

Characteristics of Emotional Communication on Social Media Platforms: The Case of Women's Online Harassment in Weibo's Trending Topics

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Abstract. With social media becoming fully integrated into the public eye, platforms such as Weibo have become important venues for expressing emotions and social values. Especially when it comes to gender issues, women's voices in the digital space are often harassed. This article focuses on the phenomenon of 'female harassment' among trending topics on Weibo, selecting three representative public opinion incidents involving Fang Qi, Mai Lin, and Wu Liufang as case studies, combines text analysis and comment data mining to trace the path of emotion propagation and its correlation with gender bias and platform algorithms. Research has found that the dissemination mechanism of 'hot search + emotional reinforcement' on the Weibo platform, combined with gender stereotypes in society, makes it easy for women who break through traditional gender role expectations to be labelled. This mechanism not only causes female parties to suffer multiple pressures in terms of reputation, psychology and career, but also restricts women's right to expression in the digital space, constituting structural gender inequality. This paper argues that in the pursuit of traffic, platforms have reinforced the logic of public opinion, which is characterised by 'conflict-emotion-sharing.' This has rather undermined the climate of diversity and rationality of wider public discussion. This study tries to address the problem through the lenses of emotional contagion, the structure of the opinion of the audience, and gender politics, which is valuable to govern platform algorithms, psychologically influence the opinion, and implement digital space more gender-friendly.

Keywords: Social media, trending topics on Weibo, gender bias, Online Harassment

1. Introduction

Social media has emerged as a significant tool through which the population can access and share information, especially with the incremental growth of digital media. Being one of the most influential social media platforms in China, the mechanism of trending topics in Weibo not only fulfills an essential role in promoting the topics, but also reflects strong potential in terms of emotional appeal and directing the opinions of the people. The trending topics on Weibo have the potential to easily boost certain events, attract attention to them, and polarize collective feelings.

The issue of women has often occurred in the trending topics in recent years due to the online discussion around it. Whether it be career choices, emotive expressions, personal behaviors, women are prone to undue scrutiny on the internet, and in fact, this could even lead to mass-scale harassment. The mentioned phenomenon not only demonstrates the amplification impact of emotional communication on social media, but also the effect of gender bias and other aspects. It is not only the personal reputation and mental health that get damaged, but also the greater effect on the discussion of the gender equality issue in general.

Nonetheless, the literature about the interdependence between emotional communication processes and gender bias on Weibo sites is comparatively limited, particularly regarding the comprehensive case studies of the emotional development process of a particular event of opinion. As the point of departure in this paper, a number of instances where women are harassed in the trending topics on Weibo are identified with representative cases of Fang Qi, Mai Lin, and Wu Liufang as they are utilized in further explanation of the nature of emotional communication and its effect on the social sphere. By examining the pertinent literature and comments posted by users on the social media platforms, the paper tries to unveil the nature of emotional communication on Weibo in terms of gender concerns and give examples of how a more rational and comprehensive online opinion formation can be developed.

2. Background

The trending topics construction, as well as the interactive comment system of Weibo, encourages the quickness of the information aggregation and dissemination of this information, in addition to establishing a digital public opinion platform with high emotional polarity and labeling. In recent years, female public figures have frequently been harassed on Weibo, from entertainers and ordinary bloggers to complete strangers. Even minor actions or comments are easily labeled, exaggerated, and cause a public spectacle, abuse, and even cyberbullying.

From the perspective of dissemination mechanisms, the discourse dissemination path dominated by social media is characterized by "emotion first." Li's "super network model" points out that public opinion evolution on platforms such as Weibo is not driven linearly, but rather by a dynamic system formed by emotional triggers, opinion nodes, algorithmic recommendations, and user aggregation effects, which can easily cause emotional overheating [1]. Lagrange further points out that the mechanism of emotion transmission on social media has both mobilizing and cognitive shaping functions [2]. It activates public opinion through emotional contagion and builds group consensus through information repetition and labeling [2]. However, in practice, the platform's preference for "highly emotional" content often causes emotional mobilization to overwhelm rational mobilization, thereby amplifying the stigma attached to individuals [2]. Scott et al. pointed out from a psychological perspective that negative comments in online mobbing not only stem from judgments of events but are also influenced by the personality factors of the speakers themselves. For example, the involvement of the "dark triad" personality traits (Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and narcissism) on social media platforms makes negative emotions more aggressive [3].

Social media attacks on women often go beyond mere discussion of the incident itself, revealing deep-seated gender bias and moralistic norms. On Weibo, women are often quickly condemned and judged for "deviating from traditional gender expectations." Deng Qiao and Zhou Min's research points out that the Weibo platform generally has a discourse logic that stereotypes, functionalizes, and negatively portrays women. Once women express themselves, show strength, or take the leading role in public spaces, they may be portrayed as "demanding," "emotional," or "incompetent" [4]. In his research, Shi Danyang summarized the three-step logic of the spread of stigma against women:

"labeling—group separation—loss of status." He pointed out that this structure of dissemination is both a reflection of cultural prejudice and a product of the platform's emotional economy [5]. Wallaschek et al. also pointed out in their study of the European Twitter platform that although mainstream society generally supports gender equality, "anti-gender" and "conservative patriarchal" discourses remain strong on social media, especially during major holidays or social events, where they are more likely to intensify and trigger gender conflicts [6]. Boukemia et al. studied female legislators pointed out that the more openly gender is expressed and the more critical the discourse, the more likely it is to provoke hostile responses and personal attacks. This "reverse gender backlash effect" limits women's willingness to express themselves in the public sphere and increases their psychological burden [7].

In this process, the recommendation logic and dissemination mechanism of social media algorithms played a crucial role. Dong Kouyan's analysis of critical discourse on Weibo's trending topics revealed that the platform's preference for "conflict" and "moral controversy" tends to focus on negative images of women, creating a space for moral judgment [8]. Tu further pointed out that Weibo's trending topics exhibit a structural logic of "emotional intensification—position confrontation—collective observation" in the spread of emotions related to women's issues. In this process, the behavior of individual women is labeled and mediatized, ultimately becoming an outlet for group attacks and an entry point for traffic capital [9]. Stella pointed out through semantic network analysis that even if public opinion starts out relatively moderate, the platform's comment section and repost section often form a "stigmatizing echo chamber," causing what was originally a rational topic to evolve into extreme confrontation. This "downward discrimination propagation" reinforces gender stereotypes [10].

These mechanisms collectively lead to multiple harms caused by online gender-based harassment. First, harassment incidents cause severe psychological trauma and damage to the public image of female individuals, with many victims choosing to withdraw from the internet, remain silent, or even change careers as a result. Secondly, the platform's tolerance mechanism has failed to form an effective protection mechanism, making gender expression even more vulnerable. Pan Yixuan pointed out that public opinion related to "female victims" follows a pattern of "rapid dissipation of attention—rapid transfer of responsibility—rapid collapse of public opinion." The platform has not effectively supported the continuous construction of gender justice, but rather has dissolved it into short-term traffic events [11]. Qin et al. also pointed out in their analysis of the "Tangshan barbecue restaurant incident" that "gender violence" was reduced to a "public order incident," which is precisely a manifestation of gender structural issues being continuously "de-structuralized" in public opinion [12]. Thelwall and Cash further point out that even in female-dominated content spaces (such as YouTube's beauty section), gender-biased comments are still prevalent, indicating that even positively expressed content cannot escape structural gender discrimination in social spaces [13].

Overall, previous studies have identified the structural logic behind the propagation of emotions in social media discourse, how gender bias is reproduced, and the role of platform algorithms as the major facilitator in fueling emotional polarization and public opinion attacks. The given theoretical results give a good analytical basis to interpret the event of the female mobbing, particularly in the case when all three instruments are engaged, such as emotional priming, symbolic labeling, and stigma echo chambers. Female public figures on websites like Weibo are highly vulnerable to risks of information amplification and moral judgment. Such theoretical findings are strong criteria in the analytical explanation of the phenomenon of female mobbing. Nevertheless, most existing studies have concentrated on macro-level mechanisms of formation and structural censure, and by the lack

of empirical exploration that focus on the precise courses of emotional development in particular events and on how communal commentaries each time build a siege mentality.

Consequently, this paper selects three common Weibo trending topics as the research object. It integrates textual content with the structures of comment interactions to examine the dynamic process of emotional mobilization and dissemination in the phenomenon of female harassment. This paper can help address the gap in research on the evolution of the given time span by presenting specific cases and data processing to enrich our understanding of the mechanisms underlying the evolution of the given gendered opinion regarding social media.

3. Case study

3.1. Fang Qi, *Ride the Wind* 2025

The case could be regarded as a common instance of how personal expression can be easily multiplied, psychologically perceived, and eventually jeopardize the personal IP value of a new media, where platform technologies and gender inequality are crossed. Having become the Queen of Golden Quotes and a so-called healing-style travel blogger with millions of fans, Fang Qi is now crossing over as a Mango TV variety show star. During the second team-building process, she stated that she was worried that Ye Tong would lack energy. The program editors emphasized her words of concern, putting them in a way of doubting the capacity of the older sister, and promptly intensified the confrontation. The news went viral on Weibo with the hashtags, Ye Tong vs Fang Qi# and Fang Qi and emotional intelligence#, which created a lot of hype among netizens. Comments made online rapidly divided into two camps. On the one hand, there are individuals who admired Ye Tong as she was too tough and made the best response. Meanwhile, there were people who wrote Fang Qi off as becoming emotionally illogical, clumsy, and pretentious, as some people criticized him for being so. An example would be a netizen saying, practically, "There is a lack of emotional intelligence, even through the screen. Li's "super network model" further explains the mechanism by which such high-temperature emotions are continuously pushed up in the Weibo hot search structure [1].

As the controversy escalated, Fang Qi's social image quickly collapsed. The report pointed out that its popularity rating on Douban plummeted from 3% to nearly 70% "dislikes." At the same time, voices on social media about "bad word of mouth" and "deliberate performance" dominated the discourse, with a large number of memes imitating Fang Qi's tone and mocking her spreading on platforms such as Xiaohongshu, forming a "collective public opinion attack."

Faced with overwhelming negative feedback, Fang Qi chose to remain silent on social media for a month before finally posting a long "heartfelt farewell" message expressing her gratitude to the program team and her fans. At the same time, Ye Tong responded again, calling on viewers to "not blow her words out of proportion" and emphasizing that the two get along well in private, in an attempt to ease tensions among netizens. Despite this, Fang Qi's program resources were immediately reduced, and she lost 900,000 fans in less than a month, ultimately being eliminated from the program.

3.2. Mai Lin, *See You Again* 4

The Ma Lin incident can be seen as a typical case of women being emotionally labeled and structurally stigmatized for violating gender expectations of "gentleness and restraint" when expressing their economic views. In *See You Again* 4, Mai Lin was edited to appear as a "show-off" for insisting on buying two smoked chickens within her budget and criticizing her companions'

spending habits to their faces, sparking widespread anger. Approximately 80% of comments on Weibo and Xiaohongshu labeled her as "selfish," "self-centered," and "revenge consumer." Netizens even called for "reporting Melin" and "boycotting Melin-style influencers" to show their disapproval of her.

Netizens' criticism deepened into public opinion mobilization: "The program team made Melin a negative example to generate buzz, but I'm not buying it." On social media platforms, many people viewed her actions as "stealing public resources" and demanded that brands sever ties with her. Hu Xiu pointed out that while this backlash helped boost the show's popularity, it only brought Lin Mai herself boycotts and rejection. This kind of negative publicity does not stem solely from audience perception, but is closely related to the platform's algorithmic preference for conflictual content [1]. "Showing off" itself has high virality and emotional appeal, aligning with the platform's content distribution logic, and has become a practical tool for the production team to "create buzz." As Lagrange pointed out, the platform's emotional mechanism reinforces existing biases while weakening the complexity of individual expression, making women more susceptible to emotional stereotyping [2].

In mid-March, Mai Lin posted a long apology on Weibo, saying that her behavior was "perhaps very self-centered" and that she would "face cyberbullying head-on" in an attempt to win back understanding. Although some netizens praised her for "boldly admitting her mistakes" and showing courage, more people doubted the sincerity of her apology, questioning whether it was "just a superficial formality," and pointing out that "her team planned everything for her, so how sincere can her repentance really be?" At this point, the public backlash had not yet subsided, and Melin was still being labeled as "selfish," "show-off," and "hollow internet celebrity."

3.3. Wu Liufang's career transition

The Wu Liufang incident illustrates the communication logic behind the moral stigmatization and institutional exclusion faced by retired female athletes on public platforms for breaking with traditional notions. Former national gymnastics champion Wu Liufang sparked a social media storm after posting several sexy dance videos on Douyin. Her junior teammate and Olympic gold medalist Guan Chenchen publicly commented, "Don't blame gymnastics," speaking out from a moral standpoint. This statement quickly ignited public outrage, resulting in Wu Liufang's account being banned from following others and her videos being taken down, making her the focus of public criticism for a time. Netizens described her as a "borderline broadcaster" and "vulgar performer," believing that she had "tarnished the image of national athletes." Some have even called for official regulation, saying, "Don't let her continue to make money off her gymnastics fame."

The statements by Wu Liufang were considered inappropriate by the general opinion, but in reality, they mirror the level of control over the bodies of women, which is very high. When the public expression of feminism was no longer within the mainstream framework of recognition, as it was observed when the female counterparts deviated from the mainstream thinking mechanism, it created collective exclusionary psychology, as pointed out by Bir in his study of the reputation mechanism of feminism [14]. Stella further reveals that on social media platforms, expressions of "body as opinion" are more likely to become the focus of stigma propagation, especially in contexts where identity and national image overlap [1].

Faced with pressure, Wu Liufang bowed in apology during the live broadcast, saying, "I want to make everyone happy with my actions," emphasizing that the video was not deliberately sensationalized, but rather a decision made by herself and her team. However, netizens' judgment has not softened, with most still accusing her of "using her body for profit" and "crossing moral

boundaries." In addition, the General Administration of Sport of China and local sports authorities have also intervened, indicating that this crackdown is no longer just a matter of netizens' behavior, but has escalated into a public governance issue.

4. Discussion

4.1. An analysis of the causes of the phenomenon of women being harassed

Women frequently encounter harassment on social media, which is both a product of technological factors and content ecology, as well as the result of long-term gender culture. From a platform mechanism perspective, social media's preference for conflictual and emotional content means that any controversial words or actions can gain extremely high exposure in a short period of time. Once women express words or behave in ways that exceed the image of the "ideal woman" in public, they are easily edited and spread as so-called "showmanship," triggering intense discussion.

This amplification effect conceals deep-rooted stereotypes. The public generally associates female roles with qualities such as gentleness, rationality, and consideration for the bigger picture. When women display assertiveness, refuse to compromise, or question the rules, they are easily labeled with negative stereotypes. The platform's algorithm further amplifies these tags, not only making individual behaviors a hot topic, but also encouraging more people to join in the discussion and judgment.

In addition, online group psychology is also constantly adding fuel to the fire. The anonymity of the environment reduces inhibitions, making people more radical and emotional when expressing dissatisfaction. Attacking others often brings a sense of virtual "justice" and group belonging, and this sense of satisfaction itself becomes a driving force for further attacks.

4.2. The impact and reflections on the phenomenon of women being surrounded and attacked

The public outcry had multiple negative effects on the parties involved. First is psychological pressure. Faced with a sudden influx of negative comments and ridicule, many female public figures have experienced emotional breakdowns and even withdrawn from social media. Whether it is due to consumer disputes or because the image has exceeded public expectations, such intense criticism can easily lead to deep self-doubt and anxiety.

Secondly, the crackdown will have a lasting impact on individuals' career development. When public opinion has not yet subsided, brands and platforms often choose to suspend cooperation or reduce exposure due to risk considerations. Whether there is an apology or clarification of the situation later, it is hard to restore their image as the parties concerned are fully involved. Their career prospects are directly undermined by the crash of their online reputation.

In addition, the frequent occurrence of mob attacks also reflects a social atmosphere in which women's behavior is subject to stricter scrutiny, and the demands of the position of women are highly conformist and uniform. This climate suffocates any kind of expression, and it is easier to self-censor and pull out of the public arena. This is harmful to the further entrenchment of gender equality in society in the long run.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined three common examples of female mobbing within the trending topics on Weibo and identified that the emotion algorithm, gender stereotyping, and group communication

psychology of the platform are the key force units that contribute to the phenomenon of female mobbing. When women do not conform to the norms that society considers appropriate in terms of their roles, chances are high that they will be stigmatized or even assaulted on social media, and this can destroy their reputation and restrain their freedom of expression. The conclusions of the current paper represent a source of the logic behind the promotion of gender issues on social media, as well as show the depth of platform mechanisms and gender culture interactions affecting the shaping of opinions among the population. Future studies might also be directed at investigating the mechanisms of intervening in the expression of positive emotions in mobbing incidents, as well as how to build a more rational digital opinion space by designing the platform.

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