

A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF #MeToo MOVEMENT RELATED WeChat POSTS ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN CHINA

By ANASTASIYA TYUKHTINA¹

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes WeChat posts of Chinese netizens on their experiences and the scope of the #MeToo movement in China. It employs a thematic analysis as a research method and answers the following research question: How do Chinese WeChat users discuss sexual misconduct, such as harassment or abuse, in #MeToo movement related posts and what are the main topics they raise? The article recognizes three discursive themes: the definition of sexual harassment, the causes of sexual harassment in the Chinese society, and different types of offenders. WeChat users seem to believe that sexual harassment includes physical, verbal, and gender harassment and view specifically Chinese societal norms, patriarchy, and traditional cultural values as contributing factors to the existence of the problem in China. When it comes to offenders, apart from perpetrators, netizens also perceive victim blamers as “companions in crime”.

KEYWORDS: #MeToo movement, sexual harassment, China, thematic analysis, WeChat

1 Having graduated from Leiden University where Anastasiya Tyukhtina wrote her final thesis the current publication is based on, she pursued a China Studies: IR and Politics master's degree at the Yenching Academy of Peking University. Her interest in the digital nature and censorship of the #MeToo movement in China defined the theme of her second master's thesis in the academy: Anastasiya thoroughly explored China's approach to cybersecurity. Currently, Anastasiya is a contributing author in Media Loft and Forbes writing on Chinese society, finance and politics. Her contact details are: tyukhtina1508@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The importance of understanding sexual harassment has been emphasized beyond scholarly discussion by global public initiatives such as the #MeToo movement. Although the issue has raised a fair bit of attention in recent years, not all the countries where the campaign became widespread have engaged with the matter in a similar way. In the People's Republic of China sexual harassment as a term was only legally defined in the PRC Civil Code *minfa dian* 民法典 as recently as in 2020, and Chinese courts still rarely grant hearings to sexual harassment cases with even fewer cases being resolved in favour of victims. Nevertheless, the prevalence of what could be perceived as sexual harassment is arguably not lower than in other places in the world.

In China, January, 2018 is generally considered the starting point of the #MeToo movement. At that time Dr. Luo Xixi accused her former Ph.D. advisor of sexual harassment on the online platform Weibo. Soon, it was discovered that the accused professor of Beihang University had harassed other several female students over the previous decade. This precedent started the wave of accusations in other educational institutions, such as Beijing Film Academy, Hebei Institute of Communications and Nanchang University. In the next twelve months, the campaign expanded and went online, with netizens speaking out about their experiences on various social media channels, for example, Zhihu, Weibo and Wechat.

Thus, digital engagement against sexual harassment in China provided a lot of data which gained a fair bit of attention of various scholars (Ge Y. 2018; Schneider, K. T. & Carpenter N. J. 2019; Tahamtan I. 2019). In many states across the globe the #MeToo movement was accompanied by people marching against sexual harassment and assault at protests whenever demonstrations were organized in their cities. The campaign in China lacked such a form of people's engagement due to the government's heavy crackdown on women's right activists and was shaped by a digitally networked movement (Fincher 2018, 23). In this context, the internet provided space for moral discussions where Chinese people could raise culturally important issues. Furthermore, public discussions on sensitive topics had been under strict control in China. Hence, it is academically and societally relevant to find out which posts and topics passed through online censorship.

In my research I answered the following research question: How do Chinese WeChat users discuss sexual misconduct, such as harassment or abuse, in #MeToo movement related posts and what are the main topics they

raise? The method I applied for my research included searching for posts, familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, translating, and writing up. I chose WeChat as a data source since the format allows its users to extensively share their thoughts on any subject matter online. Another reason is the wide availability of posts. Despite the sensitivity of my research topic and censorship of online discussions in China, there were enough posts available as material for the analysis. As the period of time since the moment when the #MeToo movement came to China exceeded two years and as my intention was to conduct qualitative thematic analysis of #MeToo posts, I could not analyse all the posts when one thousand initial results containing my keywords were found. Therefore, I chose the last week of July 2018, from 24 July 2018 to 31 July 2018 as this was a central period of the #MeToo movement with plenty of posting activity to perform robust research, fostered by public allegations of sexual misconduct against famous Chinese citizens, such as journalist Zhang Wen or TV host Zhu Jun. As for the chronological steps, I first used WeChat's search system to look for the most widely used #MeToo related keywords in China one at a time: "MeToo", "*mi tu* 米兔", "*wo ye shi* 我也是", "*an wo yi yang* 俺我一样". After my initial results were sorted by date, ninety-six posts published between the 24th and 31st of July remained. Later on, I removed sixteen of them as they were either written in English or covered the #MeToo movement in other countries, such as South Korea. As a result, eighty posts published between 24 July 2018 and 31 July 2018 remained for conducting the analysis. After identifying the most commonly used themes, I translated the posts in which these themes appeared into English. Accordingly, I proceeded with tagging my data. Each post was given a code (example: WCP01 – WeChat Post 01).

The analysis showed that the most commonly mentioned themes included 'causes of sexual harassment', 'definition of sexual harassment' and 'types of offenders'. It appeared that WeChat users acknowledged that sexual harassment may go far beyond physical harassment and also includes a wide range of behaviours such as verbal harassment or gender harassment. In addition, this study identified that users tended to support victims and when discussing offenders not only mentioned abusers but also paid close attention to victim blamers and their role in causing further psychological harm to the victims. Finally, the WeChat users in my analysis argued that high prevalence of sexual harassment had to do with patriarchy supported by traditional cultural norms which might be transmitted into society through educating patterns at home or school.

Thus, this study contributed to the #MeToo movement and sexual harassment in China in multiple ways and is arguably the first of its kind conducted on WeChat posts. Although, a complete generalization from these findings on Chinese society as a whole might be difficult due to Chinese online censorship, the reach of the #MeToo movement in China and the unclear demographics of WeChat users in this study, it still sampled distinctively Chinese posts without restrictions. The findings of these study do not always correspond with the previous work on this subject. For example, the definition of sexual harassment has become much broader than in earlier works (Huang et al. 2019; Tang et al. 1995). Thus, Huang et al.'s (2019) study showed that respondents were likely to mention physical contact more than verbal harassment, while in Tang's research some forms, for example, unwanted pressure for dates, sex related comments and gender harassment were left out. At the same time, all of these were present in the data gathered for the current research. In addition, my study revealed supportive attitudes towards victims and criticism of victim blaming. It does not align with the results of Sun's (2019) study of overseas Chinese #MeToo movement related comments on wenxuecity.com who, on the contrary, found that users did not only question the credibility of women who spoke out being harassed but also blamed victims for "wearing a skirt" and "taking a train at night". Overall, this study has brought in various perspectives on the results of previous studies on sexual misconduct in China.

1. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1.1 THEME 1: THE DEFINITION OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

One of the narratives that came forward in the posts was a call for agreeing on what sexual harassment is before engaging in discussion. According to some WeChat users, it was necessary to avoid confusion about different types of sexual interactions, especially because some of them simply do not fall under the category of unwanted sexual behaviour. Thus, they have to be distinguished from harassment for the reason that they are consensual. For instance, the author of WCP70 claimed: "First of all, we must sort out the concepts of rape, appointment for a date including sex, cheating, one-night stand, sex trading, unspoken rules that codify improper behaviours such as coercing employees for sexual favours and other similar concepts. Only after

we are done with this, we may come back to the discussion of the #MeToo movement. Otherwise, we won't know what we are talking about."

Apart from this, WeChat users claimed that an opaque understanding of the term sexual harassment may lead to false assumptions about sexual harassment rates in the country being higher than they actually are. For example, the author of WCP79 doubted the scale of the problem in China and claimed: "In China, sexual harassment itself is a foreign word. Its definition in the country is not clear yet. Coupled with the influence of traditional concepts and intergenerational differences, everyone understands the term 'sexual harassment' differently. The concerns about the unlimited expansion of sexual harassment cases will come into being precisely because Chinese people have different constructions of the subject of sexual harassment, and they also lack clear and objective judgement standards to interpret what this term means." As this quote illustrates, the author acknowledged that different generations have diverse understandings of sexual harassment. This in turn links to different opinions on the prevalence of the sexual harassment's rates in the country.

In order to engage with definitions of sexual harassment, I followed Fitzgerald et al's (1997, 10) framework for categorizing definitions of sexual harassment which can be divided into three categories: legal, psychological, and behavioural. Since definitions put forward by WeChat users can be largely divided into two groups corresponding with the second and third category of this framework, only those two will be thoroughly discussed in the present study.

The most common feature of the psychological definition of sexual harassment in Fitzgerald et al's framework deals with difficulties of determining what sexual harassment actually entails by focusing on the victim's feelings instead of concrete actions. It is also clearly seen in my research: the users barely mentioned the actions which fall under the category of unwanted social-sexual behaviour and in their description instead focused on the wide range of feelings of the victim. The definition proposed by the author of WCP05 serves as the most explicit example of this, as it solely consists of a description of the victim's feelings: "Sexual abuse, sexual harassment and other sexual words or actions that make others feel uncomfortable, anxious, restless, embarrassed, insulted, or disrespectful can be considered sexual harassment regardless of their form."

Additionally, WCP53's author wrote: "Sexual harassment is harassment based on sexual desire. As long as words or actions cause the other

party's displeasure, it is sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is different from sexual relations because sexual harassment is more concerned with the psychological displeasure of the victims." It is evident that this WeChat user concentrated solely on the psychological state of mind of the victim as a determinant of whether harassment took place and did not consider it important to give an exemplary description of behaviour that might provoke psychological discomfort.

In order to differentiate between different types of behaviours sexual harassment may comprise, Till (1980, 5) and Gelfand's (1995, 168) classification model is useful. According to this classification model, three main categories constitute sexually harassing behaviour: unwanted sexual attention, gender harassment, and sexual coercion.

According to WeChat users' definitions, gender harassment, being one of the types of behavioural harassment, includes actions such as unwanted pressure for dates and superiors persuading female employees to visit a bar after work. They largely referred to situations in which men appear to be in an advantageous position and harass women under the pretext of offering help when they appear to be vulnerable. For instance, the author of WCP12 claimed: "Taking advantage of a drunk woman, especially when she is at risk, is sexual harassment. From time to time, a man commits an assault by taking the opportunity of seeing a woman off or going with her to a hotel saying that she did not refuse which is a typical sophistry. No matter how much she thanks you for seeing her off, improper contact is infringement unless a woman takes the initiative."

Sexual coercion is another type of behavioural harassment. According to the framework proposed by Fitzgerald (1997,10), it is the most severe type of behavioural harassment requiring an action to engage another person in sexual contact in the absence of informed and free consent or the clear expression of a refusal. Amongst the analysed posts, this category was mainly represented by sexual harassment's definitions as the use of physical force and persistent touching. Analysis of the posts demonstrated that users considered sexual behaviour such as unwelcome or deliberate touching of intimate body parts including face, legs, genitals and other sexually sensitive parts as well as coercion to hugs and kisses, as sexual harassment. For example, the author of WCP30 mentioned sexual coercion when describing a traumatic experience from childhood: "After many years after it actually happened, I suddenly remembered the incident. Once in a small group class, I was concentrating on painting a water village. I was preparing to demonstrate my phthalocyanine

blue and garcinia colour to a teacher when I suddenly felt a big pair of hands reaching into my sweater, wantonly groping on my small and thin body. The intensity of his actions was crazy. He tore my tucked in shirt from the chest to the back, so that he could ensure that all his next violations were possible.” It is relevant to note that my research revealed a number of significant differences in perception of sexual harassment from previous research projects done on this subject in China. In particular, there were two studies carried in 1995 and 2019 whose results were very much alike but in both cases were very different from the findings of my own research. In particular, definitions of sexual harassment in a study conducted among college students in 1995 (Tang et al. 1995, 513) were much narrower. The students focused mainly on coercive sexuality and physical contact as sexual harassment, while other (potentially less obvious) forms of harassment such as pressure for dates, sex related comments, and gender harassment were left out. Additionally, as stated above, the research conducted more than twenty years later showed fairly similar result. Huang et al. (2019, 4679) claimed that students were more likely to mention “physical contact” than any other forms of harassment.

One of the reasons for these differences on the definition of sexual harassment might be that the posts chosen for analysis in this study were written by people of different ages and presumably belonging to various demographic groups, unlike the two above-mentioned studies which only revealed opinions of Chinese college students. Another possible explanation might be that those users who created sexual harassment definitions were all related to the #MeToo movement as their posts all appeared in the search system after #MeToo related code words were used. Hence, their interest in the topic might have led to greater awareness of various forms of sexual harassment, as their knowledge on the subject is broader and deeper. Finally, I would argue that my research methodology proved to be more effective as my study showed a lot more informative details than those conducted before. The reason might be that environments in which people shared their views on the sensitive topics were completely different. Although the questionnaires distributed among students both in 1995 and 2019 were completely anonymous, one could assume that students still felt constrained by academic environment of university when providing their answers. At the same time, WeChat users who shared their opinions on sexual harassment on WeChat used this space completely voluntarily and by their own initiative, so thematic analysis of data available online was useful in terms of acquiring new knowledge on the subject.

1.2 THEME 2: THE CAUSES OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Many of the WeChat users in this study viewed gender inequality and patriarchy as the root cause of power abuse by men which subsequently leads to different forms of sexual misconduct including sexual harassment and assault. The concepts of gender inequality and patriarchy appeared in twenty seven posts (33.75 %). For example, the author of WCP09 claimed: “Sexual assault is a form of violence, which is a means of trying to control others and realizing power by controlling others. The root cause of sexual assault is unequal gender relations and power distribution, which is rooted in the traditional gender system.”

The WeChat users in my analysis thoroughly discussed all the possible implementations of patriarchal order and interrelated factors. The substantial part of the discussion was concentrated on key characteristics of a patriarchal society, such as the objectification or sexualization of women, and worship of power. Regarding objectification and sexualization, some users claimed that men treat women in China as practical items and are only interested in their feminine attributes and appearance instead of seeing them as a person. For example, the author of WCP42 argues: “All sexual assault essentially has materialization of women in its nature. In an ideal affirmative society, men must use de-productive thinking and view women as people first and only after this look at their gender affiliation. Without correcting the mindset, a man’s mind is always concentrated on three symbols of sex: chest, thigh, and ass.” Similar claims appeared in ten other posts taken from the group of twenty seven posts on patriarchy and gender inequality.

Moreover, some users tended to view traditional cultural norms as an obsolete phenomenon detrimentally influencing society and linked the sexual harassment with the idea of men’s dominant position rooted in traditional Chinese culture. Some of those netizens whose claims were taken from the same pool of twenty seven posts acknowledged that times have changed and traditional approaches such as family planning and an overall preference for sons in families are no longer present in society. However, netizens were sure that these China-specific phenomena are deeply rooted in the culture and shape an environment where men sexually harass women. Such claims appeared in twelve posts. For example, the author of WCP48 claimed: “From ancient times to the present, gender power structure imbalance and women often being in the weak side, constitute a deep reason for sexual harassment. In ancient times, sexual assault victims would rather kill themselves than live

in the world, and also society would help them to preserve chastity after the death of the husband. Today, the Chinese people will not be proud of this, because it is the dregs of traditional culture, which should not be tolerated in modern times. However, the perception of filial piety persistent in Chinese society for thousands of years, will inevitably affect people's views on sexual assault victims.”

According to other netizens, traditional cultural norms are transmitted to future generations via wrong parenting practices. In seven posts users discussed the necessity to bring up boys in a way that they respect and care about women from childhood and cannot get away with seemingly harmless but potentially dangerous behaviour, such as chasing and kissing girls. When it comes to girls' education, WeChat users tended to claim that it is necessary to protect girls via comprehensive and in-depth conversations on the nature of healthy sex relations and a girl's right to always say no whenever they are exposed to something they do not agree with. Also, netizens laid much importance on the significance of treating children of both genders equally from early childhood. For example, the author of WCP20 wrote: “At the micro-level, reducing violence and sexual assault must begin with education. Parents and teachers must not only educate their children to be equally respectful to men and women but also let children understand that having money and power does not make the person superior to others.”

In summary, according to WeChat users, patriarchy, gender inequality, traditional cultural norms and patriarchal parenting patterns lead to the spread of sexual misconduct in Chinese society. Again, the results of the present study do not correspond with some of the prior scholarly work on this topic. For instance, Huang et al. (2019, 4683) studied students' attitudes towards sexual misconduct and did not find patriarchy being a reason for sexual misconduct in students' opinions. The authors created a reverse link and claimed that students viewed only a very limited number of sexual behaviours as sexual misconduct presumably for the reason that social atmosphere and traditional culture in China are full of the trace of male chauvinism. Not unlikely, it is harder for people to associate sexual harassment with patriarchy when they grow up with prevalent sexism around them.

The difference between my and Huang et al.'s studies thus could arguably be explained by the influence of the #MeToo movement on the perception of the studied subject in the Chinese society. At the time when Huang et al.'s research was conducted, there was still no big debate on this topic in China and sexual harassment was not yet legally defined as a term. The au-

thors claimed that in the absence of relevant laws, public education or propaganda aimed against sexual harassment is scarce and limited. In contrast, my study appeared when the situation in the country was completely different: the #MeToo movement itself created a social change and provided space for thorough discussions and building deeper connections by the WeChat users, such as seeing how patriarchy and sexual harassment are related.

1.3 *THEME 3: THE TYPES OF OFFENDERS*

A perpetrator, being the most obvious type of offender, was present in the overwhelming majority of posts. The users described sexual abusers in general words, condemned them and unanimously claimed that all of the perpetrators deserve punishment. As #MeToo in China started from the educational environment, users also tended to emphasise that no matter how big the merits of the accused professors were in the past, their status should not be the reason for forgiving the offence they committed later. There was not so much speculation about the nature of direct abusers apart from agreeing that those who sexually harassed in the past certainly deserve some sort of retribution. Given that this type of offenders and its perception among the WeChat users could arguably be called indisputable, I found it more relevant to thoroughly discuss in this subchapter a less obvious type of offenders, namely, victim blamers.

The WeChat users seemed to pay equally as much attention to them, perceiving victim blamers as “companions in crime”. Three users even argued that blaming a victim is equal to committing sexual harassment for the second time.

WeChat users acknowledged victim blaming as a harmful phenomenon in Chinese society and emphasized the drawbacks of a current social reality. For example, the author of WCP38 claimed: “The assumption “less dressed and raped” is a social reality, but society should not be like this. You are not wrong when you dress less, it is a social error, and before the social reality is changed, protecting yourself and calling for social progress should go both ways. In other words, “wearing less and being raped” is a trace of male-dominated culture.”

Moreover, WeChat users emphasized that society should turn all efforts against perpetrators, and even those who do not blame victims and instead try to give them advice on how to behave to avoid being sexually

harassed are wrong. For instance, the author of the WCP36 argued: “Why is the quality of the taxi driver not controlled by the relevant departments, but instead women are advised to choose the driver wisely? Why do people claim that women are harassed because of wearing dresses that expose parts of their bodies instead of blaming the harassers for their evil thoughts? Why is social security not a priority but instead people emphasize that women should not go out at night? Every tip actually binds women.”

Varying definitions of sexual harassment are another factor contributing to the prevalence of victim blaming. When a situation does not fit the paradigm and appears to be much more ambiguous, people are more likely to start blaming the victim instead of the perpetrator. The author of WCP35 claimed: “Sexual harassment is often classified as a “women’s issue” and is considered to be a problem of non-self-respect, non-rebellion, and speculative false accusation. Harassers can be exempted from the punishment, and the victim would be criticized for her choices and humiliated either by the harasser or by the blamers.”

2. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the literature on the #MeToo movement and sexual harassment in China. In my research performed by the means of thematic analysis I answered the following question: How do Chinese WeChat users discuss sexual misconduct, such as harassment or abuse, in #MeToo movement related posts and what are the main topics they raise?

As noted before in this paper, China does not provide people with opportunities for on-site activism, and this is why online spaces play a crucial role for citizens who want to raise societal concerns and culturally important issues. Indeed, an online space during the last week of July 2018 appeared to be fruitful. It provided an opportunity for WeChat users to create deep and broad comments which went far beyond simply discussing the allegations made against famous people in China at that period of time. In particular, they touched upon a wide range of questions including possible strategies for reducing the levels of sexual harassment’s prevalence such as laws and policies and different scenarios for development of the #MeToo movement in the country. Besides, they reflected on the social environment of gender inequality in China, feminism and the reasons why victims are afraid of speaking out. While all these topics were occasionally brought up by users in their posts,

the questions that were discussed most thoroughly included the definition and different forms of sexual harassment, hypotheses on the possible reasons for its existence in China and societal actors whose behavior is pernicious for victims.

First of all, this study identified that sexual harassment may go far beyond physical harassment and also includes a wide range of behaviours including verbal harassment or gender harassment. Prior research on this topic through student interviews, such as Tang et al. (1995), concluded that the perception of sexual harassment was much more limited. While students in that study regarded such actions as sexual coercion and physical contact as sexual harassment, some potentially less obvious forms, for example, unwanted pressure for dates, sex related comments and gender harassment were left out. As for Huang et al.'s (2019) paper, respondents were more likely to mention physical contact than verbal harassment and only few of them mentioned gender discrimination. However, all of these in varying degrees appeared in the eighty posts chosen for the analysis. Since both studies I refer to appeared before the start of the #MeToo movement in China, it is possible to propose that the campaign might have led to greater awareness of various forms of harassment, as the knowledge on the subject has arguably become broader and deeper at least among those people in China who participated in the lively WeChat discussion. Besides, users tended to support victims and many of them even identified harassment through the lens of feelings and perception of the victim.

Second, the analysis revealed that users tended to view a broad range of specifically Chinese societal and cultural reasons, including gender inequality, patriarchy, traditional cultural norms and wrong parenting educating patterns, as contributing factors to the existence of sexual harassment in Chinese society. From the WeChat users' perspective, gender inequality and patriarchy are supported by traditional cultural norms which might be transmitted in the society via wrong educating patterns at home or school.

Third, WeChat netizens paid a lot of attention to the problem of victim blaming. They not only thoroughly discussed perpetrators, but also seemed to care a lot about psychological harm and pain victims of sexual harassment experience after receiving hurtful claims of victim blamers. The WeChat users in my poll of posts perceived them as "companions in crime" and a few of them even argued that blaming a victim is like committing sexual harassment for the second time.

Thus, although the #MeToo movement originated in the West, the way the discussion was developing shows that it transported into a Chinese movement. WeChat users were aware of the origins of the movement as they mentioned the most prominent case of Harvey Weinstein's accusation in the USA in the overwhelming majority of posts. However, netizens tended to perceive it more as a background information or a side note and not delve into a deep discussion of Western #MeToo related issues or other more peculiar cases. Instead, the topics constituting the largest part of the discussion were limited to a China specific environment.

Overall, collected posts looked like a reflection of what people would say in real life. I would connect it with a research method employed for this study. Thematic analysis of data available in Chinese networks such as WeChat could arguably be called an effective way to research sensitive topics in a China-specific environment. Questionnaires that were used in the previous studies on sexual harassment in China (Huang et al. 2019; Tang et al. 1995), even when open questions were employed, only provided a limited data as the respondents were probably constrained by the nature of the method. In contrast, WeChat posts allowed users to more thoroughly discuss sexual misconduct, such as harassment and abuse, from different angles and approaches with close to no restriction in terms of size of their posts. In addition, I would presume that even though respondents in previous studies were promised personal privacy and security of data, they still were restrained by the educational environment as the studies (Huang et al. 2019; Tang et al. 1995) were conducted among university students. At the same time, WeChat users who shared their opinions on sexual harassment on WeChat used the network completely voluntarily and by their own initiative and treated online space as a secure and safe environment to surface concerns and raise issues. All of this proves that thematic analysis of WeChat posts, that appeared due to the wave of raised societal awareness and interest in sexual harassment at the time of the #MeToo movement, was useful in terms of acquiring new knowledge on the subject.

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