

# Dismantling Gender Blindness in the Crime/Gender Dichotomy

ANONYMOUS AUTHOR(S)

Modern feminists utilize social media for various activities, while the Internet incurs opposite views. HCI researchers have explored feminist practices in computer-mediated social interfaces. However, less investigated how the feminist perspective and its confronting ideologies are framed in discussing controversial social events. The dichotomized debate around the Tangshan beating incident in China epitomizes criminal interpretations of gender-related violence as a backlash against feminist expressions. By collecting posts on Weibo and analyzing them with mixed methods, we demonstrated the discursive patterns around the gender dimension and their properties of gender-blind sexism, which refuted gender-related and feminist discourses. We also discuss how online gender blindness, as a covert reproduction of sexism, normalizes and extends traditional sexism to be platformed in the digital era.

CCS Concepts: • **Computer systems organization** → **Embedded systems**; *Redundancy*; Robotics; • **Networks** → Network reliability.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Public Opinion, Feminism, Gender Blindness, Crime, China, Weibo, Topic Modeling, Discourse Analysis

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Over centuries of struggle for women's rights, feminists and their supporters around the globe attained remarkable achievements in pursuing the envisioned equal and just world. Rooted in the long tradition of women's obedience to men, improving women's conditions and gender inequality in China has much work ahead. Although promoting women's rights in various fields is an officially sanctioned policy, subtle forms of gender oppression was universal and rarely acknowledged by Chinese officials or public media. The chained mother of eight in Fengxian, China, representing the worrying status of human trafficking of women in China, was minimally reported in Chinese domestic propagation [48]. The Shanghai "Little Red Manson," a case of underground forced sex work, was reported exclusively about gangs and corruption, followed with little to no institutional action to support women and guarantee their basic rights [45]. In another case where a former Chinese tennis player reported the former vice premier of China pressuring her into sex, Chinese media outlets remained silent as always [59].

With the frequent reporting of women's rights incidents in China over recent years, people adapted to the new online environment where gender issues had become a daily agenda. Chinese citizens are increasingly involved in debates around feminism and gender issues, concurrent with the rising popularity of feminism [56]. However, feminist voices attract backlashes partially because of Chinese cultural and political norms [16, 87, 88], which accidentally coincides with the resurgence

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of sexism in the form of backlash against feminism in western countries in the post-feminist era [52]. In the most straightforward form, some Chinese people portrayed grassroots feminists as those who seek privileges for women over men or "incite conflict between the genders." However, what is often overlooked, is that gender factors are usually either neglected or downplayed in discussing public events related to women's experiences and gender inequality. With such dominant discourse overtly denying feminism, women's practical conditions would be hard to improve, and thus the structural and institutionalized power in material and phenomenological senses would sustain. The dominant discourse has turned Chinese social media into a breeding ground that disseminates and reproduces discriminatory ideology vis-à-vis gender. Prior work in HCI focused on designs informed by feminist agenda that is inclusive and unbiased to women's needs and values [8, 9, 32]. Building on that, in this study, we intended to challenge the notion of "neutral platform" by examining the ideological symptoms underneath prevailing online gender-related discourses and its relation to the social platforms.

We selected the Tangshan incident as the case in our research. The Tangshan beating incident happened in the city of Tangshan in China, where a group of gangster men attempted to harass and resorted to fierce violence toward a woman in a midnight barbecue restaurant. After a surveillance footage was uploaded online, the incident quickly incited widespread sentiments and discussions on Chinese social media about social security, public administration, sexual harassment, and gender inequality. Among the discussions, however, gender-related and feminist topics were subject to ignorance and denial by a large portion of the public [84]. To further understand the complete dynamics and nuanced facets of the public opinions, we needed to acknowledge the popular content and discursive practices in the debate around gender dimension. Therefore, we collected data from Weibo<sup>1</sup> and aimed to answer the following research questions in this work:

- **RQ1:** What were the trends of and topics involved in discussing the Tangshan incident?
- **RQ2:** What discursive patterns emerged in discussing the gender dimension of the incident?

A mixed-methods approach was used. Machine learning tools were applied to answer RQ1 at scale, and critical feminist discourse analysis was used to answer RQ2 in depth. We collected 724,446 related posts on Weibo discussing the Tangshan incident for analysis. To answer RQ1, we applied a fine-tuned machine-learning classifier that classified all posts into three categories: (1) Crime-related, (2) Gender-related, and (3) Irrelevant or Ineffective. Next, topic modeling was run for each category to reveal popular topics. To answer RQ2, we applied feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) [52] on the crime-related and gender-related posts to inspect the discursive patterns.

The results showed that Chinese feminist expressions encountered backlash reflected in various discursive patterns from the conservative public. Going deeper, we observed that these patterns dictated the recently-emerged ideology of gender-blind sexism [74] and attempted to minimize the sexist core. Meanwhile, Chinese grassroots feminists advocated for the validity of openly discussing gender issues online and resisted against the power of gender blindness. This further testified that as our society progressed, previously overt and radical sexism has partially transformed into subtle forms in the contemporary gender-blind era, whose trajectory resembles how racism against people of color has shifted in the past civil-right decades [5, 85, 91].

Informed by prior work on gender-blind sexism [74], this study analyzed posts on a Chinese social media and the discursive patterns that attempted to minimize the ignorance of gendered facts. When gender-blind discourses are mediated by online social platforms, they could potentially shape the platforms' culture, which, in turn, could shape the online discourse and continue to penetrate sexism in the digital realm. This work also contributes to our understanding of the complex discursive context of content moderation and platform policies and designs aiming for

<sup>1</sup>Weibo (stands for micro-blog in English), or Sina Weibo, is the most popular micro-blogging platform in China.

addressing sexism and gender inequality. Lastly, more attention on gender-blind sexism from the HCI and CSCW community is needed for new possibilities of interpretation and reflections upon research practices, especially in non-Western contexts.

Please note that all the quotes presented in this paper were translated from Chinese to English (unless specifically noted), and identifiable information was removed. **Content Warning:** this paper quotes potentially offensive language that may be uncomfortable to some readers.

## 2 RELATED WORK

### 2.1 Online Discourses and Collective Actions

Social media serves as a crucial channel of civic participation for a massive population [67, 86]. Works in HCI and CSCW focusing on online public discourses studied topics such as political discussion [12, 72, 81], rights of migrants and refugees [43], veterans [94], racial protest and social movement [19, 35, 39, 40, 53, 78, 79], identities and communities [26, 27].

Online discourses are gendered, meaning that differences exist between men and women's use of language and their behaviors online. Hayat et al. compared the difference between woman and man's post features and how much support they receive [38]. Cole specifically thought about how disciplinary rhetoric online can be toxic to women and feminists while the affordances of online platforms like hashtags can also be liberating [20]. Recently, dominant ideologies of gender-blind sexism and color-blind racism have also been investigated regarding their rhetoric, intimate relationships, and impact to social media [4]. However, what is relatively missing from this line of literature is how confronting narratives around feminism and gender issues manifest in online debate of controversy social events, not to mention that in a developing country where feminist awareness is premature.

Moreover, online discourses also consist of conflicts. The mass scale and power structure of online public discussion of controversial topics related to rights and politics suggest us to relate them with social movement. Social movements are characterized as a type of activity where people and groups are organized to act collectively with the intent of radical social change [71]. Contemporary information technologies enabled ready and flexible participation in social movements despite of physical barriers [15, 15, 21]. HCI and CSCW researchers examined how social movements are sustained by digital media [46, 80, 86], and how social media like Twitter supports solidarity and union among the people engaging in social movements [72, 73]. Due to the collective nature [61], social movements connect people at the same time build trust and social support [42] and often form a collective identity among the participants [1, 33]. A crucial factor facilitating these processes is the collective narrative. People generate narratives to respond to others' notions and actions, especially counter-narratives as a resistance to domination. Counter-narratives were investigated by scholars in the context of social movements [2], political activities [22, 68], and identity and life changes of marginalized groups in online communities [27, 51]. Women's marginalized online experience was also explored from the point of toxic masculinity [57], and online harassment [10, 41].

### 2.2 Chinese Feminism and Social Media

In 1995, the United Nation's Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing, characterizing the third wave of feminism in mainland China [18] and another step forward in promoting women's rights around the globe. Among the critical areas of concern of women's rights stated by the conference, gender-based violence and sexual violence seem private and ambivalent. As defined by the World Health Organization, sexual violence includes unwanted sexual advances and sexual harassment [47]. Chinese women's disadvantages are rooted in the cultural tradition of gender

stereotypes and patriarchy from Confucianism til contemporary. Nevertheless, feminist thoughts are recruiting their audiences in the population, and feminists are harnessing the Internet to speak up.

*Online Chinese Feminism.* A new generation of Chinese feminists is utilizing social media to overcome discipline of feminist expressions in offline environment. Feminism groups, like Feminist Voice and Women’s Awakening [83], were active on social media like Weibo, and organized offline campaigns. They also tried to solicit alliances with mainstream journalists to facilitate conversations with and impact on the public [83]. Although those opinion leaders were crucial for the development of feminism in China, the collective awareness and enlightenment among the general public should not be ignored. Online feminist activities can be initiated not by feminist groups or leaders but rather by people not self-identifying as feminists [56]. Those grassroots feminists undertake collective struggles against sexism mainly in cultural and media respect instead of political rights. Moreover, the platform’s functionality, like customizing profile pictures, can facilitate self-identification and self-empowerment of women [17]. However, because of the highly sensitive policy about social movement in China [16, 87] and a set of the dominant political discourse in action [88], Chinese feminists encountered backlash and suppression from the authority and the public who adherence to it. Certainly, backlash against feminism is witnessed in other nations in the post-feminist era [63].

*The #Metoo Movement.* In 2017, the #Metoo movement, widely known as a movement against sexual violence and sexual harassment, commenced. The movement initiated in the U.S., and quickly spread to other countries in the globe through the Internet. Countless people with different social, cultural, and political backgrounds share their similar personal and sensitive experiences of being harassed or abused. Users on social media also posed empathy and encouragement to the victims, which is a critical component for the success of the movement [55]. Works in the CSCW community have examined the networked disclosure mechanism [36], and how the use of hashtags in the #Metoo movement expresses solidarity and victimhood [70]. Apparently, universal experience and empathy are the bridge linking all the participants with dissimilar backgrounds.

In January 2018, the movement started in China. It reminded the Chinese people, especially women, to recognize the widespread sexual harassment, sexual abuse, and rape culture in China. Disclosures and discussions on social media significantly facilitated public awareness of sexism and encouraged Chinese women to resist sexism on both individual and collective level [54].

*Backlash and Stigmatization.* However, there were two sources of backlash during the #Metoo movement in China: national censorship and misogynistic attacks [90]. The censorship was conducted by the government or the platform to control potential risk of large-scale collective action. Platform users modified their expressions to bypass censorship [92, 93]. The other obstacle was from some of the populations with an anti-feminist or misogynistic inclination. And the misogynistic thoughts might even be strengthened by online feminist activism, which engenders intensified hate towards feminists [37]. The backlash also parallels with stigmatization of feminism in China usually claiming that Chinese feminists only privileges over men but do not perform duties [56].

### 2.3 Gender-Blind Framing and Counter Framing in Online Public Discourse

Gender blindness, or gender neutrality, is an ideology that discounts gender as a salient factor in how people experience inequalities daily. It is a notion derived from liberal feminism, which downplays gender differences [28, 74]. Similar to gender blindness, color blindness is used to conceal racist ideologies and maintain the status quo that privileges White people. Bonilla-Silva argued that color blindness is the primary mechanism to frame subtle and covert racism in the

contemporary U.S. Here, *framing* is defined as the way in which people deliver ideas and worldviews through utterance [50]. Bonilla-Silva articulated four color-blind racial frames [11]. They are *abstract liberalism*, *naturalization*, *cultural racism*, and *minimization of racism*, which generally argue that race is not the significant factor for social inequalities related to race. For example, the *minimization of racism* frame minimizes the impacts of structural racism on the living conditions of People of Color. If People of Color challenge White privilege, they might be called “playing the race card” [11]. White people utilize the four color-blind racial frames to deny their racist ideologies at all levels of society.

Referring to gender-blind sexist frames, we investigate how gender-blind frames were developed online during the Tangshan incident. Prior studies have explored gender-blind framing in various contexts, such as rape incidents [75], academia [69], menopause [51] etc. This work explored on how gender-blind framing was enacted on the social media platform (i.e., Weibo) and how grassroots feminists generated counter-framing to challenge this ideology. As rode contended, technology is gendered, reflecting a dominant masculine culture [66]. The social media platform’s culture shapes the public discourse and is also shaped by the public discourse. This work tried to understand the dynamics by analyzing different discursive patterns around the gender dimension.

### 3 BACKGROUND: CONTROVERSY ON A GENDER-RELATED VIOLENCE INCIDENT

On June 10, 2022, a group of men assaulted four women at a barbecue restaurant in Tangshan, China. Before dawn, a drunk man named attempted to sexually harass a woman. When the act met with resistance, he and his man companions, violently assaulted the woman and other three women with her [77]. After the surveillance video of the scene was re-posted on the Internet, it sparked widespread attention. People focused on the case’s progress and called for strict punishment of the perpetrators, attention to the injuries of the woman victims, and improvement of social security. As more insider information behind the case was exposed, it triggered discussions about the local gangsters and their umbrella in government; such as looking for problems in the biographies of local leaders and cadres, focusing on the disposal of past cases involving gangs in the local area, etc., driving public opinion in multiple directions. After the incident, Tangshan police enforced ‘Operation Thunder’ that tries to limit local gangs [14].

At the same time, topics surrounding sexism also stirred up strife on the Internet. Some people discussed the gender violence presented by the incident while others focused on the details of the surveillance video and accused “only women stood up for themselves among the bystanders at the scene, but not men,” bringing the incident into the gender framework for discussion. Some extreme remarks rendered a bad public opinion atmosphere [62]. Meanwhile, Weibo officially blocked 265 accounts that “incited conflict between the genders” [7]. When people are emotionally shocked by these brutal and violent events, they become depleted, but violence still remains almost ungovernable, making our effort less sustainable [34].

## 4 DATA AND METHODS

We collected the data by web-scraping publicly available posts from Weibo. Weibo became the online hub for communicating user-generated and official media content in mainland China after its release in 2009. [3] Weibo substitutes Twitter to be a permitted domestic microblogging site because Twitter was officially blocked from access by China’s authority in 2009. [6]

### 4.1 Data Collection and Pre-processing

We first collected 988 unique hashtags containing the keyword “Tangshan” (the name of the city where the incident occurred) from Weibo’s full-site search engine to prepare for systematically scrapping the posts. We chose the keyword “Tangshan” since the word was frequently used for

discussing the event based on our knowledge. Then, the first author manually filtered out irrelevant hashtags to the event, after which the second author reviewed the result. The two authors discussed different decisions and agreed on a final list of 100 hashtags and corresponding selection criteria. Those hashtags were included in the list because each fell into at least one category below.

- Reporting incident detail and development
- Public commenting to the incident
- Response from news media, government, organisations, celebrities, witnesses, and etc.
- Latest state of the victims
- Suspects’ personal information

Then, we scraped the posts from Weibo. The web crawler was developed using the Scrapy framework<sup>2</sup>. Posts and reposts mentioning any hashtag (or multiple hashtags) in the 100-hashtag list were collected. The top five hashtags in the list (sorted by the number of discussions displayed on Weibo) are shown in Table 1. In total, we collected 724,446 individual posts and reposts mentioning any of the hashtags and stored them in a database. The collected information of each post was completely public and accessible to normal Weibo users. The comprehensive list of information scraped contains (1) message ID, (2) user ID, (3) post/repost time, (4) post/repost IP location (disclosing province-level IP location on social media is mandatory in China [25]), (5) user’s gender, (6) post text, and (7) those of the reposted posts. The time scope of the collected data spans from the first day of the report - 0 am, June 10, to three weeks later on 0 am, July 1. We then pre-processed the posts’ text. Specifically, HTML tags, hashtags, links, emojis, special characters, and appended repost content were removed; punctuation, numbers, and English words were reserved. After pre-processing, only the actual original content was kept. In the end, 78,582 (12.17%) posts became empty, and the remaining 645,864 (87.83%) posts were used in the following analysis.

Hashtag (Translated)	Discussions	Readings
#Tangshan Beating	4,060 K	4,600 M
#Men beat up women in a barbecue restaurant in Tangshan	1,241 K	2,240 M
#Public security bureau is arresting suspects in the Tangshan beating incident	1,115 K	1,770 M
#Violent attack of Tangshan girls is a nightmare for all	704 K	1,950 M
#Tangshan beating incident all 9 people arrested	682 K	2,170 M

Table 1. Top five hashtags related to the Tangshan incident. The statistics were collected from Weibo website and the last date of collection is June 25, 2022. K=1,000; M=1,000,000.

## 4.2 Content Classification and Topic Modeling (RQ1)

Two significant types of content emerged from the discussion of the incident on Weibo: (1) crime-related content and 2) gender-related content. They are distinct from each other in that the posts of them perceived and interpreted the event in distinct ways. We needed a method to classify the posts according to the content divide. Instead of manually classifying random samples from our database, we leveraged machine learning tools to classify posts at scale automatically. There are two reasons

<sup>2</sup>Website of Scrapy: <https://scrapy.org/>



behind our employment of machine learning for classification. First, manual classification was hard to provide a macro-level description of the mass online discussion. By using machine learning, we could obtain information about its scale and temporal trend, which are necessary to capture the landscape of online conversations. Second, classifying all the content instead of a small sample could facilitate our subsequent discourse analysis for RQ2. When manually classifying the posts, we found a significant portion of data was irrelevant to the event or inferior in content quality—contributing little to the substantive discussion. If we directly sample posts for discourse analysis, much time and effort would be spent identifying and filtering these low-quality content. Based on such rationale, we trained a machine learning classifier to first identify and filter out those low-quality content to facilitate our qualitative analysis and improve its comprehensiveness.

*Data Annotation.* We manually labeled some posts as the training set, which was used to train a natural language processing (NLP) model to classify the remaining posts. The post-coding process consisted of two phases. In the first phase, we randomly sampled 1,000 posts from our database. Two researchers independently coded the posts in an open-coding fashion to identify codes inclusively. Then, the two researchers discussed the codes and generated a preliminary coding scheme that distinguishes the classes. The coding process was iterative. The first coding’s inter-coder cohen-kappa score was 0.55, the second coding’s score was 0.69, and the third time was 0.93; until then, we stopped iteration. The final coding scheme defines three content classes as described in Table 2. Some posts with both perspectives were classified as of the *Crime-related* class or *Gender-related* class because they have an apparent inclination to one perspective over the other. In the sample for discourse analysis, almost all such posts were predicted as *Crime-related*, which could due to classification errors and rare occurrence of such posts. Next, each coded post was deductively assigned a label by referring to the coding scheme. In the second phase, the second author additionally sampled 3,800 posts from the database and labeled them according to the coding scheme, while the first author reviewed all the labels assigned, and they discussed together until both agreed on the decisions. By examining the labels, we found an imbalance across the three classes, so down-sampling was applied to the *Irrelevant or Ineffective* and *Crime-related* classes to balance the training data. Ultimately, a total of 2,100 labeled posts with 700 posts in each class were used for training (80%) and testing (20%) the machine learning classifier.

Class	Description
Crime-related	Posts focused on legal, criminal and social security issues around the event, including the mainstream media report.
Gender-related	Posts talked about gender differentials, gender inequality, women’s rights, speaking for women, sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and sexual violence.
Irrelevant or Ineffective	Posts asking for latest states and progress, to get hot, venting emotions, spreading rumors, asking for refuting the rumors, of low-quality, were personal conjectures and questioning to the event details.

Table 2. Coding scheme for classification

*Content Classification and Evaluation of the Use of Hashtags.* We used a fine-tuned BERT (Bidirectional Encoder Representations from Transformers) model [24] to classify posts in our database. The BERT model is a state-of-the-art machine learning model for NLP and was widely applied

in various scenarios. Apart from directly using the pre-trained model, users can further pre-train the model on the task corpus and fine-tune it in a downstream task. This way of training usually yielded higher performance [76]. The model we used was based on the pre-trained BERT-WWM (Whole Word Masking) model developed specifically for Chinese text [23]. We further pre-trained the BERT-WWM model using all the posts on a Masked-Language Modeling (MLM) task, which was the major method used for training the original BERT model [24]. The further pre-training step, also called within-task pre-training, was useful as it tuned the BERT’s network weights to fit our particular corpus. The further-trained model was then fine-tuned on a text classification task using the text of 1,680 (80% of the 2,100 labeled posts) posts. Common classification metrics were measured to evaluate our model’s performance. The model achieved an average accuracy of 0.929 and a macro F1 score of 0.901 on the test set (20% of labeled posts). Finally, the fine-tuned BERT model predicted the labels of the remaining posts. We then explored the prediction results to have a overall sense and noticed a mismatch between the hashtags people use and the actual textual content posted. To explore the possible heterogeneity between crime-related and gender-related posts’ use of popular hashtags, we preliminarily quantified the semantic similarity of posts’ textual content and the hashtags they attached. Another Sentence-BERT model fine-tuned on all the posts data based on a pre-trained multilingual SentenceTransformers model (we also followed their instructions of fine-tuning) [65] was used to generate sentence embeddings for both the hashtags and the textual content (regarding the hashtags as independent sentences). Cosine similarities between the sentence embeddings were used to measure the semantic differences between the hashtags and text. Scores for posts with multiple hashtags were calculated by uniformly averaging the similarity scores of each combination between the hashtags and the text.

*Topic Modeling.* Topics of the *Criminal*, *Gender*, and *Irrelevant or Ineffective* classes were extracted using the Gibbs Sampling algorithm for the Dirichlet Multinomial Mixture model (GSDMM) approach [89]. GSDMM performs better than Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) for modeling short text like social media posts because GSDMM assumes one topic for one document, which is usually true for micro-blogs. We tested different choices of iteration ( $n$ ), topic number ( $k$ ), and  $\alpha$  and  $\beta$  value. To get the most cohesive and interpretable results, we finally chose  $n=30$ ,  $k=4$ ,  $\alpha=.1$ ,  $\beta=.1$ , for the *Crime-related* and *Gender-related* classes;  $n=30$ ,  $k=10$ ,  $\alpha=.1$ ,  $\beta=.1$ , for the *Irrelevant or Ineffective* class. Following that, we summarized each topic based on the keywords and posts of that topic by a topic name.

### 4.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (RQ2)

Our qualitative method incorporated critical discourse analysis with feminist social theories similar to [51] to extract and assess emergent themes in the posts. Based on the previous content classification, we started with an inclusive thematic analysis [13] for posts in the *Crime-related* and *Gender-related* category. Since women’s voices and gender-related topics were in the center of discussion, we adopted a feminist stand, and in operation, largely informed by and followed the principles of feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) proposed by Michelle Lazar [52] to examine the online discourses. To properly refer to people’s gender, expressions of biological sex (i.e., male and female) in this paper are substituted by gender identities (i.e., man and woman).

The corpus for thematic analysis consisted of first, the 1,400 posts used in training the classifier (700 posts in the *Irrelevant or Ineffective* were excluded), and second, 1,000 additional posts randomly sampled from the two classes, resulting in a total of 2,400 posts. We sampled from the predicted classes of posts because, as mentioned previously, this made our analysis efficient and effective. The two researchers who labeled these posts performed the thematic analysis in an open-coding fashion but periodically discussed new findings and questions with other authors. Example codes



included *personal experience* - usually experience of being sexually harassed, *feminist advocacy* - call for improving women's rights, *denouncement* - criticism to the abusers, *analysis* - discussion about the property of the incident, and *incident details* - telling or making conjectures about the incident details. The results of the discourse analysis with original posts were iteratively reviewed and revised by all the authors to avoid inappropriate or biased interpretations. We were critically assessing the discourses with a focus on themes and interpretation with high sensitivity, sometimes drawing connections to other events on concepts. It thus allowed us to depict the multiple facets of the online discourses.

We especially examined the discourses from the view of feminism [52]. A critical feminist standpoint deepened and enriched our insights, capturing a broader spectrum of presentation of the women's condition and the backlash against their rights. We do not deny that our stand would have limited our vision, but a feminist assessment was essential to the incident and the broader issues it embodies.

#### 4.4 Positionality Statement

The data analysis involved iterative discussions to ensure that the researchers' positionality would not bias the data interpretation. We must acknowledge that the researchers' experiences cannot represent everyone's. We reflect on our position and privilege as scholars.

All four authors are Chinese who are interested in and practice feminist HCI research. The first author, who led the analysis, has been paying attention to gender issues, especially in China, for years. He regards himself as privileged by male identity, but might have missed nuances when analyzing the data. Both the first and the second authors are Chinese men living mostly in China. The third author is a woman who grew up in China and has experienced gender inequalities mediated by gender-blindness in personal life and institutions. She brought her experiences into data analysis. However, as a highly educated woman, she has the privilege that might bias the data analysis. The fourth author, a Chinese man, has been conducting research on marginalized groups (e.g., rural and female users, LGBTQ+) in China for years, and he oversees the analysis based on his prior research experience.

### 5 RESULTS

We found that gender-related discussion around the Tangshan incident was subject to downplay and ignorance on the social platform (i.e., Weibo). The majority of discussion was around crime, social security, and governance. Gender-related and feminist discourses had proponents but still were not recognized enough by the general public and even encountered negation regarding their validity. The counter-narratives from Chinese grassroots feminists, on the other hand, resisted the dominant discourses through various discursive patterns.

#### 5.1 RQ1: Trends and Topics of Public Discussions

In total, 645,864 posts were classified by the BERT model into three classes: (1) *Crime-related* (106,187 posts, 16.44%), (2) *Gender-related* (104,209 posts, 16.13%), and (3) *Irrelevant or Ineffective* (435,468 posts, 67.42%). The posts without original text after pre-processing were labeled as *None* (78,582 posts, 12.17%).

Figure 1 shows the temporal trends of the number of posts of each class starting from the day of reporting the event until three weeks later, i.e., June 10th to June 30th. According to the temporal statistics, discussion about this incident on Weibo increased rapidly at the initial stage and gradually declined to negligible in two weeks. The incident attracted massive attention on the second day since report, and the discussion reached the first peak (Peak 1) on the second day. There are another two peaks (Peak 2 and 3) in the first two weeks. The primary discussion yielded the first peak.

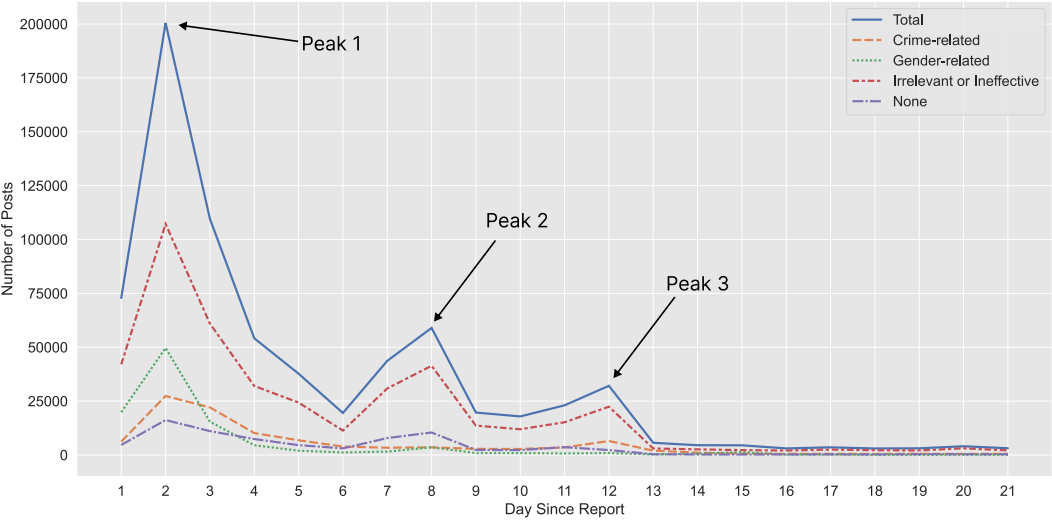


Fig. 1. Temporal trend of posts per day

On the eighth day (June 17th), the Tangshan government narrowed the restrictions for entering Tangshan, possibly resulted in Peak 2. On the day of Peak 3 (June 21st), Tangshan government announced to have its several officials undergo disciplinary investigation.

Public attention shifted during the early stage. On the first and second day since the initial report, gender-related topics were much more popular than the crime-related ones, which began to be opposite since the third day. The popularity of gender-related topics dropped significantly on the third day and remained nearly silent thereafter. Crime-related topics prevailed throughout the following days, including on the days of Peak 2 and 3. The temporal trends manifest the dynamics of public attention and imply the possible shift in user groups: the discussion might be initially promoted by users with gender awareness, but the focus shifted to criminal issues when it reached wider population.

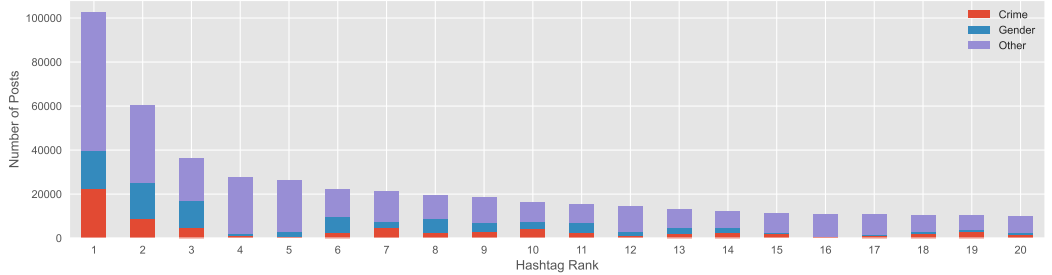


Fig. 2. Distribution of Posts with the Top 20 Hashtags Per Category

**5.1.1 Hashtag-Text Mismatch.** The quantities of crime-related posts and gender-related posts in relation to the top-20 hashtags are comparable in general while posts of the *Other* category constitute the larger portion, as illustrated in Figure 2. Crime-related posts more frequently appeared, comparing to gender-related posts, with the 1st (#Tangshan beating), 7th (#Tangshan beating incident

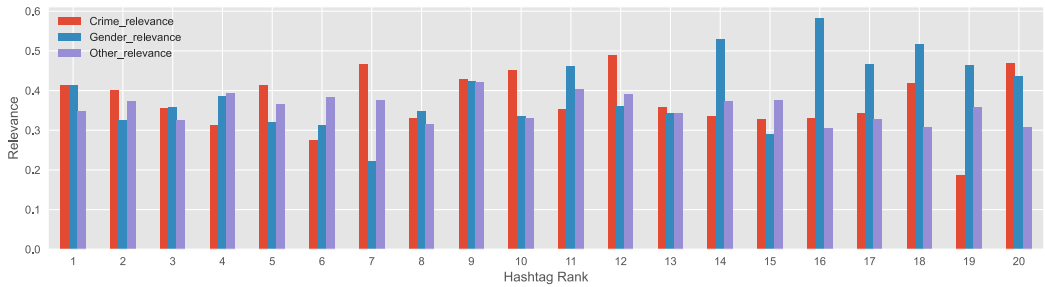


Fig. 3. Semantic Relevance Between Posts' Hashtags and Text Content with the Top 20 Hashtags Per Category

all 9 people arrested), and 10th (*#The Tangshan beating incident*) most popular hashtags. On the contrary, clearly more gender-related posts are with the 2nd (*#Men beat up women in a barbecue restaurant in Tangshan*), 3rd (*#Violent attack of Tangshan girls is a nightmare for all*), 6th (*#Several men beat up girls in a barbecue restaurant in Tangshan*), 8th (*#Severely punish the lunatics in the Tangshan barbecue restaurant beating incident*), and 11th (*#The Tangshan beating incident is a naked provocation to a society ruled by law*) mostly used hashtags. It is noticeable that many gender-related posts did not include hashtags with explicit inclinations toward women's rights and feminism but mostly about facts or sentiments (e.g., *#Violent attack of Tangshan girls is a nightmare for all*), even though holding such opinions.

The semantic similarity scores between hashtags and textual content further testified this phenomenon, as shown in Figure 3. The relevance values (semantic similarity scores) indicated that crime-related posts included popular hashtags with closer meanings to the text than gender-related and the *Other* posts do. Relatively, crime-related and gender-related expressions with the most top 13 hashtags were similar to the semantic meanings of the hashtags they used. For some hashtags with 14–20 ranks, gender-related expressions instead had closer meanings to the hashtags. The weighted-mean relevance of crime-related posts ( $M=0.40$ ) is significantly larger than that of gender-related posts ( $M=0.35$ ) with the top-10 hashtags ( $z = 188, p < .0001$ , also with a Cohen's  $D$  effect size of 1.05, implying its large practical significance ( $>.8$ ). For the top-20 hashtags, the weighted-mean relevance of crime-related posts ( $M=0.39$ ) is also significantly larger than that of gender-related posts ( $M=0.36$ ),  $z = 64, p < .0001$ , effect size of .32 (small practical significance possibly due to the involvement of more posts with average relevance). This indicates that the most popular hashtags, to some extent, semantically divergent from gender-related text, which we arguably regarded as largely manifesting the posters' authentic intentions. The preliminary quantitative evaluation implied that gender-related or feminist expressions were constrained on Weibo. In the following paragraphs, we report the topics of discussions about this incident.

**5.1.2 Crime-related Content.** There are four topics covering the majority of content in the *Crime-related* class, as listed in Table 3. Posts in the *Crime-related* class regarded the incident as a criminal event that has little to do with gender issues. Over half of the posts talked about *Gangs and Umbrella*. They were concerned with the social problems of gangland and associated umbrella personnel in the local government who concealed facts about gangs and colluded with them. The posters assumed the existence of organized local gangs and questioned the ability of local government agencies. They thought the government and public security bureau should strive to eliminate gangs. The issues of gangs subsequently raised conjectures about corruption under the assumption that only insiders could keep the gangsters from law enforcement and preserve them under the strict security policy in China. Posts under this topic usually expressed anxiety or determination to

remove illegal gangs by strict law enforcement, while the remaining posts drew more attention to the criminal facts, either about this incident or other cases. The second most popular topic was *Situation and Progress Report* in which media and grassroots users reported and discussed current situations of the victims and the latest progress of criminal investigation. The topic of *Criminal Details and Legal Sentencing* clusters posts that reported or made conjectures regarding the detailed facts of the incident or judged the criminal nature of the incident according to law. In the class of *Related Cases*, the posts described prior and similar criminal cases in relation to the suspects or government bureau, discussing the suspects' criminal records or the government's corruption and irresponsibility.

**5.1.3 Gender-related Content.** Analyzing the keywords and content of the posts belonging to the *Gender-related* class revealed four popular topics, as shown in Table 4. The first one concerned women's Rights to Act Freely and Pursue Beauty without limitations from gender stereotypes, prejudice, or sexism. Many people were aware of the multitude of constraints disciplining women's behavior, including dressing. Chinese women may be criticized as "scantily clad," a typical example of slut-shaming. In the case of Tangshan, the girl victims were accused for the same reason. Some posts attributed the sexual harassment and the following violence to the girls' dressing and attending the barbecue restaurant at midnight, which was conceived as "inappropriate" in the dominant cultural codes. Those opinions were criticized by users who promote women's right to free action and avoid to be treated unequally. Also, some pointed out that women's self-protection alone can not solve the problem unless men learn to respect and protect women. In addition, the phrase "girls help girls" (the text appeared in English, not Chinese) and the idea of "only girls protect girls" frequently appeared in this topic and sometimes other topics as well.

Many people also expressed their *Anger, Anxiety, and Disappointment of Violence Against Women*. Unlike other social security events, the Tangshan incident was perceived as against women partially because of its sexual-harassment nature. Since some women users already bewared of men mentally, this event made their worries real. It struck Chinese women's nerve not just because the victims are women but also that the place, a barbecue restaurant, is too common in China, implying such event could be universal and happen in everyday encounter.

Besides expressing fear and anxiety, some women users accused the suspects of shockingly disrespecting and insulting the victims. They were angry because the men suspects regarded the women as vents for libido. The discussion also generalized to denouncement towards other men who disrespect women or even all men. The users criticized men, especially those inclined to objectify women or show no empathy or understanding of women's disadvantaged reality.

The users also shared their *Anecdotes, Similar Cases* and broadcast *Warnings* to other women. One user mentioned that the incident reminded them to share an experience of being sexual-harassed that would otherwise have "rotten in the stomach." The disclosed experiences described personal stories and often was accompanied by warnings to other women and an appeal for social support within women. They warned others that such violence could befall any single woman and is not predictable:

*She is more than just her, she is us.*

*If we don't speak up this time, we may not have the opportunity to speak up next time.*

These posts gained noticeable popularity on Weibo. Fully exploring the repost practices is beyond the scope of this study. We only report their existence here. In general, they leveraged such empathetic narratives to stimulate women's sense of their reality and, simultaneously, attempted to build social support among those sharing similar experiences.

Topics & Top Keywords	Example Posts
<b>Gangs and Umbrella (61.12%)</b> Tangshan, incident, beat, society, power, wipe out gangs, umbrella, evil, report, severally punish, hope, law, people, eliminate evil, violence, matter, nation, gangland, real name, crime	1. This is not a matter of gender confrontation or quality, but a resolute struggle between our society as a whole and the forces of darkness and evil, as well as a resolute resistance to violence that provokes the law. 2. What protective umbrella, what black and evil forces! If the officials who can't guarantee the safety of people's lives and property should resign!
<b>Situation and Progress Report (18.28%)</b> Tangshan, incident, beat, woman, barbecue, society, personnel, crime, June, case, beat up, video, situation, law, violence, the city of Tangshan, happen, police, journalist, suspect	1. According to the designated jurisdiction of the Public Security Bureau of Hebei Province, a case of provocation and violent assault occurred in a barbecue restaurant in Lubei District of Tangshan City, which was investigated and handled by Guangyang Branch of Langfang Public Security Bureau. 2. Tangshan woman was beaten by multiple people after she refused harassment in a barbecue restaurant, and now all nine suspects have been arrested. Subsequently, Tangshan set off a wave of real-name reports.
<b>Criminal Details and Legal Sentencing (13.00%)</b> Tangshan, barbecue, beat, police, personnel, case, involved, beat up, June, suspect, woman, incident, arrested, crime, violence, the city of Tangshan, circulate, public security bureau, 10th day, branch	1. And dragged the woman to the monitoring area outside the Blind area. Whether there is a continued beating or indecent behavior, we do not know, we know is that the woman to the ground after the other party is still not relieved. 2. Drunkenness is not a reason for exemption, the troublemaker beat others, and caused serious damage. He's behavior is suspected of constituting provocation and nuisance crime, intentional injury crime. In addition, the woman resisted to avoid their own more serious violence, is a legitimate defense, not criminally responsible, and will not become the perpetrator of violence to reduce the reason for sentencing.
<b>Related Cases (7.60%)</b> Tangshan, several punish, incident, society, conference, beat, court, work, barbecue, people, June, wipe out gangs, according to law, assault case, hurry up, consume, citizen	1. That Tangshan assailant *** (name of the suspect) is the local aquaculture boss, several times became an old rogue, repeatedly restricted high consumption. 2. But the *** (name of a government official), which I have been reporting for years, has not only stayed put, but was also named "excellent cadres" in the "national political and legal rectification". It's mind boggling!

Table 3. Categorization of topics with examples for posts in the Crime-related class

**5.1.4 Other Content.** Although the *Irrelevant or Ineffective* category constitutes 67.42% of the collected posts, most of them contained low quality content or contributed little to meaningful conversations. Topic modeling clustered posts in the *Irrelevant or Ineffective* class into ten groups (determined by the researcher ). The topics for most groups are: sentimental expression of shock and hopelessness, asking for follow-up and more attention, curses to the suspects, questioning

Topics & Top Keywords	Example Posts
<b>Rights to Act Freely and Pursue Beauty (32.35%)</b> girl, female, protect, girl, speak out, girl, go out, barbecue, hope, society, severally punish, harassment, dressed, friends, fault, scantily clad, night, matter, resist, victim	1. You say women better not wear skirts in the middle of the night, they are wearing white T's and pants, you say girls should not go out alone in the middle of the night, they are in a group, you say girls should not go to shady places, they are in a well-lit street! They have not been wrong since the beginning! 2. After things came out my sister told me not to wear makeup to go out at night in the future, anyone is teaching girls how to protect themselves, so why can't some men with cheap hands control themselves and respect girls. Gender is not the original sin, evil is. Makeup, dress and time and place are not excuses for sexual harassment!
<b>Anger, Anxiety, and Disappointment of Violence Against Women (29.57%)</b> female, society, male, girl, incident, protect, matter, gender, Tangshan, hope, girl, man, speak out, violence, harass, happen, girl, beat, male, victim	1. What I am angry about is the naked harassment of women in broad daylight, what I am angry about is the unprovoked beating with physical advantage, what I am angry about is the indifference of bystanders, the silence of men. Why can't we use the words male and female, why do we have to explain that it's not feminism? 2. I lost sleep last night and woke up early today with a muddled mind because of this confusing and horrifyingly vicious event. The impact of this event on the public is that it can be very vicarious, because they are being publicly violated in the most ordinary and common state of life like each of us.
<b>Denouncement towards the Perpetrators and Men (27.41%)</b> girl, female, male, man, Tangshan, beat, woman, harassment, incident, girl, female, sexual harassment, speak out, protect, society, girls, video, hope, severally punish, strike up a conversation	1. Men are generally more egregious than women, see the video is a passerby female who several times rushed out but is stopped by her boyfriend. In the gang it is also a white dressed woman to persuade the fight. 2. So stop saying what "girls should learn to protect themselves" bullshit, the vast majority of cases are never girls do not love themselves. It is men who are worse than animals, including but not limited to domestic violence, rape, provocation.
<b>Anecdotal Experiences, Similar Cases, and Warnings (10.67%)</b> girl, Tangshan, beat, speak out, incident, sexual harassment, your turn, f**k you, death penalty, suggest, tonight, female, male, Shanghai, Xi'an, subway, Fengxian, iron chain, opportunity	1. The thing that happened to people I know. A few girls playing in their own homes at night, there was a strange drunken man (a strong sports student) who knocked on the door to play hooliganism and then began to beat people. After reporting the girls instead be educated. 2. I do not believe that this kind of people will sincerely apologize, crocodile tears only. The harassment is not accomplished by violent beating. When the pursuit was not accomplished he created yellow rumors to insult the innocence of girls. Besides one is a physical injury one is a mental injury, what is the difference between this one and the Tangshan beating incident?

Table 4. Categorization of topics with examples for posts in the Gender-related class



the ability of local police, and irrelevant content (posts about matters other than the incident). We instead focus on the *Crime-related* and *Gender-related* categories.

## 5.2 RQ2: Discursive Patterns Around Gender Dimension

The validity and importance of gender factors were in the core conflict between the criminal and gender perspectives. Those crime-related posts tended to deny the incident's relation to gender. In contrast, gender-related posts necessitated generally feminist interpretation. There were also attempts to mediate the conflicting sides, saying that criminal and gender interpretations are not mutually exclusive. In this subsection, we report their discursive patterns in accordance with the following parties: (1) Objection to Gender Dimension, (2) Support to Gender Dimension, and (3) Bridging the Two. In addition to what reported below, we also found common discourses against feminism discussed by previous studies, including stigmatization to feminism [56] and biased media rhetoric [64]. We acknowledged their presence and particularly focused on the following discursive patterns

*5.2.1 Objection to Gender Dimension.* The vast majority of posts showing a hostile standpoint against advocates of gender factors are from the *Crime-related* class (not completely due to the imperfection of machine learning classification). Those posters held such an inclination that ignores, denies, or downplays gender factors in interpreting the incident. Various discursive patterns emerged against feminist opinions, often intertwined and combined. The objection usually converged with legitimized criminal interpretation or re-framed the incident's conflict to these other than gender. The posters also criticized the feminists as being "extreme" and "inciting conflict between the genders" or "inciting gender opposition." Following are the major discursive patterns used to object gender dimension.

*Re-framing of Conflict.* A criminal perspective prevailed as the incident involved illegal gangs and violence against law. However, often the incident was re-framed as a purely criminal issue, which denied gender factors and discussions. Even though gender factors was not completely disavowed, some would confer a priority - criminal topics precede gender topics. They usually re-framed the incident's nature to the conflict between the "law-abiding and law-breaking," and thus defined the incident as an ordinary social security event. Some posts sought endorsement from "equality before the law" by referring that judicial practice about violence does distinguish an abuser's gender, and thus gender factors are out of discussion. Such argument missed the fact that modern laws have provisions specifically in protection of women, which does not contradicts with the principle of equality.

Besides legal framing, some posters related their opinions to normative social ethics about evil and good. They typically claimed that "*No discussion of men and women, only good and evil*," where the evil was generalized from the gangsters, and the good was from the victims. Such discourse deducted and regressed the debate since, as other posters also pointed out, the intent was to cease gender-related and feminist expressions in the name of commonly-held ethics. Some posts also related to the conflict between strong and weak: "*The protection is for the vulnerable, not just women; the punishment is for the evil, not men.*" Again, the strong/weak pattern ignored gender factors and particularities associated with gender. Those posts are similar in that they attempted to fit the incident into a general and conservative value framework while refused gendered reality. One example is as follows:

*We should pay more attention to the victims and perpetrators. Today the victims are only women. There still are other people getting hurt: may be boys, the elderly or even*

*children. So it's not only women who will be hurt, but that the four women victims belong to a vulnerable group in front of these abusers.*

Women in this posts were assembled with other groups into the tent of "the vulnerable." Thus the particular power relations between genders in a patriarchal society was dismissed, and the frame shifted. Also, the post used the possibility of violence toward other groups as an argument, making the incident seemly indifferent to an ordinary violent event. The substitution-like discursive pattern is further explained in *Equal Susceptibility Between Genders*.

***Equalizing Vulnerability Between Genders.*** This type of discourse could be characterized as "violence does not discriminate between genders or among other social groups." In other words, violence could equally befall each person regardless of their gender and intersectionality, depicting gender as an insignificant factor. For example, "Even if for men, it's possible to be beaten for looking at each other. (can find the case at Baidu (a Chinese search engine), a man was stabbed to death for looking at the other one)." These posts shared an underlying assumption that women encounter violence for the same reason and mechanism as men. It was clearly false and reflected a patriarchal logic.

***Union of All: "People Help People".*** An English phrase "People Help People" appeared in some posts to replace "Girls Help Girls," which was generally perceived as with a feminist inclination. The posters envisioned a Utopian status where everyone unite and provide mutual help in facing of any crisis. One post mentioned that:

*I hope that in the face of violence, in the face of any other injustice, men and women can stand on the same position and angle to help the disadvantaged. I hope not just "girls help girls", or "boys help boys", but "people help people".*

Although appealing on the surface, such a narrative did not become aware of gendered life experiences and the systematic inequality. "People Help People," in most cases, is misleading because it often suggests ignorance of neither contingent nor systematic gendered reality, and it will not be achieved with gender conflict set aside. In this way, the seemly prospective vision may only achieve its reverse.

**5.2.2 Support to Gender Dimension.** All posts supporting gender-related and feminist discussion belong to the *Gender-related* category. The posters adopted varied discursive patterns to defence the necessity of gender factors of the incident. A common characteristic among them was their awareness of the dissimilarity between genders in a social and cultural sense.

***Unmasking Sexual Motive and Challenged Masculinity.*** Based on the video footage, people argued that the oral conflict and the subsequent beating originated from the man's sexual harassment, but the motive was relatively less mentioned among the crime-related posts. Thus, these posts related the incident to gender by assuming that women are victims in scenarios of sexual harassment. A post implied that criticizing sexual motive is the reason behind gender discussion: "Isn't the reason why this happened because of sexual harassment, the problems that arise between the genders?". Another poster advocated that gender factors were somehow precedent to criminal factors:

*We CAN talk about human rights, public security, and the social system, but in this case, the root cause is sexual harassment. The physical identities of men and women are satisfied first, and then the social identities of abusers and victims are satisfied.*

Here the sexual motive was regarded as the "root cause" that was based on the "physical identities of men and women" or their relations. Violence toward women due to sexual motives and gender preconception is clearly a target for feminist criticism because of its objectification of women and

ignorance of women's wills. Gender factors were defenced by linking sexual motives with broader and deeper gender issues.

Moreover, for some posters, the women victims' resistance challenged masculinity so that the violence occurred to maintain domination over the women and "face in front of other men." The conflict originated from the abuser's sexual harassment. The first woman refused by asking "What are you doing?". The man replied with "I wanna f\*\*\* you." Then the woman's friends attacked the man, which triggered the man's outrage and violence. Based on observable details, some posters thought the man's violence did not target who beaten him but who was inferior to him. When being challenged, the man's reaction was not completely to fight back but to maintain his nominal superiority. They also pointed out that the man's reaction might be motivated by his anxiety of losing face in front of others, especially his man friends. Since the man's friends had been informed of his intention and others around noticed the quarrel as well, the man might find himself in an awkward position when the woman refused, and only continuing demonstrating masculinity and power could conceal him failure. Some pushed the analysis deeper by saying that the suspect who failed to seek privilege over women feared to be regarded as a loser and be expelled from the male-privilege group.

**Challenging Equal Vulnerability Between Genders.** Some posters refused the discourse that men have equal chances and reasons of being attacked by others as women do. They stated that men are less likely to be sexually harassed by women to refute such idea of equal susceptibility. These discourses reflected the grassroots feminists' understanding of the qualitative differences between how violence against women and men are generated. They thought that "*men do not get into that situation*" because of reasons: "*men can protect themselves*." At the same time, women would be more passive, which is not due to the biological differences but rather the social context where men's actions receive more endorsement and are more tolerable. Men, the privileged, due to limited experience, are often unaware of or adherent to their privilege and the oppression experienced by women. The hierarchical gender relations were most likely ignored by men so that they would think gender equality was well achieved, and thus attributed the women's encounter to their individual "misbehavior." Some posters also mentioned that women are regarded as the vent for men's libido in addition to brutality, which profoundly shaped their inferior position in relation to men.

**5.2.3 Bridging the Two.** Besides the dichotomized parties of objection and support to gender-related discussion, another group admitted the criminal properties while being aware of gender factors. Almost all such posts were found in the *Crime-related* class. Their posters thought that criminal and gender perspectives are not exclusive, and in principle, both problems can be solved without conflict - attention to criminal properties and legal institutions is necessary, but people holding a criminal perspective should not deny gender-related or feminist interpretations. For them, both gangs and harassment were causes for the violent incident. Therefore, some proposed eliminating the illegal gangs and umbrellas in the government and admitted the necessity of "ideologically sweeping away the misconception" toward women.

## 6 DISCUSSION

Sexism has shifted from easily-identifiable overt dehumanization to more covert and subtle forms, including gender blindness [74]. With the development of civil society, overt sexist language and sentiments are less expressed as adherence to social taboos around sexism. However, the conservative cultural norms around gendered roles and representation are still ingrained. Under the educated civil interaction and assentation to political correctness in contemporary gender-blind discourse often is deeply-coded sexism and bias, which coincides with how racism and racialized understanding have shifted to ambivalent and symbolic forms [5, 85, 91]. Sexism and racism

nowadays take new forms to extend their lifespan. This work adds to the critique of gender-blind sexism by exposing and discussing how the new sexist ideology moralizes and credits itself through abstractly yet delusively connecting to commonly-held moral convictions. We discuss this issue in the first following subsection (6.1). As the results preliminarily demonstrated, social media plays a critical role in the dissemination and reproduction of sexism and suppression against progressive feminism in online spaces. We therefore specifically discuss (6.2) how gender-blind sexism become platformed, meaning such sexism is (un)intentionally supported by social platforms' operations and users' interaction practices.

## 6.1 Normalization of Gender-Blind Sexism

According to Stoll's initial framework, gender-blind sexism consists of four major frames: abstract liberalism, cultural sexism, minimization of sexism, and naturalization [74]. In the case of Tangshan incident which is a mix of criminal and gender issues, the majority of sexist discussions centered around minimization of sexism. Abstract liberalism (stressing equal opportunity and individual choice), cultural sexism, and naturalization (seeking justifications for gender stratification from sociocultural and biological "evidence") appeared rarely. The reason could be that discussions around the incident focused more on interpreting the specific case where the competitive relation between women and men, on which other frames of gender-blind sexism base, is not very visible. Instead, we found that people frequently use normative framing and re-framing as persuasive techniques to minimize sexist attributes associated with the incident. This understanding builds upon Stoll's framework of gender-blind sexism and extends it to further explore the complexity of public interpretation of social controversy in relation to gender and feminism.

Minimization of sexism refers to the effort that downplays the role of sexism in determining the life chances of women [4]. Posts re-framing the incident to a purely criminal issue, a conflict between evil and good, and a conflict between strong and weak directly demolish the core of gender debate by substituting gender with other neutral and legitimized categories. The grassroots feminists push back against such narratives by stressing the sexual motive, women's liberty and rights focusing on unique experience of women. Adherents to the frames of gender-blind sexism, however, position themselves at a moral highland backed by common values, making them hard to be challenged. One way making this type of narrative illusive is its use of moral framing and reframing.

Moral framing, according to Lakoff [49], refers to the framing of which the driven force is based on moral concerns. Research across disciplines about moral framing proves that it is an effective persuasion tool, especially in political debate [31]. When grounded on moral values, opinions are more likely to be accepted by others in debates and discussions. As illustrated in our results about discursive patterns against feminist discussions, universal moral convictions supporting social security, vulnerable groups, and good citizens are adopted to affirm their legitimacy in dismissing gender-related and feminist discourses. These common moral values are in essence not directly contradictory to feminism, but with such framing, moral convictions endorse minimization of sexism, making it event more covert and subtle. This phenomena also affirms the necessity of studying how discursive techniques obscure and sugarcoat gender-blind sexism in online communications.

According to Feinberg and Willer [29, 30], the closer it is between the morality of framing and the morality of persuasion target, the more likely the persuasion will succeed. As a result, discourses can be re-framed to fit the moral convictions of the target audiences to make them even more persuasive, and the effectiveness is recorded in the political field [31, 82]. In our samples, some discourses replaced gender issues with the conflict between weak & strong, good & evil, and criminal & noncriminal and then explicitly or implicitly claimed their accordance with women's interests to be persuasive and rational. In this process, women's particular conditions and interests

were normalized to fit into the commonly-held social values. The idea of "people help people" is a typical example showing how moral re-framing is used to minimize sexism. It is a re-framing persuasive technique to make normally unacceptable opinions for women and feminists (e.g., people should not pay special attention to women being harmed by men) seemly reasonable and acceptable. People tend to uncritically agree with these narratives that accord with normative values. Besides, the study of Kodapanakkal et al. [44] proves that moral frames and re-frames also decrease the willingness to compromise, suggesting that the underlying gender-blind sexism may be more persistent when pivoted on normative values. Nevertheless, moral framing and re-framing here might also dismiss cultural sexism and naturalization of sexism since the latter two are apparently opposite to the normalized values.

## 6.2 Platformed Gender-Blind Sexism and Low Visibility of Feminism

Social platforms mediate the production and consumption of user-generated content, and the features of platforms influence how dominant ideologies disseminate and reproduce online [4]. Matamoros-Fernández [58] proposes the concept of "platformed racism" as a type of racism generated from the platforms' designs, affordances, policies, and culture of use. Wu et al. [85] further examine how the designs, policies, and content of Reddit support racism and result in weaponized identities as well as digital gentrification. They also suggest contextualized interventions and governance. When it comes to gender issues, Adrienne [57] investigated how Reddit's karma point system along with other mechanisms support anti-feminist and misogynistic activism. In the work, dominant ideologies directly link to the functionalities of platforms. This study builds upon this prior work and specifically highlights how the low visibility of feminist discourses on Weibo, an understudied platform used by billions of users, may endorse such gender-blind sexism.

The low visibility of feminist discourses may be one of the major caveats under the current designs and policies of Weibo. Chinese feminists have been striving to extend their reaches on social media and establish alliances to inform broader audiences [83]. Social media as the critical arena for public opinions should involve more voices from women and feminists to make it more inclusive, open, and robust. On Weibo, and other Chinese social media, feminist discourses are almost always oppressed, leaving sexism amplified and prevailing.

As described, we found mismatches between the hashtags' and the actual texts' semantic meanings. Hashtags similar to "#girls help girls" did not gain popularity whereas posts using neutral hashtags such as "#Tangshan beating" but with text supporting "girls help girls" appeared frequently. Hashtags with a feminist stand were not used much by Chinese grassroots feminists, but their ideas were expressed through posting with neutral or "politically correct" (meaning adherent to China's mainstream framing to be simply criminal) hashtags to engage in discussion.

A possible explanation for this behavior could be the policy enforcement set by Weibo and the government bureau. The hashtags with an apparent feminist stand could be limited or censored to control the trends of public opinion. It could also be due to self-discipline of Weibo users to avoid publishing "aggressive" posts amidst the sensitive Chinese Internet, or to avoid stigmatization of being "pastoral/rural feminism" (a special form of stigmatization to feminism in China, accusing feminism as only seeking privileges but not performing duties) [56]. However, fully supporting women's rights requires worry-free expressions of feminist thoughts and concerns regarding gender issues, yet the current speech constraints on Chinese social media are not optimistic.

Another possibility is that people select hashtags largely based on their rankings. Weibo exhibits rankings of trending topics, hashtags, and super-groups (interest groups focusing on more sustainable topics than trending topics). It also recommends popular hashtags with rankings according to output of certain algorithms. As shown in Table 1, neutral hashtags are ranked at the top based on number of discussions and readings. The users might incline to include top-ranked hashtags or



recommended hashtags when posting, making these popular hashtags even more visible. On the contrary, hashtags outside of the top would receive less attention. Throughout this process, already less visible feminist discussions could be further downplayed while mainstream discourses could be amplified due to the "rich get richer" phenomenon [60]. The platform then, in consequence, would align individuals' opinions with the mainstream attention and marginalize other discourses. When the mainstream narrative perpetuates dominant ideologies such as gender-blind sexism, the platform, therefore, would disseminate and reproduce them in a platformed manner.

## 7 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE WORK

This work's limitation unfolds into two parts. First, we could only scrap a subset of all posts due to the limitation set by Weibo (e.g., displaying only 1,000 posts for each hour when searching by hashtags but more posts got published during that hour, and we could not precisely measure the loss). Also, focusing on one microblogging platform is prone to the risk of limited generalizability. Second, there was censorship by Chinese authorities. Posts on Weibo might be censored based on content sensitivity, language, and word usage, IP location, and user records. Tracing content censorship, we found that some posts were blocked from access via the desktop website, and previously visible posts were later marked as "deleted by the author" and became invisible.

Although noticing the need for social support among women through online platforms, we did not explore it in depth. Future work following this line could be: (1) analyzing the social collaboration network of the women users to examine the dissemination mechanism, relation, and influence dynamics; (2) further quantifying the semantic mismatch found between hashtags used and textual content and people's posting behavior; and (3) interviewing people who participated in similar online activism about their experiences and opinions regarding gender-blind sexism in online spaces.

## 8 CONCLUSION

By employing computational methods and feminist critical discourse analysis on the online debate of a controversial social event in China, we examined the trends, topics, and discursive patterns around the incident's criminal and gender dimensions. Gender-related and feminist discourses were suppressed in the digital environment of Weibo and the broader policies of China. This particularly manifested in the resulted mismatched use of hashtags by grassroots feminists and the delusive discursive patterns emerged in discussing gender dimension of the incident. We also witnessed how Chinese grassroots feminists engaged in social media to push back against gender blindness and speak out. This work contributed to an empirical study of the covert ideology of gender-blind sexism on Chinese social media in relation to platform attributes and environment, which continues to penetrate new forms of sexism in the digital realm. We also call for more attention to the issue of gender blindness as the equal and just online environment we envisioned could only be achieved if we address the multiple facets of gendered bias and inequality.

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