

A thematic analysis of #MeToo movement related WeChat posts on sexual harassment in China

MA Thesis

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Introduction

Sexual harassment is a worldwide problem. Its importance has been emphasised beyond scholarly discussion by global public initiatives, such as the #MeToo movement. Yet, although the issue has raised a fair bit of attention in recent years, it has by no means been engaged effectively in all places alike. In China, in particular, sexual harassment is still not a legally defined term, even though the prevalence of what could be perceived as sexual harassment is arguably not lower than in other places in the world. Fears of oppression, public reprimand and victim blaming further hinder Chinese victims of sexual harassment to speak out about their experiences. The arrival of the #MeToo movement to China in January 2018 for the first time encouraged thousands of Chinese women and men to publicly speak out about their experiences. Now, their posts bear testimony to their experiences, views and the scope of the issue in China. This study aims to analyse these posts and answer the following research question: How do Chinese WeChat users discuss sexual misconduct, such as harassment or abuse, in #MeToo movement related posts and what are the main topics they raise?

The #MeToo hashtag¹ was initiated by American civil rights activist Tarana Burke in 2006 and was picked up by users of the American microblogging and social networking service Twitter all around the globe when talking about sexual misconduct. After Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano had drawn attention to the issue of sexual harassment by asking Twitter users to share their experiences using the #MeToo hashtag, the tag reached its highest popularity during a period which coincided with the sexual conduct allegations against high-profile Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein in 2017 (Mistreanu, 2019). Millions of people employed the #MeToo hashtag and shared their experience of sexual assault on social media platforms generating a significant response in support of survivors of sexual harassment and violence globally (Fieborn and Loney-Howes, 2019).

In China, the first of January 2018 is usually considered to be the starting point of the spread of the #MeToo movement. On that day Dr. Luo Xixi accused her former Ph.D. advisor of sexual harassment on the online platform Weibo. Soon, it was discovered that the accused professor of Beijing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics had harassed other several female students over the previous decade. Dr. Luo's post made her the first person to use her legal name to publicly identify her sexual harasser in the history of the movement in China. As a result, Dr. Luo Xixi's former advisor Chen Xiaowu was suspended (Chinese Feminist Collective, 2019).

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Hashtag is a type of metadata tag used on social networks, such as Twitter and other microblogging services.

Yet, the period studied for this research occupies the last week of July 2018, from 24.07.2018 to 31.7.2018. This covers a central period of the #MeToo movement with a lot of posting activity on Chinese platforms, fostered by public allegations of sexual misconduct against famous Chinese citizens, such as journalist Zhang Wen or TV host Zhu Jun, brought forward at the time. WeChat posts of the period are investigated using thematic analysis to gain insights into Chinese netizen's opinions, knowledge, and experiences on topics linked to the #MeToo movement and sexual harassment in particular. Furthermore, it compares those findings to existing literature on the topic of sexual misconduct in general and in China specifically.

There are several reasons why studying digital engagement against sexual harassment in China is important. First, despite the fact that the #MeToo movement is a global phenomenon, most of the available research focuses on events in western countries (Roxborough and Richfond, 2018; Ge, 2018), while China with its more than 900 million internet users (Statista, 2020) is often overlooked. Second, online movements bring the opportunity for civil society to expand online over the culturally important issues, raise societal concerns and moral discussions (Fincher, 2018). Third, as #MeToo and all the topics around it are considered sensitive in China, locating public statements on the issue is actually difficult in traditional media or on the street, but somewhat possible online depending on the degree of censorship making this a particularly interesting realm.

This thesis consists of the following chapters: introduction, literature review, method, findings and discussion, conclusion and appendix. In the chapter 'literature review' I discuss how various authors worldwide used online media as means of looking into the discussion of sensitive issues at the outbreak of the #MeToo movement and bring in research relevant for the analysis conducted in this study. In the chapter 'Method' I am discussing thematic analysis as a framework and the advantages which made me apply it as the main method for the current research as well as details on using data from online sources. Subsequently, in the 'Findings and discussion' section I discuss the themes revealed during my thematic analysis and link my findings to existing literature. Finally, in the conclusion I summarise the main findings and contributions of my research to existing literature on the #MeToo movement and sexual harassment. In the 'Appendix' I attach the necessary information about the posts I analyzed.

Literature review

This literature review is divided into three parts: The first part covers literature on concepts relevant for understanding the issue of sexual misconduct as well as my alter analysis. It addresses definitions of sexual misconduct, its causes and types of offenders. This part is particularly important for this paper as the ideas summarised here correspond to the most thoroughly discussed topics by WeChat users in their

posts. Subsequently, this review proceeds with general information about the Me-Too movement and online space, with an emphasis on China. Finally, the third chapter examines previous studies similar to mine conducted both internationally and in China.

1. Aspects of sexual misconduct relevant to this study

This section will briefly summarise literature on the definition of sexual misconduct, its causes and comments on typologies of offenders, which will be relevant for this study.

1.1 The difficulty of defining sexual misconduct

As highlighted by the MeToo campaign, sexual misconduct is an international phenomenon and can take a wide variety of forms (Nodeland and Craig, 2019). Hence, there is no universally accepted definition for sexual misconduct, and scholars who study this subject agree that this is challenging to define the term and which interactions constitute it due to a strong emphasis on the subjective experience of the victim (Maas, Cadinu, Guarnieri, and Grasselli, 2003). Accordingly, different terms with varying scopes and overlap exist in the discussion not he topic, reaching from sexual misconduct, to sexual harassment or abuse. Although most scholars in the field converge in that they define sexual misconduct as physical or verbal behaviour of sexual nature that is unwelcome by the victim (Timmerman, Greetje, and Bajerma, 1999), the exact definitions of sexual misconduct vary across different countries and cultures. However, finding a definition for sexual misconduct is important because such factors as how broadly or narrowly the term is defined may influence the resulting estimates of its incidence via under- or over-reporting (Timmerman, Greetje, and Bajerma, 1999). In this thesis, a very broad definition of the term is used and referring to either ,sexual misconduct‘ or ,sexual harassment‘ thus covers a broad range of actions from sex-related jokes to sexual violence from various perspectives and abuse by adopting all traits of a framework put forward by Fitzgerald et al. (1997).

Fitzgerald et al’s (1997) framework for categorising definitions of sexual harassment can be divided into three categories: legal, psychological and behavioural. Since definitions put forward by WeChat users can be largely divided into two groups corresponding with the second and third category of this framework, only those two will be thoroughly discussed in the present study. Hence, to begin with the psychological definition will be introduced.

1. The psychological definition of sexual harassment revolves around the perception and the feelings of the victim. Despite the fact that the subjective experience of the victim is arguably one of the defining features of sexual harassment, this approach is deemed problematic by many scholars. For example, Shirley Letwin points out that any definition of sexual harassment via the victim’s perceptions and emotions aroused by an offender

leaves room for interpretation of what sexual harassment actually encompasses (1991) which makes a general concept of sexual harassment and its definition relatively opaque. When sexual harassment is not defined by the behaviour, but rather how the behaviour is perceived, there is a big variety of behaviours which have the potential to fall under the concept of sexual harassment depending on who evaluates and perceives it (Golden, Johnson, and Lopez, 2001).

2. Sexual misconduct from a behavioural definition may comprise a variety of specific behaviours. In order to differentiate between various forms of harassment, a well-known classification model was proposed by Till (1980) and later developed by Gelfand et al. (1995). The model defines sexually harassing behaviours into three main categories: unwanted sexual attention, gender harassment, and sexual coercion. Since WeChat users in their posts touched upon behaviours falling in each of these categories, the present study will discuss all of them, starting from unwanted sexual attention.

As proposed by Gelfand et al. (1995), unwanted sexual attention manifests itself in unrequited and offensive behaviour potentially aiming for sexual cooperation. Diehl et al. (2012) further explain that unwanted sexual attention usually represents interpersonal behaviour targeting an individual and can be exemplified by sexualised remarks about the target person's physical appearance.

Gender harassment on the other hand is defined by Gelfand et al. (1995) as hostile, insulting, and degrading gender-related behaviour. It is noticeable that this category, unlike unwanted sexual attention, does not only target individuals but represents intergroup behaviour (Tajfel, 1978). Hence, Diehl et al. (2012) explain that although gender harassment may also be targeted at one particular woman, the insult is nonetheless at the level of her gender group, which emphasises her outsider status from the perpetrator's perspective.

The last category to appear in WeChat users' definitions is sexual coercion. As Fitzgerald et al. (1997) claim, this type is less prevalent than both unwanted sexual attention and gender harassment, but also more severe. According to the definition proposed by Abbey et al. (2014), sexual coercion describes the use of any tactic or strategy to engage another person in sexual interaction despite the absence of informed and free consent, or the clear expression of a refusal. Tedeschi and Felson (1994) claim that these so-called coercive strategies may compromise the use of manipulation (for example, through inducing guilt or promises), persistent touching (kisses or caresses), intoxication of the partner (due to alcohol or drugs) or the use of verbal pressure or physical force.

Moving beyond Fitzgerald into definitions specific to China, only few attempts have been made to identify Chinese people's thought on what constitutes

sexual misconduct. However, scholars have tried to identify the perception of sexual harassment by demographic group. Research conducted by Tang et al. (1995) among Chinese students showed that they primarily considered physical contact and coercive sexuality as sexual harassment, while other forms, such as, for example, gender harassment and covert seductive behaviour, including pressure for dates and misogynic remarks, were only acknowledged to be sexual harassment by a very small number of students. Accordingly, another study from 2019 showed that Chinese students largely agreed that sexual harassment is sex-related, disturbing, uncomfortable and against the will of the receiver, however, they were more likely to mention 'physical contact' than 'verbal harassment' and only a few mentioned 'gender discrimination' (Huang et al., 2019).

1.2 Research on the causes of sexual harassment

According to the ecological framework proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and later developed by Belsky (1980), sexual misconduct occurs due to risk markers that lie at multiple levels of the victim's environment, which they divide into several levels: the ontogenic, the microsystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem. However, only microsystem and macrosystem will be discussed here as the causes of sexual harassment mentioned by WeChat users lie at these levels.

1.2.1. Bronfenbrenner (1979) defines the microsystem as a pattern of interpersonal roles, activities, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person within any given face-to-face setting. At this level, groups and institutions that directly impact the individual, such as family, play a crucial role. Shokane et al. (2018) define risk factors at this level as negative or ineffective parenting styles and neglect of family issues. A study conducted by Adams-Curtis and Forbes (2004) showed that a history of neglect from parents or caretakers was associated with sexual coercion in the dating relationships of students.

1.2.2. The macrosystem represents the broadest level and reflects sociocultural influences including factors that maintain gender inequality, gender role norms, and pro-violence societal norms. Since the claimed causes of sexual harassment in China according to posts analysed in this study largely lie on the macrosystem level, this section will specifically explain how its corresponding factors arguably work in a distinctive Chinese environment.

Cultural and social acceptance of women's subordination is considered a vital factor contributing to violence against them (Liu, 1999). Furthermore, patriarchal forms of authority and strong beliefs in patriarchal gender relationships have significant correlations with sexual violence (Chan, 2009). The patriarchal social order and family system which have been a long-entrenched pattern in Chinese society, have hence reportedly resulted in the subordination of women and thus in violence against them (Chan, 2009).

Moreover, sexual misconduct on the macro level reflects culture-specific features in the patriarchal social order. Cultural aspects may intensify social shaming and dangers for the victim. For example, Ho and Kwok (1991) detailed how features of the Chinese pattern of child upbringing, from the principle of filial piety to that of unquestioning obedience, may facilitate the use of children by adults as sexual objects.

1.3 Victim blamers as offenders

The literature on sexual harassment emphasises the importance to distinguish between different types of perpetrators (Lucero et al., 2003). Some studies suggest a typology according to demographic variables including marital status, age etc., while others define different types of perpetrators by their actions. One potentially surprising action that is particularly relevant to this study is victim blaming as a sexual offense.

Victims of sexual harassment suffer from a range of negative physical and psychological effects including post-traumatic stress, reduced productivity, and greater levels of stress (Rosenthal et al., 2016). Whereas most of these harmful consequences stem from the act of sexual harassment, they are also exacerbated by victim-blaming which relates to beliefs that women are at least partly sexually harassed because of their provocative behaviour towards men (Smirles, 2004).

Existing theory and research suggest that people's negative attitudes towards stigmatised or disadvantaged groups – including the likelihood of blaming women for being sexually harassed – can be explained by the lack of empathy for victims due to a failure to consider their perspective (2009). Several theories are trying to explain the motivation for blaming victims, societal-level factors including the role of cultural structures, beliefs and practices as well as varying definitions of sexual harassment may contribute to victim blaming attitudes. Since these themes were discussed in the previous subchapters already, I am going to mainly focus on the way they are linked to victim blaming in Chinese society. I will start with the societal and institutional factors.

Institutional and societal level factors refer to broad cultural influences such as gender roles, media, and rhetoric surrounding sexual assault that contribute to an overall environment promoting victim blaming. As far as gender roles are concerned, researchers have suggested that patriarchal environments are particularly likely to promote sexist attitudes and behaviours and may facilitate greater risk of victim blaming (McCray, 2014). In such environments, men are socialised to be the sexual initiators and may be encouraged not to take a woman's reluctance seriously. Hence, sex is often viewed as a challenge, and women in such an environment become sexualised objects to conquer (Warshaw, 1994). These sexual scripts dictate token resistance from women and persistence by men and also vary in what is viewed as sexual harassment and assault. Acceptance of such scripts may also

influence the perceivers' evaluation of sexual harassment victims. Indeed, Edwards et al. (2020) conclude that endorsement of gender inequality and traditional gender roles is associated with victim blaming.

Another mechanism leading to victim blaming are attitudes towards the appearance of women who were subjected to sexual harassment. Parish et al. (2006) who researched sexual harassment of women in urban China claim that in transitional societies women who violate traditional norms regarding dress or behaviour may be disciplined via verbal comments. In other words, since old patriarchal norms about women's behaviour begin to change, women who violate traditional norms are punished through verbal harassment, such as victim blaming.

As noted earlier, varying definitions of sexual harassment constitute another factor contributing to the prevalence of victim blaming. Individuals are more likely to label a situation as sexual harassment when it conforms to stereotypical views about what it should be. This includes situations in which forced sexual intercourse is explicit and also when it occurs amongst strangers (Franiuk et al., 2008). Hence, when the situations do not fit this paradigm and appear to be much more ambiguous, people are potentially more likely to start blame a victim instead of a perpetrator.

Several studies on the attitudes towards victims and harassers in Chinese society in particular were conducted. For example, Sun (2019) examined MeToo related comments of overseas Chinese on wenxuecity.com and found that users questioned the credibility of women who spoke out about being harassed and also blamed victims for "wearing a miniskirt" or "taking a train at night". Apart from this, the author found in the users' comments "the undertone that only physically attractive women can be harassed, and sexual harassment is a compliment to a woman's beauty" (Sun, 2019, p. 8). Victim blaming it seems is hence a phenomenon also visible in Chinese online space.

2. The #MeToo movement in social media

I am now turning my attention to general information about the #MeToo movement and online space with emphasis on China. The #MeToo movement started on Twitter in October 2017, but was not limited to this platform and soon expanded worldwide. As the movement extended to other countries and continents, the online discussions also appeared on other countries' social platforms.

The #MeToo movement has created a large online corpus of texts on sexual harassment which are now available on different social media platforms. The broad range of topics discussed by members of different online communities includes sexual abuse, support of victims and many others. These online discussions serve as valuable primary source for scholars who study the #MeToo movement and e.g. analysed the attitudes of users of different social networks towards it (Caple, 2019), the topics most often raised by different online communities and differences

in posts of male and female users (Sun, 2019). Yet, as the focus of this research paper lies on the development of the #MeToo movement in China, I will review literature which concentrated either on the analysis of the Chinese social networks or on those non-Chinese websites where the #MeToo movement was discussed by the overseas Chinese.

3. Studying MeToo online posts in general and in China

The #MeToo movement provoked an international debate on sexual harassment on public social media sites. Much of the early conversation took place on Twitter. Various studies acknowledged the utility of Twitter for raising awareness concerning sexual violence and creating a space where users can share personal experiences, provide support and connect to other people with similar stories (Daughton et al., 2019; Bogen et al., 2019). Apart from that, tweets shared provide us with important data that can be used for understanding the nature of sexual harassment (Spezzano et al., 2019), people's concerns (Tahamtan, 2019) and different types of supportive messages (Hosterman et al., 2018).

In general, the format of each social network may already shape online discourse. For example, some social networks set word limits for posts and may hence influence content and posting habits. Content analysis of posts on both Reddit and Twitter showed that Reddit in contrast to Twitter allows the users to share their stories on sexual harassment in depth and that posts are generally more negative. The reason for this arguably is that there is no word limit on Reddit which allowed users to share more details, whereas Twitter due to its format does not allow its users to expose details and they mainly used it for supporting victims by posting relevant hashtags (Manikonda et al., 2018). At the same time, Kimberly et al. conducted a content analysis of Twitter posts and found that users preferred Twitter to other social networks. In particular, they admitted that they chose to tweet their #MeToo experiences as they did not feel comfortable posting disclosure within their Facebook friend groups (2019).

There are several reasons why the digital engagement against sexual harassment in China gained much attention of various scholars. First of all, as of 2020 there are more than 900 million internet users in China (Statista, 2020) which by sheer number may generate substantial data. Furthermore, in China online posts provide unique access to political movements. The #MeToo movement in China, unlike many other countries, from the very beginning lacked any forms of people's engagement other than digitally networked movement due to the government's heavy crackdown on women rights activists (Fincher, 2018). Hence, one of the factors which defines and influences the engagement of the Chinese people in the #MeToo movement in China is that the online movement cannot transcend the digital space into physical space through various forms of collective action (Zheng, 2019). The internet then provides space for moral discussions where Chinese people can raise culturally important issues, and act as conscious collective actor (Cas-

tells, 2012). This peculiarity makes the online discourse around the topics of sexual harassment, violence and abuse on the social platforms especially valuable material for scholars to learn about the attitude of the Chinese people towards the #MeToo movement (Sun, 2019), the most often raised topics and role of different social actors in shaping the discourse (Caple, 2019). Closely connected to this is the fact that learning about Chinese people's engagement in the #MeToo movement online also provides general knowledge about the peculiarities of a socialist one-party state where digital activism faces various challenges as public discussions on assumed sensitive topics are under strict control. It is, hence, hence interesting to find out which posts and topics passed through online censorship. Keeping all of this in mind, I am going to give an overview of how different scholars approached the #MeToo movement in China using various methods, paying close attention to the studies whose authors used qualitative methods.

There have been numerous studies emphasising the importance of social media activities for exploring how Chinese people are empowered and how they participate in the #MeToo movement (Lin and Yang, 2019; Wang and Driscoll, 2019). Yet, research on posts on Chinese social media on the topic is very limited and no studies on WeChat could be identified at all. Moreover, available studies suffer from some shortcomings. Researchers Zhang et al. (2019) e.g. only study the ways in which Chinese diaspora has gotten involved to promote the spread of discussions on topics like sexual misconduct in China. They found that avoiding media censorship on Chinese websites allowed overseas Chinese to express critical views in freer environment where they largely supported domestic victims (Zhang and Caidi, 2019). This study may help evaluate whether explicit victim support is actually a topic absent from potentially censored posts on Chinese web services.

Analysis of user comments makes it easier to understand resistance to and support for the issues discussed in the public sphere and how the topics that did not receive enough media attention can be elevated through online discourse (Cranmer and Sanderson, 2018). Sun (2019) highlights the importance of close studying of zealous arguments the #MeToo movement generated on the uncensored social media site wenxuecity.com for understanding the debate around the issue of sexual harassment. The analysis of wenxuecity.com posts showed a prevalence of patriarchal sentiments among the users. In particular, some women were eager to stand on the side of patriarchal male discourse instead of supporting other women. However, Sun's findings are based on the analysis of solely 13 online posts shared by potentially overseas Chinese and are hence hardly representing any general sentiment. This study tries to make up for this caveat by taking in a five times larger number of Chinese posts, exclusively taken from Chinese platforms.

Only a small number of studies looks at how the online discourse on sexual harassment in China brought an opportunity for people to go beyond initial outcries and to delve into deeper issues, such as moral shortcomings of society. This is

were this study aims to make a contribution. Caple argues that netizens propel the #MeToo movement through discussing a needed reassessment of societal values (2019). In one of the few studies on the subject, Caple conducted a qualitative content analysis of the most popular #MeToo related questions posted on Zhihu (Chinese social media site) between spring 2017 and February 2019. The findings show that users found the rural-urban and poor-rich divide of Chinese population an important topic of discussion in relation to #MeToo movement. An in-depth analysis of posts may hence bring country-specific issues to light. Yet, Caple's approach suffers from a seemingly arbitrarily chosen time period which was picked without a specific reason. In contrast, others studies chose to do research on particularly active period of the #MeToo movement period of time (Zhang and Caidi, 2019). Thus, this study will make an effort to conduct research similar to Caple's. but on a much more deliberately chosen period of time.

Given the variety of societal concerns raised in different online communities during the #MeToo movement in China, its inability to move into physical space, the sensitivity of sexual violence as a topic and the shortage of research, I decided to use this opportunity to look at the Chinese online discourse at the height of the Chinese #MeToo movement. I see #MeToo discussions as a way to learn more about the Chinese people's thoughts on sexual harassment through the lens of thematic analysis.

Method - Thematic Analysis

In this chapter I am going to provide a description of the analytical framework for this study. First, I am going to talk about thematic analysis in general, and then, I will specify the advantages of this approach and the reasons why I have chosen it for conducting my research.

Thematic analysis is a common approach to qualitative data analysis. Thematic analysis is unusual in the canon of qualitative analytic approaches, as it offers a method – a technique unbound by theoretical commitments – rather than a methodology. Clarke and Braun claim that thematic analysis may be applied across a range of theoretical frameworks and research paradigms (2017).

Ritchie et al. explain that one general strategy for assisting a thematic analysis of qualitative data is provided by a framework developed at the National Centre for Social Research in the UK. This framework is described as a „matrix-based method for ordering and synthesising data“ (2003, p. 219). The main idea is to construct an index of main themes and sub-themes. These themes and sub-themes are essentially recurring motifs in the corpus. Thus, the themes and sub-themes are the product of a thorough reading and rereading of interview transcripts, field notes, social media profiles, or survey responses that make up the data. This framework of themes is then reapplied to the data to structure and analyse it (Bryman, 2012).

I have chosen this method for my research because of its flexibility in dealing with diverse data. My aim was to use WeChat posts as means to better understand how the contemporary discourse on sexual violence is shaped online specifically by Chinese users. Thematic analysis provides a suitable toolkit to do so as it allows to identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants' lived experience, views and practices (Clarke and Braun, 2017). Furthermore, thematic analysis was chosen over conducting interviews, because firstly, WeChat posts appear to be understudied and secondly, an arguably larger number and wider range of individuals can be included by using this method.

Using WeChat as a data source

In this section I describe the data used in this research. First of all, in this section I briefly introduce WeChat, a Chinese social network where I collected my data and then provide the reasons why I chose WeChat. At last, I explain the selection of the WeChat posts used in this research.

WeChat was first released in 2011 and by 2016 it had become one of the world's largest mobile apps (WeChat's world, 2016). WeChat has the biggest number of domestic users and the most extensive coverage of any social media service in China with its 1.0825 billion individual users and more than 20 million registered public accounts as of 2019 (Censored on WeChat: #MeToo in China, 2019).

WeChat connects individual users and organisations in China and abroad as it allows to publicly or privately send text, video and audio messages. Besides private user profiles that people can use for posting messages which are available only for individual user's friends, WeChat provides the opportunity for both individuals and organisations to register public accounts and have followers (Zhang, 2016). These publicly available accounts are vital means for users of WeChat to weigh in on controversial legal cases, misbehaviour of officials, the regime's handling of foreign policy (Delishe et al., 2016) and other social issues, such as the #MeToo movement. Posts published by public accounts formed the data for this research. There were three main reasons why WeChat was the most suitable source of data for this research:

First of all, the format of WeChat posts is the most relevant to my research objectives compared to other networks. WeChat allows its users to extensively share their thoughts on any subject matter online. Weibo was used by other scholars for conducting their research on engagement of Chinese people with #MeToo movement. But, similar to Twitter, Weibo's format and its word-limit arguably dissuades people from writing any detailed and comprehensive arguments and long passages on the #MeToo movement, that this research aims at. Accordingly, scholars did not use the Weibo platform to study in-depth conversations about #MeToo related topics and instead used it for different purposes, for example, to know more

about the methods Chinese people implemented to circumvent the censorship (using various hashtags etc.) (ref). On the other hand, the platform Zhihu² does not have a word limit but poses a different challenge for research like this: Zhihu is a question-and-answer social media site, where the number of thoroughly discussed topics is restricted due to its format. The system encourages users to respond to questions most commented on, and hence makes it more complicated for users to engage with a bigger number of topics for discussion on a deeper level. The users of WeChat do not face any of these issues. In contrast, the holders of public accounts on WeChat are less restricted in terms of the size of their posts, the word limit is 50,000 characters (The ultimate guide to understanding WeChat: 100 knowledge points, 2020). Therefore, WeChat posts allow to more thoroughly discuss issues from different angles and approaches. Apart from that, WeChat provides a search function, which is useful for locating posts on specific topics.

The second reason for choosing WeChat data for analysis is the wide availability of posts. As the #MeToo movement is considered to be a sensitive topic in China, its discussion online is strictly controlled by the government and is heavily censored on several online platforms (Bao, 2019), yet many posts were available still. China has a very sophisticated system for censoring media and censorship of online discussions on sensitive topics appears on various social platforms on all levels. For example, both keyword-blocking through algorithm and manual efforts by human censors are known to be used by the Chinese administration (Zheng, 2019). Hence, supporters of the #MeToo movement are forced to adjust their posts to circumvent censorship and keep the campaign alive (Zeng, 2019). Users started creating various forms of disguised #MeToo hashtags including #我也是 (Me too in Chinese), #米兔 (Rice Bunny, a homophone of #MeToo), #俺也一样 (a dialect form of Me too in Chinese). Despite these measures, the Chinese censors still managed to control #MeToo related discussions on online social platforms (Bao, 2019). For example, although much #MeToo activism occurred on Weibo at the start of the movement, almost every variation of the #MeToo hashtag has been censored on Weibo since the end of 2018 (Bao, 2019). Hence, it was vital to find the network with the materials for analysis still being available. In comparison, WeChat was the most suitable for my purposes as I was able to find enough materials for analysis by entering key words in the search system of the social network. Of course, censorship remains an issue for this research and all post identified for this study must be thought of as being those that passed censorship. They are thus

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Zhihu is a Chinese question-and-answer website where questions are created, answered, edited and organized by the community of its users.

only a partial representation of what Chinese users would have potentially posted without censorship.

The third reason for choosing WeChat for this analysis is that it is under-explored. Despite of WeChat's immense popularity and media coverage, there has been little research conducted on specific WeChat messages, especially those which cover topics like the #MeToo movement and sexual harassment. In the process of reviewing the literature I failed to find any study which used WeChat for analysis of #MeToo related posts, as all the authors worked with different platforms where in-depth discussion of #MeToo related topics is not possible due to the word-limit. As a next step, this essay will provide a description of the WeChat accounts and posts I worked with.

Public WeChat accounts

As I mentioned before, I focused on conducting analysis of the WeChat posts available on public accounts. There are two kinds of profiles, in particular, those which belong to individual users and organisations³. As soon as individuals or organisations create a public account, all WeChat users have free access to posts shared by the owner of the account. WeChat furthermore displays the name of the public account, the dates of posts and the number of readings by other users. Apart from that, WeChat also shows the top comments under each post and also allows to see the number of people who showed their appreciation of the post by clicking the 'Wow' button (the analogue of the 'like' button on Facebook or Instagram).

The owners of public accounts may set their privacy settings to determine how much of their personal information (including name, place of registration of their account etc.) will be available for other users. Accordingly, three types⁴ of public accounts with varying degrees of publicly shared information may be distinguished on WeChat. The first type can be characterised by the highest level of anonymity where the user does not provide any information apart from a pseudonym. The second type of public account is one where additional information on the user's geographic location and gender is displayed. The third type of public accounts is the one where the corresponding user shares all types of private information, such as their real name, photo, age, university, occupation or gender.

3

Since during the analysis there was not identified any substantial difference in the organisation, contents or any other factors I do not concentrate on the difference in the contents of different types of posts in my research.

4

I use the word "type" just to clarify the difference between different accounts as they are displayed. Originally, there are no types on WeChat that users choose from when creating personal accounts.

This study did not exclude post from any of those sources, yet a clear selection of public posts used for this analysis had to be made regarding the date of posts.

The time-frame of this study

The WeChat search system shows that the first still available explicitly #MeToo related post appeared on the platform on 3 November 2017. However, as mentioned earlier the starting point of the #MeToo movement in China is considered to be January, 2018. Hence, I was only interested in posts which appeared on the social platform since that time⁵. As the period of time since the moment when the #MeToo movement came to China exceeds two years and as my intention was to conduct qualitative thematic analysis of #MeToo posts, I could not analyse all the posts shared on #WeChat since. There were several periods of times when posts started actively circulating on WeChat, and one of those periods was the last week of July 2018. It was a crucial period for the #MeToo movement's development in China, as within just a few days more than two dozen women brought forward sexual misconduct allegations against numerous famous Chinese people including the heads of NGOs, journalist Zhang Wen, well-known TV-host Zhu Jun and many others (Mistreanu, 2019). These events provoked the appearance of a large number of posts on Chinese social networks including WeChat starting from the 24th of July. The censors promptly reacted and shortly after the accusation of Zhu Jun started swiftly removing all social media posts referencing either #MeToo or Zhu Jun (Zhang and Caidi, 2019). Interestingly, WeChat posts, apparently, were not exposed to very severe censorship as when I searched for the keywords #MeToo, #我也是, #米兔, #按我一样 I was able to identify 96 posts from this period for my analysis. As it can be seen from WeChat search system, the number of posts on #MeToo in the period of time from the 24th to the 31st of July 2018 has significantly exceeded the number of posts posted in the rest of the month. Apart from this, a further search showed that the number of posts posted during this week exceeds the average number of posts posted during any other week of that year. Out of 76 posts dating July 2018 which appeared in the search system when searching for #MeToo, 73 were posted during the last week of July. Similar tendencies were observed for the #我也是, #米兔, #按我一样 keywords. Given the prominence of this period when many women brought forward allegations against famous citizens of China as well as the availability of posts and hence sufficient data,

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I specify this because there were more posts on the #MeToo movement on WeChat that appeared before January 2018. However, they cover the #MeToo in the US or other countries, and this goes beyond the scope of this thesis.

I decided to choose the period of from the 24th to the 31st of July 2018 for my analysis.

In the next section I am going to describe the process of the further selecting and working with the materials for this research.

Execution

In this chapter I am going to describe the process of working with WeChat posts⁶ selected for my research, this includes searching for posts, familiarisation, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, translating and writing up.

First of all, I used WeChat's search system to look for the following keywords once at a time: 'MeToo', '米兔', '我也是', '俺我一样'. If a post contained at least one of these keywords, it appeared in the search system. Overall, more than 1000 results containing these keywords were found. These results were sorted by date until 96 initial posts published between the 24th and 31st of July remained. 16 posts were removed from the corpus after first screening. They either didn't focus on the #MeToo movement in China, but other countries, such as South Korea, or they were written in English, which I identified as a possible pointer to those posts not belonging to Chinese citizens residing in China. Additionally, there were posts devoted entirely to different topics and their names just coincidentally contained my research's keywords. As a result, 80 posts remained for conducting this study and were locally saved on 3 April 2020.

My next step was familiarising with and creating a thorough overview of the data in excel. I read through the entire corpus and took initial notes. Subsequently, I began coding. Rereading all of the posts I noted topics as I saw them appear in the data. For example, if a WeChat user was talking about the relation of patriarchy to the prevalence of sexual harassment in Chinese society, I would note this as 'Causes – patriarchy'. I then highlighted the section of text corresponding to this topic code. Naturally, as the reading process proceeded, there were more codes appearing, so I highlighted various phrases for each post using different colours that corresponded to the different codes. Each colour code thus indicated the idea expressed in a specific section of text. At this stage, I highlighted everything that seemed relevant or potentially interesting for my research question.

After this, I proceeded with deducting themes. I looked through the codes I had created, identified patterns among them and converting them into themes. As themes are broader than codes, most of the time I combined several codes into one

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Some of the WeChat posts also contained images. Given that my research focuses on the study of themes originated in the texts, I did not include the analysis of images in my research.

single theme. For example, the codes ‘patriarchy’, ‘gender inequality’ and ‘traditional culture’, were all combined into a broader theme: ‘causes of sexual harassment’. I furthermore identified codes which appeared to be too vague or not relevant enough (for example, codes that did not appear very often) and discarded them. Apart from ‘causes of sexual harassment’, I identified the following common themes: ‘definition of sexual harassment’ (the codes included the necessity for establishing sexual harassment’s definition, psychological definition, behavioural definition and hostile work environment type harassment) and ‘types of offenders’ (codes included type 1 – perpetrator, type 2 – victim blamer and type 3 – parent).

My next step was reviewing the themes and checking whether they would e.g. need to be split up or combined due to overlap. At this stage, I decided that the code ‘parent’ should be renamed into ‘education patterns within families’, because it better fits under the ‘causes of sexual harassment’ theme than under ‘types of offenders’. This is because according to the posts parents themselves do not participate in any actions leading to physical or moral harm of the victim, but indirectly affect the levels of prevalence of sexual harassment in Chinese society by educating children about misleading gender norms, sex and behavioural patterns. Thus, there were only two codes left for the theme ‘types of offenders’, and one new code appeared in the theme ‘causes of sexual harassment’.

For the sake of this study and the accessibility of my data, I then translated those posts where my identified themes appeared from Chinese into English.

After this, I proceeded with appropriately tagging my data. Each post was given a code (example: WCP01 - WeChat Post 01). I combined all information in a Microsoft Excel table where I included details of the authors of posts (individual user or organisation, name of the post, type of the account, additional data, gender, place of registration). With this table I then analysed post in accordance with existing literature.

Findings and discussion

This chapter is divided into two parts. In the first part, I provide a general description of characteristics of how the total of WeChat users during the time frame of my analysis discussed sexual harassment in their MeToo related posts. Discussion in this sense refers to creating a post, not necessarily engaging in direct dialogue with other users. In the second part, I provide descriptive statistics on the topics and themes found and analyse each of those that raised most of WeChat users’ attention during the period of analysis in detail.

1. General characteristics of the discussion on WeChat

The #MeToo related discussion in the posts on WeChat during the period starting from the 24th to 31st of July 2018 was noticeably broad, deep and China-specific.

First, as expected, WeChat users demonstrated a lively discussion during the last week of July 2018 when most of the allegations against famous people were made in China. Users reacted to the events happening in their China specific environment and immediately created a large corpus of posts on the topics they found relevant for consideration.

Second, as noted before in this paper, China does not provide people with opportunities for on-sight activism, and this is why online space plays crucial role for citizens who want raise societal concerns and culturally important issues. Indeed, online space during the last week of July 2018 appeared to be fruitful as it provided an opportunity for people to create deep and broad comments and discussion there.

Third, although the #MeToo movement originated in the West, the way the discussion was developing shows that it transposed into a Chinese movement. WeChat users are aware of the origins of the movement as they mentioned the most prominent case of Harvey Weinstein's accusation in the USA in the overwhelming majority of posts. However, netizens tend to perceive it more as background information or a side note and they do not delve into a deep discussion of Western #MeToo related issues or other more peculiar cases. Instead, the topics constituting the largest part of the discussion are limited to a China specific environment.

Fourth, it is noteworthy that in their posts WeChat users went far beyond just sharing personal trauma and experience, reporting on new cases or discussing the most prominent cases of famous people's allegations. These topics were present on the platform but they definitely did not constitute the main part of the discussion. Instead, WeChat users constructed a discussion where they tried to identify things beyond the reported information. In particular, they touched upon a wide range of questions including possible strategies for reducing the levels of sexual harassment's prevalence such as laws and policies, and opportunities and different scenarios for development of the #MeToo movement in China. Apart from this, netizens also reflected on the social environment of gender inequality in China, feminism, the reasons why victims are afraid of speaking out and advice for women on how to protect themselves from harassers. While these topics were occasionally brought up by users in their posts, the questions that were discussed most thoroughly included the definition and different forms of sexual harassment, hypotheses on the reasons for the existence of sexual harassment in China and different types of harassers created in a Chinese environment. The second part will delve into these topics deeper.

2. **The main topics raised by WeChat users and their discussion**

This chapter summarises and discusses the findings of the thematic analysis of 80 posts. The three most prevalent themes are:

- 1) The definition of sexual harassment
- 2) The causes of sexual harassment
- 3) Different types of offenders

These themes appeared from codes identified via investigation of all posts. Table 1 illustrates how various codes were combined into larger themes that constitute the main part of the #MeToo discussion on WeChat.

Table 1
Turning codes into themes

Theme	Codes
Definition of sexual harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Necessity of establishing a definition of sexual harassment - Psychological definition - Behavioural definition - Hostile work environment type harassment
Causes of sexual harassment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Patriarchy - Gender inequality - Traditional culture - Educating patterns within families
Types of offenders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Perpetrator - Victim blamer

Table 2 shows the number of appearances of each theme. This chapter will address each theme in sequence, explain their meaning, show how they correspond with existing literature and include translated examples from the data as evidence.

Table 2

Prevalence of themes in the posts

Theme	# posts the theme appears in
The definition of sexual harassment	20
Reasons for sexual harassment	38
Types of offenders	29

2.1. *Theme 1: The definition of sexual harassment*

A quarter of posts mentioned the theme of defining sexual harassment. Subsequently, the corresponding codes will be discussed individually.

2.1.1 The necessity of establishing a definition of sexual harassment

First of all, not all users who raised this topic in their posts provided a specific definition of the term. Some of them just emphasised why it is necessary to establish what sexual harassment is. I identified two categories among these users: users that talked about the problems that arise from a lacking definition of sexual harassment for Chinese society and others who constructed a narrower narrative of understanding sexual harassment from the point of view of either perpetrator or victim. Below I provide examples of posts where both narratives are persistent starting with the first category.

One of the narratives which appears in the posts which correspond to the first category is the call for agreeing on what sexual harassment is before engaging in discussion. From their point of view, it is necessary to avoid confusion about different types of sexual interactions, especially because some of the interactions simply do not fall under the category of unwanted social-sexual behaviour. Thus, they have to be distinguished from harassment for the reason that they are consensual. The author of the WCP70 claims: “First of all, we must sort out the concepts of rape, appointment for a date including sex, cheating, one-night stand, sex-trading, unspoken rules that codify improper behaviours such as coercing employees for sexual favours and other similar concepts. Only after we are done with this, we may come back to the discussion of the #MeToo movement. Otherwise, we won’t know what we are speaking about”. In other words, the author of this post insists on building strict boundaries concerning social phenomena of sexual nature the #MeToo movement is fighting against.

Apart from the potentially wrong understanding of the nature of the #MeToo movement, there is also another problem which an opaque understanding of the term ‘sexual harassment’. As WeChat users claim, it may lead to the unrest among members of Chinese society about the increase of sexual violence and the excessive role of public opinion in comparison with that of law. For example, the author of the WCP79 doubts the scale of the problem in China and claims: “In China, sexual harassment itself is a foreign word. Its definition in the country is not clear yet. Coupled with the influence of traditional concepts and intergenerational differences, everyone understands the term “sexual harassment” differently. The concerns about the unlimited expansion of sexual harassment cases will come into being precisely because Chinese people have different constructions of the subject of sexual harassment, and they also lack clear and objective judgement standards to interpret what this term means”. As it can be seen, the author states that China is not fully familiar with the concept of sexual harassment as it came from abroad and acknowledges that different generations might perceive it diversely. This links to different opinions on the prevalence of the sexual harassment’s rates in the country. However, while the author acknowledges this is a problem itself, he also claims that the main issue that arises from this is the people’s fear of excessive power given to public opinion: “In the case of unclear definitions and difficulties in prosecution and evidence collection, the supervision of online public opinion has naturally become a powerful supplement to procedural justice. Many people worry that public opinion will replace justice and jeopardise justice, but this is not what #MeToo’s purpose is. Most of its appearance stems from anomie in procedures, and its ultimate goal is to force the legal system to constantly improve by the power of public opinion”.

The previous paragraph discussed posts that mentioned the issue of sexual harassment’s definition from the perspective of the entire Chinese society. This paragraph looks into narrower narratives shaped by netizens who tended to theorise about the implications of the problem either from the point of view of the victim or the person accused of harassment. The way to approach sexual harassment from the victim’s point of view is discussed in the next subchapter under the ‘psychological definition’ category, so here I concentrate on the perception of harassment by the accused person. In particular, I quote parts of a post whose author talks about the implications of an opaque understanding of what exactly sexual harassment entails for the so-called offender.

The author of the WCP19 claims: “One side thinks that her desires are not respected, the other side assumes that if you did not say "no", you don’t have any objections. How to judge in this case? Can you directly affix the hat of "sexual abuse" and "harassment" to the man?”. This post guides the attention of the reader to a completely different risk of misunderstanding of what constitutes sexual harassment. In particular, the WeChat user talks about the problem of accusations of

men. Indeed, although in the overwhelming majority of posts chosen for the analysis for the current study, men were depicted as perpetrators and power abusers, a few people viewed them as victims of a misleading sentiment created by the #MeToo campaign. These users specify that some members of Chinese society refer to the movement as a witch hunt. For example, the author of the WCP79 claims: “Among all kinds of voices, the question about whether MeToo will develop into ‘witch hunting’ is particularly loud. The so-called witch hunt refers to the trial and hunting of witches in the Middle Ages. The term was later extended to a kind of moral panic and political persecution, which implied people’s worries about being accused of being guilty”.

These claims of WeChat users coincide with a broader pattern of the fear of false accusations present worldwide and mentioned earlier in this paper (Schneider and Carpenter, 2019; Sandberg and Pritchard, 2019). Hence, not only the #MeToo movement itself transcended the area where it appeared for the first time and spread to other countries including China, but also its accompanying topics. The main factor creating negative reactions appears to be the same both in Western and Chinese environments.

2.1.2 Concrete definitions of sexual harassment as proposed by WeChat users: psychological definition

After having discussed and exemplified the range of reasons why establishing a definition of sexual harassment is necessary, this research proceeds with the presentation of findings on concrete definitions attempts of ‘sexual harassment’ provided by the users. The definitions correspond with the psychological and behavioural categories of Fitzgerald et al.’s (1997) framework mentioned earlier in this paper. I start with the discussion of the posts falling under the psychological definition.

The most common feature of the psychological definition of sexual harassment deals with difficulties of determining what sexual harassment actually entails by focussing on the victim’s feelings instead of concrete actions. Indeed, it is hard to understand what kind of behaviours are considered to be sexual harassment from the definitions proposed by the netizens who approached this issue from the victim’s perspective. The users barely mention the actions which fall under the category of unwanted social-sexual behaviour and in their description instead focus on the wide range of feelings of the victim. The definition proposed by the author of the WCP05 serves as the most explicit example of this, as it solely consists of a description of the victim’s feelings: “Sexual abuse, sexual harassment and other sexual words or actions that make others feel uncomfortable, anxious, restless, embarrassed, insulted or disrespectful can be considered sexual harassment regardless of their form”.

As can be seen, the author of this posts does not consider it relevant to include in a definition of types of actions constituting sexual harassment which may cause the victim's feelings. In general, the focus on the feelings of the victim rather than on the actions of the offender reflects one of the main characteristics of #MeToo movement internationally. The campaign focuses on the experiences of sexual violence survivors, and the movement's proponents hope that support for victims will rise. In fact, those people who promote the #MeToo campaign aim to show the victims that they take the issue of sexual harassment seriously ([Understanding the Me Too Movement: A Sexual Harassment Awareness Guide](#), n.d.). Hence, it could be that the nature of the #MeToo movement itself influenced the perception of sexual harassment by WeChat users. Apart from this, focus on the feelings of the victim is part of a broader narrative seen in the overwhelming majority of posts chosen for this analysis, namely the supportive attitude towards victims of sexual harassment in China.

Another instance is a fragment of the WCP53, whose author states: "Sexual harassment is harassment based on sexual desire. As long as words or actions cause the other party's displeasure, it is sexual harassment. Sexual harassment is different from sexual relations because sexual harassment is more concerned with the psychological displeasure of the victims". It is evident that this WeChat user concentrates solely on the psychological state of mind of the victim as a determinant of whether harassment took place. Yet, they admit that there must necessarily be some words or actions that lie at the root of the problem. However, they do not consider it important to give an exemplary description of behaviour that might provoke psychological discomfort.

2.1.3 Concrete definitions of sexual harassment as proposed by WeChat users: behavioural definition

As explained earlier in the paper, in order to differentiate between different types of behaviours sexual harassment may comprise, Till (1980) and Gelfand's (1995) classification model is useful. According to it, three main categories including unwanted sexual attention, gender harassment, and sexual coercion constitute sexually harassing behaviour. The present chapter will show how WeChat users approached and discussed behaviour falling under each of these categories starting from unwanted sexual attention.

WeChat users' definitions in general correspond with the explanation provided in the scholarly literature and mainly focus on verbal harassment which includes giving inappropriate comments, sexual jokes, whistling etc. For instance, the author of the WCP12 explains: "whistling is not a compliment, it is harassment and aggression". Another exemplary illustration of unwanted sexual attention proposed by the author of the WCP36 included "using languages that are either derogatory to women or explicitly related to sex, for example, discussing one's sexual experience or retelling the pornographic content of books". As it can be seen, unwanted sexual

attention in WeChat users' point of view may not include physical contact or any type of coercion and is nonetheless considered as malicious as the two other types of sexual harassment.

The next type of behavioural harassment, gender harassment, is also reflected in definitions proposed by the WeChat users. According to their definitions, gender harassment includes actions, such as unwanted pressure for dates and superiors persuading female employees to visit a bar after work. Apart from this, a large part of the discussion is concentrated on sexually harassing behaviour of men abusing their power. WeChat users largely refer to situations when men appear to be in an advantageous position and may harass women under the pretext of offering help when she appears to be vulnerable. For instance, the author of the WCP12 claims: "Taking advantage of a drunk woman, especially when she is at risk, is sexual harassment. From time to time, a man commits an assault by taking the opportunity of seeing a woman off or going with her to a hotel saying that she did not refuse, which is a typical sophistry. No matter how much she thanks you for seeing her off, improper contact is infringement unless a woman takes the initiative".

The last category which appeared in WeChat users' definition is sexual coercion. This is the most severe type requiring an action to engage another person in sexual contact in the absence of informed and free consent or the clear expression of a refusal. In the posts chosen for my analysis this category is mainly represented by sexual harassment's definitions via the use of physical force and persistent touching. Analysis of the posts demonstrated that users considered sexual behaviour, such as unwelcome or deliberate touching of intimate body parts including face, legs, genitals and other sexually sensitive part, as well as coercion to hugs and kisses, as sexual harassment. It is noteworthy that this category of sexual harassment was less present in the concrete definitions by WeChat users than unwanted sexual attention and gender harassment. However, in those posts where users spoke out about not just their views on what sexual harassment is but shared their own stories of being sexually harassed, this category was, on the contrary, very prevalent. For example, the author of the WCP30 mentions sexual coercion when describing a traumatic experience from childhood: "After many years after it actually happened, I suddenly remembered the incident. Once in a small group class, I was concentrated on painting a water village. I was preparing to demonstrate a teacher my phthalocyanine blue and garcinia colour when I suddenly felt a big pair of hands reaching into my sweater wantonly groping on my small and thin body. The intensity of his actions was crazy. He tore my tucked in shirt from the chest to the back, so that he could ensure that all his next violations were possible".

From all these approaches to defining sexual harassment, one may follow that users find that sexual misconduct is not just limited to direct physical actions and includes provocative verbal comments, gestures, persuasion to have a drink

etc. However, sexual coercion is the type of sexual misconduct that was considered to cause the heaviest trauma and psychological harm for the victims. Whenever users brought up personal stories of being harassed, they included deliberate touching of genitals without consent with the aim of subsequent sexual actions.

Interestingly, one post mentioned behaviour which does not seem to fall into any of the above-mentioned categories clearly due to its untargeted manor, namely hostile work environment type harassment. According to Rotundo et al. (2001), this type, together with quid pro quo harassment, fall into the category of sexual harassment in the workplace. The scholars also add that quid pro quo harassment involves “sexual conduct combined with the granting of employment benefits” (2001), while hostile work environment type harassment includes seemingly less severe behaviour that nevertheless decreases the quality of the work environment due to homo-negativity or sexism. The WeChat user who mentioned this specific type in their WCP36 summarised it as “setting up an environment” and included in this category actions, such as placing obscene pictures, advertisements, etc. around the workplace deliberately to embarrass the other party.

The analysis revealed diverse ways of approaching the definition of sexual harassment. Among WeChat users, as well as scholars who are interested in the subject, there is no consensus about what exactly should be perceived as sexual harassment. Furthermore, this research revealed a number of significant differences in perception of sexual harassment from previous interview studies conducted on this subject in China. For example, definitions of sexual harassment in a study conducted among Chinese college students in 1995 (Tang et al., 1995) (discussed earlier in this paper) was much narrower. The students focused mainly on coercive sexuality and physical contact as sexual harassment, while other, potentially less obvious forms of harassment such as pressure for dates, sex related comments and gender harassment were left out.

Apart from this, the results of the current study do also not fully align with the results of a study conducted among another group of Chinese students in 2019 (Huang et al., 2019) (also mentioned previously in this paper). Despite the fact that there are more than twenty years between both studies, the results of both studies were fairly similar: the students were more likely to mention “physical contact” than any other forms of harassment. The difference in results with this study may hence likely not be attributed to a change of sentiment over time.

One of the reasons for these differences on the definition of sexual harassment might be that the posts chosen for analysis in this study were written by people of a different ages and presumably belonging to various demographic groups, unlike the two above-mentioned studies which only revealed opinions of Chinese college students. Another possible explanation might be that those users who created sexual harassment definitions were all related to the #MeToo movement as their posts all appeared in the search system after #MeToo related code

words were used. Hence, their interest in the topic and might have led to greater awareness of various forms of sexual harassment, as their knowledge of the subject is broader and deeper. Moreover, WeChat users who shared their opinions on all the relevant matters might have been educated by posts that had been published before. Apart from this, the environment in which people shared their views on the sensitive topics were completely different. Although the questionnaires distributed among students both in 1995 and 2019 were completely anonymous, one could assume that students still felt constrained by the academic environment of university when providing their answers. At the same time, WeChat users who shared their opinions on sexual harassment on WeChat used this space completely voluntarily and by their own initiative.

Finally, another factor influencing the significant differences in the results of the present study and the studies conducted among the students in both years might be the form of research itself. In both cases when the research was conducted in universities, students got questionnaires with multiple choice questions with only one open question about the definition of sexual harassment in the latest study (Huang et al., 2019). I assume that this may artificially limit the answers of students to the number of given options. At the same time, this restricting factor did not exist in the case with the WeChat users.

Now, after having established different approaches to what the issue of sexual harassment is about, as well as to the incidents it might include, this study continues with the next subchapter which will provide the insights on the causes and contributing factors of these incidents, as identified by WeChat users.

2.2. *Theme 2: The causes of sexual harassment*

Explanatory attempts and arguments provided by WeChat users in the majority of posts refer to patriarchal forms of authority and strong beliefs in patriarchal gender relationships. The netizens tend to build connections between the prevalence of sexual violence, subordination of women, violence perpetrated against them and patriarchal social order. WeChat users' arguments largely correlate with the macro-system level of the nested ecological framework proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1979), thoroughly discussed earlier in this paper. Hence, the description of this level's related factors, as well as the examples of how they are reflected specifically in the Chinese environment are the focus of this subchapter and constitute its major part.

Many netizens viewed gender inequality and patriarchy as the root cause of power abuse by men which, subsequently, leads to different forms of sexual misconduct including sexual harassment and assault. Both gender inequality, and patriarchy as its form appeared in 27 posts (33.75 % of the total number). For example, the author of the WCP09 claims: "Sexual assault is a form of violence, which is a means to trying to control others and realising power by controlling others. The

root cause of sexual assault is unequal gender relations and power distribution, which is rooted in the traditional gender system”.

WeChat users thoroughly discuss all the possible implementations of patriarchal order and interrelated factors. The substantial part of the discussion is concentrated on key characteristics of a patriarchal society, such as the objectification or sexualization of women, and worship of power. Regarding the first, some users claim that men treat women in China as practical items and are only interested in their feminine attributes and appearance instead of seeing them as a person. For example, the author of the WCP42 argues: “All sexual assault essentially has materialisation of women in its nature. In an ideal affirmative society, men must use de-productive thinking and view women as people first and only after this look at their gender affiliation. Without correcting the mindset, a man’s mind is always concentrated on three symbols of sex: chest, thigh and ass”. Similar claims appear in 10 other posts. As far as the acquiescence of power is concerned, WeChat users claim that in China for a very long time sexual assault was not taken seriously, which made those in power fearless. As WeChat users claim, the combination of these factors led to the prevalence of sexual harassment in Chinese society.

Another contributing factor to sexual misconduct on the macro-level has to do with the reflection of culture-specific features in the patriarchal social order. My analysis revealed that users tend to view traditional cultural norms as an obsolete phenomenon detrimentally influencing society and link the sexual harassment with the idea of men’s dominant position rooted in traditional Chinese culture. WeChat users acknowledge that times have changed and such traditional approaches, as family planning and preference for sons in families, teachers emphasising the better intellectual abilities of boys at schools, girls being raised as daughters-in-law in the mother-in-law houses are not longer present in the society. However, netizens are sure that these China-specific phenomena are deeply rooted in the culture and shape an environment where men sexually harass women. Such claims appear in 12 posts. For example, the author of the WCP48 claims: “From ancient times to the present, gender power structure imbalance and women often being in the weak side, constitute a deep reason for sexual harassment. In ancient times, sexual assault victims would rather kill themselves than live in the world, and also society would help them to preserve chastity after the death of the husband. Today, the Chinese people will not be proud of this, because it is the dregs of traditional culture, which should not be tolerated in modern times. However, the perception of filial piety persistent in Chinese society for thousands of years, will inevitably affect people’s views on sexual assault victims”.

Another prominent narrative which was revealed during the analysis has to do with the description of how exactly traditional cultural norms, and patriarchy in particular contribute to sexual harassment. According to the narrative constructed by netizens, traditional cultural norms are transmitted to future generations via

wrong parenting practices. Problems that stem from a family belong to a micro-system of nested ecological model discussed earlier in this thesis (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The netizens discussed a wide range of issues regarding the parenting practices that teach children to respect both genders equally. For example, in seven posts users discuss the necessity to bring up boys in a way that they respect and care about women from childhood and cannot get away with seemingly harmless but potentially dangerous behaviour, such as chasing and kissing girls. When it comes to girls' education, WeChat users tend to claim that it is necessary to protect girls via comprehensive and in-depth conversations on the nature of healthy sex relations and a girl's right to always say no whenever they are exposed to something they do not agree with. WeChat posts in my sample also paid attention to the roles of mothers as transmitters of the "right" attitudes toward gender relations⁷. Apart from this, netizens lay much importance on the significance of treating children of both genders equally from early childhood. For example, the author of the WCP20 "At the micro-level, reducing violence and sexual assault must begin with education. Parents and teachers must not only educate their children to be equally respectful to men and women but also let children understand that having money and power does not make the person superior to others".

Thus, according to WeChat users, patriarchy, gender inequality, traditional cultural norms and patriarchal parenting patterns lead to the spread of sexual misconduct in Chinese society. Interestingly, the results of the present study do not correspond with some of the prior scholarly work on this topic. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, Huang et al. (2019) studied students' attitudes towards sexual misconduct and did not find patriarchy being a reason for sexual misconduct in students' opinions. The authors created a reverse link and claimed that students viewed only a very limited number of sexual behaviours as sexual misconduct presumably for the reason that social atmosphere and traditional culture in China are full of the trace of male chauvinism. Hence, it is harder for people to associate sexual harassment with patriarchy when they grow up with prevalent sexism around them.

Having addressed the main causes of sexual harassment in Chinese society, according to WeChat users, the next chapter outlines which concrete offenders are active in this social environment and are blamed by WeChat users.

2.3 Theme 3: the types of offenders

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Under 'right' attitudes towards gender relationship WeChat users in my sample understand equal treatment and respect of both genders.

Perpetrator, being the most obvious type of offender, was present in the overwhelming majority of posts. The users describe abusers in general words, condemn them and unanimously claim that all of the perpetrators deserve punishment. As #MeToo in China started from the educational environment, users also tend to emphasise that no matter how big the merits of the accused professors were in the past, their status should not be the reason for forgiving the offence they committed later. However, WeChat users tend to pay even more attention to victim blamers.

Netizens emphasise that victim blaming is a harmful phenomenon present in Chinese society. They argue that when speaking out about the painful experience, victims expose themselves to an additional risk of being criticised for their own behaviour. Interestingly, the analysis also revealed that WeChat users tend to perceive them as “companions in crime“. Three users even argue that blaming a victim is equal to committing sexual harassment for the second time.

Indeed, in their discussion of victim blamers as offenders, WeChat users emphasise the drawbacks of a social reality in which people agree that women who are “less dressed” might be harassed or even raped. For example, the author of WCP38 claims: “The assumption “less dressed and raped” is a social reality, but society should not be like this. You are not wrong when you dress less, it is a social error, and before the social reality is changed, protecting yourself and calling for social progress should go both ways. In other words, “wearing less and being raped” is a trace of male-dominated culture”.

Apart from this, WeChat users emphasise that society should turn all efforts against perpetrators, and even those who do not blame victims and instead try to give them advice on how to behave to avoid being sexually harassed are wrong. For instance, the author of the WCP36 argues: “Why is the quality of the taxi driver not controlled by the relevant departments, and woman is instead advised to choose the driver wisely? Why do people claim that women are harassed because of wearing the dresses which expose parts of their bodies instead of blaming the harassers for their evil thoughts? Why is social security not a priority and people instead emphasise that women should not go out at night? Every tip actually binds women”.

Varying definitions of sexual harassment are another factor contributing to the prevalence of victim blaming. When a situation does not fit the paradigm and appears to be much more ambiguous, people are more likely to start blaming the victim instead of the perpetrator. Indeed, the author of WCP35 claims: “Sexual harassment is often classified as a “women’s issue” and is considered to be a problem of non-self-respect, non-rebellion, and speculative false accusation. Harassers can be exempted from the punishment, and the victim would be criticised for her choices and humiliated either by the harasser or by the victim blamers”.

The findings of this subchapter on the attitudes towards victims and harassers do not correspond with the results of similar studies on online reactions towards #MeToo related issues. The current study revealed supportive attitudes

towards victims and criticism of victim blaming, it does not align with the results of Sun's (2019) study of overseas Chinese #MeToo movement related comments on wenxuecity.com (discussed before in this paper) who, on the contrary, found that users did not only question the credibility of women who spoke out about being harassed but also blamed victims for "wearing a mini skirt" or "taking a train at night". Overall, this study has brought in various new perspectives on the results of previous studies on sexual misconduct in China.

Conclusion

This study addressed the question, how Chinese WeChat users discuss sexual misconduct, such as harassment or abuse, in #MeToo movement related posts and what the main topics they raise are. The study employed thematic analysis of WeChat posts from July 2018 as a method to provide an answer.

The analysis revealed that WeChat users discussed the social and cultural context of sexual harassment in China. In particular, thematic analysis revealed that the most often mentioned themes included: the definition of sexual harassment, the causes of sexual harassment in the Chinese society, as well as different types of offenders. By that, this thesis made a contribution by identifying perceptions of the #MeToo movement and sexual misconduct by Chinese netizens. It outlined their main interests and gave an insight into their perceptions of the causes and dynamics of sexual harassment in a Chinese context. Although, a complete generalisation from these findings on Chinese society as a whole may be difficult due to Chinese online censorship, the reach of the #MeToo in China and the unclear demographics of WeChat users in this study, it still samples distinctively Chinese posts without restrictions. Hence, this study contributes to the literature on the #MeToo movement and sexual harassment in China in multiple ways.

First of all, this study identified that WeChat users acknowledge that sexual harassment may go far beyond physical harassment and also includes a wide range of behaviours including verbal harassment or gender harassment. This is an important finding, because scholars who conducted prior research on this topic via student interviews, such as Huang et al. (2019), concluded that the perception of sexual harassment was much more limited, and several categories such as gender harassment were not considered harassment in the first place. Apart from this, this study identified that users tend to support victims and many of them even identify harassment through the lens of feelings and perception of the victim, which indicates that WeChat may be a place where resistance to patriarchy may thrive.

Second, the analysis reveals that users tend to view a broad range of specifically Chinese societal and cultural reasons including gender inequality, patriarchy, traditional cultural norms and wrong parenting educating patterns as contributing factors to the existence of sexual harassment in Chinese society. From the WeChat

users' perspective, gender inequality and patriarchy are supported by traditional cultural norms which might be transmitted in the society via wrong educating patterns at home or school.

Finally, this study is arguably the first of its kind conducted on Chinese WeChat posts and may hence lay the foundations for future research in the area, which may address some of the studies limitations.

First, the opinion of 80 WeChat users is not representative of all WeChat users' opinion. Second, the study does not provide the information on demographics of the WeChat users, and this is why it is impossible, for example, to learn whether men and women look at the discussed issues differently. The third limitation is that some of the posts presumably were deleted due to censorship. Thus, this research does not necessarily only provide insights on what WeChat users think on sensitive issues, but also probably demonstrates what topics are considered to be not too sensitive by the WeChat censors. Future studies may address some of these limitations by concentrating on a broader time period and conducting more qualitative research on known demographics. In the end, a stronger understanding of sexual harassment in general is a step on the way of fighting it.

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Appendix

User name	Name of the post	Code came of the post (WECHAT POST+NUMBER)	Date
昆塔	#Metoo离我们并不远	WCP01	24.07.2018
小刀周遠	关于 #MeToo的几点常识	WCP02	25.07.2018
北大飞	#MeToo：我们真的那么担心“冤假错案”？	WCP03	26.07.2018

旺喜	关于Yi苗和Me-too, 有些误区要不得	WCP04	26.07.2018
太森	面对性侵，不该沉默 # MeToo	WCP05	26.07.2018
Herman	#MeToo，就在我们身边	WCP06	26.07.2018
amandarowl	MeToo风暴席卷各种大佬圈，女性不再选择沉默	WCP07	26.07.2018
baibai51	关于“METOO”	WCP08	26.07.2018
今日说影蛋清	朱军被控猥亵，metoo也到了中国	WCP09	26.07.2018
艳娃子	Metoo 那一年我六岁	WCP10	26.07.2018
塔四	#MeToo 塔西	WCP11	26.07.2018
周宇	中国MeToo的舆论可嘉，但请不要对准受害人 女权时评	WCP12	26.07.2018
戴利拉	METOO，掀开这层遮羞布	WCP13	26.07.2018
戴戴	你知道MeToo运动吗？当光暗下来，你才知道发生了什么	WCP14	26.07.2018
默不语	METOO加我一个！让老狗X无处遁形	WCP15	26.07.2018
虎嗅APP	中国式“#MeToo”正在进行时	WCP16	26.07.2018

小码哥	中国的MeToo运动缺什么	WCP17	26.07.2018
花一贺	慢点 霸占热搜刷屏豆瓣的“Me-Too运动”，了解一下	WCP18	26.07.2018
C计划团队	MeToo正在扩大化？对，还要来的更猛烈一些	WCP19	26.07.2018
RTLm	METOO#从女权、精英主义和同理心角度谈近期事件	WCP20	27.07.2018
纳博科夫	可能是上海媒体圈第一弹#Metoo	WCP21	27.07.2018
西窗随笔	西窗随笔：木子美与metoo无关	WCP22	27.07.2018
老猫晒太阳	METOO：希望你真的能住手	WCP23	27.07.2018
王冰青	我，性别男，#Metoo	WCP24	27.07.2018
一只东尼	当#MeToo来到中国，不要再保持沉默	WCP25	27.07.2018
Autumn QT	#Metoo# 未来已来，文明尚远	WCP26	27.07.2018
Xclong	从“METOO”到“MEENEITHER”	WCP27	27.07.2018
反对性骚扰的	Metoo，摸你大腿请严正拒绝	WCP28	27.07.2018

杨泉	平权在中国: 为何 #metoo姗姗来 迟?	WCP29	27.07.2018
金花	#METOO: 沉默 的孩子们	WCP30	27.07.2018
周国华	METOO 的中国 版现象联想	WCP31	27.07.2018
啃着烤猪蹄的	MeToo! 拿开你 们的咸猪手!	WCP32	27.07.2018
小涵	MeToo 我每天 一睁眼, 脑子里 就张开了一张安 全电网	WCP33	27.07.2018
匿名	#MeToo 我们一 起穿越这道疼痛 之墙	WCP34	27.07.2018
Herman	再说#MeToo 如果 这样, 侵犯者会 很难过	WCP35	27.07.2018
春生	做到这8个字, metoo永远与你无 关	WCP36	27.07.2018
sociology	话题 #Metoo: 说出秘密, 反抗 无冕之权	WCP37	27.07.2018
赵丹喵	回刘瑜: 中国 的“咪兔”很宝 贵, 请不要轻易 毁掉它	WCP38	28.07.2018
Yiming	家具也MeToo	WCP39	28.07.2018

	【思维方式思考养生43】 Metoo沉思	WCP40	28.07.2018
PrfmArvel	拉响”ME-TOO“的警报	WCP41	28.07.2018
陆JJ	在你身边的是人是狗，一次me-too就可以看出来	WCP42	28.07.2018
nanshui	【范仄随聊】也谈metoo	WCP43	28.07.2018
上官乱	Metoo让我这种女性获得了怎样的成长	WCP44	28.07.2018
任丽倩	MeToo: Yes We Can	WCP45	28.07.2018
赵老实	当我们讨论#Me-Too#的时候，讨论的正是“民主的细节”	WCP46	28.07.2018
严肃的人口学八卦组	# MeToo 背后中国女性地位之谜	WCP47	28.07.2018
文刀	#MeToo 有一种可耻的文化: victim-blaming	WCP48	28.07.2018
琴小心	琴小心：偶像的坍塌和女权的崛起——评刘瑜《关于metoo》	WCP49	28.07.2018

邝老五	邝老五：对一次“中国MeToo”现象的看法	WCP50	28.07.2018
四海君	METOO风潮终于飘摇过海而来，多年忍让能否赢回尊重？	WCP51	28.07.2018
笑染岭梅香	刘瑜关于Me-too的观点错在哪里	WCP52	29.07.2018
小庆	关于METOO的思考	WCP53	30.07.2018
世纪君	《章文，停止你的侵害》，掀起新一轮#MeToo风暴	WCP54	30.07.2018
译来译趣	#MeToo 在各语种的表达方式	WCP55	30.07.2018
学吧写作组	Metoo之思	WCP56	30.07.2018
徐娅敏	METOO，为了不再发生房思琪式悲剧	WCP57	30.07.2018
圳长	在深圳，夏天不敢穿裙子，害怕被人跟踪...#深圳Metoo	WCP58	30.07.2018
黑匣	在VR中，你就喊得出“MeToo”吗？	WCP59	30.07.2018

听伊讲	中国Metoo来了，谁来扼住伸向姑娘们的魔爪？	WCP60	31.07.2018
斜阳君	由 MeToo 所想到的	WCP61	31.07.2018
香客	香客 Metoo之外说男女	WCP62	31.07.2018
大案刑辩	我为什么不说性侵米兔，只关注疫苗	WCP63	27.07.2018
春姑娘	#纽米兔“反性侵，我自律”	WCP64	27.07.2018
汪星人	为什么#米兔运动没能引发社会变革？	WCP65	27.07.2018
读者们	幼童性侵，“米兔”里最疼的一部分	WCP66	28.07.2018
练习有素质	关于刘瑜米兔的米兔	WCP67	28.07.2018
电影筛子	人家是怎么搞米兔运动的？	WCP68	28.07.2018
刘兴亮	中国式「米兔」运动，按住那双油腻的手	WCP69	28.07.2018
ARTWOCA	米兔不米兔！	WCP70	28.07.2018
破破的桥	米兔的初衷不是为了报复，而是……	WCP71	28.07.2018

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