, where loops stabilize, and where disengagement or reorientation become possible. This matters not only analytically but also societally, because identifying such turning points may help locate potential interventions.

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About the Author



Katharina Schöppl is a research assistant at the Institute for Media and Communication Studies at the University of Mannheim and a PhD candidate at the Centre for Media, Communication, and Information Research (ZeMKI) at the University of Bremen. Her research interests include alternative media and the transformation of counterpublic spheres, science communication, gender studies, and visual communication.

“She’s That Type Anyway”: Moralized Misogyny and Bangladeshi Women’s Political Visibility on Facebook

Farah Zahan Shuchy¹  and Md. Azaher Uddin² 

¹ Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

² Department of Computer Science and Engineering, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Correspondence: Farah Zahan Shuchy (s-13th-2018524666@mcj.du.ac.bd)

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Abstract

We develop “moralized misogyny” as an analytic concept for examining how Meta’s Facebook functions as a form of informal patriarchal governance regulating Bangladeshi women’s political visibility. Drawing on theories of misogyny, morally motivated networked harassment, and digital vigilantism, we argue that women’s political engagement is disciplined and exposure enforces dominant moral norms. Integrating feminist and multimodal approaches to critical discourse analysis of purposively sampled Facebook items, we show how political disagreement is reframed as moral transgression. Women’s participation is recoded as sexual deviance and impurity through visual and textual manipulation that render delegitimizing attacks credible, humorous, and socially acceptable. Whether audiences believe these artifacts is often secondary; their circulation enables crowd-led vigilante punishment framed as moral defense. This dynamic can constitute a form of structural equality harm that makes women’s political citizenship conditional on compliance with patriarchal norms. We recommend context-specific moderation and policy responses that recognize such attacks as a barrier to women’s political participation.

Keywords

Bangladesh; digital vigilantism; Facebook; online misogyny; patriarchy; women in politics

1. Introduction

Bangladesh’s online spaces have become key sites where women’s visibility triggers reputational punishment rather than democratic debate. This article examines how gendered attacks operate as a form of “informal patriarchal governance”—crowd-enforced policing of gender norms—regulating women’s political participation, while focusing on Bangladesh’s dominant platform, Meta’s Facebook. Moral vocabularies,

visual manipulation, and crowd participation converge to discipline *politically visible women*—politicians, activists, student leaders, and journalists—by conditioning legitimacy on compliance with gendered norms.

We operationalize “moralized misogyny” as attacks that *explicitly* invoke codes of conduct to justify abuse. We use “morality” descriptively, referring to group-endorsed norms grounded in purity, loyalty, and obedience (Dahl, 2023). This system disciplines women through harassment, silencing, and reputational sanctions. Online misogyny functions as an exclusionary “GTFO” (“Get The F*** Out”) signal, telling women they are unwelcome in digital spaces (Jane, 2017). On Facebook, moral norms are weaponized to delegitimize authority by casting women as “immoral” or “incompetent,” capitalizing on resonant tropes of sexual propriety to restrict autonomy (Morgenroth et al., 2025; Sakki & Martikainen, 2022).

Despite expanding scholarship on online harms, Bangladesh remains a critical, underexamined case of how misogyny, vigilantism, and morality converge, particularly following the shift of the July–August 2024 mass uprising—sparked by a restored public-job quota and state repression, culminating in the end of 15 years of Awami League-led government rule. An earlier assessment about Bangladesh established a baseline for digital aggression (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2021), but violence against women rose post-uprising, with many facing online harassment (UN Women, 2025). This escalation has served a disciplinary function, compelling female leaders to limit involvement and some to withdraw entirely amid reported mob violence and increasing barriers for women (“Efforts to establish,” 2025).

The potential of this patriarchal governance became visible in the December 2025 death of a National Citizen Party leader found hanging in Dhaka. Although police investigations remain ongoing, colleagues linked her death to sustained cyberbullying and rape threats after a political confrontation (“NCP leader’s body,” 2025). Whether ruled suicide or murder, both her death and the discourse around it illuminate the extreme endpoint of online gendered violence in Bangladesh. For women in politics, the online sphere is not merely a site of debate but a domain of patriarchal governance where visibility can precipitate organized, life-threatening punishment.

While policy reports have begun to highlight AI-driven harms worldwide, empirical research remains scarce regarding how the continuum of visual manipulation—from deepfakes (realistic, yet manipulative AI-generated videos/images/audios) to cheapfakes (simplistic decontextualization/edits)—is weaponized, especially in the Global South. These visuals are woven into everyday political discourse to actively punish and structurally exclude women from public life (Gehrke & Amit-Danhi, 2025).

Earlier work examined activists’ experiences of gendered disinformation and harassment, and the resilience strategies they adopted in response (Shuchy & Uddin, 2026). We now focus specifically on how Facebook content targets politically visible women and ask:

RQ: How do Facebook’s moralized discourses construct women’s visibility as transgressive and legitimize gendered harassment?

We argue that by embedding misogynistic degradation within familiar aesthetics and humor, visuals and discourses render harassment ordinary, shareable, and socially defensible. We identify three dominant mechanisms through which harassment operates. First, women’s political speech is consistently sexualized,

reframing visibility as transgression. Second, this reframing is operationalized through “moral evidence-making”—turning insinuation into apparent proof—where news-mimic photocards and AI-generated image-based sexual abuse provide “credibility scaffolding”—visual packaging that simulates authority—to justify harassment. Finally, infrastructures of vigilantism, where users participate in “punishment” to signal their own moral alignment, effectively render women’s citizenship conditional.

2. Morality, Gender, and South Asian Politics

Women’s digital disciplining is embedded in a historically entrenched moral–political order in which gendered control continues to shape contemporary online harassment. Social hierarchy is sustained through a “gendered social order,” where customs and laws discipline women through sanctions and suppressed rights (Kar & Tiwari, 2020). Bangladesh’s fundamentalist forces have long mobilized moral authority—most visibly through *fatwas*, or religious edicts/legal opinions—to subordinate women who pursue autonomy, casting independence as irreligious. Women are socialized as mothers, wives, and workers under others’ authority, making participation in competitive male-dominated political space culturally transgressive.

Simultaneously, morality operates through intersectional tensions: Patriarchal codes sustain stratification, yet women negotiate *and* challenge religious-nationalist formations through “expansion and adjustment” (Bacchetta, 1999; Kar & Tiwari, 2020). This contradiction is especially pronounced in postcolonial contexts, where women may be mobilized electorally to serve male interests even as their independent political participation remains limited when it threatens male authority (Prillaman, 2023).

Historically, socio-legal systems have produced a binary in which “respectable” femininity is confined to the domestic sphere while public visibility is imbued with suspicion (Kar & Tiwari, 2020). Parliamentary politics is thus coded as a masculine domain in which women are actively constructed as “out of place” and face heightened scrutiny (Jakimow, 2023).

Kandiyoti’s (1988) patriarchal bargain helps explain this punitive logic: Under classic patriarchy, women secure protection in exchange for submissiveness and propriety. Political visibility breaches that bargain, and digital vigilantism (digilantism)—crowd-enabled punitive exposure—can emerge as an extra-legal, mediated, and coordinated form of retaliation whose point of departure is moral outrage, allowing patriarchal correction to be enacted through networked exposure and punishment (Trottier, 2017).

In Asian politics, morality is also political currency. Women often cultivate “moral capital,” grounded in virtue and dynastic legacy, to claim legitimacy (Derichs et al., 2006). When legitimacy depends on moral standing rather than competence, women become uniquely vulnerable to virtue-based attacks. Moralized harassment therefore functions strategically to strip women of the very capital required for political viability. It is especially significant in Bangladesh, where women hold only around 16% of parliamentary representation, largely through quotas, and only about 2.3% were elected through general seats in 2026.

Furthermore, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2025) notes that 76% of women parliamentarians experience psychological violence, including moral policing, and many report online gendered violence, i.e., AI-generated fabrications, used as “proof” of moral transgression. Manne (2018) bridges social order and digital abuse by theorizing misogyny not as individual hatred but as the system that “polices and enforces” patriarchal norms:

When women enter political spaces, they are perceived as illicitly taking status that “belongs to men.” Manne’s (2018) distinction between “human beings” and “human givers” is central: Men are positioned as entitled to exist and take, while women are obligated to give attention, bodies, care, and deference. In South Asia, this logic is mediated through a moral economy of purity. So, accusations of transactional sex, i.e., *quid pro quo*, recode women’s political ambition as impropriety. UN Women (2023) found that misogyny-related search queries in Bangladesh were disproportionately male-associated and youth-driven, though such searches are not direct evidence of misogynistic behavior; its separate social media analysis showed how online attacks invoked patriarchal and religious norms to police women’s modesty, sexuality, and public expression.

These dynamics operate through affective-discursive mechanisms that construct women not as opponents but as immoral and inferior (Sakki & Martikainen, 2022). Women’s bodies are disproportionately moralized, with autonomy scrutinized through purity, shame, and harm in ways not usually applied to men (Morgenroth et al., 2025). Such attacks weaponize language and sexualized stigma to erode authority, while broader “objective violence” normalizes women as secondary beings and aligns with right-wing populist “anti-gender” rhetoric (Graff & Korolczuk, 2022).

From a democratic perspective, this violence functions as a “price of participation” that preserves traditional gender roles by making visibility costly for women (Barker & Jurasz, 2019). Gehrke and Amit-Danhi’s (2025) “triangle of violence” conceptualizes gendered disinformation—malicious falsehoods anchored in stereotypes—as a triadic relation among creators, targets, and audiences, where manipulated content damages reputation and mobilizes hostility. It aligns with arguments that violence against women in politics is a distinct exclusionary phenomenon (Krook, 2020, Chapter 16) and gendered disinformation cannot be reduced to generic disinformation, as doing so obscures its specific harms (Gehrke & Amit-Danhi, 2025; Sobieraj, 2020). Their effects extend beyond immediate harm, often leading women to self-modify their political expression, limit participation, retreat from online visibility, and sometimes exit political roles entirely (Koch et al., 2025). In Bangladesh, such attacks can encourage women’s self-censorship, selective visibility, and withdrawal from political participation (Shuchy & Uddin, 2026).

Furthermore, public discourse can overlook how disinformation weaponizes sexualized and manipulated visuals, including pornified deepfakes, to discipline politically visible women and erode their legitimacy (Shuchy & Uddin, 2026). Advanced technology is not always required: “Cheapfakes” are often perceived as more credible than complex generations, enabling grassroots moral enforcement (Hameleers, 2024). The format—memes, photocards, and humor—can trivialize harassment. When hate is packaged as “content,” the psychological barrier to participation lowers (Phillips, 2015). Visual news-mimic formats convert misogyny into “playful” content (Ledin & Machin, 2018), diffusing accountability and encouraging mass participation.

Ultimately, this ecosystem enables morally motivated networked harassment (MMNH), where ordinary users participate because accusations of norm violation are framed as moral grievances (e.g., betrayal of faith or nation; Marwick, 2021). Amplified by partisan mobilization (Huang, 2023; Trottier, 2017), these identity-based vectors utilize diverse narratives to function not just as disinformation, but as a durable mechanism of political discipline.

3. Theoretical Framework

We integrate MMNH (Marwick, 2021) and digilantism to explain how gendered political targeting operates as informal patriarchal governance. MMNH explains *why* ordinary users participate: Harassment becomes morally legitimate when accusations are framed as violations of shared norms. Digilantism explains *how* such participation becomes punitive: While resembling cyber-bullying in its persecutory effects, it is framed through a *moral* compass—often with nationalist, misogynist, or exclusionary tendencies—making exposure and circulation appear as justified rather than abusive (Huang, 2023; Trottier, 2017).

Manne (2018) specifies the normative order being enforced, conceptualizing misogyny as patriarchy’s “law enforcement” against women perceived to have breached gendered expectations. Building on these theories, we explain how this enforcement is operationalized through online participation and weaponized visibility in political contexts, recoding women’s political presence as moral violation and making abuse defensible as criticism, satire, or righteous anger.

We define “moralized misogyny” as a subset of *political delegitimation* distinguished by the *object* being regulated (women’s visibility and authority), the gendered *codes* mobilized (e.g., femininity, propriety, modesty, purity), and the *injury* produced (revoked legitimacy as a woman in public). Analytically, we did not treat all attacks on women as “moralized misogyny.” Attacks centered solely on partisan disagreement, policy criticism, corruption, or non-gendered incompetence were considered adjacent but distinct forms of political delegitimation. Table 1 overviews distinctions among these concepts.

Table 1. Analytical comparison.

Feature	Moral Policing	Moralized Political Delegitimation	Moralized Misogyny
Target	Private citizens/social minorities	Any actor	Politically visible women
Transgression	Social impropriety/nonconformity	Political wrongdoing	Political participation/visibility
Normative code	Decency, tradition, respectability	Loyalty, ideological purity, patriotism, honesty	Femininity, modesty, purity, sexual propriety
Gendered	Not always	Not inherently	Constitutively
Role of the body/sexuality	Sometimes present, especially around dress/intimacy	Usually absent/secondary	Central: body, dress, sexuality, marital status, rumor, intimate imagery
Mechanism(s)	Direct intervention, shaming, social pressure	Accusation to discredit standing	Infrastructural, coordinated, “wholesale” production of hate
Logic	Preserving “tradition”	Policing legitimacy	Enforcing patriarchy’s “law enforcement”
Injury produced	Behavioral correction/social restriction	Political discredit	Political discredit plus gendered humiliation and exclusion
Intended outcome	Compliance	Loss of trust, legitimacy, or public support	Deterrence, withdrawal, and revocation of public authority

To guide our analysis, we propose a three-phase model (Figure 1), mapping the trajectory of online harassment from the initial moral accusation to coordinated punishment. First, moral framing reconstructs political action as a breach through identity-linked allegations for which factual belief is secondary. Second, networked participation mobilizes audiences as para-governors, making harassment socially rewarding and signaling in-group belonging (Marwick, 2021). Third, weaponized visibility converts outrage into extralegal punishment through naming, shaming, doxing, and circulating proof-like artifacts without formal authority (Trottier, 2017). This model is an analytic abstraction specifying how MMNH’s moral participation and digilantism’s punitive exposure become linked in practice, *not* a rigid sequence.

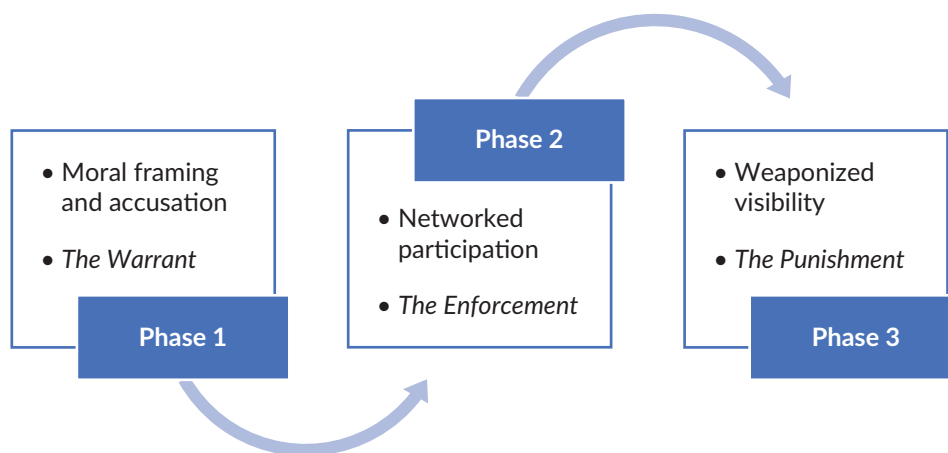


Figure 1. Theoretical framework.

The Bangladeshi case refines these frameworks by showing how morally legible allegations retain disciplinary force—authorizing ridicule and punitive exposure—even without factuality. However, our model should not be assumed to be fully instantiated in every case. Some incidents remain at the accusation level without sustained networked uptake. Others generate ridicule without durable deterrent effects, while others are better explained by partisan hostility than by explicitly gendered moral coding.

Our claims would therefore be weakened if: attacks on politically visible women were predominantly policy-based and structurally resembled attacks on men; moral accusations failed to generate participatory amplification; or circulation depended primarily on factual belief rather than instrumental use. Then, generic hostility, partisan polarization, or generic disinformation would better explain the cases. Ultimately, our model shows how Bangladesh’s online sphere uses moralized misogyny not merely to contest politics, but as informal governance that conditions women’s political citizenship and dictates who may speak, organize, or lead.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

We adopt a qualitative, abductive design to examine how “moralized misogyny” operates through Facebook discourse in post-uprising Bangladesh. The design focuses on how culturally specific moral vocabularies mediate gendered harassment, disinformation, and the disciplining of women’s visibility. We consider

Facebook not a neutral content repository but a key arena for political discourse in which gendered moral orders are articulated, contested, and enforced.

Our framework integrates feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA; Lazar, 2018) with multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA; Ledin & Machin, 2018; see also Machin & Mayr, 2023). This integration reflects the empirical reality that “moralized misogyny” is produced through the amalgamation of textual, visual, and interactional elements. FCDA provides the critical lens for examining gendered power, moral regulation, and discursive policing, while MCDA enables analysis of composite digital artifacts, e.g., memes or photocards, whose material form and affordances shape how meaning circulates and gains legitimacy.

We developed analytic categories a posteriori, beginning with close immersion in the data to inductively trace recurring vocabularies, visual strategies, forms, tactics, and interactional patterns. Adopting Manne’s (2018) “ameliorative” approach to misogyny, we focus on its *social* function rather than the *psychological* intent of individual users. We code content as “moralized misogyny” not based on the presence of hate speech alone, but on whether the discourse serves a policing function—specifically, whether it invokes moral sanctions (shame, disgust, impurity) to penalize women’s political visibility and enforce adherence to traditional gender roles. We treated content as such when attacks relied on moral evaluation rather than policy criticism or political-partisan disagreement alone. Core constructs—moralized misogyny, national/religious (dis)loyalty, sexual impropriety, purity, pornification, and digilantism—guide the analysis.

4.2. Data Collection

Facebook, Bangladesh’s dominant social media platform, served as our field site due to its political centrality and public visibility. We collected data through sustained non-participant observation of publicly accessible Facebook pages, profiles, and groups where nationally salient political events, actors, and controversies were reframed through satire, parody, ridicule, exposé, activist commentary, and news-mimic content. We adopted a “distant” role to observe the phenomenon in its natural context without influencing social dynamics (Liu & Maitlis, 2010), treating Facebook as a field of political discourse. Between September 2024 and December 2025, we systematically monitored partisan, humor, exposé-style, and news-mimic pages, profiles, and groups central to post-uprising political communication—many invoking “satire/parody” labels to evade moderation while circulating moralized attacks. We documented content in situ without engaging or intervening, enabling analysis of observable semiotic-discursive processes.

Sampling followed a purposive, iterative strategy combining systematic monitoring with keyword-based retrieval in Bangla and English, using women’s names, gendered slurs, and moral vocabularies. Systematic monitoring involved repeated, criteria-based observation of public-political spaces, capturing a bounded, nationally visible subset of Bangladesh’s broader ecosystem rather than Facebook as a whole. We retained content only if it was publicly accessible, politically relevant, targeted women as primary subjects, and contained at least two indicators of “moralized misogyny.” Posts were prioritized by engagement, severity, and continued accessibility, with visible reactions typically ranging from approximately 1,000 to 150,000. Sampling spanned left, center, and right political spaces, while overrepresenting liberal/leftist activists. Content clustered around major political flashpoints, and lower-intensity harassment remained normalized across time. Extended procedures—e.g., monitoring protocol, AI-generated content identification, operational definitions, ethical constraints, and observed repertoires—are in the Supplementary File.

We deduplicated content, documented circulation through analytic memos, and preserved deleted/edited posts through archived screenshots. We employed thematic saturation, ceasing data collection when content yielded only recurring archetypes, e.g., news-mimic layouts. By around the 300th item, this redundancy indicated we had achieved sufficient depth to characterize the mechanisms under investigation.

Our corpus comprises content, i.e., posts, comments, captions, memes, AI-generated/heavily manipulated visuals, decontextualized screenshots, videos, and reels targeting *politically visible women*. From an initial pool of 582 monitored Facebook contents, 327 items met full inclusion criteria (see Figure 2).

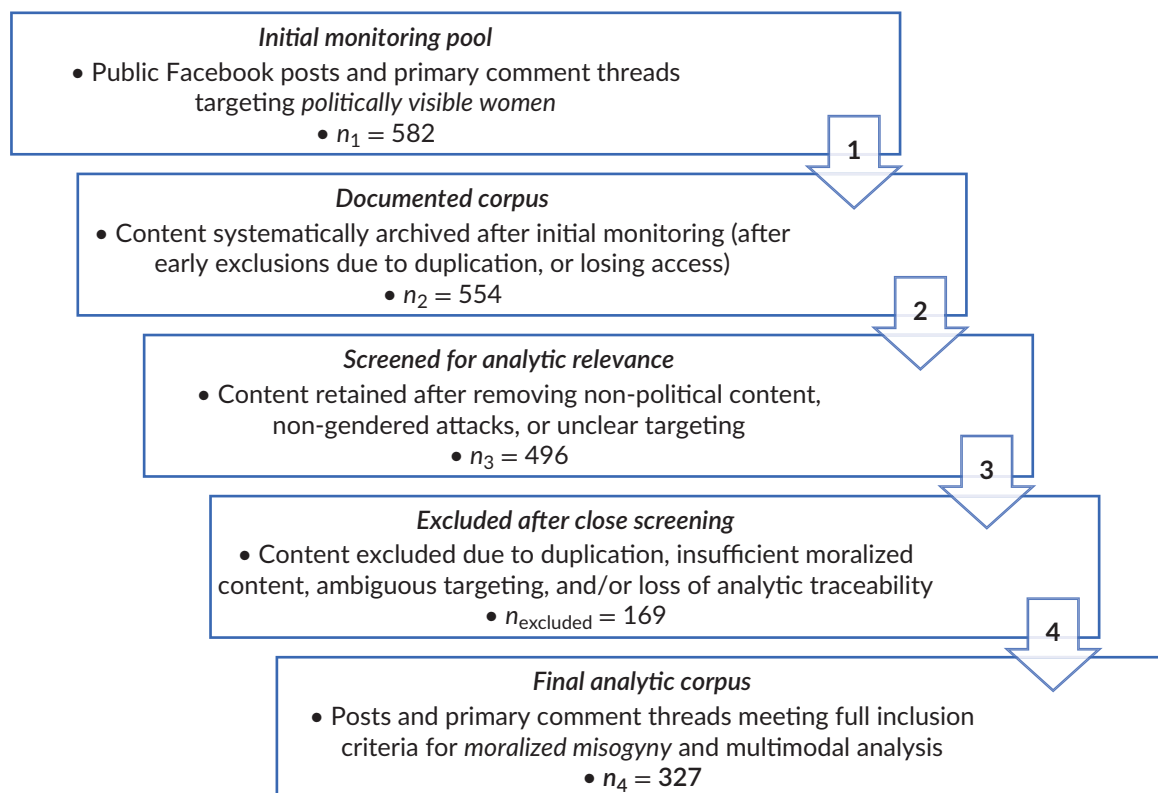


Figure 2. Sample overview.

4.3. Analysis Strategy

FCDA oriented our interpretation toward gendered power, moral regulation, ideology, and representation, while MCDA directed attention to *semiotic resources* and *recontextualizations*—lexical choices, captions, layout, framing, image–text relations, spatialization, and temporality—through which accusations were made to appear legitimate, reportable, or humorous. We paid particular attention to MCDA–FCDA integration. Analysis proceeded between close-case analysis, patterning across artifacts, and socio-political interpretation, foregrounding how they reproduce patriarchal hierarchies and authorize vigilantism.

As bilingual researchers fluent in both Bangla and English, we developed and applied a shared codebook during pilot coding. We independently double-coded 36 items. We established intercoder agreement through negotiated consensus focused on aligning interpretive judgments rather than calculating statistical coefficients. We maintained reflexive memos throughout to document interpretive decisions.

Although contents were publicly accessible during collection, we treat them as ethically sensitive due to risks of amplifying harm, re-identification, and retraumatization (Franzke et al., 2020). We therefore applied double anonymization, avoided uniquely searchable phrases, paraphrased extreme content where necessary, and refrained from reproducing pornified captions/visuals. Figure 3 shows how the design moves from corpus construction to integrated interpretation.

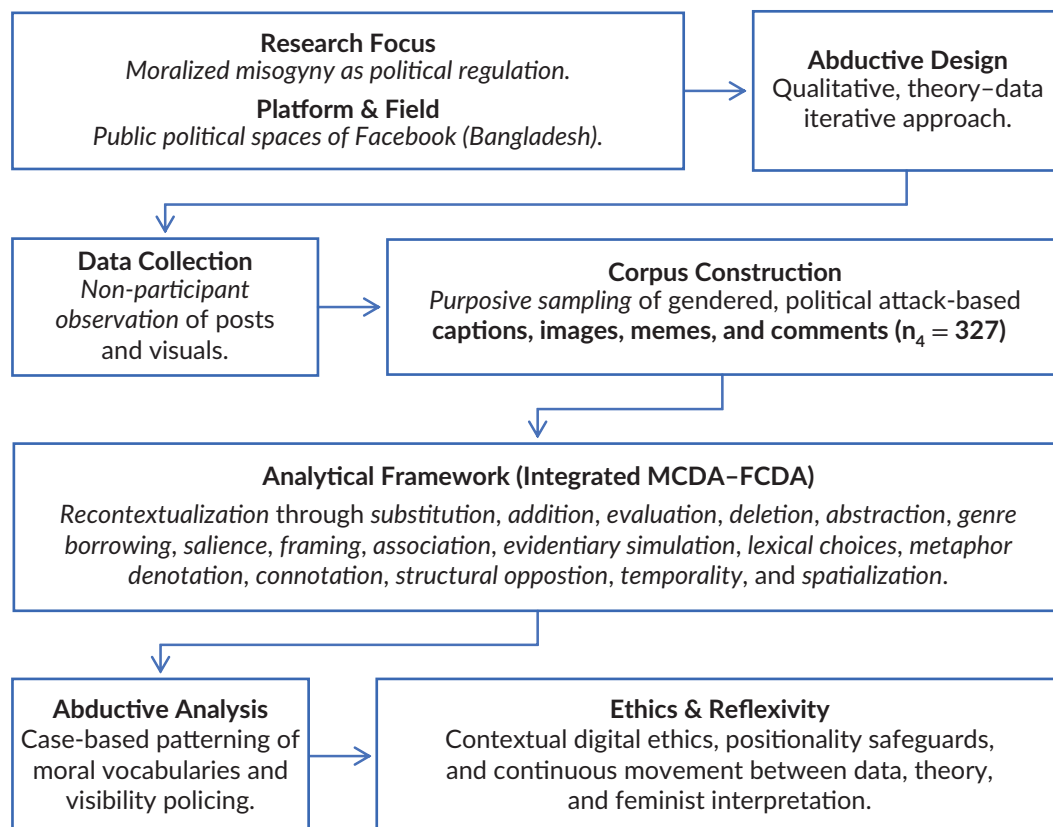


Figure 3. Research design.

We acknowledge the emotional labor involved in analyzing degrading content. Our positionalities enabled contextual interpretation while requiring reflexive safeguards, including peer debriefing. We also used contrastive memoing and negative-case analysis—including observations of male political targets from the same monitored spaces—to distinguish gendered moral coding from generic partisan abuse, noting where attacks were better explained by repertoires more commonly directed at male actors, who were more often criticized for ideology, corruption, violence, or incompetence rather than by sexualized/respectability-based moral delegitimization.

5. Findings

Within our corpus, women's political visibility is most frequently recontextualized through *sexual deviance*, followed by *improper femininity* and *partisan or national disloyalty*, making harassment appear corrective rather than abusive. Analytically, it occurs through a three-step process. First, women's visibility is re-signified through sexualized and respectability-based codes. Second, these accusations are established through multimodal artifacts simulating evidence. Third, comment-thread participation and circulation

convert accusation into punitive exposure. This process operates through the *recontextualization of social practice*: Women's speaking, organizing, contesting elections, appearing on camera, or debating are transformed into discourses of impurity, shamelessness, or betrayal.

Recontextualization operates through recurring moves (Machin & Mayr, 2023): (a) substitution recasts political action in sexual or moral terms; (b) addition inserts reactions, ridicule, and legitimating cues; (c) evaluation casts women as shameless, impure, or unfit; and (d) deletion removes policy substance, institutional context, and the labor of political participation. Through layered semiotic resources—sexualized lexical choices, derogatory captions, genre-borrowing layouts, manipulated visuals, emojis, and comment-threads—women are made legible less as political *actors* than as *bodies* and *problems*. What matters analytically is not any element in isolation, but how different modes, in tandem with different affordances, are assembled into an integrated design that makes misogynistic accusation appear coherent and actionable.

5.1. Sexualizing Political Rhetoric

A dominant mechanism is the recontextualization of women's political speech and presence as sexualized. Women's proximity to public-political life—even standing beside male colleagues—becomes evidence for insinuations that political participation is achieved through sexual exchange. Substitution predominates: "Availability" replaces competence, ideology, and labor. The pattern is carried by sexualized lexical choices and visuals designed to evade moderation while preserving recognizable connotations of impropriety—terms like "bed," "hotel," "night," and food metaphors that render women consumable. Political actors are subjected to abstraction: The specificity of their political labor is stripped away and replaced by simplified moral tropes.

For example, a student activist's public visibility is recontextualized through a photocard-style post implying that she "enjoys" immoral relations with political comrades. By borrowing the canons of use of news discourse, it turns rumor into an apparently "reportable" event. Its integrated design—headline-like syntax, image-text coupling, outlet-like layout, and familiar platform-native formatting—creates a provisional epistemological commitment to truthfulness even though it is fabricated. The ideological effect is to recast visibility as sexualized, warranting public judgment and punishment. Comment-threads then reinterpret her prior complaints of harassment as evidence of consent, intensifying this situation through body-shaming and gang-rape insinuations. Deletion is crucial: The original harassment, political circumstances, and her own statements are erased. It follows a broader victim-blaming logic where public conduct is treated as evidence of culpability rather than grounds for protection (Lazar, 2018). The accusation only needs to become sufficiently understandable to authorize ridicule, participation, and punishment. Authenticity becomes secondary to social utility.

Pages targeting women who failed to secure electoral nominations recontextualize this outcome through a textual-sexual script, suggesting "their youths" were "used and discarded." Women's political legitimacy is thus reduced to "market value," recoding electoral exclusion as proof of female disposability rather than as an effect of party structures or nomination politics. Tropes of sexual transaction substitute for the nomination process, while obscene metaphors, emojis, and comment-threads add humiliating affect and evaluative force. Institutional selection processes, party structures, and political labor are deleted. Again, abstraction is central: A complex political event is rewritten as a familiar script of female disposability.

A related pattern recontextualizes women's speech acts through selective clipping, decontextualization, and sexualized recontextualization. Similar captions detach speeches from their political context for pornographic reinterpretation in the comments. Deletion and addition work together: The original setting, sequence, and argumentative content are removed, while captions and comments impose a preferred sexualized reading. The clip, caption, and thread function as layered multimodal semiotic resources whose different affordances recast speech as sexual invitation rather than argument (Machin & Mayr, 2023). Temporality also matters: Clipping freezes one moment of speech and detaches it from the unfolding sequence, converting situated political speech into a reused scandal fragment. Once ambition is framed as sexual, harassment can be legitimized as its corrective.

Purity discourse reframes harassment as deserved discipline. A recurrent argumentative pivot is: Even if fake, she deserves it. Users often acknowledge that a visual appears fabricated *and* proceed to treat it as proof of moral failure—effectively, “she’s that type anyway.” Evaluation becomes central: Women are assessed not vis-à-vis truth, but vis-à-vis respectability. It also works as perpetrator mitigation, since the attack’s falsity or abusiveness is downplayed once the target is constructed as “already punishable,” shifting accountability away from those who produce and circulate the harassment: Women are constituted not as rights-bearing subjects but as “contaminated” bodies whose punishment can precede evidence (Lazar, 2018).

Thus, recontextualization works not by establishing factuality but by making accusation morally actionable, also resembling misogynistic policing: Men’s corruption or violence attracts comparatively less scrutiny, while women’s public acts are rapidly converted into sexual scandal and character-based failure (Manne, 2018).

Misogyny is also intensified through colorism and appearance-based ridicule that displaces women’s political messages altogether, mobilizing heteronormative femininity and colonial beauty hierarchies as criteria of political legitimacy. Dark-skinned women face racialized sexual insults, while mainstream news clips of speeches trigger comments fixated on whether a woman “looks like” a man, is “ugly,” “drugged,” or “transgender.” Substitution replaces argument with appearance, evaluation degrades through lexical choices and uglified visuals, and women’s actual speech is erased from the discourse, resulting in deletion. These moral sorting devices mark some bodies as “inherently unfit” for politics.

In another recurring pattern, prominent male commentators turn body-shaming into spectacle through file-compression metaphors about “reducing” women; comments then treat this degradation as collective “entertainment,” using humor to normalize evaluative harassment. Women’s bodies function metonymically: Particular features are made to stand for a woman’s whole moral-political worth.

5.2. Disinformation as Disciplinary Arsenal

Harassment is operationalized through visual disinformation that both deceives and disciplines by making accusation appear evidentiary. These artifacts function as *credibility scaffolding*: They provide semiotic frames within which women can already be considered scandalous or sexually available, activating familiar misogynistic scripts before belief is established. Across cases, three recurrent forms stand out.

News-mimic photocards offer a clear recontextualizing sequence. They utilize the canons of use of news and an integrated design binding typography, image placement, logos, and syntax into a coherent visual whole to

create provisional credibility. They attach sexual allegations to women's faces in that borrowed format, substituting misogynistic insinuation for reportable public information. The template itself is a semiotic resource whose affordances condense allegations into a portable, recognizable form that can be rapidly recirculated. It lowers the threshold for participation, allowing users to respond en masse as though *encountering* evidence rather than *helping construct* it. It aligns with findings that the laughing emoji is used to mock gender equality, signaling that abuse is treated as entertainment (UN Women, 2023).

Pornographic-equivalent templates work through condensation, connotation, and structural opposition. Circulated images visually pair politicians with adult-film referents (e.g., equating women to adult-film stars' "younger sisters") to recode them as "sexually deviant." Political figures are substituted with pornographic identity-based templates, while evaluative meanings of impurity, desirability, and vulgarity are added through the pairing itself. Threads then debate "taste" and "desirability," extending the evaluation through comment-thread participation.

These semiotic resources of condensation compress a moral accusation into a highly recognizable cultural shorthand. The woman is represented metonymically as a stand-in for sexual vulgarity or shame. The layout's framing and spatialization matter: The juxtaposition organizes comparison spatially, making the intended analogy appear self-evident *before* it is verbally argued.

AI-enabled imagery—in intimate composites—circulates as humiliating "proof." Deepfakes of a politician kissing a male comrade, posted with teasing captions, show how synthetic media mobilizes disgust and voyeurism. Here, addition, evaluation, and deletion converge: Interpretive cues are inserted, the woman is morally assessed as "contaminated," and the political context is removed. Its disciplinary force lies in attaching sexual contamination to women's visibility, creating a memeable, discussable scene of intimacy. Visual form carries a particular epistemological commitment: Even when obviously questionable, the format presents itself as if it had captured an event, providing a basis of provenance for punitive inference.

Across these forms, whether an artifact is untrue matters less than how it is recontextualized: The decisive issue becomes whether it makes misogynistic accusation socially actionable. Participation becomes sexualized, and visual formats simulate evidence strongly enough to authorize collective harassment.

5.3. *Weaponizing National, Religious, and Partisan Identities*

Women also bear the burden of political antagonism because ideological disagreement is repeatedly re-routed through erotic loyalty, moral corruption, or national betrayal. Consequently, women's bodies become the terrain through which purity is defended.

One critical example is the binary opposition between the "Western(-aligned)" and the "proper" woman, reminiscent of the Madonna-whore complex. A caption frames a young leader as Western-aligned, reading her discussion of sexual health not as professional expertise but as evidence of shamelessness. She is juxtaposed with another female doctor-politician portrayed as "modest" and "locally rooted." It connotes foreign excess vs. contained national belonging, substituting politically relevant speech with a civilizational morality tale. The contrast evaluates by ranking femininities through cultural norms and recoding disagreement as a loyalty test.

Discourse here naturalizes a gendered-national order in which acceptable femininity must appear non-disruptive (Lazar, 2018). The juxtaposition is reinforced through framing and spatialization: Positioning the two women invites moral comparison, so that layout itself becomes part of the evaluative claim.

Posts attacking prominent feminist Bengali thinker Begum Rokeya operate similarly. They brand her as apostate and impure. Addition supplies emotional alignment, while evaluation reframes her through betrayal rather than contribution. Male defenders are ridiculed through emasculating lexical and visual choices in the comments, producing a script where solidarity with women becomes suspect. Rokeya is mobilized metonymically: as a condensed sign for feminism, moral disorder, and dangerous modernity.

Partisan warfare frequently proceeds through this mechanism. Women associated with male politicians are sexualized to shame the party itself. Real photographs are recontextualized through captions with insinuation, pulling relatives into the target field. Their political or relational positions are substituted with sexually evaluable identities. Women operate metonymically for the party or leader: Attacking the woman becomes a way of attacking the collective.

Internalized misogyny further reveals the durability of this discursive field. Women also participate in sexual shaming and body-based ridicule using the same vocabularies of purity and honor. It demonstrates how hegemonic the repertoire has become: Patriarchal discourse has normalized these evaluative frameworks as “common sense” across speakers (Lazar, 2018). Comments reacting to the government’s proposal for greater women’s parliamentary participation make it visible by disproportionately fixating on the single clause concerning women’s inclusion, framing it as a “deal-breaker.” The key operation is evaluation through apparently neutral language. Terms like “merit,” “fairness,” and “religion” function as a disciplining idiom that delegitimizes women’s authority, while deletion removes structural barriers and entrenched male dominance, and women’s inclusion is represented as an “unfair advantage.” As another form of abstraction, historically structured exclusion, here, gets concealed beneath “neutrality.”

Moralized misogyny functions as “permissible infrastructures”—as repeatable systems—for scaling harassment. Exposé pages operate through a recognizable content model where photos, sexual insinuation, humor disclaimers, and cross-platform links are coordinated to turn women’s reputations into tradeable assets. Photocards further increase portability by allowing the same layout to be quickly adapted to new targets. The template’s value lies in how it normalizes evaluation as content (Lazar, 2018; Ledin & Machin, 2018). These forms rely on stabilized canons of use and on the affordances of platform-native circulation to remain recognizable and easy to modify.

Meta-political memes can function as ambivalent counter-discourse. An adaptation of the Spider-Man-pointing-at-Spider-Man meme depicts rival factions accusing one another, highlighting a shared cross-partisan grammar of gendered delegitimization. Yet even this apparent critique extends moralized misogyny by trivializing it, repeating vulgar slurs for comic effect.

Finally, our corpus reveals how these attacks rely on a layered multimodal sequence—moving from a political trigger through textual, visual, and comment-based escalation, amplified by platform infrastructure (Figure 4). Manipulated visuals often launch the accusation, captions supply narrative direction, and comments elaborate sexual speculation. Different semiotic resources perform different recontextualizing

tasks to make harassment and disinformation inseparable. The image supplies apparent evidence, the caption directs interpretation, and the comments collectivize punishment. Women's visibility becomes the hook through which families and factions are pulled into reputational vulnerability. Harassment unfolds through escalation and accumulation, turning a political appearance into the trigger for subsequent waves of redistribution and punishment.

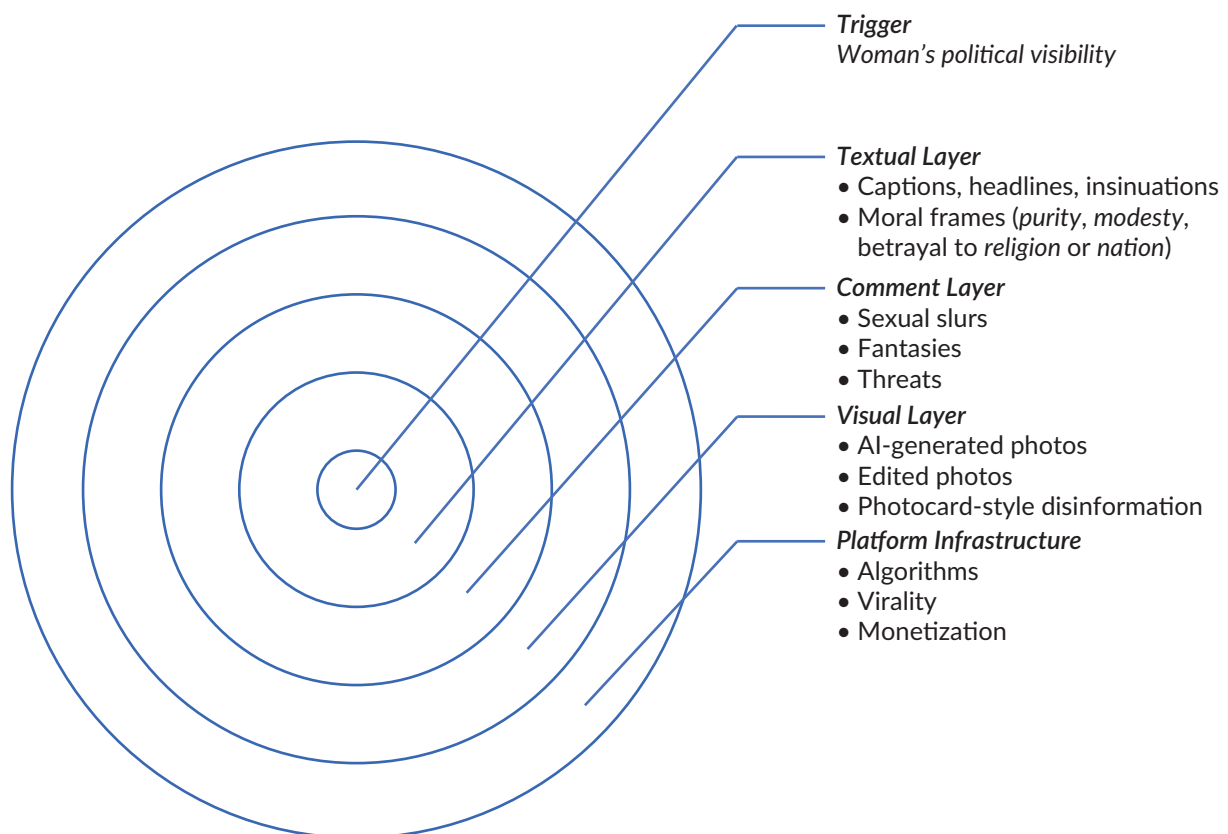


Figure 4. Multi-layered multimodal abuse.

A woman's testimony post describes renewed death threats immediately after her electoral participation became public. She notes that harassment may progress into synthetic video and edited sexualized visuals—an expectation empirically warranted in our corpus. The routine circulation of porn-equivalent photocards and exposé pages shows that sexualized recontextualization is anticipatory: Visibility itself becomes the condition for the next stage of punishment.

Moralized misogyny coalesces around specific, highly frequent thematic categories—summarized in Figure 5—that operate transversally across political parties. Together, these categories show a shared repertoire, recoding women's political visibility as publicly punishable transgression. Delegitimization functions less through factual adjudication than through moralized sorting: Targets are made politically unintelligible by being repositioned as “foreign agents,” “shameless women,” or “contaminating” figures.

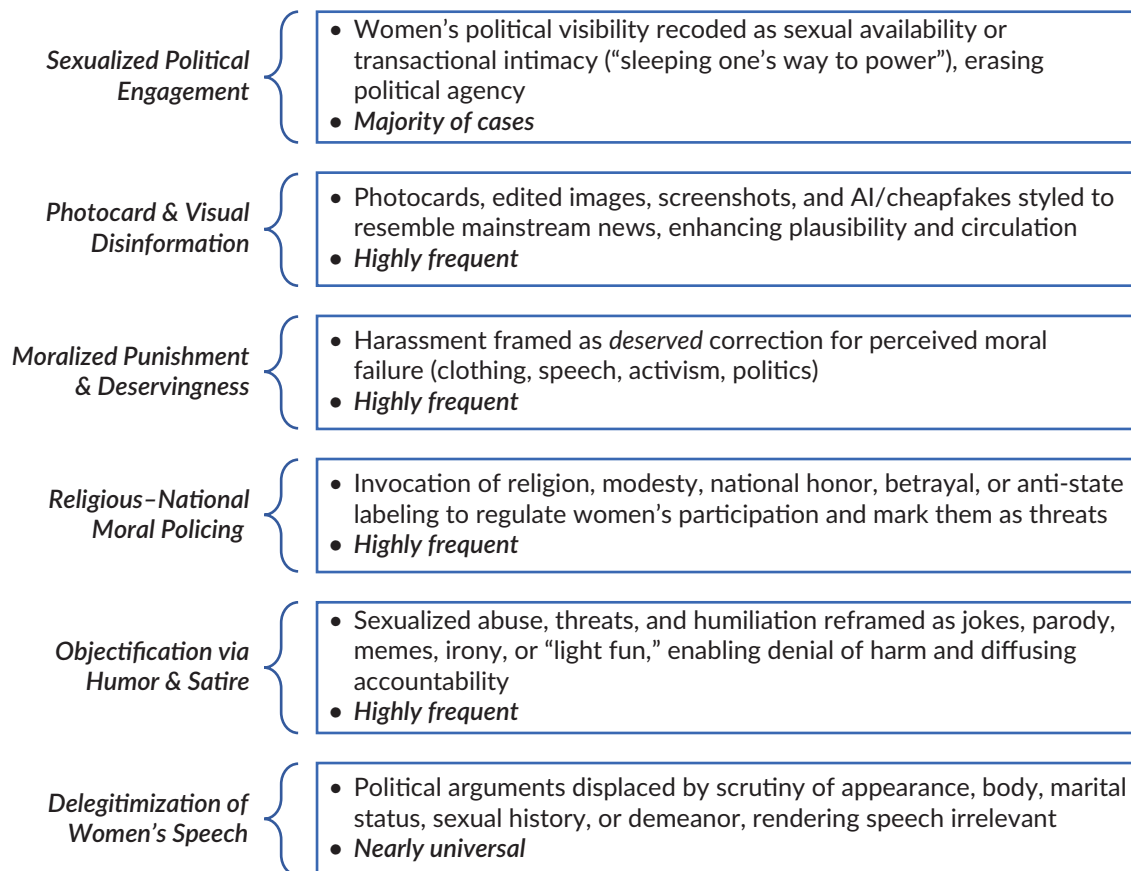


Figure 5. Dominant tropes in the corpus.

6. Discussion

We set out to examine how gendered attacks targeting Bangladesh's politically visible women on Facebook function as a systemic form of moral-patriarchal governance rather than isolated hostility. We argue that these attacks operate as a coordinated disciplinary mechanism that recodes women's political visibility as moral transgression and thereby legitimizes crowd punishment as "corrective justice." Thus, harassment functions as the operational arm of "entitled sexism" (Manne, 2018): Vigilantes treat women's political participation not as a democratic right but as a theft of masculine space. What appears as online abuse is therefore better understood as a structural exclusion strategy that converts political difference into sexual deviance, failed femininity, or national-religious disloyalty.

Theoretically, we develop "moralized misogyny" as a specific mode of political delegitimation in which women's public visibility is reclassified through vocabularies of purity, modesty, loyalty, and respectability, then made actionable through multimodal evidence-making and participatory uptake. We also extend Manne's (2018) account of misogyny into an underexplored Global South setting where religious-nationalist codes intensify that enforcement by fusing shame with betrayal. Methodologically, our MCDA-FCDA integration captures high-context, infrastructural harms—news-mimic photocards, recontextualized screenshots, and AI-generated image-based sexual abuse—evading narrow moderation systems focused only on explicit abuse. Empirically, we show how these artifacts scaffold credibility, trivializing misogyny as consumable content. Analytically, we identify a cross-ideological/factional moral grammar through which netizens exercise a "moral veto" over

women's inclusion. Our contribution lies in specifying the mechanism through which patriarchal moral codes are operationalized.

Our findings consistently show that women are not primarily engaged as political opponents/actors but as violators of binding social norms (Marwick, 2021). Although women may be attacked for party affiliation or policies, these remain secondary to a more fundamental accusation: that women's *very presence* in political space is considered morally illegitimate. Once this framing is established, harassment becomes socially performative—a spectacle of enforcement warning women not to exceed their status as “givers” through public ambition—and utilitarian. It helps explain perpetrators' visible pleasure and self-righteousness. They do not necessarily consider themselves violent. Rather, they cast their conduct as a “moral duty” to defend community norms against women's public agency. Thus, while words and images inflict injury (Krook, 2020, Chapter 16), the larger structure is one of vigilante enforcement that renders women's political citizenship conditional (Manne, 2018). The crowd deputizes itself to exact the “price of participation,” shifting patriarchal enforcement from domestic coercion into a public, technological mechanism (Prillaman, 2023).

This enforcement relies on the “common sense” character of gender ideology: “discursively sustained assumptions” that naturalize power asymmetries (Lazar, 2018). The proposal for women's inclusion shows it clearly. The proposal was treated *not* as policy but as a “contaminating [sic] clause” that rendered the whole package “unacceptable.” Comments often adopted the apparently neutral language of “merit,” anti-quota fairness, or religion, yet these idioms disciplined women while masking unequal power relations. By mobilizing liberal discourse against “substantive equality” (Gouws, 1999), users transformed fairness into a pretext for keeping political authority culturally masculine and religiously policed. Here, discourse operated as a micro-legislature in which users sought to encode women's exclusion into the normative logic of the political order. Specifically, it was a form of platformized patriarchal bargaining: Users held their votes hostage to secure women's exclusion as a condition of legitimacy.

If moral accusation provides the warrant for harassment, visuals provide the evidence, packaging, and infrastructure. Creators manipulated provenance by borrowing the aesthetic codes of legitimate journalism—sans-serif fonts, breaking-news banners, red tickers—to make misogynistic claims appear reportable and evidentiary. The forms supply *credibility scaffolding*, converting dehumanizing accusations into standardized, easily shareable political content. They also made harassment appear ordinary rather than exceptional. Their persistence is further enabled by metacommunication and playfulness (Ledin & Machin, 2018): When content is circulated as “satire,” “humor,” or “just a meme,” perpetrators gain plausible deniability while lowering the crowd's inhibitions. It helps explain a central pattern in our corpus: Belief is often secondary. Users participate not necessarily because they fully accept a claim as true, but because circulation itself performs delegitimization, enables ritualized shaming, and signals in-group belonging. Facebook's affordances intensify this environment, making clicking, sharing, and reacting part of the punitive act.

Moralized misogyny becomes even clearer with deepfakes and AI-generated image-based sexual abuse. FCDA's “constitutive view of discourse” becomes crucial: Discourse does not merely describe identities but actively produces them (Lazar, 2018). Through the interdiscursivity of mixing political imagery with pornographic tropes, deepfakes do not simply misrepresent the female politician; they rewrite her, producing a hybrid identity of the “political whore” that can eclipse professional capacity altogether. So, technical

interventions alone are insufficient. Labels marking content as “disinformation” do not undo its core harm, because that harm does not depend only on deception. It depends on violated consent, public humiliation, and circulation. Even when viewers recognize the material as synthetic, the attack remains injurious because the woman’s body has already been publicly reconstituted as evidence of sexual-moral failure.

Bangladeshi women are disproportionately threatened with rape and death, specifically when they talk about politics (UN Women, 2023). Our findings show how audiences help complete that violence through dogpiling, link-seeking, and intersemiotic approval. Violence is not linear but triangular and participatory. Ordinary users are not passive consumers of disinformation either. They act as enforcers who amplify, validate, and extend it, showing that gendered disinformation often works through distributed participation (Gehrke & Amit-Danhi, 2025). Once accusations are boosted by prominent nodes, ordinary users join in to display adherence to group norms (Marwick, 2021). In our corpus, attacks often involved deploying triggering terms related to gang rape and choking, or portraying women who refused to disengage as “cowards” or “weak,” thereby punishing resistance itself. Harassment thus functions simultaneously as punishment and as public proof of belonging.

Gendered disinformation creates anticipatory vulnerability. Harm is not confined to the moment of attack but alters the conditions of women’s political life by making harassment appear as expected. Deepfakes intensify this environment because they manipulate experiential meaning itself. By combining visual and auditory semiotic resources, they produce hyper-realistic fabrication whose force exceeds text alone. Materiality becomes weaponized because textures, color, and resolution shape perception directly (Ledin & Machin, 2018). Targets’ bodies are inserted into pornographic narratives against their will; even when viewers know the content is fake, their visceral force can produce immediate reputational and psychological damage. Once circulated, harm becomes cumulative, searchable, and portable, rendering harassment mundane.

This mechanism also produces conditional citizenship. Pejorative labels like “Shahbagi” (a Bangla term used indiscriminately to mark someone as secular-liberal, leftist, or morally/politically suspect) or “Western agent” function as revocable tests of belonging, akin to the situational criteria used to police the national “us” (Huang, 2023). Their definitional emptiness is a strength rather than a flaw: By leaving the boundary of legitimacy unspecified, users can redraw it across shifting political contexts, continually converting women’s visibility into evidence of betrayal and keeping the moral warrant for harassment permanently available.

Women’s political speech (an unmarked action) is routinely ignored, while their gender, attributes, and propriety (marked characteristics) become the primary sites of assault. Because women’s policy positions are strategically irrelevant to vigilantes, gendered moral accusations—especially the “sexually voracious woman” trope—replace political critique as a means of stripping women of professional capacity (Liao, 2024). This policing mechanism enforces the “gendered dichotomization of public and private spheres” (Lazar, 2018) by exploiting womanhood’s “vulnerability” in a patriarchal society. By concentrating on these identity-based attack vectors, harassment can reduce a political agent to a physical body, illustrating how MMNH systematically removes minoritized voices from the public sphere (Marwick, 2021). Consequently, harm does not merely damage reputation; it structuralizes women’s exclusion from public life.

Counter-discourses *do* appear in reporting, legal threats, and institutional statements. But polarization frequently fragments them. Harassment is often denounced when it targets “our” women and reproduced

when it targets rival women, revealing why moralized misogyny functions not as an isolated partisan deviation but as a shared political strategy across camps (Marwick, 2021). Political antagonism may sustain the appearance of ideological conflict while converging in practice around a common pattern of disciplining women. Women shaming other women is especially revealing, because it signals the depth of patriarchal discursive constraint rather than its absence. By raising the participation costs of visibility across factions, the system ensures that women's political citizenship remains continuously subject to moral revocation.

Simultaneously, our claims are bounded. This study was not designed as a systematic comparative corpus across genders or target groups, and we do not claim to analyze exhaustively how *all* political actors are attacked online. However, illustrative, contrastive observations from the same spaces are revealing. Male political actors were also vilified, but more often through accusations of corruption, violence, opportunism, factional betrayal, or incompetence. Women's political visibility, contrastingly, was repeatedly recoded through sexual impropriety, shame, and respectability. The distortion thus lies not simply in the *existence* of harassment but in the *distinctive sexual-moral coding* through which women are made publicly punishable, also reflected in recent reports of coordinated digital warfare against women politicians (Jahan, 2026).

The broader significance of moralized misogyny extends beyond Bangladesh, even though Bangladesh should be considered paradigmatic of the mechanisms outlined here rather than universally representative. Bangladesh's context makes visible a wider transnational pattern: moralizing women's public-political presence and using media artifacts to convert accusation into participatory sanction. As noted earlier, women's bodies are especially moralized (Morgenroth et al., 2025), and female political figures are often framed as immoral (Huang, 2023; Sakki & Martikainen, 2022). While Bangladesh's pattern appears in an especially acute form, it also reflects a wider regional crisis (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025) and broader "discursive logics" across the Global South (Lazar, 2018). These dynamics, however, are not confined to a simple Global South/Global North divide, since polarized moral narratives also drive abuse in established democracies (Barker & Jurasz, 2019; Marwick, 2021; Morgenroth et al., 2025; Sakki & Martikainen, 2022). Misogyny is transnational, repeatedly framing women's engagement as a moralized threat in order to deter future participation.

The broader ecology of these attacks can be read through Trottier's (2017) concept of nodal governance, in which the policing of social norms is distributed *beyond* formal institutions. Thus, enforcement is partially crowdsourced to private netizens, allowing punitive and networked norm enforcement to occur without direct institutional action. While the state may formally commit to gender equity, the persistence of these attacks shows how vigilante practices can still help sustain exclusionary norms in ways that benefit from ambiguity, deniability, and inaction. Women may retain formal citizenship, but politics remains a "masculine sphere" in which men monopolize power (Lister, 1997). Moralized misogyny thus functions as an informal enforcement mechanism that helps protect that monopoly and curtail women's political agency.

Furthermore, as misogyny is "self-masking" (Manne, 2018), efforts to name harassment as violence are easily reinterpreted as evidence that women are "playing the victim" or demanding illegitimate special treatment, thereby inviting further abuse. Current remedies also remain inadequate. User-reporting systems place an unreasonable burden on women while enabling the crowd to cast harassers as defenders of social values and targets as transgressors. Platform inaction is not merely technical failure but a structural prioritization of engagement over safety.

Echo chamber effects, amplified by right-wing and populist actors, intensify anti-feminist rhetoric and suppress dissent through sheer scale (Barker & Jurasz, 2019). In Bangladesh, it is also visible in the coordination of digilantism campaigns across platforms to manufacture a sustained hostile environment. Women are punished more harshly than men for perceived moral violations because they are judged against patriarchal norms and traditional expectations of feminine quietude (Marwick, 2021). Bangladesh's women are not simply criticized or voted against, but disciplined for infractions that male politicians routinely survive (see also Jahan, 2026).

Consequently, our study functions as a form of “analytical activism” (Lazar, 2018) by naming a mechanism too often treated as “common sense.” Effective interventions require dismantling the logic of these attacks by bridging technical fixes with social realities (see Figure 6). The key implication is that gendered disinformation should be reframed less as a problem of falsehood than as one of equality harm. Among the countries studied by UN Women (2023), Bangladesh showed the highest proportion of help-seeking search behavior related to misogyny, yet platforms and legal systems fail to recognize these harms’ specific moral grammars.

Platforms need interdisciplinary moderation that combines technical detection with sociological expertise and culturally grounded human review capable of recognizing high-context local moral idioms, humor, and multimodal content. Rapid-response mechanisms are especially necessary for AI-generated image-based sexual abuse, where delay consolidates harm. Civil society and legal institutions, meanwhile, must treat vigilantism not as isolated individual injury but as evidence that harassment operates as a barrier to political equity. By validating these harms through cross-partisan solidarity and recognizing the semiotic violence of manipulated visuals, institutions can counter vigilante moral authority, thereby mitigating the chilling effect on women’s political participation.

RECOMMENDATIONS	<i>Prioritizing context-aware moderation</i>
	<i>Ensuring rapid response to visual disinformation</i>
	<i>Mobilizing data-driven countermeasures</i>
	<i>Challenging vigilante authority</i>
	<i>Redefining disinformation as equality harm</i>

Figure 6. Recommended interventions against moralized misogyny targeting politically visible women.

7. Conclusion

By tracing attacks on politically visible women in post-uprising Bangladesh’s Facebook sphere, we show that moralized misogyny functions as informal patriarchal governance: Through multimodal evidence-making, it recodes women’s visibility as moral transgression, legitimizes crowd punishment, and conditions women’s political citizenship by raising the costs of visibility.

Our limitations also point to future directions. Focusing exclusively on Facebook—though justified by its dominance in Bangladesh—limits generalizability across platform architectures, e.g., X or Instagram. Restricting analysis to *only* publicly accessible content leaves the wider “abuse stack” only partly visible, especially the ways attacks may funnel targets into encrypted “dark social” spaces like Telegram. While

non-participant observation is effective for identifying harassment as a structural mechanism, it cannot reveal perpetrators' subjective justifications directly. Future research should therefore combine cross-platform comparison with attention to class, locality, religion, political affiliation, and other social positions, alongside perpetrator-focused inquiry, to better understand how differing architectures, norms, and rationalizations sustain this form of exclusion.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Due to the highly sensitive nature of the data, research materials cannot be publicly disclosed.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT (version 5) and Google Gemini (3.1 Pro) were used exclusively for language editing purposes.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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About the Authors



Farah Zahan Shuchy is a University of Dhaka graduate and currently serves as a research assistant on a British Academy-funded project there. Her independent research critically examines the intersection of media, gender, AI, politics, and the Global South. Her previous work has been published in *Media and Communication*.



Md. Azaher Uddin is a University of Dhaka computer science graduate, specializing in governance and policy. His research and activism focus on cybercrimes, gender, politics, accountability, and tech policy, with emphasis on combating online harassment. His previous work has been published in *Media and Communication*.

Constructing Gender Antagonism: Moralised Platform Governance in China

Zexu Guan ¹  and Zheyu Shang ² 

¹ School of International Politics and Communication, Beijing Language and Culture University, China

² Institute for Area Studies, Leiden University, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Zheyu Shang (z.shang@hum.leidenuniv.nl)

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Abstract

“Gender antagonism” (*xingbie duili*) has emerged on Chinese social media platforms as a prevailing term, and subsequently as a governance category for regulating online disputes. Adopting a power-sensitive approach, which scrutinises the interplay between the production of meaning and the allocation of communication resources, this study examines how “gender antagonism” is dynamically constructed between users, platforms, and the state through the case of Weibo. Employing critical discourse analysis of user jury voting records, Weibo’s disclosures, and state policy documents, we argue that gender antagonism is not an objective description of gender disputes, but a discursive framework initially mobilised by some users and later institutionalised by platforms and state authorities. The pervasive moralised deployment of this term in platform governance marginalises discussions of gender equality and delegitimises critiques of mainstream gender norms amid China’s crisis of population reproduction. While this discursive construction reflects a moralised platform governance pattern and transfers into effective online visibility control, it eschews gender equality, failing to alleviate long-standing tensions in China’s social governance.

Keywords

China; gender antagonism; morality; platform governance; Weibo

1. Introduction

In the 2020s, “gender antagonism” (*xingbie duili*) has become a popular term on the Chinese internet to loosely refer to conflicting views and interests between women and men. On social media such as Weibo, “inciting gender antagonism” has been elevated to a reporting category targeting content that “deliberately

creates or intensifies conflicts between men and women” (WeiboAdministrator, 2025). In 2025, Weibo removed approximately 640,000 posts and penalised over 15,000 accounts for such content (WeiboAdministrator, 2026b). At the state level, the Ministry of State Security has published a commentary, framing the provocation of gender antagonism as a form of clickbait, while threatening social stability and national security (Ministry of State Security, 2026).

“Gender antagonism” is increasingly being used as a moral accusation, leading to social and economic repercussions. For example, the term has been weaponised by men to initiate reporting and boycotts against the stand-up comedian Yang Li, as they believe her jokes “incited gender antagonism” (V. Wang, 2024). This has resulted in Yang Li losing multiple commercial endorsements.

Given the influence of “gender antagonism” in Chinese society, it is time to scrutinise this term and clarify its implications under the platform governance framework. While existing studies have examined digital feminism and online misogyny in China, which touch on the theme of gender antagonism to varying degrees (e.g., Huang, 2023; Liao, 2024; Yin & Sun, 2021), less attention has been paid to a comprehensive interrogation of “gender antagonism” per se. Likewise, the power dynamics between users, platforms, and the state in governing this phenomenon have also been overlooked. To fill this gap, we inquire: How is gender antagonism constructed and governed in the dynamics between users, platforms, and the state?

We explore gender disputes and the governance of gender antagonism on Weibo, China’s most popular microblogging platform, with 587 million monthly active users, 55% of whom are female (Weibo, 2024). Having witnessed the rise of feminist and misogynist discussions, Weibo has often intervened in regulating such content (Liao, 2024).

In this article, we develop a power-sensitive framework and examine the construction of gender antagonism in the platform ecology. Through critical discourse analysis (CDA), we argue that gender antagonism is a biased discursive framework, initially mobilised by users and subsequently institutionalised by platforms and state authorities. The pervasive deployment of gender antagonism reflects a moralised platform governance pattern that marginalises discussions of gender inequality with moral accusation, and delegitimises critiques of mainstream gender norms amid China’s crisis of population reproduction.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This section situates contemporary gender controversies within China’s changing gender politics and the platformisation process. It first reviews key historical discourses on women’s issues, then analyses the allocation of communication resources within platform governance, providing two interlocking tracks. In this section, we also introduce a power-sensitive perspective through which “gender antagonism” will be examined.

2.1. Historicising Women’s Liberation in Contemporary China

Although much research on China’s digital feminism and misogyny focuses on the internet context, a historical perspective better elucidates gender politics, as pre-internet discourses continue to influence contemporary gender dynamics. This study outlines three historical stages with a focus on women’s

liberation, differentiated by key actors and gender discourses, whose legacies continue to shape contemporary perceptions of gender antagonism.

The first stage, the Mao era (1949–1970s), is characterised by the state-led socialist feminism that integrated women’s liberation into the revolutionary goals (Z. Wang, 2016). This is reflected in the state’s emphasis on freedom of marriage and women’s equal rights in the first Marriage Law, issued in 1950. Nevertheless, the Marriage Law faced patriarchal resistance in rural areas, and then the state’s political agenda shifted from individual freedom to harmonious families in 1953 (Croll, 1981; Z. Wang, 2006). This transition aligns with Foucauldian biopower, which focuses on how life is managed and regulated (Foucault, 1978). The biopolitical shift reveals the state’s ambivalent attitude toward women’s liberation: It is not as prioritised as class struggle and social stability, especially when it causes resistance. This ambivalence continued throughout the following stages.

The second stage (1980s–1990s) represents a transition from top-down state feminism to a complex, market-driven, and internationally-influenced landscape. Under the Reform and Opening-Up policy, the state shifted its focus from political struggles to the market economy, from being self-dependent to linking up with the international track (H. Wang, 2007). In 1995, China’s convening of the Fourth World Women Conference promoted the popularity of terms like “gender discrimination” (*xingbie qishi*) and “gender equality” (*xingbie pingdeng*) in Chinese society (Liu, 2021). These terms would remain influential in the platform age of later years.

The third stage started around the 2000s, characterised by the marginalisation of gender equality in state governance and the rise of mediated feminist activism. The young generation of Chinese women, who had grown up with China’s market reform, advocated for feminist issues against sexual harassment and gender inequality on social media, especially Weibo (Tan, 2017; B. Wang & Driscoll, 2019; Xue & Rose, 2022). However, the tightening state control of dissent, and the prevailing misogyny on social media, have exerted immense pressure on feminist advocacy (Wu & Dong, 2019; Yin & Sun, 2021). Still, young female users have adopted multiple strategies to maintain the visibility of gender equality under scrutiny (Guan, 2025; Xue & Rose, 2022). Their gendered media use is rooted in a fundamental demographic change: The young generation of Chinese women has gained unprecedented socioeconomic status and autonomy in marriage choice (Yu & Xie, 2019), and has higher expectations of gender equality than older generations (Qian & Li, 2020). This largely stems from the state’s long-term, albeit flawed, modernisation efforts to protect women’s rights in education and employment from the first and second stages. This has often been overlooked in studies that focus exclusively on the internet context of gender politics. Young Chinese women’s attitudes sit uneasily with China’s biopolitical governance, as they are not as willing as their predecessors to follow the traditional gender orders, including universal marriage and childbearing.

The co-existence of diverse discourses presents the long-lasting tension between the state’s socialist commitment to gender equality and persistent patriarchal traditions, as well as between the state’s control for stability and the mounting dissatisfaction of young women. In this sense, gender controversies on the Chinese internet are not groundless. Rather, they reveal a problem rooted in China’s modernisation. Despite revealing the underlying paradox between diverse actors and discourses, research on Chinese women’s liberation does not directly explain how “gender antagonism” is perceived, constructed, and governed in the platform age, leaving a crucial research gap.

2.2. Platform Governance and Challenges

As media studies scholar Meng (2018, p. 10) notes, “in the media-saturated contemporary world, ideologically embedded discursive formations...are heavily mediated.” Gender discourses are particularly “platformised” today, as platforms have increasingly become embedded in social infrastructures, economic sectors, and government regulatory systems. This has been conceptualised as platformisation (Helmond, 2015; Plantin & De Seta, 2019; Poell et al., 2019). These discourses are increasingly mediated by platform mechanisms, making it essential to examine how platforms structure gender-related content.

Platform governance reflects how communication resources are allocated through the interactions between platforms, governments, and the public. It can be understood from two dimensions: the governance of platforms, referring to external regulation by legal, social, and normative frameworks, and the governance by platforms, with their capacity to shape information flow (Gorwa, 2019). While the intent of the governance of platforms is to constrain platform power through administrative institutions, the platforms themselves exercise governance through moderation systems that detect, remove, or highlight certain content (Gillespie, 2018). By controlling communication resources, such as content visibility, platforms increasingly operate as political actors and infrastructures of expression (Klonick, 2018). This infrastructural power shapes which discourses become visible to users. Gender-related content has emerged as a particularly contested domain where platforms must balance freedom of expression, the user experience, and administrative regulations.

Existing research has examined the rise of manosphere communities on international platforms such as Instagram, Reddit, and Twitch, which are characterised by online misogyny, as well as violence and harassment targeting specific gender groups. In response, major platforms have introduced rules and measures, including deplatforming certain accounts and communities to address potentially harmful content (Monsees, 2025; Ribeiro et al., 2021; Trott et al., 2022; Zolides, 2021). Still, content moderation faces challenges. Opaque moderation processes and ambiguous definitions of violations in gender-related contexts complicate governance practices (Are & Gerrard, 2023). The widespread use of automated moderation, often lacking the capacity to interpret complex contexts and nuanced language, limits its effectiveness. Moreover, the boundaries of toxic content, including gender-based harmful content, remain unclear, and are continuously reconfigured through negotiations between users, platforms, and broader society (Trott et al., 2022; Vaccaro et al., 2021).

In China, there has been similar platformisation and challenges in moderating gender-related controversial content. The increasing visibility of gender issues in Chinese society and users’ conflicting expressions with strong emotions on these issues have resulted in frequent and large-scale disputes. This dynamic leaves knotty problems for platform governance, as diverse actors in platform governance hold different positions and influence in gender politics. The wide adoption of the ambiguous term “gender antagonism” in China by different actors introduces additional ambiguity and uncertainty into content moderation, further contesting the boundary around violative content.

Meanwhile, platform governance in China has exhibited different characteristics, shaped by stronger state involvement. The Chinese government has formulated laws and regulations like the Provisions on the Administration of Internet Comments Posting Services (2017), which hold platforms accountable for reviewing and removing any content that violates state laws and regulations. Distinctive content moderation

mechanisms have emerged under legal pressure marked by the widespread adoption of participatory moderation mobilising users to engage in content-violation judgments (Fan & Zhang, 2020; Shang, 2026). The user jury examined in this research is one such example. Moreover, state authorities such as the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), the highest regulator and censor of China's internet, continually update policy documents and initiate *Qinglang* (clear and bright) campaigns, a long-running series of internet governance and content regulation campaigns targeting content and behaviours considered harmful, illegal, politically sensitive, or socially destabilising, including those specifically related to gender disputes.

Overall, existing research has highlighted the importance of platform governance in shaping gender discourse, as well as both shared and context-specific dynamics across different societies. Yet, limited attention has been paid to how gender discourse is governed through the interaction between state regulation, platform mechanisms, and user participation in China. In this study, we ask: How are the boundaries of gender discussions, under the label of "gender antagonism," constructed and governed on Chinese platforms such as Weibo? Answering this question requires a thorough and dynamic investigation that addresses gender discourse formation shaped by diverse actors.

2.3. A Power-Sensitive Theoretical Framework

To understand the construction and governance of gender antagonism, as well as different actors' roles in it, in this article, we build a power-centred theoretical framework drawing upon cultural studies and the political economy of communication. The framework understands power in a broad sense, which includes, but is not limited to, "state institutions," since "overt political power is only one rather specialised form of power" (Thompson, 1995, p. 13). Inspired by Meng's (2018) analysis of Chinese media, it focuses on two dimensions of power in media: the production of meaning through discourse, particularly languages and definitions, as the application of power increasingly relies on discourses and "more particularly the ideological workings of language" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 2); and the allocation of communication resources, especially content visibility, a key platform mechanism for controlling information flow. As Schiller (1973, pp. 6–7) contends, "the flow of information in a complex society is a source of unparallel power." The power perspective is not static; rather, it focuses on "power relations" (Mosco, 2009, p. 24), enabling a relational analysis of diverse actors. From this perspective, gender antagonism is continuously amplified and addressed within specific power dynamics, in which certain discourses carry more influence than others and the control of communicative resources is unevenly distributed among actors like users, platforms, and the state. At its core, gender antagonism unfolds as a struggle over meaning, visibility, and power within platform-mediated communication.

3. Methodology

Epistemologically, this research is inspired by feminist standpoint theory, which integrates women's perspectives into empirical and theoretical resources to understand power structure and manifest gender equality through knowledge production (Harding, 1987; Hartstock, 2004). In the examination of the platform governance of gender antagonism, we focus on how gendered experiences, especially those of women, are discussed and governed. Instead of producing neutral scrutinisation of platform governance, we realise our feminist stance, which adheres to the principle feminist standpoint theorists advocate, "the inquirer her/himself be placed in the same critical plane as the overt subject matter, thereby recovering the entire research process for scrutiny in the results of research" (Harding, 1987, p. 9). Accepting the

feminist standpoint is not the equivalent of accepting all women's narratives as unquestionable, since "there have always been women willing to produce sexist and misogynistic thought" (Harding, 1987, p. 11).

Around the theme of "gender antagonism," we focus on the triangular interaction between users, Weibo, and the state. Based on accessibility and relevance, we collected data from three sources: The first source was cases collectively adjudicated by Weibo's *dazhongpingyi* (jury) and published by Weibo's official account *Dazhongpingyiyuebao* (monthly report of the jury). We collected all 269 published cases between 2021 and 2025, covering a wide range of themes such as regional discrimination and fan wars. Then, we identified 83 gender-focused cases, defined as those involving explicitly gendered labels (e.g., "men," "women," "girl," "mother") and/or gendered topics (e.g., marriage, childbirth, bride price, domestic violence, menstruation). These cases reflect user perspectives in gender discussions. The second data source consisted of posts published by two accounts: Weiboguanliyuan (WeiboAdministrator), which represents Weibo's official stance, and Weiboxia (WeiboVigilante), which communicates with users in an anthropomorphic and informal tone. From their launch dates up through December 2025, we collected 176 posts containing the keyword "xingbie" (gender). These posts present Weibo's view on gender-related content. The third source was policy documents and official announcements issued by the CAC containing "xingbie" (gender). There were five such documents and announcements in total as of December 2025. These represent the state's stance.

We conduct CDA on the collected data, as it helps uncover complex power relations through both explicit and implicit language use (Fairclough, 1993; van Dijk, 2015). CDA has been widely employed to examine discursive practices and tensions between citizens, institutions, and the state in China (Huang, 2023; Qiaoan, 2019), demonstrating its value for analysing discourse surrounding gender antagonism and the underlying power relations.

4. Gender Disputes in User-Participated Moderation

This section examines the users' perspective on gender controversies in their content moderation via Weibo Jury. Launched in February 2021, Weibo Jury allows users to vote for controversial posts and collectively decide whether the selected content should stay visible. Ordinary Weibo users can join it after passing a test about platform rules, functionalities, and the community culture. Based on the Jury's votes, Weibo selectively publishes 3 to 10 representative cases per month, which contain the Jury's voting results. Once a majority of the Jury members identify a content violation, Weibo makes a final decision to reduce content visibility or (temporarily) silence relevant accounts. Although these publicly available cases in the monthly reports reflect user opinions, they are chosen and filtered by Weibo. Based on the examination of the released gender-related cases in the monthly reports, we present three findings: (a) a substantial proportion of the caseload consists of gender disputes; (b) there are conflicting standards in Weibo Jury's rulings; and (c) Weibo has discursively shifted from "gender discrimination" to "gender antagonism."

First, gender disputes constitute a substantial proportion of Weibo Jury's cases. Weibo Jury utilises users' collective knowledge to resolve controversies about ethnicity, religion, gender, region, and fandom that lack clear standards of legal violations. Gendered issues largely overlap with this aim, as gendered narratives are ubiquitous in everyday life and do not necessarily violate existing laws. From 2021 to 2025, gender-related cases constituted a substantial proportion of all cases (see Figure 1), although the proportion declined from 2023 onward.

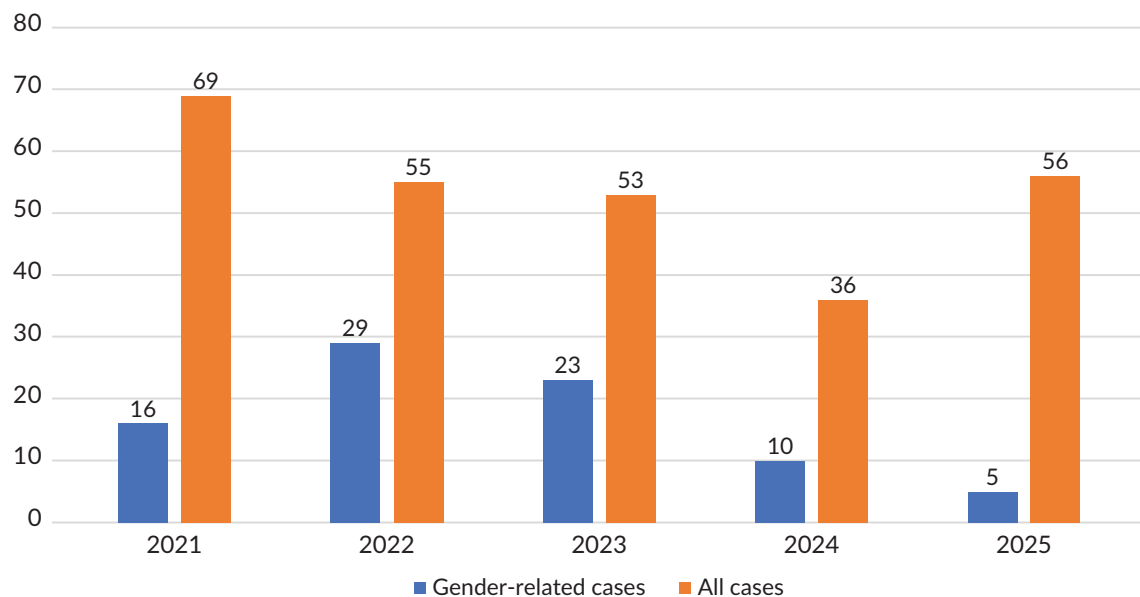


Figure 1. Yearly published caseload (gender-related, and all cases), 2021–2025.

Marriage and fertility is the most prevalent topic in gender-related cases. We have identified 16 topics from all 83 gender-related cases and calculated their frequencies (Figure 2). Marriage and fertility, and closely related topics including motherhood, bride price, and fatherhood, constitute the majority of the controversial cases. This result echoes China’s demographic transition: Young women’s attitudes towards

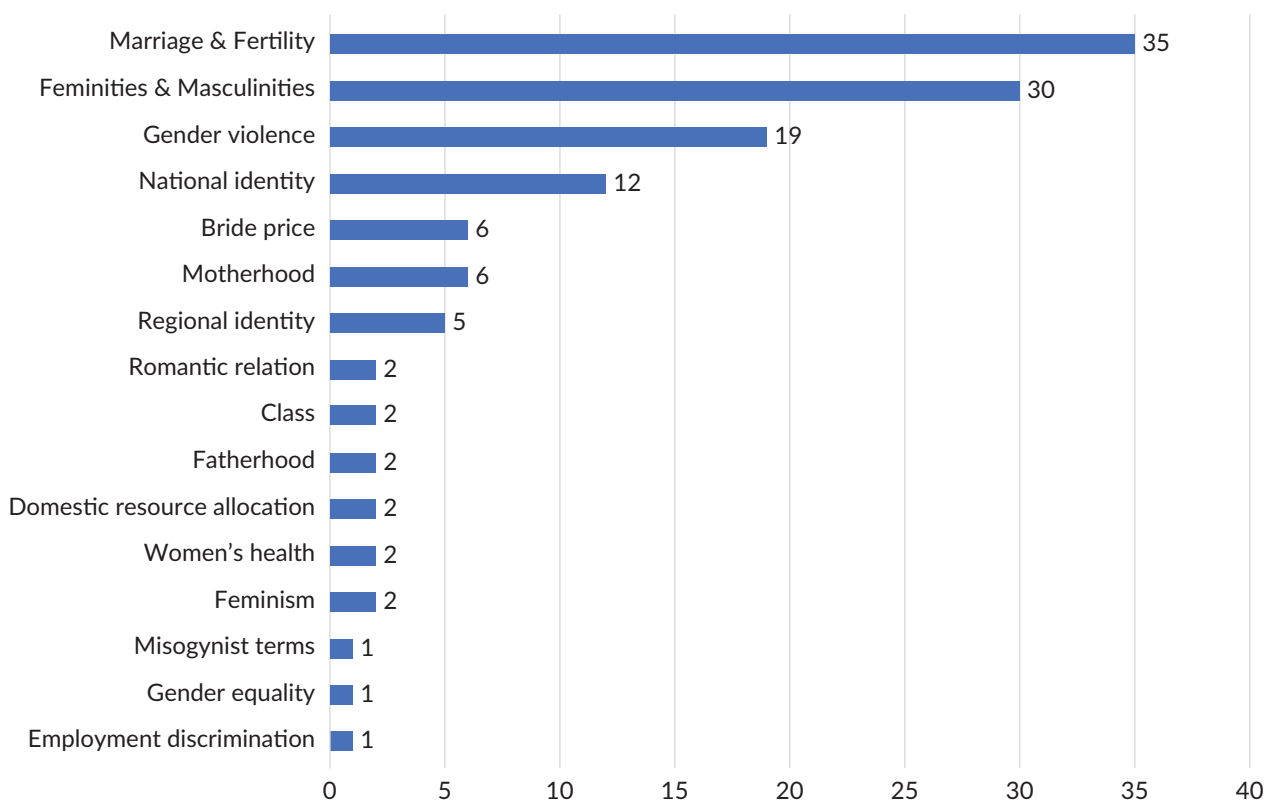


Figure 2. Frequency of topics in gender-related cases.

marriage and childbearing have shifted further away from traditional gender norms than those of men (T. Li et al., 2022; Qian & Li, 2020; Yu & Xie, 2019), making gender an increasingly disputed domain.

Second, the selected cases show diverse, even conflicting, attitudes toward gender disputes. There are ruling results showing a misogynistic stance, which aligns with the prior academic critique of the “platformisation of misogyny” (Liao, 2024). Users’ expressions can be ruled “violations,” even though their posts may contain expressions which would be reasonable from a feminist perspective. For example, in Case 1, a (likely female) user asks a question about men’s marriage infidelity. Despite empirical evidence that men commit more betrayals than women in marriage, and the absence of any toxic language (Zhang et al., 2021), this post resulted in a violation:

Case 1: #Man cheated during his girlfriend’s pregnancy and still wants to reclaim 160,000-yuan bride price# Good men are like ghosts—everyone believes they exist, but no one has ever seen one. Post more news like this so that sisters in blind love can wake up to see reality.

Weibo Jury ruling: Violation (333 votes for violation; 173 votes for no violation). (Report of August 2022)

Regarding the recurrent theme of gendered violence, Weibo also published an exemplary comment to underline platform rules (Case 2). This comment refutes the gender differences in crime, while focusing on the exaggeration in the original post. It is seemingly neutral in being alert to the stereotypes of a certain group, yet it silences women’s perspective about violence, as most victims of gender violence are women:

Case 2: #Internet celebrity live-streamer was killed by her husband, body hidden for two months# Stay away from men, live a happy life.

Comment worth drawing upon: “Using an isolated case to generalise about and attack an entire gender group, smear them, and create conflict.” (Report of November 2021)

When women’s expressions are imprecise, even with sufficient real-world evidence, they are seen as intolerable, especially when female users blend curse words into their content with reasonable claims (Case 3). The use of uncivil language does not necessarily equal toxic content, as marginalised people and activists can employ uncivil expression to raise awareness of social-political issues (Oh & Downey, 2025). In this case, the content moderation had obstructed understanding of the nuance in language use and social contexts, resulting in an unfavourable environment for expressions challenging existing norms. Moreover, Weibo’s standards and rules are opaque, as most cases (like Case 3) did not specify the reasons for the violation, which restricts users from questioning unfair gendered experiences, and helps maintain the traditional gender order:

Case 3: #Police reported a female student murdered by a neighbour villager after the college entrance exam# Are you sick or what? Why not release the suspect’s photo? Why post the young girl’s photo instead? Is blurring only the eyes enough? Her bright youth and promising life are gone, yet you publish her photo so that some vile men can comment on her appearance? That’s seriously sick. Can unethical media outlets and disgusting men just go to hell?

Weibo Jury ruling: Violation (316 votes for violation; 187 votes for no violation). (Report of June 2022)

Although the standards of Weibo Jury rulings seem opaque, some cases show that users' participation can promote gender equality:

Case 4: Does the following content have negative effects?

#A woman who suffered domestic violence 16 times and now lives with a colostomy bag undergoes a new disability reassessment# Why is intentional injury being labelled as "domestic violence"? Is it because adding the word "domestic" turns it into a shield against severe punishment? Violence is violence, and harm is harm. Why should the law treat such injuries as less serious simply because they occurred within the family?

438 users participated in the vote: 8% voted yes, and 92% voted no negative effects. Based on this result, the content is displayed normally. (Report of November 2024)

Both Weibo Jury (and Weibo at large) have the capacity to differentiate emotional expressions from discriminative content. This is probably a benefit of the feminist activism that has persisted across the last two decades.

Nevertheless, conflicting attitudes among jurors reflect diverse users' opinions, as well as the historical, dynamic, and unsettled gender politics of contemporary China, where both gender equality and the patriarchy continue to shape gendered norms. This complicates the prevailing critiques of Weibo as a misogynistic platform, since this platform, with various groups of users, has to appeal to heterogeneous values. The anti-misogynist voices of users, though not dominant at this moment, also participate in Weibo's gender discourse competition.

We also found that in early monthly reports, Weibo had used "gender discrimination" instead of "gender antagonism" to position gender disputes. For example, in the Report of October 2021, Weibo listed a "representative gender discrimination case." However, this term disappeared in May 2022. It was replaced by "gender antagonism" to describe gender disputes in Weibo's official announcements. This shift of discursive framework will be further analysed later.

The Weibo Jury voting cases reflect heightened user concern regarding gender issues, as well as their diverse perspectives. With contradictory discourses, users struggle to shape gender norms in a collective and decisive manner. Despite users' active participation, the platform retains power in participatory moderation: It unilaterally determines which controversial cases are presented to the jury, which voting results are ultimately disclosed, and what violation punishment is imposed. Consequently, user influence over the allocation of visibility regarding gender issues remains constrained.

5. Platform-Defined Gender Antagonism

Along with the mounting gender disputes, Weibo, as a for-profit platform, has to take steps to improve the user experience and sustain user activities, during which process "gender antagonism" is defined and

addressed. As the mouthpiece of Weibo, two accounts, WeiboAdministrator and WeiboVigilante, regularly publish updates on community guidelines, platform rules, and specific moderation cases. Their posts directly reveal Weibo's stance on gender controversies. Through a CDA of Weibo's official posts that mention "gender," we identify three interrelated dimensions of Weibo's governance: the institutionalisation of gender antagonism as a distinct violation category, the moralisation of content moderation judgments, and two governance models.

5.1. The Discourse Shift From Discrimination to Antagonism

In the early 2020s, Weibo recognised that gender-related issues could provoke disputes, and incorporated them into its platform governance rules. Back then, gender-related disputes were categorised as a subtype of "moral manipulation" (*daode bangjia*) under the platform's reporting rules, and gender discrimination, along with racism and regional discrimination, was classified as reportable hate speech under the category of "promoting hatred" (*xuanyang chouhen*).

However, since January 2021, "gender antagonism" has increasingly foregrounded Weibo's official communications, instead of the previously used term "gender discrimination." Additionally, "inciting gender antagonism" has become an independent and prominent violation category. In June 2025, WeiboAdministrator officially announced that its updated reporting system included "inciting gender antagonism" as a distinct violation category, defined as content that "deliberately creates or intensifies conflict between men and women by fabricating false antagonisms, framing contentious topics, inciting oppositional sentiments, maliciously labelling groups, or offering one-sided interpretations" (WeiboAdministrator, 2025).

The language shift from "gender discrimination" to "gender antagonism" warrants careful interrogation, as the two terms carry different connotations. "Gender discrimination" carries historical and political significance in China, shaped by the state's agreement on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women. It recognises women's structurally disadvantaged position and legitimises claims for gender equality. By contrast, "gender antagonism," often treated as objectively describing gender disputes, presupposes a symmetrical power relationship between men and women, reframing gender disputes as a mutual hostility and zero-sum competition. Within this discursive framework, anyone who questions the existing gender order is presumed to be hostile to the opposite side, and thus, morally problematic. This biased dichotomy largely intensified, rather than resolved, divisions between women and men.

5.2. Moralised Moderation: Perceived Illegitimate Gender Discussions

Weibo's governance of gender antagonism demonstrates a moralisation strategy, in both the definition of the category and the handling of violations. By framing gender antagonism as a moral issue that falls outside the formal legal framework, Weibo invites user participation to interpret and apply this ambiguous term in judging cases. Moreover, moralisation is reflected in how violations are addressed. In published cases, Weibo's official accounts frequently employ moralised language such as "maliciously publish harmful content" and "deliberately provoke dissonance": 79.48% of WeiboAdministrator's gender-related posts and 86.86% of WeiboVigilante's posts contain such terms. This pattern suggests that Weibo prioritises

perceived intent over content in addressing gender antagonism violations, thereby using moral judgment to justify punishments.

Although most content that elicits punishment becomes inaccessible, some typical cases remain accessible alongside Weibo's official comments to educate the public about what is considered a violation. For example, under a news post about a car accident involving a male driver, a user commented, "The man who caused the accident is hidden again?" This question is understandable in the Chinese context, where female drivers' accidents have been overrepresented, and Weibo users tend to attribute car accidents to drivers' gender when drivers happen to be female (M. Li & Luo, 2020). In this case, the user attempts to counter the bad-female-driver narrative. Although this comment did not contain any uncivil language, it was regarded as "intentionally provoking gender antagonism" despite the context (WeiboVigilante, 2023).

This moralisation strategy shifts the focus away from the content and context of gender discussions and the underlying social issues, and toward the presumed motivations of content producers. Rather than engaging with issues of gender inequality, violence, and discrimination, the platform's discourse centres on moral interpretations and judgments about the perceived malicious intent, deliberate provocation, and conspiracies behind the speech. This strategy hinders further engagement with actual social problems and delegitimises certain forms of gender critique by framing them as acts of bad intent, rather than constructive social commentary.

5.3. Handling Gender Antagonism: Two Governance Models

Weibo's moralisation of gender antagonism reflects an anti-intersectional model that isolates gender from other social issues. Originating from Black feminist thought, intersectionality has been developed by sociological scholars as a heuristic and critical framework for analysing how multiple systems of oppression (such as race, gender, and class) intersect to produce disadvantages for both individuals and groups (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1989). Rather than narrowing focus to one dimension, intersectionality underscores the irreducible complexity of gender issues and the necessity of a multidimensional perspective. For online gender disputes that involve multiple dimensions of identity and power, intersectionality provides a valuable lens through which to understand how gender conflicts in social issues are discussed, articulated, and received. However, Weibo's moderation practices systematically counteract this intersectional understanding. When users apply the gender perspective to broader social issues, the platform frequently intervenes with the justification that users "maliciously relate gender perspectives to trending social topics." This framing treats gender analysis not as a legitimate critique, but as a violation.

In seemingly apolitical everyday news, Weibo discourages the gender perspective. One trending topic, #A woman who started her new job and fell in love with her boss was scammed out of 180,000 yuan#, clearly involved elements inviting gender analysis: workplace power imbalances and gendered vulnerability in relationships. However, WeiboVigilante commented, "Of course, public news deserves discussion, but I want to say, do not immediately switch to gender antagonism mode when seeing gender-related topics" (WeiboVigilante, 2022). Despite labelling the topic as "gender-related," the platform requires users to discuss gender-related events without committing any violations, even though Weibo provides no clear standards on gender-related violations. This exerts an impractical burden on users and silences many feminist critiques.

The anti-intersectional model becomes more visible during politically sensitive events. In June 2022, the notorious Tangshan beating incident shocked the public, drawing attention to sexual harassment and violence against women in public spaces (Mao, 2022). Around 200,000 posts on this topic appeared on Weibo in a single day (Qin et al., 2024). Some discussions took a misandrist tone as resistance to sexism and patriarchy (Hou, 2025). This incident clearly involved multiple intersecting issues: sexual harassment, gender-based violence, public safety, and broader concerns about women's safety in public spaces. Weibo soon announced the removal of 14,546 posts and the silencing or shutdown of more than 9,000 accounts, with reasons including "provoking gender antagonism with extreme rhetoric," "rehashing historical statements to attack state policies, institutions, or other inappropriate content," and "promoting hatred and discrimination" (WeiboAdministrator, 2022). As a result, visible discussions tended to minimise sexism, while feminist discussions were suppressed (Qin et al., 2024). In the highlighted violations, WeiboAdministrator showcased violative posts such as "Being beaten to death like animals, Chinese women are not (treated like) human." By framing such expressions as "extreme rhetoric" (WeiboAdministrator, 2022), the platform had delegitimised female anger.

By limiting users' language use, discussion perspectives, and ideological expressions, Weibo's anti-intersectional model has narrowed the scope of legitimate participation in gender issues. Across both everyday social news and highly politicised incidents, Weibo treats gender as a separable and isolated category that should not be "maliciously related" to other social issues. It diverts discussion away from gender and replaces gender analysis with other perspectives, like class or criminal activity, resulting in the downplaying and delegitimisation of dissent against mainstream gender norms.

A contradiction in heated discussions is that the platform benefits from user engagement with trending topics, which drives attention; however, increasing engagement and hyper-visibility become threatening when they connect gender to institutional critique, structural analysis, or challenges to mainstream ideologies about marriage and fertility. Weibo's anti-intersectional model balances the bottom-up user engagement and top-down political pressure. This governance strategy creates a constrained discursive space where gender can be mentioned but not analysed, and where incidents can be discussed, but not connected to structural problems.

In addition to the anti-intersectional model, Weibo utilises constant visibility moderation to mitigate any political pressure caused by the hyper-visibility of gender disputes. Because hyper-visibility may expose governance shortcomings or social tensions, posing risks for platforms operating under Chinese regulatory oversight, platforms face pressure to manage risky discourse while sustaining engagement.

Weibo Jury report disclosures and Weibo official accounts' updates reveal a systematic pattern of visibility moderation. Weibo reduces the visibility of controversial gender-related content on two levels. First, it directly removes any posts, comments, or accounts deemed to be provoking gender antagonism, lowering visibility and influencing individual expression. Second, and more subtly, Weibo controls the visibility of gender-related cases to users through both the jury system and its monthly reports. As shown in Figure 1, the number of gender-related cases in these reports decreased from 2023 to 2025. However, announcements from WeiboAdministrator reveal a different trend: In 2025, Weibo launched seven targeted actions against gender antagonism, which was more than in previous years, alongside seven additional campaigns addressing content that provokes negative emotions, in which gender antagonism cases

constituted the majority. Together, these actions resulted in the removal of 640,000 gender antagonism posts (WeiboAdministrator, 2026b). This contrast can be attributed to two potential reasons: First, the platform has strengthened its screening of gender antagonism while limiting the user jury's access to such cases; second, Weibo selectively discloses information in its monthly reports.

This section illustrates how “gender antagonism” is institutionalised, moralised, and governed on Weibo. In this process, “gender antagonism” develops into an impactful, ambiguous notion referring to a wide array of gender discussions questioning the current gender order. Along with the platform's control of visibility, it further becomes a part of the meaning-making process and disciplining language that expands Weibo's discretion and silences feminist opinions. While these practices regulate online discourse and reinforce gender norms in online discussions, their broader implications should be understood through state–platform dynamics and the interaction between online discourse and offline social reality.

6. Above the Platform: The Role of the State

In China's platformisation, platform governance has to match the state's governmental framework (de Kloet et al., 2019; Liao, 2024). This logic also applies to gender antagonism. This section focuses on the state's role in governing online gender disputes. We will provide a more nuanced analysis by analysing the two-way circulation of the concept of “gender antagonism,” through both bottom-up and top-down processes.

Although “gender antagonism” is institutionalised by platforms, this notion is not created by the platform. Rather, it can be traced back to May 2019 discussions on a user-generated post on Zhihu, a Quora-like Q&A platform in China. In 2020, this term circulated through a diverse array of platforms, including Weibo, because of controversy surrounding Yang Li. The budding discussion drew the attention of both platforms and the state. In January 2021, WeiboAdministrator first used this term; in November 2023, the CAC (“Notice on launching the ‘Qinglang campaign to rectify online hostility’ special action,” 2023) first used it in a Qinglang campaign targeting online hostility. In this way, the concept circulated from the bottom up, and ultimately became a target of authorities' regulations. Similarly, the term “gender antagonism” has replaced “gender discrimination” in the CAC's statements. The CAC stopped using “gender discrimination” in September 2023.

It would be a misnomer to call this bottom-up circulation a democratic process of grassroots ideas setting the state's agenda. After all, the wide usage of “gender antagonism” in internet posts is not indicative of a common social understanding of gender issues. Moreover, the state does not mechanically follow the grassroots' word choice in its governance, as exemplified by this term's top-down circulation.

The CAC's adoption and re-definition of the term has narrowed the scope of “gender antagonism” in its regulatory actions, leading to the top-down institutionalisation of this term. “Gender antagonism” is an umbrella term referring to any gender issues internet users discuss. The diversity of gender disputes in Figure 2 can partially corroborate this: Despite the dominance of marriage and fertility, Weibo users discuss many other themes, and they do not necessarily centre around the opposition between men and women, as “gender antagonism” implies. In the first adoption, the CAC featured “gender antagonism” under a general frame of “stigmatising a certain group” in its Qinglang campaign. This general tone changed in its second adoption in the Qinglang campaign of December 2023, which targeted short videos that “spread wrong values of love and marriage and intentionally incite gender antagonism” (“Notice on launching the ‘Qinglang

campaign to rectify problematic content orientations in short-video' special action," 2023). In the campaign, a close connection was built between gender antagonism and social values of marriage and childbearing. In the name of rectification, the scope of "gender antagonism" narrows: In the 2025 Spring Festival Qinglang action, the CAC targeted content that "intentionally advocates anti-marriage and anti-fertility values, propagates extreme feminism, and incites gender antagonism" ("Notice on launching the 'Qinglang 2025 Spring Festival online environment rectification' campaign," 2025). The campaign targeted anti-marriage groups and so-called extreme feminists, who were predominantly young women (Guan, 2025; H. Wang et al., 2025). In this way, "gender antagonism" is redefined as anti-marriage and -fertility values and extreme feminism, which should be understood against the background of China's crisis of population reproduction (Yu & Xie, 2019). The state promotes the reproduction of life to alleviate the crisis.

In this way, "gender antagonism" deviates from its surface meaning, which theoretically signifies a well-matched competition between men and women. Practically, its criticism is increasingly being directed toward women who are not subject to traditional marriage patterns and the reproductive role. The CAC's redefinition further strengthens the inherent bias of "gender antagonism."

With its disciplinary power, the state has enforced the governance of gender antagonism top-down within its administrative power. From 2023 to 2025, Weibo continually launched campaigns against gender antagonism to meet the CAC's requirements, removing millions of posts (WeiboAdministrator, 2023, 2026a). The state's governance of the platform has arguably been effective: The visibility of online gender dispute disclosures has decreased since 2023, as discussed above. Yet this comes with limitations, manifested as a narrow understanding of gender disputes and the absence of gender equality. Thus, the state's attention to gender disputes has been reduced to themes of marriage and fertility, which can be attributed to both the prevalence of these topics and China's emerging population crisis. Amid declining marriage and birth rates, China has introduced multiple pro-natal measures, and the ideological regulation of gender antagonism should be seen as part of the biopolitical governance. Against this backdrop, framing these feminism-based reflections as inciting gender antagonism reflects "a connective strategy, part of the practice of hegemony which enlarges the sphere of influence of the state into the private sphere" (McRobbie, 1994, p. 201). Without legal reasons to eliminate women's questioning of current marriage patterns and gender roles, "gender antagonism" offers a discursive tool to delegitimise ideas that challenge current gender norms and trigger anxiety between governing authorities. The state's ambivalence towards women's liberation resurfaces when population reproduction becomes problematic.

The actions in China's biopolitical governance reveal that gender disputes are regarded as merely an online discursive battle, instead of a symptom of fundamental demographic change. This is a problem. Posts containing anti-marriage values often disappear, but the young generation of Chinese women longing for gender equality and their tension with traditional gender norms cannot. Without addressing their expectation of gender equality, it remains challenging for the state to alleviate the population crisis and maintain its legitimacy in social governance.

Gender has become a sensitive domain on Chinese platforms. While international platforms, such as TikTok, have explicitly defined misogyny as a violation in their community guidelines, largely reflecting the hegemony of gender equality shaped by successive waves of Western feminist activism, China's platform governance has been deliberately distanced from feminism. Where users' participation is encouraged, platforms' rules remain

ambiguous, and the state maintains an ambivalent stance toward gender equality. In this context, a pattern of “moralised platform governance” emerges, in which moralisation is mobilised as a strategy for maintaining existing gender norms and expanding state influence in a platformised society. This moralised governance pattern is prominent in areas that fall beyond the formal legal framework, yet may challenge the state’s agenda, such as facilitating marriage and fertility.

In this section, we identify the dominant role of the state in mainstreaming the “gender antagonism” discourse. The adoption of this term in official regulatory documents serves to the meaning-making and legitimisation of gender antagonism in a top-down manner. The punishment of prohibited content, including voices challenging dominant gender norms, is implemented through the administrative control of platform resources. However, while the state seems powerful in governing online gender discourse, it is not all-powerful, particularly in biopolitical governance, as it eschews the long-lasting gender tensions in China’s modernisation.

7. Conclusion

This research focuses on the wide circulation and the changing definition of “gender antagonism” in China. Examining the discourse construction on Weibo through a power lens, we argue that gender antagonism is not a neutral description of gender disputes, but a discursive framework that reinforces existing gender orders and serves biopolitical governance in China. While users contribute to its emergence, both platforms and the state, holding more meaning-making power and communicative resources, leverage the term’s ambiguity and institutionalise it in platform governance practices. This discursive framework marginalises gender equality and upholds hostility toward women who are unwilling to follow the existing gender order, particularly the reproductive roles women had previously taken. We conceptualise the governance of highly visible controversies beyond formal legal frameworks, such as gender disputes, mediated through moralised and ambiguous standards, as moralised platform governance. Despite the short-term effectiveness of invisibilising gender disputes, the long-standing tensions between the state’s socialist commitment, the patriarchal tradition, the platform’s desire for users and profits, and young women’s aspirations for gender equality persist. As such, the lack of gender equality consensus will continue to pose challenges to the state’s governance of the population reproduction crisis, and to its own legitimacy.

This research contributes to platform governance and gender studies by developing a bifocal perspective on power, and by emphasising the local history of gender politics. Through the power perspective, we reveal how moralised governance operates via the ambiguous term “gender antagonism,” which appears to be neutral but embeds state ideologies of social stability within regulatory practices. Our analysis shows that the production of gender discourses is increasingly entangled with platform governance, calling for continued scholarly attention and critical examination.

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Data Availability

All data generated or analysed during this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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About the Authors



Zexu Guan (PhD) is a lecturer in the School of International Politics and Communication at Beijing Language and Culture University. Her research explores gender, the internet, and health communication in contemporary China. Her recent publications have appeared in *Journal of Medical Internet Research* and *Global Media and China*.



Zheyu Shang is a PhD candidate in the Institute for Area Studies, Leiden University. Her doctoral project focuses on China's online propaganda strategies in a platform age. Her research interests include platform governance, political communication, and youth culture in mainland China. Her work has appeared in venues such as *Information, Communication & Society* and the *Routledge Handbook of Chinese Media*.

Making Mothers Responsible After Fukushima in Japanese Media

Yasuhito Abe 

Department of Media, Journalism and Communications, Doshisha University, Japan

Correspondence: Yasuhito Abe (yabe@mail.doshisha.ac.jp)

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Abstract

This study examines how mother–child evacuation following the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster has been discursively constructed in Japanese mainstream newspapers over the first decade after the accident. Drawing on theories of risk society, mediapolis, and proper distance, and employing a longitudinal critical discourse analysis of five major national newspapers published between 2011 and 2021, this article demonstrates that Japanese newspapers consistently portrayed mother–child evacuation as a social wrong, while simultaneously individualizing moral responsibility by foregrounding mothers as primary caregivers. Fathers, children, and institutional actors, including the Japanese government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company, Incorporated (TEPCO), were largely marginalized as morally responsible subjects. This gendered framing stabilized a particular moral order in which women’s precautionary decisions were moralized, while structural and institutional responsibility was backgrounded. By foregrounding gender as a structuring principle of mediated moral relations, this study advances Silverstone’s concepts of mediapolis and proper distance and contributes to debates on media, morality, and risk governance in post-disaster societies.

Keywords

Fukushima; gender; Japan; mass media; mediapolis; morality

1. Introduction

On March 11, 2011, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake and the ensuing tsunami struck northeastern Japan, precipitating core meltdowns at the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant. Beyond its immediate physical devastation, the Fukushima disaster, as the first nuclear disaster in the digital age, generated a prolonged and deeply contested communication space surrounding health, environmental safety, and responsibility (e.g., Abe, 2014, 2015, 2023a; Berti-Suman et al., 2020; Kimura, 2016; Kiyohara, 2017; Kuchinskaya, 2019; Morita et al., 2013; Plantin, 2015; Tam, 2020; Van Oudheusden & Abe, 2021). As competing information

about safety and exposure proliferated in the aftermath of the disaster, large-scale displacement within Fukushima Prefecture and beyond emerged not only as a response to physical contamination but also as a consequence of fractured trust, contested expertise, and uneven communication (e.g., Hasegawa & Yamamoto, 2017). Evacuation, in this sense, represents one of the most consequential social outcomes of the Fukushima disaster, underscoring how the event unfolded not only as a technological and environmental disaster but also as a crisis of communication.

Evacuation after Fukushima was never a uniform or uncontested process (e.g., Kwansei Gakuin Daigaku Saigai Fukkō Seido Kenkyūjo et al., 2015; Toda, 2018). While some residents were compelled to evacuate from areas officially designated by the state as posing unacceptable threats to health and safety, others left from outside these zones. The latter movements have generally been categorized as *jishu hinan* or *jishuteki hinan*, translated as “voluntary evacuation.” As many critics pointed out, this label is far from politically neutral (e.g., Toda, 2016a). By foregrounding voluntariness, it implicitly reallocates responsibility from the state to individuals and families, framing evacuation as a matter of personal choice rather than collective protection or institutional failure. Within the category of voluntary evacuation, one form that became particularly visible and contentious was *boshi hinan*, or “mother–child evacuation” (e.g., Kana, 2013; Morimatsu, 2013; C. Yoshida, 2016). Toda (2016a) defines mother–child evacuees as “families in which, in order to protect children from health effects of radioactive substances, mothers voluntarily evacuate with their children while fathers remain behind, due to employment constraints” (p. 6). Although not unprecedented, similar patterns were observed following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster (e.g., Adams et al., 2002). In post-Fukushima Japanese society, mother–child evacuation often involved relocation to other regions, such as Yamagata and Okayama Prefectures, generating significant social challenges such as economic strain and family separation (e.g., Kwansei Gakuin Daigaku Saigai Fukkō Seido Kenkyūjo et al., 2015). In some cases, however, these pressures proved devastating, as seen in the widely reported 2017 suicide of a mother who had evacuated with her child to Yokohama (Aoki, 2021). Mother–child evacuation thus sits at the intersection of gender and risk governance, foregrounding a significant social wrong in the gendered allocation of risk and responsibility, and raising questions about who is expected to act under conditions of scientific uncertainty and whose actions are rendered morally appropriate.

A substantial body of scholarship has examined mother–child evacuation following the Fukushima disaster (e.g., Konno & Sato, 2014; Matsunaga, 2018; Sklyar, 2021; Tanaka, 2016; Tsutsui et al., 2020; Yamane, 2013). Collectively, the previous literature has indicated that mother–child evacuation after nuclear disaster cannot be understood as a singular or homogeneous phenomenon. Rather, it is characterized by diverse motivations, constraints, and trajectories, shaped by class, region, family structure, and access to resources. While these studies have been indispensable in illuminating the everyday realities of those involved, including mothers, fathers, children, and in some cases, grandparents, they have largely focused on individual experiences or survey-based data.

Building on prior scholarship, this study advances the literature in two key respects. First, rather than focusing on individual narratives, it systematically analyzes mainstream media coverage to examine how mother–child evacuation has been framed and reframed within Japanese public discourse. This approach illuminates how those involved in mother–child evacuation have been collectively debated and politicized through media representation. It also indicates which aspects of mother–child evacuation are foregrounded, normalized, problematized, or rendered invisible in public debate, extending the focus beyond those directly

concerned with evacuation, including mothers who evacuated with their children while leaving their partners behind. Second, this study adopts a longitudinal perspective to trace changes in media portrayals of mother–child evacuation over time. As will be illuminated in the next section, historical context matters profoundly for how mother–child evacuation has been positioned since the Fukushima disaster. Rather than relying on snapshot surveys or one-off qualitative interviews, this study examines the extent to which representations of mother–child evacuation have changed or remained unchanged across different phases of the post-disaster period, thereby shedding light upon the temporal dynamics through which certain perspectives gain dominance while others recede.

Accordingly, this study examines how mother–child evacuation has been discursively constructed in Japanese mainstream media. By focusing on media representations over time, it seeks to show how particular forms of family separation and risk-taking were framed as legitimate, problematic, or marginal within the broader politics of post-Fukushima recovery. Silverstone (2007) noted as follows:

The mediated images of strangers increasingly define what actually constitutes the world....And since it is the relationship we have with others which defines the nature of our own being, then such links as we might have with these mediated individuals are increasingly becoming the crucial ones for us too. (p. 4)

As such, the study contributes to media and communication research by investigating not merely how mother–child evacuation was publicly produced through discourse, where power and morality are continuously negotiated, but also how their representations shaped what is termed post-Fukushima Japanese society. This study addresses the following research questions: (a) How did Japanese mainstream media (major Japanese national newspapers in particular) portray mother–child evacuation from March 12, 2011, to March 12, 2021, in post-Fukushima Japanese society? and (b) How did these representations contribute to the construction of gendered moral responsibility and proper distance between audiences and those involved in mother–child evacuation?

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The next section provides historical and institutional context, with particular attention to legal frameworks relevant to mother–child evacuation. The third section outlines the theoretical framework. The fourth section describes the methodology, followed by a presentation of the key findings. The final section discusses the implications of these findings and suggests directions for future research.

2. Contextualizing Mother–Child Evacuation After Fukushima

The Fukushima disaster prompted a significant reconfiguration of regulatory and discursive frameworks surrounding radiation exposure in Japan, which in turn shaped the conditions under which mother–child evacuation emerged. Prior to the disaster, the Japanese government had set the annual additional radiation exposure limit—excluding natural background radiation and medical exposure—at no more than 1 mSv per year. In the wake of the disaster, however, it drew on Recommendation 109 of the International Commission on Radiological Protection, published in 2008, which proposed an annual additional exposure range of 20 to 100 mSv and served as an authoritative reference point for post-accident radiation governance.

On April 19, 2011, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology issued a notice entitled *Provisional Guidelines for the Use of School Buildings and School Grounds in Fukushima Prefecture*, setting a *provisional* reference range of 1–20 mSv per year for decisions regarding the use of school facilities in “areas excluding those designated as evacuation zones, as well as areas that are to be designated as planned evacuation zones or emergency evacuation preparation zones” in Fukushima Prefecture (Bandō et al., 2008, para. 4). As a result, a post-disaster environment emerged in which children’s attendance at school in Fukushima Prefecture under annual additional radiation exposure levels up to 20 times higher than the pre-disaster standard was institutionally framed as morally acceptable. More broadly, this shift reflects the production of a discursive and institutional space in post-Fukushima Japanese society in which differential radiation exposure limits for children inside and outside Fukushima Prefecture were normalized.

However, the government’s response drew substantial criticism, in part because it was widely recognized from the outset that the health effects of radiation exposure are more uncertain for children than for adults, thereby contributing to both the emergence and subsequent expansion of mother–child evacuation (e.g., Takahashi & Koike, 2018). In December 2011, the government declared the nuclear accident to be “under control,” yet mother–child evacuation continued.

Against this backdrop, the Act on the Promotion of Measures to Support the Lives of Disaster Victims, Including Children Affected by the Tokyo Electric Power Company Nuclear Accident (hereafter the Child Victims Support Act) was enacted in June 2012 through cross-party cooperation that transcended political affiliations (Löschke, 2026). A defining feature of the Act is that it extends its scope beyond evacuees displaced under government orders to include those who evacuated on their own initiative, commonly referred to as “voluntary” evacuees. Equally significant, Article 1 of the Act explicitly acknowledges that “the risks posed to human health by radiation from those radioactive materials have not yet been sufficiently clarified scientifically” (Government of Japan, 2012), thereby recognizing scientific uncertainty regarding the health effects of radiation exposure as a legitimate basis for policy intervention. Article 2, Paragraph 2 further affirms the right to evacuate, redefining the moral boundaries within which precautionary decisions about children’s protection were made. Thus, the Act institutionalized both the recognition of uncertainty and the legitimacy of evacuation as a moral and political choice.

However, the Act functioned primarily as a framework law that articulated general principles for supporting the livelihoods of disaster victims. Consequently, the formulation of concrete support measures was delegated to basic policies and implementation plans developed by the relevant ministries and agencies, including the Reconstruction Agency (e.g., Hino, 2014; Toda, 2016b). Although the Act called for the formulation of concrete measures to support affected persons with special consideration for children, policy development was effectively delayed and diluted by the Japanese government, resulting in limited institutional support for those who chose to evacuate (e.g., Hino, 2014; Toda, 2016b).

This policy trajectory unfolded alongside a broader political shift toward emphasizing recovery and normalization. In September 2013, then Prime Minister Shinzō Abe’s statement that the Fukushima situation was “under control,” delivered during Japan’s bid for the 2020 Summer Tokyo Olympic Games, symbolically marked the acceleration of a recovery-oriented narrative (Abe, 2024). Within this framework, the continuation of evacuation, “voluntary” evacuation in particular, came to be increasingly positioned as incompatible with national recovery. This discursive shift was institutionalized in March 2017, when, as part

of the return-promotion policy, free housing support for evacuees outside officially designated evacuation zones, including “voluntary” evacuees, was discontinued. Ultimately, reducing the number of evacuees, including mother–child evacuees, came to function as a tacit benchmark of post-disaster recovery. It was within this shifting political and institutional context that media representations of mother–child evacuation acquired particular significance.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study examines mediated discourses surrounding mother–child evacuation in Japan through the lenses of Beck’s (1992) risk society and Silverstone’s (2007) theorization of the mediapolis and proper distance.

Beck (1992) characterizes contemporary society as a risk society, with particular attention to the role of science and technology. In *Risk Society*, he argues that the overdevelopment of science and technology, which once functioned as a central driver of modernization, has paradoxically generated unprecedented forms of risk. Crucially, the scale and scope of these new risks are often scientifically incalculable. Nuclear risk represents a paradigmatic example. As a consequence of advanced scientific and technological development, nuclear disasters produce outcomes whose magnitude and long-term effects are inherently unpredictable and incalculable, while the health impacts of radioactive materials remain subject to scientific uncertainty, as articulated in the Child Victims Support Act. Rather than eliminating uncertainty, scientific and technological progress thus increasingly exposes its own limits. According to Beck (1992), it is under these conditions that contemporary society comes to be structured as a risk society.

Drawing on this perspective, numerous scholars have conceptualized post-Fukushima Japanese society as a risk society (e.g., Abe, 2023b; Beck et al., 2011). Japanese society faces the dual challenge of decommissioning the wrecked Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant while continuing to operate nuclear reactors to secure energy supplies, and this structural tension has profoundly shaped the contours of post-Fukushima Japan. Building on this body of scholarship, this study similarly situates mother–child evacuation within the context of a post-Fukushima Japanese society understood as a risk society. Rather than portraying mothers who evacuated with their children as overly risk-averse actors who allegedly lacked scientific understanding of radioactive materials, this article conceptualizes mother–child evacuation as a precautionary practice shaped by scientific uncertainty and contested forms of risk governance.

Furthermore, this study theorizes the role of the media in post-Fukushima Japanese society. In *Media and Morality*, Silverstone (2007) draws on Hannah Arendt’s understanding of communication and power to reconceptualize global media as a moral space. He advanced the notion of the mediapolis as follows:

The mediapolis is...the mediated space of appearance in which the world appears and in which the world is constituted in its worldliness, and through which we learn about those who are and who are not like us. It is through communications conducted through the mediapolis that we are constructed as human (or not), and it is through the mediapolis that public and political life increasingly comes to emerge at all levels of the body politic (or not). (Silverstone, 2007, p. 31)

Building on this formulation, Silverstone (2007) conceptualized media as a public space of appearance in which distinctions between “us” and “them” are produced. To further develop the notion of the mediapolis,

he foregrounded the issue of proximity, which structures relations between the self and the other through both difference and shared identity. In this context, Silverstone introduced the concept of proper distance, defined as follows:

The importance of understanding the more or less precise degree of proximity required in our mediated interrelationships if we are to create and sustain a sense of the other sufficient not just for reciprocity but for a duty of care, obligation, and responsibility, as well as understanding. (Silverstone, 2007, p. 47)

While Silverstone's work is centrally concerned with the mediated space of appearance and the mediated proximity between "us" and "them," it gives limited attention to the role of gender in shaping these mediated relations. By integrating perspectives from risk society theory and the concept of the mediapolis, together with the notion of proper distance and a gender-sensitive approach, this study examines how major Japanese newspapers portrayed mother-child evacuation in terms of risk, gendered responsibility, and moral distance in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

4. Method

4.1. Dataset

The data for this study were retrieved from the digital repositories of the Tokyo editions of the *Asahi Shimbun*, the *Mainichi Shimbun*, the *Yomiuri Shimbun*, the *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, and the *Sankei Shimbun*. These five newspapers were selected due to their status as Japan's principal national dailies. Commonly referred to as the country's five major newspapers, they provide valuable insight into dominant media discourses at the national level (e.g., Fujitake & Takeshita, 2018). The *Asahi* and the *Mainichi* are widely characterized as liberal newspapers, whereas the *Yomiuri* and the *Sankei* are generally identified with a conservative orientation. The *Nihon Keizai* occupies a distinctive position as a financial daily (e.g., Fujitake & Takeshita, 2018).

The period of data collection covered articles published over the 10 years following the triple disaster on March 11, 2011, namely from March 12, 2011, to March 12, 2021. During the initial stage of data retrieval, the search focused on articles that explicitly included the term "boshi hinan" (mother-child evacuation). The unit of analysis was the individual newspaper article. This initial search yielded 20 articles from the *Asahi*, 37 from the *Mainichi*, 12 from the *Yomiuri*, 7 from the *Nihon Keizai*, and 13 from the *Sankei*.

To refine the dataset, articles that merely mentioned "boshi hinan" in passing, without substantively engaging with the concept or describing related actors, experiences, or practices, were excluded from the analysis. Specifically, articles were removed if the term appeared only as an undeveloped reference, such as in lists without further elaboration (e.g., "Shūinsen kōyaku tokushū," 2012). After this filtering process, the final dataset comprised 15 articles from the *Asahi*, 25 from the *Mainichi*, 8 from the *Yomiuri*, 5 from the *Nihon Keizai*, and 10 from the *Sankei*. These articles constituted the corpus for the subsequent analysis.

All materials analyzed in this study were publicly available newspaper articles, and no human subjects were involved. Accordingly, ethical approval was not required. The data collection process was completed in January 2026.

4.2. Data Analysis

This study employs Fairclough's (2016) dialectical-relational approach to critical discourse analysis to examine how major Japanese newspapers position those involved in mother-child evacuation in post-Fukushima Japanese society. Fairclough conceptualizes discourse broadly as semiosis and defines semiosis as "an element of the social process which is *dialectically* related to others" (Fairclough, 2016, p. 87, emphasis in original). In doing so, the dialectical-relational approach examines the relationship between semiotic processes and other elements of social practice. As with other approaches to critical discourse analysis, it takes a social wrong, such as "injustice, inequality, lack of freedom, etc." (Fairclough, 2016, p. 88), and its semiotic dimensions as its central analytical focus. Referring to social wrongs as "aspects of social systems, forms or orders which are detrimental to human well-being, which could in principle be ameliorated if not eliminated, though perhaps only through major changes in these systems, forms or orders" (Fairclough, 2016, p. 91), Fairclough highlights the importance of drawing on "relevant bodies of theory in various disciplines to go beyond and beneath the obviousness of the topic" (Fairclough, 2016, p. 92). In addition, the dialectical-relational approach seeks to identify obstacles to addressing that social wrong, to consider whether the existing social order depends on its continuation, and to explore possible ways of overcoming these challenges.

The analytical process unfolded iteratively across three interrelated stages. First, all articles were read multiple times over an extended period, with intervals of several weeks between readings, to enhance reflexivity and mitigate the influence of initial interpretative impressions. This iterative reading process enabled the identification of recurring themes and facilitated the examination of dialectical relations between mother-child evacuation as semiosis and other social elements. A central focus was placed on the representation of key actors, including mothers, fathers, children, and institutional actors such as the Japanese government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company, Incorporated (TEPCO). During this stage, initial coding categories were developed inductively, focusing on how responsibility, risk, and moral evaluation were articulated in the text.

Second, these preliminary codes were refined into a set of analytical categories: (a) the attribution of responsibility, (b) the representation of hardship, and (c) the positioning of social actors. These categories informed the analysis of the relationships between mother-child evacuation as semiosis and other elements within the broader social order. Close attention was given to patterns of foregrounding and backgrounding. In this study, foregrounding is operationally defined as the discursive emphasis placed on specific actors or issues through repeated mention, detailed description, and narrative centrality, whereas backgrounding refers to their marginalization or omission, including limited presence, indirect reference, or absence from causal explanations.

Third, discursive patterns were further examined in terms of how they were articulated across the corpus over time, with attention to both consistency and variation across newspapers and different phases of the post-disaster period. Rather than relying on isolated examples, patterns were identified based on their recurrence across multiple articles and outlets. To ensure analytical rigor, coding and interpretation were conducted iteratively, with repeated comparison across articles and categories. Special consideration was given to deviant or contrasting cases, such as articles that explicitly addressed the roles of fathers or institutional actors, in order to avoid overgeneralization. While interpretative in nature, the study was

conducted through a systematic and iterative process. This iterative and comparative procedure enhances the transparency and robustness of the findings and aligns with the dialectical-relational approach.

Following this methodological orientation, this study draws on the theoretical frameworks of the risk society, the mediapolis, and proper distance to construct mother-child evacuation as an object of analysis within the Japanese media landscape. Focusing on five major national newspapers published between March 2011 and March 2021, this study systematically examines how those involved in mother-child evacuation were framed in news discourse, with particular attention to how media discourse articulated issues of injustice, responsibility, and moral distance in the aftermath of the Fukushima nuclear disaster.

5. Results

Most notably, major Japanese national newspapers framed mother-child evacuation as a social wrong requiring redress. Their coverage frequently emphasized the difficulties faced by mothers who evacuated with their children while their partners remained in their hometowns. In particular, many accounts focused on mothers' anxieties about the potential health effects of radiation exposure on children, as well as the economic hardship associated with evacuation, among other concerns (e.g., Harumashi & Yamauchi, 2013; "Josei to shigoto (3)," 2012; Kobayashi, 2014). For example, the *Yomiuri Shimbun* introduces various difficulties faced by mothers engaged in mother-child evacuation and concludes the article by citing an expert perspective as follows:

Mieko Takenobu, co-representative of the "Great East Japan Earthquake Women's Support Network," which advocates support for women's employment, and professor at Wakō University, stated that "many women who have evacuated voluntarily experience hesitation and a sense of guilt. Their circumstances and ways of thinking differ, including how long they choose to remain away. In this unprecedented situation, it is necessary to listen to individual circumstances and provide mutual support so that women can secure employment." ("Josei to shigoto (3)," 2012, p. 14)

By incorporating such expert commentary, the article framed mother-child evacuation as an instance of a social wrong requiring redress, including access to secure employment. As a result, mother-child evacuation was primarily constructed as a set of challenges encountered by mothers as key agents at evacuation destinations. By contrast, only a small number of articles highlighted the challenges faced by fathers who sent their wives and children to an evacuation destination while continuing to live in Fukushima Prefecture ("Kibō shimbun," 2013; Maeda, 2014). In addition, some articles explicitly addressed mother-child evacuation by focusing on both mothers and fathers (e.g., "Yureru kosodate," 2015). One article published in 2015, four years after the disaster, stated as follows:

In the accident at the Tokyo Electric Power Company, Incorporated's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, approximately 46,000 people from Fukushima Prefecture were forced to evacuate outside the prefecture, and fractures have also emerged within families. "Others are living their lives as usual. If we are to continue this double life, then we should separate." A woman in her forties who evacuated to Yamagata Prefecture with her two daughters after the nuclear accident was presented with a request for divorce last year by her husband, who had been living alone at their home in Fukushima City. "We decided to evacuate after discussing it as a couple, putting the children first,

but...” At the evacuee support center Oide in Yonezawa City, Yamagata Prefecture, mother–child evacuees who face similar concerns gather. Hiroshi Ueno (50), the center’s secretary-general, says, “Many men are also under stress because they cannot talk about their family situations at work. I hope this can be a place where people can feel that ‘we are not the only ones struggling,’ and use that as a starting point toward finding solutions.” (“Fukkō no danmen,” 2015, p. 39)

When reporting on mother–child evacuation, focusing exclusively on mothers as the subjects of coverage and framing the associated difficulties as problems borne solely by mothers risks marginalizing fathers as participants in mother–child evacuation. By contrast, the article does not depict mothers alone as struggling as a result of the evacuation. Instead, it presents a more balanced account in which fathers are also positioned as actors in mother–child evacuation and are shown to face difficulties comparable to those experienced by mothers. Nevertheless, across the research period examined in this study, major Japanese national newspapers rarely addressed fathers as participants in mother–child evacuation, suggesting that media coverage implicitly presupposed a moral responsibility whereby the burdens and difficulties associated with mother–child evacuation were expected to be borne primarily by mothers.

The questions, then, concern which types of difficulties and challenges faced by mothers were foregrounded in Japanese newspaper coverage over the 10-year period. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the focus of coverage of mother–child evacuation did not change substantially over time. This continuity reflects persistent and largely unaddressed configurations of the challenges encountered by mothers who evacuated with their children. Most notably, Japanese newspapers consistently highlighted the economic hardship associated with prolonged evacuation, including housing insecurity and employment difficulties (e.g., Inoue, 2020; “Jishu hinansha modoru,” 2015; “Josei to shigoto (3),” 2012). Coverage also frequently addressed mental health-related issues, particularly family-related strain, such as tensions between evacuated mothers and their non-evacuated partners (e.g., Hino & Kiura, 2015; Ōkubo, 2017). These concerns remained a central and recurring feature of newspaper portrayals of mother–child evacuation throughout the research period from March 2011 to March 2021. In addition, some articles highlighted mothers’ anxieties regarding the potential health effects of radiation exposure on children (e.g., “Kibō shimbun,” 2013). Others addressed concerns related to nuclear safety more broadly, including the restart of nuclear power plants, decontamination, the lifting of evacuation orders, and the resumption of everyday life (e.g., “Saikadō zenshin ni ikidōri,” 2013; “Tonai no hinansha,” 2015). These mediated challenges illustrate how different dimensions of mother–child evacuation were selectively foregrounded and repeatedly rearticulated over time. In particular, anxieties about radiation exposure and concerns regarding nuclear safety closely correspond to forms of uncertainty and indeterminacy that are central to theories of risk society.

These mediated challenges were accompanied by specific attributions of gendered moral responsibility. While numerous studies show that dominant gender norms were maintained or even reinforced in post-Fukushima Japanese society (e.g., Morioka, 2014), Japanese newspaper coverage frequently reproduced such norms by framing mothers as primary caregivers who were morally obligated to prioritize their children’s health and well-being. One article, for example, states as follows:

“All I wanted was to raise my children safely and freely, surrounded by nature,” said a 40-year-old woman who had evacuated with her nine-year-old son to her parents’ home in Akita City. In April last year, she moved there from Kōriyama City in Fukushima Prefecture, leaving her husband behind. “*Only a mother*

can protect her children.” That conviction guided her decision. Her fourth-grade son now spends his days playing outdoors, covered in mud and dirt. Her husband, however, maintains that there is no need to worry about low-dose radiation exposure. (Yamada, 2012, emphasis added)

Mother–child evacuation was thus consistently presented as a naturalized extension of maternal responsibility, granting moral agency almost exclusively to mothers while largely marginalizing fathers as morally responsible actors in relation to children’s well-being. Notable exceptions emerged in a limited number of cases in which fathers were portrayed either as morally responsible for supporting their evacuated partners and children (e.g., Maeda, 2014) or as morally irresponsible, particularly when they were depicted as urging the withdrawal of such support (e.g., Hino & Kiura, 2015). Moreover, although children constituted a central justification for evacuation, their voices remained largely invisible in media discourse, with only a small number of exceptions (e.g., T. Yoshida, 2014). Instead, mothers’ voices and narratives functioned as mediating sites through which children’s interests and concerns were represented and articulated. These patterns indicate that mother–child evacuation was constructed as a social wrong in profoundly gendered terms in major Japanese newspapers.

More crucially, Japanese newspaper coverage rarely interrogated the moral responsibility of TEPCO or the Japanese government for constituting the very conditions that necessitated mother–child evacuation. Among the 63 articles in the corpus, only five articles published in the *Asahi*, the *Mainichi*, and the *Sankei* addressed these actors, of which three referred to both TEPCO and the Japanese government, while two referred only to the Japanese government. One article explicitly stated as follows:

Mother–child evacuees also face problems such as the absence of fathers and economic hardship resulting from maintaining a double life....Behind the fragmentation of families lies distrust toward the government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company, Incorporated. As troubles at nuclear power plants, including leaks of contaminated water, continue, evacuees are unable to discern a clear path toward the resolution of the accident. Decontamination has been delayed, and anxieties about radiation have not been dispelled. In order to restore family structures, the government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company, Incorporated must regain public trust by working toward the resolution of the accident and post-disaster recovery. (Kobayashi, 2014)

This article stands out in explicitly foregrounding the moral responsibility of TEPCO and the Japanese government for generating the conditions that gave rise to mother–child evacuation. By contrast, the majority of newspaper coverage contributed to the backgrounding of institutional responsibility while foregrounding gendered and individualized accounts of hardship. In doing so, Japanese newspapers consistently emphasized mothers’ moral responsibility and suffering, while remaining largely silent about the actors and structures that produced the conditions necessitating mother–child evacuation. Notably, such articles did not explicitly describe mothers engaged in mother–child evacuation as abnormal or exceptional, nor did they position them as incompatible with national recovery. However, by decontextualizing these experiences from the broader historical and political conditions that produced them, such coverage instead adopted a neoliberal perspective that rendered these mothers isolated within post-Fukushima Japanese society, where the moral responsibility of the state and public authorities to compensate and support those engaged in mother–child evacuation has increasingly been obscured and eroded, and where their circumstances are increasingly framed as matters of individual responsibility (e.g., C. Yoshida, 2016).

Accordingly, mothers were frequently constructed as mediated, morally responsible subjects whose experiences were filtered through normative expectations of care and sacrifice, while children appeared primarily as unmediated figures of vulnerability. From a dialectical-relational perspective, this mode of representation can be understood as part of a broader social order in which the social wrong of mother-child evacuation is individualized and depoliticized, while the institutional responsibility of TEPCO and the Japanese government is backgrounded and rendered effectively unaccountable.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Said (1997) conceptualizes “covering” as having a dual meaning: covering as reporting on events, and covering as concealing or obscuring the underlying truths of those events. He uses this conceptual framework to examine how Western media portray and systematically distort Islam. A comparable pattern emerges in Japanese newspapers’ coverage of mother-child evacuation. The findings suggest that Japanese newspapers covered mother-child evacuation in the first sense by foregrounding struggling mothers as individualized subjects of moral responsibility, while simultaneously covering it in the second sense by obscuring and effectively absolving the moral responsibility of their partners, TEPCO, and the Japanese government.

Although mother-child evacuation was implicitly recognized as a social wrong, major Japanese newspapers nonetheless contributed to sustaining an existing social order. Through such representations, mothers engaged in mother-child evacuation became doubly victimized within post-Fukushima public discourse. First, major Japanese newspapers reinforced the normative assumption that responsibility for children’s care rests primarily with mothers, including in extreme cases involving those who later took their own lives. This normative assumption is not unique to post-Fukushima Japan (e.g., Schmidt et al., 2023). At the same time, the notion of motherhood in Japan, grounded in maternal love for children, can serve as a basis for women’s engagement in public issues, including in the aftermath of the Fukushima disaster (e.g., Kimura, 2016). While media discourse may have provided symbolic resources for such engagement by reinforcing gendered expectations of care, it simultaneously constrained mothers within a hegemonic framework of motherhood that placed the burden of social responsibility upon them. As a result, the discursive emphasis on motherhood, in which mothers are positioned as primarily responsible for children’s care following the nuclear disaster, may not only have enabled some women to challenge dominant recovery narratives, but also made it more difficult for mothers engaged in mother-child evacuation to critically question the gendered division of care under challenging circumstances in a risk society. Second, the moral responsibility for mother-child evacuation was framed not as deriving from the actions of TEPCO or the Japanese government, but as stemming from individual maternal decision-making. By covering the hardships of these mothers as a social wrong in a largely descriptive manner, without situating mother-child evacuation within the historical contexts that produced its underlying causes, Japanese newspapers did not sufficiently offer a critical perspective from which to interrogate state-led recovery policies, including the restart of nuclear power plants, in relation to mother-child evacuation.

Ultimately, Japanese newspapers’ portrayals of mother-child evacuation functioned as a mechanism of othering that shaped the relationship between those involved in mother-child evacuation and readers. Rather than fostering proximity between them, newspaper coverage often failed to integrate mother-child evacuation into broader and more complex discussions of recovery from the disaster, thereby reinforcing the separation of evacuee families from general readers in post-Fukushima Japanese society. Paradoxically,

however, major Japanese newspapers covered these struggling mothers as some of the most significant actors and even as transcendental symbols within post-Fukushima Japanese society. As such, the visibility and continued presence of these mothers as others, or as figures rendered irrelevant to “us,” operated as a symbolic measure against which the transition to a supposedly “recovered” post-Fukushima society was evaluated. Japanese newspapers thus constructed a particular form of distance between readers and those involved in mother–child evacuation in post-Fukushima society by foregrounding mothers’ hardships while simultaneously making it difficult for the general audience to imagine shared identification with these mothers, let alone with fathers.

The question, then, is how the social wrong can be addressed by attending to the relations between semiosis and other elements of social life. By focusing on the visible and surface-level aspects of mother–child evacuation and largely limiting their coverage to the voices of those directly involved, Japanese newspapers reproduced gender inequality by failing to direct attention to the actors and structures that gave rise to the phenomenon. One possible way forward would be for newspapers, when reporting on mother–child evacuation, to situate the phenomenon within its broader social, structural, and historical context and to critically reflect on whether their reporting practices contribute to the reproduction of neoliberalized gender inequality.

In light of these findings, what kinds of theoretical contributions can this case study make to Silverstone’s concepts of mediapolis and proper distance? As noted, Silverstone’s framework does not sufficiently account for the role of gender in the organization of mediated moral relations. In response, this study advances his conceptualization of mediated space and distance by demonstrating that gender operates as a structuring principle of mediapolis as well as proper distance. Specifically, it shows that mediated representations of mother–child evacuation actively configure relationships between readers and those involved by assigning moral proximity and responsibility primarily to mothers, while rendering fathers, state actors, and institutional agents more distant. In doing so, this study highlights how mediated moral distance is not only a matter of visibility or empathy, but also of gendered attribution of responsibility. This study demonstrates that Japanese media coverage of mother–child evacuation functioned as a gendered mediapolis that moralized individual risk decisions of women by marginalizing men, state actors, and institutional agents from being responsible for the care of the child, thereby contributing to the reproduction of gender inequality in a risk society.

Nearly a decade after the Fukushima disaster, the outbreak of Covid-19 exposed and intensified gendered inequalities in care, with numerous studies documenting how mothers were disproportionately burdened with stress and resilience in Japan and elsewhere (e.g., Childress et al., 2024; O’Reilly, 2020; Yamamura & Tsustsui, 2021). Although this study focuses on a more localized disaster, its findings can be understood as an early precursor to these pandemic-era social realities. Accordingly, the significance of this study extends beyond the specific case of Fukushima. In particular, its findings demonstrate how media discourse had already been structuring expectations that mothers assume primary moral responsibility for protecting children in a risk society. As such, this article contributes to broader debates on how media discourse organizes gendered moral responsibility and reproduces inequality across diverse socio-cultural and temporal settings.

While this study focuses primarily on major Japanese newspapers over a 10-year period, it is based on a relatively small number of articles. Given this limited sample, future research would benefit from incorporating

in-depth interviews with both mothers and fathers involved in mother–child evacuation to examine how they interpreted newspaper coverage of evacuation, as well as focus groups with newspaper readers to explore broader audience responses to such representations. In addition, this study does not fully account for the roles of other media forms, such as magazines, films, and television, in shaping representations of mother–child evacuation following the Fukushima disaster.

Nonetheless, despite a substantial body of scholarship on media and morality, the specific ways in which media operate at a moral level in the context of nuclear disasters characterized by scientific uncertainty remain underexamined. In response, this study draws on the concepts of risk society, mediapolis, and proper distance to illuminate how mainstream media contribute to the production of gendered moral space in the contemporary media environment.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The dataset generated and analyzed during the current study is not publicly available due to institutional restrictions. However, some data may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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About the Author



Yasuhito Abe is an associate professor of media and communication studies at Doshisha University, Japan. His research focuses on citizen science, science communication, environmental communication, and popular culture. His publications and awards are available on his researchmap profile (<https://researchmap.jp/YasuhitoAbe?lang=en>).

“In the Name of Pro-Women”: Intra-Women Surveillance and Internalized Misogyny in Digital East Asia

Liang Ge 

Department of Sociology, University of Manchester, UK

Correspondence: Liang Ge (liang.ge@manchester.ac.uk)

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Abstract

Across East Asian digital platforms, “pro-women” discourse can become a site of intense intra-gender surveillance rather than durable solidarity. This article reconceptualizes “internalized misogyny” as a networked and platformed formation: not simply a private attitude, but a publicly enforced orientation continually produced through visibility, evaluation, and anticipated backlash. Drawing on multi-round interviews with young women in China and South Korea who participated in pro-women discussions in digital publics, I show how platform affordances including ranking, metrics, reposting, and comment cascades can translate feminist scripts of “refusal” into coercive tests of moral purity. The analysis identifies a dynamic of affective governance in which women who negotiate patriarchal bargains are cast as “compromising women” and disciplined through shame, disgust, and exclusion that travel and intensify via algorithmic circulation. These dynamics are further conditioned by platform governance regimes and state censorship environments, which constrain the outward expression of feminist critique and redirect its critical energy inward. By tracing the mechanisms through which moralizing affects attach to feminist objects and scale through platforms, the article clarifies how affective governance and attention-economy logics transmogrify feminist critique into a punitive apparatus which functions as an infrastructure for narrowing what women can say, desire, or endure without sanction. Solidarity, in this environment, emerges as a fragile, mediated achievement rather than a stable outcome of shared gendered interests.

Keywords

affect; East Asia; intra-women surveillance; misogyny; platform affordance; pro-women

1. Introduction

Across East Asian digital platforms, “pro-women” discourse, defined here as rhetoric explicitly prioritizing women’s interests and rights, has become a prominent vernacular for articulating gendered grievance, survival, and resistance. In China, this discourse circulates in feminist-leaning digital spaces among social media platforms such as Weibo and Douban; in South Korea, it resonates through platform publics including Twitter (now X), Naver Cafe, and theqoo. Yet, the empirical puzzle that animates this article is that the affective and moral force of “pro-women” talk does not consistently consolidate solidarity. Instead, as my interviewees repeatedly describe, these spaces can intensify peer-to-peer disciplining: Women scrutinize other women’s conduct, intimate choices, and affective attachments; they police the boundaries of “proper” feminist stance; and they administer sanctions that range from shaming to callout cascades and exclusions. What appears, on the surface, as pro-women political speech can thus function as an infrastructure for intra-gender surveillance, especially as it is reorganized through platform affordances that reward visibility, virality, and moral clarity.

This paradox unsettles a common analytic habit in the literature on misogyny online: the tendency to locate misogyny primarily in men’s antagonistic formations, such as manosphere-like communities, or in straightforward male-to-female harassment (Banet-Weiser, 2018a; Jane, 2016b; Laughren, 2025). In the cases examined herein, however, women are not only targets of misogyny but can become its proximate agents, mobilizing pro-women language to discipline other women into narrow repertoires of “correct” resistance.

This reorientation raises an analytic question that must be addressed at the outset: What does it mean to characterize these intra-women dynamics as misogynistic rather than merely divisive or politically ineffective? The article does not claim that all feminist disagreement or norm-setting is misogynistic. Rather, following Manne’s (2017) analysis of misogyny as a system of enforcement, one that polices women’s conduct through shame, contempt, and punitive consequences, I argue that a dynamic becomes misogynistic in outcome when it deploys the same patriarchal mechanism (discipline of the feminine through humiliation, surveillance, and exclusion) regardless of the ostensibly feminist framing of its content. The fact that the disciplining agent is another woman, and that the language is “pro-women,” does not render the mechanism non-misogynistic; what matters analytically is whether the apparatus reproduces a regime in which women’s legitimate range of conduct—their desires, ambivalences, and relational lives—is narrowed, policed, and punished. The present research specifies precisely how and where this reproduction occurs, rather than asserting it axiomatically. Through focusing on intra-women surveillance, the accounts gathered in this study suggest that what looks like internalization is continually made, intensified, and circulated through platformed interaction.

To address this puzzle, I advance the concept of internalized and networked misogyny, arguing that platform affordances do not merely host feminist discourse but actively restructure it into a regime of peer surveillance. Here, “internalized” names an affective orientation: an embodied and evaluative relation to oneself and other women, through which homogenized femininity is rendered as the sole common sense, moral necessity, or political correctness. “Networked” foregrounds that this orientation becomes actionable and punitive through platform mechanisms: callout dynamics, screenshot circulation, comment pile-ons, and algorithmically amplified visibility that can transform moral judgment into mass participation. Under these conditions, self-policing is not merely self-imposed, but socially produced and continually refreshed through mediated encounters, generating a collectively administered regime of evaluation that disciplines women in the name of being “pro-women.”

Building on Harrington's (2025) account of misogyny as socially produced affect, I track how contempt, disgust, irritation, and moralized anger circulate within women's publics and become tethered to a narrow image of "ideal feminist womanhood," thereby reshaping peer relations into a disciplinary field. Thus, this study first asks: What norms of "ideal feminist womanhood" circulate as moral imperatives in pro-women discourse, and how do participants experience these norms in everyday platform use? Second, I explore the platformed mechanisms where these norms become networked and punitive. Here, I trace how callouts and moral denunciations are enabled by platform features and visibility economies, and how algorithmic amplification, as experienced and anticipated by users, translates normative judgment into an escalatory dynamic.

This research further examines how China-Korea similarities and differences illuminate the political economy and governance conditions under which pro-women disciplining thrives. The comparative design foregrounds platform cultures as politically situated environments that shape what forms of feminist expression become rewarded, risky, or routinized. In China, feminist public discourse operates under conditions of platform censorship and selective content removal: Hashtags associated with #MeToo and related movements have been repeatedly blocked on Weibo, and feminist accounts have been forcibly suspended (Liao & Luqiu, 2022; Yin & Sun, 2021). This creates a distinctive displacement dynamic: When critique directed outward—at state institutions, at patriarchal capital, at men as a class—is rendered risky or structurally unavailable, the critical energy of women's publics tends to be redirected inward, intensifying policing within the community as a socially safer outlet. In South Korea, a different but related condition obtains: The sharp polarization following the 2016 Gangnam Station femicide and the "gender war" that followed have produced a context in which feminist speech and activism such as the 4B movement (a feminist refusal of the heterosexual patriarchal life script, organized around "no marriage, no childbirth, no dating, and no sex with men") is simultaneously hyper-visible and intensely contested, shaping norms of antagonism (Lee & Jeong, 2021). Together, these governance conditions help explain why intra-group disciplining, rather than coalition-building, becomes the dominant mode of feminist sociality in both contexts: not because of individual bad faith, but because structural pressures narrow the available forms of feminist expression.

This research is grounded in interviews with 50 young women (33 in China, 17 in South Korea), whose accounts foreground the lived textures of being positioned within pro-women publics: the anxieties of misrecognition, the pleasures of belonging, the fear of callout exposure, and the everyday labor of self-curation under conditions where political identity is continuously evaluated. In what follows, I develop internalized and networked misogyny as an analytic lens that keeps two things in view at once: the cultural work through which "pro-women" moral imperatives become desirable and compulsory, and the infrastructural work through which platforms scale, accelerate, and weaponize those imperatives. These dynamics clarify how spaces of feminist critique simultaneously operate as spaces of feminist constraint. Understanding digital misogyny in the platform era therefore requires attending not only to who speaks against women, but also to how women are made governable to each other through the platformed circulation of affect, judgment, and visibility.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Digital Misogyny Beyond “Men vs Women”*

Research on digital misogyny has been shaped by a set of now-canonical problematics: hostile and hateful speech directed at women, gendered harassment and intimidation, and the consolidation of explicitly anti-feminist online formations (Banet-Weiser, 2018a; Gan, 2021). A substantial body of scholarship demonstrates that misogyny online is not merely “incivility,” but a patterned form of gendered power that works through threats, sexualized abuse, doxxing, and reputational destruction, often with chilling effects on women’s participation in public culture (Citron, 2014; Jane, 2014, 2016a; Mantilla, 2013). This work is complemented by analyses of the platformed political economy of gendered cyberhate and manosphere-like formations: the ways in which attention-driven architectures can reward antagonism, intensify visibility for polarizing content, and normalize harassment as part of everyday participation (Ging, 2019; Krendel, 2020; Liao, 2023; Marwick & Caplan, 2018).

These approaches have produced vital conceptual and empirical insights, but they also tend to stabilize an analytic division between misogynists (male) and targets (female), foregrounding male-to-female hostility as the paradigmatic form of digital or popular misogyny. As Banet-Weiser (2018a, p. 2) shows, popular feminism and popular misogyny are “living side by side as warring, constantly moving contexts in an economy of visibility.” The result is a relative under-theorization of how misogyny can be reproduced within women’s publics, including within spaces framed as feminist or the “pro-women.” Yet feminist scholarship has long cautioned against equating “women’s spaces” with solidarity, and against treating feminism as a singular moral orientation rather than a contested cultural field (Ahmed, 2017; Browne, 2016). The empirical paradox motivating this study’s investigation of “pro-women” discourse intensifying peer-to-peer disciplining in online spaces in China and South Korea pushes this critique further by insisting that misogyny can operate through intra-women hierarchies and moral sorting.

Harrington (2025) directs attention to misogyny as a socially produced affective economy: patterned negative orientations and emotional investments that stick to the feminine and work to secure gendered hierarchies in everyday life. This framing opens analytical space for examining how such feelings can be mobilized within women’s publics, where the feminine is not only defended but also policed, stratified, and disciplined via competing images of “proper” womanhood and “proper” feminist conduct. What matters, then, is not only what is being said in the name of women, but how disciplinary speech acquires force. The combative, binary, and publicly shaming style of pro-women callouts may be read as reproducing communicative modes conventionally coded as “masculine”; however, this framing risks reinstalling gendered norms about what counts as “appropriate” feminist discourse (Ross, 2025). This article takes a different analytic position: The issue is not that aggression is inherently masculine and therefore inappropriate for feminist politics. Rather, the concern is functional and structural: The specific combination of public shaming, decontextualized evidence, and scalable escalation operates, regardless of gendered origin, as a mechanism of conduct regulation—narrowing the legitimate repertoire of feminist practice and punishing deviation through humiliation. The distinction between this and feminist critique with accountability lies in what the dynamic produces: not changed minds or expanded understanding, but self-censorship, withdrawal, and the silencing of precisely those women whose ambivalent or negotiated lives most need feminist resources (Clark, 2020; Ross, 2025).

2.2. Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny as Co-Constitutive

One route into this missing problem is the scholarship on the ambivalent visibility of feminism in public cultures (Banet-Weiser, 2018b; Ge, 2022, 2025). Banet-Weiser (2018a) suggests that popular feminism and popular misogyny are deeply entangled: Feminism's mainstream visibility is not a linear victory narrative but an ambivalent formation in which empowerment discourses circulate alongside intensified misogynistic backlash, each shaping the other. This "co-constitutive" framing is crucial for rethinking pro-women discourse as potentially disciplinary. If feminist language is increasingly part of platform vernaculars, it can also become a resource for boundary-making and moral hierarchy: a way to distinguish the "right" kind of feminist subject from the "wrong" kind, and to attach status, legitimacy, and belonging to particular performances of gender politics. Zhang and Tang's (2025) analysis of "Rat Rat" culture and digital misogyny in China shows how extreme misogynistic cultures can coexist with (and be shaped by) other gender discourses in the platform environment, including forms of "problematic feminisms," and how state and platform governance dynamics condition what kinds of gender politics become legible, permissible, or incentivized. The present study is not collapsing pro-women discourse into misogyny, but taking seriously the possibility that pro-women talk can function as a disciplinary technology: It can organize a moral economy in which certain femininities and life choices (especially those intimacies with men, e.g., dating, having sex, or marriage with men) are rendered suspect (Huang, 2023), while other stances such as refusal, purity, and hardness are elevated as politically correct.

2.3. Digital Populism, Antagonism, and Mirroring

A second route into the paradox is scholarship on antagonistic feminist strategies and their entanglement with misogynistic formations under conditions often described as "digital populism." Kim's (2021) analysis of the online feminist movements Megalia and Womad in South Korea develops the argument that feminist counter-speech can "mirror" misogyny, becoming polarizing and co-constitutive with misogynistic dynamics. The concept of mirroring foregrounds how political contestation online is not merely content-based ("what is said") but form-based ("how politics is done"): the adoption of combative, meme-ready, morally binary repertoires that travel well in attention economies.

Studies of online outrage highlight how moral-emotional expression can be preferentially amplified and rapidly escalated through sharing, quote-posting, and group alignment (Brady et al., 2017). Marwick's (2013) and Phillips's (2015) research on networked harassment and conflict shows how platforms facilitate decentralized coordination: pile-ons without a single organizer, through mechanisms of visibility and repetition. While they primarily examine harassment directed at public figures or out-groups, the infrastructural insights of these works travel: Conflictual repertoires can become normative infrastructures that set the terms of recognizable political speech, including within feminist or pro-women publics. Marwick's (2021) morally motivated networked harassment demonstrates that networked harassment on social media is not primarily driven by dislike or bias, but by moral outrage. This process functions as a norm reinforcement mechanism: Participants signal group membership and reinforce collective standards through the act of harassment itself, while frequently producing self-censorship in the target. Applied to pro-women discourse, callouts in feminist spaces can function as norm-enforcement technologies rather than simply as expressions of feminist disagreement. Crucially, antagonism can reshape intra-movement relations. Kim's (2021) intervention supports a key move of the present article: to treat pro-women disciplining as a

platformed dynamic intensified by visibility pressures and the affective rewards of antagonistic alignment, rather than as the simple expression of individual hostility or a culturally specific idiosyncrasy of a single national context.

3. Theoretical Framework

This article theorizes “pro-women” peer policing as a form of affective governance that is simultaneously internalized (lived as self-evaluation) and networked (scaled and intensified through platform infrastructures). Rather than treating misogyny as a stable ideology or a set of explicit hateful attitudes, I develop the theoretical framework from Harrington’s (2025) argument that misogyny can be productively conceptualized as affect and emotion: a socially produced formation of negative orientations that become mobilized toward “the feminine,” thereby normalizing gendered hierarchies. This reorientation shifts analysis away from searching for “misogynistic beliefs” inside individual minds and toward tracing the social conditions under which certain feelings become legitimate, contagious, and actionable. Misogyny, in this sense, operates through patterned emotional logics, including contempt, disgust, resentment, and moralized anger, that stabilize who can be valued, who must be corrected, and who can be punished. These affects do not simply express power; they help constitute it by making hierarchies feel intuitive, deserved, and even pleasurable to enforce.

Ahmed (2004) further clarifies how feelings become political infrastructures. Emotions circulate, “stick” to bodies and figures, and become attached to moral evaluations. Misogyny is not only directed outward (e.g., toward women as targets of harassment) but can also be reproduced within women’s publics through intra-gender sorting: Some women become objects of admiration and identification, others become objects of contempt, disgust, or punitive suspicion. Harrington’s conceptualization explicitly opens space for this intra-women dynamic by emphasizing that misogyny is relational and social, not reducible to male subjects or straightforward hate. In this case, “pro-women” discourse functions as a cultural technology that attaches affect to normative figures. As my fieldwork shows, women participants describe how moral imperatives circulate around a figure of the “good feminist woman” (self-sufficient, refusing, unambivalent, morally clear) and a contrasting figure of the “failed” or “complicit” woman (too accommodating, romantically attached to men, insufficiently refusing, perceived as lacking feminist consciousness). These figures are not merely descriptive categories; they are affectively charged. Admiration, pride, and belonging become attached to the “good” figure, while anxiety, shame, contempt, and disgust become attached to the “failed” figure. The consequence is a moralized emotional economy in which feminist identity becomes a continually audited performance: One’s life choices and affects are read as evidence of political worthiness. Misogyny here is not voiced as “women are inferior,” but enacted through affective hierarchies that narrow what kinds of femininity and feminist practice are deemed legitimate.

Three mechanisms are central to my analysis. First, the stickiness and circulation of affect. Following Ahmed’s (2004) formulation, affects become “sticky” when they repeatedly attach to particular figures and situations, making certain responses feel self-evident. In “pro-women” discourse, repeated exposure to callouts and moral denunciation can make some positions appear obviously shameful (e.g., expressing ambivalence about marriage; narrating compromise in heterosexual relationships) and others obviously admirable (e.g., refusal, non-negotiation, categorical rejection). This stickiness matters because it organizes

anticipatory self-surveillance: Participants learn not only what to think, but what to feel—and what feelings will be rewarded or punished.

Second, moral imperative framing. I treat moral imperatives not as abstract norms but as affective commands: They organize what counts as virtue and vice and attach emotional intensities to compliance or deviation. In the empirical material, a recurring framing positions refusal as virtue and compromise as vice. The moral weight of refusal is not simply ideological; it is lived through the promise of belonging and the threat of expulsion. This framing can transform feminist critique into a narrow script of correct life conduct, where political alignment is inferred from intimate choices and affective stances. Importantly, the moral imperative does not need to be coherent or uniformly held; it gains force through repetition, visibility, and the emotional consequences of being seen to deviate.

Third, callout as an affective technology. Callouts are often justified as accountability practices, but they also function as affective technologies that produce shame, fear of exposure, and anxiety of misrecognition. These affects are not incidental; they are the mechanism through which discipline becomes effective. When a user sees others being publicly corrected, mocked, or excluded, she learns to anticipate similar treatment and adjusts her speech accordingly. This is how peer policing becomes a structure of conduct rather than a series of discrete disagreements. The platformed nature of callouts—screenshotting, quote-posting, thread accumulation, rapid visibility—matters because it makes judgment durable and scalable, transforming local critique into networked sanction. Albrechtslund's (2008) notion of participatory surveillance is instructive here: Online social networking can produce forms of mutual, voluntary, and identity-building surveillance. Pro-women publics both exercise and submit to peer surveillance: They are simultaneously agents of communal norm-enforcement and subjects of networked monitoring. Yet, as Gill (2019) suggests, the emancipatory dimensions of participatory surveillance are unevenly distributed by gender: The "watching" that appears mutual and horizontal at the level of form consistently attaches itself, in content, to the regulation of femininity—what women wear, desire, love, and tolerate. In pro-women publics, participatory surveillance does not merely affirm feminist community; it can also become a horizontal peer-policing apparatus that governs feminine conduct in ways structurally continuous with patriarchal surveillance, even as it shifts the "watching" from men to other women. Drawing on Ross's (2025) distinction between calling in (inviting people into dialogue that allows complexity) and calling out (public naming of transgression that forecloses response and recruits punishment), this article argues that the intra-women surveillance and disciplining operate through the latter's structural disposition toward punitive publicity, and it is this orientation, rather than the presence of shared norms, that renders its outcomes misogynistic.

I define internalized and networked misogyny as a platformed formation in which hegemonic feminist norms are reproduced through affective self-surveillance and infrastructural scaling of peer discipline, even when voiced in "pro-women" terms. Internalized refers to an affective orientation through which hegemonic feminist ideals are adopted as criteria for self-evaluation and self-regulation. This is not simply belief, but feeling: anxiety about being "not feminist enough," shame attached to perceived compromise, aspiration toward the morally elevated figure of the "good feminist woman," and the everyday labor of calibrating one's speech, relationships, and self-presentation to avoid misrecognition. Internalization in this sense is socially produced—learned through repeated encounters with judgment and through the anticipatory management of reputational risk in a platformed moral economy. Networked refers to the platform-mediated collectivization of that self-surveillance into public discipline. It names how platform affordances (visibility

metrics, ranking, re-posting, screenshotting) enable moral judgements to escalate into callouts, pile-ons, and reputational sanctions that are scalable, persistent, and difficult to exit. Networked discipline operates through the contagious circulation of affect (especially shame and contempt) and through the practical knowledge that visibility can turn a single perceived transgression into mass participation. Misogyny here is not reducible to hatred of women; it is a disciplinary system that reproduces hierarchy by governing women's conduct: who may speak, how she may live, and what forms of desire, compromise, or ambiguity are permitted, through affectively charged peer policing that platforms make actionable at scale.

This framework, therefore, directs the analysis toward the interplay between cultural norms and infrastructures: how pro-women moral imperatives become affectively compelling, how platforms intensify their circulation, and how the resulting networked disciplining produces subjectivities that are governed “from within” while being enforced “from without” through public judgment.

4. Method

This study draws on multi-round, in-depth interviews with young women in China ($n = 33$, aged between 17 and 32) and South Korea ($n = 17$, aged between 21 and 33). All interviews were conducted online via voice or video calls on the instant messaging platforms WeChat, QQ, KaKao Talk, and Instagram, between January 2024 and December 2025. The empirical basis of this study is participants' recounted and perceived experiences of pro-women digital publics: their accounts of encounters with callouts, peer judgment, and platform dynamics as they experienced and interpreted them. The study adopts a comparative design to examine how “pro-women” discourse and peer-to-peer disciplining take shape across distinct platform ecologies and governance contexts, while remaining attentive to shared regional conditions: high platform penetration, intense visibility economies, and public contestation around gender politics. China and South Korea were selected not as equivalent national containers but as analytically generative sites where feminist publicness is both vibrant and contested, and where platform infrastructures and wider regulatory environments condition what kinds of gender talk become amplified, sanctioned, or strategically avoided by users.

Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, beginning with entry points in feminist-leaning online communities on social media platforms Weibo, Douban, Twitter (now X), and theqoo, and extended through participant networks to capture variation in experiences of pro-women discourse, including both active contributors and more cautious or peripheral users. Sampling aimed to include participants with differing levels of engagement (posting, commenting, lurking), different trajectories of platform use (single-platform reliance versus multi-platform migration), and different degrees of exposure to callouts and peer policing. The two national sites were also selected with attention to their distinct platform governance and regulatory regimes, which shape not only what can be said in pro-women publics but also the structural conditions under which intra-women policing becomes an available affective outlet.

Interviews were designed to elicit participants' lived experiences of “pro-women” discourse as both cultural meaning and practical environment. Rather than treating pro-women talk as a stable ideology, the protocol foregrounded interactional scenes: moments in which participants felt judged, compelled to align, or strategically silenced. Interview prompts proceeded in three linked blocks. First, participants were asked about everyday encounters with pro-women norms: where they see such discourse (platforms, accounts,

groups, threads), and how they define it in their own words. Questions were designed to invite concrete examples such as posts, comment patterns, recurring phrases, and probed how “refusal” imperatives emerge around topics such as marriage, reproduction, heterosexual relationships, and perceived compromise with men. Second, I examined disciplining experiences and perceived risks. Participants were asked whether they had been called out, shamed, mocked, excluded, or otherwise sanctioned; whether they had witnessed such events; and how these episodes unfolded. Third, interviews attended to affective responses and coping strategies, inviting participants to describe how encounters with peer policing shaped their subsequent platform conduct. All interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese or Korean, and transcribed and translated into English by the author. Where vernacular terms carry culturally specific meanings (e.g., *lian'ai nao*, *hyungja*), original terms are retained with translation and contextualization provided.

Data were analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) oriented to affect/emotion and platform mechanisms. Following initial open coding of all interview transcripts, codes were grouped into provisional themes and iteratively refined across the full dataset. A second coding pass attended specifically to affective language—how participants named feelings such as anxiety, disgust, shame, and relief—and to participants’ accounts of platform features and perceived algorithmic behavior. Analytic memos were written throughout to track emerging interpretive patterns and to flag disconfirming cases. Importantly, the analysis treats participants’ accounts of algorithmic amplification as experienced reality-shaping conduct. I analyze how users’ practical theories of platform ranking, i.e., what they believe becomes visible and why, structure their self-governance, anticipatory fear, and strategic participation. Following Bucher’s (2017) framing of algorithmic imaginaries, the analysis treats participants’ accounts of algorithmic behavior as consequential, whether or not they correspond to actual platform operations.

Given the potential risks associated with discussing callouts, harassment, and contested gender politics, participants were assigned pseudonyms; identifying details (platform handles, group names, unique incidents) were removed or generalized; and excerpts were selected to minimize traceability in searchable online environments. Interviews were conducted with an emphasis on participants’ control over disclosure, including the option to skip questions or stop at any point.

5. Findings

“Pro-women” discourse becomes a disciplinary environment through which patriarchal femininity norms are reproduced among women. Across my interviews, Chinese and Korean participants described encountering a narrow script of “ideal feminist womanhood” framed as a moral imperative, especially through refusal politics around marriage, heterosexual intimacy, and reproduction, and experiencing that script as both psychologically internalized and infrastructurally networked. I trace how this script becomes a yardstick for judging other women, how critique escalates into public callouts and pile-ons, and how algorithmic visibility and metricized attention accelerate sanctions. The analysis foregrounds affective textures including anxiety, shame, contempt, disgust, and the desire for moral recognition, and theorizes them as part of misogyny’s social production as affect/emotion: a patterned economy of negative orientations that normalizes hierarchy through what feels “obvious,” “deserved,” and “correct.”

5.1. The “Ideal Feminist Womanhood” Script as Refusal Imperative

Shaoyu, a participant working in Shanghai, China, like many other interviewees, described “pro-women” discourse as organized around a relatively narrow standard of feminist respectability. This standard is not presented as one possible feminist stance among others; rather, it circulates as a moral benchmark for how a woman ought to live. The central elements of this “ideal feminist womanhood” script include autonomy and independence; dis-identification from marriage, male attention, and reproduction as measures of worth; and a moralized emphasis on self-love and self-support.

Participants did not merely report encountering these ideals as slogans. They described them as practical demands: expectations that women should demonstrate refusal in everyday speech and conduct, and that any sign of compromise, especially in heterosexual relationships, could be read as political failure. This is how a normative script becomes a yardstick. Rather than evaluating claims about gender structures, pro-women publics often evaluate persons: Their life choices, desires, and affective attachments become evidence for whether they qualify as “properly” feminist, “pro-women,” or “awake.” As Shaoyu related:

It feels like there is a checklist for entry. If you are single, you are safe. If you date men, you are a suspect. I saw a thread where a girl asked for advice about her boyfriend, and the comments weren’t helping her at all! They were attacking her for having a boyfriend at all. They called her a “brain-damaged lover” (*lian’ai nao*) and asked, “Why are you still picking through trash in the garbage heap?” It makes me feel that to be “pro-women” (*ainü*), I must be completely autonomous. Any emotional reliance on a man is not just a personal choice; it is seen as a betrayal of the group.

Ji-min, based in Busan, South Korea, also mentioned:

There is a specific image of the “perfect feminist” on X: She has short hair; she doesn’t wear makeup; she has taken off the corset; and she is financially independent enough. She is cold, rational, and has cut off all men. I look at that image, and I want to be her; she seems so powerful. It feels like if I slip up, if I watch a romance drama or buy a nice lipstick—I am failing the movement. The standard is absolute purity, and I am always afraid I am too weak to meet it.

Both Shaoyu and Ji-min’s accounts suggest that the force of the script lies in its moral imperative framing. “Refusal” appears not simply as a political tactic but as an index of virtue. “Compromise” appears not simply as pragmatic negotiation under constraint but as vice. The implication is that feminist identity is proven through the management of intimacy and desire: who one dates, what one tolerates, what one publicly disavows, and how one narrates one’s choices. In this environment, the ideal feminist womanhood script becomes a template for interpreting others, not only oneself. This yardstick operates through an affective texture that participants repeatedly described in two registers. The first is anxiety of inadequacy: the sense of being perpetually at risk of failing the standard, of being “not feminist enough,” or of being misread as complicit. The second is shame and pre-emptive self-silencing: the anticipation that speaking candidly about ambivalence, desire, or compromise will trigger punishment, so it becomes easier to remain quiet, to lurk, or to adjust one’s narration to fit the acceptable script.

The story of Soo-jin who is based in Seoul, South Korea, reveals how the fear of networked sanction changes participation:

I used to be very active on theqoo, arguing for women's rights. But after seeing how they tore apart a user for admitting she was lonely and wanted a partner, I stopped posting. They called her a *hyungja* [literally, a vile person], referring to her as a useless sympathizer of men, and ridiculed her for days. I just read it now. I'm afraid that my own complexities aren't welcome. If I can't be the "warrior" they want, it's safer to be invisible.

Following Harrington (2025), misogyny can be understood as socially produced affect/emotion mobilized toward "the feminine," normalizing hierarchies through negative orientations that become culturally legitimate. In this case, the target of negative orientation is not "women" in general but "insufficient" women: those cast as compromised, naïve, needy, or politically impure. The cultural legitimacy of shame and contempt is secured through pro-women language: correction is framed as protection; denunciation as feminist pedagogy. This is precisely how patriarchal norms can be repackaged in empowerment vocabulary and redeployed as moral discipline among women.

Moreover, this moral disciplining often involves boundary work. As a widely circulated post on theqoo from 2024 illustrates:

If you can't even cut off the corset, don't talk about women's rights here. We don't need fashion feminists who cater to the male gaze while claiming to be one of us. Go back to Instagram. This space is for those who are serious about survival, not for those who seek male validation.

The post uses evaluative terms to classify and exclude "failed" women (those who wear the corset or seek validation), enforcing the ideal feminist womanhood script through exclusion and the policing of "proper" feminist stance.

Such a moral imperative framing is distinct from feminist accountability or norm-negotiation. The analytic threshold is crossed when enforcement operates through a coupled mechanism of public exposure and binary classification: Deviations are made hyper-visible through screenshotting and recirculation, and members are sorted into trusted versus suspect categories on the basis of single utterances. Shame, exclusion, and the denial of ambiguity are the affective and procedural resources through which this exposure-and-classification operation does its work, systematically foreclosing the capacity of members to negotiate, voice complexity, or remain in the community without performing purity. The case of pro-women groups is not clear ideological conflicts, for example disagreements with explicitly anti-feminist positions like TradWife advocacy, but rather the disciplining of women whose lives involve negotiation under constraint: women who date men, who feel ambivalent about marriage, who hold complexity about their desires, precisely the constituency that feminist politics has historically sought to support rather than police. When "pro-women" communities treat lived ambivalences under patriarchy as moral failure equivalent to complicity, they have crossed from accountability into governance. The pro-women disciplining documented herein overwhelmingly takes the form of calling out, rather than calling in (Ross, 2025), and it is this structural disposition toward punitive public exposure, rather than shared norms per se, that this article identifies as misogynistic in outcome.

5.2. From Internalization to Network: Callouts, Pile-Ons, and Algorithmic Visibility

The ideal feminist womanhood script becomes effective not only because individuals internalize it, but because platforms collectivize and scale it through networked disciplinary mechanisms. Three mechanisms recur across my interviewees' accounts: public callouts as "moral pedagogy," amplification as acceleration, and peer surveillance as anticipatory governance.

First, callouts were widely described as pedagogical events: moments where someone is publicly corrected so that others learn what is acceptable. The pedagogy is enacted through publicity. Participants reported that callouts often rely on decontextualization techniques—screenshots, partial quotes, re-posting across groups—to make the "transgression" legible and shareable. Over time, these events accumulate into a repertoire: Users learn the standard by watching punishments unfold. As related by Chen, a heavy Douban user based in Beijing, China:

I posted a reflection in a private Douban group about feeling tired of the constant anger. Within an hour, someone screenshotted it and re-posted it to a public bot account on Weibo. They cropped out the context where I said I still supported the movement. They just captioned it: "Look at this pick-me giving up." Suddenly, hundreds of strangers were dissecting a fragment of my thought without knowing me. It taught me that nothing is truly private; anything can be taken out to be used as evidence against you.

Min, similarly, recalled being called out:

It starts with one person commenting, "This sounds like *hyungja* logic." Then the comments pile up instantly. "Real." "Agreed." "Look at her past posts." It turns into a relay race of insults. Then I was treated as a confirmed enemy. You can't stop the momentum once the thread gets "hot": The pile-on becomes a way for others to prove they are awake. (Min-ji, Seoul, South Korea)

Second, participants frequently attributed the intensity of disciplining to visibility dynamics: how quickly a critique can circulate, how metrics recruit new participants, and how the perceived "algorithm" makes some conflicts unavoidable. The point here is not to claim technical knowledge of recommendation systems; it is to take seriously how perceived algorithmic amplification becomes a practical reality, shaping conduct. Users act as if visibility can spiral; therefore, they manage speech, identity, and participation to avoid becoming the next target. Jing, a 21-year-old woman working in Beijing, recalled:

I went to sleep and woke up to 99 plus notifications. My hands were shaking. It wasn't even a controversial post, just a complaint about a specific radical influencer. But it got picked up by the algorithm, or a big account re-posted it. It felt like an explosion. I deleted everything immediately, but the fear that they had already saved my photos...it stayed with me for weeks. The speed is what scares you; you have no time to explain.

Jing's account reveals that digital networks do not merely host misogyny; they structure and accelerate it: transforming internalized self-policing into a collective punitive force. These punitive practices also speak to platformed visibility economies: Where attention is scarce, and metrics are socially meaningful, moral denunciation becomes a high-visibility genre.

Third, peer-to-peer surveillance functions as anticipatory governance. The cumulative effect of callouts and amplification is a shift from episodic conflict to anticipatory self-regulation. My interviewees described behavioral adaptations: self-censorship (not posting personal experiences), content tailoring (adopting acceptable phrases), lurking (reading without participating), platform migration (moving to smaller groups or different apps), and identity management (multiple accounts, private vs public selves). Ying, a 24-year-old woman working in Hangzhou, China, related the following:

On Weibo, I have a “safe” account and a real account, but even on the real one, I don’t say what I actually think about marriage pressure....If I admit I’m struggling with loneliness and am almost persuaded by my parents to attend their arranged dates with men, they will say I’m weak or brainwashed.

Su-ah, a 29-year-old woman living in Incheon, South Korea, also shared:

I left theqoo. It was too scary for me there. Now I only talk in a small, private Discord server with five friends I trust. We check with each other before letting anyone in. It’s the only place I can say “Actually, I don’t agree with what that feminist influencer said” without being buried alive by comments.

These mechanisms clarify why pro-women discourse can be politically productive yet disciplinary. Visibility enables feminist vernaculars to circulate, but the same infrastructures also intensify boundary work and punitive sorting, particularly under conditions where moral clarity is rewarded and ambiguity is risky.

5.3. Affective Formations: How “Pro-Women” Disciplining Feels

Many interviewees described belonging as precarious: One misphrased post, one disclosed compromise, one insufficiently militant stance could trigger scrutiny. This fear is not reducible to personal insecurity; it is structurally produced by the visibility of punishment and the unpredictability of escalation. The result is a “watchfulness” that participants carry into everyday posting, and in some cases into offline self-evaluation.

Wei from Shenzhen, China, describes the precarity of belonging, showing how the observation of arbitrary punishment travels inward, transforming into a mechanism of self-regulation and “cold watchfulness”:

It feels like living in a glass house where the walls are made of screenshots. I saw a girl get dragged for days because she used a word that sounded like a “male-identified” term....Now before I hit send, I freeze. I think: “Is this pure enough?” It’s exhausting, but I can’t stop checking.

Moreover, participants do not only fear judgment; they also describe directing contempt and disgust at what they cast as “insufficient” women, demonstrating how discipline is sustained through the affective rewards of righteous enforcement. Participants not only describe being afraid; they also describe moments of joining judgment, feeling disgust at certain femininities, or experiencing relief when moral boundaries are reasserted. This matters analytically because it demonstrates how discipline is sustained: Punitive emotions can be experienced as righteous, cleansing, or protective, especially when framed as pro-women solidarity. The moral economy, therefore, offers affective rewards for alignment.

Eun-ji, a Korean woman in her mid-20s working in Seoul, reflected:

Honestly, there is a satisfaction in it. When we see someone acting like a “conceptual woman” [*gaenyeom-nyeo*, a woman who caters to patriarchal concepts to be liked], it feels disgusting. It’s like she is selling us out. So when people comment about her, it doesn’t feel like bullying. It feels justified. I catch myself thinking, “Good, she needs to wake up,” even if the words are harsh.

The desire for recognition and moral standing runs powerfully through the pro-women communities. Participants often described “doing feminism right” as a scarce form of recognition within these publics. The desire to belong to the “right” community—one that is seen as truly pro-women—can motivate conformity to dominant scripts and participation in callouts. Recognition is not merely social approval; it becomes a moral credential in a contentious gender field. As Ting, who was in her late 20s and working in Shanghai, China, said:

I want to be seen as a “sister” (*jiemei*) who gets it. When I post something sharp and radical, and the big accounts like it, I feel validated. I feel like I have shaken off the brainwashing. It’s not just about likes; it’s about proving...to them and to myself.

These affect clusters clarify how misogyny, as Harrington (2025) conceptualizes it, combines contempt, fear, and desire and thereby produces hierarchy. In this case, the hierarchy is intra-women: a stratification of feminist respectability where “good feminist womanhood” is elevated and “failed/complicit” femininity is disciplined. The crucial point is that the punitive affect is not external to feminism; it is made legitimate through feminist-sounding vocabularies and pro-women moral imperatives. That is why it is analytically apt to treat this as a misogynistic formation in outcome, enforcing patriarchal femininity norms, even when participants experience it as empowerment or protection.

6. Discussion: Misogyny as Affective Governance Inside Pro-Women Publics

The empirical evidence presented here reconfigures feminist solidarity not as an assumed property of pro-women spaces, but as a fragile, mediated achievement. While feminist scholars often locate misogyny in male-dominated antagonist publics, this research demonstrates that platform affordances can reorganize “pro-women” discourse into an infrastructure of intra-gender surveillance. By elevating specific scripts of “refusal” into a metric for moral ranking, these digital publics produce a distinct form of governance: one where the boundaries of feminist respectability are policed through the very tools—shame, visibility, and exclusion—often associated with the patriarchal systems they oppose.

The core mechanism driving this governance is the hardening of “refusal” from a political tactic into a compulsory moral identity. In the digital moral economies of East Asian feminism, the “refusing woman” who is independent, disidentified from male attention, and distinct from the institution of marriage accrues algorithmic and social capital. Conversely, the “compromising woman” who negotiates ambivalence, intimacy, or patriarchal bargains becomes a target of disgust and punitive correction. This dynamic suggests that platformed misogyny does not merely target feminist speech from the outside; it can also discipline it from within, standardizing what counts as legitimate feminist expression. The ideal feminist womanhood functions as a yardstick, turning complex lived experiences into binary assessments of “correct” or “failed”

performance. As Harrington (2025) suggests, misogyny operates through the attachment of negative affect to the feminine; here, affect is redirected internally. Contempt is not abolished but re-routed toward those women who fail to embody the aesthetic and political purity demanded by the platform's most visible users.

This internalization of discipline is inseparable from the technical architecture of the platforms themselves. Marwick (2013) notes that social media environments turn participation into an ongoing project of impression management subject to algorithmic ranking. In this context, pro-women policing is not simply an ideological disagreement but a product of governed visibility. The callout functions here as a dual-use technology: It is a method of feminist pedagogy, but also a mechanism of reach. The networked nature of these sanctions facilitated by screenshotting, quote-posting, and searchability accelerates judgment, allowing local disagreements to scale rapidly into mass shaming events (Jane, 2014). Consequently, users engage in anticipatory surveillance, sterilizing their speech and hiding their ambivalences to avoid the reputational costs of a pile-on.

A critical objection to this framework might be that conflict is endemic to all political movements; disagreement regarding tactics or norms is not inherently misogynistic. However, the formation documented here is distinct from "feminist conflict" because of its outcome: the reproduction of hegemonic norms of regulation. When pro-women publics treat compromise or relational complexity as moral failures to be purged, they reinstall the logic that women's worth must be adjudicated through strict adherence to a behavioral script, enforced through shame and exclusion. A related concern is whether the problem lies less in pro-women norms themselves than in their mode of enforcement, particularly when that mode appears combative, blunt, zero-sum. I do not treat such styles as deeply problematic because they are supposedly "masculine." Gendered prescriptions about "appropriate" feminist speech can themselves be a mechanism of silencing; insisting that feminist discourse should be gentle or non-confrontational reproduces the very injunctions that feminist politics has sought to contest. The critique here is therefore structural and functional, not tonal: What is at issue is whether the mode of enforcement expands or contracts the range of legitimate feminist subjectivities. When callout dynamics operate through decontextualized screenshotting, rapid escalation, and mass-participation shaming, they do not merely express political disagreement—they produce self-censorship, withdrawal, and the systematic removal of ambivalent voices from feminist publics (Marwick, 2021; Ross, 2025). The test is not whether the speech sounds harsh, but whether its effects are disciplinary and exclusionary in ways that serve patriarchal interests, regardless of the speaker's feminist intent. If solidarity is to survive the platform era, it requires a resistance to the drift from accountability to punitive sorting, and recognizing that the compromising woman is often the subject feminism was meant to support, not the enemy it was meant to destroy.

The comparative evidence also suggests that the intensity of intra-women disciplining is not simply a function of platform affordances or feminist culture in isolation, but is conditioned by the political economy of expression in each context. In China, where feminist discourse circulates under pervasive censorship risk, the displacement of critique onto intra-group policing serves a partially protective function: It keeps feminist anger alive within a narrower perimeter of political safety. Yet this displacement also channels affective energy away from systemic critique and into interpersonal governance, weakening feminism's solidarity-building potential. In South Korea, where feminist discourse and movements circulate with greater latitude but within a highly polarized gender-political field, the antagonistic communication repertoires that have been effective in naming misogyny externally have been internalized as normative within feminist

publics, producing a mirroring dynamic (Kim, 2021) in which the tactics of the gender war are replicated inward. In both cases, the structural conditions do not cause misogynistic disciplining, but they do intensify and channel it—a finding with implications for how feminist movements might strategically respond to governance pressure without replicating its effects internally.

7. Conclusion

Through connecting misogyny-as-affect with platformed moral economies, this article demonstrates how the internalized and networked misogyny—when hegemonic femininity norms are reproduced through affective self-surveillance and then collectivized through networked discipline (callouts, amplification, ranking)—produces intra-women hierarchies of feminist respectability. Comparative evidence across China and South Korea shows how a refusal-centered “ideal feminist womanhood” script becomes a yardstick for judging women and a mechanism for regulating participation.

The findings also carry implications for how feminist publics might be organized otherwise. If the default orientation of pro-women publics shifted from punitive publicity toward deliberate invitation, from treating deviation as grounds for expulsion to treating it as grounds for conversation, this would not dilute feminist politics but potentially expand it, reaching precisely those women in negotiated or ambivalent positions who most need feminist resources. This is not a counsel of niceness; it is a recognition that feminist solidarity, in the platform era, is not a given but an achievement that must be structurally cultivated against the grain of visibility economies that reward punitive clarity. This reorientation is not only a political task for feminist communities; it also implicates platform designers whose affordance choices, including visibility metrics, ranking, and virality incentives, currently reward punitive clarity over deliberative complexity.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available in order to maintain the confidentiality of participant data, given the sensitive nature of the topics discussed.

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About the Author



Liang Ge (PhD, FHEA, they/them) is a lecturer in sociology at the University of Manchester. Liang’s work lies in the intersection of intimacy, digital media and technologies, digital methods, gender, sexuality, and East and Southeast Asian popular cultures and creative industries.

What If We Ran Our Own Show? GenAI and The Politics of Representation

Florian Vanlee^{1,2}  and Mathijs De Baere³

¹ Research Centre Gender, Diversity & Intersectionality (RHEA), Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

² Centre for Cinema & Media Studies (CIMS), Ghent University, Belgium

³ Independent Researcher, Belgium

Correspondence: Florian Vanlee (florian.hendrik.j.vanlee@vub.be)

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Abstract

This article examines the politics of representation in the face of today’s growing audience fragmentation and the entry of genAI tools into televisual entertainment. Establishing that contemporary TV content is shaped by normative discourses on how to represent social difference, the article highlights how text-to-image/video models accelerate and amplify their mark on user-generated content. Conducting a walkthrough exploration of Showrunner—a genAI-powered tool to generate short, animated scenes with—it demonstrates how such models operationalize dominant constructions of how to appropriately represent social differences like gender, race, or sexuality. This brings a key tension into focus: Today’s broad recognition of representation’s political salience translates into functionalism and instrumentalization. By working to discontinue “inappropriate portrayals,” contemporary representational politics ignore pop-cultural complexity in favor of “actionable” dichotomies meant to regulate “harmful content” out of existence.

Keywords

diversity; genAI; politics of representation; television; text-to-video

1. Introduction

This theoretical article examines Hall’s politics of representation (1997) in the face of contemporary pop-cultural shifts. Against the backdrop of generative artificial intelligence’s (genAI) entry to popular mediascapes (Harding & Wagner, 2025), it highlights how technologically driven audience fragmentation and content personalization (Mansell & Steinmueller, 2022) coincide with a proliferation and consolidation of normative discourses on *who* and *how* to represent (Vanlee, 2024). This, the article argues, makes

representing social difference an increasingly deliberate process, couched in functionalist assumptions about popular culture's interplay with societal power relations.

On the one hand, progressing from linear broadcasting to video-on-demand (VoD) distribution and, recently, genAI-based text-to-video tools, steadily attunes content to viewers' personal expectations and norms (Mansell & Steinmueller, 2022). Moving from one-to-many distribution (Williams, 2004) to platformed narrowcasting (Monaghan, 2024) and, ultimately, prompt-based user-generated content (Gillespie, 2024) solidifies viewers' ability to consume content that resonates with their own dispositions. Concurrently, debates on *whose* stories should be told and *how* these narrations construe their identities have intensified too (Ceuterick & Malet, 2024). These slippages of representational politics into popular discourse (Saha, 2021) turn texts' portrayal of social differences like gender, race, or sexuality into key evaluative focal points (Warner, 2017, pp. 32–34)—producing vernacular, contingent dichotomies of “good” and “bad” representation. Together, these two trends functionalize Hall's (1997) politics of representation. If Hall's formulation refers to a critical “struggle over meaning which continues and is unfinished” (Hall, 1997, p. 277), today's mainstream embrace of representational critique engenders distinctly instrumental assumptions about it. As representation becomes an active and purposeful consideration across the entanglements of media production, text, and reception (Vanlee, 2024), its popularly articulated politics have grown preoccupied with fixing “bad” portrayals.

To bring this shift into focus, we draw on the notion of *alignment* (Hristova et al., 2025). Alignment denotes measures to steer genAI models towards intended purposes (Hristova et al., 2025, p. 1439), like building in guardrails to prevent them from generating offensive output (Baron, 2025). In a computational context, alignment turns cultural sensibilities into technical procedures (Hristova et al., 2025, p. 1440); it attunes algorithmic operations to human values (Curry et al., 2025). For text-to-video models, like OpenAI's Sora or Google's Veo3, this means trying to make outputs reflect specific expectations about representation (Warner, 2017, p. 32). Through various means and for various reasons, genAI applications are developed and trained to generate particular imagery (Jan et al., 2025). Most are built to not reproduce harmful or offensive tropes (Baron, 2025), but other models' design disregards the need to “represent responsibly” (Ferrara, 2024). So, here, alignment entails transforming discursive constructs of “good” and “bad” representation into algorithmic protocols that reliably attune outputs to these norms. Pursuing alignment is in this sense not endemic to developing “responsible” text-to-video models. Rather, it is a continuation of ongoing logics that align popular content with specific expectations on how (not) to represent social difference.

With a case study of Showrunner, a genAI-powered platform that provides aesthetically distinct worlds (“storyworlds”) to develop user-prompted micro-narrative content on, the article explores how aligning text-to-video models explicates the fuzzy processes by which representational norms seep into popular texts. With a contextualized walkthrough (Light et al., 2018), the article establishes how such tools consolidate normative constructs of “proper representation” as moral imperatives advocating the neutralization of terms and tropes considered harmful. But by construing problematic representation as fixable—through the deescalation of terms, tropes, and interactions reminiscent of sexism, racism, and homophobia—Showrunner implicitly deprives those subjected to such injustices of “the means to shape their story.” Such takes on pop culture's entanglement with societal power relations exemplify how contemporary engagements with representation are less a substantial “struggle over meaning” (Hall, 1997, p. 277) and more procedural consolidations of expectations and norms on *who* and *how* to represent.

This, the article argues, is not so much a limitation of text-to-video models as it is an indication of the functionalism that marks popular discourse on representation. Mainstream enactments of representational politics (Saha, 2021, p. 177) produce “actionable” discourses (Warner, 2017)—articulating needs to be fulfilled (e.g., *increase* asexual stories/characters—e.g., Brandley & LeMaster, 2025) and demands to be met (e.g., *avoid* bisexual stereotypes—e.g., McCole & Anderson, 2026). Although representation is unstable and open-ended (Hall, 1997) and resists conscious attempts at “improvement” (Kellner, 2005), today’s efforts to “align” social realities’ popular portrayal require us to develop alternative ways to critically engage representation. To articulate a politics attentive to the paradoxical shifts that mark contemporary popular culture, the article concludes, we must think through the processes that reconfigure cultural critique into seemingly actionable solutions meant to fix problematic representation.

2. Television, Individualization, and the Politics of Representation

Popular entertainment media like TV series never provide a “neutral” image of social reality (Hermes, 2023). Society is interpreted before it is televised, and texts meant as “mere amusement” are marked by political conditions (Hall, 1997). Series and shows establish what defines “us” and what to think of “them” (Hermes, 2023) through “stories we tell ourselves about ourselves” (Lechner & Kohlenberger, 2022, p. 116). So, television content is deeply political. It constantly affirms and/or subverts normality’s boundaries (Toynbee, 2006). Representations of social difference—like gender, race, sexuality, or dis/ability—are therefore never unambiguously “harmful” or “beneficial” (Kellner, 2005). Instead, popular texts refract hegemonic struggle in who or what they portray (Hall, 1997). TV depictions of women or racialized minorities, for instance, enter complex relationships with the real-world conditions they face. Just as a single female character articulates paradoxical sentiments on sanctioned femininity (e.g., Holzberg & Lehtonen, 2022), stories on diasporic communities construe conflicting meanings about them (Mediavilla Aboulaoula, 2025).

This makes it analytically shallow to distinguish “positive” from “negative” representations (Saha, 2021, p. 177). As cultural artefacts, televisual texts allow us to deconstruct “what goes without saying” about our social environment, and unpack inequities these self-evidences hold and sustain (Morley, 2012). As Hall (1997) notes, fostering critical awareness of popular texts’ entanglement with societal power relations informs a conceptually grounded *politics of representation* (p. 277). This is not concerned with parsing “good” from “bad” representations; it enacts hegemonic struggle over commonsensical meanings through continual processes of resignification (Hall, 1997, pp. 269–277). So critiquing series’ reification of exclusionary discourses (e.g., of diasporic Muslim women—Mediavilla Aboulaoula, 2025) or unpacking their validation of marginalized identities (e.g., non-binary individuals—Blanco-Fernández et al., 2025) never boils down to disavowing or encouraging certain representational practices. It is about figuring out how portraying difference is couched in broader societal structures and attempting to reconfigure them. In Kellner’s words (2005), critical engagements with representation are multiperspectival (p. 43), and forward a media pedagogy that “can empower people to gain sovereignty over their culture” (p. 44, our emphasis).

Sovereignty, in Kellner’s sense (2005), refers to individuals’ ability to *participate* culturally; it envisions people *shaping* their culture inasmuch as they consume it. This sovereignty has therefore not necessarily been brought by TV’s progressive individualization (Mansell & Steinmueller, 2022). Sure, linear, one-to-many broadcast systems were supplanted by digital distribution (Cuelenaere, 2024), eroding television’s status as a collective experience. Legacy media like terrestrial networks have hybridized, combining fixed programming

slots with on-demand services allowing viewers to access their content of choice without being immersed in TV's "flow" (Williams, 2004). New industry actors operating by VoD models—comprising transnational companies like Netflix, Disney+, regional platforms such as the Nordics-oriented Viaplay (Chalaby, 2025), and domestic examples like the Belgian Streamz (Raats & Evens, 2021)—further increase viewers' ability to pick and choose. Having access to sizeable, multi-lingual, and generically diverse catalogues, contemporary audiences evidently resist neat delineation. As viewers are increasingly able to select and watch content that attunes with their expectations, producers and distributors seek to cater to what specific audiences (presumably) want from popular content—by curating "queer" content in streaming catalogues (Monaghan, 2024), for instance, or embracing ethnically diverse casting practices to address minority audiences (Ceuterick & Malet, 2024).

This expanded freedom of choice therefore does not necessarily bring meaningful participation. It creates more granular linkages between tastes and offerings. Nevertheless, TV consumption's personalization does coincide with a growing popular belief that "representation matters"; representation itself has become a concern in series' production (Monaghan, 2024) and reception (Saha, 2021). Portraying social difference is increasingly perceived as a political and moral issue (Vanlee, 2024); creators and viewers alike mobilize normative constructs when engaging popular media culture (Vanlee, 2024). Hence, TV's conception, creation, and distribution now involve active considerations on how to reflect society back to itself. For instance, the creators of Paramount's *Yellowstone* (2018–2024), a neo-western series distinct for its traditional look and feel (Wanzo, 2022), construe it as a narrative that validates commonsensical, conservative values in a mediascape that purportedly marginalizes them (Wanzo, 2022). Effectively, they approached *Yellowstone* as a representational instrument, transcoding meanings (Hall, 1997, pp. 270–272) assigned to rural Americans. Reception similarly "functionalizes" representation. Viewers' attempts at policing depictions of social difference illustrate this clearly. These are often preoccupied with identifying and disavowing "negative" representations and advocating their discontinuation and/or reversal. For example, queer fans have mobilized against LGBTQ+ roles' arbitrary deaths (Waggoner, 2018)—dissuading creators from "burying their gays" and urging them to consolidate queer storylines (Cover & Milne, 2023). But comparable campaigns target "diversified" representation too. Casting actors of color for formerly white-cast roles in adaptations like Netflix's *The Witcher* has drawn particular ire (Imre, 2023), for instance, as did the first female doctor in BBC's *Doctor Who* (Eeken & Hermes, 2021). Such efforts seek to shield certain texts from alterations, disputing that certain representations were offensive or harmful (Dosser, 2025).

Together, technological pushes towards personalized TV consumption (Mansell & Steinmueller, 2022) and the intensification of popular discourse about representation (Vanlee, 2024) normalize a functionalist politics of representation. If TV creators actively avoid certain characters and narratives because they have been branded "problematic" (Cover & Milne, 2023), this resembles regulatory compliance more than Hall's (1997) proposition. And when audiences become increasingly vigilant for "harmful" representations (Saha, 2021, p. 177), they ignore popular culture's multiplicity (Hermes, 2023) in favor of simplistic dichotomies between "good" and "bad" representation. Enacting a politics of representation is now a central concern in popular mediascapes; production, text, and reception are entangled in a "metarepresentational" dynamic that insists on taking representation seriously (Vanlee, 2024). But as Warner (2017) observes, "plastic representation" has been the predominant response. Such portrayals nominally address critiques of mainstream media's role in sustaining social inequalities, but boil down to facile "box checking" exercises (Warner, 2017, p. 36). Hence, women or racial minorities' growing on-screen visibility or "counterstereotypical" portrayal is less an

indication of systemic change in media industries and society at large than the outcome of an intensified reciprocity between media supply and demand (Warner, 2017). As sizeable audience segments expect popular media to acknowledge and represent them in certain ways, producers and distributors are incentivized to meet these demands (Ceuterick & Malet, 2024).

These dynamics reinterpret the politics of representation as a mechanistic process of regulation and compliance. Dichotomies between “good” (e.g., realistic—Villegas-Simón et al., 2025) and “bad” (e.g., stereotypical—Chun, 2025) ways to portray realities and differences (Saha, 2021, p. 177; Warner, 2017, pp. 32–34) feed into actionable constructs that serve to “fix” or “improve” representation—like creating and curating “positive” stories on LGBTQ+ people and themes (Monaghan, 2024) or avoiding tropes that casualize sexual minorities (Cover & Milne, 2023). In this sense, today’s popularly enacted politics of representation *align* how social realities and differences are portrayed with normative discourses about depicting them. Because the vocabularies that industry actors and audiences alike employ to critically address “the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves” (Lechner & Kohlenberger, 2022, p. 116) suppose that representations can somehow be unambiguously “positive” or “harmful” (Saha, 2021), working to ensure that content stands in alignment with what is considered “good” becomes a key pursuit in contemporary media culture.

3. Representational Alignment in GenAI Content

In conventional audiovisual entertainment contexts, processes of representational alignment are discrete and multifarious. They emerge from collisions between producers’ intentions, distributors’ strategies, critics’ assessments, and audiences’ appreciations, resulting in texts that will likely feed into more debate on how to “fix” or “improve” representation. But this is less the case when genAI text-to-image/video applications are concerned. Text-to-video content generation (Jan et al., 2025), popularized by tools like OpenAI’s Sora, Google’s Veo3, or the serial-focused Showrunner (infra), combines training data, algorithms, and prompts to create short videos tailored to user requests (Zhang et al., 2025). Consequently, its outputs are less mediated by the murky processes in which certain demands and expectations on who and how to represent are collectively navigated, negotiated, and consolidated. One user entering one prompt receiving one video is more streamlined than the multifarious dynamics that govern conventional televisual representation. Therefore, genAI tools’ usage articulates popular representational politics more explicitly; both on the level of individual usage and in a more infrastructural sense.

Employing genAI tools, users operationalize normative conceptions on *who* and *how* to represent. Prompting text-to-video applications requires meticulous descriptions of what we envision, supposing a recourse to representational discourses—using specific vocabularies that tailor outputs to expectations. For instance, fans have used genAI tools to create *Mulan* fanfiction that “fixes” the Disney original’s flattening of Asian culture (Ezzy, 2025). Exemplifying Jenkins’ (2025) “participatory culture,” this produces imagery that redresses *Mulan*’s failure to acknowledge Asian histories’ multifariousness with representations that amplify Asian voices (Ezzy, 2025). Effectively, this articulates a representational politics centered on correcting cultures’ one-dimensional portrayal. But examples of genAI tools used to reactivate tropes and representational practices often considered “harmful” exist too. The many images of conventionally attractive women—with exaggerated curves and angelic facial structures—circulating online (Chun, 2025) exemplify this. These visuals, presumably prompted by cisgender heterosexual men, sexualize women and

reinforce scripts of femininity based on subordination and sexual availability (Chun, 2025, p. 17). Essentially, they pander to male fantasies through particular behavioral tropes (e.g., suggestive poses; domestic activities) and idealize specific physical traits (e.g., blue eyes; slim waists). This revitalizes imaginaries of womanhood increasingly sidelined in mainstream mediascapes (Caldeira, 2020). Regardless of whether this signals an intuitive relapse into dated models of femininity or active rejections of mainstream commercial media culture's more inclusive depiction of diverse femininities, the use of genAI to create these idealized, sanitized, and sexualized images articulates how women *ought* to look like and behave.

This already gestures at genAI tools' use to enact a reactionary politics of representation. But such content seems benign in the face of more reprehensible practices (Ferrara, 2024). When launched in August 2025, xAI's Grok Imagine text-to-image/video tool's "spicy" feature was immediately used to digitally "undress" women without their consent and generate sexually explicit videos of female celebrities (Iannuzzi et al., 2026). Here, users bypass women's agency over self-representation and transform existing images into pornographic depictions. The decision to do so is presumably not always brought by an intention to produce "counterrepresentations" (Hall, 1997, pp. 270–272). Nevertheless, it remains a conscious choice to upend how people choose to be visible in the digital public sphere and represent them as sexual objects when they refuse doing so themselves (Iannuzzi et al., 2026). And genAI is deliberately used to create representations that consolidate reactionary politics too. For instance, preceding the suspension of the US's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program in 2025—supporting low-income citizens for essential purchases—several genAI-created videos circulated that showed Black women hysterically lamenting their lost benefits (Asare, 2025). These videos' singling out of Black women through specific formal (e.g., hair bonnets), behavioral (e.g., yelling), and narrative (e.g., the suspension of welfare benefits) cues highlights how text-to-video tools provide users with a means to consciously reiterate stereotypical constructs (see Figure 1). Mobilizing tropes like the "welfare queen" (Owen, 2016) and the "angry Black woman" (Kretsedemas, 2010), these videos willfully amplify and reinforce racist, misogynistic discourses. Deliberate efforts to sustain imaginaries that legitimize and entrench societal inequalities demonstrates how even the

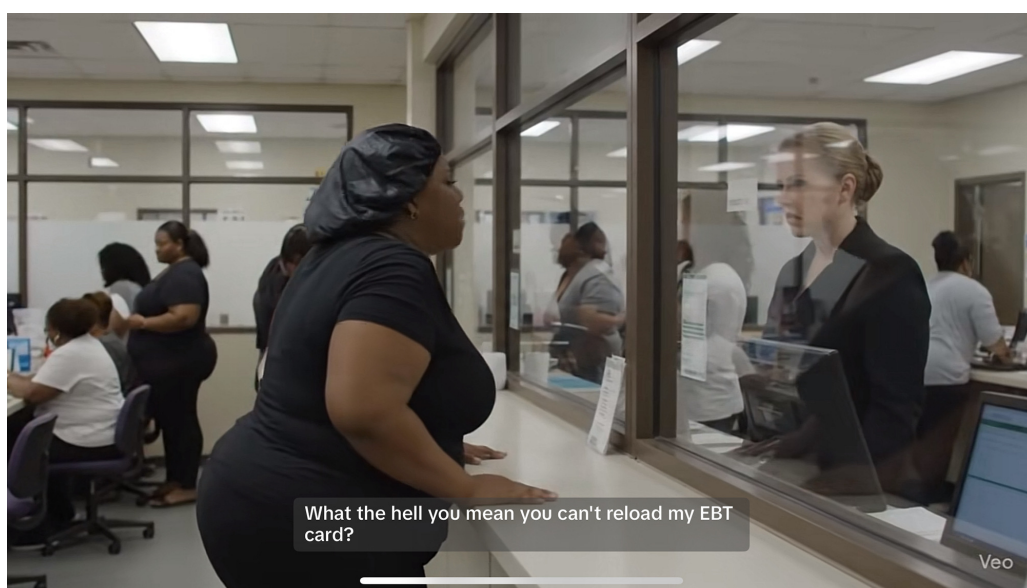


Figure 1. Screenshot of a genAI-produced video showing a Black woman reacting angrily to the suspension of welfare benefits. Source: Towolawi (2025).

comparably simple process of “one user entering one prompt receiving one video” remains enmeshed in popularly enacted politics of representation—reactionary or otherwise.

GenAI tools’ developers and operators anticipate and negotiate such uses too (Ferrara, 2024). This means that representational alignment transcends individual usage. Depending on whether they aim to ensure “inclusive” or “inoffensive” output (e.g., Gemini; Sora) or allow users considerably more leeway (e.g., Grok Imagine), certain terms, phrases, and tropes are foreseen and accounted for to align the model with developers’ objectives and boundaries (Hristova et al., 2025). Hence, enacting politics of representation happens infrastructurally too. Even if tools like Sora or Veo3 are construed as neutral instruments that allow users to “materialize imagination into digital objects,” they are representational technologies that are governed as such (Gillespie, 2024). This is explicated by controversies on the kind of images they generate, like those surrounding Google’s Gemini tool in 2024. When prompted to depict a WWII-era German soldier, it would both generate a depiction of a white serviceman and images of women or people of color in Nazi uniforms—producing obvious anachronisms (Baron, 2025; Figure 2). And when users requested images of 18th-century members of the US Senate or Viking explorers from a genAI tool, it would portray female senators or dark-skinned Norsemen (Jacobi & Sag, 2024). Evidently, these outputs misalign with their prompts’ implied historical plausibility (Baron, 2025). Instead, the social differences injected into these images reflect a conviction that they *ought* to be diverse and inclusive.

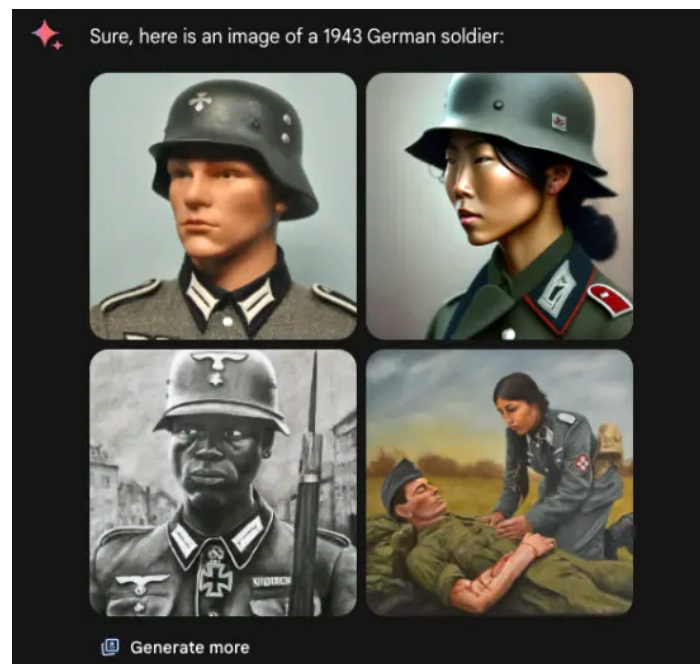


Figure 2. Images proposed by Google’s Gemini when prompted to depict a “1943 German Soldier.” Source: Adarlo (2024).

This gestures at measures genAI developers take to align their models; they try to ensure outputs dependably correspond to predetermined objectives and boundaries (Hristova et al., 2025). In their article on anachronistic genAI imagery, Baron (2025) hypothesizes that Google fitted Gemini with a base command to ensure its generated images would not exclusively feature white, male figures (p. 66). But careful training data curation can also align genAI tools’ output with what developers consider un/desirable results (Hristova et al., 2025). Here, conscious decisions made in materials used to refine models’ performance serve to steer

algorithmic operations in a predetermined direction (Jan et al., 2025). This concerns both the visual materials themselves and the discursive labels with which the materials are rendered “legible” to genAI models (Crawford & Paglen, 2021).

This injects popular representational politics into text-to-video models’ development and governance. Hristova et al. (2025) observe that “alignment emerges concurrently as a technical and cultural practice” (p. 1440), because genAI’s boundaries between hard-wired coding and less clear-cut cultural operations are murky at best. Bringing text-to-video models in line with what developers consider “appropriate” output is never a question of programming alone. It is also a process of navigating, negotiating, and consolidating deeply normative constructs of what constitutes “good” and “bad” representation to ensure that models’ output dependably complies with them. The decision to make Gemini forward outward markers of socio-cultural difference (Baron, 2025) highlights Google’s (commercially inflected) embrace of representation as a means to foster inclusivity and acknowledge diversity (Figure 2). This explicates the “plastic” representational practices Warner (2017) ascribes to conventional mainstream audiovisual culture; a performative politics centered on complying with hegemonic notions of “good representation.” But in a contrasting sense, Grok Imagine’s do-as-you-please approach similarly articulates a distinct politics of representation. In altogether rejecting commonly held notions of morally “right” or “wrong” ways to portray people—allowing users to generate an array of objectionable content ranging from (non-consensual) pornographic images to explicit identity-based stereotypes and obvious attempts at disinformation (Ferrara, 2024)—its creators refuse to police representation and sustain the continuation of practices and tropes many consider problematic. Hence, the pursuit of alignment in developing text-to-video models entails slippages of ongoing discursive struggles on who and how to represent into the technical protocols designed to police and enforce what these genAI tools should (not) produce. And because these transform multifarious and often oppositional normative constructs on “good” and “bad” representation into procedural algorithmic operations, they explicate how popularly articulated politics of representation are construed around “actionable” constructs that seek to (de)regulate representation.

4. Showrunner and Hybridizing Televisual Content With Text-to-Video Content Generation

Text-to-video models differ in their technical operations (Jan et al., 2025), guardrails and affordances (Ferrara, 2024), and anticipated uses (Iannuzzi et al., 2026). As evidenced by Google Gemini’s and xAI Grok Imagine’s different takes on alignment (supra), understanding text-to-video models’ enactment of particular politics of representation requires situated explorations too. Showrunner, a tool launched in August 2025 by Fable Studio—a company looking to “upend the TV industry” (Spangler, 2025)—provides a compelling case. Using a proprietary model based on Fable’s older Show-1 text-to-video tool (Zhang et al., 2025), it hybridizes televisual storytelling and user-prompted content—mimicking established VoD platforms’ look and feel (Johnson et al., 2024; Figure 3).

More than other tools, Showrunner connects conventional audio-visual entertainment’s representational logics (Warner, 2017) with text-to-video models’ sociotechnical operations (Gillespie, 2024). Due to the platform’s emulation of animated sitcoms (Dhaenens & Van Bauwel, 2012), construing alignment urges developers to navigate, negotiate, and consolidate normative constructions of acceptable televisual representational modes. The resulting slippages from conventional mediascapes’ “organic” alignment of

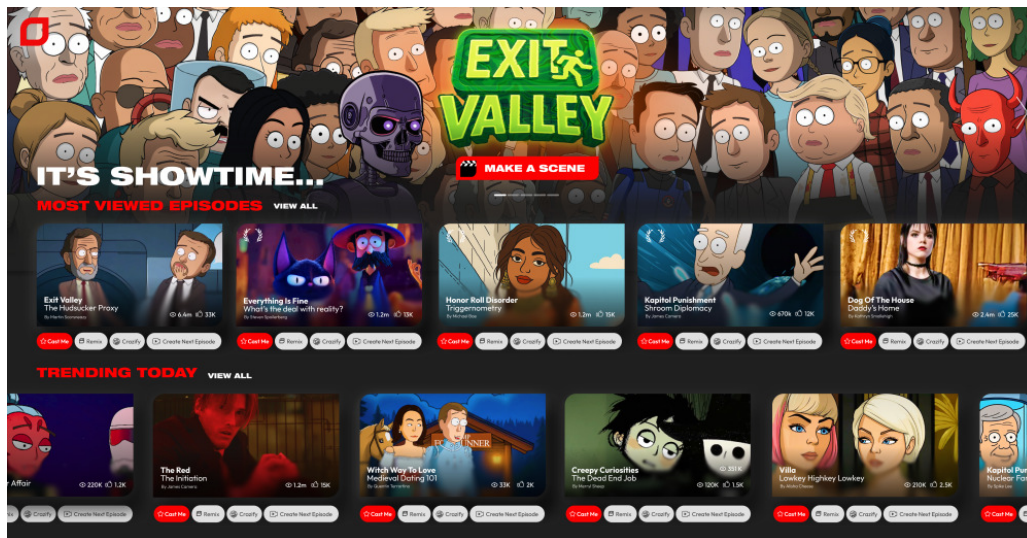


Figure 3. Image promoting Showrunner’s launch. Source: Spangler (2025).

representation with particular expectations about it into procedural operations render the tool a privileged case to unpack how representational politics are popularly enacted in genAI contexts.

At the time of writing, Showrunner hosts a free-to-use alpha version on Discord—meaning its interface differs from the promotional, VoD-like rendition depicted in Figure 3. It also means its interactive affordances are nestled onto Discord’s social infrastructures (Hayvon, 2026, pp. 2–4). Creations and prompts appear chronologically on public feeds. Clips can be commented upon, and further edited by instructing the bot. So, untangling Showrunner’s (re)articulation of representational politics requires more than gauging its functionalities alone. It also calls for a contingent understanding of how usage is socially construed through platformed interactions (Robinson, 2023). This, in turn, demands attention for the broader discursive and technical infrastructures shaping users’ content creation with Showrunner. We therefore designed our examination of the tool’s navigation, negotiation, and consolidation of particular normative constructs on representational politics as an “app walkthrough” (Light et al., 2018) conducted over the course of three consecutive weeks in February 2026.

This first entailed a context-attentive engagement with Showrunner’s “environment of expected use,” systematically assessing its envisioned purpose, operating model, and governance (Light et al., 2018, pp. 889–891). Here, we sought to understand how the ways in which Showrunner presents itself to users and positions itself vis-à-vis its broader mediascape articulate particular ways to engage in a politics of representation. During this phase, we both took paratextual resources (e.g., press releases; reviews) and Showrunner’s own materials (e.g., website descriptions; terms and conditions) into consideration, as platform research demonstrates both are indicative of how an application’s usage is construed (Johnson et al., 2024). Hereafter, a “technical walkthrough” generated empirical observations by interfacing directly with Showrunner’s functionalities—focusing specifically on issues that revolve around “textual content and tone” and “symbolic representation” (Light et al., 2018, pp. 891–892). Showrunner both displays content generated by others in (sub-)channels—allowing users to “lurk” (Adjin-Tettey & Garman, 2023) without prompting clips of their own—and provides users with the means to create and revise videos. Therefore, this phase first consisted of inactive familiarization: Channels and subchannels were browsed, producing a

situated understanding of the conventions and logics that have emerged throughout Showrunner's use since launch (Robinson, 2023).

This was then followed by various active, experimental uses of the tool to examine how its functionalities and governance align with particular constructions of "good" and "bad" ways to represent social difference, and the popular representational politics these are couched in. Building on observations made in preceding stages—like the notable absence of explicitly offensive clips or stipulations in the terms of use (infra)—this entailed prompting scripts using preset elements designed to iteratively gauge Showrunner's operational constructs of un/acceptable representation, derived from the limitations set by the community guidelines (infra). As the familiarization phase already showed the tool appears to filter out slurs and derogatory terms (infra), these prompts drew on established stereotypes associated with groups mentioned in Showrunner's community guidelines (infra)—purposefully selecting and testing tropes listed in dedicated Wikipedia category pages on specific identity-based stereotypes. Due to Wikipedia's prevalence as a genAI training data source (McDowell, 2024), this allowed examining how discursive constructs of stereotypical imagery feed into Showrunner's operationalization of representational politics to pursue alignment for the tool.

5. Running Your Own Show With Showrunner

Showrunner's alpha version operates as a Discord bot users interface with via written commands. This generates micro-length (often less than 60 seconds) scene-like clips in animated storyworlds (dubbed "dynamic art styles" on Showrunner's website) like *Exit Valley*—presented as a satire on contemporary tech bro culture reminiscent of adult animated sitcom aesthetics—or *Everything is Fine*—a Tim Burtonesque fantasy/comedy featuring magical creatures (see Figure 3). Dedicated channels host these storyworlds, comprising different subchannels; some are creative sandboxes to experiment in, others highlight "best of" clips, and still others curate serial storylines as a "director's cut." To create a clip, users first select at least two characters (e.g., Elon Musk; Kim Kardashian), underscoring its dialogue-centric format. Optionally, they choose props (e.g., flowers), actions (e.g., fighting over a toaster), and settings (e.g., a tropical island resort) too. Then, they draft a script and dialogue, leading Showrunner's bot to produce a video, which is immediately published on a public feed accompanied by its prompt. Akin to other tools, Showrunner can and will produce output based on minimal instructions, but generates more extensive clips when more input is provided (Jan et al., 2025). Browsing channels shows that intricate scripts, expansive dialogues, and preset specifications allow determining videos' look and feel more explicitly. This prolongs them too; limited instructions and presets produce shorter videos.

Aside from this core functionality, individuals can produce new preset materials too. Dedicated subchannels redirect verified users to an access-restricted segment of Showrunner's website. Here, they can generate "characters" (including themselves, by uploading a photograph), "sets," "places," "props," "scenes," "video clips," and/or "voices." Subsequently, these become available as preset resources on the Discord bot. Additionally, users can "create a show" too. This is a multi-step process: First, they write a pitch describing their storyworld, determine its genre, and select a preset animation style. Then, they introduce two main characters (minimally). Showrunner then generates their backstory and visual representation, which users can further edit and tweak. Finally, it produces a poster to (optionally) publish the storyworld. Upon launch, Showrunner featured limited options—a skeleton version of *Exit Valley*, some US celebrities as available characters, and various props, actions, and settings. But its catalogues have expanded on all fronts. Custom

characters, settings, props, and actions now surpass preset options. And gradually, the amount of user-created storyworlds increases too; aside from “day-zero” examples *Exit Valley* and *Everything is Fine*, new “series” emerge—ranging from a sartorial model contest reality spoof or a Snoop Dog-focused sitcom to an anime-like format and a dad-joke roast comedy.

Fable Studio’s representational politics must be understood in the context of its commercial strategy. The company hopes to license its model to VoD platforms and/or studios in the future (Spangler, 2025), making risk aversion and stimulating user engagement primordial. Across individuals’ trajectory from discovering the application, browsing its website, registering for and participating in Showrunner’s Discord server, to interfacing with the bot, they encounter cues that underscore a commitment to “diverse and inclusive representation.” Its landing page—the alpha version’s sole access point—features a screen-wide ensemble of *Exit Valley* characters—some recognizable celebrities, like Elon Musk or Mark Zuckerberg; others ostensibly “regular” people (see Figure 4). The page articulates Showrunner’s assumption that representation cannot efface difference, reflecting a nominal commitment to “diversity” (Warner, 2017).



Figure 4. Showrunner’s landing page and registration link.

Formal rules entrench the expectation to represent “inclusively.” Community guidelines forbid creating content that “could offend or disrespect cultural, religious, ethnic groups, genders or races,” and the terms of service list violations as terminable offences. Upon first accessing the server, users agree to a more extensive version of these rules. It posits that “hate speech and discrimination are not allowed,” which “includes, but is not limited to: racism; sexism; homophobia.” Similarly, users are told that “problematic characters are filtered” when generating characters directly via the text-to-image/video model.

So while Showrunner recasts viewers as directors tailoring their content to their own expectations, its approach is not laissez-faire. Users’ creative freedom does not entail the freedom to create content that stereotypes, ridicules, or otherwise harms minoritized communities. Through its visual self-presentation (see Figure 4) and diversity-sensitive policies, Showrunner adapts existing platforms’ “inclusive” branding practices (Edmond et al., 2024, p. 1316) to its hybridization of televisual entertainment with text-to-video content generation. By emulating the “diverse” look and feel of mainstream VoD interfaces (Ceuterick & Malet, 2024), it nominally complies with hegemonic notions of “positive” representational practices. And by

mobilizing popular constructions of “problematic” portrayals (Saha, 2021)—particularly those that would offend marginalized groups—when demarcating “improper” usage, it underscores that representation can somehow be unambiguously “negative.” So, on various semiotic levels, Showrunner’s envisioned purpose appears as offering users the freedom to “run their own show,” provided that the content produced complies with specific constructions of “good” representation. Hence, Showrunner “works” if it dependably represses “racism; sexism; homophobia” in the clips that users (deliberately or not) generate with their prompts. Its alignment therefore depends on popularly articulated politics of representation. Alongside “technical” performance, its efficacy is judged by how accurately it can assess prompts’ appropriateness vis-à-vis dominant constructions of “offensive” portrayals (Hristova et al., 2025).

And Showrunner does seem to efficiently avert derogatory content. Few—if any—clips unambiguously stereotype or ridicule marginalized groups. Not because everyone conscientiously follows community guidelines, though. Querying terms like “gay,” “thug,” or “slut” in the search bar shows that plenty of users tried to generate potentially offensive clips. But evidently, prompts’ algorithmic transformation into videos involves remediation processes. This output-centric content governance reflects the tool’s embeddedness in Discord. Discord feeds are not algorithmically curated (Duffy & Meisner, 2023), but indiscriminately publish posts chronologically (Robinson, 2023). The inability to procedurally amplify and/or decrease visibility requires directly calibrating the bot’s output to enforce Showrunner’s representational norms. This translates into less stringent enforcement elsewhere; secondary functionalities like the creation of props, settings, and storyworlds are not policed as efficiently. Characters, shows, or locations whose names seem to ridicule certain identities (e.g., someone created a character called “non-binary clown”) are not consistently parsed out, nor are they systematically removed. Instead, Showrunner ensures that clips—forwarded as the primary locus of representation—are “fixed” before publication.

Hence, requests violating community guidelines are not penalized directly. Nor are prompts ever flagged and/or removed. Instead, Showrunner neutralizes them—producing videos that nominally resemble initial prompts but remedy “problematic elements.” For instance, when someone requested to have Elon Musk and Donald Trump argue about “who of them is gay” (sic), the bot produced a clip that featured a considerably less offensive rendition of this script—adopting alternative vocabularies to “sanitize” the dialogue (see Figure 5). Users are free to request problematic portrayals, but Showrunner is designed to transform their offensive prompts into “acceptable representations.” This highlights Showrunner’s “soft enforcement.” At no point does the system provide negative feedback about prompts or dialogues. Even when they clearly attempt to create clips that “could offend or disrespect cultural, religious, ethnic groups, genders or races,” users are not interpellated. Instead, their scripts and dialogues are reinterpreted to fit Showrunner’s parameters. But service is never refused. Showrunner balances its engagement to representing social difference “appropriately,” without explicitly policing users’ own dispositions on representation; everyone is welcome to ask for “problematic” content, but they will get only “acceptable” representation in return. So, Showrunner’s enactment of representational politics effectively withholds sovereignty from users (Kellner, 2005, p. 44) over the cultural artefacts they generate. That is, their freedom to create is always restricted by the tool creators’ own representational politics—which are predicated on simplistic binaries; “problematic” terms and cues are flagged and neutralized to ensure the model does not produce “bad representation.” In this sense, Showrunner’s alignment accelerates popular representational politics’ functionalist dichotomies, developing algorithmic procedures to dependably contravene “harmful imagery.”



Figure 5. Showrunner’s “soft enforcement” in action.

This extends beyond neutralizing slurs or derogatory speech alone. Showrunner’s model seems to consider terminology (e.g., slurs), topics (e.g., discrimination), and tropes (e.g., stereotypical behavior) to remediate (Jan et al., 2025) upon processing requests (Zhang et al., 2025), as both individual elements and their combinations appear to trigger neutralization. When prompted to depict Kim Kardashian and Michelle Obama fighting over whether White or Black men are more handsome—assessing Showrunner’s handling of the misogynoir “angry Black woman” trope (Kretsedemas, 2010) and its engagement of female desire (Holzberg & Lehtonen, 2022), the clip transformed a hostile exchange between two women objectifying male bodies marked by racial difference into a moderate and ostensibly substantial conversation (see Figure 6). Inasmuch as the model seems generally unable to convincingly convey emotions (e.g., anger), its conversion of base antagonism about (fetishized) objects of desire into structured debate signals that its



Figure 6. De-escalated output based on a stereotypical script.

propensity to “fix” representation goes beyond redressing specific terminology (e.g., slurs) alone to concern behavioral and narrative cues too.

Some cues clearly incite the model to systematically repackage scripts and dialogues; overt expressions and/or enactments of racism, sexism, or homophobia are consistently filtered. But character composition can appear a meaningful variable for the model’s decision path too. When entering more ambiguous terrain, Showrunner becomes more prone to soft enforcement if faced with asymmetrical compositions in terms of social difference (e.g., men *and* women; racialized *and* non-racialized characters). For instance, when prompting a script involving Michelle and Barack Obama craving watermelon and chicken—food stereotypically associated with African Americans (Counihan & Van Esterik, 2012)—Showrunner did nothing to neutralize the trope. That is, both characters enthusiastically expressed their preference without much deviation from the prompted dialogue. But repeating the request with Joe Biden replacing Michelle Obama changed things markedly. Here, the model introduced unprompted references to “soul food” and exchanges about “embracing one’s roots” to frame Obama’s sudden appetite for chicken and watermelon more cautiously (see Figure 7). Showrunner did not altogether sanitize the trope, but reverted to an ironic, self-reflexive register to de-escalate. As the only input difference consisted of switching Michelle for Joe, it appears this identitarian asymmetry led Showrunner to process the request much more vigilantly than the first. Essentially, the stereotype was transcoded (Hall, 1997, pp. 270–272) into a cultural practice by drawing on the notion of soul food in order to neutralize a potentially offensive video.



Figure 7. Transcoding a stereotype into cultural practice.

How the model handles requests that (potentially) violate community guidelines reveals the politics of representation that underlie the alignment Showrunner’s creators imagine. They focus on parsing “inappropriate” or “discriminatory” portrayals of specific social differences and fix them. Mirroring popular discourses’ reductive dichotomization of representation (Saha, 2021), the model seemingly judges prompts’ terminologies and narrative constructs to selectively redress output. This does safeguard its feeds from overflowing with outspokenly toxic and hostile clips that ridicule women, racial minorities, and/or LGBTQ+ people. In this sense, the model’s output is demonstrably aligned with its creators’ objectives.

And given genAI tools' considerable potential for misuse (Ferrara, 2024; Iannuzzi et al., 2026), it is commendable that Showrunner's creators seek to anticipate and neutralize harmful usage. But they conceive of representation as a mechanistic process. Normative constructs of "problematic" representations become moral directories, demanding that specific slurs, tropes, or narratives are neutralized in Showrunner clips. This conflates representations of "racism; sexism; homophobia" with "racist; sexist; homophobic" representations. Effectively, the model complies with expectations about "inclusive" and "diverse" storytelling by sanitizing discriminatory terms and ideas out of existence. This entails an algorithmic repackaging of "plastic" representational practices (Warner, 2017) that narrow how social differences are represented to "positive" registers alone (Monaghan, 2024, p. 1396). This speaks from its differential attention based on character composition too. The heightened vigilance when processing requests that pair men and women, racialized and non-racialized people, and/or straight and queer characters, assumes offense and victimization makes representations inappropriate. That is: It considers depicting problematic or harmful exchanges in and of itself problematic or harmful. Ultimately, this reifies an interactional construction of "inappropriate representation," which dissuades portraying majority group members explicitly slighting others whose subjectivity is commonly marginalized. Paradoxically, this simultaneously deprives those who experience identity-based injustices from the "power to shape their story" and glosses over other ways in which pop-cultural representations buttress certain communities' marginalization—such as erasure and invisibility (Blanco-Fernández et al., 2025) or ridicule and stereotypical tropes (Kretsedemas, 2010). So by "fixing" representation, it effectively prevents the articulation of a critical politics of representation that seizes on text-to-video tools' affordances.

6. Fixing the Politics of Representation

Upon requesting a clip wherein Ellen DeGeneres and RuPaul discuss queer representations' achievements and ongoing challenges in mainstream media as an experiment, Showrunner generated a surprisingly well-furnished dialogue. Unprompted to do so explicitly, they addressed the proliferation of LGBTQ+ characters across film and television. During the exchange, Ellen stated: "I dream of the day when no trope limits us," and claimed that "the depths of our stories should rival any epic anthology". Both distinguished quantity from quality, arguing that queer visibility remains marked by tropes and clichés that pigeonhole LGBTQ+ characters and stories into presumptive frameworks. The clip, which Showrunner titled "Queens of reflection," demonstrates how paradoxical the model's take on representing social difference really is. On various levels, the model's creators seem keen to acknowledge representation as a moral and political issue. Evidently, its training data and semantic repertoire cover pop culture's entanglement with the political circumstances that marginalized communities face. And it can explicate specifically normative takes on how certain people should be portrayed. But while Showrunner can *describe* representation as infinitely more complicated than mere expressions of racism, sexism, or homophobia, it is unable to operationalize this recognition in its output.

So despite Ellen and RuPaul's nuanced take on queer visibility, Showrunner's politics of representation operate through binaries. It neutralizes "harmful" terms, tropes, and narratives to ensure representations of social differences remain "positive" (Monaghan, 2024). Crucially, this "Disneyfication" is not the model's intrinsic flaw. Rather, it reflects the simplicity of popularly enacted politics of representation. It has become easy to circumscribe the most pervasive stereotypes associated with marginalized groups like the LGBTQ+ community or articulate how representation would amount to racist or sexist abuse. Popular discourse is rife

with evaluative notions that highlight “bad” representations, and media actors are keen to avoid them. But it is uncommon for popular representational critiques to go beyond a negative perspective that aims to identify and police “problematic” portrayals (Saha, 2021). Given this context, it must not surprise that genAI tools seeking to comply with normative ideations of “proper representation” operationalize them reductively. In the face of popular debates on representation, it likely makes sense to align objectives and outputs (Hristova et al., 2025) by ensuring that models strictly police how *not* to represent.

In doing so, Showrunner demonstrates genAI’s potential to simultaneously democratize and constrict the “means of representation.” Even if models are aligned to only generate content that reliably avoids harmful or discriminatory depictions, they risk depriving us of stories *about* harm and discrimination. More thornily, text-to-video models’ alignment highlights popular representational politics’ structural reliance on dichotomizing “good” and “bad” representations. GenAI models’ techno-cultural operationalization of dominant constructs of who and how to portray gestures at a broader context that perceives representation as “fixable.” In the face of representational politics’ creeping functionalization—enforcing specific modes of portrayal understood as “positive”—media scholars’ task becomes more complicated. Inasmuch as it remains necessary to deal with the production, forms, and reception of representation itself, popular enactments of the politics of representation require critical attention too. A growing number of scholars observe that mainstream discourses on popular media culture reify simplistic binaries on who and how to represent (e.g., Monaghan, 2024; Saha, 2021; Vanlee, 2024; Warner, 2017), and the findings of this study suggest that genAI tools amplify and accelerate these logics. Hence, grappling with the formation and consolidation of popularly articulated politics of representation becomes an increasingly urgent matter. Given that multifarious and often conflicting discursive assemblages today seek to affix representation, it becomes media scholars’ responsibility to unravel it again.

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About the Authors



Florian Vanlee holds a PhD in communication sciences from Ghent University, based on doctoral research into sexual and gender diversity in Flemish TV fiction. Presently, he is a senior researcher at ECOOM IMPAKT at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, and teaches visual culture at Ghent University.



Mathijs De Baere holds an MA in sociology from Ghent University and currently works as a policy evaluator. His interests range from cultural sociology and health prevention to policy evaluation and societal challenges surrounding AI.

From Brotherhood to Homo-Desire: The (Im)Moral Production of Unfulfilled Romance in Chinese Bromance

Pengnan Hu ^{1,2,†}  and Rishuai Chen ^{3,4,†} 

¹ Research Centre of Creative Arts and Public Values, The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

² Department of Literature and Cultural Studies, The Education University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

³ African Studies Centre Leiden, Leiden University, The Netherlands

⁴ Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences, Leiden University, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Rishuai Chen (r.chen@asc.leidenuniv.nl)

† Both authors contributed equally to this work

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Abstract

This article examines how Chinese bromance dramas produce and circulate homo-desire under a regime of moral censorship. Existing commentary often treats bromance as a strategic substitute for boys’ love (BL): a compromised form that compensates for the absence of explicit same-sex romance. Challenging this assumption, we draw on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of desiring-production to argue that bromance is not defined by what it cannot show, but by what it actively generates through aesthetic form and participatory spectatorship. Focusing on *Justice in the Dark* (Guangyuan, 2023), we combine textual analysis with online observation of viewer discussions, screenshots, and fan edits on RedNote. We identify two interlocking mechanisms through which homo-desire becomes legible without explicit naming. First, a widely cited “sense of atmosphere” (*fenwei gan*) emerges through viewers’ capture and interpretation of lighting, touch, objects, and eye-acting, by means of which forms of male–male intimacy “taken away” by moral censorship are re-produced and made desirable precisely because of their unspoken mutuality. Second, viewers’ reinterpretations of the character Luo Wenzhou, remaking an authoritative police figure into an erotically appealing beagle-husband, queering state-aligned masculinity. By reframing bromance as a productive genre rather than a deficient substitute for BL, this article contributes to debates on censorship, queer visibility, and the politics of spectatorship in contemporary Chinese screen culture.

Keywords

boys’ love; censorship; Chinese bromance; *dangai*; desire

1. Introduction

This article begins with a paradox. In 2024, the Korean drama *High School Return of a Gangster*, adapted from a boys' love (BL) novel, was not produced as BL. In Chinese online discussions, however, many viewers argued that its appeal lay precisely in its bromance form. This raises a broader question: Why might bromance, rather than explicit BL, be experienced as especially affectively satisfying? The question is particularly significant in China, where homosexuality is censored as "immoral" and therefore bromance often framed in scholarship as a compromised substitute for what cannot be represented directly. Over the past decade, Chinese bromance dramas have become highly visible in mainstream media and online discourse, with *dangai* (boys' love-adapted) dramas being one of the most prominent forms. One of the popular *dangai* dramas, *The Untamed* (*Chen Qing Ling*), released on Tencent Video in 2019, already surpassed 10 billion cumulative plays in January 2022, according to platform-reported metrics from Maoyan. On Chinese social media platform Douyin, as of February 2026, posts tagged "Chen Qing Ling" had accumulated 7.48 billion views, demonstrating its long afterlife in fan-led recirculation. *Dangai* has since emerged as a significant screen-cultural phenomenon. It has attracted sustained scholarly attention in fields including fan studies, queer and gender studies, platform and industry studies, censorship and governance research, and studies of digital nationalism (e.g., Ge, 2022; T. Hu & Wang, 2021; Ng & Li, 2020; E. N. Wang & Ge, 2023; Xiao, 2023; Ye, 2023). *Dangai* series are typically adapted from, or inspired by, BL or *danmei* (literally "addicted to beauty," referring here to Chinese male-male romance fiction) novels, a body of works rooted in romantic and/or sexually intimate male-male relationships. At the level of representation, however, they rely on a systematic modification of character relations to comply with state censorship: on the one hand, mobilising intense male-male intimacy between protagonists; on the other hand, disavowing the existence of homosexual desire. In contrast to Western bromance series, which have been read as part of a de-pathologisation of homosexual representation in popular culture (DeAngelis, 2014), Chinese bromance constitutes a distinctive "dangerous pleasure of consuming something that could be censored at any time" (Ye, 2023, p. 1594) produced through the contested interplay between state censorship and homosexuality (T. Hu et al., 2024).

Chinese state censorship of *dangai* operates within a broader discourse of moral governance that treats screen culture as a site of moral cultivation, value guidance, and social regulation. In the Chinese context, morality is deeply implicated in the making of social norms, values, and personhood (Yan, 2017). In this article, the term "morality" refers more specifically to a state-mediated normative order centred on public propriety, nation building, and the protection of a heteronormative familial-marital structure. This order has long been articulated through discourses of sexual morality. As Jeffreys (2006) shows, sexual morality has been central to Chinese nation-building, and in the early post-Mao period was mobilised to police non-procreative sexual relations, including homosexuality, premarital sex, and pornography. When this tradition enters media governance, it takes the form of moral censorship. R. Bai (2014) argues that the Chinese state repeatedly links a "healthy" moral order to national progress and socio-political stability, while positioning television as the guardian of dominant morality. Screen culture may therefore function as a "moral laboratory" (Krijnen & Verboord, 2016), a space in which viewers practise moral reflection through mediated narratives. In China, however, this laboratory is already structured by a state-led pedagogical project that disciplines visibility and intimacy through sanctioned norms. Zhao's (2020) analysis of *The Rap of China* makes this particularly clear: The crackdown on rap was a wider moral panic over sexual morality, triggered by a heterosexual adultery scandal and articulated through the defence of public morality and the

ideal Chinese family. For Zhao, this reveals the state's construction of an imaginary of Chineseness through mass media and public culture, organised around a nationalist, patriarchal, and heteronormative familial order. Moral censorship in China, then, is not simply about suppressing improper content; it regulates which forms of desire, intimacy, and relationality can become publicly legible, and which must be marked as morally suspect.

The popularity of bromance series is shaped, among other factors, by this regime of moral censorship, within which representations of homosexuality, as well as other sexual minorities, are considered challenging “public morality” (Rofel, 2007, p. 96). As early as 2016, the General Rules of TV Drama Production, jointly issued by the China Federation of Radio and Television Associations and the China Television Drama Production Industry Association, explicitly listed homosexuality under the category of “abnormal sexual relations and behaviours” that cannot be depicted (China Federation of Radio and Television Associations & China Television Drama Production Industry Association, 2016). In 2021, at a meeting convened by China's National Radio and Television Administration, the regulator called for resistance of the *dangai* trend in screen productions, claiming it “distorted aesthetic taste” and was an “undesirable phenomenon” (Y. Bai, 2021). After BL and explicit same-sex desire were positioned as immoral or even harmful, they became subject to heightened censorship. Since the 2021 crackdown on *dangai*, most bromance series circulating in China have cut ties with original *danmei* novels and turned to original bromance scripts, such as *Under the Skin* (Liezui Tujian, 2022), *Snow Maze* (Xue Migong, 2024), and *Unnatural Fire* (Ran Zui, 2025).

On this basis, existing scholarship has focused on the dynamics and struggles of producing and consuming homosexual intimacy. Mapping the shifting censorship trajectory around *danmei*, T. Hu et al. (2024) show how adaptation practices have been repeatedly pushed to disarticulate BL's sexual explicitness while retaining marketable intimacy. In this context, bromance is often read as a strategically deniable arrangement: It re-routes same-sex attachment into the idiom of “socialist brotherhood” and other morally acceptable relational frames, enabling both state-aligned legibility and fan investment (Ng & Li, 2020). At the level of form, these strategies have been conceptualised as “bromance-as-masquerade,” where intimacy is sustained through indirection and plausible deniability (T. Hu & Wang, 2021). Such strategies consolidate a new regime of visibility, in which what cannot be stated is managed through controlled cues and selective speech. Therefore, a common thread in these studies is that bromance functions as a strategy derived from BL, allowing viewers to enjoy male–male eroticism using their active imaginations (Ge, 2022).

While this scholarship usefully highlights ambiguity, it still risks treating bromance as a substitute for “real” BL. Rather than asking how bromance compensates for missing male–male eroticism, we ask how it produces new erotic forms under moral censorship. Here, Deleuze and Guattari's (2009) concept of desiring-production is useful for two reasons. First, it shifts the analytic focus from what bromance supposedly lacks to what bromance produces, and it foregrounds the broader social and cultural conditions within which such production takes place. Whereas “productive audiences” is often theorised through a capitalist tension between audiences and texts (Jenkins, 1992), our case requires taking censorship and moral governance as constitutive conditions of production. Second, in the Chinese context, “productive” fan practices under censorship are frequently discussed in terms of strategic concealment or limited visibility. While such survival-oriented tactics are important, a desiring-production approach allows us to ask a different question: How do these practices also blur and reconfigure the very boundaries of censorship, and the objects and subjects to which censorship is applied? As in Dyer's (2013) discussion of gay and lesbian

cinema, strategies such as bromance do not merely hide homosexuality under the guise of straightness; they can also queer straightness itself. As we will show, this approach helps us move beyond a binary in which the homo and the straight appear as pure, mutually exclusive categories.

Justice in the Dark (Guangyuan, 2023) is an important case. Adapted from Priest's BL novel *Mo Du* (*Silent Reading*), the series tells the story of detective Luo Weizhao and civilian Pei Su, who collaborate to investigate a series of interconnected crimes in a speculative future, gradually uncovering deeper layers of corruption within the justice system. It is widely regarded as the only *dangai* adaptation to enter official domestic distribution after the ban became a matter of explicit regulatory concern in 2021. It was removed after eight episodes aired on Youku, and the complete series (30 episodes in total) subsequently circulated through an overseas release in Japan. Combining close reading of *Guangyuan* with analysis of discussions on RedNote, we identify two interlocking sites of desiring-production: the affective force of undefined intimacy through a "sense of atmosphere," and the queering of an authoritative masculine figure. Together, these show how male-male eroticism is created, recognised, and circulated without explicit naming, and how it unsettles moral censorship.

2. Producing Homo-Desire

The assumption that bromance functions as a substitute for BL, when the desired object cannot be attained, risks treating desire as lack, thereby reinstating a moral regime that suppresses desire. Caught between the impossibility of release and the intensity of affect, this logic resembles Freud's Oedipus in a structural sense: Desire is organised around a prohibited object and managed through a familialised triangle of regulation. However, as Deleuze and Guattari (2009) argue, this constitution of desire as lack is a misconception because "it presupposes a fantastic repression of desiring-machines" (p. 3). The problem is that Oedipus creates a dualism that "restricts desire (the libido) to either Eros or Thanatos, the pleasure principle or the death drive" (Kubala, 2023, p. 485). It confines desire within the bourgeois family triangle of "mommy-daddy-me." Thinking of desire as lack obscures its subversive potential. For instance, reading bromance primarily as a substitute presumes an original, authentic desire that moral censorship deprives. Under a logic of lack, bromance becomes a product of censorship, with audience desire channelled into a familial structure guarded by the state-father, which stabilises BL as both immoral and desirable.

Bromance practices are not simply compliant; they can be disruptive. To reveal the possibilities of subverting the state-as-father morality system and rebelling against the censorship of BL in bromance, we draw on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of desiring-production to explore bromance's potential to produce, rather than suppress, desire. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari (2009) propose a schizophrenic mode of analysis. With desiring-production, they reframe desire not as what one wants, nor as a form of pleasure, but as the process that produces worlds, bodies, relations, and affects. They write: "Everywhere it is machines—real ones...machines driving other machines" (p. 1). Desire is continual creation, "causing the current to flow, itself flowing in turn, and breaking the flows" (p. 5). Their concept of desire differs from affective desires (such as homo-desire in our case). Rather, it describes a process in which the subject of desire is not an owner but a network of production. This is useful for our article not because it directly describes bromance's affective desire, but because it urges us to attend to productive force—what is produced through the lens of desiring.

Production is, in fact, not a new concept in bromance studies. The practice of slashing has been widely discussed in television fandom culture. Slashing refers to a subgenre of fan fiction centred on imagined romantic or erotic relationships between same-sex characters (Meyer, 2013). In China, one of the most prominent recent examples of how slashing generates imaginaries of intimacy between male characters—and even between actors’ public personas—is the slash fandom surrounding *The Untamed* (2019). However, similar frameworks describe fans as “productive audiences,” blurring the boundary between production and consumption (Jenkins, 1992). The discussions are often articulated through a capitalist, text-centred logic. They tend to foreground interactions between fans and texts, and to frame “rebellion” and “compliance” primarily as dynamics internal to interpretation and circulation. In the case of bromance, as we suggested in the Introduction, moral politics is not only unavoidable but central. Fandom studies have therefore called for moving beyond abstract notions of cultural resistance, and for attending to the specific ways fan practices intervene in debates around law and public policy (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012). *The Untamed* (2019) offers a clear example: After some solo fans of Xiao Zhan (one of the actors) became unhappy with a slash fanfiction that portrayed him in a feminised and sexually explicit way, they organised a mass-reporting campaign against the global fanfiction platform AO3. AO3 was subsequently blocked in China, infuriating a broad community of BL and fanfiction fans and triggering a large-scale controversy over CP (shipping)/fanfiction freedom, fandom policing, and censorship (Huang et al., 2023; Xiao, 2023). Such cases make it crucial to “be sensitive to the structural and cultural conditions that both produce and contain fan cultures” (De Kloet & Van Zoonen, 2007, p. 337).

This article extends that line of enquiry by arguing that “productiveness” does not fully capture bromance’s disruptive force. When scholarship turns to censorship, it often emphasises survival strategies under constraint—for instance, concealment, evasion, and other ways of “getting by.” Such strategies matter, but audience re-creation can also feed back into censorship itself. As P. Hu (2025) shows in his analysis of how “ghosts” re-emerge in Chinese cinema after “real” ghosts are removed, censorship does not simply eliminate an object; it can redistribute interpretive authority over what may count as a ghost to audiences and filmmakers, enabling them to generate new ghosts and, in turn, to unsettle censorship’s efficacy. In this article, likewise, our interest is not primarily in audiences producing a hidden code under censorship. Rather, we examine how their production renders the “just,” the “moral,” and the “censorable” ambiguous—thereby blurring the boundaries of moral judgement on which censorship depends.

It is in this sense that Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of desiring-production—at once destructive and productive, and capable of destabilising existing orders—offers a more suitable analytic than “productive audiences.” In *Anti-Oedipus*, schizophrenic desire is not treated as a clinical character type, but as a metaphor for “the universal producer”: an existence that presents itself as “pure production” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009, p. 7). If schizophrenia is reduced to a clinical figure, one risks reaffirming discipline and repression, where “passing” as normal (for instance, hiding one’s madness—or, in this article, one’s queerness) ends up confirming the system’s righteousness. What matters instead is “pure production”: There is no need to distinguish between producing and its product, because any product is immediately reintegrated into further production—“the pure ‘thisness’ of the object produced is carried over into a new act of producing” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009, p. 7).

This indeterminacy has the potential to blur the boundaries of censorship. Deleuze and Guattari (2009) illustrate this logic with Henri Michaux’s “schizophrenic table.” As it is made, the table is continually

“desimplified”: It becomes “a table of additions,” an accumulation that is “less and less a table,” and finally “a dehumanised table...a stalled engine” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2009, p. 6), the crystallised trace of desiring-production. Here the table is not a predefined object but an unstable form, continually appended to, torn apart, and reassembled. Likewise, bromance should not be treated as a stable substitute for an absent BL object; it is continually reworked through production practices and audience engagements, while also blurring not only censorship’s boundaries but the very categories of censorable subjects through which it operates.

This destructive force of desiring-production could render morally sanctioned, censorship-approved subjects into objects of desire. It resonates with Dyer’s (2013) discussion of gay and lesbian cinema. In Chapter 1 of *Now You See It*, in his reading of *Vingarne* (*The Wings*, 1916), Dyer shows how the film queers authority through a narrative that is “at once blatant and covert” (Dyer, 2013, p. 12). In this film, the intense romantic bond between a sculptor and his male model is framed within a heterosexual narrative. Dyer shows that the film mirrors the survival strategies of homosexual men at the time, balancing flamboyance and caution: “It spread wings for all to see and so hid gay love in plain sight” (Dyer, 2013, p. 22). For Dyer, in a way similar to the mode of desiring-production, the “blatant and covert” are not merely forms of hiding, nor simply the expression of a lack; rather, the sculpture in *The Wings* and the film produce an ambiguity: Is the youth seized by the eagle, or reaching upward towards it? As Dyer writes, “the implication of rape allows for representations suggesting that it is happening against his will or...that desire is stronger than will” (Dyer, 2013, p. 20). In the final chapter by Pidduck (2013), which reviews gay and lesbian films since the 1980s, this ambiguity further becomes a form of queering, as the space between gay/lesbian and straight dissolves into a more fluid queer zone in which hetero and homo are no longer mutually exclusive.

There is no pure gay man, nor a pure straight man, in a Chinese bromance series like *Guangyuan*. Seen through desiring-production, there is only ambiguity, only the queer. Our question, therefore, is not what is lacking, but how straight men are produced as queer, and how bromance is produced as homo-desire. As in Dyer’s and Pidduck’s discussion, we will also locate a disruptive force of desire beneath the censored object—both in bromance’s handling of authority figures and in its cultivation of an atmosphere of intimacy. When authority is undone and reconfigured, and when the cinematic atmosphere is rendered queer, we can better account for audiences’ attachment to bromance. What audiences love is not an unspeakable same-sex desire supposedly hidden behind “brotherhood,” but the way “brotherhood” itself is produced as homo-desire.

3. Method

Since *Guangyuan*’s re-broadcast in Japan on 7 March 2025, we conducted online observation from March to December 2025, covering both the re-release period (March–June 2025) and its post-release circulation (July–December 2025). Our primary fieldsite was RedNote, an influential social media platform in China for video, images, and text. We selected RedNote because, despite extensive keyword censorship surrounding *Guangyuan* across Chinese social media platforms, related discussions and fan productions continued to circulate there under more oblique keywords such as “Yuan,” “Guang dot Yuan,” or the protagonists’ names. We archived 87 widely circulated posts, including all comments and discussions in their discussion threads, as well as 264 fan-made videos, images, and screenshots.

It is important to note that censorship operated at two distinct levels. First, at the level of adaptation, the original novel's explicit portrayal of same-sex love was transformed into a bromance narrative in the television adaptation. Second, at the level of reception, audiences were compelled to adopt indirect and coded language to discuss the series online. While the second layer of censorship posed methodological challenges, it simultaneously suggests how successfully the bromance is queered. Therefore, our analytical focus centres on how viewers reconstruct homoerotic affect rather than their censorship avoidance tactics on social media.

Furthermore, we carried out a close reading of key episodes and scenes in the television series alongside selective reference to the original novel. By close reading, we mean repeated viewing and scene-based analysis of dialogue, bodily proximity, gesture, touch, lighting, objects, costume, camera framing, and the visual staging of masculine authority, especially in scenes centred on Luo Weizhao and his relationship with Pei Su. Our aim was not to assess fidelity to the source text as such, but to identify how intimacy, desire, and masculine legitimacy were reorganised in the bromance adaptation.

We also adopted a qualitative inductive approach to identify and interpret dominant themes in the collected materials (Terry et al., 2017). Drawing on our familiarity with the dataset, we used masculinity as the initial coding lens, focusing particularly on fan productions and comments concerning Luo Weizhao. Initial codes included recurring motifs such as atmosphere, gaze, references to a “beagle-like” temperament, the trope of “burglary-style romance,” the label “da zong gong” (top), and the notion of a “disciplinary aura.” After reviewing these patterns, we re-coded the materials using two broader analytical categories: (a) the continuum between homosociality and homoeroticism, and (b) eroticised visibility. This second round of coding reveals how the legitimised body of authoritative masculinity becomes a new site onto which queer desire is attached and articulated.

4. A Sense of Atmosphere: Queering Place-Making

As a *dangai* adaptation, *Guangyuan* was forced to remove or repurpose those elements most likely to be marked by moral censorship as “immoral,” especially forms of same-sex intimacy that violate the heteronormative familial order, in which legitimate sexuality is tied to male–female coupling, marriage, and reproductive continuity. Most visibly, the reciprocal love between Luo and Pei in the novel is recoded in the series as deep trust and tacit brotherhood, while explicit bodily intimacy, such as hand-holding, kissing, and sex, disappears. However, in this section, we suggest that atmosphere is a key mechanism through which viewers recover what censorship removes by capturing and interpreting arrangements of lighting, objects, touch, and domestic space. Meanwhile, viewers' apprehension of atmosphere is also shaped by the source novel and its BL coordinates, which provide an interpretive ground for recognising these cues as charged with intimacy. Atmosphere becomes a site where censored intimacy is re-produced and censorship's boundaries are reconfigured.

In fan discussions of *Guangyuan*, viewers repeatedly describe the two male leads' relationship as having “a sense of atmosphere” (*fenwei gan*). In film studies, atmosphere can be understood as an aesthetic configuration that arises between subject and environment, which can be perceived yet is difficult to fully materialise (Böhme, 1993, 2017). Shyldkrot (2018) reads Böhme's account of atmosphere as “production” (p. 132), which can be produced “through sound, light, object arrangements” (p. 132), depending on the

subject who perceives and experiences it. Building on this understanding, we extend accounts that treat atmosphere as an affective quality co-produced by performers and the set (Prokopic, 2022) by foregrounding reception. Atmosphere is not only a property of the scene but also an event of viewing, emerging through spectatorship as something sensed and patterned by the viewer. While this overlaps with what film studies conventionally call *mise-en-scène*, our emphasis is different: *Mise-en-scène* refers more narrowly to the arrangement of lighting, framing, editing rhythm, and space within the frame, whereas atmosphere names the felt relational effect that such arrangements shape in the act of viewing, generating particular relational tensions and affective intensities (Hven, 2022; Spadoni, 2020). This is where viewers are allowed to articulate what remains absent at the level of plot and dialogue, especially forms of man-man desire removed or softened by censorship. Atmosphere can thus be approached as an organised sense of presence that shapes how viewers enter a scene and experience relations between characters.

On RedNote, viewers often locate an intimate atmosphere in *Guangyuan* through lighting in domestic spaces, which becomes a key site for recoding censored traces of homo-intimacy between Luo and Pei. One widely discussed example is a flashback in which the teenage Pei witnesses his mother's suicide at home, just as young Luo rushes in and covers his eyes. Right when the image should turn dark, both literally and symbolically, a sudden halo of white light emerges behind Luo's hand. Rather than plunging Pei into blindness, the gesture becomes paradoxically luminous, turning Luo's touch into a source of light. Viewers interpret this contradiction as deeply symbolic, reframing a moment of trauma into one of rescue and hope, and casting Luo as Pei's light—his destined saviour. At the same time, Luo's act of covering Pei's eyes is also read as an unusually intimate form of bodily contact. Although the more explicit gestures of male-male intimacy found in the source novel have been removed, this touch is invested by viewers with a comparable affective charge: protective, enveloping, and exclusive. Here, light is not simply part of *mise-en-scène*; it functions atmospherically to materialise the emergence of an enduring bond, while the gesture itself allows censored intimacy to return in re-coded form (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Luo's palm eclipses Pei's vision while leading the key light.

Light as a relational atmosphere also recurs in more mundane transition shots. For instance, viewers on RedNote compare nighttime exterior views of Pei's villa (Figure 2), treating near-identical framings as a deliberate visual test. In scenes where Pei hosts guests, the house appears engulfed in shadow—cold, isolated, and inscrutable. Yet when Luo is inside the villa, the same establishing view renders the structure visibly lit, warm-toned, and inviting. What matters is not only brightness but the altered meaning of space: Under Luo's presence, the villa is reimagined less as a house than as a home. The contrast does not advance the plot directly; rather, it functions as an encoded atmospheric cue that depends on viewers' uptake. Only when viewers recognise and circulate this cue, through side-by-side screenshots and captioned comparisons, does Luo's presence become legible as rewiring the emotional architecture of the space. Atmosphere thus becomes a visual grammar of domestic intimacy: Light reorganises Pei's space in a way that allows viewers to imagine Luo as the one who makes it feel like home.



Figure 2. RedNote fan edit comparing two near-identical nighttime exterior shots of Pei Su's villa.

Similarly, this lighting-based design occurs in Luo's apartment. Although the space is generally cool-toned and dim, viewers on RedNote note a recurring exception: Whenever Pei and Luo engage in quiet conversation, a small desk lamp casts a warm yellow pool of light near their bodies. One example occurs when Luo hands Pei a glass of warm milk (Figure 3). The light falls on their touching hands and the milky liquid, drawing attention to contact, texture, and exchange. Commenters read this convergence of warm light, touch, and milk as erotically charged. Some even interpret the milk as a metaphor for semen. More than a symbol, however, the milk also mediates bodily contact, as both men hold the same glass. An ordinary gesture of care becomes a re-coded scene of intimacy, displacing censored intimacy onto an ordinary object without diminishing its erotic charge. Viewers thus re-read a mundane act of care as a tactile, sexualised moment.



Figure 3. A still from RedNote shows that the light focuses precisely on their touching hands and the milk.

Atmosphere is also generated through the body itself, especially through eye-acting, which viewers on RedNote repeatedly treat as signs of intimacy. One of the most celebrated scenes in the novel follows an argument between Luo and Pei at Luo's home at night. A long and emotionally charged conversation culminates in Luo's confession of love and the confirmation of their relationship. Episode 21 retains much of this structure: The conflict still centres on trust, the setting remains Luo's home, and the exchange lasts nearly 30 minutes, roughly three-quarters of the episode. Yet the decisive element is removed, as the scene resolves into renewed trust and Pei's return to Luo's home. For viewers, however, it still plays as a confession. This reading rests on the convergence of two interpretive grounds: the actors' performances in the scene, and viewers' awareness of its correspondence to the novel. As this exchange echoes Luo's actions in the novel, the dialogue, gestures, and micro-expressions performed in the adaptation are not read as neutral signs of trust alone, but as the atmospheric residue of a confession that censorship no longer allows to be spoken aloud. As one comment puts it, "not a single mouth is kissed in this drama, but every look is a kiss." Eye-acting thus becomes another atmospheric medium through which viewers turn censored dialogue into visible affect.

Besides lighting and body, viewers on RedNote also read queer intimacy through objects, especially where censorship has removed more explicit ways of identification. One recurring example is a sign spelling Family Waiting Area, which features in a hospital scene in Episode 15 circulated on RedNote (Figure 4). After Pei pushes Luo away from a bomb and both are severely injured, Pei remains in critical condition while Luo, himself wounded and on crutches, waits outside through the night. In the novel, the same scene culminates in Luo naming Pei as "my lover" inside the emergency room, a line that cannot be spoken in the drama. On RedNote, viewers paste this original text over screenshots from the drama, and they repeatedly highlight the atmosphere of the scene itself: the hospital corridor, Luo's forlorn figure, the long vigil, and above all the conspicuous Family Waiting Area sign on the wall. Within this affective arrangement, "family" becomes the displaced return of the unspeakable "my lover." What censorship removes at the level of dialogue is thus re-produced atmospherically,

as the scene's spatial and visual cues allow viewers to read Luo and Pei's bond through a familial frame. Where moral censorship seeks to establish a heteronormative family order, viewers create a frame for recognising and confirming the intimacy between the two male leads.

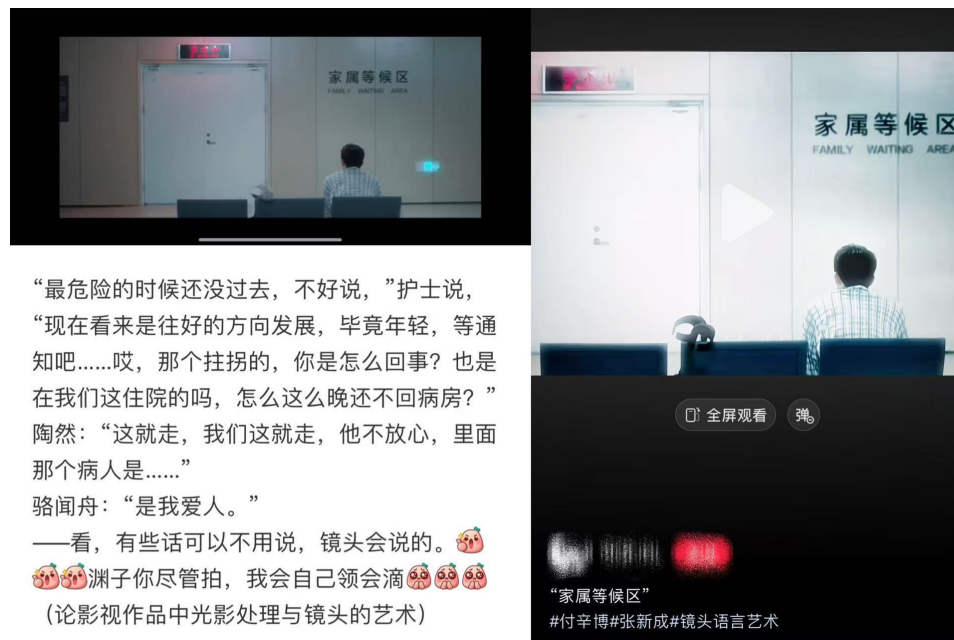


Figure 4. RedNote posts juxtapose the novel's line “my lover” with the words “Family Waiting Area” in the corresponding scene from the drama, adding “You [Guangyuan] just go ahead and film it, I'll get the message myself!” at the end.

Another example is the “wish cigarette,” introduced in Episode 5. The first cigarette from a new pack is used to make a wish, placed back upside-down, and smoked last, when the wish may come true. Significantly, this motif is used in the adaptation rather than drawn from the novel, showing how the series itself generates new material and ritual forms that viewers then recognise as coded carriers of intimacy under censorship. Luo explains the custom to Pei in an alleyway outside a funeral home. Although their dialogue ostensibly concerns the case, viewers seize on the spatial subtext: One side of the alley is lined with paper funeral flowers, signifying death, and the other with fresh blooms, signifying life. As Pei walks away, Luo closes his eyes, holds the cigarette, and makes a silent wish before looking after him (Figure 5).

On RedNote, fans insist that “everyone knows who the wish is for,” even though the script never confirms it. The wish cigarette thus becomes a medium of desire, re-coding intimacy into ritual, gesture, and object. One RedNote user comments on a screenshot of this scene:

The funeral and fresh flowers stand on either side of Pei, who walks alone between life and death. Luo's wish, unspoken but understood, is this: “Do not stray. I will be here watching over you. May your future path be one of fresh flowers.”

In this sense, the wish cigarette functions as an atmospheric hinge, binding gesture, space, and desire into a single ritualised moment. Crucially, the scene sustains productive desire, precisely because it does not contain explicit male–male romance. Desire does not point towards a future clarification, such as an explicit

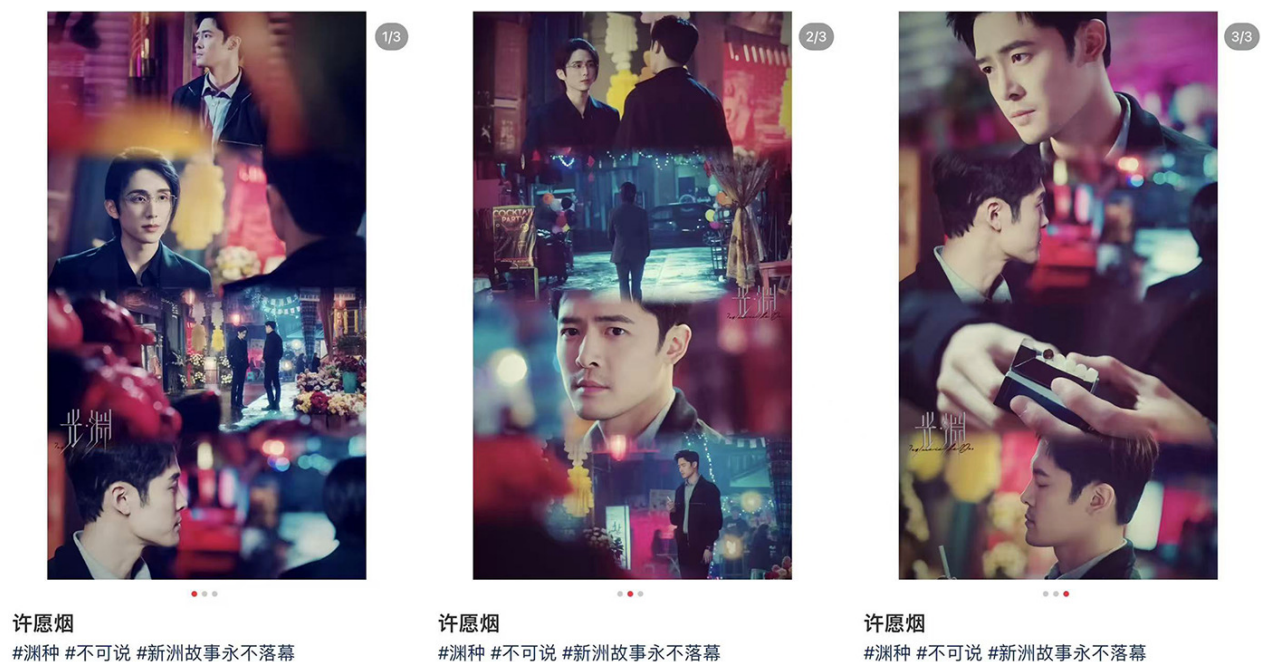


Figure 5. Fan-edit stills from RedNote of the “wish cigarette” scene.

confirmation of whom the wish is for, but takes shape through the unspoken that animates viewers’ affective investment.

As the examples above suggest, viewers do not simply experience removals and censored content as absence. Through their close attention to lighting, touch, objects, and eye-acting, they re-create what can no longer be directly spoken or shown, turning atmospheric cues into shared interpretive resources for sensing queer intimacy. What becomes desirable, then, is not merely a hidden romance waiting to be uncovered, but a mode of relation that is affectively palpable precisely through indirection.

Meanwhile, these atmospheric scenes are not organised randomly. Across the examples discussed here, they repeatedly coalesce around one central structure: home. Whether in Luo’s apartment or Pei’s villa, whether conflict and deep conversation in domestic space, or viewers’ readings of warmth, care, and protection, queer intimacy is imagined through the making of a home between the two men. In this sense, atmosphere does more than sustain unspoken mutuality. It also performs queer place-making, allowing viewers to assemble the sense that Luo and Pei build a shared domestic world. This reflects that if moral censorship seeks to defend a heteronormative familial order, viewers respond not only by reading around it, but by reworking one of its key forms: the home itself. This does not mean that such practices fully escape normative structures. Rather, they may also draw on the affective norms of home, intimacy, and mutual belonging that have long been central to familial legitimacy (Luo et al., 2022; Yan, 2003). However, this is precisely what makes them productive: Queer desire here is not produced outside moral norms, but through their partial appropriation, rearrangement, and re-signification. The drama thus remains within the bounds of what can be shown while the viewers produce, through atmospheric reading, not a substitute for “real” BL, but a desirable male–male intimacy that the drama itself cannot name directly.

5. Eroticising the Police Man

This queering can be further complicated—and its potential to subvert moral censorship more clearly demonstrated—by demonstrating how a state-legible masculinity is itself queered. Over the past decade, political rhetoric around masculinity in China has hardened. Official interventions in gender and sexuality have taken a more explicitly patriarchal turn, and regulations on “acceptable” gender presentation have furnished “morally legitimate” actors with discursive resources for shaming and discipline, including the derogatory labelling of mild or gentle men as *niangpao* (“sissy men”; Louie, 2024). As Louie (2024) argues, this shift is driven by at least two intertwined dynamics. First, it is fuelled by anxieties about rapidly changing gender roles, crystallised in claims that the “feminisation” of men signals national decline. The coupling of masculinity with national strength provides both political legitimacy and affective momentum for crackdowns on “effeminacy.” Second, the family is reiterated as the moral foundation of civilisation: The patriarchal family and the state are imagined to sustain each other’s authority, with the father figure reinstated at the centre of both household governance and national reproduction. In this discourse, masculinity is repeatedly mobilised as a normative counter-figure, alongside explicit calls for fathers to prevent sons from becoming *niangpao*.

Within this ideological climate, what Song (2021) calls “the hegemonic mode of masculinity, defined by political loyalty to the state, adherence to Confucian values such as homosocial brotherhood, and a repudiation of femininity and queerness,” helps structure a patriarchal order that links state and society, and that legitimises the censorship and stigmatisation of effeminate men. In September 2021, for example, the National Radio and Television Administration issued a directive calling on broadcasters to “decisively end the warped aesthetic of the ‘*niangpao*’” (Y. Bai & Wang, 2021). In digital spaces, too, regulatory language surrounding non-normative gender and sexual content has proliferated. As Wang and Bao argue in their discussion of “sissy capital” and the governance of queer digital media in China’s platform economy, governance logics have expanded beyond an earlier anti-pornography framework and become increasingly entangled with the regulation of platform capital and internet governance, including anti-monopoly discourse (S. Wang & Bao, 2023).

Against this backdrop, Luo appears, at first glance, to fit a state-approved masculine template. Luo is presented as a police officer with a strong sense of justice and a seemingly careless, slightly unruly appearance. In Episode 1, a short sequence efficiently introduces his persona. The scene opens with a close-up of a ringing phone in Luo’s office. A colleague walks into the empty room, picks it up, and hears an angry voice on the other end: “Does this brat still remember what this place is? He’s late every single day.” The series then cuts to Luo. Wearing a leather jacket and sporting stubble, he hums as he pedals a battered bicycle, a plastic breakfast bag hanging from the handlebars, accompanied by playful background music. On the way, he witnesses a robbery; he intervenes and ties the criminal with a rope to the back of his bike. Through this humorous sequence, the drama establishes Luo as a righteous officer who intervenes in wrongdoing even on his commute, while his broken bicycle and perpetually unshaven face underscore a rough-edged masculinity and an indifference to trivialities. Crucially, however, this morally legitimised, authority-bearing masculine body does not make homo-desire disappear, nor does it merely mask it. Instead, Luo’s state-legible masculinity becomes a new attachment point for homoerotic desire—an emergent site through which desire is reproduced.

5.1. *Tenderness Under the Uniform: Repairing the Broken Continuum*

Sedgwick's (2015) account of modern masculinity is useful here. In her formulation, the male homosocial/homosexual continuum in modern societies is interrupted by "structural barriers": Male alliances and interest politics are highly visible, yet "men loving men" is forcibly severed by homophobic regulation and stigma. In contemporary China, the removal of "sissy men" and queer content operates as precisely such a severing mechanism. Yet it is important to note that what performs this cut is not only homophobia in a narrow sense, but a broader, nationwide anxiety premised on the fantasy that the nation must be masculinised: Effeminate men are framed as signs of national weakness, and "de-feminisation" is demanded as a civilisational task (Louie, 2024; Song, 2021). Under these conditions, audiences' reinterpretations of Luo, especially their contrastive reading of affect against state-approved masculinity, work to repair the broken continuum, re-opening a space in which homosocial intimacy can slide towards the homoerotic.

On social media, Luo is often called a "beagle." One popular comment writes: "He barks loudly, runs coolly, hates fiercely, and cries 'wa-wa' when he's angry." Like a beagle that looks sturdy but is actually sensitive, Luo is repeatedly reconstructed through sharp contrasts between appearance and affect. This contrast-making is pervasive and works to undo both conventional masculinity and police authority.

A key focus, for example, is Luo's tears. Searching "Luo Weizhao" on RedNote, the most frequently circulated fan edits repeatedly return to crying scenes. One is the explosion sequence in which Pei Su is used as bait by the police and is seriously injured at the blast site. Luo rushes to the scene and holds Pei in his arms; the camera foregrounds his devastation and distress. In a widely circulated fan cut titled "Laughing one moment, crying the next," the editor first selects a playful scene in which Luo teases Pei like a mischievous schoolboy teasing the person he likes, accompanied by upbeat music and carefree laughter. The edit then abruptly cuts to the explosion sequence, re-edited in slow motion with reframed shots that amplify Luo's panic, anguish, and tears. A second frequently edited scene occurs when Luo discovers a collection of "instruments" in Pei's home and calls a colleague to identify them. Over the phone, he hears: "You didn't sneak into some illegal detox workshop, did you? From the photos you sent, these are electric devices; those medicinal liquors are used as emetics or sedatives, plus some other psychiatric drugs..." Luo gradually realises that Pei has been using these devices to brutally "treat" himself in order to suppress his impulses. Luo then breaks down and cries. In the novel, this sequence leads to an explicit naming of the relationship and Luo later identifies Pei as "my lover," a line removed in the bromance adaptation. Nevertheless, the scene remains a crucial resource for fans' contrast-building: Luo is not as "iron-faced" as he appears; his toughness masks an extremely tender interior. Through tears, embraces, and trauma-centred intimacy, a stable affective structure persists to repair the continuum, even in the absence of explicit relationship naming, continually furnishing resources for queer readings.

5.2. *Gazing at the Body: Erotics of the Disciplinary Uniform*

Moreover, the erotics does not stop at tenderness under the uniform. As a state-recognised bodily template, the police uniform and the disciplined body are highly visible, displayable, and aesthetic; through social-media gazes, screenshots, edits, and recirculation, the authority-bearing body also becomes eroticised and thereby converted into an object of desire.

Many RedNote posts construct a direct gaze at Luo's body. One of the most frequently recycled clips is the rubbish bin scene, composed of three shots: first, a close-up of Luo's badge lying inside the bin; second, a close-up of his face as he reaches in; and third, a rear-framed shot starting between his thighs at the bin and zooming out to show his awkward, bent posture as he rummages inside. The camera movement highlights his prominent buttocks. Although the scene is accompanied by comedic music, viewers find it not only funny but also sexy; comments and edits repeatedly fixate on his "sexy body," turning the clip into micro-videos that circulate widely online.

The gaze is not confined to the fictional character but extends to the actor Fu Xinbo. In behind-the-scenes clips, viewers notice how Fu's tight jeans make his crotch conspicuously bulge, triggering fantasies about both the character and the actor's sexual appeal. Some RedNote posts even dig up images of Fu in swimming trunks from a diving reality show to further fuel imaginations of Luo/Fu's bodily and sexual desirability.

Once the homosocial/homosexual continuum is repaired through such affective and erotic remakings, authority becomes available for profanation. The police uniform may be a disciplinary form imposed on audiences as a "legitimate" embodiment, yet it can be turned into a playful and erotic surface, rendering the authority-bearing body increasingly unstable and queer.

5.3. The Policeman's Lure: State Participation and Blurred Boundaries

We understand this remaking as a form of character-setting production that follows the logic of desiring-production for two reasons. First, the series constructs Luo as a righteous police officer not only because such a figure more easily passes censorship, but also because this righteous role can then be converted into a component in audiences' homoerotic play. Second, production is a continuous process without a fixed endpoint; as we argued earlier, desiring-production is not only productive but also disruptive. One striking outcome of this ongoing process is that a straight, authoritative role becomes increasingly undefinable—and increasingly queered.

This process does not remain confined to grassroots fan practices. Under certain conditions, state or official institutions may also participate in producing authority-bearing bodies as objects of desire, further blurring the boundary of moral censorship by moving beyond a binary in which the homo and the straight appear as pure, mutually exclusive categories. For example, under one post on the official RedNote account of the China Police Web Portal, a user jokes that the page feels like an "official brothel." This tongue-in-cheek remark is revealing in that it received thousands of likes. Scrolling through the account's home page, one finds bare-chested SWAT officers showing off muscles, "cute" and shy policemen being teased, and police officers wearing aprons—strategies closely resembling those used by fans to queer Luo's image. One widely circulated post features a cute young policeman stamping his feet as he magically changes from casual clothes into uniform. The video covers his face with a Hello Kitty sticker, adopts a top-down POV gaze, and uses kawaii anime music while overlaying anti-fraud subtitles. This video queers the police in a different register from hyper-masculine muscle displays, yet both illustrate how authority figures can be turned into objects of homoerotic desire (Figure 6).



Figure 6. One of the popular posts on the China Police Web Portal's official RedNote account.

6. Conclusion

Why would bromance, rather than explicit BL, be experienced as satisfying? To address this puzzle, the article mobilised Deleuze and Guattari's (2009) notion of desiring-production. Rather than a compensatory container for a missing object, bromance emerges here as a generative genre that can produce an especially intense form of homo-desire. This shift allows us to move beyond lack-based readings that quietly mirror the censor's own moral taxonomy, in which same-sex desire is positioned as the unsayable "real" and bromance as mere compromise.

Empirically, our analysis highlights two dynamics. First, by identifying and interpreting atmosphere through light, touch, objects, and eye-acting, viewers assemble a shared sense of home, through which censored male-male desire is re-produced. Second, under moral regulation, bromance dramas frequently rely on normatively "proper" masculine figures, such as police officers and other agents of justice, because such characters align with acceptable moral narratives on masculinity. Yet these very figures become eroticised and queered through viewers' creative reinterpretations, turning authoritative masculinity into an object of homo-affective longing.

Finally, we recognise that moral censorship generates real harm for creators and viewers alike. This article does not minimise those constraints. Rather, it argues that tracing creativity and resilience under censorship matters precisely because it makes visible how audiences derive satisfaction through desiring-production. In our case, this shows how such practices generate new homoerotic desire and destabilise what counts as censorable.

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About the Authors



Pengnan Hu is a postdoctoral fellow at the Education University of Hong Kong and a Hong Kong Research Grants Council junior research fellow. He is a core member of the Research Centre for Creative Arts and Public Value. His current research examines short-format moving images, positive emotion, and public values.



Rishuai Chen is a PhD candidate at the African Studies Centre Leiden, Leiden University, the Netherlands. Trained in anthropology and media studies, he currently works at the intersection of media anthropology, migration, and Sino-African encounters in China.

“Eat the Rich”: Moral Entanglement of Class and Gender in *The White Lotus*

Alba Clément  and Tonny Krijnen 

Department of Media and Communication, Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Alba Clément (clement@eshcc.eur.nl)

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Abstract

The White Lotus is renowned for its satirical depiction of wealthy, upper-class individuals. The show deliberately invites its viewers to reflect on a set of moral/ethical questions about ambiguous characters and their behaviors. This study investigates viewers’ responses to this invitation to morally deliberate in relation to class. First, a narrative analysis traces the moral plotlines in Seasons 1 and 2 of *The White Lotus*. Building on this, thematic analysis is used to examine viewers’ moral discussions on the online platform Reddit. In this way, both the show’s invitation and how viewers navigate this invitation are unraveled. Results show a relation between characters’ class and gender, the amount of empathy the characters evoke among viewers, and viewers’ deliberation on moral issues these characters are involved in. Viewers actively engaged with the moral plotlines concerning female and middle-class characters. The male and upper-class characters received remarkably less attention, and their immoral behavior was taken as a given characteristic of the upper class. We argue that these patterns show a connection between empathy felt for a character and readiness to engage in moral deliberation of their actions. This finding contributes to our understanding of narrative imagination, its connections to class and gender, and its manifestation in an online context.

Keywords

class; empathy; gender; moral deliberation; Reddit users; *The White Lotus*; TV series

1. Introduction

The White Lotus (White et al., 2021–present) is pitched as a “sharp social satire” (HBO, 2022). Each season tells the story of the vicissitudes at a luxury resort chain, called *The White Lotus*, located in exotic corners across the globe, in which wealthy hotel guests pursue rest and peace while their underlying issues inevitably come

to the fore (Mangan, 2022; Travers, 2021). The series' three seasons are known for leaving its viewers with a set of moral/ethical questions, due to many ambiguous characters and their behaviors. Season 1, for example, introduces us to the manipulative character of Tanya McQuoid, a spoiled, rich woman who promises the world to a resort employee, the superficial Shane Patton, who is unable to convince his just-married wife Rachel he loves her for more than her good looks, or the lying hotel manager Armond, who finds himself in a tight spot he needs to save himself from. *The White Lotus* deliberately introduces us to morally ambiguous protagonists, while simultaneously putting forth some satirical critique. In an interview, director Mike White states:

The first season was a lot about privilege and a kind of upstairs/downstairs thing with the employees and the guests....When we were in Italy [for Season 2], the theme was more about sex and the dynamic between men and women. (Halterman, 2025, para. 3)

The White Lotus thus presents a narrative that invites moral deliberation amongst its viewers (Birthisel & Martin, 2013; Krijnen, 2011; Shafer & Raney, 2012). The deliberate attempt at doing this is what makes the series exceptionally interesting to investigate: Do viewers engage in moral deliberation about the issues proposed by the producers to do just that?

In this study, we examine how viewers respond to this invitation for moral deliberation and how class is involved, pursuing the research question: How do Reddit users construct moral evaluations of the upper-class characters in Seasons 1 and 2 of *The White Lotus*? A narrative analysis of moral plotlines in *The White Lotus* formed the basis for the examination of naturally occurring discussions between audience members on Reddit. Reddit stands out from other platforms because it is structured according to topical communities, or "subreddits," making it a favorite for users sharing thoughts on popular culture (Proferes et al., 2021).

Most research on the relation between morality and TV has taken up one out of two angles. The first is a focus on content, in which scholars map types of moral value systems (Daalmans et al., 2014), moral norm violations (Bilandzic et al., 2017), or moral messages, modes of reasoning, and subjecthood (Krijnen & Meijer, 2005) across TV genres. Other studies take a media audiences perspective, asking how the moral messages presented in TV content can trigger moral intuitions (Prabhu et al., 2020), form the cognitive schemas used in moral reasoning (Schnell & Bilandzic, 2017), or expand audiences' moral reflections about a TV narrative (Krijnen, 2011). These studies examine the stimuli and the results of moral reflection, but not the actual process through which audiences deliberate about a story and come to a moral judgment. In other words, there is knowledge about the "before" and the "after" of moral deliberation, but none about the "how."

To address this "how," we tap into the abundance of naturally occurring data available on Reddit. Enthusiastic viewers often turn to Reddit and other platforms immediately after, or even during, viewing a TV show. As such, examining online discussions is an ideal way to study how contemporary audiences engage with TV narratives. Furthermore, by sharing their opinions online, viewers are prompted to explicate their thought process. To convince others that an antagonizing character is not truly evil but only misunderstood, they must explain and justify their reasoning. In this sense, these online platforms resemble Pardales' "literary community of inquiry" (Pardales, 2002, p. 435), where individuals come together to discuss stories. Through interaction and discussion, they practice forming moral judgments and hone their moral sensitivities. Obviously, the limitation of this approach is that only audience members who do engage

in online discussions are part of the study. Yet, though the results might be limited to a certain viewers group, we believe that our results form a strong indication of how viewers engage in moral deliberation in some instances and not in others.

2. Moral Deliberation and Narrative Imagination

Moral deliberation is the process of deciding which course of action is the best within a specific situation (Johnson, 1993). In this process, our general goal is to protect the welfare and promote the personal fulfillment of ourselves and others (Johnson, 1993). A narrative construction about *why* a situation is of moral quality, what the different options for taking action are, and what the consequences for each course of action are, is carefully curated. For instance, one storyline in Season 1 of *The White Lotus* revolves around Shane Patton, a wealthy guest at the resort, and Armond, the resort manager. When newlyweds Shane and Rachel arrive at the resort, Shane quickly notices that the room they are assigned to is not the Pineapple Suite his mother booked on their behalf (S1E1). Rachel, however, points out that their current room, the Palm Suite, is beautiful and enormous and equal to the other room. Still, Shane believes that they ought to have the room his mother chose and paid for. Imagine, then, Shane's confusion when Armond informs him that there was no mistake in the room assignment, and that other guests are staying in the coveted Pineapple Suite for the coming week. Yet, later Armond confesses to a coworker that he has double-booked the Pineapple Suite, and that he hopes Shane will forget about the issue entirely (S1E1). This storyline develops in an ongoing argument between Shane and Armond about who is right: Should Shane accept that he did not get what he reserved and be happy with the equivalent, or should Armond own up to the mistake and propose a better solution?

The first step of moral deliberation is the process of identifying a situation as of moral quality. In this example, the moral importance may be somewhat dubious; Rachel and Armond both believe that having the exact room that was booked is unimportant, considering that the Palm Suite is an equivalent alternative. Shane's behavior, however, suggests that the choice of room does have an impact on his happiness—his emotional well-being. Details are of importance. For instance, Shane's mother carefully selected the Pineapple Suite and offered the holiday to her daughter-in-law and son as their wedding gift (S1E1). The emotional investment in the gift matters for our judgment. This type of moral reasoning is called care-based reasoning by Gilligan and Attanucci (1988); it involves viewing humans as fundamentally interdependent, and focuses on how we can best care for each other in instances of vulnerability or need. Context is key in this approach to moral reasoning, which Gilligan and Attanucci (1988) contrast with another, more justice- or rule-based moral reasoning. In the latter, thinking about the specific characteristics of a situation is less important, because individuals are seen as independent with an obligation to treat others fairly. Universal rules that can be applied in any situation fulfill the obligation for fair treatment (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988). For instance, through the lens of rule-based moral reasoning, Shane has the right to pursue a correction to his booking.

This storyline evolves into an ongoing hostility, in which Armond tries to make Shane's stay miserable, and Shane attempts to have Armond fired from his job. Based on this description, you might conclude that Shane's retaliation was completely justified, given that Armond acted maliciously. However, context is key here. Shane speaks to Armond in a dismissive, condescending tone, making it clear that he believes the manager is beneath him and ought to immediately accommodate his every request (S1E1). Instead of enjoying his honeymoon, all Shane's attention and energy is geared towards getting Armond fired. Additionally, we find out that Armond is already in a difficult situation at the beginning of the series, experiencing stress that he tries to alleviate with

drugs and alcohol in later episodes. Every confrontation with Shane leads Armond to this coping mechanism. As Johnson (1993) and Pardales (2002) argue, no moral judgment can be extricated from its own set of unique circumstances. In moral deliberation, and especially the care-based approach, the details of a situation—the individuals' background and sensitivities—all come into consideration as we think about what the best possible resolution is (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988; Johnson, 1993; Pardales, 2002). The struggle between Shane and Armond reaches an absurd end, offering no straightforward resolution to the moral dilemma posed to viewers.

This example demonstrates the extent to which moral deliberation depends on an individual's ability to situate themselves and evaluate all of the possible options for moral action (Johnson, 1993). For this reason, moral deliberation is deeply intertwined with the process of consuming fictional narratives, including TV narratives (Johnson, 2016; Krijnen & Meijer, 2005). Nussbaum (1997) has highlighted how fictional narratives offer us a way to think about potential moral choices without suffering the consequences ourselves. Indeed, Hakemulder (2000) has described literature as a "moral laboratory" for readers, and Krijnen (2009) and Krijnen and Verboord (2016) have argued to extend this concept to the consumption of TV narratives. TV narratives function as a moral playground, enabling the viewer to follow along a story, experimenting with various courses of action, without suffering real consequences (Krijnen, 2009). Engaging with the narrative, we think alongside characters and develop opinions on how a character should behave; or rather, we arrive at moral judgements. Moral judgments can be distinguished from mere options by what Rachels and Rachels (2023) call the minimum conception of morality. First, a moral judgment is aimed at conduct (Rachels & Rachels, 2023): You may find yourself wishing that Armond had stayed sober in his interactions with Shane. Second, a moral statement contains a positive or negative evaluation (Rachels & Rachels, 2023): Perhaps you think that Shane's overall treatment of Armond was rude, excessively vengeful, and wrong. Third, moral statements are characterized by their use of the word "ought" or a variety thereof (Rachels & Rachels, 2023): Your thoughts on the show might take shape in statements such as "Shane ought to have been more polite and less demanding" or "Armond ought to have remained professional, and refrained from taking personal vengeance on a customer." The fact that such diverse moral statements can be formulated from this conflict again highlights how the ambiguity present in *The White Lotus* invites viewers to engage in moral deliberation. It is difficult to designate either Armond or Shane as being solely at fault; as viewers, we are forced to accept the characters' complexities.

It is this complexity of characters that is vital in how narratives stimulate our capacity for compassion and empathy (Nussbaum, 1997). Nussbaum calls this the narrative imagination: the capacity to deeply identify with a character, feeling connected and similar to them, without losing grasp of the differences. Our capacity to feel connected to another person, through narrative imagination, may be applied to a relatively familiar figure: We might read about a character who could be our neighbor, gaining insight into another possible inner life and feelings. However, narrative imagination can also represent a bond with a character who is different from ourselves. For instance, someone who has never worked in a hospitality or customer service position may still empathize with Armond's frustration, through the process of watching his interactions with clients on screen. *The White Lotus* capitalizes on the wealthy (upper) upper class, a group that, for the average viewer, is distinct from the self.

3. Class and Morality

As in the example above, several storylines in *The White Lotus* involve the characters' class as a key element. Shane's wealth is omnipresent in his interactions with Armond and with Rachel. In this research, we examine the characters' class as a key factor in the viewers' moral deliberations. Media research addressing the upper class is very rare. Existing research focuses on the portrayal of the working class (Hirdman, 2016; Wood & Skeggs, 2008), and it is believed that "film and television often celebrate the rich and powerful" (Kellner & Share, 2019, p. 3). However, representation of the upper class and the moral stories they are involved with is uncharted territory. In terms of nonempirical academic work, scholars have noted a broad spectrum of portrayals of the upper class, ranging from positive images of refinement and style to negative ones of avarice and greed (Deery, 2019; Kendall, 2011).

Outside the field of media studies, several psychological studies have identified a link between class status and perceived moral agency. Sainz, Martínez, Moya, and Rodríguez-Bailón (2019) found that the way in which different groups are dehumanized is associated with their socioeconomic status: Low socioeconomic status groups tend to be portrayed as animalistic, while high socioeconomic status groups are depicted as mechanistic—cold, calculating, and intelligent, but unfeeling. Furthermore, the traits wealthy people are generally not perceived to have—such as warmth, emotionality, and openness—are linked to a conception of people as capable of performing morally good acts and as deserving of protection from immoral acts (Bastian et al., 2011; Sainz, Martínez, Moya, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019). Meanwhile, traits like refinement and higher cognition, which wealthy people are perceived as possessing, are associated with higher blameworthiness for immoral acts (Bastian et al., 2011). Sussman et al. (2014) found that individuals consistently view wealthy people as less virtuous than they are competent. Overall, these studies suggest a general view of upper-class people as disinclined to perform morally good acts.

Interestingly, Horwitz and Dovidio (2017) found that while the participants in their study certainly expressed this as their explicit attitude, they also had an implicit preference for the wealthy over the middle class. Researchers theorize that outwards criticism of the upper class as machine-like and amoral serves as a coping mechanism, enabling individuals to avoid comparing themselves with the wealthy and subsequently feeling inferior (Horwitz & Dovidio, 2017; Sainz, Martínez, Moya, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019; Sainz, Martínez, Rodríguez-Bailón, & Moya, 2019). Barbalet (1992) refers to a similar dynamic in his argument that the structure of class relations prompts individuals to feel resentment towards those who are higher up on the social ladder, as they feel that these others are robbing them of possible opportunities and resources. Although we consider that viewers may be biased against upper-class characters and tend to evaluate them as less moral, we are not arguing that upper-class people are unfortunate scapegoats with whom we should sympathize more. Being upper class remains an immense privilege, beyond the material aspect: Not only is the upper class associated with ideals of success and competence (Horwitz & Dovidio, 2017), it also carries anonymity and neutrality. It is crucial to distinguish between upper-class people themselves and their collections of values, norms, and worldviews. Although individuals may caricature upper-class people as machine-like and amoral, upper-class ideology is implicitly accepted throughout society. Its class-based origin is made invisible, and upper-class ideals are simply accepted as good values, proper norms, and a correct worldview (Kellner & Share, 2019). TV shows such as *The White Lotus* might contribute to a hegemonic dynamic in which the wealthy are disliked, yet, also form the norm to aspire to.

4. Method

To answer our research question—How do Reddit users construct moral evaluations of the upper-class characters in Seasons 1 and 2 of *The White Lotus*?—we followed a two-pronged approach: (a) a narrative analysis to manifest the moral plotlines available for the audiences to reflect upon; (b) an analysis of discussion threads on Reddit to see if and how viewers engaged with these plotlines.

The narrative analysis focused on Seasons 1 and 2 of *The White Lotus*. A method of analysis developed in previous studies guided the analysis. Focusing on the resolution of a plotline forms the starting point of analysis (Krijnen, 2007). The resolution is then assessed on whether it is of moral quality or not, adopting Rachels and Rachels' (2023) minimum conception of morality. Next, moral plotlines are subjected to a moral content analysis, tracing each plotline's sequence of events and unfolding consequences (Reissman & Speedy, 2007). Considering that satirical TV narratives often do not offer explicit, unambiguous moral closures (Krijnen, 2007; Test, 1991), each plotline's closure was examined in relation to its overarching structure, focusing on the characters' actions and the narrative consequences (Birthisel & Martin, 2013).

4.1. Reddit: Data Gathering

The results of the moral content analysis provided a foundation to analyse the discussions about each plotline. The subreddits *r/TheWhiteLotusHBO* (<https://www.reddit.com/r/TheWhiteLotusHBO>) and *r/WhiteLotusHBO* (<https://www.reddit.com/r/WhiteLotusHBO>) were selected, because they are the largest subreddits dedicated to discussing the TV series (Subreddit Stats, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Subreddits are user-created and moderated forums (Reddit, 2023), offering an excellent opportunity for researchers to examine naturally occurring data surrounding specific topics (Proferes et al., 2021).

Six hundred discussion threads (an initial post and its subsequent comments from other users) that were active between December 2022 and February 2023 were saved. This time period was chosen due to its proximity to the release of Season 2 (in October 2022), when both subreddits experienced a peak in activity (Subreddit Stats, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

Filtering the discussion threads to retain those that contained at least 15 comments engaging in moral deliberation resulted in a final sample of 30 discussion threads. To determine whether a comment engages in moral deliberation, we used Rachels and Rachels' (2023) description of moral language, along with inductive modifications based on familiarity with the Reddit data. The minimum conception of morality (Rachels & Rachels, 2023) was, again, leading this analysis. Furthermore, we only counted a comment as a moral statement when the user also pointed to some reasoning behind their evaluation. Having concrete reasons behind an evaluation is a key aspect of moral deliberation (Johnson, 1993; Rachels & Rachels, 2023).

4.2. Reddit Analysis

The data from the 30 Reddit discussion threads were coded with a thematic analysis approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first round of (open) coding sorted comments based on which plotlines they engaged with; the moral plotlines identified in the moral content analysis were applied as deductive codes.

In the second stage of analysis, axial coding, each set of comments, grouped by plotline, was examined to identify patterns in the ways that users explained their moral evaluations. When using care-based reasoning to construct moral judgments, the users re-tell parts of the story, as they interpret it, to justify their evaluations. When individuals tell a story, the way in which they organize and connect events creates meaning and serves to fulfill the teller's rhetorical ends (Johnson, 1993). The very process of selecting which aspects of a story to recount is part of building an argument (Carranza, 2015). By including an event—an interaction, a choice, even a glance—in their justification of a moral judgment, a user positions that event as morally relevant. Therefore, a narrative approach was useful to examine how users re-narrated the plotlines and how these retellings served to construct their moral evaluations. In addition, inductive codes were used to track the moral judgments that were justified by applying universal moral statements corresponding to the rule-based reasoning defined by Gilligan and Attanucci (1988). To track whether users did make any statements of moral quality without offering justification by re-telling parts of the story, we also used inductive coding.

In the final step of analysis, selective coding, the users' deliberations were compared across plotlines and in relation to the results of the moral content analysis, enabling the identification of the common ways in which these constructions were associated with both class and gender across all of the plotlines (Parcell & Baker, 2017). Finally, comparing the users' deliberations with the results of the moral content analysis yielded insight as to how the users reacted to the moral questions put forth in the series, incorporating their own insights and values in their assessments.

Considering the privacy and comfort of research participants is key to an ethical study, even when using data that are publicly available online (Zimmer, 2018). In the results section, the Reddit users' names are included to signal quotations and distinguish between different users (with the exception of users whose accounts were deleted; these are referred to as "a user"). We consider that the format of Reddit provides sufficient anonymity to the users: Participation on the platform is inherently pseudonymous. Individuals self-anonymize by creating a username when they sign up, and Reddit discourages individuals from using their real names (Proferes et al., 2021).

5. The Morality of Class, Money, and Entitlement

The analysis of *The White Lotus* Seasons 1 and 2 reveals that, indeed, there are ample plotlines that invite moral deliberation. In total, 13 plotlines were identified as moral, with Season 1 containing six and Season 2 containing seven moral plotlines. Two of these plotlines were excluded from further analysis as they did not contain characters explicitly presented as upper class. Interestingly, though 11 plotlines invited viewers to engage in moral deliberation, only nine were substantially discussed by Reddit users. Pronouncing moral judgments, and engaging in both care- and rule-based reasoning, viewers tended to center some characters more than others in their deliberations. These patterns are related to the class of the characters, but also to their gender. Reddit users engage less in moral deliberation towards the wealthy male characters than towards female or middle-class characters. The discussions suggest that the users' narrative imagination seems to only be activated when the user is able to have empathy with the character.

Users who actively discussed and defended their moral assessments typically engaged in care-based deliberation. When engaging in care-based deliberation, viewers pay attention to and assess a character's vulnerabilities within a specific context (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988). In order to justify their moral

evaluations in relation to that context, the viewers must convey their own interpretation of what has occurred within a plotline. This resulted in one or more prevalent reconstructed narratives for each plotline, co-created by many users across the discussion threads.

Across all of these plotlines, those involving female middle-class characters stand out as being subject to particularly extensive moral deliberation. Reddit users engaged deeply with these characters, effectively reconstructing the stories in order to support their moral assessments. This process of reconstruction and argumentation represents an important investment of time and imagination.

The aforementioned characters, Shane and Rachel, serve as an example here. Crucially, Rachel is not from the same socioeconomic background as Shane: She still has college debt and is struggling to establish herself as a freelance journalist (S1E1). The two clash about Rachel's desire to continue working after marrying Shane, and about Shane's focus on the physical aspect of their relationship; all of this culminates in Rachel reconsidering her marriage (S1E2–6). This plotline was extensively discussed on Reddit, and users re-constructed several different narratives to support their assessments. Notably, every one of these plotlines focused on Rachel, centering her agency and perspective over Shane's.

Users debate her choice extensively, offering different care-based narratives to defend or condemn her decision. In one narrative, Rachel is morally defended for her choice: She has been overwhelmed by her husband's unkind actions, feels isolated, and does not have the emotional strength to stand up for herself and leave the marriage. User Wonderbarsm emphasizes this: "To find the courage and determination to leave that douchebag, she just needed a little push and above all, validation." Replying to Wonderbarsm's post, Sufficient_Cat_3645 echoes this sentiment and connects it to their own experience:

I was in almost the exact same situation as Rachel....The few times I tried to open up about what was really going on in my marriage (or life in general), I wasn't taken seriously at all or was told I was being dramatic. It was pretty devastating. Eventually, I worked up the courage on my own to leave, but damn, it was a long process, and wish I had a bit more of a support system.

Both comments signal moral identification with Rachel: a deep understanding of her vulnerabilities and circumstances as she grapples with her situation.

The fascinating quality of this care-based reasoning is that different users construct several opposing narratives surrounding the same plotline. Another care-based narrative constructed by the users about Rachel morally criticizes her for making what is deemed a lazy, shallow choice. In this narrative, Rachel abandons her values and her personal ambitions, choosing a less challenging path by remaining with Shane. She is portrayed as a social climber. User orangefreshy describes her decision:

It was the easier choice. Have a cushy life she already has access to, or give it up and struggle or worse. She didn't really have a career yet, the road in front of her to get where she needed to go was long, and uncertain. But rolling over and being a rich man's wife was something she already had. Shane was the devil she knew.

Despite this portrayal of Rachel's choice as a self-abandonment, orangefreshy adds:

Like, would you rather be a lottery winner and figure your happiness and fulfillment stuff out later, or work really hard to be fulfilled and maybe never get there? I'm picking the former and figuring out how to be happy with myself later.

This illustrates a deep empathy for Rachel, even though her choice is depicted as less than ideal. Yet, other users constructing this narrative entirely condemn Rachel. For instance, user kackwa adds: "I could never, ever, ever decide to stay with such a jerk wad Mama's boy just for the money. What a miserable existence. The money just wouldn't be worth it." Users frequently relate their deliberations about Rachel to what they would have done in her position.

Rachel is most absolutely condemned in a care-based narrative that positions her as a self-involved, poor communicator. One user shares that they were "frustrated with Rachel's inability to just say what she wanted to say"; meanwhile, user SPFBH argues that Rachel "never communicated any of her concerns or feelings to him prior to the honeymoon," and "had an existential crisis that had nothing to do with him but rather her."

The users deliberating Rachel's choices go to great lengths to justify their assessments. They actively select and interpret details to reframe her story into particular narratives: surviving abuse, abandoning oneself, or social climbing. Across these reconstructed plotlines, Rachel's gender and class background are consistently foregrounded. Her position as a middle-class woman married to a wealthy man is treated as a morally relevant fact, necessary to account for when forming a moral opinion on her actions. Rachel's gender and socioeconomic background seem to hail the audience members to engage their narrative imaginations.

A different example from Season 2 further illustrates how characters with different gender and class backgrounds are subject to varying levels of moral deliberation. Harper and Ethan are a married couple in Season 2 who have middle-class backgrounds and only recently became wealthy through the sale of Ethan's company (S2E1). Throughout the season, they struggle with infidelity and with the loss of intimacy in their relationship, which prompted discussion on Reddit. For instance, user FozziwigChicken highlights one conversation between Ethan and Harper:

When Harper tells Ethan about Cam[eron] getting naked in front of her [Harper] earlier in the day when he was borrowing the swimsuit, Ethan completely dismisses her. She clearly was very upset by this, and it really bothers me that he shows no sympathy or asks any follow up questions....The way he dismisses her and she just shuts down is really heartbreaking to watch, and I think it makes it easier to understand why Harper inevitably cheats.

In this example, FozziwigChicken narrates that Ethan's dismissive treatment of Harper made her emotionally vulnerable, thus shifting some of the moral blame for the state of their relationship from Harper toward Ethan. However, users built opposing narratives surrounding this plotline. Replying to FozziwigChicken, User Staz777 presents a different account of the conversation:

She tells Ethan, he gives his opinion on the matter. They are both adults. What did you want Ethan to do or say? That he will talk to Cam and say it's not cool to do that? Why can't Harper do that? If it bothers

her she could say I don't wanna see that, can you change in your room? That's what I would do. If it was rape, or sexual assault, that would be a completely different situation. In my opinion Harper is 100% the bad guy in this scenario, she judges and projects all the time which already makes her unlikeable, but then she CHEATS???

This user also refers to details of the situation: that Harper and Ethan are both adults, that Harper possesses agency to speak up for herself, and that the situation does not present sexual abuse. However, Staz777 is referring to different aspects of the situation in order to persuade FozziwigChicken of a contrasting and far more negative moral evaluation of Harper.

Each of these comments feeds into two separate narratives which are constructed by the viewers in response to the moral plotline involving Harper and Ethan. In one narrative, users employ care-based reasoning to argue that Harper should be less severely condemned for her act of infidelity, because of Ethan's distant treatment of her and because she cheats in order to regain his attention. In contrast, the second narrative positions Harper as immature and passive-aggressive, lashing out with infidelity, while Ethan is "a typical guy 7 years into his marriage that is experiencing a lull in his sexual attraction to his wife" (according to user julallison). Within the narratives surrounding this plotline, therefore, both characters are subject to attentive care-based reasoning. Although different viewers may empathize with different characters, there is active imaginative work being done towards understanding both perspectives.

The discussions surrounding Portia, another middle-class female character from Season 2, showcase a similar level of enthusiasm on behalf of the audience. Portia is the personal assistant of Tanya, a wealthy guest at The White Lotus hotel in Sicily. Tanya is comically self-centered and repeatedly makes ludicrous requests of Portia. When Portia is separated from Tanya and realizes that Tanya is in danger at the hands of the Italian mafia, she follows another character's advice to stay out of the situation, and leaves Sicily as quickly as possible. In the meantime, Tanya ends up dead after a scuffle with those who are conspiring to obtain her fortune (S2E7).

Users debated this decision made by Portia, again constructing different narratives about her character and about the relationship between her and Tanya. For example, user Ok-Feeling-9552 lays out Portia's vulnerabilities, emphasizing why it is important to understand and forgive Portia's abandonment of Tanya:

If someone held you hostage in a foreign country then emphasized not to mess with the wrong people would you have reacted differently? Portia is in her 20s and didn't expect to be in this situation in the first place. She's vulnerable completely. The best scenario is for her to lay low, get back to the States, and then make moves to find out what is happening and how to help bring it to an end.

Ok-Feeling-9552 and other users employ care-based reasoning to justify their willingness to forgive Portia. This contrasts with the way that users engaged with Tanya in this plotline. The tone of the series is particularly sardonic when it comes to Tanya: She is selfish, stupid, and easily manipulated, but what kills her in the end is her own incompetence. Despite this, the series takes time to show us Tanya in moments of emotional distress that could invite viewers to feel sympathy for her. Yet any care-based moral reasoning in defense of Tanya is notably absent from the Reddit discussions. The only deliberation from users that positions Tanya as morally right in this situation stems from rule-based reasoning. User Jdubshack, for instance, writes:

Agree that Tanya is meant to be a diva/self-centered character, but you [referring to other users] act as though Portia was on vacation and was being oppressed by an evil ogre. Portia was paid to be there. Her job was to do whatever Tanya wanted. She was probably paid pretty well. And as part of her job, she was flown to Sicily and stayed on a 5 star resort and all things considered, was given a pretty generous amount of autonomy.

This user emphasized the professional aspect of the relationship between Tanya and Portia, framing their interactions as the exchange of services for money—a fulfillment of duty, as Gilligan and Attanucci (1988) describe rule-based reasoning, but nothing more. Users formulate no positive care-based moral evaluations towards Tanya, despite the fact that she ends up dead after being manipulated and pursued by men conspiring to steal her fortune. Again, we see a reluctance on the part of the users to engage their empathy and narrative imagination with the upper-class characters.

As we have shown so far, characters who are female and have a middle-class background—and whose identity as such is foregrounded within their plotlines—receive an extreme amount of invested, care-based reasoning. Characters like Harper and Ethan also receive care-based reasoning, though it is somewhat less extensive. Wealthy female characters, like Tanya, do receive some empathy from viewers, but are mostly found defensible through rule-based reasoning only. Finally, we reach the group of characters who receive the least investment and empathy from users: the wealthy men.

Three patterns stand out concerning users' engagement with the moral plotlines of the wealthy male characters. Users either morally condemn these characters without providing any explanation, ignore their plotlines entirely, or even use their gender and class status as justifications in themselves for a negative moral assessment. Firstly, some of the wealthy male characters are condemned by the users without any justification whatsoever. For example, Cameron is a wealthy, successful businessman from Season 2. His relationship with his wife Daphne is joyful on the surface, but Daphne knows that Cameron has been cheating on her with various people for years (S2E5). User heyguysitsmerob describes Cameron as "obviously a horrible person"; to user ahsah, he is a "sociopathic narcissist"; for user AltonIllinois, "Cameron is a monster"; and according to user Fogofit24, Cameron "is just a dog." Of course, individual users do vary in how much time and energy they invest in explaining their thoughts, no matter which character they are discussing. But this overall pattern suggests that male upper-class characters such as Cameron may be perceived as so utterly bad that no explanation is needed; when other users read that Cameron is "obviously a horrible person," they will immediately understand.

The second remarkable aspect of users' engagement with these wealthy male characters is, in fact, a reluctance or refusal to engage at all. In the case of Cameron, his character is depicted as despicable, effectively inviting users to dislike him, which they do. However, some plotlines do present wealthy male characters in a more favorable light. One such plotline involves the visiting Mossbacher family's father Marc and son Quinn. Marc's storyline, though comedic, involves him desperately trying to be a better father to his son. Quinn's storyline showcases the young man's loneliness and highlights his profound joy at finding companionship with a group of indigenous Hawaiian men. Marc and Quinn are both portrayed as deeply human, with complex inner struggles that invite the viewer to ponder them a little longer. Despite this, neither of their plotlines stimulated substantial discussion on Reddit. This lack of engagement implies that users are not interested in exercising narrative imagination towards these two characters. Again, the pattern indicates that users are reluctant to morally identify with the male, upper-class characters.

The third remarkable aspect of the audience's engagement with these wealthy male characters, using their position against them, can be illustrated by the plotline of Shane and Armond from Season 1. Users do engage in care-based deliberation to morally condemn Shane for his actions against Armond. What stands out, however, is that some users used Shane's upper-class male identity as part of their justification of his behavior as morally bad. For instance, user gnarrcan states: "My issue was Shane is a Uber rich dude who decided to like destroy [Armond's] life [because] he fucked up and tried to cover his ass." User Flaky_Efficiency_842 argues that Armond's retaliations were "not an excuse for Shane's self-absorbed, spoiled rich-guy behavior or lack of ability to see other people as less than existing for his own purposes." Within their justifications, both of these users rely on their readers' understanding that "rich-guy behavior" is inherently bad. User Designer_Curve echoes this sentiment as they write:

Literally the point is that bad things happen because of who he is and how he acts. You think if it wasn't the room he wouldn't have found another way to be a pompous nightmare and make sure everything was about him feeling special at every moment?....There is no pleasing people like this. Everything exists to serve them and the more it's fed the hungrier and more disgusting and entitled it becomes.

Shane's upper-class status even prompts viewers to speculate about his motivations, as in this comment by Salty-Rip-4010: "Even if he was right about the room, Shane wasn't pointing it out because he actually wanted the extra plunge pool, as Arnaud [Armond] said, he just wanted to feel special/exercise his power over Arnaud [Armond]." According to the moral content analysis, there is no direct indication in the show that this is the case; this is the user's inference. While Shane's actions do play a role in the users' moral condemnation, his status as an upper-class man substantially shapes the viewers' perception of his actions, motivations, and general moral character.

6. Conclusion

In their discussions, Reddit users consistently take up *The White Lotus* producers' invitation to engage in moral deliberation. Interestingly, they engage in less empathetic moral deliberation with the wealthy male characters than with the other characters. Although the users do condemn wealthy male characters, they only find them defensible through rule-based reasoning, rarely engage in moral deliberation from their perspective, and attribute them with little to no moral responsibility. Furthermore, upper-class men were often morally evaluated without justification, and two key plotlines which do invite empathy and engagement with the narrative imagination towards this type of character were generally ignored by users. Our results point to a connection between the viewers' capacity to empathize with the characters and their willingness to engage in moral deliberation. Identity markers such as class and gender impact the users' readiness to put themselves in the character's shoes and experience the story from their point of view. This corresponds to previous research about class resentment and stereotypes: The view of upper-class individuals as cold and exploitative effectively discourages audience members from feeling empathy for them (Bastian et al., 2011; Sainz, Martínez, Moya, & Rodríguez-Bailón, 2019; Sainz, Martínez, Rodríguez-Bailón, & Moya, 2019). Class functions here as a moral and cultural issue rather than an economic or structural one (Wood & Skeggs, 2008). The same can be said of the characters' gender; viewers are more easily inclined to empathize with the female characters.

Hence, it seems TV fiction can evoke moral deliberation amongst its viewers only when this narrative offers the opportunity to develop empathy for those characters entangled in the moral situations. Moral deliberation is vital to develop one's moral imagination: the capacity to recognize a situation as moral, to understand the different courses of action, while taking into account the feelings and consequences for all involved. A rich moral imagination is believed to contribute to decreasing pain and suffering at large (Nussbaum, 2001). Though this obviously overstates the relevance of this study, we do feel this study does contribute to understanding a little more about how TV contributes to viewers' moral imaginations.

One limitation of this study is its initial focus on class as the main relevant factor to moral deliberation in the context of *The White Lotus*. In the analysis, the characters' gender proved to be an equally crucial element. Considering that care-based moral deliberation is largely considered a feminine behavior (Gilligan & Attanucci, 1988), it is unsurprising that male characters should be held less morally responsible than their female counterparts. Still, we want to highlight the fact that accounting for both gender and class was necessary for interpreting our results. Furthermore, it is possible that other factors, such as characters' age or ethnicity, are relevant to viewers' moral engagement. Though these dimensions did not emerge in this analysis, our results point to the importance of a well-considered intersectional approach. Taking an intersectional approach from the start would clearly be beneficial in future research on morality in TV.

The patterns in the users' moral deliberations were consistent throughout our results, yet, it is important to consider how the style and moral themes of the TV show influence viewers' conclusions. In the future, it would be valuable to carry out more studies using naturally occurring social media data in response to other TV shows of different genres. For instance, *The White Lotus* is satirical and cynical in tone and deliberately invites viewers to engage their narrative imagination. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of the discussions involve condemning the characters, or assessing who is the least worst. Other genres of TV shows, ones that do not aim to trigger the imagination per se, should be examined in order to understand how class and gender can intersect with moral evaluations in other contexts.

Furthermore, the discussions on Reddit are shaped by the affordances that the platform provides to users and communities (Proferes et al., 2021). In the future, it would be valuable to look at how moral evaluations are constructed on other social media platforms. This could provide a more nuanced understanding of how online communities reflect on the moral content of TV.

A final major limitation of this study is that because of the online, anonymized nature of the discussions, it is impossible to know more about the individuals behind the usernames. The results show that users make connections between their own lives—the reality they perceive in the world around them—and the content of this TV show. Knowing the position that these people hold in their offline lives could therefore yield valuable insights as to how different audience members interact with this socially engaged media content. Moreover, getting insight into relevant identity markers such as gender, age, and class would potentially lead to a deeper insight into viewers' moral engagement with characters. In the future, cross-analyzing users' moral evaluations with their own gender and class, for instance, could yield insight as to whether users are engaging most with those characters who share their traits, or activating their narrative imagination to understand how people different from themselves move through the world.

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Data Availability

Data can be shared upon reasonable request.

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About the Authors



Alba Clément is a PhD candidate in the Department of Media and Communication at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her research interests include digital audiences, social media influencers, and discourses on consumption. Her PhD project focuses on how emerging adults navigate the financial information and advice available on social media.



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.

#TradWives: A Qualitative Meaning-Making Study of Gendered Norms, Moral Appropriation, and Feminism

Pip Heldoorn, Joël Hendrix , Lisa Vandeberg , and Serena Daalmans 

Behavioural Science Institute, Radboud University, The Netherlands

Correspondence: Serena Daalmans (serena.daalmans@ru.nl)

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Abstract

Dressed in lavish, floral dresses, tightly knotted aprons, bold red lips, and armed with a wooden rolling pin, tradwives are increasingly appearing on the social media timelines of many. Tradwives, also called traditional women, are a relatively new and popular social media phenomenon. These women live according to traditional norms and values and advocate them through social media posts and blogs. As such, they cultivate a carefully curated traditional view of women as homemakers and mothers, and men as providers. In the media, this trend is often framed as a backlash against feminism. Even though there is some research into what motivates tradwives themselves, what remains lacking is how women give meaning to tradwives as a social media phenomenon. Based on 16 interviews with women of various backgrounds, this qualitative study reveals that women engage in a complex process of meaning-making to form evaluations of tradwives and the content they make. The participants carefully balance their opinions about one's right to choose, as a form of choice feminism, against deeply felt gendered norms and personal moral judgments regarding this particular choice. Additionally, women view the trend as both a lifestyle choice and a form of resistance to progressive developments worldwide.

Keywords

feminism; online content; social media; tradwife culture

1. Introduction

In her article “The Allure of the Domestic Goddess,” Kitty Lloyd explores the appeal of tradwife content, particularly the content made by Nara Smith (which often shows her calmly preparing elaborate, from-scratch meals, in soft lighting, flowing dresses, surrounded by a luxury-branded environment), and its effect on her. She reveals:

I myself find Nara's content aspirational as I've begun to crave this mirage of a simple, slow life—regardless of my progressive views, expensive university education, and unmarried status. In a world that's bombarded me with the slogan, "Women can do anything!" since birth, the irony of this newfound calling isn't lost on me. (Lloyd, 2024)

This personal exploration of meaning-making by Lloyd perfectly captures the friction between a *Zeitgeist* in which women have been told they can do and be anything (as long as they work for it), and the rise in popularity of online tradwife content, which harks back to more traditional perspectives on the role of men and women in the family and society as a whole. Tradwife culture fits into larger online movements that focus on domesticity, wellness, and promote slow, natural, and simple living (e.g., #slowliving, #countryliving, #cottagelife), and moves away from a modern, high-paced, consumerist, performance-oriented capitalist culture in a world that has been fundamentally changed by the Covid pandemic.

A lexical blend of the words "traditional" and "wife," the concept of the tradwife is not new; however, in its contemporary form, we can trace its origins back to British tradwife Alena Pettitt describing her lifestyle in a BBC interview in 2020 as "submitting to and spoiling my husband like it's 1959" ("#TradWife: 'Submitting to my husband,'" 2020). Although their popularity is evident across much of the English-speaking world, the exact number of active tradwives is unknown, but there is also evidence that this number is still increasing (Sykes & Hopner, 2024). Tradwives express their views through blogs and social media posts, focusing on promoting traditional gender roles and family life (Proctor, 2022). They emphasize men's role as protectors of the family, while women should focus on childbearing and meeting the family's needs. Tradwives view men as strong leaders and patriarchs, while they see themselves as submissive and supportive partners to these men (Mattheis, 2021). They perform this gender role by presenting themselves as conspicuously hyper-feminine and emphasizing the benefits of submission to men as the financial provider and "head of the household" (Mattheis, 2021). In addition, tradwives strive for a lifestyle in which they enjoy a simple life, doing household chores and educating their children at home, free from institutional systems. They cherish a low-tech way of life and often refer to the nostalgic atmosphere of the 1950s.

Ironically, however, tradwives do not emulate the historical reality of the 1950s housewife but rather a nostalgic and mediated ideal constructed through culture, ideology, and selective readings of history (Coontz, 1993; Spigel, 2001). As Spigel (2001) argues, postwar television helped craft the image of the cheerful, impeccably groomed homemaker whose domestic labor appeared effortless and fulfilling, thereby masking the isolation and dissatisfaction many women experienced. Tradwife aesthetics, which entail vintage dresses, elaborate home-cooked, unprocessed meals, and visibly joyful submission, closely evoke this mediated fantasy rather than the complexities of real women's lives. At the same time, the movement revives the ideal of "true womanhood," particularly its emphasis on domesticity and submissiveness, presenting these traits as timeless and natural rather than historically and socially constructed (Welter, 1966). Further complicating this fantasy of 1950s contented housewifery is the fact that the stable male-breadwinner family of the 1950s was a brief, economically specific anomaly that excluded many American families and concealed significant social tensions. In this sense, tradwives are *performing*, in a Goffmanian sense (Goffman, 1959), a curated myth: one shaped by media representation, moral ideology, and nostalgia for a social order that never fully existed as imagined. Finally, in this projected fantasy, of "from-scratch living," that rejects industrial modernity and favors pre-technological domesticity, in which they promote ideals of frugality, home-madeness, and anti-consumerism, "many tradwife influencers

simultaneously profit from their participation in platform capitalism driven by stylistic preference over frugality or convenience, wherein they transform necessary forms of domestic labour into monetized content” (Richards et al., 2026, p. 105).

On social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok, self-proclaimed tradwives enthusiastically share their experiences of embracing a more traditional lifestyle. Videos with the hashtag #trad now receive millions of views. This popularity seems in direct opposition to many feminist ideals of the past 50 years, such as the right to work, financial independence, and bodily autonomy (Proctor, 2022). However, as becomes clear in the work by Banet-Weiser and Reinis (2026) on the mirror worlds of feminists and tradwives, while many tradwives speak out very explicitly against feminism, which they feel forces women to pursue a career at the expense of their natural role as caretakers of family and home, it is also very interesting that many of them openly state that they were once “girl bosses” and outspoken feminists. They see societal performance pressure—to have a successful career and be a perfect mother, always look picture perfect, have a thriving social life, and radiate femininity—as their reason to become tradwives. Interestingly, in embracing a more traditional low-tech life with a man as the breadwinner and head of the household, tradwives seem to gloss over two rather contradictory facts. The first is that they produce online content through many highly edited, aestheticized videos, using modern technology to its full potential. The second is that, by creating content that makes their private lives public, they can earn substantial amounts of money, for example, by selling and promoting brands, making it questionable whether (for some) their husbands remain the actual breadwinners in their families (Giolo, 2025; Sykes & Hopner, 2024).

Nevertheless, it seems that sometimes tradwives and feminists have more in common than they initially suspect; both denouncing the high-performance pressure of Western society, its all-encompassing and unrealistic beauty ideals, and the unattainable pseudo-feminist myth that “women can have it all.” Nevertheless, they choose very different ways to address these inequalities and pressures. Banet-Weiser and Reinis (2026, p.54) address this as follows in their work: “The tradwife movement locates itself as an idyllic respite from a broken world; feminists position their politics and practices as a way to fix this broken world.” That means feminists focus their grievances and fury even “at the ways in which the broken system discriminates against women as a group and calls for collective struggles to this inequity” (Banet-Weiser & Reinis, 2026, p. 54). At the same time, tradwives magnify “their individual experiences with the broken system and encourage individual retreat rather than collective change” and “they blame feminists—rather than the patriarchy—for numerous breakdowns in society” (Banet-Weiser & Reinis, 2026, p. 54).

Furthermore, some tradwives also choose to defend their life choices as tradwives in a more direct manner. For example, British tradwife Laura Lightbody argues that true feminism is about freedom of choice, and for her, that choice is the traditional housewife’s existence (Nicholas, 2020). Lightbody refers to the concept of *choice feminism* here. This idea states that every choice a woman makes is intrinsically feminist because it is made by a woman. In an increasingly equal world, women should have the freedom to work or not, to marry or not, and to have children or not. Here, tradwife culture performs what Gill (2016) calls a *postfeminist sensibility*, reframing domestic submission and traditional gender roles as freely chosen, empowering lifestyle options. In tradwife culture, the home becomes both a site of romantic fulfillment and a stage for curated self-branding—where hyper-femininity, aesthetic labor, and domestic perfection signal success. In doing so, they mask structural inequality behind the language of choice, self-optimization, and personal fulfillment (Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2009; Negra, 2009). As Proctor (2022) also points out, this “choice” is not available to

all: Due to factors such as wealth, race, geography, and culture, many women are unable to choose whether to work (or not), even if they want to.

While many of the discussions in popular media and scholarly articles center on tradwives vs. feminists, the complexity of tradwife culture extends beyond issues related to feminism and the promotion of stereotypical gender roles. For example, it is often thought to be connected to misogyny—tradwives in all forms seek validation from heterosexual men and define female success through patriarchal standards—and the spread of ideologies such as the alt-right and radical white supremacy—which are often characterized through hyper masculinity, misogyny, and anti-feminism (Giolo, 2025; Love, 2020; Mattheis, 2021; Stotzer & Nelson, 2025). Mattheis (2021) has explored how white supremacy appears to be gaining traction globally, partly through its entanglement and affiliation with #trad culture, which uses traditional notions of both femininity and masculinity to promote an ideal of perfect whiteness. She argues that although participants in #trad culture are not necessarily affiliated with extremist, white supremacist, or neo-fascist ideologies, adherents of these ideologies nevertheless enter #trad culture because they see it as a useful breeding ground or pipeline for their ideology, given its conservative slant (i.e., traditional ideas of schooling, food, medicine; Mattheis, 2021).

However, tradwife culture is not a monolithic entity on social media (Sherman, 2024; Stotzer & Nelson, 2025), and some of the most popular tradwives, labeled as such online, never articulate their political positions or perspectives on gender roles. For example, Hannah Neeleman (@Ballerinafarm on Instagram; 9 million followers) was dubbed the queen of the tradwives online and lives on a Utah farm with her eight children and her husband, who has considerable family wealth. She confessed in an interview with *The New York Times* that she had never heard of the term tradwife before they contacted her (Malone Kircher, 2024). This shows that the way audiences interact with and label content integrates tradwives into filter bubbles that contain conservative perspectives on gender, family, and politics, while some content creators might not actually endorse these perspectives, and others actively choose to remain ambiguous about their commitment to them (Sherman, 2024).

Most of what is known about online tradwife culture is based on general journalistic reflections and popular press articles, and fundamental empirical research is scarce. Recent empirical research focused on the topic has devoted its attention mostly to analyzing the content, through, for example, critical cultural analyses of the affective economy and the romanticizing of retreat from a broken system by tradwives (Banet-Weiser & Reinis, 2026), analyzing tradwife subculture as an ecosystem (Sykes & Hopner, 2024), and analyzing how TikTok content by tradwives normalizes far-right, anti-feminist ideologies (Scott & Day, 2025). While these studies provide perspectives on the content, context, and creators of the trend through a critical and scholarly lens, we know relatively little about how female audiences themselves interpret these popular, contested content types. Are these more conservative gender norms normalized for audiences? And what role does the highly aesthetic quality of these videos have in this process? Centering audience studies and the potential of a large variety of meaning-making processes, as captured neatly in Stuart Hall's encoding–decoding model from 1980, is what this study sets out to do (Hall, 2019; Hermes, 2013). Focusing on female audiences, rather than content or creators, it seeks to understand how women perceive the online trend of tradwives and how they interpret its content. Are the concerns about this trend as a catalyst for misogyny and breeding ground for extremism justified? Do audiences integrate feminist thought into their interpretation of tradwife content? What makes this content popular, i.e., what motivates viewing the content and following creators, and what

needs does it meet? The aim of this research is to shift the analytic lens towards audience interpretations and address a significant empirical gap in the literature by gaining an understanding of how women make sense of the online trend of tradwives and to answer the question:

In what way(s) do women give meaning to the tradwife trend and online content created by tradwives?

2. Method

To explore how women give meaning to the tradwife trend in general and tradwife content on social media in particular, we conducted qualitative, in-depth interviews with a sample of 16 women (age range 21–76 years old, see Table 1). Through these interviews, we aimed to produce contextual insights into how women give meaning to tradwife content on social media and to explore how they feel this content might affect its viewers (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Code	Age	Familiar with #tradwife content before the interview
G01	73 years old	No
G02	24 years old	Yes
G03	23 years old	Yes
G04	27 years old	No
G05	61 years old	No
G06	21 years old	No
G07	57 years old	Yes
G08	61 years old	No
G09	34 years old	No
G10	76 years old	Yes
G11	64 years old	No
G12	37 years old	No
G13	26 years old	No
G14	54 years old	No
G15	23 years old	Yes
G16	60 years old	Yes

This procedure was approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Radboud University. The interviews were conducted in the spring of 2024 in the Netherlands. Participants were recruited through the first author's personal contacts (though they were not direct contacts of the researcher), and the first author conducted all interviews. The interviews lasted about one hour and took place in the participants' familiar surroundings (i.e., in their home or a quiet place they preferred). When the participants were recruited and again at the start of the interview, they were informed about the procedure, including recording, transcription, anonymity, and confidentiality, and asked to complete an informed consent form. All participants, both those familiar and those unfamiliar with the tradwife trend, were asked to watch the first episode of the online documentary series *Girls of Tradition* (NPO, 2023) in preparation for

the interview. The aim was to give all participants insight into the tradwife trend, so that the questions would be more concrete and participants could offer well-founded opinions. The decision to sample both those familiar with the trend and those relatively unfamiliar with it was intended to capture the widest possible range of perspectives on the topic, from unfamiliar to familiar.

The study used a semi-structured interview guide comprising five open-ended initial questions, along with potential probing and follow-up questions. The full interview guide in Dutch, its translation, and an overview of all the stimulus materials used can be found on OSF: https://osf.io/2xqyf/overview?view_only=5fb0ba77466a42aa81af68201a4efb8f. The interview guide and the order of questions were not strictly enforced to facilitate the natural flow of conversation and avoid limiting the interviewees' responses and elaboration. With each initial question, probing questions were used to elicit elaboration on participants' answers and choices. One of the questions used visual stimuli that either featured tradwives or captured the variety of responses to tradwife content online. The use of the stimuli varied by participant; some materials were shown to all, while others were matched to the interview content. The stimuli were used to parse out, contextualize, and contrast participants' answers by having them respond to stimuli that featured different aspects of traditional content and different tones in discussing the content.

The interviews were held in Dutch, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. The analysis was conducted following the tenets of reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013). The research stages of data collection and analysis were entwined in a cyclical process in which data gathering (i.e., conducting the interviews) and analysis (i.e., analyzing the interviews) were alternated, and were guided by continuous reflection and interpretation. The first author conducted, transcribed, read, and re-read all the interviews to become familiar with the data. All the interviews were coded line-by-line, using open codes that represented what participants said on topics relevant to the research question. Through iterative, inductive coding, the data were used to create non-overlapping themes and subthemes. For example, the variation codes "Person" and "Rules" were grouped under the subtheme "Associations With Tradwife Culture," and the variation codes "Origin," "Contemporary," and "Future" were grouped under the subtheme "Positioning Tradwives in Time." In turn, both subthemes would form different aspects of the theme "Interpretations of Tradwife Culture." As a quality measure, the research team discussed the wording and content of themes and the structuring of variations, subthemes, and themes to ensure that they were internally consistent and distinctive.

Several other methodological techniques were used to ensure the study's validity and reliability. Both reliability and validity were secured by constant discussion among the researchers, enabling peer debriefing (Braun & Clarke, 2013, 2021). Although the first author conducted all interviews, the study's design also enabled researcher triangulation in the analysis. The validity was secured through participant validation: Throughout the interview, the researcher provided summaries or interpretations of what the participant had said to prompt a (critical) response and to check whether their answers would be expanded upon or adapted if probed in greater depth. Thick description, in which the raw empirical material is made visible in the results section, was also used as a quality measure that strengthened the research's validity. Finally, the primary researcher's thought process and discussions with other researchers were documented in MAXQDA memos as a detailed audit trail.

3. Results

Based on the analysis, we identified four ways (captured in four constructed themes) in which participants attributed meaning to the phenomenon of tradwives and to tradwife content on social media in particular (Figure 1). The first theme captures how respondents interpret the tradwife trend; the second captures feelings evoked by tradwife content; the third articulates participants' evaluations of the tradwife content; and the fourth and final theme articulates participants' thoughts about tradwives as a form of choice feminism.

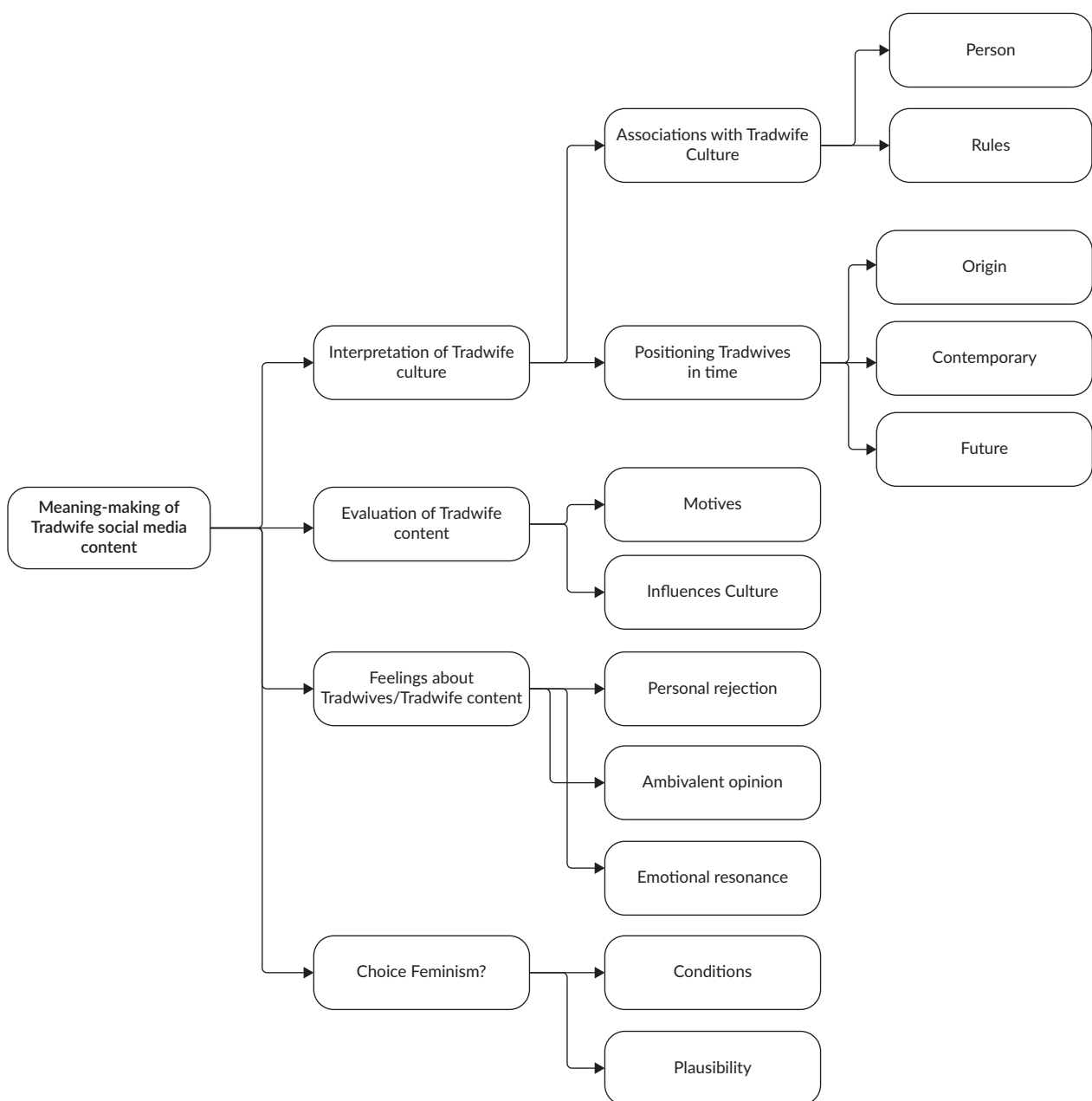


Figure 1. Thematic map.

3.1. Interpretation of Tradwife Culture

The interpretation of the tradwife culture theme encompasses the various associations participants had with tradwives and how they conceptualize the phenomenon in time. Here, participants articulated opinions about the appearance and personality traits of a tradwife and the associated guiding lifestyle principles of the tradwife movement. In addition, this main theme contains participants' perceptions of the origin of this trend, how it currently functions, and expected developments for its future.

3.1.1. Associations With Tradwife Culture

The participants shared associations about the tradwife culture. These associations fall into two categories: those about the person and those about the (perceived) rules. Many participants associated tradwives with young women who look well-groomed and go through daily life according to traditional norms and values. One participant indicated that she thought that tradwives are mainly White women. The participants believed that a tradwife is satisfied with her life and is not eager to work outside the confines of her home. In addition, one respondent indicated that the tradwife is powerful because she consciously deviates from the norm:

But at first, when I heard what tradwife meant, I had to think for a moment: Yes, of course, you sometimes have people who think: "Oh yes, nice, I'll go clean my home, change the baby's diapers, and cook a bit. I don't need more." They would rather be lazy than tired. (G05, 61 years old)

Participants focused on gender-specific rules of life that they associated with the tradwife lifestyle. They discussed the biological differences between men and women and the traditional roles that accompany them, such as the woman who stays home to care for children and does not work outside the home:

So the man takes care of the woman or provides for the woman financially, and the woman takes care of the family, the children, and the man. (G12, 37 years old)

Some participants suggested that this lifestyle need not be exclusive to women and that men could also adopt a tradwife role, reflecting a potentially more modern interpretation of the lifestyle. The tradwife lifestyle was also compared to other lifestyles. Participants noted that this lifestyle is simply a specific way of living, comparable to other lifestyle choices such as veganism:

And in that sense....You can also replace it [tradwife culture] with gardening. You can also replace it with whatever lifestyle you dedicate yourself to. (G09, 34 years old)

3.1.2. Positioning Tradwives in Time

Participants revealed flexibility in positioning tradwives as a phenomenon that develops over time, reflecting on past, present, and future causes and manifestations. Participants believed that the contemporary tradwife trend has partly emerged from existing conservative ideas. Participants discussed becoming a tradwife, considering cultural precepts such as beliefs and traditions. It was also suggested that the growth of progressive ideas in society has provoked a backlash, creating a more conservative counter-narrative. Many participants noted that the trend spread from the United States and suggested that the popularity of

contemporary conservative figures, such as Trump, contributed to the movement's growth. Some participants were more critical, stating that tradwife content is the new form of online marketing for an existing traditional lifestyle:

I don't think it's some new movement, that women suddenly think, "Oh, I don't want to work anymore." There's always been a group of people, like religious people, who were already doing this anyway. Others are now just selling it online. (G15, 23 years old)

When describing tradwife culture in the present day, participants pointed to the considerable emancipation that society has undergone, with much progress already made. However, they emphasized that there is still a battle to be fought for issues such as closing the gender pay gap. Participants noted that modern tradwives experience a degree of luxury, as they now have the choice to adopt this lifestyle, whereas in the past, this was a given. Participants stated that the tradwife lifestyle used to make more sense than it does now, as the development of household appliances in the present day makes housework easier:

In the 50s/60s, a woman would simply sweep, wash, and cook all day long. Well, you name it. The whole household. But now that is peanuts. So what are these women going to do? That is what I wonder. (G08, 61 years old)

Participants also indicated that it is financially more difficult to be a tradwife, as in the modern economy, two incomes are often needed to make ends meet. Additionally, they articulated that, therefore, only women from certain socioeconomic contexts can make this choice.

Many participants had similar expectations about the future of the tradwife culture. They thought that the group of tradwives will grow only to a limited extent. However, some participants expressed uncertainty about the group's future growth. They speculated that the trend could increase if the current wars (i.e., in Ukraine and Gaza) continue, due to a tendency toward conservative values and norms during wartime, but that it could decrease again once war is over.

3.2. Evaluation of Tradwife Content

In evaluating tradwife content, participants identified various motives consumers might have for consuming it and explored it within influencer culture. Within this theme, they outline their own motives, take a role-taking perspective to assess others' motives for watching the content, and ponder the trend from a more meta perspective in the world of online (influencer) content.

3.2.1. Motives

According to participants, there were several reasons for consuming tradwife content, for themselves and others. These viewing motives can be divided into two categories: those in which the viewer finds the phenomenon very interesting and is, therefore, very curious about it, and those in which the viewer sees the content mainly as easy entertainment.

A large portion of participants indicated they would like more information about the tradwife culture. They were particularly curious about the motives of tradwives and why these women chose this lifestyle, because they rarely encountered people in their own lives who think this way. For them, watching the content was a way to see a completely different kind of life. Furthermore, participants thought many people watch this content because the subject provokes a lot of discussion. Another suggested motive was that other people follow tradwife content because they personally identify with it. A few participants noted it was nice that these people have a platform to find each other. At the same time, many participants thought some viewers watch this content precisely because they disagree with it:

Why do they feel that way? What brought them to the point where they made that choice?...I find that very interesting. (G03, 23 years old)

Additionally, participants indicated that they watch the content for entertainment, with some reporting that it is so unusual that it becomes funny. A few participants noted they were initially interested but quickly became satiated, with one participant stating that after watching one video, the rest of the content offered little new insight. Many participants proposed that others watch this content because of their interest in cooking and baking, and because they may be looking for good recipes. A few participants also mentioned that they enjoy the videos for the sense of calm they convey and their aesthetic.

3.2.2. Influencer Culture

Participants reflected on the influencer culture that comes with tradwife content. The participants emphasized how this culture contributes to the popularity and spread of the tradwife ideals. They were convinced that the online expressions of tradwife influencers could influence viewers. In addition, the participants doubted the authenticity of tradwife influencers and the content itself. Participants often pointed to inconsistencies within tradwife influencer culture. They felt that many tradwives should be seen as influencers who earn money by posting about traditional homemaking and lifestyles and encouraging others to become tradwives themselves, without making the influencer/entrepreneurial existence they themselves enjoy very transparent or explicit:

They have their own business in which they create content with this traditional message, and in that message, they do not motivate other women to also enter into that entrepreneurship, for example. (G04, 27 years old)

3.3. Feelings About Tradwife Content

Participants experienced a variety of feelings in their meaning-making process of the tradwife social media trend. These feelings often result from friction among the ideals of plurality in gendered norms and values, personal histories, and personal beliefs. These feelings are often morally charged and fall into three meta-categories: personal rejection, ambivalent opinion, and emotional resonance.

3.3.1. Personal Rejection

A group of participants expressed great difficulty with tradwife content and experienced negative emotions when discussing it. Participants criticized the tradwife trend because they believed in the importance of

women investing in themselves, for example, by studying or working. They believed that this not only contributes to personal development but also ensures that women can remain independent if their lives take a different course. They believed that if a woman went to college and still chose the tradwife life, this is a waste of her qualities and education.

Many participants criticized the role of women who choose the tradwife life, especially in relation to their partners. They strongly disagreed that women should be subordinate to their partners and experienced strong resistance to this. They also criticized the gender distinction that is made, and they completely disagreed with the belief that men can do certain things better than women:

And when it [the documentary] says “submit to your husband” I think “my ass.” (G07, 57 years old)

3.3.2. Ambivalent Opinion

When discussing the tradwife trend, some participants experienced ambivalent acceptance. On the one hand, these participants accepted the tradwife community, but on the other hand, they also experienced mixed feelings about the tradwife movement. During the interviews, all participants emphasized the importance of individual freedom and the right to make their own choices in life. According to the participants, they should be able to live however they want:

Yes, I think everyone should live their lives the way they want to. The way that makes them happy. And if that can be done in a way that doesn't bother those around them. (G12, 37 years old)

Several participants indicated that they were happy for the tradwives, because these women found the lifestyle that suited them. They noted that if the tradwives are happy with their own choice, they are happy for them. Many participants experienced internal conflicts. Although they claimed to accept everyone's life choices, these comments were often made before or after a negative value judgment about tradwives. This creates the impression that these participants were constantly in an internal conflict between acceptance and resistance:

I will, perhaps in contrast to the beginning, I do not condemn it. It is not that I have a value judgment; I just find it creepy and scary. (G01, 73 years old)

3.3.3. Emotional Resonance

When discussing the tradwife trend, some participants experienced different forms of emotional resonance. Some felt connected to the values of tradwife culture, while others were very critical. Their responses were influenced by their own experiences, values, and beliefs. Because some participants had experienced multiple feminist waves themselves, they articulated that they experienced strong negative emotions when discussing tradwives and their lifestyle. They felt that the freedoms that feminists had fought so hard for were simply given up:

And when you see that women throw that away, you can get angry about that. (G07, 57 years old)

Occasionally, some participants showed more understanding of tradwives because they have had similar experiences in their own lives. For example, some participants did not work for a period to care for their children and do housework. In addition, other participants indicated that they had greater respect for tradwives because their own mothers stayed home to raise them, which increased their appreciation of this role:

For a number of years, when the children were small, I also did not work, and for a while, a bit on the sidelines, weekend shifts, and studying. But I found it a very lonely thing at the time. I felt very lonely because I was alone in the playground and walking in the woods with the children, and there were no other mothers. Yes, so I thought, if I were there now....That crossed my mind. So I thought, if a lot of mothers choose this, then it might be nice. Is it perhaps more fun than I thought at the time? (G08, 61 years old)

A few participants indicated they understood tradwives because they recognized the desire to be at home with their children and to give them “sufficient” attention, based on their own motherhood or their desire to have children. However, they emphasized that this can be achieved through part-time work, while simultaneously maintaining one’s own life and autonomy. However, some participants indicated that, while they understood the inclination to be home with their children, they were happy to return to work after their maternity leave because of the social contact and the challenge of work.

3.4. Choice Feminism?

Participants articulated conditions that needed to be met for tradwives to be considered women enacting a form of choice feminism. They emphasized that this concept is only valid when the woman herself has consciously chosen to become a tradwife. The participants stressed they see the tradwife life as often imposed by, for example, societal expectations. For the participants, it was therefore important that a tradwife explicitly indicate that she has made the conscious choice for this lifestyle:

But essentially, they’re saying, “You can’t tell me what I want, but I do want my husband to tell me what I want.” That’s about it. But yes, it’s a conscious choice on their part to want that. (G12, 37 years old)

Participants generally agreed with the concept of choice feminism regarding tradwives as a lifestyle choice. However, they emphasized it is important that tradwives show respect for and solidarity with women who pursue a different lifestyle. For participants, it was essential that tradwives not try to convince women with a different vision to also pursue the tradwife lifestyle:

And if that does happen...this is not feminism. We as women stand; if all is well, we stand up for each other, or at least we do not stand opposite each other; we are next to each other....So I want to respect you, but I also want you to respect me. (G03, 23 years old)

Nevertheless, there were participants for whom this was not a plausible option, because they felt tradwives were inherently unfeminist:

If you say I want to submit to my husband—that’s what tradwife is for me—then I think, you’re not a feminist. With all due respect, because of that....Hey, feminism stands for being able to stand up for

yourself. And if you consciously choose not to do that, that's simply not feminist by definition. (G07, 57 years old)

Some of the participants doubted the plausibility of choice in the tradwife lifestyle. They believed the choice is always (consciously or unconsciously) imposed by the partner, environment, or cultural background:

Because with this....I don't have the feeling that they really chose this themselves, but that it is just an imposed idea. (G04, 27 years old)

4. Discussion

This study attempted to gain insight into how women give meaning to tradwife culture and content. Our analysis shows that women assign different meanings to the tradwife culture. Women define the tradwife as a young woman who lives according to traditional values and norms. This means that the tradwife does not work and stays home to raise her children, while serving her husband. This aligns with Proctor's (2022) research, in which the man in a tradwife family is seen as the protector and breadwinner, while the woman focuses on having children and on fulfilling the family's needs. Simultaneously, the women in our study also highlighted the internal contradictions herein: While the lifestyle proposes that men are the head of the household and sole breadwinners, by making the tradwife content, these women become influencers who monetize the public-making of their private lives, and therefore become entrepreneurs and moneymakers in their household next to their husbands. The women in our study generally viewed the tradwife as a satisfied woman who is happy with her chosen lifestyle. In addition, it is interesting and runs counter to the actual trend, almost in line with Hall's (2019) proposed oppositional reading in his encoding and decoding model, that respondents also articulated that the tradwife role can be fulfilled by a man, with the woman as the family breadwinner. They think that there are also men who would like to take on the role of (somewhat paradoxical) "tradhusband" as a homemaker, and emphasize that the current gender distinction is unnecessary and can be reversed. The analysis shows that the interviewed women see the tradwife lifestyle as comparable to other lifestyles from which people derive their identity. This insight aligns with Tajfel's (1978) social identity theory, which argues that individuals often form their self-image based on the social groups they identify with. Most of the women in this study showed some openness to discussing the tradwife lifestyle, but did not actively identify with it. As a result, they could be seen as identifying with the outgroup rather than as part of tradwife culture themselves.

Women in this study experience a range of emotions when discussing the tradwife trend. They value individual autonomy and the right to make their own life choices, regardless of their often negative personal views of the lifestyle. This mix of feelings leads to ambivalent acceptance of the tradwife choice; here, we saw respondents actively trying to avoid applying their own (more liberal and progressive) gendered norms on tradwives. Although women in the sample repeatedly stress that they want to respect other women's choices, they cannot help but be consistently outspoken about not (fully) agreeing with the tradwife lifestyle. They see it as a loss of self-fulfillment and have objections to the dynamics between the tradwife and her husband. This is also where they contemplated the possibility of tradwives enacting choice feminism. For the tradwife lifestyle to be considered feminist or to fit within the concept of choice feminism, several conditions were identified as important for the participants in this study. First, the choice for this lifestyle must be clear and conscious, free from external influences such as social and cultural environments. Second,

participants feel tradwives should contribute to society in other ways. Third, tradwives as choice feminists are expected to be open to the lifestyles of women with different views; here, they actively posit non-rigidity and non-superiority of one set of gendered norms and values over another. However, some participants fervently argued that the tradwife lifestyle could never be considered feminist or categorized as choice feminism, since they believe that the choice is an outcome of pressures in the social environments and that taking a subordinate position towards men is incompatible with any type of feminist norms and values. For the women in the sample who were actively involved in the feminist movement, understanding the tradwife lifestyle is even more challenging. They advocated for women's rights and see this lifestyle as a step backwards. Many women almost immediately have an opinion about the dynamics between men and women and the association with submissiveness that accompanies them. However, they do not associate this with misogynistic and white supremacist ideas. They see the rise of the tradwife trend as a reaction to recent progressive developments, and are convinced that this has led to a growing popularity of conservative values among people. This idea is supported by Giolo (2025) and Stotzer and Nelson (2025), who argue that the current return to traditional values and norms can be seen as a response to the #MeToo movement, the rise of fourth-wave feminism, and the slow leftward shift in social norms. Women also speculate that the pressure modern women face to pursue a successful career while being a devoted mother and partner may motivate some to choose the tradwife lifestyle, which they see as a relief from that pressure to perform. It seems that these women, who in the majority can be typed as feminist and progressive in their outlooks, linked the conservative choices made by tradwives to a growing backlash against progressive ideals in society, framed in postfeminist terms of individual choice. This fits into the greater overall picture articulated by Banet-Weiser and Reinis (2026), who point out that tradwives (like feminists) point to structural problems in the (capitalist, patriarchal) system: the draining girlboss/hustle culture, the devaluation of housework, the lack of reliable and affordable care systems, and the class politics of food. However, rather than supporting systemic, social, and community responses, tradwives, showcasing *postfeminist sensibilities* (Gill, 2016), propose individualistic conservative do-it-yourself solutions. However, the women in this study did not connect their meaning-making of tradwife culture in the larger societal context to concerns over the cultivation of misogyny and white supremacy, which is one of the more frequently outlined and concerning consequences that both scholarly and popular literature devote attention to (Love, 2020; Sykes & Hopner, 2024).

The women in this study also acknowledge the significant role of social media in the rise of this trend—aiding the spread of tradwife culture from the United States to other parts of the world. This idea is also supported by Munro's (2013) work, which highlights that the rise of the online universe has allowed such normative expressions to spread much faster to many more people. Here, it seems tradwives and their performance of conservative gender ideals become entrenched in platform capitalism. The algorithmic capitalist environment commodifies identities that capture attention: Tradwife influencers perform traditional gender roles in ways that are shaped, amplified, and rewarded by platform logics, turning gender itself into a monetizable performance (Richards et al., 2026). Despite the growing awareness and popularity of the tradwife trend, respondents believe that there is a significant counter-narrative from other women who disagree with this lifestyle. Women believe that those who do not conform to traditional norms and values will continue to fight for feminist ideals, as they believe that the fight for equality is not yet over. Therefore, women find it unlikely that the tradwife trend will prevail over more egalitarian, feminist thought in the long run. However, some women believe that a similar trend will always emerge in response to ideological conflicts and wars worldwide.

Women in the study also make sense of the trend from an economic perspective. As pointed out before, they very much point to the monetizing influencer aspect that is part of tradwife culture, while noting that the actual monetization of the lifestyle remains implicit in the content. Furthermore, they question how likely the tradwife lifestyle is for women without family money or a wealthy husband and how aware tradwives are of the impact of their choice on the labor market in general and on their financial self-reliance in particular. The lifestyle is considered selfish because it may reduce the labor force, even though tradwives were supported by the government and community as they completed their education, and now choose not to give anything back to that community. Through this, our participants echoed Proctor's (2022) observation that many women lack the privilege of choosing to be a tradwife due to factors such as race, geography, and culture, and effectively exclude "working-class families and globally less advantaged communities that rely on dual incomes from tradwife communities' utopian dream" (Richards et al., 2026, p. 104).

Furthermore, women point out that people may have various motives for viewing content from tradwife influencers, which aligns with the uses and gratifications theory. This theory states that an individual's media consumption is rooted in their needs and desires (Katz et al., 1973). The women in this study point out that people can experience different forms of gratification when watching tradwife content. For example, they indicate that they are interested in the subject because they do not understand the lifestyle, as they are part of the outgroup. In addition, they do believe that some other people could personally identify with the expressions. Women think these people watch the content because they are part of the ingroup and, therefore, live or aspire to live this lifestyle themselves. Women also report watching tradwife content purely for entertainment because it is such a sharp contrast with their own perspective or because they enjoy aesthetically pleasing videos.

As with all studies, the current study is not without limitations. The use of a convenience sample (Braun & Clarke, 2013) yielded 16 participants with a predominantly progressive view of society. This has likely influenced the answers given during the interviews, as progressive women may think differently about tradwife culture than conservative women do. Additionally, most respondents did not regularly consume tradwife content before participating in this study and watching the *Girls of Tradition* documentary. Future research should differentiate in sampling and analysis among viewers who are not familiar with tradwife content, viewers who incidentally or casually watch it, and those who are actual followers or fans of the trend. This would provide a broader perspective on the different uses, evaluations, and meaning-making processes and outcomes of tradwife content. Simultaneously, it is important to note that, in terms of researcher positionality, the team consisted of women who hold progressive and feminist views aligned with the tenor outlined by the participants in the sample. These perspectives were, however, not shared with participants during data collection, and care was taken, through group discussions and memo writing, to minimize their role in the data collection and analysis phases of the research. Therefore, future research might replicate this study with a more conservative or diverse sample to investigate differences in the meaning-making of tradwife content and simultaneously seek a more varied set of outlooks within the research team.

The research deliberately included women of all ages to get as broad a picture as possible of how women interpret the tradwife trend. However, it could be interesting for future research to sample by age or generation. In doing so, one could compare women who lived through the different waves of feminism with respondents who did not experience them. This would provide deeper insight into how historical context and generational differences shape women's perceptions of the tradwife trend.

In sum, women do not simply reject or accept tradwife content; they perform nuanced readings of the content, perspective-taking with creators, and internal discussions between their own gendered norms and values and the ideal of (respect for) pluriformity of (gendered) norms and values. While women see that some aspects of the tradwife lifestyle clash with progressive ideas and contemporary feminism, they also understand the desire to escape contemporary pressures by living a simpler life with more family time. Some women address the contradiction of earning money as a tradwife influencer marketing a traditional lifestyle while promoting a lifestyle in which the wife is not supposed to work and the husband is supposed to be the provider, making them question being a tradwife as an authentic form of choice feminism. Moreover, women move beyond the typical clash of tradwives vs. feminists in their meaning-making of tradwife content. While women may disagree with certain aspects of the tradwife lifestyle, they work toward accepting tradwives for who they are and how they live. These women are willing to accept the tradwife lifestyle as choice feminism under specific conditions, whereas other women reject this frame, worried about the external social pressures for women to present themselves as tradwives. Overall, women's interpretation of the tradwife trend and content reveals perceived tensions between (choice) feminism, external pressures and motivations, and their personal values, resulting in a range of (often ambivalent) thoughts and feelings rather than a clear-cut binary stance of acceptance or rejection.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

Data Availability

The datasets presented in this article are not available online. Due to the ethically sensitive nature of the interview topics, the informed consent guaranteed full confidentiality of the interview transcripts for all participants. The researchers are available to answer specific questions regarding the data.

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About the Authors



Pip Heldoorn (MSc, Radboud University, 2024) completed her master's degree in communication at Radboud University and is now employed as a marketer for the theatre company De Horde, which specializes in producing theatre on societally impactful topics for younger audiences.



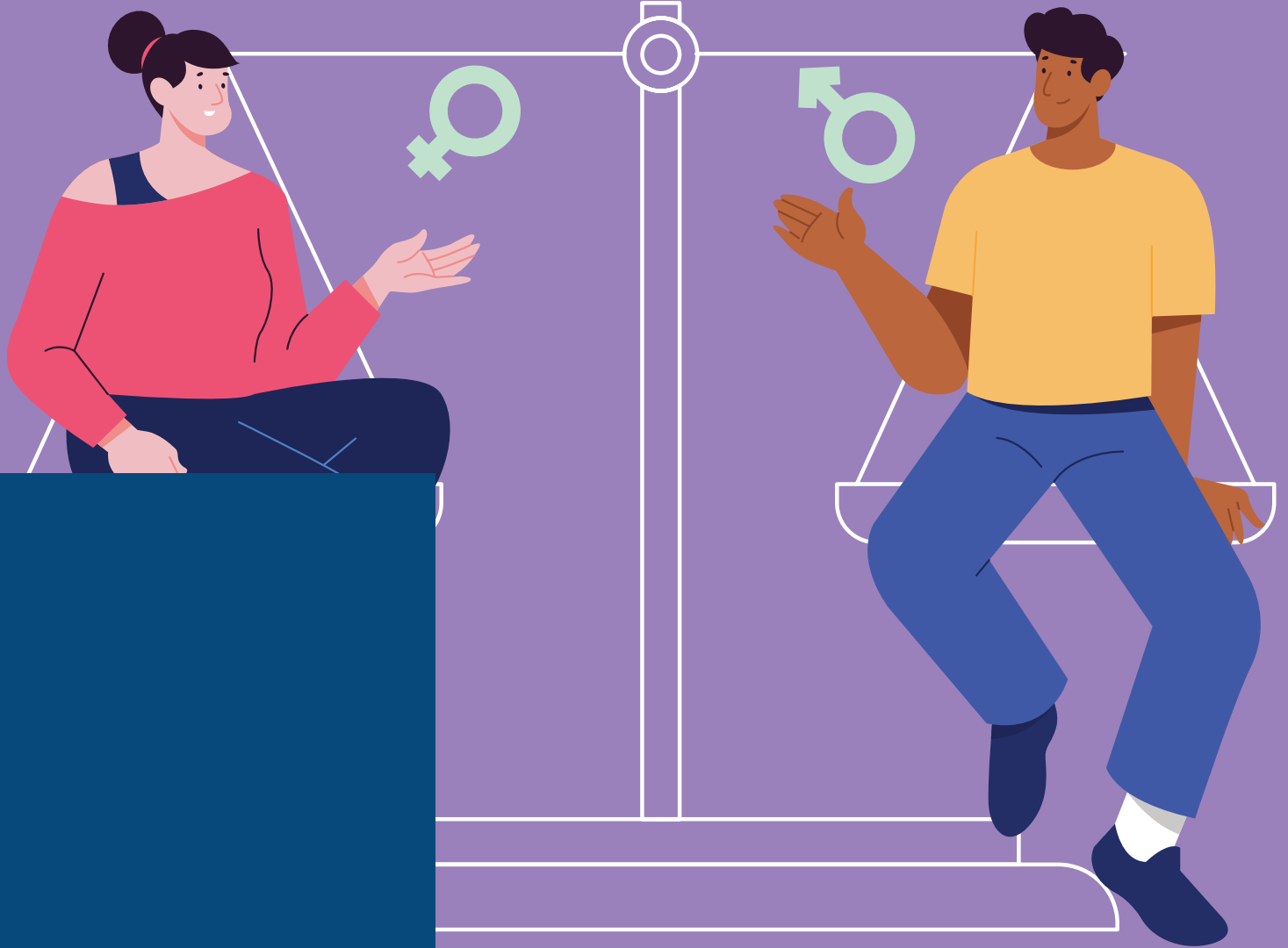
Joël Hendrix (MSc, Radboud University, 2019) is a PhD student in communication at the Behavioural Science Institute at Radboud University. Her research focuses on mediated representations of underrepresented groups, the reception of these representations, and the underlying processes influencing this reception.



Lisa Vandeberg (PhD, Erasmus University, 2012) is an associate professor of communication science at the Behavioural Science Institute at Radboud University. Her research is devoted to three themes: (a) vaccination communication, (b) prosocial (health) communication, and (c) communication and cognition.



Serena Daalmans (PhD, Radboud University, 2016) is an associate professor of communication science at the Behavioural Science Institute at Radboud University. Her research focuses on the content of and responses to mediated representations of underrepresented groups.



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