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**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## Speaking Softly: Feminist Digital Citizenship in Campus-Based Social Media Practice

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**| ABSTRACT**

VWSM (Voice of Women's Studies Majors) is a WeChat public account founded and run by women's studies undergraduates at a Chinese women's university. Drawing on the framework of digital citizenship of young people, this study conducts a thematic analysis of 312 VWSM original articles and two semi-structured interviews to examine how feminist digital citizenship is formed through the mutual reinforcement of disciplinary training and sustained writing practice. The findings identify three dimensions of this formation: knowledge translation, engagement with sensitive topics, and reflexive practice and feminist subjectivity formation, offering empirical grounding for the framework of digital citizenship of young people in the specific context of campus-based media. The depth and continuity of VWSM points to institutional embeddedness as a significant driver of feminist digital citizenship formation, one that spontaneous online participation alone is unlikely to generate.

**| KEYWORDS**

Digital citizenship of young people, feminist media practice, women's studies, feminist identity formation, WeChat, China

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### 1. Introduction

"We are nothing more than a grain of sand, never destined to become a pearl. Yet we long to be part of the beach beneath the coconut trees, where people can walk and feel comfortable." This is how student editors of VWSM (Voice of Women's Studies Majors) described their WeChat public account. WeChat is China's dominant social media platform whose public account feature allows individuals and organisations to publish content to the public. VWSM was one such account, founded and run by students majoring in Women's Studies at a women's university in China. Over its eight-year run from May 2016 to March 2024, the account published 811 posts in total, of which 312 were original articles authored by students. With modest readership and a small subscriber base, VWSM never became a "pearl" in China's vast and competitive social media landscape. Yet over the exact period marked by intensifying censorship and mounting pressure on feminist voices in China's digital media environment (Chen & Ding, 2024), its creators consistently channeled their studies into public feminist discourse, engaging with gender topics that mainstream media rarely touched.

Since 2015, feminist voices in China's online spaces have faced dual pressure. At the institutional level, strict censorship has seen dozens of feminist accounts abruptly suspended or shut down (Chen & Ding, 2024) while at the societal level, organised anti-feminist backlash has sought to delegitimise feminist expression in public discourse (Huang, 2023).

Existing scholarship has begun to examine how feminist voices sustain themselves under these pressures, yet a notable gap remains. Most studies have focused on the confrontational dynamics between feminist and anti-feminist voices online (Huang, 2023; Han, 2018), or on accounts run by feminist activists and organisations navigating censorship pressure (Chen & Ding, 2024). These studies offer a valuable portrait of how Chinese feminist media operate under macro-level structural constraints. Yet campus-based feminist public accounts operate on different terms. Their central concern is how academic training translates into feminist media practice and how that practice shapes participants' subjectivity, a dimension that remains largely absent from

existing research. This study takes VWSM as a case to examine what feminist digital citizenship looks like when it grows from within an educational institution, shaped by the very training the institution provides.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Feminist Discourse in China's Digital Space**

Scholars argue that in Chinese society, social media platforms have given rise to a digital public sphere where gender issues are deeply intertwined with how citizens express public opinions, creating vital spaces for feminist expression and mobilisation (Peng, 2020). Feminist groups have used social media to articulate distinct voices and build strategic alliances with mainstream journalists (Wang & Driscoll, 2019), while some participants who did not identify as feminists nonetheless collectively challenged stereotypical representations of women online (Mao, 2020). Yet the same platforms that enable feminist expression also constrain it. Feminist voices are generally marginalised in mainstream discourses (Peng, 2020), and as Huang (2016) observes, the internet has become a major medium for the distribution of both feminism and misogyny, meaning the support feminist voices find online is inseparable from the hostility they simultaneously face. Since 2015, when women's rights became an increasingly politically sensitive topic, feminist voices have become less legitimate in both public discourse and institutional settings (Greenhalgh & Wang, 2019), with strict media regulation and online censorship placing feminist media under growing pressure (Chen & Ding, 2024; Han & Lee, 2019). Feminist voices have also faced systematic push-back from civil society. As Huang (2023) documents, anti-feminist discourse has constructed feminists as "deviant women" or "traitors to the nation", among other demonising strategies, constituting a persistent structural suppression of feminist expression in China's online spaces. Peng and Liu (2026) offer a useful map of this landscape, identifying two major strands of digital feminist practice in China, namely a confrontational strand represented by NGOs and grassroots activists, and a conforming strand represented by commercially driven women-focused digital influencers. While this typology illuminates the dominant forms of Chinese digital feminism, it also points to a space that remains underexplored, namely campus-based feminist media practice, which operates outside both strands and is driven by different operating conditions and motivations.

### **2.2 Digital Citizenship of Young People**

Digital citizenship centres on the self-creation and assertion of citizens as active participants in society through digital acts, encompassing questions of identity, belonging, and civic agency in digital environments (Hintz et al., 2019). Narrowing down to Chinese young people's digital citizenship, Fu (2026), building on Fu (2021), categorises it along three interrelated lines. The first is citizenship learning, through which young people learn about their place in society through online engagement. The second is identity performance, examining how young people form and express identities by navigating different social contexts and staking out positions in digital public space. The third is political participation and subjectivity formation, referring to the process through which the political subjectivities are formed and enacted through everyday online activities.

Unlike perspectives centred on discursive confrontation, digital citizenship foregrounds the active dimensions of practice, examining how individuals learn, perform identities, and form subjectivity through digital engagement. Fu (2020) demonstrates that digital literacy among young people emerges from their participatory practices within digital communities, practices that simultaneously serve as sites of citizenship formation. Fu (2018) further shows that young people's experiences of belonging across different social media spaces play a key role in forming and sustaining their identities. Lin and Starkey (2014) similarly find that Chinese university students' social media engagement constitutes a form of citizenship learning, through which they engage with social justice issues including wealth inequality, and abuses of power and authority. For young people in China, digital media serves as a relatively free space to engage with different collective subjectivities and experiment with possibilities for political participation. Fu (2026) identifies two forms this takes in practice. One is everyday digital politics, through which young people challenge structural inequalities through mundane and persistent digital engagement, and the other is prefigurative politics, through which they demonstrate in the present the social relations and values they seek for the future.

### **2.3 Feminist Identity Formation**

Feminist identity is not an innate quality but something formed through ongoing engagement with society, culture, and others. As de Beauvoir (1972, p.301) argued, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman," establishing that gender identity is socially constructed. Butler (1990, p.186) takes this further, contending that gender ought not to be conceived as a fixed state but as "an incessant and repeated action," constituted through performative acts. Both perspectives point to feminist identity as something continuously constructed through practice.

In the context of campus-based feminist media, the construction takes place at the intersection of formal education and public writing, where disciplinary training provides the conceptual resources and digital practice provides the terrain. As Guo and Lin (2024) observe, women's universities are better positioned than mixed-gender institutions to foster gender consciousness and challenge entrenched gender stereotypes.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 Research Design and Case Selection

The study takes VWSM as the single case, examining it as a bounded and distinctive phenomenon within China's feminist digital media landscape. Of its 811 posts, 312 were original articles authored by students, spanning categories including social commentary, creative writing, film and book reviews, the *Talk-to interview* series, and annual International Women's Day features. The remaining posts comprise a separate Weekly Reports column of 249 curated news reports, and approximately 250 departmental news reports and announcements. Both fall outside the scope of this research. VWSM's original content was contributed by a rotating core editorial team of approximately 12 to 15 students per year, alongside open contributors and collective participants in themed features.

#### 3.2 Data and Methods

Ten articles were selected from all original articles for core analysis. Articles were selected if they met at least two of the following three criteria: a clear feminist perspective, original student authorship, and direct relevance to one or more of the three analytical themes of this study. The ten selected articles span from 2017 to 2023, with readership ranging from 41 to 392, offering a representative range of content types and time periods. A broader review of all original articles informed the selection process and provided contextual understanding of the account's overall content patterns.

Table 1: Selected corpus for core analysis

No	Title (simplified)	Date	Type	Readership
1	<i>The First Gender Discrimination in Employment Case in China Ends with an Apology</i>	Apr, 2017	Social commentary	131
2-5	<i>International Women's Day Series</i>	Mar, 2019-2022	Collective creation	188(2019), 361(2020), 251(2021), 392(2022)
6	<i>Editorial for the 2021 Special Issue</i>	Jan, 2021	Editorial	227
7	<i>Danmei (Boy's Love): Revolutionaries or Captives of Patriarchy?</i>	Jan, 2021	Social commentary	304
8	<i>Talk-to Interview on Women's Health</i>	Mar, 2022	Interview	261
9	<i>Outcry of Books</i>	June, 2022	Book review	121
10	<i>Does Female Self-Improvement Lead to Difficulty in Partner-Seeking?</i>	June, 2023	Social commentary	220

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted in April, 2026 with individuals directly involved in VWSM. Interviewee A was a former director of the account, providing first-hand accounts of operational decision-making, team management, and the account's relationship with Women's Studies Department. Interviewee B was a core creator-editor who gave detailed descriptions of topic selection and the writing process. Informed consent was obtained from both interviewees prior to data collection.

Thematic analysis was applied, proceeding through close reading of the selected corpus, cross-referencing textual findings with interview data, and interpreting them within the framework of digital citizenship of young people. Open coding of all 312 original articles informed the selection of the three thematic dimensions. Data collection and analysis were conducted in Chinese, with quotations translated into English for the write-up. Several limitations should be acknowledged. The single case design limits the generalisability of the findings. As an observer from a different department within the same institution, the researcher occupies a dual position that may have shaped the analysis, while also affording a degree of institutional understanding that an external researcher would be unlikely to access.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Knowledge in Action: Translating Feminist Theory into Digital Discourse

VWSM's student writers consistently translated feminist theories acquired through formal coursework into public discourse accessible to general readers. By publishing feminist arguments online, students brought feminist knowledge into a shared discursive space, learning to use feminist language and narratives to make sense of their society and interpret their place in it (Delanty, 2003). Interviewee B described the process as "a combination of theories we learned in class, social hot topics, and our own personal experiences." She noted that the Women's Studies curriculum provided two kinds of support for writing. One was inspiration, in that topics regularly discussed in class made it easier for student writers to "find what they wanted to write about." The other was theoretical grounding: the reading lists recommended by professors made relevant reference materials more readily accessible. The ongoing dialogue between coursework and digital writing formed the basic mechanism of knowledge translation in VWSM, which can be observed across three progressive dimensions.

The first dimension is students' introduction of canonical Western feminist theories into the analysis of contemporary Chinese social phenomena. In response to a popular question on Zhihu, the largest Chinese online question-and-answer platform, asking whether women who constantly improve themselves become less attractive as potential partners, a VWSM article cited de Beauvoir to reframe what appeared to be a discussion about the dating market into a fundamental question about women's subjectivity. The VWSM article concluded that seeking one's true self matters more than pursuing generalised self-improvement, returning to the feminist core concern of individual subjectivity. By publishing this argument openly, the student writer brought feminist theory into public circulation, inviting readers to engage with feminist ways of understanding everyday social pressures, reflecting students' capacity to strategically deploy feminist discursive resources in China's digital public sphere (Peng, 2020). The cross-platform dynamic, where a question raised on one digital space prompted a feminist response published on another, illustrates how digital media had become a natural arena for young people to engage in public intellectual exchange.

The second dimension is students' conscious construction of a feminist knowledge system in digital public space. The post *Outcry of Books* mapped feminist literature across East Asian and Western traditions, covering voices of Cho Nam-joo from Korea, Chizuko Ueno from Japan, and Li Yinhe from China, alongside European and American figures such as de Beauvoir, Bourdieu, Wollstonecraft, and Friedan. Students attached their own reflections to each title, commenting on Ueno's *Misogyny in Japan* that misogyny "permeates the social order like gravity, so taken for granted that one barely notices its existence," and writing on *Kim Jiyong, Born in 1982* that the book "is like a mirror, and we are all Kim Jiyong, bound by both the times and the ideas we inherit." Sharing personal responses to feminist texts on a public online platform mirrors the kind of intellectual exchange that might happen in a classroom, but extends it beyond academic walls to any reader who encounters the post. For young people who have grown up with online media as a primary space for knowledge sharing and peer exchange, publishing reflective feminist reading list was a natural act of digital citizenship, circulating feminist ideas in the same registers they use for everyday intellectual life. That the post was titled "*Outcry of Books*" signals that students understood this circulation as an act of feminist public expression, consistent with Fu's (2021) argument that digital participation and citizenship learning are mutually constitutive.

The third dimension is students' willingness to publish original feminist academic analysis in digital public space. In an article on *danmei* (Boys' Love) culture, two students employed Lacan's concept of "the big Other", Freudian psychoanalytic theory, and Sedgwick's theory of male homosocial desire to conduct a systematic feminist rereading of a cultural phenomenon widely overlooked or stigmatised by mainstream discourse. The core argument was that female writers of *danmei* were the real "big Other," constructing male characters' appearance, personalities, and behaviours based on their own preferences, thereby subverting the traditional "male gaze" and making *danmei* "a cultural production where women serve as architects to consume the male image." Publishing the analysis on a public WeChat account extended the students' feminist inquiry beyond the classroom, bringing academic feminist critique into a space accessible to any reader. It reflects what Fu (2026) identifies as a key value of digital media for citizenship learning, serving as an enabler of new forms of knowledge production and public

intellectual engagement that formal education alone cannot provide. The account was both a testing ground for the students' analytical thinking and a means of bringing feminist scholarship into broader public conversation.

#### **4.2 Speaking the Unspeakable: Challenging Sensitive Topics in Campus Media**

Feminist discourse in China's digital media landscape operates under persistent censorship pressure, with feminist social media accounts facing severe constraints on their survival and expression (Chen & Ding, 2024; Han, 2018; Huang, 2023; Wang & Driscoll, 2019). Despite the pressure, VWSM's student writers systematically engaged with sensitive topics, producing original content across four dimensions: body politics (menstrual shame, HPV vaccine stigma, contraception, and body positivity), gender and sexual diversity (*danmei* culture, homosexual rights, transgender issues, and diverse gender expressions), institutional gender inequality (gender-based hiring discrimination, equal pay, and gender disparities in STEM), and intimate relationships and domestic life (domestic violence, full-time motherhood, and paternal involvement). The sustained engagement across the entire lifespan of VWSM reflects a consistent editorial commitment. In Fu's (2026) terms, it constitutes a form of everyday digital politics, through which young people collectively challenge structural inequality and injustice from within the digital spaces available to them.

The consistency reflects a conscious discursive strategy. As stated in the *Editorial for the 2021 Special Issue*, VWSM committed to "gently tell people the truth about diversity, respect, inclusiveness, and justice." A gentle narrative was a deliberate choice made under a constrained media environment. Fu (2026) describes such everyday digital engagement as prefigurative politics, where young people demonstrate in the present the social relations and values they seek, challenging the status quo through mundane and persistent engagement. For VWSM's student writers, speaking softly and persistently about topics that mainstream discourse preferred to avoid was a conscious feminist politics enacted in digital space.

The *Talk-to interview* series, in which students conducted 18 interviews with faculty members and graduates, brought academic expertise to bear on the same range of sensitive topics, extending classroom discussions into publicly accessible digital dialogue. Engaging faculty voices lent academic authority to topics that might otherwise be dismissed as too sensitive or personal, giving students a defensible basis for bringing them into public discourse. Interviewee B recalled that the health interview series originated from classroom discussions, and the decision to take those discussions online reflected a conscious choice to extend feminist academic thinking into digital public space. The interview questions carried an embedded critical stance, as students went beyond asking whether certain phenomena existed to examining what they revealed about structural gender inequality. By framing discussions this way and publishing them openly, students invited readers into a deeper feminist analysis of everyday life, turning academic conversations into accessible public dialogue.

Interviewee A admitted that one of her primary goals as student editor-in-chief was simply to "keep VWSM from being shut down" as censorship continued to tighten. Yet survival and feminist commitment were not in tension. The account's editorial choices consistently pushed beyond personal experience toward structural critique. A 2017 post used China's first employment gender discrimination lawsuit as its entry point, translating one female graduate's job-seeking experience into a broader critique of structural gender inequality in the workplace. The fact that this was among the account's earliest posts suggests that systematic feminist critique was part of VWSM's editorial commitment from the very beginning. In publishing such analysis on a digital platform, students practiced what Fu (2026, p. 210) describes as challenging "the status quo on a mundane level and conjur[ing] up openings to change the system."

#### **4.3 Becoming Feminist: Reflexive Practice and Subjectivity Formation**

From 2019 to 2022, VWSM's International Women's Day posts were composed of 80 students' contributions organised around feminist themes including bodily autonomy, feminist awakening, solidarity, and resistance. One student, writing on feminist awakening, described how feminist consciousness had reshaped her sense of self: "more and more women are recognising themselves as 'the other' in multiple social contexts... We should refuse to become objects, refuse to conform, and resist being defined." Another, on self-definition, wrote that "the only one who can define a woman is the woman herself... Find your own place on the spectrum, and enjoy your identity as a woman." Their reflections constituted, in Fu's (2026) terms, a collective enactment of feminist political subjectivity, a space where students formed and expressed their feminist identities together across four consecutive years.

Such collective practice of public expression shaped individual feminist identities in ways that were not always smooth or linear. Interviewee A described her transformation from "always rushing ahead" to "strategically holding back." She was navigating something deeper than an organisational challenge. Fu (2026, p. 210) observes that young people appropriate digital spaces as relatively free environments to experiment with different dispositions and possibilities for political participation, a process

through which their political subjectivities are formed and enacted. For Interviewee A, the experimentation unfolded under real pressure. Keeping VWSM alive meant learning when to speak and when to hold back, and in doing so, developing both a clearer understanding of the constraints she was operating within and a stronger capacity to act within those constraints. The digital account was the terrain on which her feminist subjectivity took shape, as much a site of political formation as a platform for expression.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

VWSM offers empirical support for Fu's (2026) framework of digital citizenship of young people in China. The three dimensions Fu identifies proved mutually reinforcing in practice. Knowledge translation shaped how students approached sensitive topics, and both contributed to the formation of feminist subjectivity. The case also highlights a dimension that Fu's framework leaves underexplored. When feminist training and digital writing practice are embedded within the campus context, as they were at VWSM, the resulting digital citizenship tends to be deeper and more sustained than what emerges from more incidental forms of online participation.

VWSM represents a form of Chinese feminist digital media that existing scholarship has yet to fully address. Huang (2023) and Chen and Ding (2024) both focus on accounts whose primary challenge was survival, whether through navigating anti-feminist backlash or developing strategies under censorship. Peng and Liu's (2026) typology of confrontational and conforming digital feminism similarly centres on accounts operating within the dynamics of public visibility and survival. VWSM operated on different terms. Without NGO backing or commercial purpose, it sustained feminist practice through the commitments of students whose primary motivation was expression itself. In this sense, campus-based feminist media constitutes a distinctive type within Chinese feminist digital practice, one whose continuity is rooted in educational formation.

VWSM never became a pearl. But its practice is a reminder that feminist digital citizenship takes shape in many forms. Confrontation is one. So is the cumulative weight of writing, publishing, and refusing to stay silent.

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