Who Are the Misogynists That Stigmatize Feminists in China?

Dongdong Yang, University of Connecticut, United States
Jiayun Ye, University of Wisconsin-Madison, United States

Abstract

Against the backdrop of rising feminist activism on digital platforms, global misogyny is thriving. Anti-feminists around the world have adopted strategies to stigmatize feminists, making feminism a dirty word. However, the predictors of such stigmatization has been understudied. Therefore, drawing from research on far-right ideologies and intergroup contact theory, the current study employed an online survey to identify the profile of Chinese misogynists that stigmatize feminists based on womanhood. Results demonstrate that nationalism and offline contact with feminists reduced stigmatization of feminists, while patriarchal beliefs exacerbating said stigmatization. Life satisfaction was not significantly related to stigmatization of feminists, which highlights the cross-cultural differences in anti-feminist research and calls for more nuanced, quantitative studies on the stigmatization of feminists in China and beyond.

Keywords: Stigmatization of Feminists, Nationalism, Life Satisfaction, Intergroup Contact, China

Introduction

With social media providing alternative spaces for sexual violence survivors and feminists to share unique experiences and perspectives, conservative claims for restoring traditional gender roles have also become louder (Saresma, 2018). While misogyny is considered as central to the far-right ideology and closely related to ultra-nationalism, white supremacy, anti-environmentalism, homophobia, and xenophobia in Western societies (e.g., Agius et al., 2022; Barla & Bjork-James, 2021; Koronaiou & Sakellariou, 2017; Saresma, 2018), the predictors of stigmatization of feminists in the Chinese context have been understudied.

Feminism has long been stigmatized around the world, even in nations such as Finland (Saresma, 2018) that maintains a great gender equality record (World Economic Forum, 2022). As a nation that boasts a long history influenced by Confucianism, traditional Chinese society advocates the moral principle of "Three Obediences" that require women to obey their fathers, husbands, and sons in different life stages (Ling, 1998). Partly due to this age-old ideology, China ranks 102nd in terms of gender equality among 146 participating regions (World Economic Forum, 2022). Compared to Western democracies, Chinese news media are owned by the state and tend to more frequently feature national pride items (Liu et al., 2021). Such propaganda—in combination with the nationwide patriotic education campaign (e.g., Naftali, 2020) and the wolf-warrior diplomacy (e.g., d'Hooghe, 2021)—has fueled nationalism (including but not limited to pride in traditional Chinese culture) among the population. This is the patriarchal system where misogyny takes root in contemporary China.

Prior research suggests that the relationship between nationalism and feminism varies, depending on socio-political contexts. For instance, white nationalists in the United States argue against feminism in order to defend existing systems (Bjork-James, 2020), while in some European countries, femonationalism promotes cultural superiority of societies that claim to protect women's rights and stigmatizes Muslim immigrants as a threat to their societies (Farris, 2012; Möser, 2022). Even in the Chinese context, on one hand, nationalists frequently label feminists as national traitors (Q. Huang, 2022), while on the other hand, some pro-state feminists resort to nationalistic rhetoric to advocate for women's rights (Yin & Fang, 2022). Give such conflicting findings from qualitative research, the current study set out to quantitatively verify the complicated relationship between nationalism and stigmatization of feminists, aiming to test the applicability of Western feminist and political communication theories in the Chinese context.

Moreover, low-status men reported higher levels of female-directed hostility (Kasumovic & Kuznekoff, 2015). Additionally, intergroup contact when characterized by equal status and cooperation helps to reduce prejudice between majority and minority groups (Allport, 1954). Therefore, the current research employed an online survey to examine whether offline interpersonal contact with feminists and life satisfaction reduce stigmatization of feminists, while nationalism and patriarchal beliefs exacerbating such a stigma.

Literature Review

Stigmatization of Feminists

Globally, feminists are excluded from "normal" women and typically suffer from criticisms or humiliation of their physical appearance, relational status, and personality (Q. Huang, 2022). Being stigmatized as "deviant women" who violate the social expectation of

femininity and gender roles (Q. Huang, 2022), feminists feature "butch woman with all the masculine qualities" (Alexander & Ryan, 1997, p. 559), being unattractive or sexually unappealing (Rudman & Fairchild, 2007). They are perceived to possess unfeminine traits, such as "aggressive," "radical," "extreme," and "stubborn" (Houvouras & Scott Carter, 2008; Breen & Karpinski, 2008; Swirsky & Angelone, 2014). Individual reluctance to identify as feminists is further fueled by the false perception that feminism poses a threat to conventional gender dynamics and family values (Houvouras & Scott Carter, 2008; Rudman & Fairchild, 2007). Worse still, womanhood-based stigma around feminists also embodies homophobia by labeling feminists as homosexuals. For example, a major stereotype of feminists held by men is feminists being ugly and man-hating lesbians (McLaughlin & Aikman, 2020; Rudman & Fairchild, 2007; Swirsky & Angelone, 2014). Therefore, feminists are not only stigmatized as being "not woman" but also not heterosexual women, which further marginalizes them based on gender norms.

Nationalism and Feminism

The connection between feminism and nationalism has been examined from different angles. One of such perspectives revolves around the imagined community of the nation through the categories of gender (Hogan, 2009). The traditionalist understanding of man as the head of the family and nation is associated with nationalism (Saresma, 2017), because in order to defend the traditional order of society, men should defend their country just as they protect their women (Nagel, 1998). Nation and family are taken as rooted in differences emblematic of the natural order that should not be altered (Koronaiou & Sakellariou, 2017). This black-and-white rhetoric (Wiberg, 2011) advances a rigid binary system that divides people into ingroup and outgroup members based solely on biological sex and nationality. Therefore, advocates of such ideologies promote exclusion as they defend "us" against the "others," be they feminists or individuals that do not share the nationalistic sentiment (Saresma, 2018).

Patriarchy refers "to male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women, and to characterize a system whereby women are kept subordinate in a number of ways" (Bhasin, 2006, p. 3). With patriarchy remaining an important organizing principle in many societies (Agius et al., 2022), right-wing traditionalists are warning that patriarchy is being threatened (Wodak, 2015), largely by feminists, and feminism is believed to undermine the moral standards of society. Empirical research has demonstrated that right-wing traditionalist ideology is strongly correlated with patriarchal beliefs (e.g., Wiberg, 2011), and conservative voters are less likely to prioritize the issue of violence against women (Araújo et al., 2021). It stands to reason that the proponents of patriarchal ideology blame feminists for creating tension within society and undermining existing social order because they are resistant to patriarchal ideas. Based on the above reasoning, it is postulated that:

H1: Patriarchal beliefs will be positively related to stigmatization of feminists.

In Western contexts, nationalism and anti-feminism are central to contemporary far-right movements (e.g., Koronaiou & Sakellariou, 2017). For instance, Koronaiou and Sakellariou (2017) observed that the Greek neo-Nazi Golden Dawn Party has been trying to reproduce a nationalist habitus consisting of anti-feminism and anti-homosexuality that expects real Greek women to internalize. In line with far-right theories that attribute the decline of the traditional family and birth rates to feminists (e.g., Wilson, 2020), the Golden Dawn Party also considers women as reproductive vessels that sustain the nation and the white race (Koronaiou & Sakellariou, 2017). The valorization of hierarchy and traditional values (Agius

et al., 2022) supports "masculinized discipline and tendency of anti-pluralism" (Yin & Fang, p. 5) and is thus destructive to feminist advocacy. Furthermore, gender-ideology and feminism are frequently framed as threats to state sovereignty (Agius & Edenborg, 2019).

In the Chinese context, the relationship between nationalism and feminism is also complicated, albeit for different reasons. On one hand, in 2015 five Chinese feminist activists were detained for 37 days because of planning to hand out anti-sexual harassment stickers on public transportation (Xiong & Ristivojević, 2021). After their release, several of them moved out of China and started to organize feminist campaigns overseas (Lv, 2019). As a result of incidents like this and long-time propaganda that stigmatizes feminists, feminism is widely considered as a Western cultural invasion that threatens Chinese culture (Y. Huang, 2016) and interferences in China's affairs (Xiong & Ristivojević, 2021). However, on the other hand, a number of Chinese feminists have embraced nationalism while promoting gender equality (Yin & Fang, 2022). Given the plurality of feminisms in China and complexity of the relationship between nationalism and feminism, the following research question was proposed:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between nationalism and stigmatization of feminists?

Relative Deprivation and Intergroup Contact as Predictors of Stigmatization

According to Dohm (1902), anti-feminists include the conservatives who subscribe to the moral superiority of the existing social order, the masculinists who believe in the natural inferiority of women, the practical egoists who reject women's rights for fear of losing their own privileges, and the cavaliers who claim to protect women's honor. As previously demonstrated, those who believe in patriarchy tend to stigmatize feminists. In this section, the authors of the current study aim to establish the link between relative deprivation and said stigmatization.

Relative deprivation theory (Stouffer et al., 1949) suggests that individuals' dissatisfaction with their status is not simply a function of their objective status, but rather contingent on their subjective assessment of their status, especially when they feel entitled. Gurr (1970) maintains that perceptions of relative deprivation lead to frustration, which could trigger violence. This theory explains why lower-status men increased hostility toward women (Kasumovic & Kuznekoff, 2015). Since misogynists believe that traditional gender relations are a zero-sum game, they claim that women deprive men of male privilege and that feminists are going too far (Agius et al., 2022). For instance, the #HimToo movement—as a backlash against #MeToo—which portrays men as the victims of unfounded accusations of sexual assault (Barla & Bjork-James, 2021) is mainly composed of male participants who are not able to find a romantic partner (Donnelly et al., 2011). Therefore, it is hypothesized that:

H2: Life satisfaction will be negatively related to stigmatization of feminists.

According to the intergroup contact theory, certain types of intergroup interactions could improve intergroup attitudes and reduce discrimination (Allport, 1954). Based on this theory, Wu et al. (2017) demonstrated that interpersonal-mediated interactions occurring between Chinese social media users with a heterosexual orientation and LGB celebrities reduced stigmatization of sexual minorities. Even imagined contact with stigmatized outgroups can prepare people for successful face-to-face intergroup communication (Turner & West, 2011).

Therefore, the current study predicts that individuals who have had contact with feminists tend to not stigmatize feminists. More formally:

H3: Offline contact with feminists will be negatively related to stigmatization of feminists.

Method

The current study collected data from Chinese people who had at least heard of feminism through an online survey. To ensure understandability and semantic validity, the two bilingual authors translated all items into Chinese and then back-translated them into English. Data were collected in October, 2022 using snowball sampling with the anonymous survey being hosted on www.surveyplus.cn, as online censorship prevented the researchers from drawing a more representative sample on a more widely used platform.

Study data were based on responses from 305 Chinese adults with an average age of 27.21 (SD = 9.31) with a gender ratio of 69 men to 228 women. The screening question first asked participants if they had heard of feminism before, and those who had no prior knowledge of the topic were directed to the survey's conclusion. Following McLaughlin and Aikman (2020), feminism in the present study was defined as "a belief in equal rights for men and women," and "feminists are those who advocate for women to have equal rights to men." After reading the definition, participants were asked if they considered themselves to be feminists: 257 respondents confirmed their feminist identity, while 48 did not self-identify as feminists. Participants then responded to questions regarding offline contact with feminists (α = .92, M = 4.74, SD = 1.23), stigmatization of feminists (adapted from McLaughlin & Aikman, 2020, α = .84, M = 1.89, SD = .95), nationalism (adapted from Hyun & Kim, 2015, α = .92, M = 4.22, SD = 1.53), patriarchal beliefs (adapted from the measure of institutional power of men in Yoon et al., 2015, α = .96, M = 2.26, SD = 1.27), and life satisfaction (Diener et al, 1985, α = .92, M = 3.87, SD = 1.33) using seven-point Likert-type scales. A full list of measures is presented in Table 1. Demographic data, including gender, age, sexual orientation, and marital status were also collected as control variables.

Table 1. Measures

Variable	Item
Offline Contact with Feminists	I know many feminists in my real life.
	I have worked with many feminists in my real life.
	I have many feminist friends in my real life.
	I interact often with feminists in my real life.
Stigmatization of Feminists	Feminists are homosexual.
	Feminists are unattractive.
	Feminists are masculine.
	Feminists are man-hating.
	Feminists are rude.
	Feminists are radical.
Nationalism	I am proud to be Chinese.
	Chinese people are one of the smartest and most diligent peoples in the world.
	Chinese cultural value is superior to other cultures in the world.
	Chinese traditional value is superior to that of other civilizations in the world.
	Generally, the more influence China has on other nations, the better off those nations are.
	For me, China is the best country in the world.
Patriarchal Beliefs	I would feel more comfortable if a man, not a woman, was running the country's finances.
	It is important that men – not women – make the big decisions that will affect my country.
	A man, not a woman, should be the head of a company.
	Men, compared to women, would make for more competent CEOs of financial institutions.
	The powerful roles that men play on TV/movies reflect how society should run.
Life Satisfaction	In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
	The conditions of my life are excellent.
	I am satisfied with my life.
	So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.

Results

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for all the independent and dependent variables. Under the linear regression procedure run on SPSS 26, collinearity diagnostics showed that there was no collinearity problem because the variance inflation factor (VIF) values were all under 1.85.

Table 2. Means Standard Deviations and Correlations

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Stigmatization of Feminists	-				
2. Nationalism	.08	-			
3. Patriarchal Beliefs	.51**	.43**	-		
4. Life Satisfaction	.002	.35**	.15**	-	
5. Offline Contact with Feminists	-.28**	-.12*	-.31**	.15**	-
M	1.89	4.22	2.26	3.87	4.74
SD	0.95	1.53	1.27	1.33	1.23

Note: $p* < .05, p** < .01$

A multiple regression analysis was conducted, with stigmatization of feminists serving as the dependent variable. Covariates were entered in the first step, with the aforementioned four independent variables being entered in the second step. The model was significant, $F_{(4, 295)}$ = 17.57, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .34$, $\cdot R^2 = .15$). Hypothesis 1 predicted that patriarchal beliefs would be positively related to stigmatization of feminists. In line with this hypothesis, patriarchal beliefs were positively related to stigmatization of feminists ($\beta = .45, p < .001$). Hypothesis 3 expected that offline contact with feminists would be negatively related to stigmatization of feminists. As expected, offline contact with feminists was indeed negatively related to stigmatization of feminists ($\beta = -.12, p = .03$). However, inconsistent with Hypothesis 2, life satisfaction was not related to stigmatization of feminists ($\beta = .06, p = .30$). Therefore, H1 and H3 garnered support, while H2 was not validated. Lastly, regarding the relationship between nationalism and stigmatization of feminists (RQ1), results from this study showed that nationalism was negatively related to stigmatization of feminists ($\beta = -.13, p = .03$).

Discussion

The present research is one of the first quantitative studies that analyze the predictors and inhibitors of stigmatizing feminists in the Chinese context. Drawing from theoretical exploration of far-right ideologies and intergroup contact theory, this study highlights the implications of re-examining the western-centric feminist assumptions in different geographical and temporal contexts (e.g., Q. Huang, 2022).

First, patriarchal beliefs drove people to stigmatize feminists as deviant women. Patriarchy values the presumably natural gender order and emphasizes men's leadership in both public and private realms (e.g., Agius et al., 2022). As a result, family becomes the end goal for women (Koronaiou & Sakellariou, 2017), and feminists who advocate for women's ambitious involvement in the public domain or display unfeminine traits are stigmatized. Notably, anti-feminism can transgress the bi-polar gender system—both men and women can internalize patriarchal beliefs and subscribe to the anti-feminist ideology (Saresma, 2018).

Moreover, offline contact with feminists reduced the stigmatization of feminists. Compared to online communication featuring rampant incivility and increasing polarization (Chen, 2017)—which discourage people from political expression (Weinstein et al., 2015)—offline

communication provides more favorable contexts for improving acceptance of minority opinions and communities (e.g, Wu et al., 2017), especially when people interact with feminists in a cooperative and non-competitive manner (as shown in the offline contact items presented in Table 1). In addition, being exposed to cross-cutting perspectives (e.g., feminism) helps people build up their knowledge, which also facilitates tolerance and acceptance of the stigmatized, out-group members (Wu et al., 2017).

Interestingly, people who scored higher on nationalism refrained from stigmatizing feminists. As observed by Jayawardena (1986), in a number of third-world countries, women's struggles for emancipation often constitutes an essential component of national resistance movements. This finding echoes Kim (2009), who maintains that nationalism and feminism in South Korean complement each other in a constructive way. In China, the entanglement of feminism and nationalism may result from both an active choice and passive acceptance of reality. Since offline grassroots feminist campaigns have largely been cracked down (e.g., Xiong & Ristivojević, 2021), nationalism serves as a main device to unite people from diverse backgrounds and improve public acceptance of feminism (Hyun & Kim, 2015; Yin & Fang, 2022). Because the state functions as a significant collective for action, in the Chinese context, a complete denunciation of the state might be detrimental to contemporary feminist movements (Mansbridge, 2003).

Lastly, life satisfaction was not significantly related to stigmatization of feminists in the present study. This non-significant finding might be explained by the less representative sample drawn mainly from the authors' personal networks as a compromising solution to circumventing censorship in the process of data collection. Specifically, in our sample a majority of the respondents were young women who at least received college education and self-identified as feminists. Since feminist ideas are considered to be held and pursued only by the middle class (Q. Huang, 2022) or even academic elites (Saresma, 2018), these people may enjoy an affluent lifestyle while only remaining unsatisfied with Chinese women's status. However, the life satisfaction measure used in this study did not differentiate sources of satisfaction. Therefore, researchers should practice caution when they are generalizing study findings to other sectors. Additionally, only one type of stigma (i.e., womanhood-based stigma) was identified in the current study, while rights-based stigma (e.g., "Feminists want to enjoy more rights than men") (Q. Huang, 2022) may be more relevant to relative deprivation theory and life satisfaction. Future research should address such limitations and conduct a more nuanced examination of the predictors of the stigmatization of feminists in China and beyond.

Conclusion

On balance, the current study extended prior critical and qualitative work on global anti-feminism by establishing the links between nationalism, offline contact with feminists, patriarchal beliefs, and the stigmatization of feminists in the Chinese context through an online survey. The fact that offline contact reduces stigmatization of feminists provides support for the notion that intergroup contact in a cooperative environment helps reduce discrimination against minority groups. By contrast, patriarchal beliefs drive individuals to stigmatize feminists. Moreover, study findings also validate the negative relationship between nationalism and stigmatization of feminists, highlighting the prevalence of pro-state feminists in contemporary Chinese society. However, life satisfaction does not affect stigmatization of feminists, calling for a closer examination of different types of stigmas, as well as different demographics.

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Contact email: dongdong.yang@uconn.edu