

# *The Popularity of Ding Zhen: Female Gaze, Female Power and Public Sphere*

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**Abstract:** ‘Gaze’ as an important sociological concept has long been a hot topic of discussion among feminists. With the development of feminism, the ‘female gaze’ has gradually attracted more and more people's attention. This article uses Ding Zhen as a case to analyse how the popularity of Ding Zhen reflects the inversion of gaze and what effect does this have on social media as a public sphere. This article argues that the women’s appreciation of his looks led directly to his popularity. He becomes the object of the female gaze. On the one hand, the power of female enhances the equality of the public sphere. Women take control of discourse by consuming and reverse the traditional power relations between the sexes and propose new standards for men by the female gaze. On the other hand, the resulting negative discourse undermines the harmony and rationality of the public sphere. The objectification of everyone is not the equality we seek. This article provides a useful case study for research on the female gaze.

## 1. Introduction

Social media has already been an essential part of modern life. What happens on social media is usually the topic of discussion in people's leisure time. November 2020, a boy named Ding Zhen became a hotshot across China. With his handsome appearance, he has captured the hearts of countless girls and was treated as a superstar. As he is almost the first grassroots male in China to become famous for his appearance alone, he became a hot topic of discussion. Some people are very curious about the reasons for his popularity, while others are critical and questioning. As the discussion surged, the event became one of the influential events on Weibo and had a profound impact on Weibo as a public sphere.

This article will present theories about the public sphere and the female gaze before analysing the causes and effects of Ding Zhen's popularity. The analysis reveals that Ding Zhen's popularity reflects the inversion of gaze and has transformed Weibo into a fairer but more emotional public sphere.

## 2. Background of relevant theories

The public sphere, a classical concept in media studies, was first developed by Jürgen Habermas

in the 1960s. Habermas<sup>[1]</sup> (1964) defined the public sphere as an area of people's social life to which all citizens can have access and in which citizens can develop something close to public opinion (p.49). This is in fact an idealized sphere, where has independent and rational deliberation (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer<sup>[2]</sup>, 2014; Bolsover<sup>[3]</sup>, 2017). Due to the era and society in which Habermas lived, Habermas<sup>[1]</sup> (1964) believed that the "bourgeois public sphere" was the representation of the public sphere (p.51). As the first person to introduce the concept, Habermas has been acknowledged by many scholars (Fraser<sup>[4]</sup>, 1990; Rauchfleisch & Schäfer<sup>[2]</sup>, 2014), with a widespread and significant influence.

However, numerous scholars challenged the universal applicability of Habermas' arguments and expanded and redefined the concept of the public sphere (Fraser<sup>[4]</sup>, 1990; Rauchfleisch & Schäfer<sup>[2]</sup>, 2014). Fraser<sup>[4]</sup> (1990) critiqued Habermas' theories<sup>[1]</sup> (1964) from a feminist perspective. She believed that it is impossible to participate in public debate and discussion on a completely equal footing in unequal bourgeois societies (p.66). Women of all backgrounds were excluded from official political involvement due to gender discrimination (p.64). She considered that in modern stratified societies, a sphere that allows competition between multiple publics is closer to the ideal public sphere than a single, all-encompassing bourgeois sphere (p.69). Moreover, although scholars differ in their definitions of the public sphere, Rauchfleisch and Schäfer<sup>[2]</sup> (2014) found that when defining the public sphere, almost all subsequent scholars agreed with Fraser's<sup>[4]</sup> (1990) argument about the public sphere and highlighted the importance of openness, longevity and participation. As a result, places or forums that meet the above conditions can be treated as public spheres (p.140).

Furthermore, with the evolution of internet technologies, there has been an extension of the public sphere into the online space (Shao & Wang<sup>[5]</sup>, 2017, p.695). The affordances of the online platforms play a crucial role in shaping the participation of the networked publics (Boyd<sup>[6]</sup>, 2011, p.46), which may influence the formation of the public sphere (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer<sup>[2]</sup>, 2014, p.140). Boyd<sup>[6]</sup> (2011, p.46) figured out that the four affordances of online contents produced by networked publics are persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability. Weibo, one of the most famous social media in China, happens to have all four of these affordances. On Weibo, the uncensored and non-deleted contents will remain on the platform permanently. Users can copy them at anytime from anywhere. As the same time, there are still ways for networked publics to preserve censored or deleted contents permanently, such as screenshots and copying before them disappear. As for scalability, Boyd<sup>[6]</sup> (2011, p.46) mentioned that it refers to the possibility of enormous visibility. On Weibo, we frequently find contents posted by ordinary users that have been reposted over 10,000 times overnight. In terms of searchability, Weibo users can search content they are interested in by keywords or hashtags in the search box. Although some sensitive topics due to censorship may not be searchable by keywords directly, it is often searchable by homophones. Overall, the affordances of Weibo contribute to making Weibo a public sphere.

This article will employ the concept of the public sphere proposed by Rauchfleisch and Schäfer<sup>[2]</sup> (2014). Base on their definition, Weibo can be considered as a public sphere. Despite censorship, a large number of participants from multiple publics continue to debate on issues of common concern openly and continuously on Weibo (Rauchfleisch & Schäfer<sup>[2]</sup>, 2014, p.151), which is facilitated by Weibo's affordances.

Apart from the concept of the public sphere, the meaning of "gaze" also needs to be clarified. White<sup>[7]</sup> (2017) summarized that classic Hollywood cinema and modern media tend to portray women as objects and enable women to be gazed at by white heterosexual men with a sense of pleasure and control (p.76). In this gaze, women are constructed as passive objects, used as ornaments and as sites of sexual desire for a heteronormative male audience (Mulvey<sup>[8]</sup>, 1975; Barry & Phillips<sup>[9]</sup>, 2016), which is a manifestation of male hegemony. However, women are not the only ones to be the object of the gaze. Some studies have shown that men are occasionally the recipients of the

objectifying gaze (Bernard et al. <sup>[10]</sup>, 2018), a response to the power imbalance caused by the male gaze in feminist theory (Abdolmaleki <sup>[11]</sup>, 2013, p.903).

### 3. Case study

Numerous issues are discussed on Weibo on a daily basis, and the topic concerning gender equality is one of the most frequently discussed topics. This article will use Ding Zhen as a case to analyze how the popularity of Ding Zhen reflects the inversion of gaze and what effect does this have on social media as a public sphere.

Ding Zhen, a twenty-year-old Tibetan boy, lives in Sichuan Province. Last November, a videographer was shooting a tourism film for Sichuan province and accidentally made a short video of Ding Zhen and posted it on Tik Tok. In that video, which lasts only seven seconds, Ding Zhen does nothing but smile. However, the girls on Tik Tok were so captivated by his innocent smile that they shared the video on other Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat. The next day, the video became trending on Weibo, which is # How handsome can a Tibetan-Sichuanese man be #. As of 6 May 2021, this topic had been read 440 million times and discussed 58,000 times, and the original video had also been liked 2.77 million times on Tik Tok. Because of this video, Ding Zhen became famous overnight by accident and received the same treatment as superstars, has countless Weibo topic about him, was invited to fashion weeks and variety shows and has his fan groups. He has even been offered a stable job. In short, his charming smile has led him to a life that many people envy.

As Ding Zhen is the almost first grassroots male in China to become famous simply because of his good appearance, many people are fascinated by the roots of his success. They believe that finding the roots would help them replicate success and make a fortune. On the surface, the reason for Ding Zhen's success is very simple: his appearance catered to the Chinese female aesthetic and women made him successful. At root, his popularity reflects the inversion of the gaze and the fact that the male gaze no longer occupies an absolute position. Women on Weibo state that his pure smile makes them feel physically and mentally relaxed when they are tired from their studies and work. They exert an erotic gaze on him with a sense of pleasure. As a result, Ding Zhen, as a man, is objectified and becomes the “bearer of the look” (Mulvey <sup>[8]</sup>, 1975, p.62).

Nevertheless, Ding Zhen has also been questioned by many netizens, especially male ones. Thanks to persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability of Weibo contents, the girls compiled some men's negative statements on Weibo and created a Weibo hashtag #Some men's attitudes towards Ding Zhen#, which was read 1.27 billion times and discussed 146,000 times. In this hashtag, we can find three types of comments from male netizens. The first category of comments tried to express that Ding Zhen has achieved the success that others want just by looking good and is unfair to hard-working people. The second category of comments suggested that he has no talent and is not worthy of such a cult following. The third category of comments vented disgust and hatred towards Ding Zhen in extremely offensive words. By contrast, the girls gloated that the men had finally experienced first-hand what it was like to be gazed at, just as the girls endured daily.

In this case, we can discover that the female voice on Weibo is powerful, enhancing equality in the public sphere. First, women are not only one of the multiple parties just included on Weibo, but they even hold the power of speech. Through visual and financial consumption, they are no longer just defined and handed out, they can now also define and empower others and decide what kind of men can be famous. It is due to their spontaneous sharing, promotion and consumption that has allowed Ding Zhen's influence to grow exponentially. Second, the conspicuous transformation from the male gaze to the female gaze is, in fact, a reversal of the traditional power relations between the sexes (Li <sup>[12]</sup>, 2020, p.60), which is a revolutionary move in assessing the power of gender (Li <sup>[12]</sup>,

2020, p.55). The popularity of Ding Zhen has made the networked public generally aware that men can also be objectified, and the male gaze no longer has the hegemonic reign that it once did. Therefore, there is relative equality between men and women. Additionally, by going after Ding Zhen, heterosexual women hint at a new demand for men—— physical beauty, which used to interpret as a feminine trait (Mulvey <sup>[8]</sup>, 1975). Overall, in this case, women have taken control of the discourse and inversed the gaze, contributing to making Weibo a more egalitarian and idealized public sphere.

However, both men and women are objectified as a sub-standard of equality and not the kind of equality we are seeking (Abdolmaleki <sup>[11]</sup>, 2013), which has led to an increase in irrational, emotional voices on Weibo. First, scholars have found that objectification can lead to increased body shame, appearance anxiety, eating disorders, self-monitoring, reduced ability to achieve optimal motivational states (Gervais et al. <sup>[13]</sup>, 2011; Calogero <sup>[14]</sup>, 2004). In this case, in objectifying Ding Zhen, women make men suffer the negative feelings of being objectified. Several men have clearly expressed on Weibo that Ding Zhen undoubtedly makes them feel appearance anxiety. However, making more people feel anxious is not the equality we seek. Second, due to homophobia, some men express hatred towards objectified men (Elliott & Elliott <sup>[15]</sup>, 2005). The Weibo hashtag “Some men's attitudes towards Ding Zhen” reflects the irrational and emotional statements made by some men about Ding Zhen's popularity. Divisive, emotional discourse destroys the harmony of Weibo as a public sphere and makes it less idealized.

#### 4. Limitations

In addition to the power of women, the government also facilitated the rise of Ding Zhen. As Ding Zhen is an ethnic minority boy from an impoverished area, the government intentionally expanded its promotion of Ding Zhen after he accidentally became popular in order to implement a policy of inclusion and support for minorities. This article does not consider the special status of Ding Zhen in order to simplify the issue. Later scholars may take this factor into account and study the case in more depth.

#### 5. Conclusion

This article analyses how Ding Zhen's popularity reflects the inversion of gaze. The women's appreciation of his looks led directly to his popularity. He becomes the object of the female gaze and the “bearer of the look” (Mulvey <sup>[8]</sup>, 1975, p.62).

This article also analyzed the impact of Ding Zhen's popularity on Weibo as a public sphere. On the one hand, the power of female enhances the equality of the public sphere. Women take control of discourse by consuming and reverse the traditional power relations between the sexes and propose new standards for men by the female gaze. On the other hand, the resulting negative discourse undermines the harmony and rationality of the public sphere. The objectification of everyone is not the equality we seek.

Overall, this case reflects a landmark inversion from the male gaze to the female gaze and has turned Weibo into a fairer but more emotional public sphere.

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