

The Alienation of Women's Discourse on Chinese Social Media

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Abstract. The burgeoning gendered terms and the derogatory languages that underpin the patriarchy on Chinese social media emerge as an encumbrance to the development of women's discourse which is plagued with discourse alienation. Given this, this paper reviews the recent research progress into the alienation of women's discourse on Chinese social media, to manifest the representations of discourse alienation produced by language and to seek possible solutions for constructing healthy women's discourse. Through analyzing the alienation from the lens of language, this review cites examples in previous research to illustrate how Chinese characters and language relating to women with positive meaning have been derogated, and demonstrates that women's ways to express in the public sphere are influenced by male-dominated discourse. Three factors conspire to the alienation of women's discourse, namely the consumerism fueled by Internet communication, the imbalance between the progress of women and ingrained patriarchal culture in the Chinese context, and the passive action taken by women themselves. Major findings were: 1) Chinese-language social media is the breeding ground for the burgeoning gendered terms that stigmatize women's cohort and muffle women's discourse; 2) Social media platform perpetuates the patriarchal ideology and consumerism, leading to the alienation of women's discourse; 3) Women usually plunge into the impasse of men's discourse by borrowing, imitating and adopting men's language to express themselves. This paper also indicates the problem of the operation mechanism of social media platform by excessively spreading biased gender representations, which can be addressed with the establishment of a corpora of gender-biased expressions to detect and curb their dissemination.

Keywords: Social Media; Women's Discourse; Gendered Terms; Alienation.

1. Introduction

In current China, the progress achieved by feminism on Chinese-language social media is plagued with stagnation. It begins to exacerbate stocked by internet communication which perpetuates the inscribed gender stereotypes (Wang, 2019). There is a common finding in previous studies that social media presents as a double-edged sword regarding its discourse establishment, as it provides open space for speech freedom. Meantime, it aggravates the gendered language which underpins the patriarchal culture. Many scholars argue that despite the fact that in current public sphere, the topics about domestic violence and sexual abuse become more welcome in women's discourse without being deprecated as before, mainstream social media (e.g., Weibo, NetEase and Zhihu) still maintain the established order of gender domination, with patriarchal ideas influencing women's discourse subconsciously (Dong, 2021). Hence, it leads to the predicament of women's discourse. On the one hand, women begin to take initiative to express themselves in the public sphere formally talking about the issues related to their interests, which is beneficial for the construction of women's discourse. On the other hand, their discourse tends to turn

in the opposite direction to supporting patriarchal discourse unconsciously by adopting the "complicity" women's discourse (Zhang & He, 2019) by imitating men's discourse to express their ideas and catering to conventional values.

However, the alienation of women's discourse can be manifested in the burgeoning gendered terms online, the counter-discourse practices made by women and the grammatical arrangements of online news. More sexist terms are created against women and women's discourse, which is devoid of their own identity. In the following sections, this paper will elaborate on the representation of the alienation of women's discourse, its causes, and corresponding solutions.

2. The Alienation of Women's Discourse

This section will introduce the background of alienation in terms of women's discourse first. Before the emergence of Weibo (i.e., A Chinese social media platform), NetEase (i.e., a comprehensive digital forum in China) and Zhihu (i.e., a community question-answering site in China), the images of women were often portrayed as perfect

housewives who were made under men's gaze, and women's expressions were underplayed in traditional media, for example, newspapers, television, and advertisement. Under this circumstance, featured with strong interactivity and a low threshold for communication, social platforms such as Weibo have transformed the traditional dissemination of information by dissolving the boundaries between transmitters and audiences (Song & Yang, 2010). Given this change, women as audiences become more active on social platforms and have more freedom to express their views and feelings, presenting a more comprehensive image of women and making for the liberation of women's discourse (Zhang & Yu, 2011). With social media platforms burgeoning, the environment for women's discourse is revamped. However, it has also deteriorated simultaneously. The stereotyping of certain women cohorts or the women as a whole can be observed on these popular social media platforms. Social media in China perpetuates the established gender order. A butch of gendered terms and sexist syntactical arrangement mirror that gender disequilibrium is still rife, reinforcing the stereotypes against women, thereby aggravating the oppression of women discourse.

2.1 The Prevalence of Gender-Biased Terms

On Chinese social media platforms, an increasing number of women express their views and feelings through mass self-communication more than ever (Zhang & Yu, 2011). Nonetheless, the predicament of women's discourse precipitates concerns, including not only the explicit and implicit meaning that women audiences want to convey, but also the way they articulate which are still fettered by the male power with social media adding fuel.

One perspective of this alienation can be perceived as more Chinese characters have started to digress from their original positive meaning and been turned into derogatory ones, which abounds in social media. The above phenomenon can be best explained by gender-related derogatory terms. In Chinese, "Xiaojie" (i.e. lady in English) used to be an honorific way of addressing unmarried women. However, in modern days, its meaning has been distorted, referring to those who are engaged in sexual services. The derogation happens as well to "yuan" which shows women with an elegant carriage. "Ming yuan" (i.e., a socialite in English), which used to address beautiful young women from better-off families. Different from its original meaning, now it refers to a group of women social climbers who love to purchase luxuries to satisfy their vanity on social media. Then "yuan" has turned to be a gender-biased generic Chinese character to point at women. Previous research suggests that women are disposed to record daily life in private sectors through self-disclosure on social media (Zhang & Yu, 2011). Although women have obtained more respect in reality than before, regress in the realization of securing the same status as men can be found in a virtual world where the oppression of women's discourse abounds. Even though women's discourse is most seen in private space, their words can be thrust into the spotlight for derogation. For example, according to the posts on the

private sector on "Weibo," women will be labeled as "bing yuan", literally meaning women who are recuperating from illness merely for they wear make-up, which runs counter to the traditional weak and feeble image of ill women. The emerging lexical terms online featured with the character of "yuan" indicate negative meanings when it is collocated with other nouns which are usually those words about male-dominated occupations such as "cheng xu yuan" (i.e., woman programmer) or male-dominated Chinese culture sector such as "fo yuan" (i.e., a woman who offer sacrifice in Buddhist temple). The above-gendered items reflect the incompatibility between women and ingrained social norms. It all has been preconceived that the pursuit of ostensible life is a defect of women and should be criticized; women who are dressed well should not enter temples which are considered sacred places that were used for men to worship the Chinese god, which had been the conventional notion; it is also now widely accepted that the female individuals who do make-up while lying in the hospitals are regarded as e-commerce frauds for selling health products. The derogatory "yuan" is produced in this context which brings the specific characteristics of the women above to the forefront as a representative depicter of many other women (Peng & Hou & KhosraviNik & Zhang, 2021) and social media help exacerbate the situation.

2.2 Women's Counterattack

Influenced by feminism, the growing number of women netizens start to discuss issues regarding their interests and vocalize for their rights in public sectors on social media, especially after the outbreak of the pandemic. However, the discussion invariably tends to evolve into conflicts awash in verbal belligerence between men and women. This showcases that on the one hand, the women's criticism of sexist information has stimulated the sensitive nerves of some men's rights advocates (Song, 2015); on the other hand, it also reveals the deep-rooted gender discrimination against women in society (Song & Yang, 2010). During this conflict, women tend to counterattack men using morphing versions of men's discourse, indicating that women's discourse is controlled by men's power. For instance, when stigmatized as "nv quan," in which "quan" literally means the fist which shares the same pronunciation as "right" in Chinese, the women online will impugn male netizens with terms with homonyms derogating the male cohort in the same pattern that men do, rather than articulate their own speeches. This can be best understood as the "complicity" woman discourse which is a narrative strategy that distinguishes itself from a male discourse by borrowing, adapting, and seeking a "feminine" coding style to use established words (Ling, 2002). This kind of discourse does not get rid of the restrictions of male-dominated discourse in essence. Besides, some women tend to use personal-journey rhetoric citing a biased personal experience to justify gendered notions, which constructs a consistent pattern that exploits the sexualized portrayal of female images and endorses the long-existing prejudice against unconventional women (Peng & Hou & KhosraviNik &

Zhang, 2021). For example, when it comes to discussing the issue of the female Ph.D., some women netizens tend to assume that female academics were attractive to men and ask them for favor in order to help them publish some papers and gain some academic achievements. Their distinct experiences stoked by the preconceived gender notion still prevails.

2.3 Grammatical Arrangement in Online News

Social media abounds in the news where women as victims of accidents are often sexualized and objectified in online columns. From a grammatical point of view, in Chinese-language sentences, the agent of the action is usually placed in the subject position and the recipient of the action is placed in the object position in the active voice in contrast to the passive voice in English. However, the Chinese online news reports about crime are mostly written in a passive voice, putting the victim (female) in the subject position and the perpetrator (male) in the object position; or it directly ignores the perpetrator. Such the arrangement of the subject and object in the sentence weakens or even obliterates the crime of the perpetrator while highlighting the misfortune of the victim (Talbot, 2004).

A series of grammatical choices reveal the male-centered attitude from which the whole incident is reported (Talbot, 2004). This deliberate emphasis on the gendered bias can be illustrated by the examples of "women are wretched" and "women are obscene". Instead of alerting people to reduce the occurrence of such incidents, the news reports will deepen people's prejudice against women and even give rise to the so-called "victim guilt theory," which will further promote discriminatory and derogatory expressions against women. Typical examples are "female landlord raped by tenant" and "female college student sexually assaulted for XXX", in which women subjects such as "female landlord" and "female college student" are often sexualized. These female groups have been reduced to the objects for male gaze rather than individuals who can express their experience and resort to justice (Konnolly, 2020). Searching for keywords on the Internet reveals that these two female characters, although not derogatory in themselves, have been associated with sex-related news events and fictional works of fiction and that their creators are basically trying to highlight their sex-related qualities.

3. Reasons to the Alienation of Women's Discourse

The combination of reinforcing factors (e.g., consumerism) were stoked by the Internet communication, the imbalance that lies in the progress of women and ingrained patriarchal culture in the Chinese context, along with the passive action taken by women themselves. These will lead to the alienation of women's discourse in the Chinese-language social media.

3.1 Symbiotic Consumerism and Internet Communication

One of the most important reasons for the suppression of women's discourse is the objectification caused by symbiotic consumerism and Internet communication (Song, 2015). Specifically, women are the objects of male speculation with most of the commercial cases featuring women's physical appearance and their personal expressions. Although social media has provided a novel platform where women can express their views and feelings, it shows a proclivity of objectifying women through discourse apart from visual ones, which results in women's discourse being underplayed and reduced to the object for men to consume eventually (Zhang & Yu, 2011).

One case is that many website channels and social media topics that are themed women provide female netizens an environment where they can share their personal experiences. Some of them even contested intimate relationships. These channels and topics are originally intended to create Subaltern Counterpublics for women's discourse by interpreting female identity, interests, and needs from women's perspective to bring private discourse to the public sphere (Song, 2015). Initially, they thrust serious topics such as domestic violence and sexual harassment into the spotlight, endowing many women the opportunities to discuss their opinions as the entities involved, allowing issues regarding women's rights to gain a spot in public discussion and raising the public awareness and sensitivity about women interests (Dong, 2021). Nonetheless, their absolute female stance brings about belligerence and ridicule from men who are unable to strike a chord with women, let alone form rapport communication between the two genders. In most instances, women's discourse is not deemed as a sharing with other women to satisfy their spiritual needs but as sexual beings for men to seek for fun. On the one hand, the commercial interests of social media provide a pivotal momentum for it to publicize content featured with feminine characteristics and gender stereotypes which is regarded as the most direct way to cater to the audience and thus generate profits. In addition, the channels are designed in the commercialized pattern by advocating women's values on the surface while demonstrating female figures to allure online speculators. On the other hand, the virtual community exerts chances to perpetuate stereotypes due to its anonymity and interactivity, as women are disposed to show themselves in regard to physical appearance stimulated by the consumerist values, and men tend to launch butch of invective to criticize women's views on gender issues, which are frequently seen on the Internet. In this sense, those trailblazing channels function as tools for deepening patriarchal notions as they utilize women's discourse as a commodity for males to consume, further deconstructing women's discourse.

3.2 Social Justifications

After discussing symbiotic consumerism and Internet communication, social justification is the other independent factor that should be considered. In the post-

reform era of China, with the increasing number of women gaining wealth and receiving higher education, the chasm lies between the progress achieved by women and the recognition of it from the public. In particular, men have become the major cause that leads to gender conflicts and further stigmatization of the women cohort. It is worth attention that the patriarchal ideology serves to aggravate the contradiction that the female group is invariably at the forefront of the digital discourse environment while their discourse is underplayed and marginalized.

The diversity of women's characteristics in modern China is plagued with the inscribed patriarchal value retaining the one-sided traditional female image which is namely being tender in personality, beautiful in appearance, and less capable in intelligence. Social media is the place where the agitation of prejudice and gender stereotype is rife. As is illustrated in the previous Section 2, the women who are dressed attractively worshipping the Chinese god in temples become the target of criticism online for being alleged to desecrate the god and violate the traditional rules. It can be understood by the predominant impact of Confucian culture with the patriarchal norms at its core that advocates traditional female gender roles as caregivers and heir producers of domestic life, during which they should not intervene in male business. In modern China, women are also endowed with the right to pay tribute to God and express their views on practicing Chinese cultures. Nonetheless, the misogynist assumption that women Buddhism worshipers are often considered an aberration in traditional Chinese culture which is a prevailing judgment that underpins patriarchal conventions, assigning certain limited roles to women and positing that they are categorically incompatible with certain fields of traditional cultures. This can be manifested in the gendered term "fo yuan". In addition, the relatively high socioeconomic status is invariably highlighted in the gendered term "leftover women," which runs counter to the traditional cultural norms of feminine figures as dependant, subservient and not so competent as men (Yu, 2019).

3.3 Women Identity

Furthermore, women are still lacking in awareness of establishing their identity. There is no denying that the predominant patriarchal culture stands in the way of women's further progress in discourse as it is the social convention that shapes one's gender role and identity (Dong, 2021). The women, growing and struggling in this process, has gradually internalized the patriarchal values as their behavior code, thus developing a distorted identity that is alienated from their qualities and values and making themselves victims of sexual prejudice. Taking the website channels and topics as an example, on the one hand, women take the advantage of these platforms to express their personal feelings or views on issues related to their interests in order to establish a social bond with other females. On the other hand, influenced by patriarchal ideology, some women post personal content to cater to men's standards (e.g., physical appearances, emotional needs) subconsciously. In addition, some

women tend to use personal-journey rhetoric citing a biased personal experience to justify gendered notions, which forms a consistent pattern that exploits the sexualized portrayal of female images and endorses the long-existing prejudice against unconventional women (Peng & Hou & KhosraviNik & Zhang, 2021). In this sense, women's discourse fails to help confirm their female identity but falls into the trap of men's discourse.

4. Solutions

To cope with the alienation of women's discourse, measures ought to be taken from three perspectives, namely the social platform, influential scholars and women themselves.

First and foremost, the platform should see beyond the short-term profits (e.g., website traffic) (Song & Yang, 2010) and see a big picture of social media (e.g., reputation) by waiving the practice of disseminating gendered content. The women netizens have emerged as a cohort of large numbers with a growing number of women equipped with the awareness of women's identity. If prioritizing the profits and continuing to ingratiate men's audience, the platforms will fuel more conflicts between genders which is inimical for discourse rapport and further cost its long-term profits.

Specifically, the platforms have the responsibility for playing the role to treat each gender equally, illustrating the diversity of female image and creating more open space for women's discourse, instead of displaying the single-sided ones that cater to men's needs. In terms of editing online news, changes can be made by these platforms by reporting news in a more objective way in depicting men and women. The Chinese online news reports about crimes are mostly written in a passive voice, putting the victim (i.e., female) in the subject position and the perpetrator (i.e., male) in the object position; or it directly ignores the perpetrator, and such the arrangement of the subject and object in the sentence weakens or even obliterates the crime of the perpetrator while highlights the misfortune of the victim (Talbot, 2004). In doing so, the news can easily attract people's attention and has a proclivity of catering to the male audience to watch. In addition, as for the gendered terms that are derived from the social platform such as "yuan", it is time for the platform to crack down on accounts disseminating the sexist terms abusively. It is feasible for the technology department of the social media platform to design a system that can filter the contents featured with sexist or gendered terms in a fixed linguistic formula by detecting keywords. Therefore, the heterosexist postings will be shielded and substituted by gender-balanced content. By doing so, it will not only appeal to female netizens but also help gradually alter the stereotype against women from the perspective of the public.

Furthermore, the influential celebrities and authoritative scholars who are highly recognized on social media should take the lead to speak out for the women who are labeled with derogatory marks by the conventions. At the present, most insightful articles or far-seeing comments can only be accessed on academic and formal platforms

which do not enjoy a large audience as social media does. In this sense, the prestigious scholars and researchers should take the responsibility by voicing their views through social media to influence the public discourse and make some difference in the aggravated women's discourse.

Last but not least, it is necessary for women to enhance their awareness of self-identity. By discarding the practice of simply imitating men's language to launch counterattacks to gendered discourse, they are advocated to take initiative to create women's own language with experiences of themselves (Zhang & Zhang, 2010), articulating thoughts and feelings using women's languages instead of men's or neutral language to further achieve self-confirmation as women. Luce Irigaray, one of the pre-eminent contemporary feminist linguists, has made contributions to women's discourse in the context of postmodernist feminism (Zheng, 2022). In her trail-blazing work in the 1970s and 1980s, Irigaray contended that it is crucial to redefine female experience and female subjectivity to establish a new concept for women's discourse, thus further deconstructing the binary discourse dominated by men (Wang, 2020). Though it is difficult to shatter the long-prevailing power of men with her proposition, women should write and articulate in a way that is related to their gender (Mills, 2012).

Although the concealed and dominant masculine culture functions as the core of modern social media discourse, the conventional one-way male control is no longer compelling as there exist possibilities for women's discourse to develop. Given the possible solutions above, the current discourse online can be changed into a two-way interaction between men and women, which is promising for women to change the current situation in the public discourse.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Chinese-language social media perpetuates the patriarchal ideology which directly stocks up the conflicts between genders online, leading to the alienation of women's discourse. On social media platforms, burgeoning gendered terms are created to maliciously criticize women's discourse and stigmatize women's cohort. Meanwhile, women usually plunge into the impasse of men's discourse by borrowing, imitating, and adopting men's language to express themselves rather than articulate their own feelings and experience. The reasons abound for the alienation with three most salient ones, namely the consumerism fueled by Internet communication, the social justification of the chasm between the progress made by women in a new era and ingrained patriarchal values, and the lack of women's identity. To address these issues, the platform is required to forgo a profit-oriented mindset and set a mechanism to filter the gendered content to present diverse women's images and discourse. Therefore, scholars in the academic field are suggested to speak out for women groups and influence more audiences by publicizing academic insight on gender equality on social media. Also, it is necessary

for women to articulate their feelings and experience by utilizing their feminine language. In addition, it is also suggested that related corpora should be established encompassing newly-emerged and long-prevalent gendered terms in the operation of social media platforms, aiming to detect and curb their dissemination. Although these solutions cannot provide a straightforward equal and opposite response to crumble the male-dominated discourse on social media, it will tend to reduce the encumbrance that stands in the way of the progress of women's discourse and feminist ideas.

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