**Challenges in conducting feminist critical discourse analysis on social media: Stereotyping sportswomen in China’s sports fandom**

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Abstract

This article discusses the application of feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) in social media data analysis. The discussion is primarily based on a case study that uses FCDA to explore the stereotyping of sportswomen in China’s social-mediated sports fandom. It emphasises the challenges and practical considerations involved in the design and implementation of the case study. In doing so, it provides insights into the research process and methodology, highlighting how FCDA helps to critically examine the male gaze and gender power dynamics within social-mediated sports fandom. By reading this case study, we will learn how to incorporate a feminist perspective into critical discourse studies in various research contexts. It is hoped that the case study will contribute to a broader understanding of the methodological issues associated with FCDA research practices.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, readers should be able to:

* Apply feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) to analyse gender representations through the perspective of critical discourse studies in specific research contexts.
* Understand the challenges and complexities involved in conducting FCDA to analyse gendered discourses.
* Analyse and critique discursive strategies used in social-mediated communication through a feminist lens, gaining insights into the intersections of gender, power, and representation.
* Apply FCDA in their own research practices to examine gender dynamics, power relations, and discourses in various socio-cultural and professional settings.

Project Overview and Context

This article discusses a research project that examines social-mediated representations of sportswomen, specifically focusing on male Chinese fans’ gaze at elite female athletes. The research is based on a feminist premise, considering the historically entrenched perception of sport as a masculine domain, which leads to the persistent disproportionate media coverage given to female athletes.

China’s participation in sporting mega-events has always been part of the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) nationalist politics (Sullivan et al., 2019). The Chinese team, supported by a state-sponsored athlete system, has accumulated hundreds of gold medals, with a significant portion earned by female athletes (Schuinski et al., 2021). Such accomplishments have made the representation of athletic womanhood a key part of male Chinese fans’ sports consumption during sporting mega-events. However, existing research on China’s sports fandom primarily focuses on male fans’ consumption of men’s sports, offering insufficient accounts of women’s sports (Cha & Lim, 2019; Shen et al., 2021). This calls for scholarly intervention to address the research gap regarding how male fans consume and engage with women’s sporting events.

In exploring this research trajectory, the case study also considers the influence of post-socialist gender politics, which involve the political engineering and socio-cultural shaping of gender power dynamics in China. Under Mao’s leadership (1949-1976), gender equality was promoted, but it was criticised for neutralising gender differences (Rofel, 2007). Post-socialist gender politics celebrate individual aspirations and desires (Liao & Ling, 2022; Zhao & Bouvier, 2022), aligning with the ethos of the post-reform era that emphasises individualism and self-entrepreneurship (Wallis, 2018). Intertwined with the revival of patriarchy at an infrastructural level, it discursively supports men’s renewed pursuit of male dominance (Peng et al., 2023), which is informed by new challenges to their position pf power within the socio-economic structure (Hird & Song, 2018).

Being mindful of such complex power dynamics, this case study aims to understand how male Chinese fans interpret and engage with sportswomen during sporting mega-events. Situating itself within the broader field of critical discourse studies, it unpacks the complex interplay between gender dynamics and social-mediated discursive practices in China’s sports fandom.

Section Summary

* The research project focuses on gender power dynamics and social-mediated communication in the context of male Chinese fans’ consumption of women’s games.
* The research design is based on a feminist premise, seeking to understand how sports fandom is entrenched as a masculine domain.
* Understanding the gendered portrayal of sportswomen provides insights into how post-socialist gender politics manifest in China’s sports fandom.

Research Design

Our study aims to examine how male Chinese sports fans’ gendering of women’s sports plays out in the discursive realm. To achieve this, we formulated the following research questions:

1. How do male Chinese sports fans gaze at sportswomen’s bodies?
2. How do male Chinese sports fans assess sportswomen’s accomplishments?

To answer these questions, we analysed male Chinese sports fans’ postings on the Chinese-language sports fandom platform, Hupu. We chose Hupu as our data source because it is currently the most widely used Chinese-language sports fandom platform, with approximately 55 million monthly active users, predominantly men (90%) (Sohu, 2020).

Our data collection focused on male Hupu users’ postings specifically discussing two sportswomen, Zhang Yufei (a Chinese sportswoman) and Marta Vieira da Silva (a Brazilian sportswoman). This allowed us to capture specific aspects of the research topic. The first dataset collected postings in response to a question titled ‘What would you do if you have a girlfriend like Olympic champion Zhang Yufei?’ Zhang Yufei is a Chinese swimmer who gained public attention for winning medals at the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and was repeatedly described as a ‘beauty’ by China’s sports media (NetEase, 2021). This question explicitly invited male Hupu users to imagine Zhang as their girlfriend, providing an opportunity to analyse how male Chinese sports fans sexualise the bodies of sportswomen.

The second dataset collected postings from threads related to a video clip captioned ‘Female Pelé’ Marta and her unbelievable football skills,’ as well as GIFs titled ‘Brazilian’s Marta is still playing.’ Marta has been named FIFA World Player of the Year six times and is widely recognised as one of the greatest footballers (Sohu, 2021). Her skills and achievements on the football pitch attracted male Hupu users’ engagement. Unlike the first dataset, the focus was not on Marta’s sexuality, allowing us to explore how male Chinese sports fans assess the accomplishments of sportswomen.

In our data analysis, we employed Lazar’s (2007) feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) framework, known for its effectiveness in identifying and critiquing gender-related discourses. FCDA advances a transdisciplinary approach, integrating feminist scholarship and critical discourse studies traditions to uncover how gender issues are reflected in any kind of discursive practice. Aiming to scaffold progressive politics, it is particularly interested in exploring how gender hierarchy is discursively (re)produced by investigating the dialectical tension between structural permanence and the practical activities of individuals engaged in social interactions (Lazar, 2017).

FCDA acknowledges that discourses are not isolated but are constitutive of larger societal processes (Lazar, 2017). In consistency with other variants of critical discourse studies, it recognises the dialectical relations between economic/political structures and social actions, revealing linguistic manifestations of social conflicts in discourse (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Yet, compared to other variants of critical discourse studies, FCDA places a stronger emphasis on the critical analysis of discursive strategies and their impact on women’s agency. It helps decolonise the broad field of critical discourse studies by taking asymmetric gender power relations into consideration (Lazar, 2007).

We chose FCDA for our study due to its feminist paradigm of sociolinguistic inquiry, which offers a conceptual foundation to uncover and challenge gender hierarchy in popular cultural texts. By adopting FCDA, we can analyse how male Hupu users appropriate discursive strategies to rationalise gendered economic/political institutions and patriarchal social norms. It enables us to explore the interconnections between discourses and the specificities of discursive strategies, providing insights into the (re)shaping of gender power dynamics in China’s sports fandom and beyond.

Section Summary

* The case study aims to address the gendering of women’s sports within the discursive realm.
* The research questions focus on how male Chinese sports fans gaze at sportswomen’s bodies and assess their accomplishments.
* The study analyses postings retrieved from the Chinese-language sports fandom platform, Hupu, during the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.
* The study adopts Lazar’s FCDA framework to offer a critical analysis of gender-related discourses in China’s sports fandom and their dynamic intersection with post-socialist gender politics.

Research Practicalities

Reflecting on our experience of conducting the current research, we have noted several noteworthy issues, including ethical considerations, data analysis procedures, language translation, and time management, that require careful implementation of an FCDA-informed, social media-based research project.

In terms of ethical issues, ensuring the anonymity and confidentiality of participants’ personal information is crucial when conducting research involving human data (Zimmer, 2010). This is particularly important in our research, which utilises social media as the data source. While social media posts are often publicly accessible, the individuals who created them may not have anticipated their use in research. It is therefore researchers’ responsibility to respect their privacy and protect their identities. In our study, we ensured that only data from public platforms were collected, refrained from accessing private accounts without explicit consent, and collected only the necessary data. In addition, personally identifiable information was removed from the research results to maintain anonymity. We securely stored and handled the collected data to ensure confidentiality, including the removal of any information that could directly identify individuals, such as names, usernames, specific locations, and unique personal experiences or specific combinations of demographic characteristics.

Potential harm was also a significant ethical concern in our research design, given the sensitive nature of the research topic. Our research aimed to expose the sexist dimension of social-mediated communication in China’s sports fandom, without singling out any individual male sports fans. Yet, posters of the toxic content could face negative repercussions if their identities were inadvertently revealed. Therefore, it was important for us as researchers to exercise due diligence in managing potential impacts responsibly, promoting a respectful and constructive discourse (Haggerty, 2004), as the study’s findings have the potential to shape broader public discussions on sportswomen, sports fans, and gender relations in China.

In a broader context, ethical research is not only characterised by its commitment to minimising harm but also by its proactive role in promoting positive societal change. It is essential to recognise that the views expressed in the posts do not represent the entire male Chinese sports fan community. It is crucial to acknowledge the diversity of perspectives within this group. Adhering to the principles of beneficence and non-maleficence (Andersson et al., 2010), our research was guided by a commitment to produce beneficial results and prevent any potential harm. The study structured as a critique of the problematic gender power dynamics being perpetuated in China’s sports fandom, with the goal of fostering greater respect and equality for female athletes. In this way, the research findings serve as a valuable resource to guide campaigns or programmes dedicated to countering sexism in sports and advocating for more accurate and positive representations of female athletes. This reflects our self-identification as socially responsible researchers striving to decolonise existing scholarly knowledge of China’s sports fandom through the lenses of feminism and critical discourse studies.

It is worthwhile noting that conducting FCDA requires examining and interpreting complex texts from a feminist perspective. To do so, we did not just passively read the texts but actively engaged with them, unravelling the various layers of meaning and uncovering the underlying assumptions, ideologies, and power dynamics. One key component of our analytical skills was critical reading ability. While reading the posts, we focused not only on what was being said, but also on how it was said, and what was left unsaid. By discerning patterns, inconsistencies, and biases, we gained insights into how gender power dynamics were enacted and negotiated within the discursive structure of the textual data. The analytical procedure we followed helped us achieve the research goals and provide guidance for fellow critical discourse analysts to practise FCDA-informed analysis in their own projects.

In our research practice, language translation also emerged as a practical issue with which we had to address. As we presented our research outcomes in English, we employed appropriate translation techniques to ensure accuracy and maintain the integrity of the data. Translations were conducted by bilingual researchers familiar with the cultural context and linguistic nuances of both languages. It is important to note that the involvement of slangs and Internet buzzwords in the original Chinese-language posts added an additional layer of complexity to the translation process. Researchers had to decode the cultural connotations of these Internet buzzwords, including their cultural references and contextualised uses. To overcome this challenge, we engaged in thorough discussions and sought consensus to fully understand the content. This additional procedure ensured that the translations captured not only the literal meanings of the words but also their socio-cultural and political undertones. Consideration was taken to accurately convey the meaning and intentions of the original Chinese posts in the translated English versions. Such translation techniques are transferrable skills, applicable to any research projects involving non-English data.

Effective time management is another essential skill in our research, especially when dealing with a large amount of data. We faced the task of efficiently sifting through numerous online posts and threads while juggling data collection, analysis, and interpretation. This process presented a significant challenge, and the time constraints added additional pressure on our research workflow. Under these circumstances, we adopted a systematic approach by setting clear and achievable goals and breaking down the overarching research process into manageable tasks (Phillips et al., 2008). This approach allowed us to prioritise the most crucial steps and establish a well-defined timeline for each stage, including data collection, analysis, and the composition of the final report. We also balanced thoroughness with efficiency, ensuring our analysis was meticulous and detailed without getting caught up in insignificant details that did not serve the research goals. As such we developed strategies to identify and focus on the most relevant and meaningful data. By navigating these complexities and actively managing our time, we ensured that our research progressed smoothly and efficiently.

While adhering to our planned schedule, we also recognised the need for flexibility to accommodate unforeseen circumstances. Such challenges ranged from technical complications to the realisation that specific data required more analytical attention than initially anticipated. In response, we persistently sought solutions and readily sought assistance from each other when necessary, ensuring our commitment to maintaining the integrity and timeliness of the research project. The necessity of such flexible planning is another lesson we learned through conducting the current research project, and we believe it is another transferrable skill with potential application in a wider context.

Section Summary

* How to address ethical considerations in data handling.
* How to avoid potential harm and responsible communication in relation to research findings.
* How to cope with the cross-cultural dimension of translation processes.
* How to effectively manage time in research practice.

Method in Action

Upon the completion of the research project, we learned several lessons. First, we recognise the significance of defining a clear trajectory for data analysis, which relies on the formation of appropriate research questions. In our project, the entire process started with the identification of research questions that shed light on the manifestation of sexism and gender stereotypes in the discussions of male Chinese sports fans on Hupu. The development of these research questions was informed by our thorough consultation of existing literature, which emphasised the role of social-mediated communication in revealing broader gender power dynamics within Chinese sports fandom. Having well-defined research questions provided us with a solid foundation for data analysis. This experience highlights the importance of designing an FCDA research with theoretically informed research questions in mind.

During the data collection stage, issues also emerged as we tried to select appropriate data for analysis. Given the vast amount of textual data available, meticulous attention to detail was required. We aimed to ensure that the selected data encompassed a wide range of perspectives, avoiding personal biases and increasing the relevance of our research findings to a broader context. To address this issue, we recognised that Chinese-language sports fandom platforms often serve as an extension of broader societal discourse, upon which gender power relations are deliberated. This recognition allowed us to confidently assert that our chosen texts entail the potential to offer a glimpse of how focal societal issues play out within the discursive realm.

While our initial plan involved employing both quantitative content analysis (CA) and feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA), we ultimately made the deliberate decision to present only the findings of FCDA. This decision was driven by the nature of our research questions and the specific focus on gender power dynamics. Within its feminist paradigm of sociolinguistic inquiry, FCDA offers valuable opportunities to elicit how discursive practices showcase gender power dynamics established in wider society. Although quantitative CA helped us capture general trends in Hupu users’ postings, it became evident that FCDA was better suited to address the complexities and nuances of our research objectives.

Furthermore, it is essential to acknowledge that the publication of research papers often requires authors to respect in-house word limit requirements, rendering the necessity to prioritise the most relevant and impactful results. Consequently, a mixed-methods approach was unselected in our research, albeit its merits. Reflecting on our experience, we conclude that researchers should thoughtfully consider and select the most appropriate methods that align with their specific research purposes.

At the data analysis stage, the most challenging issue we faced was the striking a balance between offering insightful data analysis and generating generalisable research findings. Given the interpretive nature of FCDA, the research findings built upon such analyses are not meant to be ‘objective’ facts but subjective interpretations of social phenomena. Indeed, different researchers may analyse the same piece of text in various ways, making it difficult to definitively determine the most ‘accurate’ interpretation. This feature of the approach raises questions concerning the reliability and validity of the research findings. To address this challenge, we adopted a triangulation strategy by involving more than one researcher in the analysis process. The results of the preliminary analysis were cross-checked by a third author. The inclusion of multiple researchers with varied backgrounds allowed us to explore different dimensions of the gendered discourses in China’s sports fandom. Researcher triangulation enhanced the credibility of our interpretations and facilitated engagement with readers from various disciplines and cultural contexts. We also strengthened our propositions with evidence from existing literature, fostering meaningful discussions and potential applications of the research findings in diverse academic and social settings.

Another challenge we encountered was the issue of the wider applicability of the FCDA results. The approach is heavily context-dependent, warranting a research trajectory not being constrained by conventional foci on generalisable findings. Yet, it remains necessary to avoid cherry-picking data that support preconceived ideas. To overcome this challenge, we adopted a multi-case analysis strategy, focusing on two distinct research objects, Zhuang Yufei and Marta Vieira da Silva. This approach enabled us to avoid over-reliance on a single case, providing a more comprehensive and holistic analysis that considers different situations. By identifying commonalities and differences, we reinforced the validity of our findings and expanded their implications. One should note that even with two cases, the generalisability remains limited. Yet, albeit with such limits, our careful selection of cases helped mitigate this issue, ensuring that our research provides valuable insights into specific instances while also contributing to broader discussions on gender discourse analysis.

While we strived to address the challenges mentioned above, one area where we could have improved is the potential biases involved in the selection of our case studies. Our focus on Zhang Yufei and Marta Vieira da Silva may have inadvertently overlooked other relevant sportswomen or aspects of gender stereotyping within China’s sports fandom. For example, incorporating a mixed use of both popular and less-known sportswomen as the case studies could help capture both mainstream discourses and often-overlooked rhetoric. We could have also considered different platforms or data sources beyond Hupu, which would have provided a comprehensive understanding of the discursive landscape of China’s sports fandom culture.

Albeit with the aforementioned limits, our experience shows that the effective implementation of FCDA in research practice is constrained by various factors, requiring careful, tactic planning to overcome challenges. The ability to address such challenges is an essential problem-solving skill that is valuable for fellow researchers across various fields.

Section Summary

* FCDA-informed research requires advancing well-defined research questions to underpin it.
* Data collection for FCDA projects relies on the careful selection of datasets.
* The interpretive nature of FCDA posed reliability and generalisability challenges, which can be addressed by triangulating different datasets and involving multiple data analysts.

Practical Lessons Learned

The successful completion of our research relied on several key factors. First, finding the suitable data source was crucial for our text-driven research. To a certain extent, Hupu proved to be a suitable choice due to its large user base, which provided rich data for our analysis. By examining discussions and perspectives predominantly from male users, we gained an in-depth understanding of the gendered discourses prevalent in male fans’ consumption of women’s sports. It offers an ideal-type example for future researchers to explore the dynamic interplay between sports fandom and gendered discourses in the Chinese context and beyond.

Considering the need for detailed analyses, data collection for FCDA-informed projects also requires careful selection and management of data size. On this note, the selection of two ideal-type case studies, Zhang Yufei and Marta Vieira da Silva, in our research design, helped shed light on the issues concerning the sexualisation of sportswomen’s bodies and the trivialisation of their accomplishments. These case studies allowed us to thoroughly address the research questions underpinning the entire project, ultimately leading to a profound comprehension of the male gaze and the evaluation of sportswomen’s achievements. It offers valuable insights for future researchers and encourages them to gain access to a broader range of experiences and perspectives through diversifying the case selection.

Reflecting a critical paradigm of sociolinguistic intervention, FCDA prescribes an analytical framework, which adheres to critical discourse studies conventions. To critically address the focal cases, we applied FCDA to specifically examine the language use and discourses embedded in the sampled textual data. Through closely analysing the linguistic choices, subtle nuances, and omissions within the discussions about these sportswomen, we identified elements that contribute to gender inequality. The findings from the FCDA approach not only validated our initial assumptions but also demonstrated its effectiveness in revealing the shared challenges of sexualisation and gendered assessment faced by both athletes in terms of their bodies and achievements. Hence, this suggests that future researchers can indeed benefit from employing FCDA to explore implicit biases, stereotypes, and gender power dynamics that perpetuate gender inequality within the sports discourse.

Despite the fruitful outcomes of our research methodology, we encountered certain challenges and identified areas for improvements. One major challenge was the management of the large volume of data obtained from Hupu users’ postings. When we analysed and organised such a vast amount of information, it required us to carefully plan and efficiently manage data. To address this challenge in future research, we recommend implementing more advanced data management tools or techniques that can streamline the process and enhance efficiency.

Another challenge we encountered was the inherent subjectivity in the analysis process. Given the interpretive nature of FCDA, maintaining reflexivity and minimising researcher bias presented ongoing challenges. To mitigate these challenges, it was crucial to constantly reflect on and acknowledge our own position, subjectivity, and potential preconceptions. To this end, we constantly engaged in peer discussions and incorporated diverse perspectives throughout the research, which proved to be valuable in approaching the data with a critical and open-minded approach. For future research, we recommend enhancing reflexivity by documenting the analysis process and actively engaging in discussions with colleagues or experts from diverse backgrounds. This approach will enable researchers to constantly turn on their self-reflexive capacity, insofar as to gain new insights and ensure a comprehensive and well-rounded analysis.

Lastly, FCDA, as a specific trajectory of critical discourse studies, necessitates scholars to take a transdisciplinary approach by engaging with feminist literature. This entails conducting a systematic and contextualised analysis of gender power dynamics within a given context. We recommend that future researchers actively engage with real-life events that exemplify imbalanced gender power relations to feed into their more nuanced and inclusive analyses of gendered discourses.

Our research not only provides valuable insights within a given context but also holds broader implications. Through the application of FCDA, we uncovered implicit biases and power dynamics that exacerbate existing gender inequality, highlighting the need to decolonise critical discourse studies through the integration of feminist perspectives. The ways in which we dealt with such practical and methodological challenges as data management and researcher bias provide valuable guidance for future scholars to further pursue this research trajectory. It is hoped that our quest would scaffold future scholarly interventions, catalysing the formation of a social milieu that fully appreciates equality, diversity, and inclusion.

Section Summary

* The choice of Hupu as a research platform provides an ideal-type example for future FCDA research on sports fandom-related topics.
* FCDA offers an effective approach, helping researchers to expose gender power dynamics and gender inequality in social-mediated discursive practices.
* Practical challenges in FCDA projects include data management and subjectivity, which can be addressed through triangulating different researchers, datasets, and diverse perspectives in data analysis.

Conclusion

While our case study yields valuable insights on the practical application of FCDA to decolonise critical discourse studies, the implementation of this approach is always accompanied by challenges. Managing the extensive volume of data obtained from social media platforms requires careful planning and efficient data management techniques. Additionally, maintaining reflexivity and minimising researcher bias during the analysis process poses ongoing challenges that necessitate continuous reflection and engagement with diverse perspectives. Reflecting on our research experience, we conclude that FCDA indeed offers a critical lens for analysing language and discourse, unearthing implicit biases and contributing to a deeper understanding of gender inequality. By incorporating feminist insights, this methodology enhances the depth and nuance of discourse analysis, emphasising the influence of gender power dynamics on societal conversations. It also aligns with efforts to decolonise critical discourse studies as a disciplinary area, recognising and valuing diverse voices and perspectives, thus highlighting the essential role of feminist contributions in both expanding and diversifying the field. We encourage researchers to draw upon our experiences and lessons to inform their methodological choices and empirical research practices in planning their own projects.

Discussion Questions

1. How does FCDA contribute to a better understanding of gender dynamics and power relations in various contexts?
2. What methodological and practical considerations are researchers expected to encounter when employing FCDA?
3. How can the insights gained from this case study be applied to other research areas to investigate and challenge gendered discourses and power dynamics?
4. What challenges are researchers expected to face when collecting social media data for an FCDA project, and how can these challenges be overcome?
5. Reflecting on the complexities of data analysis, what strategies can researchers employ to ensure the validity and reliability of their FCDA research findings?

Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

1. What is feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA)?

A. A quantitative content analysis.

B. A qualitative textual analysis. – CORRECT

C. An ethnographical research method.

1. Which of the following challenges applies to FCDA research projects?

A. Limited availability of research participants.

B. Difficulty in quantifying the data.

C. Analysing discursive practices in given contexts. – CORRECT

1. Which of the following issues does not apply to FCDA research projects?

A. Research findings need to be generalisable.

B. Data need to be quantified for statistical analysis. – CORRECT

C. Research findings need to offer insights into focal issues under investigation.

Further Reading

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