

LOCAL GOVERNANCE OF DIGITAL MOTHERHOOD AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS: BIRTH AND MOTHERHOOD DISCOURSES ON TIKTOK IN CHINA AND MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This research examines how female intrasexual competition and internalized sexism are manifested in digital discourses surrounding birth and motherhood on TikTok (the Chinese version called Douyin) in China and Malaysia. Drawing on qualitative content analysis and in-depth interviews, the study reveals how platform algorithms, aesthetic norms, and social expectations shape women's online self-presentation and peer judgment. The findings highlight the ideological tensions between traditional familism, neoliberal individualism, and feminist expression within digital motherhood culture. By comparing China and Malaysia, the paper underscores how cultural and policy environments influence women's negotiation of reproductive identity and digital visibility. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of gendered digital governance and localized feminist dynamics in the Global South.

Keywords: female intrasexual competition, digital motherhood, TikTok, internalized sexism, gendered digital governance

1 Introduction

The rise of TikTok (known as Douyin in China) has transformed not only the digital entertainment landscape but also the governance of social life, cultural norms, and public discourse across Asia (Abidin et al., 2023; Ye et al., 2025; Zhao, 2020). TikTok operates as a cultural governance site where state agendas, family policies, and user interactions intersect (Zhao, 2020; Zhou, 2023; Ye et al., 2025). Among its diverse genres, content related to birth and motherhood has become a particularly influential domain (Yang et al., 2024; Zhang, H. et al., 2023). In China and Malaysia, women actively participate in creating and consuming such content as part of broader engagement with family, education, and moral narratives. These digital expressions are not merely personal storytelling. They are embedded in national anxieties over fertility decline, family well-being, and the sustainability of social structures (Zhang, M. et al., 2024; Ji & Zheng, 2020; Su-Russell & Sanner, 2023; Lau et al., 2021; Abidin et al., 2023). As such, the digital performance of motherhood carries broader implications for population governance, family policy, and gender norms.

Women's interactions surrounding motherhood on TikTok are often marked by comparison, competition, and emotional tension. Scholars conceptualize this phenomenon as female intrasexual competition, defined as rivalry among women for social validation, reproductive legitimacy, and cultural recognition (Chae, 2015; Fisher & Krems, 2022). On TikTok, this competition is intensified by algorithmic mechanisms and audience metrics that reward idealized maternal performances showcasing competence, physical recovery after childbirth, or children's achievements. In China, these ideals resonate with state-led narratives of demographic responsibility and the

moral construction of “good motherhood” (Han & Kuipers, 2021). In Malaysia, digital motherhood intersects with religious and cultural frameworks emphasizing modesty, maternal sacrifice, and family cohesion. Thus, online maternal competition becomes a lens through which to observe how women navigate both platform logics and sociocultural expectations in their everyday digital lives (Tong & Turner, 2008; French et al., 2020; Abdul Ree et al., 2020; Lau et al., 2021).

Despite its significance, this phenomenon remains underexplored. Existing research on digital motherhood has been dominated by Western contexts, focusing primarily on neoliberal individualism, intensive mothering, or self-optimization (Wegener et al., 2023; Williams, 2023). In contrast, scholarship on Asian digital media often centers on youth culture, influencer economies, or political communication, overlooking how reproductive norms and maternal identities are constructed in platform-mediated spaces. Comparative studies across Asian societies are particularly scarce, even though they can illuminate how different governance regimes and cultural frameworks shape women’s online self-presentation and competition.

A comparative focus on China and Malaysia offers critical insights into how digital platforms mediate motherhood discourses within distinct yet interconnected governance systems. China represents a centralized, state-driven context in which family and fertility policies are closely tied to demographic management and national development strategies. Maternal narratives on TikTok thus reflect broader demographic governance imperatives, promoting childbirth, model mothers, and domestic stability (Han & Kuipers, 2021). Conversely, Malaysia embodies a multicultural and religiously plural environment where motherhood is governed not only by state initiatives but also by Islamic values, communal traditions, and ethnic identity politics (Abdul Ree et al., 2020). Prior scholarship in Southeast Asia highlights that social media practices must be interpreted through local frameworks of morality, religion, and cultural negotiation rather than universalized Western theories (Abidin et al., 2023).

By comparing these two contexts, this study reveals both common pressures, such as algorithmic amplification of idealized maternal roles (Abidin, 2021; Bishop, 2019; Ye et al., 2025), and context-specific variations, including how governance structures, religion, and cultural values shape women’s digital self-presentation (Zhou, 2023; Tong & Turner, 2008; Hussain, 2025). This comparative lens highlights Global South perspectives on how gender and family governance are digitally mediated (Abidin et al., 2023; Meerangani, 2022; van Dijck et al., 2018; Zhao, 2020).

This study addresses these research gaps by examining how female intrasexual competition related to birth and motherhood is manifested, negotiated, and governed on TikTok in China and Malaysia. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions:

- a) How do women’s digital interactions around birth and motherhood reflect societal gender norms and policy concerns such as fertility, family responsibility, and education?
- b) How do women respond to these pressures by internalizing, resisting, or reconfiguring competitive maternal ideals?

The significance of this inquiry lies at the intersection of individual experience and policy discourse (Chae, 2015; Gill, 2018). On one level, online rivalry and comparison among mothers reveal the affective costs of social validation in digital spaces showing how algorithms, metrics, and moral expectations shape women’s self-perception. On another level, these competitive dynamics expose broader challenges in the governance of reproduction and family life: how states and societies negotiate demographic sustainability, gender equality, and cultural continuity (Fong, 2002; Ji & Zheng, 2020; Zhang et al., 2024).

By situating TikTok within the frameworks of cultural governance, gender policy, and everyday digital practice, this research contributes to interdisciplinary debates on how digital platforms mediate not only individual identity formation but also the reproduction of social order. It offers regionally grounded insights into how women in China and Malaysia engage with, contest, and reshape the normative expectations of motherhood in the algorithmic age revealing how digital media serve as both instruments of governance and spaces of negotiation in the evolving politics of gender and family in the Global South.

2 Literature overview

2.1 Digital Media, Gender, and Governance of Female Competition

Female intrasexual competition, once confined to offline social hierarchies, has been transformed by digital media into a systemically governed phenomenon. Platforms such as TikTok no longer merely host interpersonal rivalry. They algorithmically structure visibility, amplify emotional narratives, and encode ideological boundaries (Cotter, 2019; Gillespie, 2018; Zeng & Kaye, 2022; Ye et al., 2025). This transformation marks a shift from individual contestation to a multilayered governance process where algorithmic, gender, and social mechanisms intersect to regulate women's self-expression, motherhood performance, and moral identity (Zhou, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023; Gu, 2021).

Algorithmic governance operates through recommendation and engagement metrics that determine whose maternal narratives gain traction. Content emphasizing aesthetic perfection, emotional confession, or moral virtue receives algorithmic amplification, while deviant or critical voices are marginalized (Bishop, 2019; Caplan & Gillespie, 2020). Such governance by visibility converts private maternal experiences into public performances, binding women's agency to platform logics of attention and affective labor (Abidin, 2021; Wilhelm, 2021). Algorithms thus become arbiters of gendered worth, transforming digital motherhood into a competitive field of quantifiable self-representation and reinforcing patterns of internalized discipline (Chae, 2015; Gill & Orgad, 2018).

At the same time, gender governance, which includes the state and cultural regulation of femininity (Zhou, 2023; Tong & Turner, 2008). In China, reproductive discourse is tightly aligned with demographic governance: from the one-child restriction to pronatalist encouragement, state ideology frames motherhood as a civic duty linked to national rejuvenation (Fong, 2002; Zhang et al., 2024; Zhou, 2023). Online maternal content that upholds family stability, filial piety, or patriotic fertility ideals is promoted, while dissenting or feminist narratives are subtly suppressed (Xue & Rose, 2022; Gu, 2021; Piao et al., 2025). In contrast, Malaysia's gender governance is embedded in its multi-religious social fabric, where Islamic values of modesty (*aurat*), propriety (*adab*), and piety (*taqwa*) intersect with multicultural norms (Abdul Ree et al., 2020; Hussain, 2025). Malay Muslim "mumfluencers" often perform a hybrid identity, balancing neoliberal self-branding with moral virtue signaling (Abidin, 2021; Ab. Latif, 2023; Wong, 2023). Across both contexts, digital motherhood becomes an ideological negotiation between feminist aspiration, state policy, and cultural legitimacy.

Social governance, enacted through peer interaction, further sustains this regulatory environment. Likes, comments, and shares function as instruments of collective moral judgment: women monitor and evaluate one another's maternal authenticity, domestic devotion, and appearance (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019; Zhou, 2023). Such participatory policing reproduces patriarchal standards from below, turning digital spectators into agents of conformity. Mothers who display non-traditional roles remaining single,

delaying childbirth, or voicing frustration often encounter online shaming, while idealized mothers are praised yet simultaneously resented (Zhou, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023; Gu, 2021). Algorithmic amplification and peer surveillance cultivate internalized sexism, as women reproduce patriarchal values as digital measures of worth (Schwabe, 2024; Fisher & Krems, 2022).

Within this triadic system of governance, digital maternal competition emerges as both a product and instrument of control. What appears as voluntary self-expression or empowerment often functions as affective labor that aligns with broader demographic and moral imperatives (Wilhelm, 2021). In China, maternal performances echo state narratives of patriotic fertility and moral motherhood (Zhou, 2023; Zhang et al., 2023; Gu, 2021), while in Malaysia, religious and familial discourses define respectability through moral virtue and domestic harmony (Tong & Turner, 2008). Despite cultural differences, both societies exemplify how digital motherhood becomes a site where governance is enacted through visibility, morality, and peer comparison.

In sum, motherhood occupies a critical nexus of algorithmic, gender, and social governance. Algorithmic governance curates emotional visibility and regulates who becomes intelligible as a “good mother”; gender governance delineates ideological boundaries of femininity; and social governance enforces conformity through moral surveillance. Interacting across these layers, a digitally mediated disciplinary structure emerges, in which internalized sexism flourishes through the relentless pursuit of idealized maternal images, competitive authenticity, and performative empowerment (Gill, 2018; Zhang et al., 2024). Besides, feminist articulations on TikTok, though appearing to resist patriarchal scripts, are frequently commodified through algorithmic reward systems that valorize spectacle and emotional labor, thereby reproducing the hierarchies they claim to resist (Banet-Weiser et al., 2019; Lin & Zhao, 2024). Female competition online, therefore, is not spontaneous but systemically orchestrated through the interplay of technological infrastructure, ideological authority, and peer surveillance. Recognizing algorithms as cultural institutions of gendered governance is essential for reimagining digital justice and exposing how empowerment discourses can operate as instruments of control (Obia, 2023; Zuboff, 2019).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Female intrasexual competition in digital environments cannot be understood merely as an extension of biological instincts or psychological tendencies. It is fundamentally embedded in governance structures and policy frameworks that regulate social behavior, shape normative expectations, and determine how women’s reproductive and maternal roles are socially valued (Foucault, 1977; Zhao, 2020). Within the Chinese and Malaysian contexts, where state policies, cultural traditions, and digital platforms intersect, the regulation of discourse surrounding birth and motherhood reveals how governance frameworks operate not only at the level of political oversight but also through subtle mechanisms of normative control (Fong, 2002; Tong & Turner, 2008; Meerangani, 2022). Social media platforms such as TikTok act simultaneously as spaces for expression and as instruments of governance, where algorithmic curation, state regulations, and peer surveillance converge to reproduce or contest gendered expectations (Ji & Wu, 2018; Han & Liu, 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). In this sense, the governance of female competition online is less about isolated individual behaviors than about the systemic interplay between state policy, platform regulation, and internalized social norms (Zhang et al., 2024; Zuboff, 2019).

These dynamics highlight the multi-layered nature of governance in digital environments. At the macro-level, state policies and regulatory frameworks provide the

overarching directives for family, fertility, and gender relations (Ji & Zheng, 2020; Fong, 2002). China's emphasis on increasing the birth rate, for example, translates into discursive governance where media platforms are tasked with promoting positive portrayals of family life and penalizing content that criticizes motherhood or discourages childbirth (Ning, 2025). In Malaysia, policy discourses on women's empowerment are embedded within broader frameworks of national development, where the state often relies on moral and religious narratives to sustain traditional gender roles (Ong & Hussin, 2020; Tong & Turner, 2008; Meerangani, 2022). At the meso-level, platforms act as intermediaries of governance through their algorithmic systems, which prioritize certain forms of content and marginalize others, effectively shaping the discursive environment in which competition and internalized sexism unfold (Caplan & Gillespie, 2020; Gillespie, 2018; Gillespie, 2003). At the micro-level, users themselves act as agents of governance by reproducing, policing, and contesting norms through comments, likes, and peer surveillance (Abidin, 2021; Zhao & Wang, 2023). Female intrasexual competition thus becomes not only a reflection of personal rivalry but also a manifestation of governance enacted across multiple scales.

Importantly, the integration of governance and policy perspectives moves the discussion of female competition beyond cultural critique toward administrative and institutional analysis. For example, internalized sexism, where women judge themselves and others according to patriarchal standards, can be reinterpreted as a governance outcome: women are effectively enlisted as agents in sustaining policy-driven reproductive and maternal norms (Bearman et al., 2009; Zhou, 2023). When a mother on TikTok is praised for having three children and "contributing to the nation," it is not simply peer admiration, but an echo of state governance discourse refracted through digital interaction (Zhou, 2023). Similarly, when Malaysian TikTok users frame motherhood as a religious obligation and shame those who delay childbirth, they are not merely competing with one another but reproducing state- and religion-backed role expectations (Tong & Turner, 2008; Meerangani, 2022; Lau et al., 2021; Mohamed et al., 2024). Governance here is diffuse, extending beyond direct censorship or policy pronouncements to everyday digital interactions that align personal conduct with institutional goals (Xue & Rose, 2022; Zhou, 2023).

This governance-oriented framework also underscores the implications for policy studies. The case of digital motherhood competition demonstrates how governance operates through hybrid mechanisms of hard regulation and soft influence (Plantin et al., 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018). Hard regulation includes laws and policies governing online speech, family planning, and women's rights; soft influence encompasses algorithmic design, platform guidelines, and social incentives for conforming to normative roles. Both forms of governance work in tandem to discipline women's digital self-expression and to channel competitive energies into directions that reinforce state and societal priorities (Zhao, 2020; Zuboff, 2019). For instance, platform moderation practices that remove "anti-natalist" or "childfree" content represent direct regulatory interventions, while the algorithmic amplification of "ideal motherhood" aesthetics reflects a more subtle governance strategy (Ning, 2025; Zhang et al., 2024). Together, they create a digital environment where competition among women is not random but guided toward affirming socially desired behaviors.

Furthermore, situating female competition within governance research highlights the feedback loop between digital discourse and policy legitimation. When women on TikTok compete to display their maternal competence or criticize others for insufficient reproductive effort, these interactions not only reflect policy expectations but also provide social validation for them (Attané, 2022; Zhang et al., 2024). Policymakers can

point to such digital discourse as evidence of public support for pronatalist or family-centered agendas. Conversely, when negative narratives, such as critiques of maternal exhaustion or refusals to have children, gain traction online, governance mechanisms intervene to suppress or reframe them (Zhou, 2023). This dynamic illustrates how digital competition among women becomes a governance resource, offering both legitimation and monitoring functions for state and institutional actors (Zhou, 2023; Plantin et al., 2018).

From a governance and policy perspective, the analysis of female intrasexual competition on TikTok also contributes to broader debates about the governance of digital societies. It demonstrates how digital platforms extend state governance into intimate domains such as reproduction and family life, blurring the boundaries between public policy and private choice (Piao et al., 2025; Zuboff, 2019). It further shows how gendered competition is instrumentalized as a governance tool: women's rivalry over roles, appearance, and maternal achievements becomes a mechanism for reinforcing policy objectives without direct coercion (Abidin, 2021; Zhao, 2020). In this sense, digital motherhood discourse exemplifies what Foucault (1991) described as "governmentality," where governance is achieved through the shaping of subjectivities rather than overt enforcement. This governance-oriented perspective therefore shifts the study of female competition away from purely cultural or psychological explanations and toward an analysis of how administrative, policy, and technological mechanisms converge to shape women's reproductive and maternal subjectivities in the digital age. Ultimately, this governance-oriented framework lays the theoretical foundation for analyzing how macro (state policy), meso (platform governance), and micro (peer interaction) levels jointly shape women's reproductive subjectivities and sustain the digital reproduction of internalized sexism.

3 Research

3.1 Interpretivist Paradigm and Phenomenological Research Design

This study adopts an interpretivist paradigm with a phenomenological research design to explore how women in China and Malaysia perceive and experience female intrasexual competition related to birth and motherhood on TikTok. The interpretivist approach assumes that social reality is multiple, contextual, and constructed through interaction (Lincoln et al., 2011; Schwandt, 2000). Ontologically, it views reproductive and maternal experiences not as fixed truths but as fluid constructions mediated by algorithmic exposure, sociocultural norms, and gender ideologies. Epistemologically, knowledge is co-created between researcher and informants, requiring continuous reflexivity and awareness of the researcher's positionality and cultural background (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Finlay, 2002).

Phenomenology complements this orientation by prioritizing lived experience and meaning making. Following van Manen's (1990) hermeneutic phenomenology, the research seeks to reveal how women articulate, feel, and interpret motherhood and competition within their sociocultural contexts. Epoché, the suspension of presuppositions, was applied to foreground participants' voices (Moustakas, 1994). This interpretivist-phenomenological alignment is crucial for addressing cross-cultural digital settings like China and Malaysia, where reproductive identity is interwoven with national, religious, and moral narratives (Abdullah & Mijan, 2019; Huang et al., 2020).

Data collection relied on semi-structured, in-depth interviews that allowed women to narrate their experiences freely while maintaining thematic consistency with the research objectives. The analytic process employed phenomenological thematic analysis (Moustakas, 1994; Braun & Clarke, 2006), identifying meaning units and clustering

them into textural (what) and structural (how) descriptions to capture the shared essence of experience. Reflexivity was maintained through a reflective journal documenting analytic decisions, emotional responses, and potential biases (Finlay, 2009). This ensured transparency, ethical accountability, and sensitivity to participants' emotional and cultural vulnerabilities.

3.2 Sampling and Participants

The study involved 27 female TikTok users, which are 17 from China and 10 from Malaysia, aged between 20 and 40. This demographic represents women in their reproductive years and those most active in digital discussions of motherhood (Tatem et al., 2014; Duarte, 2025). The cross-national sample captures both linguistic and cultural diversity, reflecting China's state-shaped reproductive policies and Malaysia's multiethnic, multi-religious gender norms (Hussain, 2025; Zhou, 2023; Su-Russell & Sanner, 2023). Both mothers and non-mothers were included, recognizing that TikTok's algorithm exposes a broad range of women to maternal discourses, regardless of reproductive status.

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit participants capable of providing contextually rich insights into internalized sexism and digital maternal competition. Recruitment took place via TikTok messaging, WeChat groups, RedNote, and parenting forums. Inclusion criteria required participants to identify as female (cisgender, transgender, or queer), reside in China or Malaysia, be active TikTok users, and have engaged with motherhood-related content within the past three months.

Data saturation was reached after 17 interviews in China and 10 in Malaysia, where the smaller number nonetheless achieved thematic convergence due to tighter narrative coherence (see in Table 3.1).

Code	Name	Age	Ethnicity	Occupation	Location	Marital Status	No. of Children	Education	TikTok Usage Frequency	Interaction Frequency
1	Ming	37	Han	Freelancer	Da Lian	M	2	Master	Often	Highly
2	Wen	28	Han	Teacher	Guang Zhou	M	1	PhD	Often	Often
3	Yi	33	Qiang	Teacher	Sichuan	UM	/	PhD	Highly	Highly
4	Xing	32	Han	Education Consulting	Baotou	UM	/	Bachelor	Highly	Often
5	Yu	30	Han	Talent Teacher	Baiyin	UM	/	Master	Highly	Often
6	Min	29	Han	Media Director/Vlogger	Chengdu	UM	/	Master	Highly	Highly
7	Na	40	Han	Accountant	Jilin	M	1	Diploma	Highly	Highly
8	Xi	21	Han	Student	Baotou	UM	/	Bachelor	Highly	Highly
9	Jia	20	Han	Student	Changsha	UM	/	Bachelor	Highly	Highly
10	Qing	21	Han	Student	Shao Yang	UM	/	Bachelor	Highly	Often
11	Xiao	32	Han	Event Planner	Tangshan	M	/	Master	Highly	Often
12	Yan	32	Meng	Full-Time-Mom	Beijing	M	2	Bachelor	Highly	Often
13	Song	26	Han	Vlogger/Designer	Baoding	UM	/	Master	Highly	Highly
14	Wei	36	Han	Beautician	Yuncheng	M	1	Diploma	Highly	Often
15	Jie	27	Han	Nurse	Baotou	UM	/	Diploma	Highly	Often
16	Luo	21	Han	Student	Shehong	UM	/	Bachelor	Highly	Often
17	Dan	22	Han	Vlogger/Freelancer	Beijing	UM	/	Diploma	Highly ¹⁶⁸⁵	Often
18	George	26	Chinese	Photographer	Bintulu	UM	/	Bachelor	Highly	Rarely

19	Tio	38	Chinese	Manager	KL	M	3	Bachelor	Often	Rarely
20	Rogina	24	Chinese	Student	Penang	UM	/	Bachelor	Highly	Normal
21	Nadia	37	Malay	Teacher	KK	UM	/	PhD	Often	Rarely
22	Nurul	38	Malay	Nurse	Perlis	M	4	Diploma	Often	Rarely
23	Khean	36	Chinese	Life Planner	Cheras	M	2	Bachelor	Highly	Often
24	Aisyah	35	Malay	Marketing	KL	UM	/	Master	Highly	Often
25	Dorithy	22	Iban	Kidgarden Teacher	Bintulu	UM	/	SPM	Highly	Often
26	Kathelina	22	Iban	Sales	Sibu	UM	/	STPM	Highly	Rarely
27	Florence	23	Iban	Principle Coach	Bintulu	UM	/	STPM	Highly	Rarely

Table 3.1 Demographic Profile of Interview Informants (Anonymous)

4 Discussion

4.1 The Competitive Analysis of Negotiating Gender Norms and Policy Expectations through Digital Motherhood Interactions in China and Malaysia

Across both Chinese and Malaysian contexts, women's digital engagements around birth and motherhood reveal a complex negotiation of gender norms, policy expectations, and sociocultural pressures. The thematic analysis demonstrates that TikTok functions as a space where women simultaneously internalize, question, and reconstruct dominant maternal ideals. While patriarchal frameworks remain powerful in shaping expectations around fertility, family responsibilities, and education, women's interactions in these digital spaces demonstrate ambivalent agency, which is a process of self-negotiation that alternates between conformity and resistance.

In China, five interrelated themes emerged (see Table 4.1). These themes highlight how Chinese women navigate a tightly woven web of social norms reinforced by state discourse and digital visibility. The pervasive idealization of motherhood on TikTok, often represented through the aesthetics of domestic success and moral endurance, echoes long-standing Confucian and pronatalist ideologies. Yet, within the same digital environments, users also engage in subtle resistance by reframing maternal exhaustion and marital conflicts as collective emotional experiences rather than personal failings. Reproductive choices, particularly regarding the three-child policy, are narrated through a mixture of social obligation and personal constraint, reflecting how fertility policy continues to mediate female self-perception and social worth. Meanwhile, female users express internal contradiction. They are simultaneously defending traditional motherhood as moral duty while celebrating feminist autonomy as social progress. This duality reflects broader patterns of fragmented feminist consciousness and strategic identity performance, where women switch between ideological positions depending on context, algorithmic reward, or emotional resonance.

In Malaysia, a comparable but more culturally plural pattern emerges, structured around five major themes (see in Table 4.2). Malaysian women's narratives reveal how digital motherhood becomes a site of intercultural dialogue and identity affirmation, where Islam, Confucianism, and modern feminist values coexist and occasionally collide. The visibility of motherhood on TikTok allows women to articulate their moral commitments as mothers within their respective religious or ethnic frameworks while engaging with transnational discourses of gender equality and work-family balance. However, digital comparisons across ethnic groups often amplify the pressure to perform "ideal motherhood" through consumption and self-discipline, reproducing classed and moral hierarchies similar to those observed in China. Nonetheless, the Malaysian context shows more explicit discursive openness to feminist interpretations

of choice and equality, particularly in the rejection of prescriptive gender roles and the valorization of mutual parenting responsibilities.

Main Theme	Subthemes
1. Gender Norms and Idealized Motherhood in Digital Contexts	- Polarized Discourses on Motherhood Roles - Reliance on Digital Narratives for Reality Checks - Societal and Normative Expectations - Stereotypes of Full-Time Mothers - Idealized Motherhood Image
2. Family and Gendered Power Relations	- Mother-in-Law Dynamics - In-law Relationships - Societal Pressure on Marriage and Childbirth - Competition for Partners
3. Reproductive Choices and Fertility Expectations	- Childbearing Status - Reproductive Method Choices - Fertility-related Discrimination - Gender Preference
4. Class and Educational Dimensions of Motherhood Competition	- Class-based Competition - Highly Educated Mothers - Pregnancy-related Competition - Competitive Education - Parental Identity and Educational Status Symbols
5. Feminist Consciousness and Identity Negotiation	- Debates on Full-time Motherhood - Generational and Cultural Parenting Norms - Parenting Strategies - Public Scrutiny and Parenting in Shared Spaces

Table 4.1 Emergent Themes of Female Competition and Policy-Driven Gender Expectations in Digital Motherhood Interactions (China)

Main Theme	Subthemes
1. Social and Cultural Expectations of Motherhood	- Community Expectations Across Ethnic Groups - Societal Expectations - Polarized Perspectives on Modern and Traditional Parenting - Reliance on Digital Narratives for Reality Checks
2. Ethnicity Religion and Cultural Identity in Motherhood	- Cultural and Religious Identity in Motherhood - Respect Ethnic Differences - Impact of Religion - Limited Cross-Ethnic Comparison
3. Ideal Motherhood and Feminist Negotiations	- Freedom of Choice in Birth and Motherhood - Perception of 'Perfect Mother' Standards - Perceptions of Stay-at-Home Moms

	- Shared Parenting Responsibilities - Influence of Celebrity Mothers
4. Parenting Choices and Social Comparison	- Comparison of Parenting Styles and Education - Comparison Among Different Ethnic Groups - Postpartum Recovery - Balance of Career and Family
5. Socioeconomic Status and Class-Based Competition	- Perceptions of Wealth - Class-Based Competition

4.2 Emergent Themes of Female Competition and Policy-Driven Gender Expectations in Digital Motherhood Interactions (Malaysia)

Women's digital engagements surrounding birth and motherhood in China and Malaysia both reflect how contemporary motherhood has become a mediated negotiation between state policy, cultural traditions, and personal agency. Yet, the ways this negotiation unfolds reveal strikingly different ideological underpinnings and governance logics. Across all themes in China, cognitive dissonance emerges as a central feature of women's engagement. Many simultaneously internalize traditional expectations (marriage, fertility, filial duty) and invoke feminist ideals (autonomy, choice, resistance). As one Informant remarked:

"You are told to be independent, but also to have children for the nation or family. How can one person take balance to do both?"

(Informant 15 – Jie)

This contradictory positioning is not merely a matter of personal confusion but reflects structural tensions: the coexistence of Confucian moral heritage, pronatalist state discourse, fragmented feminist education, and algorithm-driven visibility. Another Informant captured this paradox:

"Now being a mother means being perfect in everything, such as successful career, nice home, smart looks. If you complain about the difficult of motherhood too much, people say you're weak. Why you choose to have a baby? If you don't complain, they say you're fake"

(Informant 11 – Xiao)

These contradictions fuel intense intrasexual competition. The manifestations are not only through class, appearance, and fertility status but also through ideological positioning. Chinese female users attack each other as "too traditional" or "too radical," often shifting their stance depending on context.

"Some call me a bad mother for focusing on work, others say I'm not feminist enough because I had a child early,"

(Informant 6 – Min)

This strategic use of discourse functions both as a defense mechanism and as a way to gain algorithmic visibility, since conflict drives traffic. As Informant 3 (Yi) explained:

"Fathers who post about childcare get praised, but mothers are attacked for being attention-seeking. Still, we post, because that's how people notice you. Especially an extremely title or hash tag can also dive the traffic."

(Informant 3 – Yi)

Their behaviors reflect contextual adaptability shaped by policy, culture, and algorithmic logic. Women alternate between traditional and rebellious stances, deploying whichever narrative best preserves social capital or online visibility.

“Sometimes I post about traditional values, sometimes about women’s rights—it depends on what people like and what won’t get deleted.”

(Informant 8 – Xi)

As a result, TikTok becomes a stage for what can be called strategic contradiction, which is a performative balance between rebellion and respectability. This constant oscillation is sustained by the platform’s emotional economy and the state’s moral governance. The Three-Child Policy and family ethics campaigns position motherhood as civic virtue, while the algorithm monetizes ideological conflict. Women thus navigate dual pressures, to which embody the “ideal mother” and to appear “empowered.” In this dynamic, intrasexual competition extends beyond material resources to include symbolic and ideological capital. Women compete not only for social recognition but also for moral legitimacy, such as who represents the modern feminist, the virtuous mother, or the rational citizen. Yet this competition, paradoxically, strengthens the structures it critiques by keeping women divided through judgment and self-surveillance.

Ultimately, the Chinese case illustrates how gender governance in the digital age operates through ambivalent empowerment: encouraging women’s self-expression while channeling it into moralized, self-regulating forms. The tension between tradition and rebellion, conformity and critique, becomes both the emotional engine of TikTok’s motherhood discourse and a reflection of women’s psychological struggle to reconcile modern aspirations with enduring patriarchal scripts. As Informant 17 (Dang) reflected,

“We talk about freedom, but in the end, we still measure ourselves by how others see us as mothers, as wives, as women. On TikTok, probably some voice breaks the stereotypes or traditional social expectations, but it also creates a new rules and standards for women. Sometimes I feel conflict and confusion.”

(Informant 17 – Dang)

It transforms the traditional social expectation and feminist binary into a cycle of contestation that is simultaneously emotional, cultural, and political. In this sense, women’s engagement with birth and motherhood discourse on TikTok is best understood not as either resistance or compliance but as a dynamic and contradictory negotiation, shaped by shifting alliances between tradition, policy, market logic, and feminist aspirations. Such competition, while appearing as self-expression, paradoxically reinforces patriarchal and nationalist structures by fragmenting female solidarity and normalizing self-surveillance within the moralized digital economy.

In contrast, Malaysian women’s digital interactions around motherhood on TikTok are shaped by the country’s multicultural governance model and religiously informed moral frameworks. Gender norms and policy expectations are continually negotiated within a multicultural and governance-oriented social framework. Motherhood in Malaysia remains deeply intertwined with national policies such as the National Policy on Women, the National Family Policy, and the Malaysia Madani vision, all of which emphasize the family as the moral and developmental foundation of the nation. Yet, women do not simply internalize these state-defined ideals. Rather, they reinterpret and personalize them in digital spaces, using platforms like TikTok to articulate both conformity and critique. Through humorous storytelling, emotional sharing, and everyday reflections, mothers transform official narratives of “responsible motherhood” into flexible expressions of care, resilience, and self-determination.

“Sometimes I share funny moments. It’s not to show off, but to remind others that being a mother is hard yet rewarding,”

(Informant 19 – Tio)

This negotiation occurs within Malaysia’s distinctive multicultural and religious context, where social harmony and mutual respect guide gender relations. Women from Malay,

Chinese, and Indian backgrounds navigate traditional and modern motherhood ideals without overt confrontation, reflecting the broader ethos of hormat (respect) embedded in local governance and social norms, such as the wearing of headscarves or childrearing practices, become points of digital debate, mothers tend to reframe these issues through empathy and relational understanding rather than through divisive competition.

“People might debate about hijab or working mothers, but most comments are supportive, reminding us to do what feels right for our faith and family.”

(Informant 22 - Farah)

In this sense, TikTok operates as a participatory extension of Malaysia’s pluralistic governance, where diverse maternal experiences coexist within shared moral frameworks.

At the same time, digital platforms enable women to engage with globalized ideals of feminism and motherhood in locally meaningful ways. Malaysian mothers often adopt a pragmatic or “moderate feminism” that values gender equality within the family rather than as opposition to patriarchal norms. Through discussions of childbirth choices, shared parenting, and career–family balance, women subtly challenge structural limitations in policy implementation, such as inadequate childcare support or rigid work arrangements, while reaffirming the centrality of family cohesion. These expressions reveal how digital motherhood becomes an informal form of policy discourse, through which citizens reinterpret and negotiate the moral boundaries of national gender policy. Social comparison and class-based performance further complicate these negotiations. While TikTok fosters supportive maternal communities, it also reflects economic hierarchies and consumerist ideals of motherhood. Displays of affluence, luxury confinement centers, or premium childcare services reveal how neoliberal and middle-class discourses are internalized in both state policy and digital self-presentation. Yet, many mothers resist such commodified images by emphasizing emotional well-being, community solidarity, and spiritual contentment as markers of good motherhood. Through these reconfigurations, women subtly critique the socioeconomic inequalities embedded in family and gender policies while constructing alternative visions of maternal success grounded in empathy and collective care.

Overall, Malaysian women’s digital interactions around birth and motherhood illustrate a dynamic interplay between policy, culture, and personal agency. They neither fully conform to nor openly reject policy expectations; instead, they translate, reinterpret, and reframe them through culturally embedded digital practices. In doing so, mothers function as active participants in everyday governance negotiating gender norms through online storytelling and collective discourse. This fluid process of internalization, resistance, and reconfiguration not only reflects the pluralistic logic of Malaysian social governance but also demonstrates how digital motherhood constitutes an evolving space of policy reflexivity, where national ideals of gender and family are continuously reshaped from the bottom up.

These differences between China and Malaysia can be traced to their distinct intersections of governance, ideology, and digital mediation. In China, the centralized state exerts strong ideological influence through both policy and algorithmic regulation, producing a moralized digital sphere where feminist expression is tolerated only when it reinforces state-endorsed family values. The result is an environment where women internalize contradictory expectations, and self-expression becomes a survival strategy within overlapping structures of control. In Malaysia, however, the pluralistic and semi-democratic governance system disperses ideological authority across religion, ethnicity, and policy institutions. This creates a softer, negotiated form of gender governance, where women engage in discursive flexibility rather than direct opposition. Social media

thus serves as an extension of Malaysia's participatory pluralism, enabling women to reinterpret state policy in culturally resonant ways.

4.2 The Strategy of Local Governance of Digital Motherhood and Policy Implications

in China and Malaysia

Women's digital engagements with birth and motherhood narratives on TikTok reveal not only individual psychological negotiations but also broader structural conditions shaped by governance, policy discourse, and cultural norms. The process through which women move from internalizing societal expectations to transforming maternal self-understanding unfolds within different national frameworks of digital governance and social policy. While both Chinese and Malaysian participants demonstrate emotional reflexivity and evolving agency, the pathways of transformation are mediated by distinct policy environments, cultural ideologies, and community infrastructures. The comparative analysis of China and Malaysia reveals that women's digital motherhood practices evolve through a shared trajectory from internalization to transformation, mediated by the interaction between state policy, cultural norms, and platform governance. In both contexts, women interpret algorithmically amplified motherhood ideals through culturally embedded lenses: Chinese users navigate policy-oriented gender discourse shaped by pronatalist regulation and moralized femininity, whereas Malaysian users negotiate motherhood ideals within ethnoreligious pluralism and family-centered moral frameworks. Despite these differences, both groups exhibit adaptive strategies that blend conformity and creativity manifesting as selective engagement, emotional regulation, and micro-acts of resistance within digital communities. This study therefore proposes a "Local Governance of Digital Motherhood Strategy Model", which integrates structural, digital, and individual dimensions to explain how women collectively reshape maternal identities online.

At the structural level, state and institutional policies, including China's three-child policy and Malaysia's National Policy on Women (2021–2030), constitute the macro-discursive field where ideal motherhood is regulated and valorized. At the platform level, algorithmic amplification and influencer culture operationalize these ideals through emotionally resonant content that reinforces comparison and moral judgment (Abidin et al., 2023; Chen, 2024). Finally, at the agency level, women enact micro-strategies that transform these pressures into opportunities for empowerment, ranging from selective consumption and community-based support to creative reinterpretation of traditional maternal symbols.

The model underscores that effective governance of digital motherhood requires not only content regulation or media literacy campaigns, but also culturally grounded policies that recognize women's emotional labor, plural identities, and negotiated agency within digital ecosystems. By situating women as active interpreters rather than passive recipients of digital norms, this framework provides a transferable reference for policymakers, platform designers, and educators in other sociocultural contexts to address the psychological, cultural, and ethical implications of algorithmically mediated motherhood (Foucault, 1980; Gill, 2018).

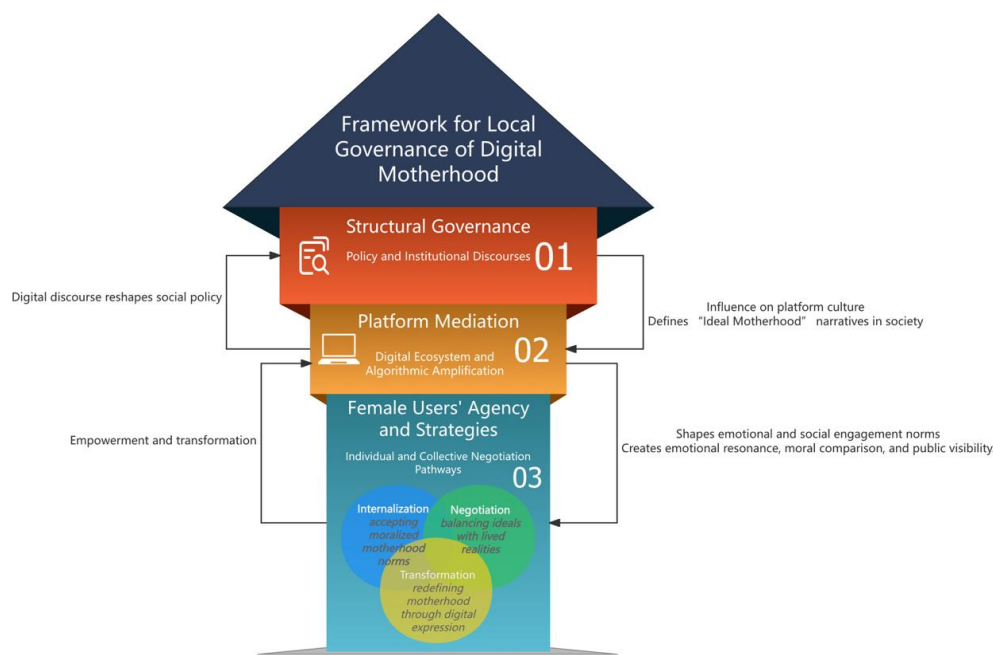


Figure 4.1
An Integrative Strategy Model of Local Governance of Digital Motherhood

The figure conceptualizes a multi-level strategy model integrating state policy, platform mediation, and women's digital agency in negotiating motherhood norms on TikTok. It illustrates how women's practices evolve from internalization to transformation through three interconnected layers. They are structural (policy and ideology), digital (algorithmic mediation), and individual (agency and emotional strategies). The model offers a transferable framework for governing digital motherhood discourses in culturally diverse contexts.

In China, the local governance of digital motherhood is deeply entangled with state-led demographic policy and platform regulation. Following the transition from the one-child to the three-child policy, the state's demographic strategy has repositioned women's reproductive roles as central to national rejuvenation and social stability (Gu, 2021). However, this pro-natalist discourse intersects with a highly regulated digital environment where emotional expression is closely monitored. Platforms like TikTok are required to align with the "positive energy" paradigm and youth protection mechanisms, resulting in the algorithmic amplification of idealized, patriotic, and disciplined maternal images (Zhou, 2023). Consequently, many Chinese mothers reported emotional ambivalence oscillating between aspiration and exhaustion, as they attempted to meet normative standards of "good motherhood" while avoiding perceived negativity online.

This convergence of demographic policy and digital governance contributes to a distinctive emotional trajectory: women tend to internalize societal expectations and resort to subtle, non-confrontational strategies such as selective engagement, self-censorship, or the use of private groups for mutual support. These micro-practices, while constrained by platform moderation and social harmony norms, represent a form of "quiet resistance" that allows women to negotiate limited agency within a tightly governed communicative sphere. Thus, the transformation of maternal identity on TikTok is largely intrapersonal and implicit, reflecting a broader structural paradox in China's digital policy encouraging motherhood as a civic duty while restricting the emotional complexity of maternal experience.

In contrast, Malaysian women's digital motherhood practices emerge within a pluralistic governance context characterized by ethnoreligious diversity and community-centered

resilience. While the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC) has recently intensified platform oversight through a licensing framework to enhance online accountability (Sahak et al., 2025), the country's sociocultural landscape remains more open to decentralized, community-driven support. Participants described the coexistence of Islamic, Confucian, and secular interpretations of motherhood, which together produce a hybrid moral framework emphasizing both familial responsibility and personal wellbeing (Mohamed et al., 2024). Unlike their Chinese counterparts, Malaysian mothers often approached idealized motherhood portrayals on TikTok with humor, distance, or critical reflection rather than guilt. They depersonalized online comparison and redefined digital engagement as an opportunity for social connection and emotional education rather than moral benchmarking.

This distinction reflects Malaysia's relatively decentralized maternal governance model. Emotional regulation and wellbeing were not only individual coping strategies but also community values embedded within ethnic, religious, and linguistic networks. The proliferation of peer-based TikTok groups organized by faith, motherhood stages, or language facilitated collective empowerment and the normalization of topics such as postpartum depression and work-life balance, which remain stigmatized offline (Mohamed et al., 2024; Lau, et al., 2021). In these spaces, women employed digital literacy and mutual empathy as culturally grounded strategies to maintain psychological balance amid algorithmic pressure. Such community-oriented engagement suggests a form of "collective digital resilience" (Meerangani, 2022), through which Malaysian mothers co-create alternative, inclusive maternal narratives that resist commercialized ideals without direct confrontation.

Comparatively, the Chinese model of digital motherhood governance is state-platform-centered, promoting social stability and demographic goals, whereas the Malaysian model is community-mediated, emphasizing pluralism and emotional equilibrium. Both trajectories, however, reflect women's gradual movement from passive internalization of algorithmically reinforced norms to active reinterpretation of maternal values. The difference lies in the degree of discursive openness: Chinese women's transformation is often solitary and implicit manifested through silence, selective participation, and private reflection, while Malaysian women's transformation is dialogic and collective manifested through sharing, humor, and emotional reciprocity. These divergent strategies reveal how national governance systems and policy frameworks shape the affective infrastructures of digital motherhood.

From a policy perspective, these findings highlight the need to reconceptualize digital motherhood governance beyond population control or content regulation. In China, integrating reproductive incentives with mental health support and digital expression rights would help alleviate the emotional burden generated by pro-natalist campaigns and algorithmic idealization. Policies should move from regulating emotion to supporting emotional wellbeing by linking maternal care subsidies with counseling and community-based services. In Malaysia, where digital pluralism and community empowerment are already significant, the challenge lies in balancing new regulatory initiatives (such as the MCMC licensing system) with the preservation of grassroots support networks that foster empathy and mutual learning. A culturally sensitive regulatory framework—acknowledging linguistic diversity, religious ethics, and gender inclusion—is essential to sustain healthy digital ecosystems for mothers.

Collectively, the cross-national comparison demonstrates that platforms like TikTok function as mediated arenas where governance, culture, and affect intersect. Women's maternal self-transformations are not merely individual psychological processes but also manifestations of how digital infrastructures and local policy systems enable or constrain

agency. Future governance models should therefore adopt a multilayered approach—combining state policy, platform accountability, community engagement, and emotional literacy education—to transform digital motherhood from a site of algorithmic competition into one of social empowerment.

5 Conclusions

This study has examined how women in China and Malaysia interpret and respond to digital motherhood narratives on TikTok, revealing a nuanced trajectory from internalization of normative ideals to active transformation of maternal identity. Through comparative analysis, the findings highlight that while both contexts share algorithmically mediated pressures of moral motherhood and peer comparison, their responses diverge according to distinct sociocultural and policy frameworks. Chinese participants' experiences are characterized by ambivalence, silent resistance, and reflexive self-monitoring shaped by policy-driven gender discourse. In contrast, Malaysian participants demonstrate community-based negotiation and emotional regulation grounded in ethnoreligious pluralism and collective support systems.

The proposed Digital Motherhood Governance Model synthesizes these insights into an integrative framework that connects macro-level governance, meso-level platform mediation, and micro-level female agency. By illustrating how women navigate the continuum from conformity to empowerment, the model offers both theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, it expands current understandings of digital gender governance by bridging feminist media studies with local policy analysis. Practically, it suggests that effective policy intervention should move beyond regulating content to empowering users through digital literacy, emotional support networks, and inclusive media design that recognizes women lived complexities.

Future research should extend this comparative framework in three directions. First, cross-platform studies could examine how different algorithmic architectures (e.g., RedNote, Instagram, or YouTube Shorts) shape maternal discourse differently across cultures and policy environments. Second, longitudinal research could trace how women's perceptions and coping strategies evolve over time, especially in response to policy shifts such as China's demographic campaigns or Malaysia's digital inclusion initiatives. Third, intersectional inquiries should explore how class, religion, and ethnicity intersect with digital motherhood, particularly in multicultural societies where online representation influences social belonging. By expanding the geographical and methodological scope, future studies can refine the governance model proposed here, transforming it into a flexible analytical and policy tool applicable to other societies confronting similar tensions between gender norms, digital mediation, and emotional well-being.

Ultimately, this research demonstrates that women's engagement with digital motherhood narratives embodies both vulnerability and resilience, which reveals not only how societal ideals are internalized but also how they are reimagined through creative, emotional, and communal practices. In doing so, it contributes to broader discussions on digital gender governance, emphasizing that sustainable empowerment in the digital age must be rooted in both cultural sensitivity and policy inclusivity.

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