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#AVERAGEYETCONFIDENTMEN: CHINESE STAND-UP COMEDY AND FEMINIST DISCOURSE ON DOUYIN

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Introduction

In China, the spotlight is shining on female stand-up comedians. Whereas in traditional Chinese forms of comedy like sketch shows or crosstalk, women have typically been the butt of the joke, stand-up comedy—a Western performance genre that has recently seen surging popularity—has given Chinese female comedians a space to push back against dominant gender stereotypes. Relying on self-deprecation, ambiguity, absurdity, and irony to present alternative perspectives and challenge current gender norms (Chen & Gao, 2021), female stand-up comedians have sparked important conversations around topics like body shaming, marriage issues, or workplace sexism (Li, 2021). Their performances have received intense attention and circulation online, becoming trending topics on Chinese social media.

In particular, Douyin (China's version of TikTok) has emerged as a prominent platform for videos related to their performances to be shared and commented upon. Douyin users have been creatively leveraging the app's features to engage in feminist discussions inspired by these female stand-up comedians' acts. While social media platforms play a significant role in facilitating feminist discourse in the Chinese public sphere (Chang, Ren & Yang, 2018; Peng, 2021; Zhou, Wang & Zimmer 2022), research has yet to elucidate the complex interrelations between popular culture (in this case, stand-up comedy) and feminist expression in such spaces. Furthermore, research on Chinese social media tends to focus on older, more mainstream platforms like Weibo and WeChat; here, we put the spotlight on Douyin, an under-researched yet highly popular youth-oriented space.

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Our study thus asks: how do Chinese female stand-up comedians spark discussions about feminism on Douyin? To answer this question, we employed a qualitative content analysis of Douyin videos related to Chinese female stand-up comedians, as well as comments posted on these videos. In doing so, this research aims to better understand the cultural impact of female stand-up comedians’ rhetoric in terms of probing gender norms, and the role of social media in mobilizing broader public engagement with feminism in the Chinese context.

Methodology

To compile the corpus, we relied on the hashtag as a methodological tool (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019), selecting five hashtags as a way to identify and collect relevant data. Three of these hashtags were the names of the most popular Chinese female stand-up comedians: #Yangli, the “punchline queen” (Feng & Wang, 2021) famous for mocking Chinese men; #Siwen, who gained attention for her candid perspective as a young divorcée; and #YanyiYanyue, twin sisters who perform together and call out body shaming in Chinese society. Additionally, two highly prominent buzzwords related to these stand-up comedians were selected, in order to capture videos that were relevant to the research question but did not explicitly include the names of these comedians among their hashtags: #AverageYetConfidentMen (a term coined by Yangli in her popular stand-up performance, and widely embraced as a way to criticize Chinese patriarchy) and #WomansFist (a term which replaced the Chinese word for “feminist” with its homophone, “woman’s fist,” to label feminists as angry and aggressive “punchers”).

We selected the 30 most-liked public videos under each of the five hashtags, as well as the top 50 comments under each video. The overall corpus thus consisted of 150 videos and 7,500 comments.

The data was analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in a two-phased approach, first focusing on each video and corresponding comments—paying particular attention to the use of Douyin to convey these messages—and then considering the data holistically, aiming to consolidate the themes identified in videos and comments.

Findings

Three key practices and associated video types emerged from the analysis:

Practice	Form	Use of stand-up comedy footage	Key Douyin features used

Sharing and annotating stand-up comedians' gags	Footage from comedians' sets, annotated with personal commentary	Yes	Editing, dubbing, text blurbs, filter, tags
Enacting everyday sexism	Satirical skits	No	Recording of original video and audio, video effects, text blurbs, and soundtracks
Critiquing feminist rhetoric	Confessionals	No	Recording of original video and audio, text blurbs, etc.

In the first practice, users creatively used footage from the comedians' sets and annotated it with one's personal commentary. The act of annotation took various forms, from adding a brief voiceover introduction preceding the comedy excerpts, to overlaying personal commentary via text blurbs on top of the footage, to editing together various clips in order to convey feminist arguments. For instance, users weaved together excerpts and combined stand-up comedians' punchlines with other female celebrities' feminist speeches into collective statements. In comments, Douyin users shared extremely positive responses, calling the comedians "queens" and "sisters." Some also opened up about their own experiences in relation to the topics covered in the comedy sets, such as sharing their experiences of divorce.

The second key practice was the use of satirical skits to call out everyday sexism. For instance, creators used Yang's term "average yet confident men" to humorously enact their encounters with men in daily settings and call out men's overinflated egos. The skits were performed by both gender creators, often using text blurbs to convey the characters' true thoughts and emphasize how men and women perceived the same thing differently.

However, these female comedians and their supporters also faced fierce backlash on Douyin. Particularly under the hashtag #WomansFist, anti-feminist videos—which generally took the form of confessionals posted by men—spoke up against China's rising feminist sentiment. They argued that the female comedians' speeches were "flaunting Western terminology [i.e. feminism] and insulting all men," "creating gender opposition," and were "harmful to the harmonious core of socialism with Chinese characteristics." These videos rarely featured sophisticated visuals, sound effects, or interactive elements; creators seemingly aimed to draw the viewer's attention primarily to the content of their critique.

Discussion

Shining a spotlight on a new yet wildly popular Chinese platform, our research thus shows how social media both facilitates and amplifies discussions about feminism in contemporary China. In doing so, we build on existing work surrounding the resonance of the #MeToo movement in Chinese online spaces (Yin & Sun, 2021; Zeng 2019; Zhou & Qiu, 2020), while further elucidating the role of local popular culture (here, stand-up comedy) in catalyzing feminist—and anti-feminist—discourse. Furthermore, by analyzing comments in addition to videos, our findings were able to surface the salient function of social media as a space of connectivity around gender issues. Relatability and solidarity emerged as common refrains in these comments for the first two themes, in support of the comedians' feminist messages; however, our third theme, focused on the anti-feminist rhetoric, also demonstrated how the comment section can become a space to amplify hate speech and incivility.

While our analysis suggests that social media makes discussions about feminism more visible and perhaps more broadly accessible (see also Yin & Sun, 2021), it remains to be seen whether and how voice might translate into influence (Allen & Light, 2015), tapping into social media's mobilizational potential (Fischer, 2016). Indeed, important challenges remain. Beyond the threat of backlash and deeply embedded misogyny that characterizes Chinese online spaces (Han, 2018), another significant obstacle has to do with government censorship (Li & Li, 2017; Yin & Sun, 2021; Zeng, 2019). In the context of our data, it is worth noting that the focus of feminist expression was on personal experience rather than institutional critique, on the individual level rather than the structural one; this could be due at least in part to a reluctance to bluntly criticize larger political or institutional structures.

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