

Body image and Self-Objectification in a Confucian Cultural Context: Self-Representation and Consumption of Desirable Feet on Douyin (TikTok) in China

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While issues related to gender and mental health have been extensively discussed in the context of body image based on objectification theory, there has been limited exploration of the interplay between gender, sexual attention, and self-representations in online communication, particularly concerning specific body parts within a given cultural context. Podophilia, the most common sexual fetish, includes a range of interests in feet, such as foot tickling, kissing, foot jobs, and shoe/stocking play. Traditionally, these activities have been linked to offline experiences. However, in the digital age, particularly in China, where the government is committed to prohibiting erotic and sexually explicit materials, content displaying various private body parts faces restrictions under Chinese media and internet policies. Interestingly, the representation of feet and legs remain relatively unrestricted, resulting in a significant amount of sexually suggestive media content related to these body parts. This study aims to investigate the influence of culture, policy, and economics on self-representations of foot- and leg-related content and the consumption of such content in the Chinese online environment. Through the analysis of 500 Douyin videos and 5000 corresponding online comments, this research disclosed how video creators portray their body parts, why these videos are predominantly women-centered, and why these women are more or less *self-objectified*.

Keywords: foot fetishism, sexual conservatism, objectification theory, gender, China, Douyin (TikTok)

Introduction

Desire is polymorphous in character; it is a basic human urge that pervades many of our relationships, even if unconsciously. Moreover, desire is multifaceted and lies at the heart of human intellect and communication, defying easy explanation or categorisation. Nevertheless, carnal desire is often regarded as one of the most prominent forms of desire. Bryant (1982, p. 11) has stated that “the sexual urge is a powerful component in physiological motivation and plays an equally intense role in the shaping of the social configurations that accomplish the externalization of carnal desire and provide for its satisfaction through institutionalized behavioral means”. In China, however, sexual cravings are often difficult to satisfy.

Although one of our society’s tasks is to “monitor, channel, and control sex behavior” (Bryant, 2011, p. 365), in China, sexuality seems to be overly regulated and inhibited (Lin, 2018). China has long been associated with sexual conservatism since ancient times, primarily influenced by cultural and political factors (e.g. Chen, Dunne, and Han, 2007; Zhang et al., 2020; Sigley, 2007). Generally, both Chinese men and women, irrespective of age, tend to be reserved when discussing sexual matters in public, even within educational contexts (Cui et al., 2001; Lieber et al., 2009; Tang, 2002). This hesitancy is rooted in the traditional perception of sex as a taboo subject (Jeffreys and Yu, 2015).

First, Confucianism, the system of ethical and moral government, is often viewed as the initiator of sexual conservatism in China because it “sees sexuality as taboo and forbids discussion about sex” (Gao et al., 2012, p. s13). In the era of the People’s Republic of China, Confucian values continued to exert influence (Liu et al., 2020); however, political reasons have become more prominent, as sexual conservatism aligns with the core values of the Communist Party of China (Chen et al., 2015); although, prostitution, striptease dancing, pornographic sites, and various other activities featuring explicit erotic content are prohibited because they do not (Jeffreys, 2004; Chen et al., 2015).

Since the implementation of the Reform and Opening-up policy in 1976, China has witnessed a more permissive attitude towards discussions of sexuality (Ho et al., 2018; Pan and Huang, 2013). For instance, the use of sexual appeals in advertising has become increasingly common in China (Cui and Yang, 2009; Ye et al., 2012), however, the dissemination of pornographic or obscene content through print and digital media remains illegal. The government views such content as potentially harmful to the physical and mental well-being of individuals and, more significantly, as a corrupting force on societal morality (Zhang, 21 September 2018). Consequently, in China, the outlets for individuals to express or satisfy their sexual desires are limited.

Researchers have noted that the peculiarities of online media have made participation in sexual behaviours that are regulated by offline social and cultural standards enticing (Daneback and Ross, 2011). In the online space, some users serve as both producers and consumers of erotic content; this has been conceptualised by Jacobs (2011, p. 27) as “people’s pornography” symbolising “a quest for the expansion of civil liberties”. However, due to China’s media policy, most people can only upload and access soft pornography and/or erotic materials through legally permitted online platforms. Additionally, a significant portion of this soft-pornographic content undergoes substantial censorship

due to internet management regulations and guidelines. The dissemination of soft-porn content is tightly restricted within the Chinese online media landscape. For example, on 9 January 2019, the China Netcasting Services Association (CNSA) officially released the *Rules on Content Audit Standards for Online Short Videos* and the *Management Code for Online Short Video Platforms*. The former contains 100 rules, 17 of which are related to how to manage and regulate sexual audio-visual content (CNSA, 2021).

While the *Rules on Content Audit Standards for Online Short Videos* (CNSA, 2021) explicitly forbid extended emphasis on private body parts (such as breasts, buttocks, etc.) through video filming, there is an absence of provisions addressing the public display of feet and/or legs. Notably, feet, along with associated elements such as shoes, carry significant sexual connotations, and frequently employed in puns and innuendos (Achrati, 2003; Sumler, 2010). Consequently, China's rigorous internet management regulations have resulted in an abundance of erotic visual content related to feet on social media platforms. While extensive literature exists on offline practices of foot fetishism (e.g. Weinberg et al., 1994; Zarei and Bidaki, 2013), there remains a considerable gap in understanding the dynamics of this phenomenon in digital spaces, especially concerning gender relations and self-representations. Given the vital role of social media in contemporary culture (Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018) and the Internet's role as a primary source of sexual information (Adams-Santos, 2020; Daneback et al., 2012), this research seeks to contribute to our comprehension of foot-teasing videos in the Chinese online context. It does so by examining the way vloggers present their body parts, their audience, and the relevant motivations lying behind this behaviour in the given Confucian cultural framework.

Theoretical Background and Formulation of Hypotheses

Foot fetishism in Confucian culture in China and objectification theory

According to Gates (2008), sexual fetishism is a psychosexual phenomenon characterised by intense sexual arousal, desire, or satisfaction that is focused on specific objects, body parts, or situations. Although some scholars argue that foot binding has been an extensive form of foot fetishism in ancient China since the Song dynasty (Howard and Pillinger, 2010), Shepherd (2018) sees foot binding as a fashion trend or beauty standard considered attractive and a symbol of femininity.

In ancient times, Chinese men commonly perceived foot binding as advantageous in sexual intercourse, influenced by the superstitious belief that women with bound feet possessed more muscular and sensitive vaginas (McGeoch, 2007). Despite the notion that the bound feet of Chinese women held some capacity to evoke sexual arousal or imagination among Chinese men, historical evidence suggests that these bound feet did not emerge as the focal point of sexual desire for them. The examination of numerous representations from small paintings, figurines, trick boxes, and suggestive brush-holders led Gates (2008, p. 62) to the conclusion that most Chinese men typically overlooked the supposedly irresistible feet, rarely incorporating them in foreplay. Therefore, Chinese

men, within the context of sexual fetishism, may not be defined as foot fetishists who derived sexual pleasure or gratification from women's bound feet. The fondness that Chinese men exhibited towards women with bound feet was multidimensionally influenced by the prevalent cultural norms and beliefs of that era, including perceptions of it as a symbol of femininity and beauty, as an indicator of higher social status that made women more desirable as marriage partners, and as a representation of obedience and submission (Gates, 2008; Ko, 1997; Shepherd, 2018).

The multiple meanings of foot binding have fascinated many anthropologists worldwide. Discussions concerning the categorisation of foot binding as a sexual fetish remain pertinent; however, previous dialogues underscore a gendered dimension; that is, within Confucian societies, male individuals with a foot fetish, or those seeking women with bound feet, in alignment with the cultural norms surrounding women or women's feet, sought to satisfy their sexual fetishes or notions of the ideal wife.

Hence, foot fetishism may be associated historically with men in Chinese society, but only as a depiction of Chinese men's fascination with women's feet. It concerns neither Chinese men's love of other men's feet nor Chinese women's love of men's feet. Thus, in the realm of Confucian podophilia, Chinese men play an active role, while women assume a passive one concerning the physical objects of male sexual desire.

Objectification theory is a valuable paradigm for comprehending the psychological and behavioural effects of growing up in a society that frequently objectifies the female body (Moradi and Huang, 2008). Objectification happens when a person is stripped of their humanity to the degree that they are viewed as or act like an object in relation to others (Bell et al., 2018). There is mounting evidence that being objectified or seeing the objectification of women in the media may cause people to *self-objectify* (Moradi and Huang, 2008).

Self-objectification occurs when people regard themselves as a body, and prioritise their physical appearance above their abilities and humanities (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Visuals on social media platforms are generally self-representations/images (Davis, 2018). In the era of social media, individuals engage in digital self-representation by curating and sharing content that reflects their identity, interests, and, importantly, physical appearance (Chua and Chang, 2016; Mascheroni et al., 2015). The pursuit and reception of sexual attention are prevalent on social media platforms. Social media users (especially female users) often seek validation through likes, comments, and shares, with some content explicitly designed to attract sexual attention (Bell et al., 2018; Davis, 2018). The interplay between self-objectification and digital self-representation is evident on social media. Influenced by societal norms, users may engage in self-objectification by sharing images conforming to perceived ideals. This, in turn, attracts sexual attention, creating a cycle where users internalise external validation, such as receiving likes and gaining followers, as a measure of their self-worth (Davis, 2018). Therefore, I formulated the following hypothesis:

H1: The selected foot- and leg-related videos are mainly self-objectified content for the viewer's titillation to gain internet reward.

Semantically, *foot fetishism* or *foot fetishist* have a clear gender orientation (heterosexual) and gender hierarchy in Confucian culture. First, Confucian societies generally have little tolerance for same-sex sexuality (Yang, 2021; Shi, 2013). Although it has been posited that the current Chinese government maintains a neutral stance, neither actively endorsing nor discouraging homosexuality (Mountford, 2010), it is essential to note that the government has censored content related to homosexuality in various media formats, including films, television, and social media platforms (Suen and Chan, 2020). Consequently, this raises the inference that men may refrain from self-objectification by using their feet to entice both men and women because the former might imply homosexual tendencies, while the latter could be perceived as a challenge to traditional masculinity. In a Confucian society, men are often expected to assume the role of being pleased rather than being the pleasers in heterosexual gender dynamics (Gao et al., 2012). In addition, many past studies have noted that women are more inclined to engage in objectifying self-representations on social media platforms (Carrotte et al., 2017; Deighton-Smith and Bell, 2018; Szymanski et al., 2011). Hence, the present research predicts that women are more likely to show their feet to an audience, for which reason I formulated the following hypothesis:

H2: Women are more likely to show their feet or legs on Douyin than men.

Previous investigation has found that although both men and women are more likely to objectify women than men, men tend to objectify women more often than women do (Strelan and Hargreaves, 2005). This may be especially true among foot fetishists, as many scholars advocate Freud's (1905) asseveration that the foot or shoe is a corresponding token of female genitals deeply connected to young boys peering up the skirts of adult women. In support, many researchers have found that those satisfying their desires by consuming sexual media content are mostly men (Hald and Malamuth, 2008; Carroll et al., 2008). In this case, the visuals they consume are perceived as objectified instruments for their sex goals (Puvia and Vaes, 2015). More importantly, the "guiding principle of gender relations in Confucianism is 'male as superior and female as subordinate' [...] women are also supposed to be submissive and less sexually aggressive than men" (Gao et al., 2012, p. s13). As such, the pursuit of carnal satisfaction for Chinese women was denied by Confucian cultural norms. Given that commenting is an active form of digital engagement behaviour (Yoon et al., 2018), the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2a: Men engage more actively in commenting on foot-related videos than women.

Self-representation theory and the Douyin money-making mechanism

Self-presentation theory, frequently used to describe the elements that motivate online self-presentations (Chua and Chang, 2016; Mascheroni et al., 2015), proposes two motivations that drive people to participate in self-presentation: (1) a desire to communicate their ideal self-images and (2) to satisfy their audience (Baumeister, 1982).

The former may be associated with the notion of *self-awareness* as this endeavor aims to assert women's control over their own bodies (Tiidenberg, 2017); however, the latter may be highly associated with the money-making mechanism in social media.

Research has shown that Douyin users generate income by including third-party advertisements in their posted videos (Liang, 2021) and live-streaming shows (Kaye, Chen, and Zeng, 2021). Generally, the more followers they have, the more money they make (Kaye et al., 2021; Liang, 2021). Furthermore, self-objectifying images are frequently employed to accumulate *likes* (Bell et al., 2018). Notably, these likes hold economic value on social media platforms (Veszelszki, 2018), which may, therefore, prompt Douyin users to produce video content that is engaging and captivating in order to attract viewers. This has been defined as an *attention economy* that “functions as a form of capital, which, once measured, can be marketized and financed” (Drenten et al., 2020, p. 42).

Particularly in the ongoing global Covid-19 pandemic, which has led to an economic downturn and increased unemployment rates in China (Song et al., 2020), self-employed individuals on social media platforms have experienced unprecedented competition. We-media platforms have emerged as opportunities for individuals, especially women, to seek re-employment amid the adverse impacts of Covid-19 (Martinez Dy and Jayawarna, 2020). In this increasingly competitive online business landscape, characterised by the effectiveness of using sex appeal to engage and captivate audiences (Cui and Yang, 2009), vloggers may employ images of their feet or legs to attract viewers. This choice is facilitated by the absence of CNSA prohibitions against displaying these body parts on Douyin, for which reason I formulated the following hypothesis:

H3: Video creators display their feet or legs more for profit than other purposes.

However, as mentioned above, filming, uploading, and distributing sexually suggestive videos online can be seen as a protest against sexual conservatism in China (Jacobs, 2011). Additionally, critics argue that objectification theory portrays women as passive victims of objectification, ignoring their agency and autonomy in negotiating and resisting objectifying experiences (Moradi and Huang, 2008). Hence, the video creator may be using their desirable feet to challenge traditional Chinese sexual morality if they do not insert commercial messages into the videos, as the commercialisation of bodies is seen as a threat to women's rights and to efforts to achieve equality (Jyrkinen, 2005). Therefore, I formulated the following hypothesis:

H3a: Video creators display their feet or legs more for sexual revolutionary purposes than profit-gaining.

Self-objectification, self-esteem, and mianzi issues in Confucian society in China

Although posting sexually suggestive self-images on Douyin may be mainly driven by the desire for economic gain (Meng and Leung, 2021), the way in which vloggers present their sexual desirability remains unclear. To achieve profit-earning goals, they first need to engage their audience with their content, in short, to advertise themselves. Based on objectification theory, previous studies have observed that women's bodies can often be reduced to their sexual body parts (Gervais et al., 2012; Seitz, 2002). However, these investigations have not elucidated on which aspect holds greater allure and attractiveness: revealing faces, showcasing a specific body part, or the presentation of bodies and faces? One earlier study found that facial attractiveness was valued more than bodily attractiveness (Peters et al., 2007). As a result, vloggers may show body parts (feet and legs) and their faces. However, some social and cultural factors in China may prevent vloggers from doing this.

The issue of *mianzi* [面子] (*face*) is central to the Chinese concept of self (Gao, 1996). A person's *mianzi* can be defined as their societal self-esteem (Hwang and Han, 2010). It contains public self-image, capacity, dignity, and reputation as the key components of its internal value constructs (Zhou and Zhang, 2017, p. 152).

As the discussion above reveals, China is to some degree a country of *sexual shame* due to sexual conservatism; online users may be too shy or ashamed to show their faces when posting sexually objectifying self-images. Moreover, it has been reported that the issue of sexual harassment has caused concern for many female users of Douyin (Broderick, 2020), and both women and men tend to dehumanise objectified female targets for different reasons (Puvia and Vaes, 2015, p. 66). Being dehumanised is detrimental to social self-image and self-esteem, so Chinese video creators may not be showing their faces in their objectified self-images in order to protect their *mianzi*. However, scholars have demonstrated that self-objectification often results in low self-esteem (Mercurio and Landry, 2008); therefore, Confucian notions of *mianzi* and sexual conservatism may consequently not be binding on the creators of these videos. In light of the above discussion, the following two hypotheses were made:

H4: The participants are more likely to only show their feet or legs in the selected videos to preserve *mianzi* as defined by Confucian culture in China.

H4a: Self-objectification has weakened the Confucian notion of *mianzi*, and vloggers tend to show both their faces and feet to make their video content more appealing.

Methodology

Sample selection and coding instrument

In recent years, short video platforms have exploded in popularity in China, especially Douyin. Douyin has more than 600 million daily active users (Wang and Wu, 2021). Users can find countless videos on this platform containing soft porn or sexual-teasing content. Although some hashtags, such as #高跟鞋 (*high heels*), #丝袜 (*nylon stockings*), and #绝对领域 (*Zettai ryōiki* in Japanese; *A.T. Field* in English), #长腿女神 (*leggy goodness*), etc., are highly popular, video samples were not selected from hashtags with such explicitly gendered and sexually suggestive messages.

For example, high-heeled shoes (Kelly et al., 2005) and nylon stockings (Held, 2023) are often considered a symbol of femininity and are associated with an emphasis on women's legs, creating a sexualised connotation and contributing to a sexualised image that aligns with a conventional ideal that portrays women as heterosexual and cisgender. Furthermore, A. T. Field ('绝对领域') is an abbreviation of Absolute Territory Field, a term that describes "the thigh area seen in the gap between socks that reach the knees, and a skirt or shorts" (Surajaya, 2019, p. 219). Within manga culture, *shōjo* or *bishōjo* comics are characterised by *exaggerated sexuality* (Yiu and Chan, 2013, p. 857). A. T. Field is a frequently employed aesthetic expression in anime and manga, creating a sexually suggestive image of female characters catering to the desires of men who recognise this form of attractiveness (Surajaya, 2019). By focusing on specific attributes or clothing associated with female sexuality, these hashtags contribute to gendered and sexually suggestive messages within a heterosexual discourse.

In order to avoid biased results, videos were selected from the following hashtags with no sexually suggestive, gender, or cultural cues. These are #脚好看 (*nice feet*), #我的脚 (*my feet*), #脚 (*feet*), #把脚伸出来 (*show off your feet*), and #jio (a common dialect term for feet in Chinese). These hashtags were labelled from A to E in alphabetic order (Table 2). The selection process involved the identification of the top 100 videos that had been viewed most often from each hashtag, determined by the platform's algorithm based on user engagement metrics. Consequently, a total of 500 videos were chosen for content analysis.

With regard to user comments, the ten comments with the highest number of likes were gathered for each video, and each respective commentator was categorised by gender as male or female. Noteworthy comments may underscore recurrent trends, *themes*, or topics that strike a chord with the community; consequently, the individuals posting these comments are more likely to have longstanding immersion in this domain, indicating a deeper understanding of relevant matters. It is important to note that the author's comments are excluded from this analysis.

Regarding the hypothesis test, the following coding scheme was formulated to study the selected videos (see Table 1).

*Table 1:
Coding categories with explanations*

Scheme		Explanation
Themes	Sex	This element was used to test H1. The selected hashtags have no sexually suggestive cues; therefore, various foot-related content, including foot care, pedicures, foot health, and the dissemination of knowledge on foot fetishism, among others, have been shared under these selected hashtags. Hence, the themes were divided into sex and others. Sex refers to visuals that present the protagonist as sexy, coquettish, and a siren (a seductive or alluring woman). In sex-themed videos, individuals post revealing or suggestive images of themselves to garner attention or provoke sexual interest.
	Others	
The gender of the video's protagonist	Male	This element was used to test H2. Only solo-show videos were collected.
	Female	
The gender of the commentator	Male	This element was used to test H2a.
	Female	
Purposes	Profit	This element was used to test H3 and H3a. This was determined by whether the vlogger who posted the video had embedded a shopping link within it, and whether the vlogger posted a commercial message on their homepage.
	Sexual revolution	
Body fragments	Prone to show feet or legs only.	This element was used to test H4 and H4a.
	Prone to show the whole body, including the face.	

Source: Compiled by the author.

Coding process and coder reliability

Three coders (including the author) familiarised themselves with the coding instrument before the main coding. In the training process, discrepancies were discussed until the coders reached a consensus. In the training process, we found two prominent disturbances. One is that some users' comments received many likes but did not indicate their gender on their personal homepages; consequently, such comments were not collected. Also, some bloggers posted animal and human babies' feet under the selected hashtags, garnering significant views and likes. However, these sorts of content are

unrelated to my research topic, podophilia, so content of this sort was not included in the study. Social media platforms primarily thrive on user-generated content (Davis, 2018). To preserve the anonymity of the video creators, their network IDs were not disclosed in the analytical process or results. 91% of the intercoder reliability was assessed using Kassarian’s (1977) coefficient of agreement. The lowest acceptable level of reliability coefficients should exceed 80%; as such, the result of my study is satisfactory.

Results and discussion

The data was analysed using SPSS to calculate the frequencies. Also, chi-squares were applied to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions. Table 2 shows the general features of these chosen videos and the gender of the commentators. Tables 2a, 2b, and 2c demonstrate the results of the chi-square analysis.

*Table 2:
The representation of the selected video and the gender of the commentator
(presented in frequencies)*

Scheme		A (%)	B (%)	C (%)	D (%)	E (%)
Theme	Sex	71	81	80	83	92
	Others	29	19	20	17	8
The gender of the video’s protagonist	Male	2	10	2	30	17
	Female	98	90	98	70	83
Gender of the commentator	Male	99	97	86	82	88
	Female	1	3	14	18	12
Purpose	Profit	71	98	73	81	86
	others	29	2	27	11	14
Body fragment	Prone to showing feet or legs only.	65	81	93	88	49
	Prone to showing the feet/ legs with their other body parts, especially the faces.	35	18	7	12	61

Source: Compiled by the author.

H₁ predicts that the selected foot-/leg-related videos are made as arousing entertainment for the audience rather than for other purposes. In support of this claim, Table 2 shows the influence of the vlogger’s gender on the chosen theme of the video. The vlogger’s gender significantly influences the chosen theme of the video ($\chi^2 = 12.862, p < 0.01$). Female vloggers predominantly engage with the theme sex (82.74%), whereas male bloggers show a lower association with this theme (47.37%). In contrast, male vloggers

have a higher association with the theme *others* (52.63%) compared to their female counterparts (17.26%). These findings suggest a gender-based disparity in thematic content, highlighting the role of the vlogger’s gender in shaping the nature of the video content. Thus, H_1 is accepted. The results are consistent with much previous research that women are more likely and continue to be shown as sex objects (e.g. Ward, 2016; Wright and Tokunaga, 2016).

Table 2a:
The influence of gender on the theme of the video

Scheme	Item	Blogger’s gender N (%)		Total	χ^2	p
		female	male			
Theme	sex	398(82.74)	9(47.37)	407(81.40)	12.862	0.000**
	others	83(17.26)	10(52.63)	93(18.60)		
Total		481	19	500		

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Source: Compiled by the author.

However, the difference lies in the fact that in films and advertising, women receive payment from brands or companies to be depicted as physically attractive; on social media, they appear to have undergone a shift towards self-objectification. This is because most of the videos they posted are sexually suggestive *selfies*, positioning them as objects for the sexual amusement of others, “rather than being perceived as individuals with the ability for independent action and decision making” (Zurbriggen et al., 2010, p. 1).

Scholars have observed that marketers or advertisers frequently employ sex to promote products because of their selling power (Frith et al., 2004; First, 1998). In marketing, the concept of *sex sells* is based on the belief that integrating sexual imagery or themes into advertisements can capture attention, generate interest, and leave a lasting impression on the audience (Lawrence et al., 2021). Consequently, the primary reason for the spontaneous self-objectification of these vloggers on social media may be the effectiveness of their sexy selfies in attracting the audience’s attention. Neazer (2018, pp. 46-7) also noted that sexy selfies play “a role in attracting attention from potential partners, they contributed to intimate or erotic conversations, they yielded positive feedback resulting in feelings of self-esteem and connectedness, and they helped to increase popularity”. Therefore, vloggers may consider the impact of self-objectification on audience engagement and tailor their content accordingly to achieve desired outcomes.

Moreover, sex is traditionally considered a taboo topic in Chinese Confucian societies (Gao et al., 2012; Jeffreys and Yu, 2015). Advertisers commonly employ taboo appeals as an executional cue in controversial advertising, leveraging the notion that sexuality is often considered taboo to create intrigue and interest (Sabri, 2017). This strategy might be particularly effective in sexually conservative Confucian China (Jeffreys and Yu, 2015) with its strict governmental regulations on sexually suggestive and explicit materials

(Wang and Ma, 2021). Given that many people in China lack access to pornographic and erotic media content and that the socio-political climate on the subject of sex in China is highly repressive (Ho et al., 2018), the taboo or risqué nature of sexually suggestive cues could amplify the appeal of media content. This could explain why a majority of the examined foot-/leg-related videos prominently feature the theme of sex.

Although women use sex appeal on social media on their own initiative, and may also achieve their political goals and comfort in their own bodies through this practice (Tiidenberg, 2017), they are not exempt from the influence of the male gaze, which female users on social media platforms frequently become subject to through captions, edits, and comments on their selfies (Davis, 2018). As can be seen from Table 2b, Female commentators predominantly engage with the theme *others* (46.39%), while male commentators show a strong association with the theme *sex* (99.26%). These findings suggest that different video content has a significant relationship with the enthusiasm of network participation of varying gender groups ($\chi^2 = 187.715, p = 0 < 0.05$). From Mulvey’s (1989) perspective, the exposure of women’s erogenous zones delivers a direct visual impact to gazers. Furthermore, the erogenous zone is not the sole source of visual pleasure for gazers, as it can extend to other parts of the female body. Finally, the visual pleasure experienced by the gazer partly originates from discreetly observing women. Consequently, the gaze of online male users aligns ideally with gaze theory because the content they view is sexually suggestive; the medium involved is their private screens, offering a more concealed and voyeuristic gazing experience than at a movie theater. Thus, H_{2a} is accepted.

*Table 2b:
The influence of theme on online engagements*

Scheme	Item	Theme N (%)		Total	χ^2	p
		sex	others			
Commentator’s gender	female	3(0.74)	45(46.39)	48(9.60)	187.715	0.000**
	male	400(99.26)	52(53.61)	452(90.40)		
Total		403	97	500		

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Source: Compiled by the author.

Most of the video creators are women (90.4%). Few men showcase their feet on Douyin, possibly influenced by the discourse linking foot fetishism to historical associations with heterosexuality and male dominance over females in China, as discussed above. Consequently, when men attempt to appeal to female audiences with their feet, they risk diminishing their masculinity. Similarly, attempting to attract male audiences with foot content may lead to the public perceiving and defining them as homosexual in the online sphere. However, neither of these is currently well-tolerated in Confucian society in China (see Ren et al., 2019; Xie and Peng, 2018; Zhang et al., 2018; Zhou and Hu, 2019). Thus, H_2 is supported.

In China, most of the LGB population would not disclose their sexual orientation to their medical care providers (Suen and Chan, 2020), let alone make it public online. This reluctance stems from the political climate, rendering LGB individuals in China more susceptible to discrimination and inequitable treatment across various social contexts. The media landscape in China, encompassing newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet, consistently portrays LGBTQ+ individuals and lifestyles negatively (Wang and Ma, 2021). Media studies reveal that LGBTQ+ persons are often stigmatised as mentally unstable, social deviants, or second-class citizens (Deklerck and Wei, 2015). Specific instances depict LGBTQ+ individuals in Chinese media as criminals, as being severely mentally ill, as adversaries of traditional Chinese values, and as a threat to social stability (Chang and Ren, 2017).

Furthermore, the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1997 resulted in the progressive growth of gay meeting places and social groups, as well as a significant rise in the frequency with which gay culture was represented in the media. In reaction to this transition, China's state-run media administration declared in 2008 that any texts and pictures depicting homosexuality would be prohibited from Chinese-language public media in general (Bao, 2015). Despite the growing tolerance in public attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community, in March 2016, China's State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) extended the prohibition to the portrayal of homosexual characters on TV shows (Wang and Ma, 2021). This prohibition was later extended to the internet in June 2017, as indicated by Article 16, Item 67 of the *Detailed Regulations on Content Audit Standards for Online Short Videos*, which restricts the display of content related to homosexuality (SARFT, 2021).

Besides the above mentioned, this research confirms that sexual stimuli can effectively attract attention. Table 2c demonstrates that *attention* amounts to the actual or potential number of followers, online traffic, online fame and, ultimately, financial rewards as we can see that the video creators' purpose has a significant relationship with the *theme* ($\chi^2 = 54.003, p = 0 < 0.05$). In detail, vloggers driven by profit predominantly engage with the *sex* theme (75.79%), while those with other purposes show a higher association with the *others* theme (63.74%). Hence, H_3 is supported, but H_{3a} is not supported. This discovery not only underscores the effectiveness of sex appeal as a tool for grabbing attention, but also highlights that the sexual behaviours of female vloggers are a long way from constituting the "people's pornography" sexual liberation movement often referred to by Jacobs (2011). Instead, it aligns more closely with what Jones (2015) defines as "online sex work", signifying the exchange of sexual commodities and/or services mediated through the internet. While their sexual activities online do indeed challenge some dominant conservative norms and principles regulating sexuality in China, such as sex being for reproduction and not pleasure (Pan, 2006); their online representation exists as sexy entertainment sold for men's pleasure.

*Table 2c:
The influence of the vlogger’s purpose on theme*

Scheme	Item	Purpose N (%)		Total	χ^2	p
		profit	others			
Theme	sex	310(75.79)	33(36.26)	343(68.60)	54.003	0.000**
	others	99(24.21)	58(63.74)	157(31.40)		
Total		409	91	500		

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Source: Compiled by the author.

Furthermore, most bloggers (75.2%) have chosen not to show their faces in their sexually suggestive self-representations. This could be due to the need to protect their image in society and the fact that some conservative Confucian sexual ideas are still at play, making them feel ashamed or socially unethical in posting these sexy images on social media. Consequently, to protect their mianzi, they choose not to show their physical faces. Thus, H_4 is supported, but H_{4a} is rejected. This result is also partly in line with H_3 in that they are here to make money, not to protest against sexual conservatism, and they may be inwardly ashamed of their online sexual behaviours since the Confucian-conservative notion of mianzi still has an effect on them. They, therefore, are not essentially free from the influence of Confucian conservatism.

Conclusion

I analyzed the content of 500 Douyin videos relating to feet and legs to find out whether social media has become a new arena in which individuals in China can satisfy their carnal desires in the societal circumstances of Confucian sexual conservatism, with a particular emphasis on podophilia. The research findings have several theoretical implications concerning the various factors influencing sexually suggestive self-representation within China’s digital media landscape; and they highlight the intricate interplay between cultural, economic, and communicative factors affecting online communication around self-objectification, self-representation, and attention-seeking behaviours.

The research findings indicate that in a country where all kinds of sexually suggestive and explicit media content are illegal and/or considered immoral, consuming some foot and leg-related materials on the Internet seems to be the only option for most people in China. Thus, cultural conservatism, especially in a society with strict control of sexual media content, can lead to a demand for online platforms where individuals can explore their sexual preferences legally. In this context, digital online platforms serve as outlets for sexual stimuli seekers to satisfy their desires and for video creators to achieve economic gain.

However, the allure of substantial economic gain inhibits these sexually suggestive visuals from significantly advancing sexual revolution and liberation in China. Vloggers

commonly engage in self-objectification due to its potential for high online traffic and economic gain. The monetisation of online content (Drenten, Gurrieri, and Tyler, 2020) on Douyin thus amplifies and encourages women's sexual self-objectification. This discovery underscores the idea that attention is a scarce and valuable resource (Davenport and Beck, 2001; Goldhaber, 1997), a form of capital that, once quantified, can be commodified and converted to income (Terranova, 2012). It also affirms that for women who upload these self-representations on social media, adhering to heteronormative standards of attractiveness and femininity is crucial in garnering attention (Duffy, 2017). Thus, the monetisation of online content and its relationship with self-objectification reveals the economic consequences of digital communication. Economic incentives often lead individuals to conform to certain presentation styles, reflecting the broader influence of market forces on digital communication practices.

This can also be attributed to the infrequent participation of men in presenting their feet online, which thus does not challenge the traditional discourse on homosexuality. The traditional discourse on foot fetishism has depicted women as inferior, leading to the objectification and commodification of their body parts. This research examined videos associated with non-gender-specific hashtags, revealing a distinct gender bias. That is, the predominant focus of foot and leg-related content is women, and is of a sexually suggestive nature that incorporates self-objectification. This content primarily caters to male audiences, indicating a persistent gender dynamic within foot fetishism across over time and in diverse contexts in China. To some extent, the scarcity of male foot content on Douyin can be attributed to prevailing masculine social norms and an unsupportive political climate concerning LGB rights in China (e.g. Zhang et al., 2018; Zhou and Hu, 2019).

The findings mentioned above highlight the profound influence of cultural norms and societal values on online communication. The phenomenon of infrequent participation of men in displaying their feet online, coupled with the persistence of traditional narratives regarding homosexuality, underscores the deep-rooted cultural constructs shaping online behaviour. Moreover, the historical portrayal of women as inferior in the context of foot fetishism, resulting in the objectification and commodification of their body parts, points to the broader implications of cultural values on gender relations in digital spaces. The analysis of videos under non-gender-specific hashtags reveals a notable gender bias where the majority of foot/leg-related content revolves around women, featuring sexual suggestiveness and self-objectification. This not only reaffirms the endurance of gender dynamics in online communication, but also reflects the perpetuation of certain cultural norms. These findings suggest that culture significantly shapes the dynamics of online communication, impacting gender roles and the distribution of content based on traditional expectations. The enduring influence of cultural norms, especially in a complex socio-political landscape, remains a vital consideration in understanding digital communication practices in China.

With regard to the self-objectification of women on Douyin, it is apparent that they predominantly opt to showcase their feet without exposing their faces. This inclination to conceal their facial identity is rooted in the imperative need to uphold their social and moral reputation. While self-objectification carries the potential of undermining

the self-esteem of individuals (Mercurio and Landry, 2008), leading them to integrate their faces and their body parts in visuals to seize economic opportunities, the reluctance exhibited by vloggers to do so can be traced back to the pervasive influence of Confucian conservatism and the profound importance attached to the Confucian concept of *mianzi*. This observation on women's self-representation on social media platforms highlights a distinct cultural influence in their communication preferences when engaging in self-objectification. This choice is rooted in the necessity of maintaining their social and moral standing, underscoring the intricate interplay between cultural values and online self-presentation, where economic incentives and societal norms converge.

Limitations and Future Research

There are several limitations to this research. First, the sample only included videos with hashtags excluding any explicitly sexually suggestive, gender, and cultural cues. Thus, the sample was not niche enough to reveal what kind of foot- and leg-teasing visuals Chinese foot fetishists enjoy watching, or more precisely, what sort of female feet they prefer in a given cultural context. Moreover, the sample size (500 videos plus 5,000 corresponding comments) is relatively small since Douyin has 600 million active users, so any future study should increase the sample size.

My research reveals that women display their feet on social media platforms with the intention of attracting viewers for financial gain. However, it does not ascertain whether these women also derive satisfaction from the attention and adoration they receive from both male and female viewers and whether this practice fulfills their own exhibitionist or narcissistic tendencies. Previous studies have indicated that individual personality traits and psychological motives, such as exhibitionism, narcissism, voyeurism, self-esteem, self-disclosure, and the desire for attention, significantly influence people's use of social media (Park et al., 2022; Mehdizadeh, 2010; Seidman, 2013). Notably, there is substantial evidence suggesting that girls and young women are more inclined to seek validation through the acquisition of likes and, as a result, often post sexually suggestive selfies on social media platforms (Mascheroni et al., 2015). Furthermore, Tiidenberg (2017) posits that women who share provocative selfies are engaging in acts of self-awareness, asserting their autonomy over their bodies and invoking a profound sense of personal agency in the digital age. As such, this research suggests that future research could include interviews with online *foot-teasing video* creators or *foot-teasing artists* to delve into their underlying motivations.

While this study has provided valuable insights into the use of anonymous or "without face" images among vloggers in the context of Confucian *mianzi* and conservative views, several intriguing areas warrant further investigation. One promising avenue for future research could be an in-depth investigation into shifting preferences for physical attractiveness over facial features among male audiences. Confer, Perilloux, and Buss's (2010) findings suggest a changing trend in men's valuation of women's *bodily attractiveness over facial attractiveness*, particularly in a non-committal context. Additionally, future research could delve into the motivations of the male viewers on

social media platforms who seek visual pleasure without the expectation of long-term relationships. Understanding their particular preferences for specific body fragments could shed light on evolving standards of attractiveness in the digital era.

On the other hand, considering the safety and privacy concerns of female users, those who choose to crop or cover their faces in images, present a particularly pertinent avenue for investigation. Building upon previous research by Ringrose and Harvey (2015), a comprehensive examination of the underlying factors driving these behaviours could provide valuable insights into the intersection of personal privacy, self-presentation, and online interactions.

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