

Analysis of the Politicization of Media Coverage of the MeToo Movement in China and its Impact on Public Opinion

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the MeToo movement has aroused widespread social concern, it has transcended being just a social movement and has integrated into a broader political and social context. The study endeavors to investigate how the MeToo movement, originally a social movement focused on sexual harassment and sexual assault, has evolved into a phenomenon with a pronounced politicization tendency. To gain a deeper understanding of the politicization of the MeToo movement and its impact, by analyzing the media coverage of the MeToo movement in China, this study aims to reveal the key drivers of politicization of the movement and explore the impact of this politicization for the movement itself and society.

KEYWORDS

MeToo Movement; Media Coverage; Public Opinion; China.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the MeToo movement has emerged as a highly influential global social movement. Originating in 2017, it initially spread through social media platforms, aiming to disclose and resist sexual harassment and assault in professional settings (Fileborn & Loney-Howes, 2019; Ghadery, 2019). Since its inception, the movement has rapidly proliferated globally, triggering extensive public debate, legislative reforms, and a fresh awareness of gender disparities and the prevalence of sexual harassment. The MeToo movement signifies a pivotal historic moment, underscoring the significance of gender justice and advancing the societal quest for gender equality. Nevertheless, with the ongoing evolution of the MeToo movement, its political inclinations have increasingly garnered attention as a matter of concern.

In China, the MeToo movement began in 2018 (Lin & Yang, 2019; Xiong & Ristivojević, 2021; Yin & Sun, 2021), when several scholars and journalists bravely accused male authorities in high-level educational and media institutions of sexual harassment and sexual assault. The movement quickly garnered widespread attention and heated discussions on social media, fostering public awareness of gender inequality and workplace sexual harassment. Despite facing challenges of censorship and internet restrictions, the MeToo movement in China has sparked a series of social discussions and prompted a reassessment of existing sexual harassment policies, leading some institutions and organizations to address and improve their mechanisms for handling sexual harassment. The movement not only reveals the prevalence of sexual harassment but embodies the gradual awakening and progress of Chinese society in the pursuit of gender equality.

The rapid evolution of the MeToo movement and the widespread attention it has garnered suggest that it has transcended being just a social movement and has integrated into a broader political and

social context. The politicization of the movement is evident not only in its impact on specific policies and legislation but in its inclusion in international discussions and its influence on political agenda-setting. As the primary source of public information, media coverage and interpretation of the MeToo movement have significantly shaped public cognitions and understanding of the movement. Thus, the political bias in Chinese media coverage and the resulting public opinion have become crucial entry points for studying the politicization of the MeToo movement.

The study endeavors to investigate how the MeToo movement, originally a social movement focused on sexual harassment and sexual assault, has evolved into a phenomenon with a pronounced politicization tendency. By analyzing the media coverage of the MeToo movement in China, this study aims to reveal the key drivers of politicization of the movement and explore the impact of this politicization for the movement itself and society. Specifically, this study will focus on the role of emotional mobilization in the process of politicization and how media coverage shapes public emotional attitudes and political cognition towards the MeToo movement.

To gain a deeper understanding of the politicization of the MeToo movement and its impact, this study will address the following core questions:

- 1) How did the MeToo movement in China transform from a social movement focused on sexual harassment and sexual assault into a discussion with a politicization tendency?
- 2) What role did emotional mobilization play in the politicization of the MeToo movement in China, and how did it become a critical factor in driving the politicization of the movement?
- 3) What roles did the media play in the politicization of the MeToo movement in China? How did they influence public cognition and attitudes, as well as the political impact of the movement?
- 4) What impact did the politicization of the MeToo movement in China have on public attitudes and its long-term effects on the movement? Did it contribute to promoting gender equality and social change against sexual harassment?

By exploring these questions, this study aims to present a more comprehensive and in-depth perspective to understand the complexity of politicization tendency of the MeToo movement and its social impact.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Emotional Mobilization, Linguistic Patterns, and Politicization Tendency

In the field of research on the politicization tendency of the MeToo movement, emotional mobilization and linguistic patterns are extensively regarded as the core factors driving this phenomenon. Feng Jianxia (2019) conducted an in-depth analysis of how emotions such as anger, resentment, and dissatisfaction have driven political resistance within the movement. She highlights that this emotional mobilization is primarily manifested through the language empowerment of participants on social platforms. This insight underscores the significance of emotions in mobilizing public engagement and shaping the politicization of the movement. Nonetheless, Feng's research may have insufficiently explored the differential impacts of different emotions in diverse cultural and political contexts.

Han X. (2021), on the other hand, emphasized the role of storytelling in achieving women's empowerment, holding that it not only helps women reflect on their own lives but serves as a means to restore subjectivity and initiative. Han's research expands the understanding of emotional mobilization within the MeToo movement by connecting it to personal empowerment and introspection, offering a more nuanced analytical perspective. Nevertheless, the study may have been overly focused on individual-level changes, failing to fully consider how these personal experiences converge into the political momentum of the movement. Clark (2016) and Shaw (2012) have

emphasized the 'discursive' nature of the MeToo movement, focusing on the politics of discourse within digital spaces. They showcase how radical discourse and interactions within blog circles significantly influence emotional mobilization and politicization. These studies underscore how, in the digital age, language and discourse serve as bridges connecting personal emotions to political action. While these perspectives provide an important insight into understanding how emotional mobilization occurs within the digital space, the analysis of how discourse is interpreted and received by different groups may still be limited.

Regarding the popularity of the MeToo movement and media coverage, Sun Chengzhi (2022) and Sara Liao (2019) have revealed how media can enhance the visibility and recognition of the movement, thereby fostering its politicization. These studies highlight the pivotal role of media in the dissemination and politicization of the movement, while also suggesting the risks that the movement may face due to media logic and commercial interests.

As for the inconsistent attitudes of governments towards the MeToo movement across different countries, Zeng.J. (2019) and Huang, C.L. (2021) have pointed out the impact of political and cultural contexts on the politicization of the movement. This perspective underscores the constraining role of external political contexts on the development of the movement and provides an understanding of the multifaceted factors influencing the politicization process. Nonetheless, these studies may not have fully explored the concrete impacts of interactions between the public, media, and government on the politicization of the movement under different political systems.

In summary, although previous research has made remarkable achievements in revealing the contribution of emotional mobilization and linguistic patterns to the politicization of the MeToo movement, there are still some gaps, including insufficient exploration of the differences in emotional mobilization in different cultural and political contexts, inadequate analysis of the connection between individual experiences and the convergence of political power, limited discussion of the dual nature of media influence, and a relatively superficial analysis of the factors influencing the politicization of the movement under different political systems.

2.2. Digital Media and the MeToo Movement in China

In previous related studies, Yin and Sun (2021) discussed the implementation of new policies after perpetrators of sexual assault were exposed, as well as the enhancement of social awareness and discussions resulting from such events. They particularly highlighted the unprecedented increase in awareness of sexual harassment and sexual assault in some countries (such as South Korea and China) through the efforts of the internet and feminists. The literature also mentioned the contributions of scholars and activists to the MeToo movement, such as the advocacy activities initiated by Chang Jiang, a professor at Tsinghua University, on Weibo. Liao and Luqiu (2022) emphasized the role of the internet and social media in grassroots activism, particularly through hashtag campaigns. They analyzed how these digital protests reflected and shaped intersecting power relations of gender, sexuality, race, class, and region, as well as how mainstream media adopted these tags to increase their visibility. Ling and Sara (2020) described a specific case of sexual misconduct (the case of Wu Chunming, a history professor at Xiamen University) and the subsequent protest activities it sparked. They highlighted the role and impact of young feminist activists and how they raised social awareness of the issue through dressing up and demonstrations. Li et al. (2021) discussed the impact of the MeToo movement in China, while also noting the limitations of the development of the movement, particularly in the absence of organizational and activist guidance, and the inadequacy of relying on individual efforts to drive the movement.

These studies all revolve around the significant role of social media and digital platforms in driving social change and enhancing social awareness. Yin and Sun (2021) and Li et al. (2021) all stay abreast of concrete cases and impacts of the MeToo movement in China. Liao & Luqiu (2022) and Ling &

Sara (2020), on the other hand, places more emphasis on the widespread use of the internet and social media globally in promoting social actions.

These studies demonstrate that social media and digital platforms are indispensable tools in modern social movements, capable of effectively raising the visibility of issues and promoting awareness among the public and policymakers. However, there are also limitations in relying on individual efforts rather than systematic organizational support. Effective social change requires a combination of individual action and robust organizational support to ensure the sustainability and impact of the movement. This includes coordinated efforts, strategic planning, and institutional backing. These studies also give prominence to the importance of transnational feminists' united efforts and support through the internet on a global scale.

Based on the analysis of the aforementioned literature, several key research gaps and deficiencies can be identified, which may affect the depth and breadth of a comprehensive understanding of related social movements:

Existing research primarily relies on qualitative analysis or case study methods, lacking large-scale quantitative data analysis. This may limit the universality and in-depth exploration of systemic factors influencing social movements. Although Li, P., et al. (2021) mentioned the limitations of relying on individual actions, there is a lack of in-depth analysis on how to effectively integrate resources and guidance to improve the effects of the movement. Moreover, there is little discussion on the effects and limitations of online activism in causing actual social, legal changes. Most studies do not delve into how different genders, ages, socio-economic statuses, and educational backgrounds influence and engage in the movement. This lack of detailed stratification may obscure some key dynamics, such as the unique challenges faced by specific groups or their unique contributions. There is also a scarcity of assessments of the long-term effects of social media campaigns, such as the enduring impact of the MeToo movement on changing social attitudes, legal frameworks, and behavioral norms. Longitudinal studies could provide more insights into understanding the true outcomes of these movements.

Overall, while existing literature provides an initial understanding of the role of social media and online activism in modern social movements, more research needs to cover a broader range of regions and groups, employ various research methods, analyze the limitations of activism, and assess the long-term effects of social movements. This will contribute to the development of a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding framework.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

The study employs a case study method, integrating online public opinion analysis and semi-structured in-depth interviews, to investigate how emotional mobilization and linguistic patterns within the Chinese MeToo movement contributing to its politicization. The selection of case studies focuses on incidents of faculty members sexually harassing students within higher education institutions in China. It also examines the subsequent media coverage, institutional handling, and public discussions on social media platforms. By comprehensively analyzing the volume of coverage for concrete cases, the disciplinary actions taken by educational institutions, and the public comments on Weibo forums, the study aims to uncover shifts in societal attitudes towards sexual harassment and how these attitudes influence the politicization process of the MeToo movement.

3.2. Data Collection

Case Selection and Analysis: four high-profile cases of faculty members' sexual harassment in Chinese universities were selected as the subjects of the study. The data collection involved gathering

and analyzing relevant news reports, official statements, and public comments on social media to comprehend the essential particulars, public response, and outcomes of the incidents.

Table 1. Four cases of faculty members' sexual harassment in Chinese universities

1. Harassment of Female Students by an Associate Professor at Hangzhou Normal University	2. Harassment of Female Students by Professor Huang from the College of Fine Arts at Chongqing Normal University	3. Sexual Harassment of Students by a Tutor at Huazhong University of Science and Technology	4. Sexual Harassment of Students by a Counselor at Liaoning University
Date: December 12, 2022 - February 27, 2023	Date: Before September 2023 - March 2024	Date: Before September 2023 - March 2024	Date: July 2022
Incident: reports surfaced at Hangzhou Normal University of an associate professor harassing female students. A teacher of Introduction to Mao Zedong Thought and the Theoretical System of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics, privately used WeChat to discuss his mother-in-law and daughter-in-law conflicts, family conflicts and other personal issues with female students from the university. Additionally, he made inappropriate comments about the girls' appearances, such as "Your pajamas are super cute," "You're still blooming," and "You share the same birthday as my spouse," among others.	Incident: the former dean of the College of Fine Arts at Chongqing Normal University, Huang XX, was exposed for having an improper relationship with a graduate student. The victim, Ms Wang, claimed that under Huang's coercion, they had multiple sexual encounters, even after being drugged and losing consciousness. Huang XX reportedly manipulated her into becoming his mistress and his nominal foster daughter. The first incident occurred at a planned dinner party where he deliberately got her drunk before taking advantage of her.	Incident: Zhang X was harassed by her tutor, who would invite her to his office every evening around 8 pm to discuss papers. Initially, the discussions were minimal, with most of the meetings consisting of casual chats. However, over time, the tutor began to make inappropriate physical contact with Zhang X, initially grabbing her hand suddenly, and later using the excuse of escorting her back to the dormitory to engage in shoulder-touching and other behaviors.	Incident: a netizen reported on Weibo that a counselor at the Sunwah International Business School, Liaoning University had sexually harassed students, alleging that the counselor had repeatedly made inappropriate remarks and engaged in sexual harassment of students.
News Coverage: 33 articles (including videos)	News Coverage: 6 articles	News Coverage: 28 articles	News Coverage: 19 articles
Weibo Forum Comments: a majority condemned the professor's unethical behavior and expressed skepticism about the lenient punishment.	Weibo Forum Comments: the punishment was perceived as lenient, and there was dissatisfaction with Professor Huang's behavior.	Weibo Forum Comments: they support for the school's disciplinary action and criticism of the unethical behavior that led to it.	Weibo Forum Comments: sarcasm directed at the counselor's remarks and support for the disciplinary action.
School's Disciplinary Action: the professor was suspended from teaching for one month and disqualified from award nominations for two years.	School's Disciplinary Action: the professor was suspended from teaching for one month and disqualified from award nominations for two years.	School's Disciplinary Action: cancellation of teaching qualifications.	School's Disciplinary Action: dismissal.

Online Public Opinion Analysis: keyword searches and social media analysis tools were used to collect Weibo forum comments associated with the selected cases. The comments were content

analyzed to identify public sentiment tendency, linguistic patterns, and the focus of discussions to assess public attitudes towards sexual harassment incidents and their handling.

In-depth Interviews: a semi-structured interview was conducted with a female student from a foreign university and a male teacher from a prestigious university in Wuhan. The interview covered topics such as perceptions of sexual harassment, the school's response to harassment incidents, personal responses to harassment, and attitudes towards speaking out. The interview aimed to gain a deep understanding of individuals' perceptions and attitudes towards sexual harassment in different contexts.

As the female student from the foreign university was not in China during the interview on January 4, 2024, the interview was conducted via voice call. Before the interview, I promised not to disclose her school's name and to protect her privacy. The interview lasted for twelve minutes, during which I asked her four questions and engaged in some discussions with her. I first asked her to define "sexual harassment", and she explained that she perceived it as excessive intimate physical contact and verbal harassment by one party against another's will. I then inquired about whether male professors at her university would avoid close contact with students and the school's attitude towards professors who sexually harass students. She shared examples from her university, such as professors only contacting students via email and maintaining appropriate social distance during social interactions. Furthermore, the university took sexual harassment very seriously and would dismiss professors who sexually harassed students. Lastly, I posed a hypothetical question, asking if she would be willing to speak out if she were to be sexually harassed. She replied that she would certainly speak out and expressed the belief that society should not hold victims accountable, but rather encourage them to speak up for themselves.

On January 5, 2024, an interview with a professor from a university in Wuhan was conducted at a nearby coffee shop. The interview lasted ten minutes, during which I asked him four questions and engaged in discussions. I began by inquiring about his definition of "sexual harassment", to which he responded that any physical or verbal contact with a student outside of course and academic contexts that made the student uncomfortable could be considered harassment. Next, I asked if he would avoid intimate contact with students. He stated that he would not accept gifts from students and would strive to avoid intimate connections with them in personal life. I then inquired about the school's disciplinary actions for professors who sexually harass students, to which he replied that the university generally opts for suspension or dismissal of the professor. Lastly, I asked if he believed that contemporary women would be willing to speak up for themselves. He affirmed this, citing that compared to over a decade ago, the current public opinion is more open and rational, with people being more inclined to help and understand women rather than attack the victims.

3.3. Data Analysis

Qualitative Analysis: content analysis was made on the collected case reports, public comments, and interview records; by identifying themes and patterns through coding, the analysis explored public responses to sexual harassment incidents, the linguistic manifestations of emotional mobilization, and how these factors influence the politicization process of the MeToo movement.

Comparative Analysis: public responses and disciplinary outcomes of different cases were compared, and perspectives of individuals from both domestic and foreign universities were contrasted to analyze similarities and differences in public sentiments and attitudes under different contexts and handling methods.

Critical Analysis: based on the collected data and prior research, a critical analysis was conducted to assess the effectiveness of the current handling mechanisms for sexual harassment issues within the higher education system and the role of social media in fostering public discussion and politicizing the movement.

Through this multi-methodological research design, the study intends to comprehensively understand the politicization process of the MeToo movement within the context of higher education in China, as well as the underlying social and cultural motivations.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Emotional Mobilization and Linguistic Patterns in Public Reaction

Analysis of the four cases revealed that public responses on social media were primarily manifested as emotions of anger, disappointment, and support for speaking out. Public discussions surrounding sexual harassment incidents were rich in emotional mobilization languages, such as "zero tolerance," "speaking up bravely," and "severe punishment." These emotions and linguistic patterns reflected public dissatisfaction with the handling of the incidents by educational institutions, particularly when the perceived punishment was lenient. Public discussions raised awareness of the incidents and facilitated the dissemination and politicization of the MeToo movement within society. Divergence between School's Disciplinary Actions and Public Expectations.

The analysis of cases revealed a significant discrepancy between the leniency of disciplinary actions taken by educational institutions and the stringent public expectations for punishment. In the cases of Hangzhou Normal University and Chongqing Normal University, the public generally perceived the school's disciplinary actions as too lenient, failing to effectively punish the perpetrators or serve as sufficient deterrence. In the case of Liaoning University, although the university employed a more severe dismissal, the public response was relatively positive, indicating that when educational institutions take more severe disciplinary measures, they can partially meet public expectations and reduce negative perceptions of the incidents.

4.2. Perception of Sexual Harassment and Willingness to Speak Out

An interview with senior female students from a foreign university and male teachers from a prestigious university in Wuhan revealed differences in perceptions of sexual harassment among individuals in different contexts. While most interviewees recognized excessive intimate language or physical behavior as harassment, there were gender and cultural differences in whether they were willing to speak up for themselves. Female interviewees generally expressed a willingness to speak out, emphasizing that being harassed was not the victim's fault. The male teachers pointed out that the internet era provided more platforms for victims to speak out, but the willingness to speak out was also influenced by personal, cultural, and social factors.

4.3. Politicization Impact of the MeToo Movement

The study demonstrated that public attention and discussions of university sexual harassment incidents, particularly their widespread dissemination on social media, accelerated the politicization of the MeToo movement in China. Public anger and dissatisfaction, as well as criticism of the school's handling, pushed for greater social attention and discussions of the issue, encouraging more people to engage in the movement. Apart from that, the responses of the interviewees reflected an increased understanding of the issue and a change in attitudes within society, indicating the significant role of the MeToo movement in promoting gender equality and opposing sexual harassment.

To sum up, the study has revealed the pivotal role of social media in the politicization of the MeToo movement, with public emotional mobilization and linguistic patterns playing a crucial role in promoting the dissemination of the movement and influencing political agendas. Furthermore, the divergence between the way educational institutions handle sexual harassment incidents and public expectations, as well as the differences in perceptions of sexual harassment and willingness to speak out, have all impacted the development and politicization of the MeToo movement.

5. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The study, through a detailed analysis of cases of the MeToo movement in the higher education context in China, and the data acquired through online public opinion and in-depth interviews, has revealed how the MeToo movement has evolved from a primarily social movement focused on sexual harassment and sexual assault to a phenomenon with a pronounced politicization tendency. The study results display that emotional mobilization and linguistic patterns on social media have played a key role in the politicization process of the movement. Public expression of emotions such as anger, disappointment, and support for speaking out has driven social attention and discussions on the issue of sexual harassment, thereby accelerating the politicization of the movement. Additionally, the discrepancy between the school's handling of incidents and public expectations further ignited public discussion and action, illustrating the social dynamics within the process of politicization.

Media has played a dual role in the politicization of the MeToo movement. On the one hand, it has enhanced the visibility and recognition of the movement, contributing to its widespread dissemination and acceptance. On the other hand, media coverage may also be influenced by commercial interests and political forces, which may distort public understanding and response to incidents. The study indicated that emotional mobilization through media coverage is amplified, particularly on social media platforms, with public responses to sexual harassment incidents being filled with emotionally charged languages, which promotes the politicalization process.

Through the analysis of interviews with individuals from different contexts, the study points out significant gender and cultural differences in perceptions of sexual harassment. While most interviewees could identify excessive intimate behaviors as harassment, female interviewees were more inclined to speak out against it, while male teachers emphasized that the internet era provided more platforms for victims to speak out, but the willingness to speak out was still influenced by social and cultural factors. These findings highlight the importance of cultural sensitivity and gender awareness in promoting social change towards gender equality and opposing sexual harassment.

Based on the research findings, it is recommended that higher education institutions and policymakers employ stricter and more transparent measures to handle sexual harassment incidents, to meet public expectations and reduce negative perceptions of the incidents. Simultaneously, efforts should be made to strengthen education and training on sexual harassment issues to enhance the understanding and sensitivity of the entire society, particularly among men and conservative traditional cultural groups. Furthermore, it is encouraged for the public to actively speak out using platforms like social media to provide broader social support and political influence for the movement.

Through these measures, the development of the MeToo movement in China can be further promoted, fostering gender equality and social justice. Additionally, valuable strategies and insights can be provided for addressing global issues of sexual harassment and sexual assault.

5.1. Research Limitations

Although the study utilized online public opinion analysis and semi-structured in-depth interviews, the collection and analysis of public comments were primarily limited to the Weibo platform. Data from other social media platforms such as WeChat and Douban were not fully utilized, which may have impacted the comprehensive grasp of public sentiments and attitudes.

Although gender and cultural differences in addressing sexual harassment issues were identified, the in-depth analysis of how these differences specifically influence individual behaviors and the politicization of the movement was relatively limited. More empirical data is needed to support this analysis.

The study did not delve into how China's specific political and legal context impacts the politicization of the MeToo movement and public engagement, particularly the direct and indirect effects of policies and laws on the development of the movement.

The analysis of media coverage in the study primarily focused on content and emotional mobilization, with insufficient discussions on media ownership, editorial policies, as well as their potential impact on reporting positions.

5.2. Future Research Directions

Employ a multi-platform data collection method, including, without limitation, popular Chinese social media platforms like WeChat and Douban, as well as international platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, to make a more comprehensive analysis of public responses.

Conduct in-depth research on how gender and culture specifically influence individuals' perceptions, responses to, and willingness to engage in the MeToo movement, particularly examining the role and impact of men.

Explore how different types of media (e.g., state-owned, private, social media) contribute to the MeToo movement, including media strategies, reporting depth, and mechanisms influencing public cognition.

Launch empirical research on the impact of policies and laws on the MeToo movement to assess how concrete policy measures influence the development and social change of the movement.

A deeper understanding of the politicization of the MeToo movement can be achieved by exploring these future research directions, and more effective strategies and policy recommendations can be proposed to promote the social change of gender equality and anti-sexual harassment.

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