

Unveiling Gender Power Dynamics in Chinese Digital Discourse: A Case Study of the Discourse of Mutual Accusations in Allegations of Sexual Harassment

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Abstract. This study stems from a case involving a prominent Chinese internet celebrity whose account suspension followed her sexual harassment allegation. Subsequent online discussions on Weibo saw both the accuser and accused strategically presenting themselves as victims using text, imagery, and evidence, while official statements and public evaluations added complexity to the discourse. Employing the MCDA approach, the research analyzed data from Weibo posts under the 'XHJ incident' hashtag, amounting to a total of 23,569 outcomes. This analysis delves comprehensively into competitive and collective victimhood, strategic anonymization, and challenges faced by female accusers in public discourse. The case study shows that competitive victimhood in digital contexts intersects with gendered narratives, extending to construct collective victimhood within intricate power dynamics and inadvertently oversimplifying nuanced experiences of sexual harassment through anonymization and functionalization strategies. Furthermore, it provides insights into challenges encountered by female accusers in the public discourse, including perpetuated doubt about women's credibility and intentions, contributing to silencing and disempowerment.

Keywords: Sexual harassment; digital discourse; MCDA; victimhood; anonymization; female accusers; gender politics.

1. Introduction

Recently, extensive online discussions have been sparked by the recent suspension of the account belonging to a prominent Chinese internet celebrity XHJ with millions of fans.¹ Earlier, XHJ uploaded a video on a popular Chinese social media platform Weibo, alleging instances of employer-perpetrated sexual harassment by the former boss of her previous company, SHY, and asserting coerced endorsement of an unfavorable collaboration agreement.² Initially, this presentation of XHJ as a victim drew widespread attention. However, subsequent official statements deemed these accusations to be false and fabricated, meticulously orchestrated by XHJ. Nevertheless, the online discourse surrounding these allegations persisted, with the digital platform Weibo serving as a battleground for narratives. Both parties strategically positioned themselves as victims, employing textual content, imagery, and evidentiary material to shape the landscape of public perception. This digital arena, with its interplay of accusations, counterarguments, and official statements, offers a unique window into the complexities of gender power dynamics in Chinese contemporary society.

Scholars have highlighted the role of power in sexual harassment incidents [1], emphasizing the significance of discourse in understanding and addressing such issues [2]. Drawing upon the MCDA approach, this study examines the interactive narratives among participants within this case on a prominent social media platform, Weibo, with the aim of revealing the dominant social and cultural ideologies regarding gender and sexuality, as well as the strategic maneuvers undertaken to align with these dominant narratives.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gender Politics within China's Digital Realm

Gender power dynamics have long been ingrained in Chinese society, where traditional gender roles have shaped male dominance and female subordination [3]. Despite efforts in legal frameworks and gender education, these norms persist and continue to influence contemporary societal perceptions [3]. The impact of Confucian ideologies and the expectation for women to bear shame and responsibility within a patriarchal structure has led to the perpetuation of unequal power dynamics [4]. With the extensive diffusion of digital platforms and their integration into everyday existence, these platforms have evolved into fertile grounds for the intricate manifestation of historical and contemporary gender power dynamics.

In general, China's digital landscape encapsulates a dynamic interplay of both liberatory and repressive forces within its gender politics. On one hand, the digital sphere provides counter-publics that empower marginalized groups to challenge established norms and articulate their distinct narratives [3]. Women and queer individuals have leveraged these platforms to build communities, forming support networks that transcend traditional boundaries and constraints [5]. These counter-publics serve as transformative spaces that enable the reshaping of gender narratives and the amplification of voices that have been marginalized for too long. However, the digital environment is not exempt from the reproduction of deeply ingrained gender norms. While offering spaces of empowerment, these platforms simultaneously perpetuate existing gender stereotypes and hierarchies [6], partly due to the fact that gender constructivism has been marginalized while gender essentialism persists in post-reform China [7]. This essentialism conflates gender differences with biological sex, reinforcing traditional notions of masculinity and femininity [8]. Within the current digital landscape, these norms are further perpetuated, shaping the portrayal and perception of women in the digital domain [6]. The prevalence of such essentialist views has also contributed to the heightened propagation of gendered opposition, where individuals defend their interests based on their immutable gender identities, thus making the confrontation more resolute and less negotiable. Furthermore, feminist voices, despite their presence online, often find themselves stifled by social media regulations and broader societal stigmatization of gender equality pursuits [5]. The shrinking feminist public space online serves as a stark reminder of the persistent influence of traditional gender norms, which insidiously pervade digital interactions and shape platform management strategies [9].

2.2. Allegations of Sexual Harassment in China's Digital Sphere

Allegations of sexual harassment have emerged as a pivotal discourse within gender politics, accompanying the rise of #Me Too movement on social media. Initially, the international rise of the #MeToo movement marked a pivotal moment, inspiring women worldwide to break their silence and use social media platforms to share their experiences of sexual harassment. This movement then gained significant traction in China in 2018, when Luo Xixi, a doctoral student at Beihang University, bravely stepped forward to share her personal experience of sexual harassment by a former advisor [10]. Social media platforms became crucial channels for these women to voice their experiences, uniting them in a collective effort to raise awareness about the prevalence of sexual harassment in Chinese society.

Similar to the complex trajectory of the #MeToo movement's development in China, allegations of sexual harassment have encountered significant criticism and the reception of these accusations in China has been marked by substantial contention and elicited public censure. On one front, the #Me Too movement in China was marred by intricate transitions, grappling with issues such as strict state censorship, which has constrained victims from voicing concerns about systemic gender discrimination, creating barriers for grassroots feminist movements that challenge patriarchal norms [11][12]. Thus, as seen in other grassroots digital struggles in China, feminist activists have devised innovative digital camouflage strategies to sustain their movement, including the use of alternative hashtags, modification of sensitive keywords, and secure data storage on protected websites [13][14].

On another front, a significant number of women, when publicly accusing instances of harassment and actively voicing their concerns, find their narratives criticized and categorized under the framework of 'victim feminism'. Throughout history, the denunciation of allegations concerning sexual harassment within the context of gender-based discrimination is far from unprecedented. Allegations of sexual harassment are often criticized as a strategic tool employed by specific female individuals to exploit instances of inappropriate sexual behavior for personal gain and societal attention, distorting the accuracy and credibility of genuine cases. This concept emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in Western societies, gaining prominence amidst evolving social attitudes and shifting gender dynamics [15]. Alongside this, derogatory discourses targeting victims also gained prominence, with the term "victim" itself being weaponized to impugn victims' character, irrespective of context, implying their supposed contribution to societal fragility and feminization [15]. This intricate interplay of ideas and discourses eventually coalesced into the concept known as 'victim feminism', a terminology attributed to figures such as Christina Hoff Sommers and Katie Roiphe [15]. This concept has maintained its influence up to the present day, as exemplified in a scholarly observation of the current decade, which has been characterized by the predominance of online misogyny, aptly described as "a fundamental form of anti-female violence expressed widely on popular media platforms" [16].

In fact, the current situation in China is that instances of sexual harassment disclosed on social media often struggled to elicit acknowledgment or admission from the accused parties. Even when responses are forthcoming, they frequently involve various tactics and strategies aimed at sidestepping accountability. Among these strategies, the stigmatization of victims stands out, blaming victims as "loose women" [17]. The entwinement of media and traditional gender-biased narratives not only absolved offenders but also shifted culpability onto the victims themselves, undermining accusations against males [15]. For instance, Xu and Tan's research revealed that within China's higher education system, female doctoral students often became targets of sexual harassment, while implicated male professors employed discourse strategies that not only perpetuated gender stereotypes but also involve framing themselves as victims [10]. These professors accuse the female students of fabricating allegations in a bid to unfairly advance their academic careers. This rhetoric serves a dual purpose: to deflect accountability and cast doubt on the legitimacy of the allegations, while also positioning themselves as unjustly accused victims. Ironically, an "ideological prohibition on victim-blaming" serves to paradoxically incentivize accused males to assert victimhood, concurrently exacerbating the marginalization of feminist voices into a category commonly referred to as "victimology" within the anti-feminist community.

Regarding the reason why sexual harassment allegations on Weibo merit attention, beyond the intricacies of the allegations themselves and prevailing biases against women within mainstream ideologies, the post-truth characteristic of the Weibo platform is also noteworthy. Some scholars have indicated that on platforms like Weibo, the post-truth itself constitutes a form of truth, reflecting people's emotions and demands through media and public opinion. In other words, "post-truth and truth are not necessarily in opposition; biases, distortions, and other alterations also constitute a form of truth" [18]. Thus, in the era of post-truth, the urgent pursuit of information suppresses the need for factual accuracy, constructing a relatively closed "alternative space" for emotionally driven truth (emotional truth) on social media platforms [19]. This sensitive and polarizing social issue, namely sexual harassment allegations, is susceptible to becoming distorted over time due to the influence of cognitive biases, particularly confirmation bias, and the echo chamber effect [18]. The resulting consequence is the emergence of extreme phenomena within the fervent emotions of netizens, characterized by a pronounced one-sided stance driven by lingering remnants of traditional gender political beliefs and heightened male-female oppositional sentiments. This eventually leads to the understanding that allegations of sexual harassment in China, initially propelled by its legalization and strategic media campaigns that captivated the public interest and transformed gender political discourse, have eventually been subjected to an environment of heightened online polarization and sustained volatile public opinion [20].

3. Research Design

Under the MCDA rubric, this research delves into the construction of identities and strategies within narratives from the parties involved in the XHJ incident, exploring their intersections with gender politics. To gather the data, the researcher retrieved posts from Weibo by conducting a search using the '#XHJ incident' hashtag, resulting in a comprehensive total of 23,569 outcomes.³ At the outset, posts were meticulously curated from XHJ and SHY, each offering evidence and contentions to critique the other. These posts encompassed textual narratives that asserted victimhood, complemented by supporting materials such as WeChat chat records, excerpts from court judgments, videos, and other relevant media. Concurrently, a comprehensive snapshot of authentic interactions on Weibo was captured by selecting 258 widely circulated posts under the '#XHJ incident' hashtag to ensure a rich diversity of ideologies. Among these, 131 posts were contributed by females, while 127 were posted by males, effectively encapsulating a spectrum of perspectives ranging from official media accounts to the chaotic cacophony of public discourse. All posts, initially composed in Chinese, were meticulously translated into English for thorough analysis.

The guiding research questions for the data analysis are as follows:

RQ1: How do the two parties involved in the XHJ incident construct narratives shaping forms of Victimhood, employing specific strategies, and how do these narratives intersect with gender politics?

RQ2: What narrative characteristics and implications are manifested in the official and public evaluations of the incidents, and how do these evaluations either rationalize or challenge gender power relations within the context?

To address RQ1-2, this research adopts the Multi-Modal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) approach as demonstrated by Machin and Mayr [21] in "How to do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction". The formal and transient analysis draws upon the concepts of multi-modal critical discourse analysis as proposed by Machin and Mayr [21], employing the same analytical tools previously used for text analysis. In this research, this approach is applied to analyze textual and visual discourse collected from Weibo posts. These analytical approaches were systematically employed for each selected prominent Weibo post, indicating that each post underwent scrutiny from the perspective of each analytical method. While certain methods may have been more pertinent than others for specific posts, the aim was to ensure transparency, systematicity, and reliability in the analytical process. The interconnectedness between analytical concepts, empirical material, and interpretations was explicitly maintained throughout the analysis, and the interpretations were substantiated by typical material quotations. As advocated by Anabela Carvalho and Jacqueline Burgess [22], MCDA constitutes an interpretive method, where the credibility and validity of outcomes rely primarily on "logic and credibility of argumentation, backed up by quotes from the texts."

Although most qualitative content analysis methods predominantly focus on written or spoken content, MCDA also encompasses the analysis of sounds and images, as previously undertaken in the textual analysis [23]. Given that this study primarily delved into the reciprocal accusations between involved parties within prominent Weibo posts, images and videos played a significant role in the construction of victimhood, in addition to the extensive textual narratives. These materials collectively influenced the perception of online users and subsequent comments. In interpreting this event, it is plausible that subsequent commenters drew upon elements beyond the written text. However, in order to present and analyze the material more effectively, the information contained in videos and images has been transcribed into a textual form, and the differentiation between information originating from various forms has not been explicitly emphasized in the paper's analysis."

The central focus of this MCDA resides in the communal process of meaning-making, encompassing expressions of opposition, dominance, and negotiation [23]. As highlighted by Batel et al. [24], meaning creation is inherently "relational and co-constructed—while also being contested within a community." By closely examining the discourse competition between the involved parties and subsequent commentators on the Weibo platform, the construction of identities within the

narratives of both parties and commentators, as well as their interaction with gender politics, becomes evident. This analytical approach, as noted by Sarah Banet-Weiser [15], addresses a deficiency observed in much prior research within the media communication realm. Consequently, within this collective process of meaning-making, the decoding of encoded themes converges with performative practices aimed at eliciting responses from other Weibo users.

In the realm of qualitative analysis of social media, ethical considerations, such as the disclosure of commenter identities, inevitably arise. Given that analyzed comments are published on a public forum and are searchable on Weibo, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Nonetheless, to protect confidentiality, the initials of commenters have been altered when presenting Weibo comments. Additionally, for the sake of readability, quotations have been occasionally refined. Simultaneously, to mitigate excessive repetition that might hinder readability, not all references to the analytical process are explicitly indicated.

4. Analytical discussion

This study identifies discourse strategies that construct competitive and collective victimhood within gendered narratives in digital contexts. These strategies intersect with power dynamics, simplifying sexual harassment experiences through anonymization and functionalization. Insights are also offered into challenges faced by female accusers, perpetuating skepticism and disempowerment.

4.1. Constructing Competitive and Collective Victimhood Camps in the Digital Sphere

Examining the interactions surrounding the purported sexual assault case on Weibo, it becomes evident that competitive victimhood plays a pivotal role in shaping the discourse. Competitive victimhood, as a social phenomenon, refers to a dynamic wherein different groups or individuals strive to establish their suffering as more severe or deserving of attention than that of others [25]. Simultaneously, within the context of the present case study, competitive victimhood is intricately intertwined with the complexity of gender dynamics, which underscore the underlying tension and perceived power imbalance between men and women. In other words, the competitive pursuit of victim status signifies more than just a contest for empathetic acknowledgment; it encapsulates the broader societal struggle for recognition, legitimacy, and agency within a gendered framework. Consequently, these interactions do not merely reflect isolated instances of rhetorical competition; they mirror the broader societal gendered narratives where men and women navigate the terrain of victimhood in distinct ways, often influenced by deeply ingrained gender norms and stereotypes.

XHJ

“I have been enduring continuous sexual harassment from my boss, SHY. He's been pressuring me to undress for him, and under this psychological distress, I have developed depression.”

SHY

“One of the artists under my company, XHJ, maliciously spread rumors of me sexually harassing her.”

“If the court finds that their fabricated rumors do not meet the threshold for a defamation case, then my company will pursue a lawsuit for defamation of character.”

In the current case study, the individuals involved in the accusatory exchange, in order to vie for victim status, attempt to highlight the perceived injustices they have faced while downplaying the experiences of their counterparts. To illustrate, in this situation where XHJ accused SHY, her former boss, of sexual assault, asserting her victimhood and the emotional distress she has endured as a result. In response, SHY (the accused individual) countered with his own narrative of victimization, claiming false allegations and harm to his own and the company's reputation. In their attempt to validate their suffering, both parties engage in a form of competitive victimhood, each seeking to garner sympathy and support from the online community. However, the intricacies of language cannot be overlooked in these interactions. In any language, there exists no neutral way to represent a person. All choices will serve to draw attention to certain aspects of identity that will be associated with certain kinds of

discourses. This linguistic nuance further influences the framing of victimhood narratives, shaping how participants position themselves within the discourse, and even influencing public perceptions, inviting online users to engage in this digital debate.

Thus, these interactions go beyond personal conflicts; they form a complex web of competitive victimhood dynamics that extend further. This intricate phenomenon taps into the concept of 'taking sides' or 'choosing a camp', prompting individuals to align with one party or the other. The potency of these narratives lies not solely in the allegations but also in their strategic use of pronouns within the competitive victimhood discourse. Pronouns like 'we' and 'you' are deftly wielded to shape shared experiences and allegiances, significantly influencing sentiments within the digital sphere, evoking an emotional response from the wider audience, and sculpting a narrative of opposition.

XHJ

"I'm sorry, I can't continue filming. I've been sexually harassed by my boss... It has pushed me into depression... I have also faced immense pressure personally."

"Have you ever witnessed such sensationalism? Taking away 22 years of my youth, tarnishing my virginity, exploiting my personal story, all to manipulate and sully my innocence."

SHY

"If the three of you continue to spread such false information online, for every piece you publish, we will file a lawsuit. Let's see how much the cost of your fabrication can endure."

"When you push an innocent person into the abyss, you must be prepared for the abyss to retaliate."

XHJ employs self-referential pronouns, particularly the first-person pronoun "I," to establish a strong sense of individual agency and subjectivity. This serves to convey her personal experiences and emotions as she articulates her ordeal with a tone of vulnerability and victimization. By delineating her own suffering using the pronoun "I," XHJ emphasizes her direct connection to the experiences being described, thereby aiming to evoke empathy and sympathy from the audience who are sensitive to issues of gender inequality and power dynamics. SHY, on the other hand, employs the first-person plural pronoun "we" in the quote "we will file a lawsuit." This inclusivity potentially implicates himself and his legal team, positioning them as a united front taking collective action. Through this use of pronouns, SHY endeavors to project a sense of unity and resolve. Additionally, the phrase "Let's see how much the cost of your fabrication can endure" conveys a sense of defiance and challenge, underscoring his stance as the one initiating an active response to what he considers false information. Moreover, SHY employs the pronoun "you" in the quote "When you push an innocent person into the abyss." Here, the pronoun "you" is utilized in an accusatory manner, holding the addressees accountable for their alleged actions. This choice of pronoun not only distances SHY from the actions being described but also establishes a sense of confrontation and moral judgment, positioning him as the wronged party. This strategic pronoun usage resonates with those who value due process and skepticism toward unproven allegations. This dichotomous narrative, underscored by the strategic use of pronouns, sets the stage for a clash of perspectives, indicative of the broader 'us' versus 'them' divide. As this narrative unfolds online, the audience responds with remarkable expediency, aligning themselves with either XHJ or SHY. This swift categorization is evident in the form of user comments, reposts, and the generation of related content that either supports or refutes the allegations. The engagement of the online community transforms into an active battlefield of narratives, where individuals are encouraged to take sides based on their predispositions, beliefs, and affiliations.

Furthermore, within this intricate interplay, the protagonists, donning the collective identity of 'we', embark on a calculated effort to project their stance as a unified collective of victims, thereby fostering the establishment of an ideological framework centered around collective victimhood. The formation of this cohesive 'we' strategically lays the groundwork for contrasting it against an adversarial 'other', thus enabling the articulation of statements such as,

XHJ

"Indeed, we (referring to those who have experienced sexual harassment) have never wavered in upholding our rightful claims."

SHY

“In theory, each one of us could potentially face such 'accusations', a phenomenon that is not only abnormal but also quite alarming.”

By employing the pronoun 'we', XHJ strategically aligns herself with individuals who have also encountered experiences of sexual harassment, effectively constructing a collective identity that embodies the essence of collective victimhood. The 'we' pronoun functions as a conduit, unifying her story with the shared pain and struggles of fellow survivors. This unification not only validates her own account but also magnifies its impact through the resonance of shared emotions. This identity functions as a unifying force, binding those who resonate with her narrative into a cohesive unit and fortifying a sense of solidarity. XHJ employs this collective identity to transcend the confines of her individual ordeal, positioning herself as a representative of a larger group that stands against the injustice of sexual harassment. In contrast, SHY's strategic use of the phrase 'each one of us' serves to evoke collective vigilance. The all-encompassing 'each one of us' envelops not only himself but extends to encompass all individuals, amplifying the scope of concern. By framing his statement in this manner, he skillfully suggests that no individual is immune to the potential threat of false allegations, thereby fostering a widespread sense of apprehension. Through the suggestion that anyone could fall victim to such allegations, he seeks to cultivate a broader sentiment of caution and circumspection among his audience. This calculated choice of expression taps into the inherent fear of unfounded accusations, invoking the audience's heightened awareness and aversion towards situations where reputations may be unjustly tarnished.

Such rhetoric serves to underscore a prevailing sense of inclusivity, solidarity, and genuineness within the discourse. This strategic narrative reframing operates as a conduit, enabling the competitive victimhood discourse to transcend the confines of individual experience and foreground the narrative of collective victimhood as a potent force in shaping the digital discourse. Through the lens of gender politics, the narrative's significance becomes twofold: it not only amplifies the voices of those who resonate with its claims but also intertwines with the broader tapestry of gender relations.

4.2. Strategic Anonymization and Functionalization in Mutual Accusations

When examining domains where gender dynamics intersect with victimhood narratives, the strategic use of anonymization compounds the complexity, primarily due to the fact that it obscures and oversimplifies the narrative. Just as strategic vagueness and non-specific references are observed in political discourse, the utilization of anonymization in cases of sexual harassment allegations characterizes the opposing party as an indistinct, faceless collective entity. This abstraction of personal identity results in the de-individualization of both the accuser and the accused, not only blurring the scope of the allegations but also accentuating the inherent collective ideological framework within the narrative. Furthermore, within the context of gendered power dynamics, the deliberate deployment of anonymization assumes heightened significance. Here, narratives ascend to a level of collective symbolism, wherein the accused are emblematic of systemic biases while the accusers epitomize the struggle against these very biases.

XHJ

“Over the past three years, due to my personal vulnerability and the manipulations of certain individuals, I found myself drifting further down the path of what is referred to as the 'perpetrator.’”

“Simultaneously, this situation has also provided an opportunity for certain malicious individuals to misrepresent and distort my actions without restraint.”

SHY

“These past two years have been a journey filled with numerous experiences, revealing to me that some individuals can be capable of such malevolence.”

“I refrain from adopting a tactic akin to that of certain individuals who selectively share incomplete screenshots, aiming to provoke a malicious backlash from online users. I invite everyone to consider the full context before passing judgment.”

The phrase “certain individuals” in XHJ’s statements widens the net of accusation, enveloping figures of authority, her boss, and associates within the company, along with other skeptics who doubt her claims. By strategic use of anonymization, she extends the finger of blame toward multiple fronts, emphasizing collective culpability that spans beyond isolated individuals, potentially suggesting the presence of a larger systemic gendered oppression. This tactic prompts audiences to infer a more systemic dimension to the allegations, inviting them to perceive not only isolated incidents but also potential undercurrents of gender-related oppression, ultimately fostering a heightened likelihood of eliciting empathy. Conversely, SHY, who asserts his innocence against allegations of sexual harassment, reciprocally accuses those disseminating falsehoods, as well as individuals who ostensibly champion women's rights and engage in online vitriol against him without fully comprehending the circumstances. This strategic choice enables him to castigate those he perceives as misguided proponents of misinformation and uninformed allegiance in the online realm. Through this lens, he endeavors to unmask the potential consequences of unverified claims and impulsive alignment with specific ideologies. In this narrative trajectory wherein SHY not only asserts his own victimhood but also shines a light on the subject of online actors who may inadvertently perpetuate polarizing debates by employing sexual harassment accusations as a conduit for advancing feminist discourse.

Hence, the use of the phrase "certain individuals" in XHJ's statements not only amplifies the scope of the accusation but also unveils a nuanced layer of the discourse's complexity. This anonymization strategy extends beyond the conventional back-and-forth of accusations between the accuser and accused, encapsulating a diverse array of individuals and fostering a narrative that underscores the multifaceted nature of gendered dynamics, encompassing both those who, whether consciously or unconsciously, serve the systemic gender oppression perpetuated by patriarchal structures as well as those who propagate misinformation without clarity and wield the banner of women rights through the conduit of allegations of sexual harassment. Thus, this expansive narrative articulation unveils not only the dynamics of accusation and counter-accusation but also sheds light on the undercurrents of gendered discourse that perpetuate division, conflict, victimhood, systemic oppression, and the enduring dialogue surrounding gender politics.

In addition to obfuscating the scope of allegations, anonymization strategies are commonly employed in narratives of sexual harassment accusations to safeguard the accuser's privacy. This approach aids in facilitating their willingness to share the experiences of harm suffered, allowing their stories to be witnessed and evaluated by an audience while minimizing the potential for further harm [10]. Simultaneously, the potential of narrative anonymization encourages more victims to openly identify their harassers, fostering a shared consensus and consolidating communal strength [26]. However, this kind of anonymization's propensity for blurring details and deliberate obfuscation may arouse suspicion among audiences, thereby possibly rendering victims unable to engage the audience in a rational manner while subjecting them to scrutiny. This technique could also be strategically exploited to obscure truths and provide false information, consequently triggering a crisis of ethical trust.

XHJ

“In the upcoming phase, I will persist in organizing data, offering detailed narratives of a quantifiable number of individuals who have reached out to me for help, as well as a specific count of those who have encountered analogous situations. I am dedicated to delivering a comprehensive presentation of these matters.”

In framing her account, XHJ introduces anonymization by referring to individuals as a collective entity—“a quantifiable number of individuals” and “those who have encountered analogous situations.” This linguistic choice masks the identities of the individuals involved, simultaneously safeguarding their privacy. Nevertheless, the utilization of these general terms raises an inherent question: to what extent does it encompass individuals? This deliberate ambiguity introduces a level of aggregation, substituting concrete numbers with abstract representation. This veiling mechanism can effectively camouflage potential evidentiary deficiencies, thereby allowing the speaker to

circumvent the obligation of presenting irrefutable evidence. In this context, XHJ endeavors to establish the presence of a larger cohort of victims who unite to bolster the credibility of her allegations against her boss for sexual harassment. While this approach may seemingly raise concerns regarding the veracity of the claims, it simultaneously capitalizes on the persuasive potential of ambiguity. As articulated by van Dijk [21], the use of numerals, statistical data, or implicitly quantified terms like 'a significant number' can impart an impression of objectivity and scientific validity. In employing such linguistic devices, XHJ harnesses the power of ambiguity not only to obscure potential evidentiary gaps but also to enhance the persuasiveness of her narrative. However, concrete numerical figures are still absent; the extent of the victim count remains uncertain, and the veracity of these victims' existence is called into question. This anonymization and aggregation obscure the intricacies of the issue. Particularly in cases involving allegations of sexual harassment, the inherent complexity renders victims hard-pressed to provide incontrovertible evidence capable of withstanding public skepticism and legal scrutiny. Through the utilization of anonymization and aggregation, individuals are able to present their experiences without divulging their own identities or those of relevant parties, thus avoiding undue concerns about potential repercussions. Yet, in practice, the lack of specific details and deliberate obfuscation brought about by this anonymization and aggregation approach can stimulate the audience to fill gaps with assumptions, suppositions, and biases. This, in turn, provides room for speculating about the identities and actions of 'certain individuals.' Consequently, the strategic utilization of anonymization and aggregation in those allegations aligns with the inherent difficulties of establishing the veracity of such claims, thereby leaving it vulnerable to prevailing skepticism and conjecture surrounding public accusations of sexual harassment.

XHJ

“This constitutes the entirety of the legal battles between me and 'Sun' (referring to SHY) over the course of three years, encompassing the obscured 80% of the truth orchestrated by malevolent actors.”

“Such actions, in my view, precisely substantiate how 'Sun,' who has artfully cultivated a victim persona online, exhibits a glaring inconsistency between appearance and reality.”

SHY

“For the malicious spreading of rumors by Hui, Yao, Zhao, and Chen (referring to XHJ and the three accomplices who joined her in making false allegations of harassment), we have initiated criminal prosecution. Their steadfast refusal to admit guilt and lack of remorse greatly incense me.”

“I now issue a stern warning to Hui. Hui's claim of having publicly apologized and fulfilled the fabricated rumor incident is false.”

In news coverage related to criminal cases, the practice of anonymization is also prevalent to safeguard privacy. However, the anonymization employed in the mutual accusations of the present case evidently does not serve the purpose of protecting the privacy of the opposing parties. This distinction arises from the fact that the principal participants in the current case have already publicly disclosed their identities and are well-known to the broader online community. In fact, the strategic utilization of anonymization can be perceived as a form of functionalization, as evident in the examined case, where parties engaged in mutual accusations employ anonymization to emphasize functional roles over personal identities, simplifying intricate individual attributes into categorical roles that imply an underlying assumption of misconduct. Such functionalization, as Machin and Mayr [21] expound, can formalize and simplify individuals into roles, either designated by the authors or generalized. In the present context, both the accuser and rebuttal functionally anonymize the opposing side, emphasizing their roles as potential perpetrators of defamation or sexual harassment. This application of functionalization essentially reduces the individuals to their perceived offenses, akin to Machin and Mayr's [21] exploration of the ancient Romans being functionalized as 'criminals' or 'prostitutes.' Thus, within the milieu of mutual accusations, both sides functionally simplify one another into categories such as "wrongdoer" or "defamer," substantiating their alleged misconduct and shaping the cognitive perception of online users.

Within the realm of gender politics, the anonymized reference to "specific individuals" transcends their individuality, assuming the role of symbolic figures representative of entrenched oppressive structures. In this context, women underscore their positions as victims of pervasive patriarchal norms and the unequal distribution of power, while men assert their own victimhood amidst the prevalence of online vitriol and fervent feminism. This adaptation of the anonymization strategy into the milieu of mutual accusations consequently evolves into an amplification tool, which situates individual experiences within the broader narrative of gender-based inequalities and victimization. However, it is pivotal to recognize that the inherent tendencies of oversimplification and abstraction within the processes of anonymization and functionalization might inadvertently diminish the nuanced complexity of individual experiences. This in turn runs the risk of obscuring the diverse manifestations of power dynamics and subtle variations within the broader narrative. Within the specific context of this discourse, where the focus lies on gender politics and online exchanges surrounding accusations of sexual harassment, individuals from both sides harness anonymization as a tool to conform to preexisting ideologies, soliciting empathy and support from their respective communities. This process of adaptation and alignment with existing ideologies can potentially streamline the diversity of individual experiences into specific roles, which may inadvertently hinder the holistic understanding of intricate power dynamics and the myriad dimensions of victimhood within the context of online discourse. As the subsequent analyses unfold, a closer examination of these implications will elucidate how this process of simplification influences the trajectory of the discourse and shapes the collective understanding of the intricate interplay between gender politics, victimhood, and online communication.

4.3. Challenges of Female Accusers in Public Discourse

In fact, the heightened attention drawn to the discussed case does not solely stem from its nature as a sexual harassment allegation; rather, it emerges from the subsequent narrative shifts that have unfolded. These shifts encompass a widespread sympathy for accused males and a potent satirical framing of women as exposers of various forms of sexual violence. This narrative transition experiences a decisive turning point with the release of an official statement, which revealed XHJ's accusations as fabricated and levied criticism against her strategic manipulation of sensitive topics, including the vulnerability of women and issues related to sexual harassment.

Official Account

“Upon closer examination of XHJ’s deceptive and misleading tactics, her scheming can be deemed 'meticulous,' revealing a certain level of acting prowess. Whether manipulating the narrative around supposed instances of harassment, disseminating related videos online, eliciting sympathy, or presenting herself as a champion of justice — every step, including disguising her public declarations as a plea to prevent further deception, orchestrating colleagues' public endorsements, and rallying support, is meticulously calculated, hitting at the crux of contemporary discourse propagation. It is as if she believes that a few photographs, snippets of audio, or ambiguously authentic chat logs are enough to affix labels such as 'sexual harassment' or 'infidelity' onto anyone's reputation.”

In this official account, a profound analysis of XHJ's tactics is offered, revealing a calculated and strategic approach characterized by a high level of finesse. Words such as ‘manipulating,’ ‘disguising,’ ‘orchestrating,’ and ‘rallying’ underscore her intentionality and premeditation. By using these phrases, the passage ironically highlights XHJ's manipulation of gender-related discourse for her own benefit. This description not only portrays her as an active agent in shaping the discourse but also positions her as a skilled actor who is adept at manipulating public perception.

Moreover, XHJ's manipulation of both benevolence and malice in her deceptive claims serves as an initial point of examination. However, this official analysis transcends her individual actions and delves into the broader implications of women's engagement in public spaces when making allegations of sexual harassment. This shift from exploiting goodwill to challenging established gender norms within the public domain exposes the multifaceted layers of the issue. As we extract insights from the official critique, a significant argument emerges, encapsulated in the phrase

'disguising her public declarations as a plea to prevent further deception, orchestrating colleagues' public endorsements, and rallying support.' This emphasis magnifies one of the criticisms directed at XHJ's actions—her propagation of fabrications within the public sphere. While it is undeniable that disseminating falsehoods in public carries negative repercussions, it is equally important to consider the alignment between the emphasis on the public nature of XHJ's accusations and the foundational principles of mainstream media's gender politics. These principles often categorize women within the 'private' sphere, discouraging their intrusion into the public domain. The official criticism of XHJ's public strategy, such as 'publicly accusing in public forums,' 'disclosing private conversations publicly,' and 'publicly divulging personal details through live streams,' resonates with the Western critique of "victim feminism." This perspective suggests that women who accuse men seek not only redress but also control over public discourse. Consequently, when women step into the public arena with their accusations, skepticism arises, leading to inquiries into potential ulterior motives—ranging from self-interest and financial gain to shame-driven motivations and the pursuit of attention. This contrast is further accentuated when considering the reputations of the accused men and their established roles as dominant voices in public discourse. Consequently, the entrance of these women into the public sphere seems to imply inherent culpability in their allegations against men, thus intensifying gender biases. As our exploration deepens, we'll uncover another dimension through which patriarchal ideas permeate, shedding light on how this oversimplification narrows our comprehension of gender issues, focusing our attention on inherent gender conflicts rather than proactive solutions.

Official Account

“The horror of the XHJ incident lies in her inducing netizens into a 'Boy Who Cried Wolf' mentality. For instance, when netizens genuinely experience sexual harassment and seek help online, they are met with skepticism and doubt. Thus, it can be inferred that XHJ, as a female accuser, manipulates the concept of so-called sexual harassment, causing harm not only to the rights of actual victims but also indirectly influencing those genuinely in need of safeguarding, which is deplorable.”

Commentor 15

“Recent women, what has happened to them? Women were previously known for their gentleness and kindness, for their understanding and compassion. They were perceived as vulnerable and in need of protection. But now, why have women become so detestable? As a man, I can deeply empathize with the helplessness and despair of the boss of this female internet celebrity (referring to SHY). Moreover, I comprehend the frustration and exasperation when dealing with drama queens.”

The utilization of the terms 'female accuser' and 'female internet celebrity' in both the official commentary and the netizen's remarks not only demonstrates a tendency to functionalize the roles ascribed to the accuser but also accentuates the gender-related attributes of the accuser within the comments, concurrently directing our assessment of these roles in specific ways. Whether employing these labels or the term 'drama queen,' as articulated by a netizen, the prominence of her 'feminine characteristics' remains consistent, exemplifying instances of 'ideological framing' [21]. In this context, irrespective of whether female participants are involved in legal or personal affairs, their portrayal primarily revolves around their gender. This prompts us to question the backdrop of this process and the reasons behind it, as suggested by van Dijk [21], who indicates that certain moral issues can be conveyed by contrasting women's and men's behaviors. Notably, in criminal reports concerning child (sexual) abuse, condemnations tend to be sharper when the perpetrator is female [26], aligning with cases where the false accuser is a woman.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this narrative's simplicity underscores its alignment with prevailing ideologies, once again highlighting the influence of a patriarchal society. This alignment becomes particularly evident when examining the functionalized framework, as exemplified by designating the instigator as a 'female internet celebrity' or 'female accuser,' which serves a dual purpose. On one hand, the dominant male voices contend that false accusations are a widespread concern within society. Their assertion is founded on the actions of a select few women who garnered media attention. Just as they employ strategies to counter and suppress women's voices,

such as asserting that 'our problem is that feminists exaggerate rape statistics ' [15], they adeptly employ similar tactics to amplify instances of false accusations by women. Despite the well-established disparity between the number of women who experience sexual assault and those who falsely accuse men of sexual assault, a few instances of women fabricating false allegations have gained remarkable media prominence, leading to an excessive exaggeration or normalization of the issue of false accusations. On the other hand, they construct an individual narrative of social justice transgressors, thus deflecting responsibility away from structural capitalism or the patriarchal system. Within this narrative, the focus on individual women turns them into subjects of state media coverage. The issue appears to be rooted in the manipulation of gender divisions by a select few individual women with the intent to provoke emotional reactions. The existence of false accusations hinges upon their disruption of societal order, suggesting that without this disturbance to social harmony, these instances of false accusations would not materialize, thereby safeguarding the rights of authentic victims of sexual assault. However, the issue lies in the fact that when the majority of sexual assault victims raise their voices, whether they 'intrude' into the public sphere or, due to biases, perform the role of a 'drama queen,' or are attributed with motives like 'feminism victim' for personal gain, none of these factors mitigate the skepticism, but rather augment it, that society harbors towards female victims.

The official and public responses not only reveal XHJ's deceptive strategies but also shed light on the intricate interplay between gender politics, power dynamics, and societal norms. These discourses expose the challenges faced by female accusers in the public discourse domain, highlighting the broader discussions around women's agency, their presence in public spaces, and the inherent struggles they confront within a patriarchal context when navigating public narratives.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the case study surrounding the mutual accusations within the digital sphere highlights the intricate interplay of competitive and collective victimhood, strategic anonymization, and challenges faced by female accusers in public discourse. This multifaceted analysis provides valuable insights into the dynamics of online discourse, particularly in the realm of gender politics. The evolving narrative within the discourse underpins broader societal ideologies and raises critical questions about the complex relationships between gender, power, and public perception.

Competitive victimhood emerges as a dominant force within the digital realm, reflecting broader gendered narratives where men and women navigate the landscape of victimhood in distinct ways. This dynamic intersects with the complexities of gender power dynamics, intensifying the tension and perceived power imbalance between genders. Both accusers and accused strategically employ victimhood narratives to garner sympathy and support from online communities, employing language to evoke emotional responses and aligning individuals with one side or the other. However, this alignment goes beyond mere solidarity; it resonates deeply with underlying societal currents, tapping into the potency of collective victimhood narratives. The amplification of gender-based conflict within these narratives, though driven by the intention to garner support, inadvertently fuels divisive sentiment within the online community.

Anonymization and functionalization, while prevalent across various discourses, acquire distinct nuances within gendered victimhood narratives. Anonymization serves to protect the identities of victims, encouraging them to share their experiences while safeguarding their privacy. However, it also holds the potential to obscure truths and mislead audiences, creating ethical concerns. Functionalization, on the other hand, simplifies individuals into categorical roles, amplifying their perceived misconduct and shaping public perception. In the context of the sexual harassment accusations at hand, functionalization distills the parties involved into distinct categories—the purveyors of fabricated rumors driven by personal interests and the oppressive exploiters of power. Concurrently, the strategy of anonymization magnifies the impropriety of their actions, thus shaping public perception. Within gender contexts, these strategies symbolize broader struggles against

systemic biases, yet they may oversimplify complex gender dynamics and hinder a nuanced understanding of individual experiences.

Furthermore, this study delves into the intricate challenges faced by female accusers in the realm of public discourse, which underscores the intricate interplay of power dynamics, societal norms, and gender politics. As accusations unfold within the digital sphere, they assume unique dimensions, inherently influenced by prevailing gender ideologies. When accusers step into the public domain to share their experiences, they often encounter skepticism, invoking the critique of "victim feminism." This unintended narrative reinforcement unwittingly deepens biases, which take tangible form in the skepticism directed towards women who courageously venture into the public space to voice their victimization experiences. Labels such as "drama queens" or "exposers of sexual violence" echo an enduring belief that women should confine themselves to the private sphere, refraining from disrupting the established order by participating in public discourse. This skepticism underscores the deeply entrenched patriarchal norms that cast an ever-present shadow of doubt on women's credibility and intentions, perpetuating a relentless cycle of silencing and disempowerment.

In this study, the research has undertaken an analysis of the interplay between dynamic narratives of sexual harassment accusations on social media and the complex realm of gender politics. Unlike prior research that often focused on unilateral analyses, this study has extended its scope to encompass a detailed examination of the reciprocal accusatory dynamics between both sides. It provides insights into how both parties strategically align with traditional gender political concepts to incite broader confrontations within the digital realm, shaping the notions of competitive victimhood and collective victim narratives within the context of sexual harassment incidents. Furthermore, this research places significant emphasis on the perspectives presented by official media outlets and the public's evaluations of the events. It underscores how these assessments reflect narratives entrenched in traditional patriarchal systems, which include notions that women should be confined within the private sphere. Simultaneously, it highlights that the majority of these evaluations oversimplify the discourse, neglecting the limitations of the feminist movement's discourse confined to female-centric circles. This approach proves ineffective in raising public awareness and challenging prevailing unequal gender power dynamics.

This study acknowledges several limitations that warrant discussion. First and foremost, the employed case analysis approach, while focusing on a prominent sexual harassment case within the digital domain, does not encompass the full spectrum of widely reported incidents. Numerous instances of sexual harassment cases have gained substantial attention online, yet the majority lack comprehensive responses from the accused individuals. Additionally, the absence of official determinations hampers the establishment of factual veracity. As a result, the present study has excluded these cases from analysis. Furthermore, with regard to the chosen research methodology, the employment of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) holds significance, given the intricate intertwining of textual narratives and visual elements on the Weibo platform. However, the materials analyzed predominantly involve textual narratives, while visuals such as images and videos have been transposed into textual form for analytical convenience. The effective utilization of MCDA for dissecting narratives akin to those found on social media platforms necessitates further exploration and practical application.

Notes

1. Weibo https://weibo.com/7452068877/N1Kmvpm9r?refer_flag=1001030103_;
NetEase <https://www.163.com/dy/article/I5BJJ68R0530QRMB.html>;
Sohu <https://www.sohu.com/xtopic/TURBd05qazROVEU0?spm=smwp.srpage.SERP-list.1.1692832977150bA9I6FL>.
2. XHJ and SHY are abbreviations for the female and male protagonists in this event.
3. Figure by 28th July 2023; retrieved from <https://s.weibo.com/weibo?q=%23XHJ%23>.

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