#STOPMENSTRUALSHAMING:
XIAOHONGSHU USERS' ONLINE ADVOCACY FOR WOMEN'S ISSUES IN CHINA

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Introduction

This paper aims to investigate advocacy for women's issues in China, focusing on the activism against menstrual shaming on the social media platform Xiaohongshu, a culturally significant but understudied platform used primarily by women. With women accounting for 90.41% of active users, Xiaohongshu provides a unique social media environment that shapes the way users engage with feminist issues (Chi et al., 2022). Despite the growing literature on digital feminism in China (Hou, 2020; Yin and Sun, 2021) and the surging popularity and significance of Xiaohongshu in the Chinese social

media ecosystem (Lian et al., 2021; Song, 2022), no studies so far have examined the feminist activism on this platform.

Our study contributes to this gap by exploring the discourse around menstrual shaming on Xiaohongshu, as a lens into the dynamics of activism on this female-oriented platform. By analyzing posts and comments related to the hashtag #StopMenstrualShaming on Xiaohongshu, this study sheds light on the formation of a sense of community and solidarity in the context of Chinese digital feminism. In doing so, we employ the conceptual framework of hashtag activism, which refers to the development and spread of online activism with tangible results in the physical and digital worlds (Jackson et al., 2020).

Research Design

With over 200 million monthly active users (Song, 2022), Xiaohongshu has become one of the most popular social sharing media platforms in China today, and a space where female-related topics are widely discussed (Lian et al., 2021). Similar to Instagram, Xiaohongshu has gained popularity as a platform to share images and short videos related to fashion, beauty, and lifestyle. In addition, it includes features for social networking, shopping, and brand promotions, with an e-commerce function that enables users to purchase products directly through the platform (Chen, 2021).

To create our corpus, we used the data analysis tool Qiangua.com, which was specifically designed for Xiaohongshu, to collect publicly posted content under the hashtag #StopMenstrualShaming. Data collection was conducted in October 2022, and our timeframe spanned one year, from October 23rd, 2021 to October 23rd, 2022 (the longest period for which we could access posts).

Our corpus consisted of 329 public Xiaohongshu posts (images and videos) and 10,336 comments posted under the hashtag #StopMenstrualShaming. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clark, 2006) was used to identify themes and codes in the data: we first went through all the data and took down notes, then identified recurring themes, developing cross-case codes and consolidating them into larger themes. In terms of research ethics, although all data was publicly posted, we took further precautions to anonymize all data and usernames.

Findings

The study revealed how Xiaohongshu provided a space for Chinese female users to express solidarity and engage in activism against menstrual shame.

Xiaohongshu's expressive, conversational and interactive affordances— as well as the perception of Xiaohongshu as a largely female space (Lian et al., 2021) —enabled its users to share micro and macro truths about menstruation in intimate, creative and impactful ways. Users deployed diverse modes of digital expression (Figure 1), such as infographics, video selfies, real-life scenario skits, poetry, paintings, popular culture TV series, movies, and books, to share personal experiences with menstrual shame, as well as to address the larger cultural and societal dynamics behind this stigmatization.

Figure 1. *Diverse modes of digital expression to support activism against menstrual shaming (top row: artistic expression, popular culture; bottom row: video selfies, skits, infographics)*

Tapping into the perception of the platform as a female-oriented space, users shared personal experiences, describing the challenges they faced with menstruation, especially at school. The negative framing of menstruation in Chinese society showed up significantly in these posts and comments. The lack of knowledge about the body and the menstrual cycle put girls and young women in a position where they experienced negative feelings, especially shame and low self-esteem about their bodies. But posts in our data also discussed larger sociocultural dynamics. Users shared how the lack of open discussions about these topics at home negatively impacted their menstrual experiences, particularly in early adolescence. They talked about how menstruation was considered taboo by their mothers and older female relatives, while boys were often excluded from conversations, resulting in them teasing female peers.

Significantly, users harnessed Xiaohongshu as a unique platform to foster female solidarity and collective efficacy. They sought to address the issue of menstrual shaming by advocating for concrete actions, such as rejecting euphemisms for menstruation and instead promoting the use of the term "menstruation" to reduce its

stigmatization; citing examples of policies and relevant news both domestically and internationally to support efforts to end menstrual shaming; suggesting practical solutions to government bodies, schools, and other authorities. By repeatedly utilizing the slogan "Stop Menstrual Shaming" in both posts and comment sections, they aimed to strengthen the message and mobilize greater support for their cause. They also used evocative emojis like red exclamation marks in their titles to capture the attention of their audience and elicit emotive responses. Moreover, poetic language was incorporated to describe menstruation as a source of feminine power that nourishes human beings, with the aim of instilling greater self-confidence in women.

Discussion

Our study foregrounds the salient role of Xiaohongshu in helping women express their feminist values in an online space that they perceive as safe and intimate. Shining a spotlight on a significant but understudied platform, we illuminate the dynamics of hashtag activism in Chinese digital feminism, especially the formation of solidarity, relatability and collective identity on a female-oriented social media platform. Our findings show how Xiaohongshu enables women to advocate for feminist causes in the social and cultural context of China, and points to exciting opportunities for future research in this area.

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