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Does Social Media reinforce Gender Norms?

A study based on the largest social media application in China

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Abstract

WeChat, a pivotal social media platform in China, has engendered a shift of social interactions to the digital realm within the routines of daily existence. Among the 1.3 billion users, female users are a large group. However, women's everyday gender experiences while using WeChat have not received sufficient academic attention, especially the gender ideology of Chinese women in the context of the rise of indigenous Chinese feminism. To what extent do prevailing gender norms persist in this digital social environment? How is the landscape of gender norms influenced by WeChat? This study delves into the digital portrayals and interactions of Chinese women born during the Z-era, exploring their perspectives and encounters. Through in-depth interviews with a cohort of 12 women from diverse regions of China, this investigation focuses on three core questions: (1) What are Chinese women's gender experiences on WeChat? (2) How do Chinese women respond to gender norms? (3) How do gender norms affect their self-presentation on WeChat? Analysis of the collected interviews reveals that Chinese women remain subject to gender norms during their WeChat interactions, with distinct features of the platform engendering unique gender-related challenges. As products of the Internet age, the burgeoning digital feminism movement has contributed to the empowerment of these women. In this, female social networks support them in challenging gender norms. Nonetheless, entrenched gender structures endure within WeChat, as evidenced by women's adherence to established gender norms, particularly within the realms of family and work. Consequently, self-presentation on WeChat becomes a reproduction of gender inequality.

Table of Contents

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Gender norms have always been a topic of discussion among sociological and feminist scholars. A universal aspiration involves the advancement of women's empowerment. With the rapid development of new technologies and the Internet, social media has become an important sphere carrying people's daily interactions, and new gender norms have emerged. Topics such as the male gaze, patriarchy, and gender inequality are reproduced in social media in particular ways. A number of scholars have already paid attention to the development of the Internet in shaping and influencing gender norms, especially popular social media applications. For example, the objectification of women by TFM accounts on Instagram (Rodriguez & Hernandez, 2018b) and the existence of gender stereotypes on Facebook (Bailey et al., 2013) show us the dilemma of women's existence in the Internet space. At the same time, social media has created open, collaborative spaces that enable women to take agency (Peña-Fernández et al., 2023) in political and social movements. Digital platforms have burgeoned as pivotal arenas for galvanizing women's self-empowerment within the feminist movement (Willem & Tortajada, 2021). Alongside the presence of online male hegemony, we can also see a shift in female ideology brought about by movements such as #MeToo. However, extant gender studies centering on digital media predominantly scrutinize Western contexts. As a country with a large population of over 60 million women (National Bureau of Statistics of China >> Census Data, n.d.), the gender experiences of Chinese women cannot be ignored as an important part of the world's female population. In addition, social media such as Instagram is not widely used in China due to the regulation of the internet, and China has its own local popular social media, WeChat. Emerging as a principal conduit of digital interaction for over 1.3 billion active monthly users (Thomala, n.d.), WeChat has arguably become an essential social media in Chinese life and it brings social interactions across multiple domains, both private and work. However, we know little about the gender norms and challenges that Chinese women experience when using WeChat, and how they use their agency to combat gender norms in digital space.

In order to understand the gender experiences Chinese women face in using WeChat and how WeChat shapes gender norms, I asked the following questions:(1) What are

Chinese women's gender experiences on WeChat？(2) How do Chinese women respond to gender norms on WeChat? (3) How do gender norms affect their self-presentation on WeChat? I focus on how gender norms are presented on WeChat and how women challenge norms throughout the process. This investigation is underpinned by an extensive battery of semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with 12 Chinese women. I found that the presentation of gender norms on WeChat is based on the different functions of WeChat use and that gender norms such as femininity, objectified femininity, and patriarchal dominance influence Chinese women's self-presentation on WeChat. As a result of these experiences, women implicitly and overtly challenge gender norms. Their actions are often invisible to others. Women's agency can also be seen in this process, where self-empowerment and female social networks support and help them to confront gender constraints. But most women choose to challenge gender norms in a discreet way, which has a lot to do with their interpersonal networks. Based on in-depth interviews, I found that while most women can be aware of gender inequality, they feel pressured to perform gender as an online presence on WeChat. How they present themselves and why therefore became another focus of my research. I understand their self-presentation on WeChat by introducing Goffman's dramaturgical theory. The social nature of gender makes it necessary for women to present themselves on WeChat while always paying attention to their interactions with others to meet the audience's expectations of them. It can be said that gender influences their WeChat use, and the process of WeChat use shapes gender.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Gender norms

In the UN's Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022, "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (United Nations, n.d.) is presented as the fifth goal. When we discuss gender norms, they are deeply constructive of individual behavior and are arguably one of the central areas in gender studies as well as an important reason for widespread gender inequalities (Cialdini 1998; Harper & Marcus,2018; Ridgeway 2008b). Feminist voices on advocating for the breaking down of restrictive gender norms and the elimination of gender inequalities have been gradually heard since the 1870s (Cislaghi & Heise, 2019) and have been widely supported and discussed. In particular, achieving women's empowerment and gender equality has become a globally engaged project, such as the 1995 <Beijing Declaration>, a blueprint for action that guided the cause of women's rights worldwide ("Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace, 1995," 2018).

The study and discussion of "norms" has long existed in sociology, and there are multiple definitions of what constitutes a "social norm," but collectively they emphasize that members of a group share a set of behavioral rules (Bicchieri, 2017; Harper & Marcus, 2018b), and those who follow this set of behavioral rules may receive rewards, such as status in the community and recognition from others. The social sanctions triggered for those who violate the norms are also conceivable, and experiencing group rejection or gossip is often possible (Cislaghi & Heise, 2018). Sen and Östlin have also elaborated on this in their study, mentioning that emotions such as shame and indifference, for example, marginalize those who do not follow the norms (2008). The powerful force of social norms becomes a guidebook for people's behavior, subliminally reminding groups how they should behave to conform to social expectations (Bicchieri, 2005), with structural drivers underpinning social norms.

The roles and behaviors for males and females are not supposed to be biologically determined, but socially constructed. As a subset of the social normative framework, gender norms reflect unequal gender relations (Heise et al., 2019). Definitions of gender norms are found throughout the relevant gender studies literature, and while

there is no one very clear definition, the meanings are generally the same. In a study of global data on gender norms and health published in the Lancet, Weber et al. refer to gender norms as underlying rules that guide how girls and boys, women and men, should act (2019). While those who do not act according to the rules or behave differently from the rules become social "deviants" and do not fit in with a particular group. Those who transgress face social sanctions, for example, women who are too dominant may be perceived as "not like a woman" (Ridgeway, 2008). Heise et al. also pointed out that gender norms are an expression of privilege and reflect unequal gender relations that are generally detrimental to girls and women (2019b). This power and privilege represented by gender norms make these rules widely practiced and difficult to change ("Gender Norms," 2013). Power is given, and resources are distributed depending on whether a person is a male or female (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Taking these studies together, we can find that gender norms have the following characteristics. One is that gender norms are internalized and learned by us at an early age (Blum et al., 2017). Girls and boys learn early in the life cycle from their parents about the expectations from others that they should follow (Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2002). For example, boys they should not play with Barbie dolls or love pink (Kane, 2006). These expectations about gender are perpetuated in larger social settings such as schools, corporations, and other institutions. The second finding in gender research is that the unequal gender relations presented by gender norms (usually to the disadvantage of women) are unequal power (Bicchieri, 2017; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). The unequal power relations between men and women and the effects this has on their lives are visible in all societies. Within the framework of a patriarchal society and male hegemony, women are underrepresented and have a ceiling in many areas such as politics and economics. Even in the backward areas of many developing countries, girls are still told that they should not receive higher education and that being a good wife and housewife is more important, while on the contrary, their brothers have the privilege of enjoying education (d'Hellencourt, 2004). Another point is that gender norms are created through social interactions (Ridgeway, 2008), in which individuals engage in social interactions to emphasize or adjust or resist behavioral norms about masculinity and femininity (West & Zimmerman, 1987), as we can see in numerous studies on masculinity and the harm that masculinity cause to women(Connell, 1993; Rivera & Scholar, 2020; "Traditional Norms of Masculinity," 2013). Social media is at the forefront of social interaction,

but due to the overly rapid rise of various social media software, not enough research has been done in this area, and investigating gender norms on social media becomes timely and important.

2.2 Masculinity and Femininity

When we talk about gender norms, masculinity and femininity are topics that cannot be ignored. From traditional culture to religion to law, we can glimpse gender systems in all social institutions. These frameworks and systems construct and define masculinity and femininity, the patterns of behavior that are considered correct for girls and boys, women and men (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Gender inequality and the demands of femininity have hindered women's participation in key areas of society, while on the contrary, masculinity is considered normal (Connell, 1987). For example, a man should show his abilities at work rather than in the kitchen and piles of cleaning products, while a woman should stay at home. Furthermore, in Connell's book <Gender and Power>, he used the term "hegemonic masculinity" to show the dominance of masculinity in society, but when we look at femininity, we find it in a subordinate position. What is more unfortunate is that the presence of femininity does not serve the interests of women. The perception that women are instruments of reproduction and that their role and way of expressing femininity is to be a mother and nurture children is still present in many parts of the world. In a gender survey from the World Bank conducted in more than 20 countries, women in Tanzania reported that the number of children determines masculinity, that men want more children to show their masculinity, and that it is up to men to decide how many children to have ("Gender Norms," 2013). But do women remain subordinate when they are in a class that is more receptive to education? In Tichenor's report, he noted that male dominance persists even when women earn more than men (2005). As Schrock and Schwalbe (2009) elaborate, "Manhood acts are inherently about upholding patriarchy and reproducing gender inequality " (p287).

While emphasizing the strong dominant power of masculinity, Connell also stresses that such a model is subject to challenge (1987). Some men are open to traditional norms that restrict women ("Gender Norms," 2013). A father from Uganda supported his daughter through high school even when she was pregnant at age 17 (Harper et al., 2018). Urban women gradually reported more changes in the power and freedom they

had. The findings also showed that when studying urban men over the same period of time it was found that most felt they had lost a lot of control ("Gender Norms," 2013). Cases of easing masculinity and women gaining more empowerment are on the rise. Of course, there is some literature that is in denial about toxic masculinity, such as drawing our attention to the fact that masculinity is pluralistic and is displayed differently in specific social cultures (Stecopoulos, H., & Uebel, M., 1997). They argued that we shouldn't describe it as a universal behavior of masculinity on a global scale, but should differentiate it according to class, race, etc. In my opinion, the use of trappings such as religion, race, etc. to cover masculinity serves to hide commonalities of masculinity in different social situations. There are also scholars who do not even need the trappings and defend this masculinity in a straightforward manner. In an article written by David French, following the release of the American Psychological Association's <Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men>, he described APA's actions as a "false declaration of war" and impassionedly defended traditional masculinity (French, 2019). The dangers of traditional masculinity are as much for women as they are for men. In the extensive literature on gender and health published in The Lancet, the association of masculinity with unhealthy negative behaviors such as alcoholism, reckless driving, etc. has been confirmed. Women and girls, on the other hand, are subject to male subjugation, and such control enable men to acquire and display masculinity (Rivera & Scholar, 2020), which is an important feature of hegemonic masculinity. And when controlled women and girls put up resistance, control is likely to escalate into violence (Ellis, 2015; Ferris, 2002). There are also some studies that point out how men benefit at the expense of women, a clear example of which is the objectification of women (Bird, 1996). Women become props for them to express their masculinity by talking about women and sex, passing around porn videos in groups (Eder & Thorne, 1995). It seems that when a boy or man has many women or has sex with multiple women, he is a "respectable" man, and girls' bodies become an object to be collected and displayed by men.

In eighteenth-century literature, feminists also defined women as "mothers," "housewives," and other service roles (Banner & Berg, 1978). Some scholars believe that the discourse of women as the embodiment of "home" shows the worship of women and expresses their innate qualities. Such gender norms continue to be

perpetuated globally today. Most research on women indicates that cultural expectations of women from childhood are submissive, friendly, and nurturing (Campbell, 1993; Eder & Thorne, 1995; Young Femininity, 2004). When viewing Connell's description of femininity, women's submissive relationships to men are oriented toward male interest (2013), which results in women remaining friendly under the demands of femininity when norms encourage men to be assertive and superior (Ringrose & Renold, 2020). This social construction controls women's patterns of thought and behavior, and gender inequality is re-emphasized. According to the Lancet, women subjected to gender norms also face illnesses, such as eating disorders (Heise et al., 2019b). In addition, women's appearance and body image under the influence of patriarchy are also overemphasized (Zota & Shamasunder, 2017), and the damage caused by excessive beauty and plastic surgery cannot be ignored. Slut shaming, stigmatization, and labeling are social sanctions for those who rebel against gender norms and femininity. Terms such as "slut" and "whore" make girls and women feel diminished by attacking their sexual values (Ringrose & Renold, 2012), and men can make their masculinity prevail again through such control. Within the theoretical framework of "doing gender," the stigma associated with stigmatizing terms such as "slut" and "whore" controls women's patterns of behavior. Wearing short skirts, and acting too tough in the workplace, which are contrary to traditional femininity. Women are sanctioned for failing to express their femininity in ways that are acceptable to social norms (usually male-dominated) (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Slut-shaming, a discourse that denigrates women through assumed sexuality, allows women to experience discrimination and disempowerment, with some women unconsciously hiding themselves and continuing to conform to the norms of behavior set for them by gender norms of being a "good girl"(Nack, 2002b). This labeling of "good girl" and "bad girl" re-emphasizes male dominance, encouraging one type of femininity and devaluing another through rewarding discourse (Armstrong et al., 2014). It can be argued that globally, girls and women are experiencing tensions between expressing themselves and traditional gender perceptions and that such tensions are more pronounced in developing countries (Keleher & Franklin, 2008). As a developing country with an extremely large population of approximately 690 million women as of 2022 (China: Population by Gender 2022, n.d.), patriarchy remains in a position that is not easily shaken (Yu, 2019). Exploring the behavioral patterns of Chinese women in the face of gender norms will not only help us

understand the current state of development of indigenous feminism but can also complement Western research and add geographical diversity.

2.3 The Current Status of Gender Norms in Developing Countries - China as an Example

The prevailing cultural norm in Asia is that women in most countries belong to a subordinate position (Anwar & Thamarangsi, 2017), and women in the Chinese region are no exception. This study is based on research within the framework of indigenous Chinese gender norms and aims to understand the gender performance of contemporary Chinese women. When we look at the Global Gender Gap Report 2022 (Global Gender Gap Report 2022, n.d.) released by the World Economic Forum, we can find that among the 146 countries surveyed, China ranks 104th in terms of gender gap, which is at the bottom of the list, and the ranking remains largely unchanged compared to the previous year. This indicates that China still has a lot of work to do in narrowing the gender gap and is still lagging behind the middle level. Despite the Chinese government's continuous efforts to change gender ideology since the Beijing Declaration issued in 1995, the results are still not very significant and even tend to regress and lag behind in some respects (Luo, 2017). For example, calling women who are not married at the age of 25 "leftover girls" attempts to devalue women themselves, as if only women who have families and husbands can realize their personal value. The oppression of the female body in Chinese history dates back 3,000 years, with classical Confucianism and Taoism providing religious and cultural support for male domination of the female body, which has always been a symbol of patriarchal power (Man, 2000). Submissiveness, gentleness, and loyalty have been advocated for female behavior (Croll, Citation 1995). And the need to actively assume the role of nurturer (Evans, 2010). This makes Chinese women often face a double burden from work and family, and it is still common even for women to give up work to become housewives (Riley, 1997). In their study of Ethiopia, Nepal, Uganda, and Vietnam, Harper et al. found that "Son bias'" is a common phenomenon in developing countries and backward regions (2018b), which can also be traced in China. Sons are given preferential treatment in most families, while daughters are "money-losing" and some female babies are even abandoned at birth (Zheng & Zheng, 2011). Such ideologies are fixed in boys and girls during childhood, with males naturally

perceiving themselves as the dominant ones and females being limited by such gender inequalities.

It is worth noting that in the current global and local Chinese environment where consumerism is prevalent, the female body becomes the physical presence where patriarchy is enforced (Ahmad & Anctil, 2016). In Swami et al.'s study, they mentioned that society's attention to external body representations such as appearance and body shape indicates a gender discriminatory and patriarchal attitude, which leads women to go for more body repair and a significant increase in the percentage of cosmetic industries such as plastic surgery. Behind the magnification of female beauty is an ideology that imposes gender standards on the female body (Brush, 1998) and a performance of the male gaze. The male gaze limits female agency and fosters the fantasy of male control over the female body (Oliver, 2017). On the other hand, some studies draw attention to the power of contemporary Chinese women to reshape gender in such a globalized national economy, and the preconceived notion that "women are necessarily exploited" may need to be revisited (McWilliams, 2013). Personal aesthetics constitute contemporary women's practice of "doing gender", reshaping the rules of feminine appearance, and women can express their own image (Braizaz, 2018). In particular, women are now the largest economic force for growth in the world (Group, n.d.), and the "she economy" has become a global trend. Especially for Chinese women from the Z generation, female consumerism has prompted more women to actively express their personal identity, and Chinese women are awakening to a sense of self-awareness and independence (Lian et al., 2021). As the Z Generation, which has been exposed to the Internet since birth, scholars have found that this generation is more confident, independent, and brave enough to challenge authority (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015), and more people are opposed to the gender stereotyped image of women as housewives (Bermúdez-González et al., 2021). Although some studies have focused on the ideology of the Z generation and reported that many young people of the Z generation believe that traditional gender norms are outdated (Gerlieb, 2021), women in the Z generation still face challenges, especially in the context of the Internet age, where idealized images of women in social media continue to oppress women (Gales, 2022). In contrast, little research has been conducted on Chinese from Z generation attitudes toward gender norms, and in

particular, the gender representation of women of the Z generation on local Chinese social media is not well understood.

2.4 Seeing and Being Seen - Gender Representation on Social media

In their study, Johnsdotter and Essén have stated that media and advertising are manipulating femininity and masculinity (2010). Gender stereotypes are abundant in mainstream media, and television commercials (Bermúdez-González et al., 2021), so how gender is represented in the digital environment has become even more important. Ward and Grower's study demonstrated that traditional gender concepts promoted by the media, especially television, reinforce individuals' beliefs about these stereotypes (2020). However, in recent years, with the emergence and widespread use of more and more social media, television has become far less present in people's lives than social platforms (van Dijck & Poell, 2014), and social media is now a common practice in global communication. More research on social media and gender norms is presented. What exactly are the implications of the rapid growth of Internet social platforms for traditional gender norms? As a platform for disseminating information, sharing lives, and posting ideas (Highfield & Leaver, 2016), boyd and Ellison articulated social media as a space for the reproduction of gender inequality, where male hegemony is still prevalent (2007). Adolescent groups play a role in constructing masculinity in social media using (Dinsmore, 2014). Rodriguez and Hernandez's discussion revolved around comments about the men attracted to sexy photos of women on Instagram. Instagram as a visual and textual platform (Pila et al., 2017), the subjective awareness of the viewer is shaped in the interaction (Chesher, 2012). Statistical methods of analyzing comments on randomly selected female photos on Instagram reveal that male judgments about female bodies, looks, and poses are everywhere. Sexual obscenities and words of conquest can be found in comments attached to female photos, such as "bitch", "whore", and "how much can I pay". Judgment and humiliation are an aspect of masculinity display (Connell, 2020). Especially with expressions like "I can pay" and "she's mine" that treat women as male property, and women who try to present themselves in photographs are once again dominated by gender differences. The dichotomy of power is emphasized. These discourses objectify women while reinforcing their subordination and making it the norm. Routines become norms as they continue to be reinforced (Kimmel, 2017). Additionally, the data showed that the most popular dress code for women is the

bikini, accounting for 73.2% of the sample (Rodriguez & Hernandez, 2018). The excessive focus on women's naked bodies highlights the maintenance of masculinity in specific contexts for gender differences. Toxic masculinity is also manifested in various social media platforms such as Facebook (Mikorski & Szymanski, 2017), and Twitter (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2015). Social media has become fertile ground for the male gaze and fosters a controlling mentality, and the male gaze culture has turned social media into a way to objectify women (Oliver, 2017c). Nude photos of men with provocative connotations are, however, rarely considered vulgar (Sofia P. Caldeira et al., 2018). While women are devalued by insulting terms, the requirement for ideal femininity limits other women from expressing themselves (Braizaz, 2018). Breast size and the degree of body fatness are positively correlated with attention (Rodriguez & Hernandez, 2018). The ideal model of femininity conveyed by social media is slim, young, and sexually attractive (Gill, 2007). Another empirical study of femininity on Facebook shows that a dependent, submissive temperament remains an important gender stereotype (Rose et al., 2012). Some voices argue against the reinforcement of gender norms and the self-limitation of women by social media (Batsleer & McMahon, 2016), arguing that social media has increased female empowerment and that women are free to express and construct identities during communication (Jackson, 2018). The #Metoo movement, which has increased public awareness of sexual violence through online communication since it was launched on social media in 2017, has had multiple positive impacts and is a challenge to traditional systems by the power of the female collective (Tahan, 2021). The content presented by women through social media has also helped viewers reconsider traditional gender consciousness (Alvermann et al., 2021).

Academics have been divided about women's representation on social media (Dobson, 2015). Is this self-empowerment or a reinforcement of gender stereotypes? Butkowski et al. sought to examine how young girls incorporate stereotypical gender displays into their Instagram selfies. They showed that pervasive gender stereotypes are not eliminated on social media, but not only that, women's self-presentation on Instagram reinforces gender stereotypes while also allowing them to receive rewards from society, such as more "likes" (2019). Men are reinforcing their dominance by rewarding specific femininity (Armstrong et al., 2014b). Even some celebrity accounts with great influence do not showcase female diversity, but instead satisfy the

male gaze through physical display (Gow, 2022). Post-feminist discourse simplifies feminism by focusing on the expression of the body and beauty to show empowerment (McRobbie, 2009). As Gill discusses about post-feminism, the focus on the body brings with it the choice for women to pursue beauty in a variety of ways to please themselves (2007), which may appear to be a form of self-empowerment, but Gill suggested that it is an internalization of socially constructed "beauty". Arguments such as "dressing for myself" replace the phrase "dressing for men," but with slender bodies, perky hips, and smooth skin, most women present similar beauty on social media. Women seem to unconsciously reenact gender stereotypes while claiming self-empowerment in pursuit of individualism (Murray, 2015). Women who value their image on social platforms may suffer from health-related harm, such as hunger strikes, due to excessive focus on their appearance (Butkowski, Dixon, & Weeks, 2019). Taken together, social media on the one hand enhances women's agency and self-expression but can also be a tool to reinforce existing social norms.

The representation of gender on social media in China has its own peculiarities. Since popular social networking platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are not available in mainland China due to network limitations, the study of Chinese local social media requires our attention. On the one hand, without access to global social platforms, Chinese women's groups have developed digital grassroots feminism with local characteristics (Yang & Zhou, 2023). The bottom-up approach to gender issues through online practices has led to more women's participation and reflection in cyberspace. On the other hand, much local research in China also suggests that misogyny remains rampant on social media (Tan, 2017). Defenders of masculinity refer to feminists as "rural feminists," a name intended to stigmatize groups of women who seek to defend women's power against traditional gender norms (Yang. 2014). Studies of women's use of WeChat in the workplace have reported that social media reinforces societal gender norms about working women (Miao & Tian, 2022). In Rodriguez and Hernandez's (2018) talk about hegemonic discourses of masculinity on ins, the study is based on the fact that ins users can be anonymous. Anonymity is widely considered to be one of the important factors in online hate speech (Kilvington, 2020). Anonymity on the internet is equivalent to cloaking people in invisibility, where personal information such as names are erased and individuals act without fear of violating social norms. Anonymity provides the opportunity to

separate online behavior from personal identity (Suler, 2004), which exacerbates online unease (Lusthaus, 2018). People can be bold enough to say even more outrageous and vicious things than they would in real life (Brown, 2017). The same can be applied to comments on Instagram. If the veneer of people pretending to be who they really are were removed, would the obscene comments still be present on social media? A study of the Chinese social media platform WeChat will hopefully add to this thinking.

2.5 Online Masquerade

The power of social media in shaping consciousness cannot be ignored (Merunková & Šlerka, 2019). Young people from the Z generation were born and raised in an era of rapid online development. According to a data survey, the average Z generation people spend at least three hours a day on the Internet (Global Average Time Spent per Day on Social Media by Generation 2021, n.d.). New technologies are changing lives and the world. The way people communicate and interact with each other has changed, but whether gender norms are changing with new technologies or are hard to break is a topic we need to discuss, especially women's self-presentation when using social media. Online representations of gender expand people's daily lives into digital space and intersect with real practices (van Doorn, 2011). Offline practices present people in different ways depending on the occasion, place, and who they are talking to (Marwick & boyd, 2010), and there are clearly different norms to follow for a date and a job interview. The same is true for self-presentation on social media, where people often need to edit their "selves" to fit specific people and contexts. The role of the self is constructed in interaction. Goffman's theory of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959) has been increasingly used by scholars in their research on online activities as a theoretical framework to explain people's participation in online activities. An example is the studies of how celebrities construct their online personas (Marshall et al., 2015; Valentinsson, 2018). However, with the prevalence of online socialization, constructing personas online has become an everyday part of ordinary people's lives (Boyd, 2014).

In Goffman's seminal work <The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life>, he used metaphors to figuratively help us understand why individual performance varies in different contexts (1959). In this theoretical framework, life is a stage, and each

person is an actor performing on the stage. Since it is a "performance", it has a dramatic component, and the actor needs to present an idealized version of himself or herself rather than the real self. The performance is tailored to the audience and the context (Marwick & boyd, 2010). This follows the paradigm of symbolic interactionism, where meaning is constructed through interaction (Blumer, 1962). Social media is like an online masquerade. People shape their image on social media by editing their profiles, cover photos, and sharing posts (Merunková & Šlerka, 2019b). Performance is the giving of meaningful verbal signs to convey a specific message to the audience and generate interaction. Such performances are not haphazard and without rules, but are performed with an awareness of social norms (Kilvington, 2020). It is as if people are aware of the rules of a masquerade ball before they attend it and develop their performance according to the rules. The performance is constructed under social expectations (Merunková & Šlerka, 2019b). In Miao and Tian's interviews with women in the workplace, we can see that some of the elite women in the workplace choose to highlight their professional identity on social media while trying to hide their gender identity because they are expected by their companies to show professional traits (2022b). For the disclosure of personal information, actors are selectively presented, which Goffman refers to as impression management (Goffman, 1959). First, actors observe the audience's reaction to the performance to adjust the self-presentation. Merunková and Šlerka noted that people delete posts that do not receive strong feedback from others on social media (2019). Girls get frustrated and delete posts because they do not receive too many comments after posting selfies on Instagram (Pila et al., 2017). On the other hand, impression management also requires actors to actively interact with their audience in order to build connections, and Wallace et al. found in their study that Facebook users consciously "like" their friends' posts to convey a friendly and supportive image of themselves (2014). The implementation of impression management is based on the frontstage and backstage owned by the actor. Individuals behave differently in the foreground and background, and it depends on the context (Goffman, 1959). The frontstage is an open, public place where there will be an audience and therefore the individual will perform in line with expectations. When the performance comes down and the actor returns backstage where there is no audience, backstage becomes a private domain inaccessible to others (Serpa & Ferreira, 2018), and complaining,

vulgar behavior occurs backstage (Goffman, 1959). The virtual frontstage performance is carefully shaped by the actors.

The repeated switching between frontstage and background creates interaction and communication but also conflict and contradiction. Some have described the Internet as a completely virtual world, separated from the real world (Suler, 2004b), as if when people turn off their computers and phones, they can completely disconnect from that "virtual" world. However, with the rapid development of technology and the Internet, the online world has been integrated into the real world, and we need to switch between online and offline repeatedly, forcing us to maintain consistency in our online and offline interactions (Miao & Tian, 2022b). The concept of context collapse, a concept about the impact of social media, was born in the framework of Goffman's theory. As online social networks expand, a person's offline social network becomes a list of friends on social media. These "friends" are no longer friends in the real sense of the word (Hogan, 2010), they may be people you met on a trip, people you talked to at the gym, classmates from elementary school, and so on. When these different groups co-exist in the digital space of social media, they form the basis of contextual collapse (boyd, 2017). According to Goffman's self-representation theory, actors will perform different self-expressions for each audience in the list. However, when they are all watching the same "performance," it leads to a context collapse in which the performance does not align with the audience it is aimed at (boyd, 2014). Contextual collapse triggers the need to maintain overlapping scenarios, but this is a very complex task for the actor. Actors' carefully constructed performances are not always recognized by all audiences, which can cause actors to become embarrassed or even flee from such contextual collapse, such as deleting friends (Borkovich, & Breese, 2016). Most users on social media are not professional media workers and for the most part have to meet with family and friends often offline, so actors need to maintain a balance of personal privacy and public information in order to maintain a certain level of authenticity to sustain the scenario. When we constantly change our self-presentation based on the audience's reflection, authenticity is constructed by the audience and there is no real sense of authenticity (Marwick & boyd, 2010b).

In Goffman's account, actors are expected to follow basic rules of decency and other social norms when performing, and if these are violated, the actor may be disgraced.

What is important for the audience to do is to give the actors the expected response. So when we examine the self-presentation of women on social media, should we consider that these women's performances must be presented according to social norms? Do women under the influence of feminism still need to set their performances according to these rules? Additionally, when the audience doesn't give the expected response, do malicious and foul comments motivate women to change their self-presentation? To think of women's self-representation on social media exclusively according to Goffman's theory of self-presentation ignores women's agency and the awakening of women's consciousness in the current global climate. In addition, the theory of dramaturgy assumes that audiences will also follow the rules to give performance responses, but does not take into account that there will be audiences who violate the rules. Here, we want to focus on the contextual collapse of women on social media and explore how Chinese women present themselves.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Research Philosophy

Research methods encompass various classifications and levels, with a foundational classification being philosophical. This dimension shapes the overarching approach and guides the selection of research methods. This study adopts the interpretivist research philosophy due to its alignment with the specificities of the research questions. The interpretivist perspective underscores comprehending social phenomena through the lens of subjective experiences and interpretations of involved individuals. This concurs with the study's aim to delve into and gain insights into women's gender experiences on WeChat. Selecting the interpretivist approach is substantiated by the research questions' nature. A profound exploration of women's subjective experiences on WeChat and the gendered connotations linked therewith is pivotal to this research. The objective is to fathom how women construe and navigate their gendered identities and respond to gender norms on WeChat. The interpretivist research perspective provides the avenue to dissect the intricacies and diversities of women's interactions on WeChat, thereby enabling the capture of nuances that alternative research methods might oversee.

Moreover, the interpretivist research philosophy aligns harmoniously with our epistemological stance. Within the interpretivist paradigm, researchers delve into comprehending how individuals interpret their societal roles, acknowledging the socially constructed nature of reality. Gender's fluidity across cultures, contexts, and personal experiences is acknowledged, being a socially constructed concept. Women's insights into the gender norms they encounter on social media hold value as they mirror gender disparities and broader gender-linked societal matters within a novel digital realm. Opting for the interpretivist approach facilitates a profounder grasp of how Chinese women actively shape and negotiate their gender identities on WeChat, whilst taking into account their unique cultural and social circumstances.

Furthermore, the interpretivist research philosophy is particularly suited to the qualitative research design chosen for this study. We used in-depth interviews and thematic analysis to explore women's experiences on WeChat.Through open-ended

questions and flexible interview techniques, we are able to capture the complexity and depth of participants' narratives, affording them the platform to articulate their stories and confer meaning onto gender dynamics. This alignment resonates with the interpretivist approach's core, which accentuates the significance of context and personal interpretation. In sum, the motivation for choosing the interpretivist research philosophy in this study is appropriate to the specificity of the research questions. By espousing the interpretivist philosophical framework, a comprehensive understanding of women's gendered encounters on WeChat, coupled with their subjective sentiments and cultural backdrops, is attainable, thereby enabling the capture of multifaceted and intricate data.

3.2 Research method

Research methods serve as the compass guiding the researcher's approach to data collection and analysis, contingent upon the fundamental question of "what is being studied" (Holden & Lynch, 2004b). Qualitative research, in particular, seeks to delve into social phenomena based on the meanings people give to things (Ezzy, 2013). This approach finds its strength in the exploration of intricate social dynamics and the illumination of individual experiences and viewpoints. In light of this, the purpose of this study is to understand Chinese women's experiences when using social media and to understand their interpretations of their behavior. This endeavor necessitates a data landscape that extends beyond mere mathematical correlations or binary responses of "yes" and "no." To accommodate the multidimensional nature of the inquiry, a qualitative research design is adopted, focusing on the investigation of women's gendered experiences on WeChat. As it permits a nuanced exploration of women's experience of gender norms on social media and their intricate self-presentation dynamics, the qualitative research paradigm is particularly well suited to this study.

In a qualitative framework, interviews hold significant importance as a method in the data collection strategy. As asserted by Nutbrown and Clough, interviews stand among the most potent tools for comprehending human beings (2014). In essence, interviews empower researchers to directly access the interviewees' subjective experiences. The structured interview, characterized by its highly standardized format, necessitates uniformity in both content and structure (Saunders et al., 2009). This approach involves the researcher posing the same questions to each interviewee,

following a predetermined sequence (Bryman, 2016). However, this format makes the interview inflexible and difficult to conduct in-depth conversations, which makes it more difficult to obtain detailed and specific information. In contrast, the semi-structured interview adopts an organization centered around a list of topics, allowing for flexibility in altering the sequence of questions as the dialogue unfolds. This flexibility in content and order affords respondents greater latitude while providing researchers with the opportunity to delve into comprehensive responses (Bryman, 2012). Consequently, this approach unlocks the potential for capturing depth and complexity of the data collected. Considering the strengths and limitations of varied interview formats, the sole research method employed in this study is the semi-structured interview. This deliberate choice ensures two-fold benefits: first, interviews remain closely aligned with the research topic, and second, it establishes a malleable and systematic avenue for exploring participants' experiences and feelings related to gender dynamics on WeChat. Employing open-ended questions encourages participants to openly share their narratives, insights, and personal interpretations. Moreover, the decision to employ semi-structured interviews resonates harmoniously with the interpretivist research philosophy and the specific nature of the research questions. This interview format offers a thematic framework while concurrently allowing for dialogue flexibility. Such methodological alignment ensures the exploration of research questions while granting participants the autonomy to shape the trajectory of discourse.

It is important to mention that the focus group was not intended to be used in this study due to ethical concerns about the confidentiality of the participants' conversations. Through our contact with the respondents, we found that they were reluctant to share their experiences with too many people, so the focus group may have prevented them from describing more of their experiences.

3.3 Data collection

3.3.1 Interviewee recruitment

After obtaining ethical approval, interviewees were recruited through a combination of network and snowball sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to ensure

that participants with knowledge and experience relevant to the study topic were selected. Participants were recruited based on criteria such as different geographical, educational, and social backgrounds. Being a country with a land area of 9.6 million square kilometers, China not only spans a large geographical area, but also has many different ethnic groups and cultural differences between regions, which also construct people's consciousness (Fan, 2000), so the selected respondents are from different geographical areas of China. In addition, this study focuses on the experiences and subjective feelings of women in the Z-era, so age is an important condition when recruiting respondents, all of whom were born between 1990 and 2000. In order to create a sample representative of the various backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of the target population, recruiting information posted on other online platforms in China was also used to collect the sample. Notably, the sample size was not predetermined, but was determined based on reaching data saturation, i.e., more interviews that did not yield new information or themes, which ensured that we collected enough data to effectively and comprehensively address the research questions.

As shown in Table 1 below, 12 eligible women were interviewed. To ensure their privacy, we sorted them in the alphabetical order of the nicknames they provided. The table contains information about their age, place of birth, educational background, and occupational background. In general, all interviewees have received higher education (i.e., a bachelor's degree) in China, and only one interviewee had a high school educational background.

Table 1. Participant Profile

Name	Year of Birth	City of China	Educational Background	Occupation
H	1995	Hei Longjiang	Master	Government functionary
HeiHei	1995	Shao Xing	Bachelor	Bank employee
JieJie	1997	Zhe Jiang	Master	Master Student
KangKang	1993	Jia Musi	Master	Company Accountant
LuLu	1997	Bei Jing	Master	Bank employee

Nico	1996	Qing Dao	Master	Cafe staff
QiuQiu	1996	Nan Chang	High School	Teacher
Rylee	1996	Tian Jin	Master	Lawyer
TaoTao	1996	Guang Zhou	Bachelor	Lawyer
X	1996	Dong Ying	Master	Government functionary
XiaoQiu	1997	Cheng Du	Bachelor	Administrative staff
XiXi	2000	Xi An	Bachelor	Bachelor Student

The implementation of the interviews was challenging because the interviewees come from various regions of China and were far from my location, making it difficult to implement face-to-face interviews in the field from an economic perspective. In addition, many of the recruits indicated that they did not want to talk about the topic in a face-to-face manner, preferring to protect their privacy. Therefore, a combination of factors led to the use of online conversations to conduct the interviews. This saved money and allowed the respondents to talk and share their experiences with us without the interference of third parties. In addition, by asking the interviewees about their feelings and suggestions at the beginning, we learned that most of them said they did not want to turn on the camera during the online interview because it would make them feel uncomfortable. Not being able to observe the interviewer's demeanor and their state of mind when speaking posed a challenge to our understanding of their words, but it was more important for the interviewees to express their opinions in the most comfortable way possible.

3.3.2 Interview questions

Usually, the interview lasted about 45 minutes, and in some cases lasted about an hour. Prior to the formal interview, two friends participated in a pilot interview after developing an interview outline in order to understand possible interview difficulties and to avoid my questions steering the conversation in the wrong direction. During the pilot interview, we noticed that the description of some questions could confuse

the interviewees or take their answers out of the focus of the study. In addition, it was necessary to introduce the interviewer before the interview to enhance the interviewee's trust. Maintaining a casual and relaxed tone during interactions with interviewees can serve as a soothing balm, assuaging any hesitations stemming from the unfamiliarity of the situation. This conversational approach works wonders in bridging the gap between participants and the interviewer, fostering an atmosphere of comfort and rapport. Drawing from insights gleaned from the pilot interview, we further honed and refined the interview outline to maximize its effectiveness.

The initial segment of the interview outline was devoted to eliciting participants' fundamental personal details and their utilization of WeChat. This preliminary stage served as a launchpad, allowing me to establish a foundational grasp of the participants' backgrounds. Additionally, we took the initiative to delve into participants' comprehension of 'gender norms,' ensuring their responses were underpinned by a comprehensive understanding of the research theme. For the second part, some questions were designed to explore participants' personal experiences and feelings when using WeChat, and these questions focused on gender norms and their impact. As it was shown in Peters et al. that people are more willing to talk about other people's experiences than their own (2009), in the third part we asked participants if they could provide their friends' experiences and asked them about their feelings. By asking these questions, it is possible to understand their point of view, and on the other hand, to learn from them how they perceive these experiences.

3.4 Ethical practices

The ethical issue is one of the central aspects of this study and cannot be ignored, as the study involves close interaction between participants and interviewers. We needed to make sure that the research and interview questions met the relevant ethical quasi-measures before actually starting the survey. In addition, interviewees expressed great concern about ethical issues, which stimulated me to think about various ethical issues that might arise, especially regarding the confidentiality of data and data storage, and several participants expressed their concerns before being interviewed. Even though we mentioned in the recruitment information that the interviews would be conducted anonymously, all interviewees reconfirmed this with me. Half of the interviewees were very concerned about the subsequent misappropriation or disclosure of their

data, which could be related to their current occupations. To ensure that the participants' concerns were answered, I reconfirmed the confidentiality and security of the data with my mentor. When we contacted participants, we sent pre-interview information and consent forms, which were translated into Chinese to make the ethical issues clear to participants, clearly indicating the purpose of the study and the protections afforded to participants. Furthermore, we re-emphasized the ethical issues at the beginning of each interview, reasserted the anonymity of the interview and the confidentiality of the data, and introduced myself in order to lower the participants' vigilance. For example, we only used anonymity in this paper, as well as the fact that the data would not be made public in any form. In addition, we emphasized the participant's right to withdraw from the interview and refuse to answer any questions at any time. Finally, we asked participants if they had any other questions to reconfirm their willingness to participate.

Notably, almost all of the participants expressed to us the request that they did not want their facial information to appear in the interview, and three of them explicitly stated that they would not turn on the camera during the online interview. When we could only hear the participants' voices, it posed a challenge for me to determine the emotional changes of the interviewees, as I could not obtain information about their facial expressions or physical information. However, after weighing the pros and cons, I felt that as an interviewer I needed to do my best to give the interviewees what they felt comfortable talking about in order to make them more comfortable to participate in the interview and share their personal experiences. This proved to be effective, as all the interviewees said they felt more relaxed without the cameras on, and I was able to make some judgments about their emotions through their tone of voice, which I think had little impact on my analysis of the data. I did not choose the focus group because the participants were sensitive to the confidentiality of the information and they were only willing to communicate with me one-on-one.

3.5 Data analysis

According to Braun and Clarke's (2006) guiding article, thematic analysis allows researchers to look for common meanings in the data in qualitative studies. Since this study aims to explore the gendered experiences and perspectives of Chinese women born in the Z generation when using WeChat, I wanted my data to vividly convey the

feelings of the respondents, the use of thematic analysis allows me to understand in detail the stories of what is happening to Chinese women during their using of WeChat.

In developing the thematic analysis, we followed Braun and Clarke's guidebook (2006) in an ongoing interaction between my exploration, understanding, and data. According to Braun and Clarke's advice, rigorous handling of the data is a critical first step in developing a thematic analysis, and I immersed myself in the data to become deeply familiar with them, which made the basis for all subsequent steps. The repeated reading of interview data is time consuming but there is no shortcut. Reflexive questioning is also emphasized by Braun and Clarke at this stage, where the researcher approaches the data while also taking care to maintain a distance from the data, moving from reading the data to asking themselves questions. My notes from the first phase were casual, I kept writing down my thoughts and reflections which also allowed me to reconnect with the data. Moving into the second phase required the researcher to take a systematic look at the data, and in this exploratory process I kept looking for key pieces and coding them, and I used mind maps in this phase to help me clearly disentangle the relationships between the codes. The process of interacting with the data helped me to discover the explicit and underlying meaning of the data. The process of generating the original codes was cumbersome but it led me to discover and generate valuable initial themes. Themes as a cluster of codes are constructed through relationships between codes. The process of selecting themes as a researcher was an interesting and creative "adventure". Through repeated exploration and reflection, themes were divided into gender experiences, ways of responding to gender norms, and self-presentation on WeChat. In addition, each theme was further divided into sub-themes. As an extension of the third phase, the revisiting of the themes was necessary, and the compatibility with the research questions was the yardstick to check the well-adjusted themes. In this phase, the codes were reread and some sub-themes received revisions and adjustments.

3.6 Reflexivity
Increasingly, researchers are concerned about the role of reflexivity in ensuring the quality and validity of qualitative research (Darawsheh, 2014; Jootun et al., 2009), and factors such as my age, race, and gender can shape my relationship to the research

and my choice of the research topic and research methods. In other words, these factors contribute to the researcher's value bias (Hunt, 1993). The researcher, as a socially constructed human being, does not fully distance himself or herself from what is observed in the research (Saunders et al., 2009b). With respect to uncertainty and unpredictability, subjectivists argue that we are unable to minimize uncertainty (Hunt, 1993), and it is particularly important for me as a researcher to reflect and improve, which is why I believe that reflexivity needs to be discussed here.

First, I approached the study as a female researcher. I am deeply influenced by feminist researchers and concerned with hearing women's voices (Gayle, 2003), so semi-structured interviews were adopted by me as the main method in women's studies. In addition, as an ordinary member of hundreds of millions of women, I hope to listen to more women's voices and give them a microphone. Of course, I also realized that too much focus on women has made me neglect men's attitudes and perspectives, which is something I need to correct in my future research. Secondly, as a woman from China, I have a certain understanding of the environment in which Chinese women live, and I prefer to focus on the current situation of women in my country, which is an important reason for my choice of the research topic. This same gender identity and cultural background allowed me to better understand the concerns of female respondents when interacting with strangers, so I provided a comfortable atmosphere for participants to share their experiences. In addition, because of this same identity, the interviewees naturally saw me as an "insider" and the expression "I think you understand" often came up in their expressions, which made me try to avoid expressing my own opinion too much in the interviews to influence the participants and instead use more "why?" or "can you tell me more about that" to encourage participants to talk more.

Another noteworthy aspect of my research is that I was sensitive to the power relationships between me and the participants at all times. I did not want my research design to create pressure on the participants. Gordon, in describing the relationship between researchers and research findings, mentioned that data collection is the building block that helps us understand the world, and that researchers should not seek absolute certainty about the results, but should present the findings through contextual interpretation (1991). As a researcher, my position in analyzing the data

was socially constructed and I was clearly aware of my superiority over the interviewees and the bias this brought to my analysis.

3.7 The difficulties

Since my study involves the use of two languages, there were difficulties in transcribing and translating all the data. It is hard for a vocabulary produced in a particular cultural context to still maintain its cultural specificity after being translated into another language. In particular, my interviewees are women from the Z-era, who are very frequently exposed to the Internet, so some Internet words often appeared in their expressions. I asked them to further explain the words used in the interview to demonstrate their understanding and feelings. Also, by referring to some Chinese scholars' experiences in multilingual studies (Chin, 2018), I realized that the meanings behind some words that the translation failed to present needed to be specifically explained when I used them.

Chapter 4. Findings

4.1 Gender Experiences

Introduction

WeChat's common functions, such as Direct Message, Group chat, and Moments are shaping Chinese women's gendered experiences when using WeChat. All of the participants reported facing challenges from gendered norms when using WeChat. After analyzing the interview data, we found that participants' different gender experiences were related to different functions of WeChat use. In this chapter, participants' experiences of gender norms encountered while using different features of WeChat are examined in detail. According to their descriptions, gender issues are prevalent in their daily experiences of using WeChat, which will be elaborated on according to the different features of WeChat. The participants perceived gender issues from all sides, and social gender expectations of women were reflected in the social platform WeChat.

WeChat Moments

Moments is the most frequently used function, where people post or reprint articles, and this function is somewhat similar to Instagram's posting function. However, WeChat Moments has relatively closed properties (Zhang et al., 2018), and Moments cannot be accessed by strangers who are not WeChat friends. Therefore, the use of Moments mostly involves self-disclosure (Duan et al., 2020), and all of the participants also indicated that they use the Moments to share or record their lives. While showing their lives this also presented many gendered challenges for participants, especially the selfies that were posted in the Moments. All of the respondents stated that they received negative comments on their selfies, mostly related to their appearance and body image. For example:

> (XiXi) I posted a selfie of me and my friend. But maybe the camera was too close to me, my arms looked bulky. And then there was a guy, he commented, I forget exactly how he commented, he said something like 'you become fat', yeah, he said 'as a girl you have such bulky arms'.

Another interviewee also described the experience of being judged for her figure, she recalled how her selfies in the Moments used to get comments like:

... (KangKang) Some people said like 'How can you be so fat as a girl, and your belly is fleshy'.

What can be seen in the descriptions of both two participants is that the identity of "girl" is repeatedly emphasized and that sexism is reflected in the evaluation and requirements of women's bodies. As mentioned by Zota and Shamasunder, under the influence of patriarchy, women's appearance, and body shape are overemphasized (2017). A body that is not slim enough does not conform to male expectations of women and the rationalized image of women. Society's concern for external physical manifestations such as appearance and body shape imposes gender standards on women's bodies to reinforce men's dominance over women. Among the participants, there were also reports of gender norms being less demanding on the male body. Using her boyfriend as an example, a participant told me:

(HeiHei) Whether using photoshop on selfies I think this is also a difference between men and women. A selfie without photoshopping, I will not post in the Moments, I always feel I look ugly and can't show it to other people. But my boyfriend doesn't care about this, he often posts some not good looking selfies .... And his friends comment to praise him.

In addition, when I asked participants if they thought gender norms were equally restrictive for men and women, most participants expressed the idea that gender norms are more critical of women's physical appearance and body image. My participants mentioned a traditional gender perspective that men are responsible for earning money and working, so they do not need to pay much attention to their appearance. One participant mentioned to me a Chinese proverb that "Men are responsible for making money and raising a family, while girls are responsible for staying beauty foe man". People may evaluate a man more on his career than on his appearance, while women as housewives must be strict in their appearance since they cannot bring economic income to the family. The existence of femininity does not serve the interests of women (Connell, 1987). Another point Connell makes about

masculinity is that judgment and shaming are one aspect of the masculinity display (2020). Criticism of women's bodies and appearances that do not conform to male expectations is indicative of patriarchal attitudes. On the other hand, pervasive gender stereotypes can be reinforced through male rewarding behaviors (Butkowski, 2019). Examples of men emphasizing their dominance by rewarding specific femininity also appeared in the participants' accounts:

> (HeiHei) The wife of my classmate,she is very beautiful. I have seen a bunch of male comments below her selfies. The specific content I can't remember but like 'I want to have meals with you' and also comment like my classmate doesn't need to come to the party, but his wife must show there.

In addition to being judged on their appearance and body shape, women are sanctioned for dressing in a way that does not conform to acceptable femininity. Cultural expectations for Chinese women are submissive and conservative, and this is reflected in their clothing as well. Modest dress is considered to be a display of femininity, while on the contrary, bold dress goes against society's gender expectations of women (Finnane, 2023). Similar judgments about body shape and appearance also appeared in clothing, with half of the interviewees sharing their experiences of being judged for dressing in a way that did not conform to traditional norms:

> (KangKang) I like going to the beach, but I feel it may be not appropriate if I postsome swimsuit photos in the Moments... Because some male friends commented that "it is not appropriate to dress like this", or "Too exposed in public space"... Remarks like these.

In her experience, swimsuits were judged as being too revealing for women to wear and did not conform to the gender requirement that women need to behave modestly. On top of this, those who rebelled against gender norms and femininity were subject to even harsher social sanctions. Slut-shaming, stigmatizing terms, and obscene words about sex are everywhere. Another participant recounted to me the experience of a female friend of her who is a dancer:

(QiuQiu) I have a friend who is a dancer, and her dance is super hot. In my opinion, it is very beautiful and sexy, but there are always some low comments under her post... some guys commented like 'Hello sluttt' or 'You are such a slut' because in some dancing videos, she wears less.

The sexist remarks stem from the gender norms of behavior that women are expected to fulfill. Insulting terms such as "slut" remind women that they are dressing in a way that goes against traditional femininity. Within the theoretical framework of "doing gender," the stigma associated with stigmatizing terms can control women's behavior patterns (West and Zimmerman, 1987), and some women unconsciously hide themselves and continue to conform to the norms of behavior set for them by gender norms. One participant discussed how social sanctions limit her self-expression:

(KangKang) This caused me to reflect when many people are saying the same words, I will think about whether I did wrong. Shouldn't I post these photos to public space like the WeChat Moments? I've cut back on posting these, or even don't post photos that expose my body.

She mentioned in the conversation that her posts in her Moments were just to record her life and personal status. However, some of the judgments about her dress made her reflect on her own behavior and take the initiative to obey the gender norms required of her. Her experience shows the influence of male-sanctioned discourse on women's behavior and the control of women's behavior. In addition, another manifestation of hegemonic masculinity in the Moments is gaining benefits by objectifying women. In patriarchal societies, the female body is the object of the "male gaze" (Shields, 1990), and in Lindner's (2004) study of magazines, objectification of women is a frequent feature of advertisements in which beautiful women are objectified and used for sexual purposes. WeChat as a social media leads to many businesses using it as a free advertising platform to post promotional advertisements in the Moments, and women are sacrificed in some advertisements of bars and clubs:

(QiuQiu) I have seen some KTV or bar operations posting advertisements in their Moments saying like 'There are many beautiful ladies here waiting for you

to come and play' and I would feel why only women are used as a publicity gimmick. I would feel balanced if they also said like 'There are handsome guys', but only using women as advertising is a sign of objectification of women in my opinion.

In the advertising slogans this participant reported she had seen, women became a material resource and sexual connotation. As she mentioned, why only women and not men are mentioned in advertisements? Consumer places like bars and nightclubs seem to become places that provide men with access to women, without regard for their personhood and dignity, but rather turn them into pretty objects to be displayed in the window and objects of sexual desire to please men. In the discourse expressed in these advertisements, women become a gimmick to attract men, gender inequality is re-emphasized.

Direct Message and Group Chat

Another major function of WeChat is the chat feature, which in turn includes private messaging and group chat. These two different chat functions present different forms of gender challenges for women. For WeChat's direct message function, this is the more intimate space to come for private interaction. The more private setting tends to bring about unsafe conversations as noted in the study by Ali et al. (2022), where the experience of receiving private messages from men with harassing nature was reported by my participants. The 28-year-old participant (HeiHei), an account manager at a bank whose job requires her to be in contact with a large number of customers as well as her leaders, described to me experiences that made her uncomfortable:

> (HeiHei) I had a client before. I remember after I posted a selfie in my Moments, he DM me and then kept talking with some very exaggerated words, 'I think you are very good-looking, I think you are very nice'. I know that my relationship with this person is not to this intimate level, but he had some particularly exaggerated remarks that made me have particularly uncomfortable and even harassed feelings.

Much of the sexual harassment women experience often comes from workplace relationships, where women's workplace identities construct gender barriers and workplace inequalities due to the need to maintain relationships with leaders or with clients (Miao & Tian, 2022). This gender barrier increases the likelihood that a woman will be sexually harassed, "I can't do anything because he's my client." Another participant also told me "I'm not the boss yet, and I don't have full control over my job, so my behavior may be motivated by financial interests." Boyd and Ellison described social media as a space for the reproduction of gender inequality (2007). One participant explained how social media creates space for gender inequality:

> (HeiHei) He does not have time offline, but WeChat can create time and space for you. The time and space offline are limited, but social media can extend time and space infinitely... Things happen on WeChat it is 24 hours, no matter what time it is, no matter where he is, he can contact me and send me these. As long as I don't block him, he can send me these messages.

The transcendent properties of the Internet that transcend time and space provide a convenient breeding ground for gender inequality. In addition, group chats bring together people with the same needs or perceptions, and it can be argued that social media widens the scope of gender norms and exacerbates the ideology of gender inequality. One participant expressed her opinion "such as group chat, which is a group of people who share similar perceptions." Moreover, there are many functional chat groups on WeChat, which generally have functional attributes or interests oriented. For example, a participant mentioned the visa group she often uses, and when she has questions about visas she gets solutions in that group chat. However, due to the need for information, participants described the issue of gender norms in group chats as "something that there is no way to get around." "Because you still want to use the information from the group chat to do something for yourself". Based on my participants' experiences with the group chat, it is a double-edged sword. Group chats allow gender-aware people to interact and promote gender issues to be taken seriously. But it also reinforces some gender issues and male hegemony, and even functional group chats can have sexist comments when people are getting the information they need.

Conclusion

Chinese women's gender experiences when using WeChat are based on the functions of WeChat, mainly in the WeChat Moments and Chat functions. In addition, since most of the participants were working women, their reported gender experiences on WeChat were inextricably linked to their workplace identities, which put great pressure on women. Due to factors such as self-personality, socio-cultural background, and workplace relationships, Chinese women adopted different ways of coping with these gender norms, and in the next chapter, we further explored the measures taken by women to cope with gender norms.

4.2 Responding to gender norms

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we focused on Chinese women's gendered experiences of WeChat use, where appearance and body image are judged, stigmatizing terms are presented in comments, and harassment is experienced in chats. In addition, the blurring of boundaries between the work and private space creates stress for many women because of the need of WeChat for both life and work in China. Our research found that gender norms exist in Chinese women's actual experience of using WeChat, regardless of which common function it is based on. As a necessary daily social media, the use of WeChat is inevitable, so how do women respond to gender norms? The focus of this chapter is on the ways women challenge gender norms on WeChat. My interviews revealed that their responses can be categorized into two ways, challenging gender norms in a covert way and challenging gender norms in an external way.

4.2.1 Challenging gender norms in a covert way

To explore how Chinese women respond to gender norms, I asked them further about their practices and reasons for doing so after they described their gender experiences.

Screening and Hiding the Moments

More than half of the 12 participants reported screening behaviors when they add friends. Most of the screening occurred prior to the gender experience, avoiding interactions with people who might make participants uncomfortable. One participant described the screening behavior as "it makes my WeChat friends who are in my safe zone and who don't make bad comments". But because some people are in workplace relationships, they have to add people they need to interact with in the work area. Another participant told me that she is using two WeChat accounts, one is her working account, and all of her friends are in the other account which she added after a rigorous screening process. I have also been told about the negative experiences a participant has had as a result of not screening:

> (Nico) I liked to add friends at random before, especially people from my hometown. I was in the hometown group and added a senior as my WeChat friend but I didn't know him... He often gave me comments that made me feel uncomfortable... After that, I become more careful to control the WeChat friends... It is quite effective.

However, Chinese interpersonal networks play a huge influential role in everyone's life (Ruan, 1993), and most of the time the friends you add to WeChat are not really your friends, but you have to add them to your WeChat friend list. WeChat, as a widely used social medium, is deeply embedded in daily life, triggering accelerated interactions and blurring of interpersonal boundaries. Creating more WeChat accounts strategy was one way to circumvent this, but for many, this is too much of a hassle, and a hiding feature specifically designed for the Moments becomes the primary option for most participants to deal with gender norms. Posts will be hidden for those who would emphasize gender norms more. In my study, it was found that participants most often use the blocking feature on people with whom they had work and family relationships. The participant who works in the government told me that she always hides her Moments about her own life from her colleagues because they would talk about the content of the photos she posts. Another participant elaborated on a similar situation, "I use the same WeChat for both work and life, and there is no separation... I would block all my clients when my posts show my own daily life." Typically, women in the workplace are at higher risk of gender challenges due to workplace networks, such as the client one participant mentioned earlier who harassed her via

private chat after seeing her Moments. Under the influence of both patriarchy and gender barriers in the workplace, women are prone to experience gender challenges, but due to the network they must keep interacting with some people, so the Moments hiding function can help them maximize the separation between work and private space.

In addition to those in work relationships would be hidden from the Moments, family members were another group that participants were very concerned about. First, family in this context refers primarily to the older members of participants' families. There are some intergenerational differences in gender values in China (Hu & Scott, 2014). Since Chinese economic reform, although reducing gender inequality has been emphasized as one of the sustainable development goals (Lu et al., 2019), the older generation still holds some traditional gender beliefs influenced by thousands of years of Confucianism (Hu & Scott, 2014b). Some participants described the older generation's gender perceptions in their accounts as "deeply ingrained" and "hard to change their minds". A participant explained her reasons for blocking her family "The era that the elders came from caused the thinking they have, it's not that easy for them to keep up with the idea of the times, they can't recognize that some of the backward ideas about gender are toxic."

Female Social Network

With the growth of social media, social networks created on social platforms have become another measure for women to confront gender norms. Women's social networks not only create spaces to deliver messages for women but also intensify the challenge to traditional gender consciousness. Five participants reported that they had joined women-only WeChat groups. The role of female chat groups has been described in this way:

> (LuLu) I have a chat group of women only and there is not a single male in the group which makes the environment much cleaner ... I think it's protecting women, but at the same time, I also think that women are still not empowered or weak. The reason why there is a group between women and women is that we want to form a protection network to resist men from joining. We don't want men to use our information to do something, because they have been given too

much privilege. We communicate with each other, help each other, and share some information with each other. We protect ourselves.

Although voices and initiatives advocating for gender equality appear in all areas of society, my participants have different views on equal opportunities for men and women. In LuLu's view, men are still the group that holds the privilege in the society, while women are limited in all aspects. Women's social networks allow social resources to be shared among female groups, forming mutual support networks where women's agency is reflected. In addition, encouragement and support among women became another driving factor for participants to join female social networks. When the gender experience on WeChat reinforces the norm that women should be defined by their femininity, female networks become empowering educators. One participant talked about how female chat groups contributed to her change in gender consciousness "I have a women-only group. I turn to them if I'm hesitant at some point because of gender awareness issues." Conversations about female self-empowerment have developed in these female friendship groups, and women's networks have challenged gender norms and provided support for women to become more gender conscious and construct identities in their communication.

Keeping silent

Although all of the respondents' stated gender experiences included being oppressed by idealized images of women, many chose to keep silent as their response to gender norms. The participant mentioned that when she saw demeaning comments about women in the Moments, "I will not do anything if I see it," and she evaluated that it's not a positive response to gender norms, "but it's the easiest way for me to live my life". In response to a question about why she doesn't do anything to sexist comments, " I don't think it's necessary," "Most of the time, I would just let it go, just ignore them." One reason for most of the participants who took the silent measure mentioned was that it's difficult to change the perceptions of others. They see fighting back as useless and realize that the disadvantageous position of women in patriarchy is difficult to change. A participant emphasized that her personal power is limited, alluding to the passive subordinate position of women and the unshakeable dominance of men in patriarchy (Connell, 1987). However, some participants also criticized such a strategy of silence as giving men the opportunity to test women's

boundaries, as it is women's acquiescence to their behavior that reinforces masculinity. I discussed this in the next section, cases are showing where gender norms were challenged in an external way.

4.2.2 Challenging gender norms in an external way

In addition to adopting covert tactics, this study found that a minority of the participants also mentioned that they rebelled against gender norms and femininity in superficial, more intense ways. The participants responded that this was often related to their awakening of feminine consciousness during their exposure to the Internet. What is more, some of the external challenging ways that they displayed occurred based on WeChat as a social platform. It can be argued that WeChat has become a tool for challenging gender norms while bringing gender challenges.

Re-posting in the Moments
While we mentioned in the previous section that the area where women are most likely to experience gender norms when using WeChat is the Moments, some participants also mentioned how they use the Moments as a public platform to fight back positively. Due to the way WeChat Moments is set up, only mutual friends can see each other's comments. One participant felt that this feature was set up to somewhat protect the commenters, as they may comment with the assumption that their comments will not be seen by others and thus be bolder in their words. "She would take screenshots of the comments and then post them to her Moments so that people could see some male comments," the participant told me about her friend's way of rebelling against the stigmatized word comments. And in her opinion, taking screenshots of the stigmatized comments and posting them again to the Moments would cause the commenters to panic, as the commenters would apologize to the person and ask her to delete the post. In addition, such a radical approach would also gain the approval of many women. Two participants both said that when they saw their female friends bravely defying gender norms in the Moments they would give a "like" to show their support. In this case, re-posting gave full play to their agency, and the results of self-empowerment were positive.

Reprinting articles on Gender topics

In addition to posting, another function of the Moments is the ability to reprint articles written by some media accounts. As mentioned by Yang and Zhou, Chinese female groups have developed a local digital grassroots feminism (2023), which brings gender issues from bottom to top through online practices to provoke more women to participate and think. There was a participant who explained the act of reprinting articles as a way to make her position known, saying that when she reprints articles to her Moments it means that she agrees with the views conveyed in the articles. She mentioned that she often reprints articles about women's topics that are widely discussed to her Moments. When I asked her why she chose to share specifically about women's topics, she said, "I have something to say because it's really unfair and I'm very angry, so I want to use it to express myself". Another participant mentioned to me that she reprints women-related social topics in her Moments as well. In her description, discussions about social topics also help her filter out people who don't agree with her views and values. However, both these two participants reported challenges. One mentioned that she had been so angry with many incidents that women were assaulted by unknown men on the road that she had reprinted some articles about fighting male hegemony to her Moments. She told me that "basically I get more feedback from women," and she described her experience to me as follows:

> (Nico) A very good friend of mine, a guy... He commented 'Just go out less and tay at home' and then I was like very, very angry and felt very bad... I told him 'I don't think I need you to tell me what to do, I don't think you have any position as a male, who are you to teach women to not go out... As long as there are abusers out there, there will be victims... You shouldn't teach women what to do even if you don't understand their anger and fear.'

Later, she tried to explain her anger and fear to her male friend, thought that they had been good friends since childhood and that he could understand her feelings, but in the end, this only caused the estrangement of their relationship, and the friend never interacted with her on WeChat after that. Additionally, another participant stated "I have more female friends than male friends on WeChat, but it can be seen that a large

percentage of women are not willing to speak up for gender issues." The social construct of submissiveness, gentleness, and loyalty (Croll & Citation, 1995), which has been advocated for women's behavior, controls women's thoughts and behavior patterns, and male hegemony is still prevalent.

Conclusion

From the participants' reported experiences, it appears that most will choose to respond to gender norms in a covert way, even if a few are brave enough to take an outward response but are likely to be resisted. We believe that we cannot evaluate which approach is better because participants are challenging gender norms in ways that are appropriate for them, but we also found that while women are challenging gender norms, they are still maintaining the gender structures. WeChat's experience of gender and society's cultural expectations of gender are influencing their self-presentation, and we showed in the next chapter how women present themselves in the context of gender norms.

4.3 Self-presentation on WeChat

The social attributes of masculinity and femininity allow gender to be realized in interaction (West & Zimmerman, 2009). In this study, we found that even though most participants were conscious of challenging gender norms, whether in covert or outward ways, it was evident that when they reported how they presented themselves, the way most participants chose to do so still maintained the gender structure. In particular, WeChat as a social media is like a masquerade ball that allows actors to portray the image desired by the audience. Structures such as female roles and social expectations still exist, and the self-roles constructed by women in WeChat interactions are still conforming to gender expectations. When talking about self-representation in WeChat, a participant used the word "ambivalence". She said that on the one hand, she saw many brave women fighting against gender norms, which gave her courage, but at the same time, the presence of gender norms made her less motivated to post selfies on WeChat, and she still had concerns about self-expression. She explained to me that "people are social animals, there is no way out, I am not living alone in this world." Social interaction is the driving force for participants to "do gender". Such ambivalence is reflected in several participants' descriptions. On

the one hand, the wave of feminist ideology and female agency in the digital space are subtly influencing women's self-expression, and they are eager to be free from gender constraints. On the other hand, unshakeable patriarchy and socially constructed gender norms have made it necessary for women to "perform" in a feminine way even on social media. This explains the academic debate about the impact of social media on gender norms that we mentioned earlier. Social media has increased female empowerment and allowed women to construct identities (Jackson, 2018). But at the same time, social media is reshaping these gender norms as a space for the reproduction of gender inequality (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Five participants who used the term "Guaiqiao" to describe their self-presentation. The term "Guaiqiao" can be translated as obedient and submissive, and is used primarily to describe girls in the Chinese cultural context. This is also in line with many studies on femininity, where females are required to be friendly (Ringrose & Renold, 2020):

> (JieJie) The postings in my Moments are relatively Guaiqiao... I think Guaiqiao behavior helps me to stay in a safe and comfort zone. Because society's traditional impression of women is that you are gentle, you are kind. I don't show a very ambitious side.

For her, not expressing herself too much is something she was taught as a child, and although she doesn't consider herself an obedient woman. She feels safe presenting herself in this way on social media and doesn't want to get in trouble for rebelling against society's expectations of femininity. In addition to presenting a submissive role in the Moments, another participant often pretends to be obedient when talking about her online chat experiences with males. Although she mentioned that this is not her true character, "The image of a Guaiqiao girl is the kind of female character I want to present to older people or a specific group of people." In addition, there was also a participant who said that in her family group chat, she would behave "Guaiqiao" because it was in line with her parents' gender expectations for girls, but at the same time, she mentioned that she could chat freely in the friends group.

What can be seen through these cases is that the participants refer to another real selves when describing how they present themselves on WeChat. Due to the online virtual nature of social media, women's self-presentation on frontstage is actually a processed performance, and they construct idealized images of women on WeChat to meet the expectations of their audience. The performances were performed with an awareness of social norms, as that participant mentioned the term "pretend", participants were aware of the rules of performance, which were constructed under social expectations. In the participants' descriptions, I saw that WeChat is the frontstage of their performance, while the backstage existed in their real lives. A participant told me that although she would not post selfies in a bikini in her Moments, she would not change what she wears in her life, she would still choose to wear a bikini and take nice pictures, and would probably post them on more inclusive platforms like Instagram. In my study, the participants' self-presentation is inevitably socially constructed, and even though they were aware of the toxicity of hegemonic masculinity and the oppression of idealized images of women, they still have to choose to perform roles that followed gender norms. Most participants cited their need to interact with family and work associates as the most important factor influencing their choice of performance content. Gender norms are re-emphasized in women's online performances.

Chapter 5. Conclusion

This paper explores the gender experiences of Chinese women in their use of WeChat. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 women from 12 different cities in China, focusing on three key questions. First, this paper examined the gender norms that Chinese women encounter in their use of WeChat. Second, this study explored the various strategies Chinese women use to cope with gender constraints on WeChat, and finally, we found the reality that Chinese women's self-presentation on WeChat still needs to follow gender norms. In this chapter, we will discuss the key findings of this research on Chinese women's use of social media and describe my contributions to the research field. Finally, we will discuss the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

5.1 Key findings

Chinese women continue to overcome various gender constraints and cultural expectations while using WeChat extensively in their daily lives. The different forms and contents of gender norms based on the different functions of WeChat use are clearly visible in women's experiences. Whether it is the overemphasis on women's appearance and body image under the influence of patriarchy, the stigmatized vocabularies that demonstrate masculinity, or the culture of male gazing that turns social media into a way to objectify women, all construct women's gender experiences. As Oliver articulates, social media has become another space for developing masculinity (2017c). Despite these limitations, women rely on their agency and women's networks to respond to these gender ideologies in covert or outward ways. The screening of WeChat friends and the hiding of Moments allow women to gain agency and autonomy over private spheres and interpersonal boundaries. Chat groups which have only female users, create a network of women who help women, and the support network not only provides them with information and resources, but also promotes a change in women's gender ideology and actively challenges gender norms and restrictions. Women struggle to utilize their agency and self-empowerment (Jackson, 2018)

It is worth noting, however, that Chinese women are taking control of their personal use of WeChat through self-empowerment, but the gender norms that emerge from

their interactions still influence their self-presentation and self-expression on WeChat. They prefer not to against gender norms in the family or work sphere because they need to rely on these relationships. Performing on the frontstage of WeChat becomes the way they choose to present themselves, and women divorce their real-life selves from their WeChat selves, which continue to fulfill patriarchal female roles on WeChat. Although some wished to challenge gender norms, they kept these challenges private on WeChat. While local Chinese feminist ideology is currently spreading rapidly on major online platforms, the ideology of women born in the Z generation is also being shaped by the internet. However, choices become a manifestation of female oppression when gender is "doing" in interaction, forcing women to choose between authentic self-expression and adherence to gender norms. Although they challenge gender norms in their use of WeChat, they are still held hostage by these norms. Gender influences their use of WeChat, and the process of WeChat use shapes gender. These women's narratives illustrate the relationship between gender norms and social media.

5.2 Contributions

This study ventures into uncharted territory by exploring the intricate relationship between gender ideology and social media interactions, focusing on the WeChat as a case study. While the paradigm shift from offline to online interactions is reshaping the sociocultural landscape, it becomes increasingly evident that the digital area holds multifaceted implications for gender ideologies. While prior investigations have explored gender dynamics in the context of popular Western social media platforms, such as discussions of hegemonic masculinity on Instagram (Rodriguez & Hernandez, 2018b), or the presentation of feminist politics on Tik Tok (Simões et al., 2023), a substantial gap persists in understanding how gender is negotiated and constructed within the context of Chinese social media, particularly WeChat. Our research takes decisive steps to bridge this gap, making contributions to the ongoing discourse.

Our contributions to the existing body of knowledge are multi-faceted. Based on the theory of "doing gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1987), gender is a set of socially constructed behavioral patterns. However, with the development of the Internet, interactions between people are not only limited to offline physical spaces, but

generated on digital platforms deserve our attention. While some researchers, as well as international organizations such as the United Nations, have paid attention to the important role of media in the construction of gender (Costantini & Sebillo, 2022; Popa & Gavriliu, 2015), most of them still focus on the more traditional digital media, such as advertisements, television programs, and short video platforms. Our study extends the horizons of knowledge by enriching the growing body of scholarship dedicated to the interplay between digital platforms and the construction of gender identity by focusing on everyday chatting application. Through the study of Chinese women's experiences on WeChat, we bring to light the intricate balance between self-expression and societal expectations in the emerging digital sphere, providing a nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate this complex terrain.

Furthermore, our research reshapes the contours of the gender dynamics discussion within the realm of WeChat. While prior research has examined the impact of gender on WeChat Moments (Lin et al., 2020), we transcend these boundaries to extend this exploration to delve into the profound impact of gender experiences on users' self-presentation. Carving a new perspective within the existing literature. By delving into emergent themes encompassing personal experiences, social connections, and coping mechanisms, we unravel the intricate ways in which women assert their agency and reshape gender identities in a digital context, adding to existing literature.

Moreover, this study unveils the unique aspects of Chinese social media, highlighting its divergence from the Western digital landscape. First, China still tries to maintain restrictions on Internet use (Deibert, 2002), which has led to the development of a localized digital grassroots feminism among Chinese women's groups (Yang & Zhou, 2023), and the presentation of the feminist movement on Chinese social media is quite different from Western digital feminism. China's homegrown digital feminism needs to be more secretive and challenge more obstacles due to online regulation and other reasons. WeChat's nuanced characteristics, including its private and non-anonymous nature, set it apart from more open platforms like Instagram. Kian et al. have mentioned in their study that the anonymity of the internet allows the spread of a hegemonic masculinity (2011). In contrast, the majority of WeChat users are non-anonymous, such that masculinity is still fully reflected in women's use of WeChat. This presents a distinctive opportunity to explore the unabated reflection of

masculinity within women's use of WeChat, thereby contributing novel insights to the understanding of masculinity in digital spheres. This novel exploration provides a new dimension to the discourse around masculinity, challenging prevailing assumptions and providing new ideas for subsequent research on masculinity for the digital realm. Additionally, the seamless integration of WeChat into various facets of users' lives blurs conventional boundaries, exposing the intricate interplay between work, family, and private spaces (Wang, 2016). In particular, the widespread use of WeChat in the workplace limits personal self-expression. Miao and Tian's study demonstrated the self-presentation of Chinese professional women on WeChat (2022c). However, they did not focus on women's gendered use of WeChat in their daily lives and the self-empowerment women make to cope with gendered expectations. Using the interpretivist approach and qualitative research method, our study examines these gendered aspects in detail, unraveling women's agency, constraints, and self-empowerment within the dynamic digital environment.

Importantly, our research underscores its implications for both academia and practical domains. Academically, our findings underscore the critical importance of considering sociocultural differences when examining gender experiences within digital spaces. WeChat, as a multifaceted platform, is a central hub for Chinese users' communication, social networking, and online activities. The unique sociocultural context in which WeChat operates influences the dynamics of gender representations, expectations, and interactions. By contextualizing gender dynamics within the unique sociocultural fabric of Chinese society and WeChat's ecosystem, we lay the groundwork for comparative cross-cultural research that deepens our understanding of gender in a globalized world. On the other hand, Goffman's dramaturgical theory has been widely used in digital media research to facilitate our understanding of people's "performances" in cyberspace. Although many studies have focused on self-presentation, impression management, and identity formation in the age of social media (Ganda, 2014; Hogan, 2010b), there are not many studies that understand self-presentation in social media from a gender perspective in the context of dramaturgical theory. This study presents the importance of dramaturgical theory in understanding how social media constructs gender behaviors by showing Chinese women's self-presentation experiences and journeys during the use of Wechat

Practically, this study holds significance for policymakers and platform developers seeking to foster inclusive and empowering digital spaces. Our findings illuminate gender-specific challenges and opportunities on WeChat, providing a foundation upon which strategies can be developed to promote gender equality, ensure privacy protections, and cultivate a safe online environment.

In essence, our exploration into Chinese women's gendered experiences on WeChat serves as a catalyst for further research and discourse, enriching the global conversation on gender, digital spaces, and cross-cultural interactions. By illuminating the intricacies of gender ideology within the context of Chinese social media, we hope to inspire future researchers to delve deeper, encouraging a more holistic understanding of the multifaceted dynamics that shape our digital existence.

5.3 Limitations of the study and suggestions for future research

Reflecting on my research, I think there are three limitations. One is the technical aspect. Due to geographical constraints, I was unable to talk to the participants face-to-face, and also because the participants' requested interviews were all conducted online by voice, which resulted in my inability to observe the participants' expressions and body languages during the interviews, which led to the possibility that my analysis of their representations was influenced by my personal and more subjective consciousness. Regarding my participants, I did not examine the background of my sample differently, although my participants came from different cities of China, they were mostly from second- and third-tier cities in China and were highly educated. If my study had included participants from different classes and educational backgrounds, I might have found more factors contributing to gender consciousness. In addition, since social media is still a relatively new digital environment, there is not much quantitative research literature that I could review and draw from in my study.

These limitations led this study to focus on the similarities in gender norms encountered by Chinese women when using WeChat, while neglecting to compare their differences. I suggest that future research could collect more samples and present a diversity of backgrounds in the sample. Gender norms are more prevalent in rural areas than in urban areas, and researchers could add the experiences of women from rural areas as data for analysis. In addition, gender norms are not only for women, but

men and sexual minorities also face great challenges, and it would be interesting if future research could also focus on the gender experiences of men and sexual minorities when using social media and compare the differences with women's gender experiences. The voices of different gender groups should be heard by more people. My research data, based on interviews and qualitative analysis, informs the data for future studies, and I hope that subsequent studies can add quantitative analysis, such as examining the most significant factors that influence women's gender performance.

Appendices

Appendix 1 Interview Outline

Ethics

- □Introduce myself and the target of the interview.
- □Ensure that participants know that their names and the content of their conversations will be kept confidential.

Basic Information

1.Can you tell me about yourself? Include your age, which city you are from, what is your educational background, and what is your current occupation?

2.Do you find it difficult to understand the term gender norms

3.Do you often use WeChat in your daily life?
If the answer is "yes", the following question:
1)How do you use WeChat in your daily life?

Personal experience and feelings
4.What kind of content do you usually post on WeChat?

5.Can you tell me about any challenges you have encountered in your daily life when using WeChat regarding gender norms? Can you share some specific examples?

6.How have these challenges impacted your self-expression and behavioral ?

7.When you present yourself on WeChat, what do you think is the difference between yourself on WeCHat and the real you?

8.How do you see the relationship between the comments and the content you post?

9.Have you ever had bad, negative comments in your circle of friends?
Follow-up questions:

1) In your impression, what is the gender of the negative commenter?

2) How do you feel about the negative comments?

3) What do you usually do in the face of negative comments?

10.Do you think gender norms have the same impact or restrictions for men and women on WeChat?

1) If not, please give examples of the differences you think

2) How do the restrictions you mentioned for women affect your use of WeChat?

11.Have you ever felt pressure to conform to a certain gender imprint? If so, how did you deal with this pressure?

12.Have you ever taken action to maintain yourself and counter the influence of sexually different norms on WeChat? Do you mind to share your experiences and perspectives?

13. What is your evaluation of your self performance when using WeChat?

If the answer is negative, the next questions

1)Why?

2)How do you think you would like to improve?

Experiences of other women

14. Have you seen negative comments under other women's posts?

If the answer is "yes"

1）How you feel about it?

2）How will this affect your own use and interaction on WeChat?

Appendix 2 Project Information Sheet

What is the project about?

I am sociology master student who is studying at Ghent University in Belgium. In order to better understand the gender differences Chinese women encounter when using WeChat, I would like to invite you to participate in an interview for this study. This interview is anonymous. You can choose a fictional name to ensure that your participation remains confidential. It takes about 45 minus to complete this interview. The interview will only be attended bu two people, you and the interview (Shuyu Liu).

What will be involved in participating in this program?

The purpose of participating in this interview is to share with me your personal gender experiences, some of your feelings as well as perceptions in using WeChat. All the data I collect through the interview will be used for my master's thesis. In order to record your interview completely and accurately, our conversation will be audio-recorded if you give permission for this.

What if participants wish to withdraw?

It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to participate in this study. You have the right not to answer any questions and you may withdraw before, during or after the interview.

What about participants' confidentiality?

Your identity will be kept strictly confidential. Only my supervisor and I and two other reviewing professors have access to all data.

Appendix 3 Participant Consent Form

Study Title: Does Social Media reinforce Gender Norms? A study based on the largest social media application in China

Notice: This form is for you to state whether or not you agree to take part in the study. Please read and answer every question. If you sign your name on this form, it represents that you understand what is involved in participating in interviews and you'd like to take part in this research. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

Have you read the information sheet and understood the information about the study?	Yes No
Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study?	Yes No
Do you know that the interview will be anonymous?	Yes No
Do you understand that the information you provide will be held in confidence by the researcher?	Yes No
Do you understand that you are free to refuse to answer any questions and you can withdraw your interviews for any reason	Yes No
Do you agree to take part in this study?	Yes No
If yes, do you agree to your interviews being audio-recorded?	Yes No

Your name: Your signature:

Date:

Interviewer's name: Interviewer's signature:

Date:

Appendix 4 Project Information Sheet (Chinese version)

这个项目是关于什么的？

我是就读于比利时根特大学的社会学硕士生。为了更好地了解中国女性在使用微信时遇到的性别差异，我想邀请您参加本研究的访谈。这次访谈是匿名的。您可以选择一个虚构的名字，以确保您的参与是保密的。完成这次访谈大约需要 45 分钟。访谈只有两个人参加，即您和访谈者（刘姝好）。

参加这个项目将涉及什么？

参加这次访谈就是与我分享你个人的性别经历、使用微信的一些感受和看法。通过访谈收集到的所有数据将用于我的硕士论文。为了完整准确地记录您的访谈，如果您同意，我们的谈话将被录音。

如果参与者希望退出怎么办？

您可以自行决定是否参与本研究。您有权不回答任何问题，您可以在访谈之前、期间或之后退出。

如何为参与者保密？

您的身份将被严格保密。只有我和我的导师以及另外两位审查教授有权查看所有数据。

Appendix 5 Participant Consent Form (Chinese version)

研究题目：社交媒体是否强化了性别规范？基于中国最大社交媒体应用的研究

注意：本表用于说明您是否同意参加本研究。请阅读并回答每个问题。如果您在本表上签名，则表示您了解参与访谈的内容，并愿意参与本研究。如果您有任何不明白的地方，或者您想了解更多信息，请询问研究人员。

您是否阅读了信息表并了解了有关研究的信息？	是　　　　否
您有机会就研究提出问题吗？	是　　　　否
您知道面试是匿名的吗？	是　　　　否
您是否了解您提供的信息将由研究人员保密？	是　　　　否
你是否明白你可以拒绝回答任何问题，也可以以任何理由退出采访？	是　　　　否
您同意参加这项研究吗？	是　　　　否
如果同意，您是否同意对您的采访进行录音？	是　　　　否

您的姓名：　　　　　　　　　　您的签名：
日期：

采访者姓名：　　　　　　　　　采访者签名：
日期：

Appendix 5 Link to access the interview transcripts

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Z3mdng6PXReITPuD1bDcSmZwkFFFxEuL?usp=drive_link

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