



ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

Mediated Intra-gender Moral Competition and Affective Dynamics in Chinese Digital Feminism

Cheng Lan¹, Qingxia Yin^{2*}

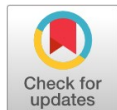
¹Faculty of Humanities, Lancaster University, Lancaster, The United Kingdom

²School of Communication, Xiamen University Malaysia, Sepang, Malaysia

Abstract—The digital feminism in China has developed in a platform environment shaped by state regulation, commercialisation, algorithmic visibility, and diverse feminist positions. Existing research has documented both solidarity and conflict within women's and feminist communities, but it remains unclear when differences within feminism become comparative moral evaluations that contribute to persistent intra-gender division. This study integrates research on Chinese digital feminism, aiming to identify its recurring discourse patterns, examine the affective and relational dynamics within them, and explain under what conditions differences within the female population can be organised through comparative evaluations around feminist or gendered legitimacy. A critical narrative synthesis was conducted on a corpus of 42 peer-reviewed studies published between 2016 and 2026. Following scoping-review guidance for procedural transparency while retaining an interpretive analytical strategy, studies were coded using a structured study-level matrix. Non-exclusive coding identified discourse configurations, structural critique, solidarity, inward moral evaluation, exclusion, polarisation, and three operational conditions of mediated intra-gender moral competition. Five overlapping configurations were identified: activist-oriented feminism, lifestyle-oriented feminism, market-aligned feminism, boundary-policing or delegitimising discourse, and coded feminism. Structural critique and solidarity or coalition-building were more recurrent than inward moral evaluation, affective polarisation, or mediated intra-gender moral competition. MIMC appeared only in a small subset of studies in which comparative evaluations of women or feminist positions were organised around relative feminist or gendered legitimacy and became publicly consequential through platformed circulation, exclusion, ridicule, or boundary enforcement. Chinese digital feminism should not be characterised as inherently divisive. Platform, regulatory, and market conditions can support solidarity, adaptation, commercialisation, exclusion, or conflict rather than producing a single outcome. This study conceptualises mediated intra-gender moral competition as a conditional platform-mediated mechanism through which feminist difference can become a comparative hierarchy among women, rather than as a general feature of digital feminist discourse.

Index Terms— Chinese digital feminism, Mediated intra-gender moral competition, Affective dynamics, Platform governance, Relational aggression

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Introduction

Although feminist politics is often associated with collective identity and solidarity, research on Chinese digital feminism also documents fragmented publics, contested feminist identities, and conflicts within and around feminist communities (Li & Gu, 2026; Nakahara & Cai, 2026; A.

*Corresponding Author: qingxia.yin@xmu.edu.my

Wang & Whyke, 2025; W. Yang et al., 2023). These dynamics are present in an environment shaped by censorship, platform governance, commercialised self-presentation, and recommendation systems (Chang, 2025; Gu & Heemsbergen, 2023; Piao et al., 2025; Sun & Ding, 2024; A. Wang & Whyke, 2025). Thus, what should be concerned is not simply whether conflict exists, but when differences among women or feminist positions become moralised and comparatively ranked, thereby deviating from critiques of structural issues or coalition-building.

Existing research can be organised into three overlapping strands. Many studies have explored how feminist actors cope with limited visibility through strategic adaptation, self-censorship, implicit expression, and organizational adjustment (Chang, 2025; Gu & Heemsbergen, 2023; J. Tan, 2017; Zhang & Quan-Haase, 2026). The second strand of research emphasises heterogeneity. It shows that Chinese digital feminism encompasses activist, lifestyle-oriented, market-aligned, popular-cultural, and other forms that may coexist within the same platform ecology (Ghasemi & Zakaei, 2025; Han & Liu, 2024; Liao, 2025; Liu, 2023; A. Wang & Whyke, 2025; B. Wang & Driscoll, 2019). The third strand focuses on affective and moral dynamics, including anger, polarisation, contested feminist labels, exclusion, and boundary work (Huang, 2023a; Kumar et al., 2026; Li & Gu, 2026; Piao et al., 2025; Tian & Ge, 2025; W. Yang et al., 2023; Zuo, 2026). These strands provide rich accounts of visibility, discursive heterogeneity, and affect, but are rarely integrated to explain how feminist difference becomes comparative moral judgement among women. This is the gap addressed by the present synthesis.

This study addresses this gap through a critical narrative synthesis of interdisciplinary research published between 2016 and 2026. Scoping-review guidance was used to strengthen procedural transparency in search, screening, and reporting, while the analytical stage remained interpretive and configurational rather than statistically aggregative (Greenhalgh et al., 2018; Peters et al., 2021; Tricco et al., 2018). The synthesis identifies five recurring discourse configurations and examines how they intersect with affective dynamics, moral evaluation, and platform conditions. The analysis is organised around three research questions.

RQ1: What recurring feminist discourse configurations circulate in the Chinese digital public sphere, and how can they be analytically distinguished?

RQ2: What affective resources are mobilised within and across these configurations, and how do they interact?

RQ3: Under what conditions does feminist difference become organised as mediated intra-gender moral competition, and how do platform, regulatory, and market conditions shape this process?

The study makes two contributions. Empirically, it offers a transparent synthesis of a fragmented interdisciplinary literature. Conceptually, it draws on relational-aggression research (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Underwood, 2003), neoliberal and postfeminist accounts of subjectivity (Gill & Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008; Rottenberg, 2014), and research on affective publics (Boler & Zembylas, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015) to develop the concept of mediated intra-gender moral competition. The concept describes a platform-mediated process in which women's identities, choices, and emotional performances become objects of comparative moral evaluation and relative feminist or gendered legitimacy. It does not refer to sexual orientation or biological mate competition. Instead, it identifies a conditional sociological mechanism shaped by user interaction, platform affordances, market logics, and regulatory conditions, without characterising Chinese digital feminism as inherently divisive.

Digital feminism in the Chinese context

Feminist expression under constrained visibility

Digital feminism in China operates in a sociotechnical environment shaped by state regulation, platform governance, commercial infrastructure, and changing gender norms. Feminist visibility is therefore neither absent nor unrestricted; it is negotiated through political sensitivity, platform moderation, and culturally legible forms of public expression (Chang, 2025; Gu & Heemsbergen, 2023; Luo et al., 2026; Whyke et al., 2024; Zhang & Quan-Haase, 2026). Feminist actors may rely on coded language, metaphor, strategic ambiguity, altered hashtags, emojis, or less confrontational self-presentation to sustain visibility while reducing political and social risk (Chang, 2025; Gu & Heemsbergen, 2023; J. Tan, 2017). Feminist meanings may also be negotiated through popular-cultural and less explicitly political forms in which audiences participate in articulating the political implications of the content (Liao, 2025; Nakahara & Cai, 2026). These forms are better understood as situated responses to constrained visibility than as direct indicators of ideological commitment.

Chinese digital feminism should therefore be treated as a heterogeneous field rather than a single ideological form. Activist mobilisation, lifestyle politics, self-presentation, market participation, popular feminism, and coded expression coexist and sometimes conflict (Han & Liu, 2024; Liu, 2023; Sun & Ding, 2024; Y. Tan, 2026; A. Wang & Whyke, 2025; B. Wang & Driscoll, 2019). These forms vary in political explicitness and compatibility with commercial logics (Bao, 2024; Liao, 2025). Besides, the willingness to adopt the feminist label openly is itself contested (Zuo, 2026). Political expressions involving structural inequality or gender-based violence may face higher exposure risks when disseminated. In contrast, forms that are less confrontational or compatible with the platform ecosystem can be widely disseminated through consumer culture, lifestyle narratives, or popular language (Gu & Heemsbergen, 2023; Liu, 2023; Sun & Ding, 2024; B. Wang & Driscoll, 2019).

Platform affordances and the shaping of feminist discourse

Digital feminism in China is not only influenced by political regulation, but also shaped by platform functionality, commercial infrastructure, and recommendation systems. Platform architecture is not a neutral communication channel. Existing research has shown that the interactive

structure of platforms and unique social media ecosystems can exacerbate ideological group clustering, emotional polarization, and adversarial interactions (Piao et al., 2025; Su et al., 2026). The research related to Douyin shows how visibility rules, governance, and gendered censorship shape creators' adaptive strategies (B. Wang & Driscoll, 2019). Across RedNote (also translated as Xiaohongshu), Weibo, Zhihu, Douyin, and other environments, feminist discourse appears in different combinations of activism, lifestyle-oriented self-presentation, coded expression, popular culture, and affective interaction (Bao, 2024; Liu, 2023; A. Wang & Whyke, 2025; B. Wang & Driscoll, 2019; Zhang & Quan-Haase, 2026). Platform effects should not be reduced to simple amplification. Constraints on explicit criticism of commercial infrastructures may favor more platform-compatible forms of feminist expression, while recommendation systems may amplify the visibility of polarization without producing the same relational outcomes in every context (Gu & Heemsbergen, 2023; Piao et al., 2025; Sun & Ding, 2024). Therefore, the focus of this study is how these conditions intersect with moral evaluation and when differences among women become comparatively ranked.

From intrasexual competition to mediated intra-gender moral competition

The original research related to intrasexual competition refers to competition between members of the same sex in relation to mating and reproductive success (Darwin, 2016; Trivers & Campbell, 1972). Research on human evolution has subsequently extended this framework to include behaviors of belittling and indirect attacks against competitors. The premise is to interpret these behaviors as strategies aimed at reducing the mate value or reproductive competitiveness of opponents (Buss & Dedden, 1990; Vaillancourt, 2013). This study does not extend this evolutionary explanation to Chinese digital feminism, as the phenomenon examined here differs in its object, mechanism, and institutional setting.

Relational-aggression research provides a more limited but useful point of departure. The existing research shows that harm can operate through reputational damage, social exclusion, and manipulation of relationships rather than direct physical confrontation (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Underwood, 2003). As this literature was developed from offline interpersonal settings, it is not treated here as a ready-made explanation for adult digital publics. Instead, it helps identify relational mechanisms involving reputation, acceptance, and social standing.

The research on relational attacks provides a valuable but limited entry point. It suggests that harm does not have to be achieved through direct physical conflict. It can also be caused through damage to reputation, social exclusion, and manipulation of interpersonal relationships, especially between women (Gill & Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008; Rottenberg, 2014). In the Chinese digital context, similar logics can be applied to self-presentation and debates around independence, work, marriage, motherhood, consumption, and intimate life (Huang, 2023b; Liu, 2023; A. Wang & Whyke, 2025). These insights can be applied to explain how structural inequality is transformed into judgments about individual behavior and virtues.

Affective-publics scholarship provides a third resource by treating emotion not simply as an individual psychological state but as something that circulates through networked communication and organizes attention, identification, and public alignment (Boler & Zembylas, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015). Research on Chinese digital feminism similarly shows that anger, solidarity, antagonism, and affective identification are entangled with platform-specific forms of visibility and interaction (Li & Jiang, 2026; Piao et al., 2025; Su et al., 2026; X. Yang & Hu, 2024). This perspective makes it possible to analyze moral judgement as a publicly circulating and platform-conditioned process rather than only an interpersonal act.

Negative evaluations between women are not sufficient, however, to constitute mediated intra-gender moral competition. Judgements that reproduce conventional gender stereotypes without constructing relative feminist or gendered legitimacy fall outside the concept, as do general anti-feminist hostility and platform polarisation when women or feminised positions are not comparatively evaluated within a female or feminist relational field (Huang, 2023a; Peng et al., 2023; Piao et al., 2025; Y. Wang & Chang, 2023; W. Yang et al., 2023).

Based on these distinctions, this study defines mediated intra-gender moral competition as a platform-mediated process in which women's identities, choices, expressions of femininity, or emotional performances are comparatively evaluated and sanctioned through moralised affect, producing relative hierarchies of feminist or gendered legitimacy. The concept is descriptive rather than evaluative. It does not refer to sexual orientation or biological mate competition; rather, it identifies a sociological process generated through interactions among users, platform affordances, and regulatory and market conditions.

The concept is applied only when three conditions are jointly present: (1) women or feminised positions are evaluated comparatively rather than independently; (2) the comparison invokes relative moral, feminist, or gendered legitimacy, such as authenticity, awareness, responsibility, independence, or ideological consistency; and (3) the evaluation becomes publicly consequential through platformed mechanisms of visibility, circulation, ridicule, exclusion, sanction, ranking, or boundary enforcement. Cases lacking these comparative and moralising dimensions are not classified as mediated intra-gender moral competition.

Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework of this study. It regards platform availability, regulatory conditions, and market logic as contextual forces that shape the visibility and consequences of moral evaluation, rather than decisive causes of internal gender divisions.

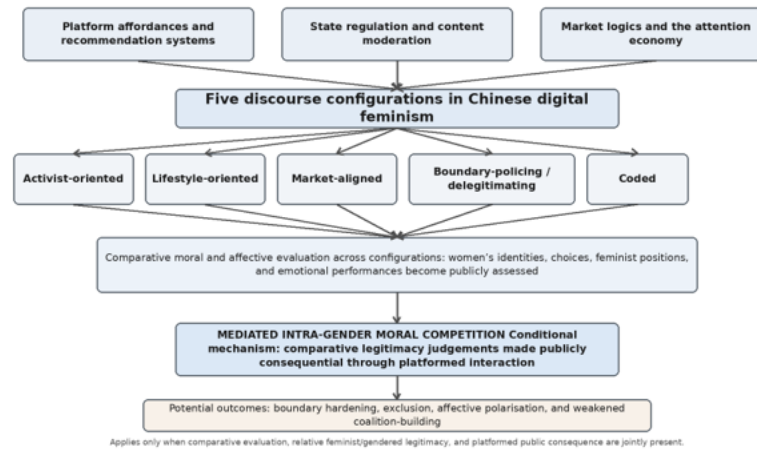


Fig. 1 Conceptual architecture

Methods and Materials

Research design

This study adopted a critical narrative synthesis design and drew on the guiding principles of scoping review to enhance procedural transparency (Greenhalgh et al., 2018; Piao et al., 2025; Tricco et al., 2018). The retrieval, screening, eligibility assessment, and reporting processes were systematically recorded. The analysis phase focused on interpretation. The final configurational framework was constructed through repeated coding and comparison of the included studies. This design is suitable for literature collections covering different platforms, theoretical traditions, methodological paths, and forms of empirical evidence. Its goal is to identify recurring configurations and relationships, rather than estimating pooled effects.

Data sources, search strategy, and eligibility

The primary databases were Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, and CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure). The search covered studies published from January 2016 to 31 August 2026. The databases were first accessed on 15 January 2026 and were re-accessed for the update search on 31 August 2026. Online-first journal articles available by the second access date were considered eligible even when issue assignment occurred later in 2026.

Table I
Search strategy and eligibility framework for literature selection

Category	Defined parameters and inclusion logic
English core search	("digital feminism" OR "online feminism" OR "feminist discourse") AND ("China" OR "Chinese") AND ("social media" OR "platform")
Chinese core search	("网络女性主义" OR "数字女性主义" OR "女性话语") AND ("中国") AND ("社交媒体" OR "平台")
Inclusion criteria	Peer-reviewed journal articles published in English or Chinese in which Chinese digital feminism, feminist activism or identification, feminist boundary work, or anti-feminist discourse in a substantive digital setting was a primary analytical object.
Exclusion criteria	Non-peer-reviewed material; languages other than English or Chinese; no substantive digital component; feminism or anti-feminist boundary discourse not a primary analytical object; offline-only studies.
Supplementary query expansion	Additional searches combined the core blocks with mechanism terms such as "emotional politics", "affective", "internalized sexism", "intra-gender", and "online interaction"; Chinese equivalents included "情感政治", "内化性别歧视", "性别规训", and "女性互动". These terms were not mandatory eligibility criteria.
Analytical scope	Discourse configurations, affect, platform governance, visibility, commercialisation, solidarity, exclusion, moral evaluation, affective polarisation, and intra-gender boundary formation.

Note. The feminism, China/Chinese, and digital-platform blocks formed the mandatory core search. Affect- and interaction-related terms were used for supplementary query expansion and did not determine study eligibility. Database-specific field tags and syntax were adapted while preserving this conceptual structure.

The research results were managed in Zotero before eligibility screening and subsequent import of the final corpus into Excel. The search strategy used a broad mandatory core combining digital-feminism terms, a China or Chinese geography block, and a digital-platform block. Terms

relating to affect, moral evaluation, intra-gender interaction, and online interaction were used in supplementary sensitivity searches rather than as mandatory conditions for inclusion. Exact field tags, truncation, and syntax were adapted to the requirements of Scopus, Web of Science, and CNKI. Table I presents the search concept blocks and eligibility criteria.

Screening and selection

Screening and eligibility assessment were conducted in stages informed by scoping-review methodology (Peters et al., 2021). Reporting of identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion followed the PRISMA Extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) (Tricco et al., 2018). The initial screening was conducted primarily by the lead author. Titles and abstracts were assessed against the predefined eligibility criteria, after which potentially relevant records underwent full-text assessment.

To strengthen consistency and reduce single-reviewer selection bias, the second author independently verified a randomly selected sub-sample of title-and-abstract screening decisions and reviewed the eligibility of all studies retained in the final corpus together with a randomly selected subset of full-text exclusions. Disagreements were discussed against the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria before the corpus was finalised.

Bibliographic information and screening decisions were organised in a reference-management library. The characteristics, methods, platforms, and principal findings of potentially eligible studies were subsequently charted for analysis. Before the final corpus was confirmed, full-text records were rechecked against the predefined eligibility criteria. Following this eligibility verification, 42 studies constituted the final qualitative synthesis corpus. Table II summarises the selection process.

Table II
PRISMA-ScR flow statistics

Selection stage	Description of action taken	Records (n)
Identification	Records identified through database searching across Scopus, Web of Science, and CNKI.	865
Deduplication	Records remaining after removal of duplicate entries across databases	550
Screening	Records screened on title and abstract	550
Exclusion I	Records excluded for language or publication type and for lack of relevance to focus	365
Eligibility	Full-text articles assessed for eligibility against thematic criteria	185
Exclusion II	Full-text records excluded because they lacked substantive analysis of digital feminist interaction, affective dynamics, or gendered platform relations, or because gender/feminism was not a primary analytical focus	143
Included	Final corpus of studies included in the qualitative thematic synthesis	42

Coding procedure and typology construction

The included studies were coded using a structured study-level matrix, with the individual study as the primary unit of analysis. Coding proceeded iteratively in three stages. First, descriptive coding recorded five dimensions. These were platforms examined, substantive feminist or gender issue, affective resources identified, feminist positioning or narrative stance, and relevant platform, regulatory, or commercial conditions. Multiple codes were permitted where supported by the source material, and coding decisions were linked to article-level evidence.

Second, descriptive codes were grouped through axial coding into five higher-order discourse configurations: activist-oriented feminism, lifestyle-oriented feminism, market-aligned feminism, boundary-policing or delegitimizing discourse, and coded feminism. These were treated as analytical ideal types rather than mutually exclusive categories. Overlap was retained only when distinct dimensions were independently evidenced within the same study, not when classification was uncertain. For example, Chang (2025) was coded as both activist-oriented and coded because the study examines feminist activism sustained through self-censorship, coded language, and metaphor. H. Wang and Chang (2025) was coded as both lifestyle-oriented and market-aligned where lifestyle feminism was explicitly embedded in RedNote's consumerist platform logic and vulnerability to platform co-optation. Boundary-policing or delegitimizing discourse was a discourse configuration, whereas exclusion or boundary hardening was recorded separately as a relational analytical code.

Third, the corpus was reread using the three operational criteria for mediated intra-gender moral competition defined earlier. General disagreement, anti-feminist hostility, platform-level or gender polarisation, and negative evaluations among women were excluded unless all three MIMC conditions were jointly met. Moralisation was treated as a broader interpretive process; inward moral evaluation was the study-level analytical code; and MIMC was applied only when comparative legitimacy and platformed public consequence were also evidenced. The matrix separately recorded structural critique, solidarity and coalition-building, exclusion and boundary hardening, and affective polarisation so that countervailing evidence was retained rather than treated as an exception.

To assess coding consistency, the second author independently recoded a randomly selected subsample of 12 studies (28.6% of the corpus) using the final code definitions. The audit covered 13 binary study-level codes and 156 coding decisions. Overall agreement was 94.9%, with Cohen's $\kappa = .870$. Disagreements were reviewed against the operational definitions and used to refine distinctions among platform-level polarisation, gendered moral judgement, and comparative feminist legitimacy. Table III reports the full audit.

Table III
Coding consistency and analytical credibility

Assessment component	Decision units	Agreement	Cohen's κ	Role in analytical credibility
Overall coding framework	12 studies; 156 study-by-code decisions	94.9%	.870	Indicates high overall consistency across the coding framework
Discourse configurations	60 decisions	100.0%	1.000	Tests consistency in assigning activist-oriented, lifestyle-oriented, market-aligned, boundary-policing/delegitimizing, and coded configurations
Analytical variables	60 decisions	90.0%	.792	Tests structural critique, inward moral evaluation, solidarity, exclusion/boundary hardening, and polarisation
Mediated intra-gender moral competition conditions	36 decisions	94.4%	.636	Tests the three operational conditions of comparative evaluation, moral or feminist legitimacy, and platformed public consequence
Audit sample coverage	12 of 42 studies	28.6% of corpus	—	Provides a substantial subsample for consistency checking

Note. Cohen's κ was calculated on binary study-level coding decisions. The MIMC κ is lower than its raw agreement because positive instances of the three MIMC conditions were relatively uncommon in the randomly selected subsample, making κ more sensitive to prevalence.

Findings

The coding of the 42-study corpus identified five recurrent but non-exclusive configurations surrounding Chinese digital feminist discourse: activist-oriented feminism, lifestyle-oriented feminism, market-aligned feminism, boundary-policing or delegitimizing discourse, and coded feminism. Activist-oriented feminism was the most frequently identified configuration ($n = 28$), followed by coded feminism ($n = 11$), boundary-policing or delegitimizing discourse ($n = 9$), lifestyle-oriented feminism ($n = 7$), and market-aligned feminism ($n = 7$). Because configurations were coded non-exclusively, these frequencies indicate analytical recurrence rather than mutually exclusive groups, and their combined total therefore exceeds the number of studies in the corpus.

More importantly, the configurations did not map consistently onto a single emotional or relational outcome. Structural critique was identified in 31 studies, while 23 contained evidence of solidarity or coalition-building. Fourteen studies contained inward moral evaluation and 17 contained some form of exclusion or boundary hardening, but only five studies documented affective polarisation as a central pattern. Most importantly for the conceptual argument of this article, only five studies satisfied all three conditions of mediated intra-gender moral competition. The literature therefore does not support a general claim that Chinese digital feminism is predominantly organised around intra-gender hostility. Instead, it reveals a heterogeneous field in which structural critique, solidarity, commercial adaptation, strategic ambiguity, boundary formation, and moral competition coexist.

Overlapping configurations of Chinese digital feminist discourse

The five configurations were not discrete camps. Activist-oriented feminism foregrounded structural critique, collective claims, consciousness-raising, and mobilisation (Chen & Ding, 2024; L. Hou, 2020; A. Wang & Whyke, 2025; Y. Wang & Tavmen, 2025; Z. Yang, 2025), while coded feminism captured strategic ambiguity, altered hashtags, metaphor, humour, remix, and self-censorship used to sustain visibility under constraint (Chang, 2025; Gu & Heemsbergen, 2023; Y. Tan, 2026; Zhang & Quan-Haase, 2026). Lifestyle-oriented feminism centred autonomy, intimate life, self-development, and everyday or reproductive choice (Liu, 2023; Lu, 2025; H. Wang & Chang, 2025)), whereas market-aligned feminism captured branding, consumption, monetisation, entrepreneurship, and other commercially compatible forms of empowerment (Cheng, 2025; Cui, 2026; Liu, 2023; Sun & Ding, 2024; P. Wang, 2026). Boundary-policing or delegitimizing discourse concerned authenticity claims, anti-feminist labelling, ideological boundary work, and exclusion (Bao, 2025; Han & Liu, 2024; Huang, 2023a; Li & Gu, 2026; H. Wang & Chang, 2025; W. Yang et al., 2023; Y. Yang, 2026; Zhu & Yang, 2026; Zuo, 2026).

The analytical significance lies in overlap. Activist-oriented and coded configurations frequently co-occurred where visibility constraints prompted strategic adaptation, while lifestyle-oriented and market-aligned configurations could overlap where autonomy and everyday feminist identity were articulated within consumerist or self-branding logics (Chang, 2025; H. Wang & Chang, 2025). Boundary-policing or delegitimizing discourse could cut across otherwise different orientations because it describes a relational practice rather than a substantive feminist agenda (Bao, 2024; Han & Liu, 2024; Li & Gu, 2026; Zuo, 2026). Table IV therefore presents the configurations as non-exclusive analytical ideal types rather than mutually exclusive groups.

Table IV
Overlapping configurations of Chinese digital feminist discourse in the coded corpus

Configuration	<i>n</i>	Core analytical markers	Typical relational pattern	Interpretive caution
Activist-oriented feminism	28	Structural critique, mobilisation, collective claims, consciousness-raising	Anger, indignation, solidarity, collective identification	Activist affect should not be equated with polarisation
Lifestyle-oriented feminism	7	Selfhood, autonomy, intimate life, self-development, reproductive or everyday choice	Self-affirmation, ambivalence, personal legitimization	Not synonymous with “pink feminism”; not necessarily depoliticised
Market-aligned feminism	7	Consumerism, branding, monetisation, entrepreneurship, commercial visibility	Individualised empowerment but sometimes community visibility/resilience	Market participation does not automatically eliminate structural critique
Boundary-policing / delegitimising discourse	9	Authenticity claims, ideological boundary work, anti-feminist labelling, delegitimation	Moral judgement, ridicule, exclusion	External anti-feminism and intra-feminist boundary policing must be distinguished
Coded feminism	11	Strategic ambiguity, altered hashtags, metaphor, humour, remix, self-censorship	Caution, irony, solidarity, adaptive persistence	Frequently overlaps with activist discourse

Note. Configurations were coded non-exclusively; therefore, frequencies exceed the total corpus of 42 studies.

Structural critique and solidarity are more common than inward competition

The second research question concerns the affective resources associated with these configurations and how they interact. The coding does not support a binary contrast between politically serious structural critique and emotionally driven intra-gender conflict. Structural critique was present in 31 of the 42 studies, making it one of the most recurrent patterns in the corpus. Solidarity or coalition-building was identified in 23 studies. By comparison, inward moral evaluation appeared in 14 studies, exclusion or boundary hardening in 17, and affective polarisation in five.

Across the corpus, affective resources did not map onto a single relational outcome. Anger, indignation, empathy, and affective identification appeared in studies documenting collective mobilisation, structural critique, mutual support, and digital sisterhood as well as in studies documenting antagonism or boundary hardening (Y. Hou, 2025; Li & Jiang, 2026; X. Yang & Hu, 2024; Y. Yang, 2026; Yin & Sun, 2021; Zeng, 2020). The coding therefore treated affect as relationally variable rather than inherently divisive.

Exclusion likewise did not automatically indicate intra-gender competition. Boundary-setting could be used to protect feminist spaces or sustain collective participation without ranking women by relative feminist legitimacy (Chang, 2025; He, 2024). For this reason, exclusion or boundary hardening was coded separately from MIMC unless comparative legitimacy judgements were also present.

Fragmentation also had more than one meaning. Decentralised or coded communication could reflect ideological division, but it could also function as adaptive persistence under unstable visibility through altered hashtags, secondary accounts, distributed networks, or other low-profile forms of circulation (Feng & Nie, 2026; Han & Liu, 2024; Zhang & Quan-Haase, 2026). The empirical pattern therefore does not support treating fragmentation or affective intensity as a proxy for polarisation.

Table V
Relational and analytical patterns identified across the 42-study corpus

Analytical code	Studies (<i>n</i>)	% of corpus
Structural critique	31	73.8%
Solidarity / coalition-building	23	54.8%
Exclusion / boundary hardening	17	40.5%
Inward moral evaluation	14	33.3%
Affective polarisation	5	11.9%
Mediated intra-gender moral competition	5	11.9%

Note. Codes are non-exclusive and may coexist within the same study.

Mediated intra-gender moral competition as a conditional pattern

Only five studies met all three operational criteria for Mediated Intra-Gender Moral Competition (MIMC) (Cheng, 2023; Huang, 2023b; Li and Gu, 2026; Miao, 2026; Tian and Ge, 2025). Across these studies, comparative moral positioning was the shared pattern: women or feminist positions were assessed relationally, the comparison invoked relative feminist or gendered legitimacy, and the evaluation acquired public consequences through platformed circulation or boundary enforcement. MIMC was therefore a narrower form of inward moral evaluation that could overlap with, but remained analytically distinct from, exclusion and affective polarisation.

Negative cases reinforced this boundary. Anti-feminist hostility, ideological polarisation, or negative stereotypes about women were not coded as MIMC when the evidence did not establish comparative ranking among women through a feminist or gendered standard of legitimacy (Huang, 2023a; Peng et al., 2023; Piao et al., 2025; Y. Wang & Chang, 2023; W. Yang et al., 2023). This conservative threshold prevents the concept from functioning as a general label for misogyny or online gender conflict.

Platform, regulatory, and market conditions shape divergent pathways

Across the corpus, platform affordances, regulatory constraints, and market logics were recurrent contextual conditions, but they were associated with divergent relational outcomes. Their effects varied with the form of discourse being circulated and the social relations through which it was interpreted.

Censorship and unstable visibility were commonly associated with coded or decentralised communication, including strategic ambiguity, altered hashtags, emojis, self-censorship, account migration, and redistribution through secondary or distributed networks (Chang, 2025; Feng & Nie, 2026; J. Tan, 2017; Zhang & Quan-Haase, 2026). These practices could reduce explicitness while preserving continuity and participation.

Recommendation systems and interaction architectures were more directly associated with polarisation in a smaller group of studies. Large-scale and cross-platform evidence identified ideological clustering, affective polarisation, and antagonistic encounters, but platform-level polarisation did not by itself establish comparative feminist legitimacy among women (Piao et al., 2025; Su et al., 2026).

Market logics were similarly mixed. Studies documented individualised empowerment through self-branding, consumption, productivity, and entrepreneurial self-management, but also forms of visibility, community formation, and issue circulation sustained through commercial or platform infrastructures (Sun & Ding, 2024; H. Wang & Chang, 2025; P. Wang, 2026).

Taken together, platform, regulatory, and market conditions shape how feminist discourse becomes visible, circulates, and persists. They can shape when moral evaluation becomes publicly consequential, but they do not in themselves establish MIMC.

Discussion

The synthesis shifts the theoretical focus from the presence of conflict to the process by which feminist difference becomes a comparative hierarchy. The central analytical distinction is between affective mobilisation, which can organise collective identification and support, and affective stratification, in which emotion or conduct becomes evidence for ranking women's relative feminist or gendered legitimacy.

Seen in this way, mediated intra-gender moral competition is not a competing typology alongside the five discourse configurations. It is a narrower relational mechanism that can emerge across them when standards of autonomy, awareness, responsibility, authenticity, or resistance are used comparatively and become socially consequential through platformed interaction. This distinction allows the discussion to move beyond a descriptive inventory of feminist forms toward the processes through which plurality is maintained, negotiated, or converted into hierarchy.

Affect as a relational resource in the production of division

Affective-publics scholarship emphasises that networked emotion can organise attention, attachment, and collective alignment (Boler & Zembylas, 2016; Papacharissi, 2015). The Chinese cases in this synthesis show why this circulation should not be equated with division. Studies of #MeToo, labour activism, "girls help girls" discussions, and feminist livestreaming show how anger, empathy, recognition, and peer support can connect personal experience to structural critique and collective identity (Li & Jiang, 2026; Sun & Ding, 2024; Y. Wang & Tavmen, 2025; X. Yang & Hu, 2024; Y. Yang, 2026; Zeng, 2020). Analysis of anger around patriarchal marriage further demonstrates that the same affective register can have ambivalent relational effects rather than having a fixed political meaning.

The theoretical issue is not which emotion is inherently feminist or divisive, but when an emotional style becomes an evaluative standard. Anger may be read as political awareness in one setting and as irrational excess in another. Restraint may be understood as strategic adaptation or as insufficient commitment. Once this kind of performance is used to judge women comparatively as more aware, independent, responsible, or politically legitimate, affect no longer only mobilises: it stratifies.

This distinction between affective mobilisation and affective stratification extends the idea of affective publics by specifying a narrower relational outcome of emotional circulation. Networked emotion can create attachments and solidarities without creating hierarchy. MIMC begins only when affect is converted into evidence about the relative legitimacy of the person expressing it. This explains why the high frequency of structural critique and solidarity in the corpus is theoretically consequential rather than merely a counterexample to conflict.

Moralisation and relative feminist legitimacy

Moralisation refers here to a shift from interpreting structural inequality toward evaluating personal conduct, identity, choice, or virtue. This process is consistent with neoliberal and postfeminist accounts in which empowerment is organised through autonomy, responsible choice, self-management, and continuous self-improvement (Gill & Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008; Rottenberg, 2014). In Chinese digital contexts, these vocabularies are visible in self-presentations and debates around work, marriage, motherhood, consumption, and independence (Huang, 2023b;

Lu, 2025). The present synthesis adds a relational dimension: individualisation can provide not only standards for evaluating the self, but also criteria for evaluating other women.

The 6B4T literature makes this shift particularly visible. Cheng (2023) shows how the translation and negotiation of 6B4T generated disputes over whether solidarity with married women was compatible with radical feminist commitments. Besides, Li and Gu (2026) document community norms that linked refusal of marriage and motherhood to ideological consistency. Accordingly, marital or reproductive position becomes more than a personal difference because it can be treated as evidence of feminist commitment.

Huang (2023b) analysis of the “married donkey” label makes the comparative mechanism more explicit. Marriage can operate as a symbolic indicator of dependence on or complicity with patriarchy. Tian and Ge (2025) document contested evaluations of motherhood and gendered expectations in Zhihu discourse, while Miao (2026) shows how resistant discourse can construct an ideal of the independent woman around economic autonomy, personal achievement, and distance from patriarchal dependency. Importantly, Miao (2026) also shows emotional solidarity alongside internal exclusions and class-based hierarchies. This coexistence shows that resistance and intra-gender hierarchy are not mutually exclusive.

These cases clarify why moralisation is broader than MIMC. Anti-feminist discourse may delegitimise feminism without ranking women within a feminist relational field (Huang, 2023a; W. Yang et al., 2023). Female users may reproduce gender stereotypes without constructing relative feminist legitimacy (Peng et al., 2023) and platform polarisation may be intense without evidence that women are comparatively judging other women (Piao et al., 2025). MIMC names the narrower point at which individualised standards become relational measures of legitimacy and platformed interaction makes those comparisons publicly consequential.

Theoretical contribution of mediated intra-gender moral competition

The concept of mediated intra-gender moral competition makes three theoretical interventions. First, it retains the relational insight contained in the language of competition while departing from evolutionary accounts that locate female intrasexual competition primarily in mate- or reproduction-related rivalry (Buss & Dedden, 1990; Darwin, 2016; Trivers & Campbell, 1972; Vaillancourt, 2013). Competition in the present framework is neither biological nor necessarily intentional. It describes a relational configuration in which the legitimacy of one position is established comparatively through the downgrading of another.

Second, the concept extends relational-aggression research beyond interpersonal exclusion or reputational harm (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Underwood, 2003). Digital feminist disputes may involve exclusion and reputational judgement, but the distinctive object of status competition in the MIMC cases is normative: relative feminist or gendered legitimacy. The relevant classifications concern who is independent, politically aware, complicit, authentic, responsible, or sufficiently feminist, rather than social acceptance alone.

Third, MIMC adds a relational layer to theories of neoliberal and postfeminist subjectivity (Gill & Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2008; Rottenberg, 2014). Existing work explains how structural inequalities can be individualised through discourses of choice, responsibility, self-management, and empowerment. The synthesis suggests a further step: once these standards circulate between women, self-governance can become comparative governance. Women are not only invited to manage and evaluate themselves; they can also be positioned as judges and objects of one another’s legitimacy.

Affect and platform mediation connect these interventions. Affective-publics research explains how emotion organises attention and collective alignment (Papacharissi, 2015), while platform research shows how visibility, recommendation, moderation, and circulation make judgements repeatable and consequential (Gu & Heemsbergen, 2023; Piao et al., 2025; G. Wang & Kanthawala, 2026). The contribution of MIMC is to specify one conditional relational outcome of this circulation: emotional and moral difference can harden into a hierarchy of legitimacy without implying that such a hierarchy is the normal or inevitable outcome of digital feminism.

The concept should therefore be treated as a proposition for further empirical testing rather than a comprehensive theory of Chinese digital feminism. Quantitative or mixed-method research could test whether comparative legitimacy judgements predict exclusion, reputational sanction, or affective polarisation; whether these relationships vary across platform architectures; and whether structural critique, solidarity, or coalition-building moderate them.

Limitations and future research

Several limitations qualify the conclusions of this synthesis. First, the search was restricted to Scopus, Web of Science, and CNKI and to peer-reviewed material published between 2016 and 2026. Grey literature, reports, conference papers, and unpublished theses were therefore outside the search frame. This increases procedural consistency but may exclude emerging or locally circulating work. The ten-year window also introduces a currency and relevance problem in a fast-moving platform environment: earlier studies may describe affordances, moderation practices, or governance regimes that have since changed, while recently published and online-first research may be more immediately aligned with current platform conditions.

Second, the analysis is based on published studies rather than primary platform data, and platform coverage within the literature is uneven. The coding therefore reflects the concepts, samples, and methodological choices reported by the original authors and cannot recover interactions

that those studies did not document. Frequencies in this review should consequently be read as patterns within an academic literature rather than prevalence estimates for Chinese social-media users.

Third, the interpretive synthesis and coding were led by the lead author. A second reviewer independently verified a subsample of screening decisions, reviewed the eligibility of the retained corpus, and participated in the coding-consistency audit, but these procedures do not eliminate interpretive judgement from typology construction or the application of the MIMC criteria. The restrictive operational definition and explicit retention of counterevidence reduce, rather than remove, this source of bias.

Finally, the synthesis identifies recurrent associations rather than causal effects, and MIMC is developed from only five studies that met all three operational criteria. The framework should therefore be tested against primary platform data, comment-network analysis, interviews, experiments, longitudinal designs, and cross-platform or cross-cultural comparisons. Such work should also examine when disagreement produces solidarity, negotiated coexistence, or withdrawal rather than hierarchy.

Conclusion

This critical narrative synthesis identifies Chinese digital feminism as a heterogeneous field of overlapping discourse configurations. Structural critique and solidarity were more recurrent in the reviewed literature than affective polarisation or MIMC, so fragmentation and emotional intensity should not be treated as evidence of intra-gender competition in themselves.

The principal conceptual contribution is mediated intra-gender moral competition: A conditional relational mechanism through which feminist difference can become a hierarchy of relative legitimacy. MIMC is distinct from general misogyny, anti-feminist hostility, women-on-women stereotyping, and platform-level polarisation because it requires comparative moral positioning among women or feminist positions together with a platformed public consequence.

Platform affordances, regulatory conditions, and market logics shape the visibility and consequences of these evaluations without determining a single relational outcome. MIMC therefore specifies one possible pathway within digital feminist interaction rather than a general diagnosis of Chinese digital feminism.

By treating competition as relational, moral, and platform-mediated rather than biological or motivational, the framework redirects attention from whether women disagree to when disagreement becomes ranking, sanction, and exclusion. This proposition provides a focused basis for future comparative, quantitative, and mixed-method testing.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing or conflicting interests to disclose in relation to this research.

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Author Contributions

C.L. conceptualised the study, developed the methodology, conducted the investigation and formal analysis, and wrote the original manuscript draft. Q.Y. contributed to conceptualisation, provided supervision, validated the findings, and administered the project. Both authors reviewed and edited the manuscript.

Consent to Publish and Consent to Participate

Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement

Not applicable.

Ethics Statement

Ethical approval was not required for this study because it is a review of previously published, publicly available scholarship and does not involve human participants, personal data, or animal subjects.

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