

# The Characteristics and Perception of Sexual Harassment Discussions on Xiaohongshu

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**How to cite this paper:** Guo, S. Y. (2024). The Characteristics and Perception of Sexual Harassment Discussions on Xiaohongshu. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 12, 136-154.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2024.1211010>

**Received:** September 6, 2024

**Accepted:** November 9, 2024

**Published:** November 12, 2024

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## Abstract

This study explores the characteristics and perceptions of sexual harassment discussions on Xiaohongshu, a social media platform widely used by young women in China. Through a combination of textual analysis and thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, the research examines how users engage with topics related to sexual harassment, the emotional responses elicited, and the coping strategies shared within the community. The findings reveal the prevalence of victim narratives, frustration with institutional inaction, and an evolving awareness of self-protection among users. Furthermore, this study highlights the role of digital feminism in shaping public discourse and solidarity on the platform, particularly through its connection with the #MeToo movement. Despite Xiaohongshu's potential to foster open discussions on gender inequality and harassment, significant limitations remain, particularly in terms of privacy protection and systemic societal challenges. This research concludes with recommendations for platform-specific improvements and broader societal changes to more effectively address sexual harassment and support victims.

## Keywords

Social Media, Sexual Harassment, Xiaohongshu, #MeToo Movement, Social Constructionism

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background

In recent years, the issue of sexual harassment has engendered widespread attention around the world. On July 21, an online user named “Renmin University Doctorate Wang Di” posted a 58-minute video publicly accusing a Renmin professor, Wang Guiyuan, of egregious harassment, molestation, and retaliatory threats affecting her graduation, sparking widespread debate on social media (Yue, July

22, 2024). On July 23, a netizen shared a post alleging that a female graduate from Shaanxi Normal University accused Professor Wang of repeated sexual harassment, including inappropriate touching and sending indecent photos, claiming there were dozens of victims, and on July 24, the university reported the matter to the police, leading to Professor Wang's provisional suspension pending investigation (People's Daily Online, July 26, 2024). Both cases highlight the growing global scrutiny on sexual harassment, including China. This increasing focus on sexual harassment underscores how online spaces, particularly the Xiaohongshu platform, which has become a critical venue for women to engage in conversations about such sensitive issues, are essential for understanding the role of social media in shaping public perception and discourse in China. It is Xiaohongshu that is widely regarded as a platform primarily catering to young females in China, reflecting its user base, where the number of girls engaging with Xiaohongshu is significantly higher than that of boys (Chi et al., 2022; Huang, 2023). Xiaohongshu has become a vital space for users to share experiences, express opinions, and participate in discussions that contribute to the broader discourse on gender issues in China. This study aims to shed light on how users engage in discussions on gender issues in China, influencing public perception and discourse on sensitive topics such as sexual harassment on Xiaohongshu.

## 1.2. Significance of the Study

Research on social media and sexual harassment has yielded significant insights, particularly in the context of the #MeToo movement and its reverberations on the Chinese feminist movement. Yin and Sun (2021) conducted a rigorous text analysis to explore how digital feminism has catalyzed the emergence of women's sub-public domains in political, social, and cultural contexts, thereby challenging gender inequality in China. This underscores the paramount role of digital media in shaping and amplifying feminist discourse. Similarly, Tan and Xu (2023) focused on the participation of Chinese victims in digital narratives, finding that by sharing traumatic experiences and reflective discourses, victims formed a collective identity and maintained emotional solidarity, which effectively challenged the social environment surrounding sexual harassment. Lin and Yang (2019) also contributed to this discussion by analyzing the #MeToo movement's empowerment of Chinese women at both individual and collective levels, revealing through interviews and observations how the movement stimulated women's consciousness and collective resistance. Although Deal et al. (2020) examined sexual assault disclosures on Twitter within the context of the #MeToo movement, employing content analysis to investigate 1,459 tweets, they primarily focused on variations in sexual explicitness and the fulfillment of social functions such as expression and social validation. These studies collectively underscore the multifaceted role of digital media in both individual empowerment and collective action against sexual harassment, highlighting both common themes and unique aspects across different cultural contexts.

There are several gaps in the existing research on the #MeToo movement and digital feminism. Although most studies focus on the macro level of the #MeToo movement, exploring the overall impact of the movement and changes in social structure, they often neglect the specific perceptions and reactions of individual users when engaging with these topics. Furthermore, although existing research primarily relies on qualitative text analysis or interviews, there is a notable lack of textual analysis and thematic analysis, particularly in the context of analyzing user perceptions on large social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu.

### 1.3. Purpose of the Study

To address these gaps, this study aims to explore the characteristics and perceptions of sexual harassment discussions on Xiaohongshu. Through a combination of textual analysis and thematic analysis, the study will examine users' specific perceptions and responses to the topic of sexual harassment. This approach reveals dynamic changes at the individual level, not only deepening our understanding of digital feminism but also offering a new perspective for future research. Additionally, the study evaluates the role of social media in the spread of sexual harassment topics, the impact of the #MeToo movement on gender equality awareness, and online discussions and public cognition from a social constructivist perspective.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The Role of Social Media in the Spread of Sexual Harassment Topics

It is social media that plays a pivotal role in addressing sexual harassment issue. Sexual harassment, which refers to unwelcome sexual remarks or behavior aimed at an individual's gender or sexuality with the intent or effect of disrupting the work or learning environment or creating a hostile, intimidating, or offensive atmosphere (Delgado Falcon, 2019; Xiong et al., 2018), has been widely examined in the context of social media. Notably, it is through social media that a critical platform for addressing and spreading awareness about sexual harassment has emerged, often bypassing traditional media and legal channels, thereby reshaping public discourse and agenda-setting dynamics.

There are various studies that have highlighted the influence of digital media on feminist politics, particularly within the #MeToo movement. For instance, Yin and Sun (2021) introduced the concept of "intersectional digital feminism," emphasizing how digital media has significantly advanced feminist initiatives in China by navigating the complexities of inclusion versus exclusion, visibility versus invisibility, and influence versus backlash. What this framework illustrates is the role of digital media in supporting feminist movements across diverse social and cultural landscapes.

Additionally, Tan and Xu (2023) explored the digital narratives of Chinese victims in the #MeToo movement, revealing that online platforms enabled these

victims to form a collective identity and maintain emotional solidarity through the sharing of traumatic experiences and engaging in reflective discourse. As a result, the public exposure of sexual harassment through hashtags, content archiving, and information recirculation not only broke the silence but also challenged societal norms that condone such behavior, leading to the formation of a powerful digital feminist movement.

Moreover, [Lin and Yang \(2019\)](#) investigated the empowerment of Chinese women at both individual and collective levels within the #MeToo movement. They found that the movement heightened women's awareness and ability to seek justice, while also reconstructing their identities and promoting resistance against sexual harassment through online and offline support and actions. Nevertheless, they also cautioned that this level of empowerment is still insufficient to fully address the problem, particularly given the challenges posed by legal reforms and social structural inequalities.

[Li et al. \(2021a\)](#) further contributed to this discussion by using a multidimensional framework to evaluate how different social actors in China's #MeToo movement employed various framing strategies—individual action frames, collective action frames, and issue-specific frames—to mobilize resources. These frames not only enhanced public understanding of the movement but also played a crucial role in disseminating and discussing sexual harassment topics.

While these studies collectively underscore the significant role of social media in spreading awareness about sexual harassment, especially within the #MeToo movement, they also reveal certain gaps. Most notably, the individual perceptions and reactions to these topics, as well as the ways social media platforms mediate the spread of sexual harassment discussions within China's unique sociocultural context, have not been fully explored. To address these unresolved issues, future research should delve deeper into how social media influences public discourse on sexual harassment, particularly in relation to individual experiences and the broader cultural landscape in China.

## **2.2. The Impact of the #MeToo Movement on Gender Equality Awareness**

It is the #MeToo movement that has had a profound impact on social discourse. The #MeToo movement, which gained significant momentum on social media in October 2017, has become a powerful platform for exposing the prevalence of sexual violence and raising public awareness about gender inequality. By encouraging victims to share their experiences using the #MeToo tag, the movement has sparked social responses aimed at confronting sexual harassment and advancing gender equality ([Li et al., 2021b](#); [Xiong et al., 2018](#)).

Research on the #MeToo movement's impact reveals its pivotal role in promoting public awareness of gender inequality through digital platforms. For example, [Yin and Sun \(2021\)](#) explored the movement's role in fostering digital feminism in China by creating a feminist sub-public sphere and a counter-public advocating

for change. Although these advancements are significant, their study also highlighted the considerable challenges posed by censorship and misogynistic attacks, which continue to hinder progress. Similarly, [Lin and Yang \(2019\)](#) examined the movement's influence on the empowerment of women in China, noting that it has heightened awareness and spurred efforts to combat gender inequality both online and offline. They, however, cautioned that these advancements remain insufficient, particularly in the context of legal reforms and persistent social inequalities.

In addition to these studies, [Li et al. \(2021a\)](#) employed a multidimensional framework analysis to demonstrate how various social actors within the #MeToo movement utilized individual, collective, and issue-specific action frameworks to mobilize resources. This approach has deepened our understanding of how digital media-driven movements like #MeToo shape public awareness and facilitate the dissemination of gender equality initiatives.

There are significant challenges, including national censorship and sociopolitical restrictions, that still limit the effectiveness of the movement in China despite these successes. Consequently, there is a need for more inclusive and targeted strategies to overcome these barriers.

What the #MeToo movement has done is not only influence public perceptions of gender inequality—particularly regarding sexual harassment and assault—but also bring gender-based violence and systemic inequalities to the forefront of public discourse. Additionally, the movement has played a crucial role in amplifying the voices of marginalized groups traditionally excluded from mainstream gender equality discussions. [Moitra et al. \(2021\)](#) pointed out that, although the movement has primarily featured privileged women, it has also provided a platform for individuals from diverse backgrounds to share their experiences. Nonetheless, they caution that structural barriers and societal biases have limited the movement's reach, leaving many marginalized voices still struggling to be heard.

Furthermore, the #MeToo movement has challenged societal norms and legal frameworks related to gender equality, prompting calls for legal reforms and greater accountability. This has also led to a reevaluation of workplace cultures and power dynamics, compelling organizations to address harassment and discrimination more proactively.

In short, while it is true that the #MeToo movement has made substantial strides in raising awareness about gender equality and influencing public discourse, there remains significant work to ensure that all survivors' voices are heard and that meaningful changes are enacted to address the root causes of gender inequality. As the movement continues to evolve, maintaining a focus on intersectionality and advocating for further legal and societal reforms will be essential to achieving true gender equality. This literature review, therefore, provides a comprehensive overview of current research on the #MeToo movement's impact, highlighting both its successes and ongoing challenges.

### 2.3. Online Discussion and Public Cognition from the Perspective of Social Constructivism

It is social constructionism that posits reality is not an independent, objective entity, but rather a product of social interaction and language communication (Romaioli & McNamee, 2021; Schudson & Gelman, 2023; Xiong et al., 2018). This perspective emphasizes that our cognition and understanding are constructed through symbolic systems like culture and language, with social interactions playing a central role. In the context of the #MeToo movement, online discussions have been pivotal in shaping public cognition from a social constructivist viewpoint, as digital media platforms have facilitated the construction of collective identities and promoted public awareness of sexual harassment by providing victims with the means to share their stories and build emotional solidarity (Yin & Sun, 2021). Aubrey and Frisby (2011) argued that media plays a significant role in both perpetuating and instigating ongoing self-objectification. This occurs as media sexually objectifies bodies by fragmenting body parts or sexual functions, effectively reducing individuals to mere objects. There are scholars, such as Galdi & Guizzo (2021), who have long recognized the media's role as a cultural risk factor for sexual harassment and violence against women, attributing this to the sexual objectification of women, which emphasizes their physical attractiveness and sexual readiness while reducing them to mere decorative and sexual objects.

Yin and Sun (2021) explored the #MeToo movement in China, illustrating how digital platforms not only enabled victims to narrate their experiences but also promoted public awareness of sexual harassment by fostering a collective identity. This identity, strengthened through emotional solidarity, has been instrumental in challenging societal silence on sexual harassment. Similarly, Tan and Xu (2023) inspected the role of online discussions in the Chinese #MeToo movement, focusing on how these discussions allowed victims to form a supportive community, break societal silence, and circulate information, thereby altering public perceptions and inspiring broader social change.

In their study, Lin and Yang (2019) extended this analysis by examining the empowerment of Chinese women through the #MeToo movement. They found that online discussions have fostered a collective struggle against gender inequality, although they noted that, despite progress in raising awareness and encouraging collective action, deeper social structural inequalities continue to pose significant challenges. Likewise, Li et al. (2021a) used a multidimensional framework to demonstrate how various social actors leveraged online platforms to construct and disseminate frames around sexual harassment, significantly shaping public perceptions and sparking widespread societal discussion on gender inequality.

What these studies collectively underscore is the critical role of social media, grounded in social constructivism, in shaping public perceptions of sexual harassment and gender inequality. Through online discussions, the public not only gains a deeper understanding of these issues but also participates in broader social change. However, further research is needed to explore the complexities of effectively

using online platforms to promote changes in public perception within diverse sociocultural contexts.

The rise of social media has profoundly influenced the shaping of public cognition, particularly through online discussions. There is a social constructivist perspective that understanding and interpreting reality is heavily influenced by social interactions within specific contexts. For example, [Waltermann and Henkel \(2023\)](#) illustrated how public discourse in online forums contributes to the social construction of new concepts, such as automated vehicles, demonstrating that online discussions actively shape how individuals and groups understand and discuss these technologies. Similarly, [Zhao et al. \(2017\)](#) emphasized the role of online discourse in constructing public perceptions during crises, noting that these discussions are crucial in forming collective narratives that influence public action and policy.

It is online discussions that serve as a powerful force in shaping collective beliefs, offering a platform for individuals to express opinions, share experiences, and challenge existing norms. For instance, [Jenol and Pazil \(2022\)](#) explored how social media discussions around the COVID-19 vaccine shaped public attitudes, highlighting the significant influence of online discourse on public health behaviors. In this context, the construction of public cognition is heavily shaped by the dynamics of online discussions, where misinformation and authoritative voices compete to influence collective beliefs.

From a social constructivist perspective, collective beliefs are formed through ongoing dialogue and negotiation among users, reflecting broader societal tensions and power dynamics. These discussions can either reinforce or challenge existing social structures, illustrating the complex and dynamic nature of public cognition, which is continually reshaped by the interplay of individual contributions and the broader social context.

The implications of online discussions for public cognition are significant, particularly when dealing with complex and contested issues. While the social construction of meaning in online spaces can lead to a more nuanced and multifaceted public understanding, it can also result in the entrenchment of misinformation and the polarization of public opinion ([Zhao et al., 2017](#)). Therefore, fostering constructive and inclusive online discussions is essential for promoting a more informed and balanced public cognition.

In summary, online discussions are a powerful tool for shaping public cognition from a social constructivist perspective. They provide a space where meanings are negotiated, collective beliefs are formed, and public understanding is constructed. However, the impact of these discussions depends on the quality of the discourse and the broader social and technological contexts in which they occur. As digital platforms continue to evolve, understanding the mechanisms of social construction in online spaces will be crucial for promoting a more informed and equitable public dialogue. This literature review synthesizes key insights from recent research on the role of online discussions in shaping public cognition, offering a comprehensive overview of the social constructivist perspective on this

phenomenon. Based on the above analysis, this study proposes the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the characteristics of sexual harassment topics on the Xiaohongshu platform?

RQ2: What are the main emotional reactions and attitudes of Xiaohongshu users when discussing the topic of sexual harassment? How are these reactions reflected in users' interactive behaviors (such as likes, comments, and shares)?

RQ3: What is users' cognition, emotions, and opinions on the topic of sexual harassment on Xiaohongshu?

### 3. Methods

In the present study, a combination of textual analysis and in-depth interviews was used to explore the characteristics of sexual harassment topics on the Xiaohongshu platform and their impact on user perception.

#### 3.1. Textual Analysis

The study on sexual harassment on the Xiaohongshu (RED) platform was conducted using a systematic and multi-faceted approach to ensure diversity, representativeness, and reliability. It was initially through a Textual Analysis that 10 randomly selected popular posts related to sexual harassment, along with their user comments, were systematically coded and thematically inspected. This analysis aimed to understand users' emotional reactions, attitudes, and interactive behaviors, such as likes, comments, and sharing. To enhance the consistency and reliability of the findings, two researchers independently conducted the coding process.

In addition to this, the researcher identified the issue of sexual harassment on Xiaohongshu by closely observing discussions and posts shared by female users. By searching for posts using specific hashtags like #sexualharassment and leveraging the platform's recommendation algorithm, the researcher focused on content where users expressed uncertainty about sexually offensive behaviors, including male gazes and body contact. Through the analysis of high-engagement posts and supportive comments, the research assessed how this topic influences user attitudes and behaviors.

There was a well-defined search process that the study followed to explore sexual harassment on Xiaohongshu. Searches were conducted on Xiaohongshu using targeted keywords and hashtags to ensure a broad and representative sample of discussions. Relevant posts and comments were carefully collected and inspected, allowing the researcher to extract key data points and gain a comprehensive understanding of how sexual harassment is discussed and perceived on the platform.

#### 3.2. In-Depth Interviews

It was to gain a deeper understanding of users' perceptions of sexual harassment on the Xiaohongshu platform that the research adopted a qualitative approach

combining in-depth interviews and a structured questionnaire. Initially, 11 in-depth interviews were conducted with active Xiaohongshu users, focusing on their views on sexual harassment and their motivations for participating in discussions on the platform. These interviews were guided by a semi-structured questionnaire, which allowed for both depth and flexibility in the responses. After conducting the interviews, the recordings were transcribed and thematically inspected to identify individual and collective cognitive patterns related to sexual harassment. The demographic information of participants is in **Table 1**.

In addition to the interviews, the study utilized a qualitative questionnaire to investigate respondents' perceptions, views, motivations, and behaviors concerning discussions of sexual harassment on Xiaohongshu. The questionnaire was meticulously designed with the core objective of exploring participants' awareness and attitudes towards sexual harassment, as well as their motivations for engaging in these discussions and the ways they express their views. Divided into several sections, the questionnaire covered basic participant information, perceptions and views on sexual harassment, participation motivations and behaviors, and personal reflections and future expectations. Each section was crafted to align with the research objectives, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of respondents' attitudes and behavioral patterns. For instance, questions were included to assess respondents' participation in discussions on sexual harassment, their perceived importance of these interactions, and their motivations for engaging in such discussions.

It was by integrating both in-depth interviews and a structured questionnaire that the research provided a comprehensive and nuanced view of users' cognitive and behavioral patterns related to sexual harassment on Xiaohongshu, offering a thorough exploration of the topic from multiple perspectives.

**Table 1.** Demographic information of participants in in-depth interviews.

	Sex	Age	Education Level	Occupation
1	Male	35 - 50	High school degree	Cashier
2	Male	18 - 25	Bachelor's degree	Student
3	Male	18 - 25	College degree	Beauty Assistant
4	Female	26 - 35	Bachelor's degree	Wedding Planner
5	Male	18 - 25	High school degree	Lifeguard
6	Female	26 - 35	High school degree	Assistant
7	Female	26 - 35	High school degree	Barista
8	Male	26 - 35	High school degree	Mechanic
9	Female	18 - 25	College degree	Financial Advisor
10	Female	18 - 25	Bachelor's degree	Writer
11	Female	18	High school degree	Student

It is user perceptions, motivations, and behaviors related to sexual harassment topics on the Xiaohongshu platform that the interview questions in this study are designed to explore. By making the questions open-ended, the study allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences and viewpoints.

There are three main sections into which the interview questions are organized, each focusing on different aspects of participants' experiences and perception. The first section, Cognition and Perception of Sexual Harassment Topics, seeks to understand participants' awareness and views on sexual harassment. This section includes questions about whether they have seen or participated in discussions about sexual harassment on Xiaohongshu and invites them to share their experiences. Participants are also asked to reflect on the significance of these discussions and their impact on both them and society. Furthermore, they are encouraged to compare these discussions with those on other platforms, such as Weibo or WeChat, to identify any perceived differences.

The second section, Motivation and Behavior in Participation, delves into the reasons behind participants' engagement with sexual harassment topics on Xiaohongshu. It explores the motivations that drive them to participate in these discussions and the factors that influence these motivations. Participants are asked to describe the viewpoints or emotions they tend to express during these discussions and to explain their reasons for doing so. Additionally, this section examines the interactive behaviors they most frequently use, such as liking, commenting, or sharing, and seeks to understand what these behaviors signify for them.

The final section, Personal Reflection and Future Expectations, encourages participants to reflect on how their involvement in these discussions has shaped their understanding of sexual harassment. They are asked whether their participation has led to new insights or changes in their previous views on the topic. Moreover, participants are invited to suggest improvements to the Xiaohongshu platform to better facilitate discussions on sexual harassment in the future. Finally, they are given the opportunity to share any additional viewpoints or experiences related to sexual harassment that were not addressed in the earlier questions.

Through these structured yet open-ended questions, the study aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of how users engage with sensitive topics on social media and the broader implications of these discussions.

### 3.3. Thematic Analysis

The study employed thematic analysis to scrutinize the data from in-depth interviews, following the six-phase framework established by [Braun and Clarke \(2006\)](#). This method is particularly suited for identifying recurring patterns and themes in qualitative data while maintaining flexibility. The analysis began with a phase of familiarization, where the researchers immersed themselves in the interview transcripts by reading and re-reading the data. During this phase, initial ideas and insights were extracted, forming the foundation for subsequent steps.

Next, the researchers undertook a systematic coding process. Each transcript

was meticulously examined, and data segments relevant to the research questions were systematically coded, encapsulating key ideas and salient concepts that ranged from specific instances of sexual harassment to broader reflections on societal norms. As the coding process was iterative and reflexive, both explicit and latent meanings were ensured to be captured.

In the third phase, the researchers identified broader themes by grouping related codes together. For example, there were codes relating to participants' emotional responses to harassment and their motivations for engaging in online discussions, which were categorized under a broader theme of emotional solidarity.

The next phase involved reviewing themes to ensure they accurately reflected the data. The researchers revisited the coded data and the overall dataset to verify the credibility of the themes. During this phase, some themes were merged, split, or discarded if they did not have sufficient supporting data. In the penultimate phase, themes were further refined and named, focusing on their essence and how they connected to the study's research questions, which guided the overall analysis.

Finally, in the reporting phase, the findings were written up, where vivid examples from the data were used to illustrate each theme. It was by presenting quotes from the interviews and relating them to the overarching themes that the thematic analysis provided a rich, detailed account of user perceptions and behaviors related to sexual harassment on Xiaohongshu.

### **3.4. Ethical Consideration**

There were ethical considerations of paramount importance in this study, especially given the sensitive nature of the topic of sexual harassment and the use of data from the Xiaohongshu platform. For the Textual Analysis, great care was taken to ensure that all user data was anonymized, with no personally identifiable information included in the analysis, thereby protecting the privacy of the individuals involved. It was when conducting the in-depth interviews that participants were provided with a clear and detailed informed consent form, which outlined the study's purpose, emphasized the voluntary nature of their participation, and affirmed their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

## **4. Finding**

### **4.1. Textual Analysis of Xiao HongShu**

It is a qualitative thematic analysis of users' discussions on sexual harassment based on the "Xiaohongshu sample" that the following summary presents, providing specific examples as evidence for the identified themes:

#### **4.1.1. Prevalence and Fear of Sexual Harassment**

Sample 1 highlights the widespread nature of sexual harassment in everyday settings, such as university campuses and subways. Users share personal experiences that reveal the deep-seated fear and helplessness victims often feel. For instance,

one user recounted the terror experienced when harassed on the subway, underscoring both the prevalence and severity of the issue. The user described feeling trapped, unable to move or call for help in the crowded space, which heightened their sense of vulnerability. “I couldn’t speak up because I was afraid of drawing attention,” the user explained, capturing the paralyzing fear many victims experience in public settings.

#### **4.1.2. Coping Strategies and Self-Protection**

In Sample 3, users discussed various strategies for dealing with sexual harassment, such as preserving evidence, contacting the police, and interacting with law enforcement. These suggestions reflect a heightened awareness of the need for self-protection among victims. One user described how they collected fingerprints on their clothes after an incident on a crowded bus, noting that “even though it was difficult, I made sure not to wipe my clothes so I could later show the evidence to the authorities.” Another user shared their experience of immediately using their phone to record the aftermath of an incident, explaining, “I knew the police might not take me seriously, so I wanted to have proof that I could show them right away.” These examples reflect the heightened awareness of the need for self-protection and demonstrate how users take proactive steps to support their claims when seeking justice.

#### **4.1.3. Inaction and Disappointment in Social Systems**

Sample 1 also reveals a deep disappointment with the response of authorities, particularly the police and campus security, when addressing sexual harassment cases. Users expressed frustration with the indifference or inaction they often encounter, which exacerbates their sense of helplessness and fear when seeking help.

#### **4.1.4. Psychological Trauma and Adaptation Mechanisms**

Some users in Sample 1 mentioned that repeated experiences of sexual harassment have led to a gradual “desensitization” to such incidents, forming a coping mechanism tinged with helplessness and self-mockery. This reflects the psychological trauma, and the adjustment process victims undergo as they continue to face harassment.

#### **4.1.5. Escape and Refuge**

In the Sample 1, a user expressed a strong desire to relocate due to the frequent sexual harassment experienced in their current environment. This illustrates the profound impact sexual harassment has on victims’ quality of life and sense of security, driving them to consider extreme measures like moving away.

#### **4.1.6. Women’s Mutual Assistance and Solidarity**

Sample 7 narrates the story of a Korean feminist who faced threats for translating and disseminating the struggles of Korean women, highlighting the importance of solidarity and mutual support among women facing gender inequality. The sample calls for unity and support for this feminist, demonstrating the power of

cross-border female solidarity. In sample, the feminist has translated many of the struggles faced by Korean women into English on Twitter. However, a notorious male YouTuber, known for driving an innocent woman and her mother to suicide, made a video threatening her. In response, she said, “If my personal information is leaked, people may discover that I am not a perfect person, but I hope they will remember my efforts for women’s human rights.”

#### **4.1.7. Lack of Sex Education**

In Sample 4, users discussed how the absence of comprehensive sex education contributes to confusion and helplessness among women in dealing with sexual harassment in the workplace and other settings. The sample stressed the importance of sex education, noting that many women only realized they were victims of harassment as they grew older. For example, Sample 4 highlights the struggles of “imperfect victims” in the workplace, who often endure discomfort to protect their jobs, emphasizing the need to protect vulnerable individuals so they can become stronger.

#### **4.1.8. Sexual Harassment of Minors on the Internet**

Sample 5 describes a social experiment that exposed how underage girls are particularly vulnerable to online sexual harassment. This sample calls for stronger online security measures to protect minors, emphasizing their heightened vulnerability in digital spaces. Sample 5 told a story about 37-year-old Vivian and her friends who conducted a social experiment to challenge victim-blaming in sexual harassment cases. Using AI-generated photos, they created four female personas: a sexy rich woman, a tough woman, a girl-next-door, and an underage girl named Xiaoyu. Unexpectedly, Xiaoyu, the underage profile, received significantly more sexual harassment than the other three. In just two or three days, Xiaoyu got 108 messages, nearly half involving sexual harassment—ranging from requests for private photos to offers of protection from men posing as “gentle uncles.” Initially, her profile portrayed a 16-year-old girl, but after changing the age to 14, the harassment increased to 50%, far surpassing the harassment faced by the other characters. The experiment caused severe psychological distress for the researchers, leading them to stop early.

#### **4.1.9. Against Victim Blaming**

Sample 9 takes a strong stance against victim-blaming, using specific examples to criticize this harmful logic. For instance, the sample refutes the notion that “wearing revealing clothes brings trouble,” emphasizing that the responsibility for sexual harassment lies solely with the perpetrator, not with the victim’s attire or behavior. “I was wearing a baggy hoodie and still got harassed,” one user replied, emphasizing that harassment occurs regardless of attire. Another user pointed out that focusing on what the victim was wearing only serves to further traumatize them and divert attention from the true issue—the actions of the harasser. These discussions reveal how users on Xiaohongshu actively refute victim-blaming

narratives and advocate for holding perpetrators accountable rather than shaming victims for their clothing or behavior.

These analyses reveal the widespread discussion of sexual harassment within the Xiaohongshu sample and illustrate how users utilize social media to express and share their experiences. The samples demonstrate the crucial role that social media plays in fostering discussions on sexual harassment, supporting victims, and advocating for action and change.

## **4.2. Thematic Analysis of In-Depth Interviews**

Next is the summary of the thematic analysis with specific references to the respondents as evidence:

### **4.2.1. Perception and Awareness of Sexual Harassment Topics**

Respondent 01 observed that discussions on Xiaohongshu tend to be more harmonious compared to platforms like Weibo or WeChat. It is likely due to the higher proportion of female users (1:9) on Xiaohongshu that this difference exists, fostering a more supportive environment for discussing sexual harassment.

Additionally, Respondent 01 pointed out that the predominance of female users in this space allows for greater freedom of expression on sexual harassment topics, making the discussions feel more comfortable and less hostile.

### **4.2.2. Motivation for Participation and Behavior**

Respondent 02 emphasized that the motivation to engage in discussions about sexual harassment is often rooted in a sense of social responsibility and a desire to support others. Their participation, primarily through liking and commenting on posts, serves to amplify the message and raise awareness.

Meanwhile, Respondent 03 highlighted that common interaction behaviors, such as liking and collecting posts, play a crucial role in spreading awareness, even if users are not actively commenting.

### **4.2.3. Emotional Expression and Social Responsibility**

Respondent 04 expressed a wide range of emotions—anger, empathy, and frustration—indicating that discussions on sexual harassment are deeply personal and have a significant impact on participants.

Similarly, Respondent 07 expressed a strong sense of social responsibility, stating that their involvement in these discussions stems from a desire to contribute to societal change and support others facing similar challenges.

### **4.2.4. Community Atmosphere and Platform Specific Dynamics**

Respondent 06 described the community atmosphere on Xiaohongshu as unique, with discussions often centered on practicality and personal experiences. This distinguishes Xiaohongshu from platforms like Weibo or WeChat.

Both Respondents 05 and 08 suggested that Xiaohongshu could enhance its platform by improving privacy protection and offering professional support resources, reflecting ongoing concerns about the safety and effectiveness of

discussions on the platform.

#### **4.2.5. Future Expectations and Suggestions for Improvement**

Respondent 09 underscored the need for better content moderation and privacy protection on Xiaohongshu, emphasizing concerns about the safety of discussions and the quality of content shared.

Respondent 10 advocated for Xiaohongshu to maintain an open environment when handling discussions on sexual harassment, suggesting that these discussions should not be easily censored or restricted.

This thematic analysis captures the diverse perspectives of respondents on sexual harassment topics, including their motivations for participation, emotional responses, perceptions of the community atmosphere, and suggestions for improving the platform. Each respondent offers valuable insights into how Xiaohongshu can enhance the quality and impact of discussions on sensitive issues like sexual harassment.

### **4.3. Triangulation of Textual Analysis and Thematic Analysis of In-Depth interviews**

It is a spectrum of experiences and emotions associated with sexual harassment that the textual analysis of Xiaohongshu reveals, underscoring the platform's role in providing a space for victims to share their stories and coping strategies. Furthermore, the thematic analysis of in-depth interviews stresses the significance of social responsibility and the desire to support others as key motivators for participating in discussions about sexual harassment. However, both analyses also reveal concerns about Xiaohongshu's limitations in effectively addressing sexual harassment. These findings highlight the need for systemic changes in how sexual harassment cases are handled and for enhancements to the platform's features to better protect and support users.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

### **5.1. Analysis of the Results**

The findings of this study offer a comprehensive insight into how sexual harassment is discussed and perceived on the Xiaohongshu platform, shedding light on the role of social media in shaping public discourse on sensitive topics. The textual analysis reveals that users frequently share personal experiences of sexual harassment, underscoring both the prevalence of such incidents in daily life and the profound psychological impact on victims. Through this platform, users can express their fears, frustrations, and coping strategies, which emphasizes the importance of social media as a tool for raising awareness and providing support to victims. There is an alignment between this observation and previous research that highlights how digital platforms amplify marginalized voices and foster solidarity among users who face similar challenges (Yin & Sun, 2021; Tan & Xu, 2023). While earlier research highlighted the empowerment of women through collective identity

formation, this study underscores the users' frustration with existing social systems and the need for both platform-specific improvements and broader societal changes (Lin & Yang, 2019).

It is through the thematic analysis of in-depth interviews that the study further illustrates the motivations behind users' participation in discussions about sexual harassment on Xiaohongshu. Respondents expressed a strong sense of social responsibility, driven by a desire to support others and contribute to societal change. This sense of duty is evident in their engagement behaviors, such as liking, commenting, and sharing posts, which not only help spread awareness but also contribute to creating a supportive community for victims. These findings resonate with the concept of digital feminism, where online platforms facilitate the formation of a collective identity and promote public discourse on gender inequality (Lin & Yang, 2019). However, both the textual and interview analyses also reveal limitations in Xiaohongshu's effectiveness in addressing sexual harassment. Users expressed disappointment with existing social systems, such as the police and campus security, and suggested that the platform could improve by enhancing privacy protection and providing professional support resources.

The triangulation of textual analysis and in-depth interviews underscores the complex dynamics involved in discussions about sexual harassment on Xiaohongshu. While the platform provides a vital space for victims to share their experiences and seek support, it also highlights the challenges of fostering meaningful change in a sociocultural context where systemic issues persist. What the study's findings suggest is that while Xiaohongshu plays a significant role in promoting awareness and discussion, there is a need for both platform-specific improvements and broader societal changes to effectively address sexual harassment. These insights contribute to the ongoing discourse on the role of social media in shaping public perceptions and behaviors, offering a nuanced perspective on the potential and limitations of digital activism in China.

## 5.2. Limitations and Future Research

Although this study provides valuable insights into Xiaohongshu's role in discussions about sexual harassment, it is not without limitations. Firstly, the relatively small sample size, particularly for the in-depth interviews, may limit the generalizability of the findings. While the qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of user experiences and perceptions, a larger and more diverse sample could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the broader user base on Xiaohongshu. Moreover, the study primarily focused on the Xiaohongshu platform, which, while significant, represents just one part of China's broader social media landscape. Future research could benefit from a comparative analysis of discussions on sexual harassment across multiple platforms, such as Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin, to better understand the unique and overlapping dynamics within these digital spaces.

Another limitation is the potential bias in the self-reported data collected

through in-depth interviews. Brutus et al. (2013) analyzed self-reported limitations in 1,276 articles published between 1982 and 2007 across five major management journals, finding that the majority of these reports pertain to validity issues. This is because respondents may have modified their responses due to social desirability bias, especially when discussing sensitive topics like sexual harassment. Additionally, the study relied on publicly available posts and comments, which may not capture the full extent of users' experiences, particularly those who prefer to discuss these topics privately or in less visible ways. Future research could explore alternative data collection methods, such as anonymous surveys or sentiment analysis of private messages, to gain a more nuanced understanding of user behavior and attitudes.

Looking ahead, several promising areas for future research emerge. One potential direction is to investigate the long-term impact of online discussions on users' perceptions and behaviors. For example, longitudinal studies could examine whether participation in Xiaohongshu discussions leads to lasting changes in attitudes toward gender equality and sexual harassment. Additionally, future studies could explore the role of algorithmic content curation on Xiaohongshu and other platforms, analyzing how these algorithms influence the visibility and spread of discussions on sensitive topics. Finally, given the global nature of the #MeToo movement, comparative studies examining how different cultural and political contexts shape online discussions of sexual harassment could provide valuable insights into both the universal and context-specific aspects of digital activism.

### 5.3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the study analyzes the characteristics and perception of sexual harassment discussions on Xiaohongshu, revealing the platform's vital role in shaping public discourse around sensitive issues. The textual analysis shows that users frequently share personal stories, coping strategies, and frustrations with institutional responses to sexual harassment, highlighting the platform's significance as a space for awareness and support. Through in-depth interviews, the study further illustrates that users are motivated by a strong sense of social responsibility, participating in discussions not only to express their emotions but also to support others and contribute to societal change. However, users also express concerns regarding privacy, the need for professional support resources, and frustrations with the broader societal systems that fail to adequately address these issues.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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