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Radical boycotts and moderate buycotts: feminist consumer activism on social media in China

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ABSTRACT

Social media provide space for feminist activists in authoritarian regimes. This study examines two cases of online feminist consumer activism: the boycott of Procter & Gamble (P&G) and the buycott of Hanshu in China. Through interviews with 27 participants and the analysis of social media posts on Weibo and Douban, we investigated the motivations for and mechanisms of feminist actions. We found that consumerism provided protection for the dissemination of feminist ideas under rigorous censorship. Activists took advantage of various functions of different social media platforms to coordinate and strategically push forward the feminist agenda. We also found that, compared with buycotters, boycotters were more rebellious, anti-establishment, and more likely to self-identify as radical feminists. This study provides a non-Western case of the coordination and contention between feminism and consumerism and sheds light on the diverse dynamics of political consumerism.

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Introduction

“Every penny you spend is a vote for the ideal society you want,” Chinese feminists declared on social media in 2021 during a boycott of Procter & Gamble (P&G) to support a feminist comedian and a buycott of Hanshu to oppose a male pop star involved in sex scandals. In the first case, Yang Li was invited to promote P&G’s sanitary products in the live-streaming session on the online shopping platform JD.com on March 24. However, the announcement of the event triggered a strong backlash from men who accused Yang of promoting gender opposition due to her sarcastic jokes about men (Global Times 2021). Thus, P&G removed Yang’s photo from the promotion poster, which angered many women and led to a boycott campaign. Eventually, Yang appeared in the live-streaming session, and on March 25, P&G China apologized on Weibo.

In the second case, the Chinese cosmetics brand Hanshu enjoyed a buycott following a prominent #MeToo incident in China. On July 18, Hanshu terminated its contract with pop star Kris Wu based on rape allegations against him posted on Weibo. Despite Wu not

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being officially arrested until August 16, Hanshu's proactive action garnered immense support, with over 1.32 million people flooding its live-streaming session that night. Next day, more brands, including Porsche China, terminated their contracts with Wu. These two cases demonstrate that consumer power has become integral to the ongoing feminist movement in China. Feminists creatively "vote" for social change in an authoritarian environment.

This phenomenon can be understood through the lens of political consumerism. Originally emerging in the Western context, political consumerism has been one of the most popular modes of political participation, next to voting (Carolin Zorell 2018). Michele Micheletti (2003) defined political consumerism as citizen-consumers making choices for political reasons, such as improving government practices regarding ethnic minority rights and green manufacturing. Specifically, there are two opposite yet complementary political consumerism behaviors (Zorell 2018). The negative variety, known as *boycotting*, means consumers refuse to buy certain products to express their dissatisfaction and exert pressure to correct unethical practices. In contrast, *buycotting* is a positive action in which consumers deliberately choose products when the producer is worth rewarding for acting responsibly.

Although previous studies have examined the relationship between feminism and political consumerism, the debate about how consumerism influences feminist activism has not yet been resolved. Some scholars argue that women-friendly political consumerism has reversed the gender gap in civic participation (Dietlind Stolle and Micheletti 2006). However, others point out a contradiction between feminism, which pursues gender equality, and consumerism, which is built on the exploitative, patriarchal capitalist system. Notably, relevant studies have primarily been conducted in the Western context (Lauren Copeland and Shelly Boulianne 2022). Therefore, this study examines the alignments and tensions between feminism and consumerism in China, an understudied setting. We believe that introducing cases from the Global South can contribute to the theoretical debate and provide novel insights into discussions on feminist consumer activism.

We selected the two cases—boycotting P&G and buycotting Hanshu—for two reasons. First, since both cases were related to celebrities, they garnered much attention, involved many participants, and successfully provoked the companies to respond. Second, the cases occurred on similar platforms, which facilitates comparison.

This study focuses on the motivation for and mechanism of the feminist consumer activism as well as the differences between boycotts and buycotts in China. Through qualitative analysis of 27 in-depth interviews with participants and over 3,500 social media posts and replies on Weibo and Douban¹, we found that the emergence of consumerist feminism reflected both opportunities and struggles of feminist movements in the authoritarian context. On the one hand, digital consumerist feminism, as a collective action, offered marginalized women a means of political participation. Feminists aimed to raise people's awareness of gender issues and engage more supporters with lower risks. They skillfully coordinated with one another and adopted various functions of different social media platforms to push forward their agendas. On the other hand, the effects of consumer activism were limited because little effort was put into promoting institutional reform. Classism and neoliberal ideologies also compromised the progressiveness of such activism.

Furthermore, to fill the research gap, we distinguished boycotts from buycotts in the Chinese feminist context. While some activists participated in both forms of political consumerism, there were also hardline boycotters and buycotters who rejected the other type of action. We found that hardline boycotters were more rebellious, anti-censorship, and anti-establishment than buycotters, largely because of the high cost of boycotts under the authoritarian regime. They self-identified as radical feminists, which is a politically sensitive label in China. This study contributes to the literature on the coordination and contention between feminism and consumerism in the digital sphere and the de-Westernization of relevant discussions.

Literature review

The market as an arena for feminism: congruence or contradiction

As a venue for politics, the market is associated with social justice beyond the prices or quality of products (Micheletti, Andreas Follesdal and Stolle 2004). Communication networks formed in the market allow marginalized groups, particularly women, who have long suffered gender inequality to defend their stances (Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough 1997). Hence, since the early and mid-20th century, women's liberation in Western nations has been intertwined with the discourses and practices of producers and consumers (Nicki Lisa Cole and Alison Dahl Crossley 2009).

In the 1960s, women consumers practiced self-presentation through consumption as the women-oriented market mushroomed (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2012). Criticizing women's subservient roles in the patriarchal market, feminists organized consumerist activism (Pauline Maclaran 2015). By the late 1970s, the National Organization for Women, an American feminist organization, pushed brands to amend sexist commercials through boycott threats (Steven Lysonski and Richard W Polley 1990). Subsequently, many advertisements started to persuade women to pay for the identity of an empowered woman who gained professional success in a male-dominated workforce (Regina McNamara 2014).

Thanks to the global reach of the internet, consumer activism has burgeoned among feminists in recent years. Consumers became part of business models because they directly interacted with brands on social media platforms (McNamara 2014). After mid-2000s, the young generation in the US innovated mobile applications to increase the effectiveness of consumer activism (Maclaran 2015). Caroline Heldman (2017) investigated 13 boycotts aiming for gender justice and found that corporate accountability improved as companies made more donations and reconsidered their leaders' stances on gender issues. Some campaigns mobilized legislative debate, calling for equal distribution of public resources and protesting formal laws that encroached on women's rights. For example, a boycott against the art store Hobby Lobby promoted employers' insurance coverage of contraceptives. These movements are characterized by a pursuit of institutional change.

Nonetheless, while being recognized for its efficacy, consumerist feminism also faces criticism. Firstly, it emerged from neoliberal capitalism, which perpetuates unequal power dynamics based on consumption capability. Consumerist feminists believe that shopping can promote fairness, but this view excludes women from

disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds (R Thwaites 2017). Second, postfeminism emphasizes individual choices over collective activism, undermining feminist movements seeking structural change (Amber E Kinser 2004). Lastly, feminism clashes with patriarchal capitalism, reminding us of the exploitation of underpaid workers and the objectification of women in beauty standards (Josée Johnston and Judith Taylor 2008).

Recent studies have further revealed the intricate relationship between consumerism and feminism. Banet-Weiser (2018) emphasizes that postfeminism, rooted in consumption, self-entrepreneurship, and the attention economy, revolves around the struggle for visibility. However, increased visibility does not guarantee liberation from sexism. Driven by profit and competition, visibility circuits result in certain forms of feminism gaining visibility while others fading into invisibility. The most visible feminism predominantly represent white, middle-class, cisgender, and heterosexual perspectives (Banet-Weiser 2018). Examining Dove's user-generated advertising campaign, Brooke Erin Duffy (2010) argues that many brands exploit consumers' labor under the guise of women's empowerment. By encouraging consumers to participate in brand marketing without compensation, these practices fuel the commodification of feminist ideas and reinforce existing power structures.

The interplay of consumerism and feminism takes on distinct forms in non-Western contexts, challenging Western-centric assumptions. In Latin America, social programs aimed at alleviating poverty frequently utilize a consumerist framework, integrating the poor into the market as both consumers and producers. While these programs often invoke the language of women's empowerment, scholars reveal the limitations of such neoliberal approaches to emancipation, advocating for liberation beyond market-based solutions (Verónica Schild 2015). Shifting to the Asian context, research on soap operas reveals how consumer culture is often portrayed as a vehicle for individual and social transformation (Yu-fen Ko 2004). While scholars argue that postfeminism in China shows complicity in the market-state nexus (Sara Liao 2019), it is also crucial to recognize that these seemingly individual consumer choices, within politically restrictive environments, can collectively contribute to broader social change.

To advance the discussion, we explore cases of consumerist feminism in the understudied context of China. Our research aims to not only introduce a new context but, more significantly, provide fresh insights into this extensively debated relationship by incorporating the dynamics of an authoritarian state.

Commodity feminism and popular feminism in “neo/non-liberal China”

Since the late 1970s, consumerism has become an integral part of feminist activism in China, as it aligns with the neoliberal globalization that followed economic reforms. The opening of the market allowed non-state stakeholders to participate, and brands began to shape people's interests and choices alongside the state (Mitchell Dean 2010). The hyper-commercialization of society targeted urban middle-class women, who gained purchasing power and sought self-empowerment, leading to the rise of postfeminist discourses centered around “empowerment through consumption” (Siyuan Yin 2021). The communist-era ideal of women as producers transitioned into the image of women as consumers. Platforms like Taobao and brands like SK-II employed feminist slogans and

campaigns to encourage women to purchase feminine products (Cara Wallis and Yongrong Shen 2018).

Simultaneously, a grassroots model of feminism emerged in China's neoliberal reforms. The Feminist Five publicly protested against sexual violence and harassment (Jia Tan 2017). The liberalization toward a decentralized economy empowered non-state stakeholders, fostering a wave of "popular feminism" characterized by grassroots collective action and the creative use of new media (Angela Xiao Wu and Yige Dong 2019). Grassroots citizens spontaneously supported each other and shaped gender-related agendas, forming a vibrant counterpublic. The #MeToo movement in China exemplifies this trend, with participants on platforms like WeChat and Weibo engaging supporters, gathering evidence, and pooling resources for legal action (Li Ma 2021).

However, despite such reforms, the state still exerts strong control over Chinese society, especially when the Communist Party perceives a threat from civil society. Wallis and Shen (2018) coined the term "neo/non-liberal China" to describe the paradoxical coexistence of marketization and state interference in the nation. The rise of grassroots activism coincided with increased authoritarianism, such as tightened censorship, the jailing of activists, and increased crackdowns on activism. As a result, Chinese feminists consider cultural issues about gender equality a primary battleground and seldom seek reform in state policies (Wu and Dong 2019).

In summary, gender discussions in contemporary neo/non-liberal China have mainly been commercialized, bottom-up, and depoliticized. Facing the tightening control and severe stigmatization, grassroots feminists seek online spaces to promote changes. Against this background, an emerging wave of consumer activism has formed on digital media. To investigate the motivation for and mechanism of this activism, we propose the following two research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What goals do Chinese feminists want to achieve through online consumer activism?

RQ2: How do feminist activists use social media platforms to conduct boycotts and buycotts?

Differentiating between boycotts and buycotts

Previous studies usually combine boycotting and buycotting into a single mode of political consumerism (e.g., Hannah Poon and Tommy Tse 2024). However, it is imperative to distinguish between the two modes of activism, as they are driven by differing motivations of individuals with varying demographic and attitudinal profiles and may have different effects (Cindy Kam and Maggie Deichert 2020). The central distinction between boycotting and buycotting lies in their intentions and outcomes. Boycotting involves intentional purchase avoidance and is driven by a punishment-oriented approach, while buycotting involves intentional advocacy of purchases and is guided by a reward-oriented approach (Kam and Deichert 2020; Lisa Neilson 2010). Boycotts generally attract participants willing to engage in conflicts and respond to negative experiences, while buycotts tend to attract trusting individuals who support based on positive information. Lauren Copeland (2014) argued that boycotters exhibit higher

norms of dutiful citizenship, emphasizing deference to authority, while boycotters exhibit higher norms of engaged citizenship, highlighting voluntary activity and helping others. While these findings are valuable in democratic contexts, their transferability is limited. In this study, we examine the disparities between boycotters and buycotters in China, aiming to assess whether these two forms of political consumerism manifest differently in an authoritarian context. Thus, the following research question is posed:

RQ3: What are the differences between boycotters and buycotters in the context of feminist activism in China?

Methods

Interviews

Following a grounded theory approach, we collected data from two sources: in-depth interviews and social media posts. From January to April 2022, we interviewed 27 activists who boycotted P&G or buycotted Hanshu. We recruited them by sending messages to those who had sent boycotting or buycotting posts or who had replied to those posts on Weibo or Douban. For example, O1 posted “Yang Li has been removed by P&G. Let us boycott it,” so we knew she was a boycotter. The interviewees were well-educated women from 16 to 35 years old. Twelve of them were college or graduate students at that time. Among those who had graduated, eight worked in the private sector, while six worked for

Table 1. Demographics of the interviewees.

	Age	Occupation	Education	City/Province	Stance	
O1	22	Student	UG	New York City	Hardline boycotters	
O2	33	Designer	UG	Shanghai		
O3	22	Student	UG	Shenyang		
O4	22	Student	UG	Beijing		
O5	20	Student	UG	Shanghai		
O6	27	Doctor	PG	Tianjin		
O7	35	Engineer	PG	Paris		
O8	24	Lecturer	UG	Wuhu		
O9	22	Lecturer	UG	Chongqing		
O10	22	Student	UG	Suzhou		
O11	27	Marketer	UG	Beijing		
O12	16	Student	N/A	Tianjin		Centrists
O13	20	Student	UG	Changchun		
U1	25	Local officer	UG	Nanjing		
U2	24	Teacher	UG	Ningbo		
U3	24	Unemployed	UG	Suzhou		
U4	21	Student	UG	Yantai		
U5	20	Student	UG	Ningbo		
U6	23	Student	PG	Beijing		
U7	27	Marketer	PG	Hangzhou		
U8	30	Teacher	UG	Chongqing		
U9	22	Student	UG	Xi'an		
U10	24	Local officer	UG	Hebei	Hardline buycotters	
U11	29	Marketer	UG	Beijing		
U12	26	Marketer	UG	Changzhou		
U13	29	Teacher	PG	Fuzhou		
U14	22	Student	UG	Undisclosed		

Note. UG: undergraduate degree, PG: postgraduate degree. All interviewees are women.

Table 2. The interview question list.

Why did you boycott P&G/buycott Hansu? What did you do besides posting online?
How did you join this movement? Is the movement organized? Did you invite others to join the action?
To which extent do you think boycotting P&G/buycotting Hanshu can help preserve women's rights?
Some people think that boycott/buycott as cannot promote gender equality because the brands just want to make profits instead of making genuine change. What do you think about this?
To boycotters: What do you think of boycott?
To buycotters: What do you think of boycott?
In addition to boycott/buycott, have you fought for women's rights in other ways?
If yes to the previous question: How did you fight for women's rights? Which strategy do you think is better than boycott/buycott?
If no: Why did you only boycott/buycott but not use other strategies?
How do you view women's rights? What do you think of "feminism"? How do you know about feminist statements/theories?
What do you think about the censorship of feminist content?
To buycotters: Some people think that we shouldn't encourage buycotting because it is unfair to people who cannot afford expensive products. What do you think about this?

local governments or state-owned entities (*tizhi nei*). One was unemployed. The interviewees were mainly based in coastal cities or capital cities in China (see Table 1). Throughout the paper, we pseudonymized the interviewees as follows: 1) "O" or "U," indicating whether she was interviewed as a boycotter (O) or a buycotter (U); and 2) a number distinguishing the interviewees. If we found a boycotter was also a buycotter during the interviews, we still labeled her "O" instead of "U" because we originally identified her as a boycotting activist.

The interviews followed a semi-structured approach, and each lasted for about one hour. The interview questions touched on themes including the activists' motivations, the process and efficacy of the movement, and their perceptions of feminism and censorship (See Table 2 for the question list). During the interviews, we added follow-up questions according to the responses.

We followed a three-step process to analyze the interview transcripts. First, we created a document to record answers to all interview questions and underlined points we deemed crucial. Second, we color-coded the content to indicate differences and similarities among the interview data, which allowed us to track and compare the interviewees' opinions. Finally, we conducted an inductive analysis to derive themes from the interview data, drawing upon the color-coded content as a basis (Juliet Ma Corbin and Anselm La Strauss 2015).

Social media posts

To complement and corroborate the findings from interviews, we collected relevant posts on Weibo and Douban, the two major platforms where the activism cases occurred. First, we used Python and a set of case-related keywords and hashtags to extract posts from Weibo on December 19 2021. Regarding P&G, we searched the Chinese keyword "P&G" ("宝洁") and the hashtag #P&G Yangli# (#宝洁 杨笠#): 728 Weibo posts released from March 24 to March 26 2021, were included. Regarding Hanshu, we retrieved 2,048 posts released during July 18–21, 2021, based on keywords "Hanshu" (韩束) and "buy/support/order" (买/支持/下单) and the hashtag #Hanshu terminated its contract with Kris Wu# (#韩束与吴亦凡解约#). Second, on Douban, we searched the keyword "P&G" ("宝洁") for

posts and their replies released during March 24–26, 2021. After removing single-word replies such as “up” and “support,” we obtained 110 boycotting posts and 718 associated replies in total. Similarly, using the keyword “Hanshu” (“韩束”), we collected 48 boycotting posts and 206 replies posted during July 18–21.

Although it is difficult to determine a user’s gender online, our impression is that most of the posts were written by women, given that the participants in the two movements were predominantly women. This is likely because women are more engaged with feminist issues and are the primary target audience of P&G and Hanshu. Upon data collection, we highlighted the posts showing the activists’ attitudes and strategies for further analysis. The process of analyzing these posts mirrored that of analyzing the transcripts. Other than examining the evolution of content on a single platform over time, we also explored the interconnectedness of content across different platforms (Richard Rogers 2019). Using comparative distinctions (Kathy Charmaz 2006) of the grounded theory approach (Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss 1999), we coded the similarities and differences emerging from the social media posts in comparison to those identified in the interviews. We could identify and compare patterns in the behaviors and opinions of the participants.

When analyzing the data, we borrowed a platform studies framework that highlights the interactions among platform affordances, users, business models, and governance (Jose van Dijck 2013). This approach allowed us to understand how the technical features and social dynamics of each platform shaped the expression and coordination of feminist consumer activism. We paid particular attention to how activists leveraged platform-specific functionalities, such as Weibo’s hashtag system for viral spread and Douban’s discussion groups for in-depth deliberation. We also considered how content moderation policies influenced the visibility of activist messages, revealing the constraints and opportunities that digital infrastructures create for activists.

Findings

Brands as an ally: making feminism a social norm

The activists participated in boycotts or buycotts primarily because of the desire for more allies to shape public opinion about feminism. Chinese women face subordination both institutionally and culturally, and feminism is stigmatized and censored in the country (Wallis and Shen 2018). As O13 said, “Feminists must find as many allies as possible in such a tough situation, including brands.” This quote demonstrates that consumerist feminists aimed to promote the acceptance of feminism as a social norm by cooperating with various stakeholders.

The interviewees mentioned three strategic considerations. Firstly, given the risks associated with on-the-ground activism in public in China, feminists turned to digital consumer activism to express their views. Utilizing the internet provided a safer platform, aligning with Guobin Yang’s (2016) observation that new technology reduced the revolutionary nature of civic engagement. Additionally, some interviewees sought to avoid conflicts. U3 mentioned, “I’m not good at arguing with anti-feminist people. It’s too exhausting. So I prefer buying things to show my support.” Therefore, online consumer activism allowed feminists to express their dissatisfaction at low risk and cost.

Second, boycotting and buycotting showed the rise of women's consumption capability, which would likely push brands to become more sensitive about gender issues. For example, U2 buycotted Hanshu to "shape public opinion and warn other brands." "A woman-targeting brand can survive only if it satisfies women's needs," she shared. However, the activists held different opinions about whether the companies need to make real changes and sincerely respect women. Several interviewees voiced complaints about the limited impact of their actions on companies, which made them hesitant to participate in consumer activism in the future. According to O5, many products sold by Hanshu in live-streaming sessions were clearance items with Wu's picture printed on the packaging, suggesting that the brand terminated its contract with Wu solely out of concern for losing customers. However, for most interviewees, the true intentions of the company were of little importance as long as the message was conveyed that a brand could only generate profits by respecting women consumers. As U7 suggested, "Brands must package themselves from up to bottom, from slogans to products, if they want to trick women out of money. Fake it, so they might make it."

The third strategic consideration of the activists was to mobilize more women to participate in feminist activism or support it in the future. The interviewees hoped that more people would acknowledge the severe gender inequality in China. O6 pointed out, "Sexism used to be common in advertisements, but now more and more people know that jokes about women's sexual experiences and body shape are inappropriate." She believed that "culture would influence people imperceptibly. Boycott is a publicity opportunity that may engage more participants who used not to care about women's rights to join the feminist movement." In this sense, the consumer movement seeks not only to correct several companies' wrongdoings but also to raise awareness and encourage participation on a broader scale.

Regarding the goal of consumer activism, many participants were committed to collectively shaping public opinion favorable for feminist movements in the long run rather than pursuing institutional restructuring. Their specific agendas, though varied, primarily lay in the cultural sphere, rooted in personal experiences concerning society, marketing, and media. The feminists combated misogynistic marketing strategies and pushed brands to treat women consumers respectfully. They also supported hiring women brand ambassadors and criticized prevalent sexual harassment online. In other words, feminist consumer activism in China, based on the postfeminist logic of visibility, has been constrained in fighting with conservative groups for public opinion, while its Western counterparts have usually promoted systematic reform through legal practices and state policies (Heldman 2017). Wu and Dong (2019) attribute this lack of institutional critique in grassroots feminist movements to tightening social control in China. The government's crackdown on human rights organizations deprives consumer activists of the support of non-government organizations (NGOs) in pursuing institutional reform. The state's embrace of Confucianism also reinforces the gender stratification (Wu and Dong 2019). Amidst the rising conservatism, most feminists prioritize making gender equality an universal ideology with as many allies as possible before institutional change can be achieved.

“Everyone can be the leader:” grassroots’ coordinated actions on social media

Regarding the mechanism of the political consumerism movement, we argue that feminists engaged in coordinated actions across various social media platforms, leveraging their unique features. Coordinated actions involve the coordination of resources and contributions toward a unified goal, requiring effective leadership, clear labor divisions, guidelines, and mutual trust based on shared ideologies (Margaret Levi and Gillian Murphy 2006).

In both cases, these actions were divided into three stages and happened on three types of platforms (See Table 3): Douban, Weibo, and live-streaming platforms such as JD.com, Taobao, and Douyin². Douban served as the headquarters where strategies were developed and participants were directed to other platforms. Weibo emerged as the central battlefield where feminists confronted the anti-feminist camp and vied for public support. Interactions with brands took place on both Weibo and live-streaming platforms.

In the first stage, the feminists aimed to make the issue go viral. They used Douban to inform the audience about news related to P&G and Hanshu. Douban was chosen because it hosted discussion groups where like-minded individuals formed close online communities. As O9 explained, “The group is managed by a woman leader and has a friendly vibe for discussion.” Group administrators marked important posts as “starred content” to attract more attention, and members boosted posts by replying to them. This allowed the feminists to quickly gather an initial group of participants, even with a limited number of followers.

Next, those feminists promoted the topic on Weibo by using a hashtag to reach a larger audience. Weibo displayed trending topics and had a significant number of daily active users. For instance, on March 24, a member on Douban urged others to post as many boycott-related messages on Weibo since it served as a “battlefield for public opinion.” Some even organized lucky draws on Douban, offering Ukiss lipstick to three women who posted boycott messages against P&G on social media platforms. Ukiss, a Chinese beauty brand, had faced backlash for criticizing Bilibili, a video-sharing platform, for circulating

Table 3. Platform functions and three stages of feminist boycotts and buycotts.

Platform			
	Douban	Weibo	JD/Taobao/Douyin
Functions	Discussion groups (Digital communities/ starred content)	Trending topics (Countless daily active users)	Live-streaming (Direct interaction/ purchasing)
Stage 1: Making issues go viral	Gathering the first group of participants	Making the issue a trending topic to inform the public	-
Stage 2: Making guidelines for massive action	Making, organizing, and adjusting guidelines	-	-
Stage 3: Interaction & Feedback	-	Communicating with and getting final feedback from the brands (e.g., apology)	Leaving live comments; Getting instant feedback from the brands

Note. The arrows indicate the direction of the flow of activists.

sexist content and terminating their business relationship in 2021. U6 noted that “Weibo tended to set controversial news relating to gender or celebrities as trending topics to increase traffic.” In other words, the activists consciously relied on Weibo’s business model to make the issue going viral.

On both platforms, the consumer activists utilized nationalist discourse to trigger emotions and garner attention. For example, a boycotter wrote that P&G should be boycotted anyway because it comes from a “Western capitalist country.” Similarly, a boycotter points out that one would also contribute to boosting domestic business alongside promoting gender equality if they bought Hanshu’s products. These examples speak to Qianqian Li’s (2023) finding that Chinese feminists use nationalist and anti-imperialist narratives to legitimize feminist ideologies in a hostile environment.

In the second stage, feminists developed guidelines for massive participation on Douban because consumer activism would be influential only if a huge number of people acted immediately. The activists discussed, organized, and refined the guidelines in discussion groups to ensure easy and rapid adoption by others. For example, leading boycotters listed all P&G’s products for reference. They asked participants to request a refund or receipt (*fapiao*), to directly message the brand’s PR manager on Weibo/LinkedIn and its consumer service staff on JD.com, and to inundate P&G’s live-streaming room with coordinated comments. To encourage participation, the boycotters provided scripted messages that participants could copy and paste when messaging the manager or leaving supportive comments for Yang Li in the live-streaming room. In boycotting Hanshu, activists introduced various products during Taobao live-streaming sessions to help others identify suitable options for immediate purchase.

Interestingly, we found that activists sometimes argued with each other as they developed guidelines. For example, some boycotters supported stopping the boycott and telling the brands they bought its products for Yang Li as she finally showed up in the live-streaming session, but others declared not to make purchases unless P&G apologized. However, most boycotting posts ultimately advocated for continuing the boycott, indicating certain activism guidelines might dominate others despite the internal disagreements within online discussions.

In the final stage, feminists engaged in interaction and received feedback primarily on Weibo and live-streaming platforms, fostering dialogue with brands. On Weibo, boycotters communicated directly with the brand’s PR manager and received responses. On March 25, P&G China apologized for the incorrect online response of their customer service staff. Boycotters also contributed to the brand’s PR communication efforts. Thousands of people commented on Hanshu’s Weibo post announcing the termination of its contract with Kris Wu. The following day, Hanshu launched a splash screen ad on Weibo featuring their new commercial partner, China’s National Swimming Team. Furthermore, feminists visited live-streaming platforms to leave comments and receive immediate feedback. Fan-made video clips, extracted from live-streaming sessions, went viral on short video platforms. U7 remarked, “The short video about Hanshu’s live-streaming kept earning traffic on Douyin, especially those featuring the two hosts as a couple.” Such interactions corresponded to a popular trend of shipping two real-life or fictional people as a couple in China, enabling consumer activism to sustain for a longer time.

Notably, the activism did not strictly follow a linear progression, as different stages often overlapped and coexisted. For instance, the first and second stages continued alongside the third stage of interaction and feedback. In this phase, boycotters recruited more participants and shared scripted comments to support Yang Li during P&G's live-streaming session. It is also crucial to acknowledge the obstacles faced by grassroots actions, given that Chinese social media platforms prioritize profitability and hold considerable power over individuals. As O4 noted, "The PR department of a brand can easily bribe any platform to suppress boycotts to reduce the negative impact." The platforms also had to police content that might be regarded as disturbing social stability (Zizheng Yu, Jiayi Hou and Oscar Tianyang Zhou 2023). Given the tightening internet controls, O9 said that feminists used to talk about moving to another platform, but "it is unrealistic because people may get separated and can hardly be reorganized. Nobody can invest so much time and effort." This quote displays political and technological restraints on the feminist movements in China.

Although this part mainly focuses on the similarities between the cases, the boycotters and buycotters did employ different strategies. Boycotters invested more in combating online censorship and anti-feminism practices than buycotters because they tended to experience more hostility from authority and conservative groups. In the second stage of developing guidelines, some boycotters reminded the participants to use a burner account to protect privacy. In the last stage of interactive communication, they left repetitive live comments quickly to overwhelm dissenting voices and sway public opinion.

In summary, Chinese feminists relied on various functions of social media tools and formed digital communities based on similar ideologies. Social media facilitated shared grievances about gender biases, common feminist goals, and principles for coordinated political consumerism movements (Mario Diani 2011). This finding echoes Paolo Parigi and Rachel Gong's (2014) argument that "digital ties" enhance closeness between participants and reinforce personal commitments to activism. In our cases, digital ties improved political participation by transforming the private behaviors of consumers into collective action, but their efficacy was constrained within the domain of virtual platforms. The effects were also limited by commercial and political factors in the Party state.

Spectrum of consumerist feminism: radical boycotters and moderate buycotters

Regarding the differences between feminist boycotters and buycotters, our sample showed hardline boycotters were more radical and critical of the authorities, while hardline buycotters were more moderate and avoided confrontation with the government. The interviewees can be divided into three groups based on their participation in the two cases: four hardline boycotters, seven hardline buycotters, and 16 centrists who participated in both feminist boycotts and buycotts (Table 1).

On one hand, the two groups had different attitudes toward consumerism. The hardline boycotters warned against embracing consumerism and refused to fight for women's rights by buying products because they thought the capitalist system was based on patriarchy. On Douban, one boycotter suggested that "consumerism serves

men by nature and only flatters women for money.” Additionally, they believed that consumer activism would fail to promote gender justice because it could not lead to the restructuring of power relations, which aligned with the Western critique of postfeminism in which feminist movements were deemed a myth. For example, O4 affirmed the way that feminists should lead, and her views deserve an extended quotation:

Feminism is against consumerism and the pink tax. Radical feminists have never agreed to fight for women’s rights by buying products . . . Commercialization can move closer to feminism, but feminism cannot move closer to commercialization.

In contrast, none of the hardline boycotters mentioned the negative impacts of consumerism. Instead, they encouraged people to “pay for smaller gender gaps.”

On the other hand, the hardline boycotters were rebellious, anti-censorship, and anti-establishment, as boycotts were more costly in the authoritarian state than boycotts. For one thing, boycotting posts often criticized gender oppression aggressively and encouraged resistance against patriarchal structures, while boycotting posts complimented the brands and conveyed positive emotions. One boycotting post stated, “Power comes from destruction rather than purchasing,” revealing that hardline boycotters rejected boycotting and advocated for dismantling existing systems.

For another thing, all hardline boycotters we interviewed identified as radical feminists and intended to resist authority despite feeling angry, disappointed, and sometimes scared. They emphasized words like “resist,” “rebel,” and “fight.” None of them believed in cooperating with the state, with one participant stating, “I will keep fighting, no matter how hard. The more you delete my posts, the more I’ll post.” Her declaration shows the boycotters’ uncompromising stance on pursuing social justice.

In contrast, five of the seven hardline boycotters were unaware of censorship, while the remaining two (U13 & U14) were aware but supported it, considering some women were too rebellious. None of the seven labeled themselves feminists. For example, U13 claimed, “Censorship is reasonable because some views are unacceptable. I support women fighting for their rights but disagree with extreme feminism. One cannot always mention feminism because the current situation of women has been much improved.” Ignorant of the tightening political environment, boycotters tend to be in complicity with state power in suppressing feminist activism.

Finally, the centrists espoused the “middle ground” of maintaining a balance between boycotts and buycotts, acknowledging and resisting censorship to some extent but often compromising. For example, U5 believed in collaborating with authorities to secure fundamental rights, such as providing hygiene products to girls in rural areas. Alongside, they rejected a fixed definition of feminism and embraced diverse perspectives. They also worried more about being stigmatized for supporting feminist activism.

The sharp distinctions between boycotts and buycotts might have resulted from two factors. First, boycotters were more likely to be censored than buycotters in China. The former resisted gender discrimination and pressured brands to change, while the latter rewarded companies for contributing to gender equality. U11 shared, “I don’t boycott because they would delete boycotting posts but allow buycotts.” Second, several hardline

boycotters and centrists worked for local governments or state-owned institutions, making them vulnerable to censorship. For example, after being punished for uploading feminist content, O6 stated, "I now mainly do less aggressive things, such as making donations and buying books by women authors." Therefore, one's position on the spectrum of feminist consumer activism is influenced by their social role and distance from state power.

Conclusion and discussion

Based on two cases of boycott and buycott practiced by Chinese feminists online, this study demonstrated that digital consumerist feminism, as a collective action rather than an individual choice, offered women an avenue for civic participation in an authoritarian context. Under the guise of consumer activism, the feminists shaped gender equality as a social norm at relatively low risk and cost. These findings support Hui Faye Xiao's (2019) observation that the internet has enabled Chinese feminists to overcome bureaucratic obstacles, therefore revitalizing social activism.

Furthermore, social media played an essential role in "flash-mob style" activism, which was skillfully coordinated although it was spontaneous, decentralized, and occasionally messy. Grassroots feminists pushed forward consumer activism according to the functions of different platforms. They ensured that the issue went viral, published guidelines for massive participation, interacted with the brands, and received feedback through real-time communication. With digital technologies, consumers can quickly convey a unified message through a simple click. This high-profile activism compels companies to respond quickly to customers' demands.

However, digital consumer activism has made little headway in institutional reform. The focus on commercialization and celebrity culture undermines the political nature of feminist activism. Online discussions primarily revolve around celebrities and live-streaming gossip, while brands' responses often seem like mere crisis management tactics. Companies prioritize capitalizing on increased traffic for quick profits rather than advocating for feminist causes, as exemplified by Hanshu's clearance items. This contrast between feminist ideals and commercial interests has discouraged some from participating in future initiatives, thus limiting the potential of feminist consumer activism. Moreover, conservative groups can also employ similar tactics to promote their agendas. In P&G's live-streaming room, many men boycotted the brand because it had invited Yang Li to attend the promotional event. Some interviewees recognized the limitations of consumer activism, emphasizing the importance of addressing the gender pay gap, implementing women-friendly policies, and increasing women's representation in politics. They viewed consumer activism as ineffective, indirect, and temporary, but the only viable means of expression in an authoritarian regime. Fear stems from the state-level backlash against feminist activism, with feminists being stigmatized as "foreign forces" destabilizing society. For instance, after receiving our interview invitation, U14 asked, "Are you Chinese?" indicating a hostile attitude toward foreign nationals. Some interviewees worry about their safety because the government monitored collective actions and online speech. U4 said her university monitored students' Weibo accounts and prohibited them from posting "wrongful opinions." The government also encourages citizens to report

each other, leading to distrust among the public. All these factors explain why feminist activism in China compromises its agenda to survive authoritarian governance.

Additionally, feminist consumer activism might enhance the hegemony of patriarchal capitalism in two ways. First, based on the neoliberal logic of “paying for your rights,” the feminists emphasized that women were major target consumers of the companies to justify the movement. A boycotting post claimed, “Household chemicals, makeup, and skincare are industries women traditionally occupy. We have the right to consume with dignity.” Such discourses reaffirm that minorities can only achieve full personhood by being recognized as a market. Highlighted industries also enhanced gendered consumer roles and beauty norms (Nancy Fraser 2013). Feminist activists hailed young women as the main force in supporting the economy, ignoring unfair resource distribution in capitalist society (Wu and Dong 2019). Second, feminist consumer activism in China has been characterized by meritocracy and classism. Most interviewees declared that feminist goals could only be achieved when more women climbed the social ladder, indicating hierarchy-based assumptions. Accordingly, they tried to empower women by demeaning men’s economic capital. For example, a boycotter posted, “Men who boycott Yang are all factory workers earning only 3,000 Yuan (about 414 USD) monthly because successful men don’t have time to do this. It is ridiculous for brands to care about losers.” Such discourse was not only blind to the vulnerability of women but also potentially exacerbated the resentment of lower-class men (Wu and Dong 2019). Alongside, consumerist feminism was practiced by privileged women in developed areas. All our interviewees were middle class, well-educated, and lived in urban regions. Some had overseas backgrounds. Hence, the agenda of consumerist feminism in China resembles that of Euro-American white and middle-class feminists (Yalan Huang 2016).

The major theoretical contribution of this study is twofold. First, it augments the discussion on the role of consumerism in feminist activism in a new, non-Western context. In liberal democratic regimes, consumerism has usually been criticized for de-radicalizing feminism. In the authoritarian context of China, however, consumerist actions have become one of only a few feasible avenues for feminist activism because the government cracks down on offline movements or any activism that pursues institutional reform. Considering stigmatization, the culture of reporting, and potential punishment, consumerist feminism is a laudable approach to disseminating feminist ideas despite its limitations and uncertain prospects.

Second, this study sheds important light on the differences between the two major modes of feminist consumerism—boycotting and buycotting—which have been understudied generally and ignored in the authoritarian context. In this study, we identified a spectrum of radical boycotters and moderate buycotters. We explained that the high cost of boycotting in a hostile environment is a major factor leading to the differences between them. Although the actions of centrist activists indicate aligning potential of feminist boycotts and buycotts, this possibility is constrained by different stances of hardline boycotters and buycotters on consumerism. Future research could examine whether this spectrum applies to other contexts.

Overall, this study revealed both the opportunities and risks that digital consumer activism entails for Chinese feminist activism. Because the study focused on only two cases and sampled social media posts from only two platforms, the findings should not be

generalized to the entire landscape of consumerist feminism in China. We suggest that future research examine more cases across different platforms. Moreover, since our interviewees were urban women, scholars could consider recruiting participants from rural areas or investigating rural women's views about the consumer activism practiced by urban feminists. These approaches could generate a fuller picture of the interactions among social class, consumerism, and feminist movements under the authoritarian regime. Lastly, further research could be conducted in different political and social contexts.

Notes

1. Although Weibo and Douban both involve public discussion, Douban is more niche and decentralized, with a focus on interest groups and has a strong feminist and queer subculture. Weibo is a mainstream platform focusing on microblogging, hashtags, and trending topics.
2. JD.com and Taobao are major e-commerce platforms in China. JD.com is known for reliable products and fast delivery, while Taobao focuses on a wide range of sellers and competitive prices. Douyin, a short-video social media platform, combines entertainment, influencer culture, and livestream e-commerce.

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