From a Technical Term to a Moralized: A Discourse Analysis of "Cābiān" ("Borderline") on Social Media

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Abstract: In the era when social media has profoundly reshaped interpersonal communication, Moralized predicaments are concealed within stigmatizing symbols, forming another layer of invisible landscape. This study aims to reveal the semantic orientation and associated practices of the symbol "cābiān" ("borderline") and to analyze its feedback mechanisms on Moralized politics, thereby providing a theoretical basis for deconstructing newly formed Moralized stigmatizing discourse in the age of social media. Grounded in Fairclough's three-dimensional framework of critical discourse analysis, this study adopts the method of critical discourse analysis, integrating textual analysis and case study.

***Keywords*:** moralized, symbolic violence, social media, discourse analysis, cābiān ("borderline")

1. Research Background

Today's social media has long become a daily tool for people's free appreciation, self-presentation, and free expression. In recent years, however, discussions and topics surrounding "cābiān" ("borderline") have continuously emerged. As one of the most widely used high-frequency words on social media, it can be seen in many different contexts and subjects. Although it is still sometimes used as an abbreviation of "edge ball" in sports and legal contexts, it is more commonly used to describe sensuality, appeal, coquettishness, and bodily exposure. However, "cābiān" is clearly not a single-meaning adjective like "sexy"; it carries rich extended meanings and circulates widely on social media. It frequently appears in various graphic and video content, and has gradually been linked to morality and social norms.

2. Studies on the usage of the "cābiān" symbol and related social phenomena

According to the literature, the "cābiān" symbol has appeared across various research fields. In the logic of video dissemination, Zhao Hongxun and Ding Siyu believed that the display of "pornographic edge" in short videos has become a fragmented, de-aestheticized spectacle.[1] In studies of ethnic imagery and communication, Chen Guoxing stated that costume is a typical symbol of character construction, but within fragmented Douyin videos, it is difficult to display fully. Even the creator "@Jiumei Xiaomei" calling out "Don't wear borderline Miao costumes; see real Miao costumes and escape from involution," cannot fully convey the ethnic characteristics of traditional clothing.[2] In the promotion of guofeng (traditional Chinese style) cultural videos, Ji Fangfang and Wang Xueling argued that the misunderstanding of guofeng culture arises from editors' lack of conceptual understanding, lack of professional knowledge, and tolerance toward "borderline" culture.[3] This, in fact, mirrors the current usage of the "cābiān" symbol on social media.

2.1 The 'cābiān' symbol and gender research

A large proportion of studies on the "cābiān" phenomenon are connected with gender research, especially concerning women. Zhang Wan, studying female fitness influencers on Douyin, noted that some works show "borderline tendencies" that harm the healthy ecology of women's online representation.[4] However, there are also dissenting voices. Li Zihui found that when a woman's dance video does not fit the viewer's value system, terms such as "borderline girl" appear in her comments. Even without direct connection between her appearance and negative meaning, "gazing" behavior still occurs because the exposed female image satisfies curiosity and visual pleasure.[5] Pan Miqiao also noted that when women with attractive looks are mentioned online — from "borderline" streamers to "beautiful" female celebrities — discussions tend to emphasize their appearance, body, and clothing, while ignoring their creative value, thus objectifying and commodifying women.[6] In summary, most academic discussions of "cābiān" focus on women's content production and generally regard women's "borderline" behavior as self-disciplinary acts catering to male aesthetics. Up to now, most studies habitually use "cābiān" to describe female-produced content, developing critiques of women's self-presentation and social phenomena from a superficial perspective, while neglecting issues such as platform moderation rules, traffic distribution mechanisms, individual agency, and the symbolic meaning of "cābiān." Moreover, little attention has been paid to factors such as netizen

attitudes, national media power, or collective behavior. There has also been almost no research focusing on the symbol itself, on concrete cases, or on the discourse of "cābiān" within specific contexts. More importantly, there is almost no in-depth research on male "cābiān" behaviors or phenomena

2.2 Research Questions

As seen above, existing studies on the "cābiān" symbol show narrow perspectives, shallow analyses, and overly absolute conclusions. However, contrary to these research assumptions, social realities indicate that many women who post sexy, charming, self-display videos do not aim to please men or others, but simply express their personal aesthetics and artistic styles.

Therefore, focusing on a concrete case, analyzing the highly controversial "cābiān" symbol through textual and factual evidence, and objectively presenting the web of power relations in social practice constitute an innovative academic endeavor. It must be emphasized that this study does not intend to define what degree of expression counts as "cābiān behavior," nor to debate whether so-called "borderline" behavior is proper or improper.

This research focuses on Weibo, the most widely used social media platform in China, and takes the "Jingchuan Liyu cābiān controversy" as a case study, centering on the following core question: Under the condition of technological empowerment, how does the "cābiān" symbol, through social media, complete its transformation from a cultural symbol into a gender-stigmatizing label, and how does it, in turn, act upon gender politics?

3. Textual and Discursive Features

3.1 Keywords

The study finds that since the birth of social media, the semantics of the symbol "cābiān" ("borderline") have undergone changes. Most content still used it in the fields of sports, law, or technology. Overall, in contemporary social media, the widely used symbol "cābiān" mainly refers to perceptible but hard-to-define "borderline" content—such as bodily performances like hip-swaying and pelvic thrusting, or verbal teasing like double entendres.

Focusing on the case study, the distribution of textual keywords explains the core focus of the semantic network formed in the current "cābiān" discussion. Based on word frequency statistics (see Word Cloud in Figure 1), the controversy centers on gender and moral evaluation. The features are as follows:

Gender-directed words such as "she," "female," and "cābiān girl" account for 72.3%, indicating the gendered nature of the discussion. Among them, the compound "cābiān girl," explicitly gendered, co-occurs with "vulgar" at a rate of 81.2% and with "sexual implication" at 63.4%. This usage logic demonstrates that women are frequently associated with negative moral issues in this topic.

3.2 Textual Structure

Textual structure refers to the way textual content selects, organizes, and arranges information. It involves the perspective, stance, and attitude adopted by the text producer. Under this mechanism, the "foregrounding" and "backgrounding" of selected information express ideological bias in subtle ways. In discussions related to "cābiān," there is a systemic operation of "foregrounding" and "backgrounding." Regardless of whether the speaker's view of "borderline" behavior is radical or moderate, they consciously or unconsciously control the logical focus to express their personal stance. For instance, by forcibly linking "cābiān" with illegal or immoral behaviors such as prostitution, dissemination of obscenity, and moral corruption, the deterrent power of legal and moral terminology is foregrounded, while the actual manifestations of those behaviors described as "cābiān" are backgrounded, blurring their similarity or difference from the concepts of law and morality.

At the same time, the analyzed textual content also presents a dual-track framework of confrontational dialogue and simplified attribution. The former usually presupposes an opposing stance — for example, "questioning dressing freedom is narrow-minded" or "defending cābiān equals supporting illegality" — to construct binary oppositions, then completes the logical closure through hypothetical rebuttals such as "if your daughter did this, would you…?" or through layered argumentation, merging different social issues like "public infidelity," "mistress-style fashion," and "cābiān" into one continuum and expanding the scope of criticism.

3.3 Rhetorical Devices

Rhetorical devices are the core tools through which a text strengthens semantic associations and emotional tendencies. In this discussion, the rhetorical strategies most commonly used by text producers are metaphorical transference and near-synonymic recurrence.

Metaphorical transference refers to the forced association of cross-domain symbols to reconstruct the essence of an issue. Besides direct metaphor use, text producers also construct metaphorical frameworks through symbolic accumulation.

Near-synonymic recurrence manifests as repeated associative practices that reinforce related meanings. The study finds that 71.57% of users (146 posts) directly associate the semantics of "cābiān" with moral decay, sexual implication, or soft pornography. Words such as "vulgar" and "pornographic" frequently function as appositives to "cābiān," as in combinations like "vulgar cābiān content," or tautological structures like "cābiān is cābiān, vulgarity is vulgarity."

3.4 Stylistic Choice

Style is a set of linguistic characteristics that gradually take shape throughout historical development and exhibit synchronic variation. Through a detailed analysis of the texts discussing "cābiān," it is found that their stylistic strategies generally display the coexistence of the appropriation of authoritative styles and the deconstruction of everyday styles.

The appropriation of authoritative styles is mainly reflected in the unconventional use of authoritative linguistic registers — such as legal or academic terminology — in moral contexts. For example, using "whether one's parents can accept it" as the standard for distinguishing between "dressing freedom" and "cābiān" elevates private family norms to the level of public moral codes, and restricts "freedom of dressing" to a technical standard defined as "conforming to social norms."

The deconstruction of everyday styles, on the other hand, relies mainly on online colloquial language, subcultural symbols, and emotional expressions.

Online slang and emotional interjections such as "speechless," "are you sick," or "tf" are found throughout the corpus. This widespread use of vulgarized, emotional language, regardless of discursive stance, reflects a shared communicative habit among users. In essence, these forms of everyday stylistic deconstruction represent the hybrid use of multiple registers to resist the stability and rigidity of authoritative discourse.

3.5 Sentence Construction Strategies

The arrangement of syntactic structures and the selection and variation of sentence patterns can subtly manipulate the focus of information, thereby better revealing the speaker's intentions.

In the use of imperative sentences, the most direct manifestation is the frequent combination of negative commands and modal verbs. Negative commands employ negators such as "don't," "stop," and "no longer," forming directive discourse. Modal verbs, expressing obligation, permission, or possibility — such as "must," "should," and "can" — are often combined with them.

Secondly, rhetorical questions appear systematically throughout this discussion. Whether it is "why is he a male bodhisattva but she a cābiān girl?" or "do Instagram and Twitter not have minors?", such rhetorical questions employ interrogatives like "why," "isn't," and "how come" to presuppose answers. Notably, 64% of the posts containing rhetorical questions also employ the structure "if…then not…," a direct presuppositional pattern.

Such presuppositional constructions belong to conditional sentences. By constructing hypothetical structures, they fabricate argument premises. For instance, the widely used "if this is called dressing freedom, then what counts as cābiān?" creates a conditional complex sentence ("if P, then Q"), whose syntactic function is to construct the mutual exclusivity of "dressing freedom and borderline" as a hypothetical premise (P) and then infer "the ambiguity of the cābiān definition" (Q).

3.6 The Generation and Interaction of New Discourses

In the discursive practice surrounding "cābiān," new forms of discourse and new types of discursive interactions have emerged. This section focuses on the newly generated discourse "jiǎnchá" ("appraising borderline"), which originates from the meta-discourse of "cābiān."

From a textual perspective, "jiǎnchá" is an abbreviation of "jiàndìng cābiān" ("identifying borderline"), created by prefixing the technical evaluation verb "identify" to the symbol "cābiān." Its literal meaning is intuitive. To show clearly how the "jiǎnchá" discourse is generated, contextualized, and characterized, and what new meanings it carries, a representative Weibo post is selected for in-depth textual analysis. Using "jiǎnchá" as the keyword to filter the data, the post with the highest level of interaction is as follows:

From the text's symbolic usage and attitudinal stance, it can be seen that the "jiǎnchá" discourse has triggered three semantic shifts of the meta-discourse "cābiān":

First, from a technically neutral description to moral compliance and censorship;

Second, from individual perception to quantifiable indicators of female dress norms;

Third, from individual–group tension to a discussion of gendered power relations.

In sum, the practice of the "jiǎnchá" discourse precisely corresponds to the "disciplinary power" described by Foucault: by incorporating the female body into an all-encompassing moralized discourse of scrutiny, it simultaneously achieves the

symbolic dissolution of female subjectivity and the implicit reproduction of patriarchal aesthetic norms.When "Jingchuan Liyu" was disciplined to pull up her pants and adjust her posture, the quantified discipline had already seeped from the screen into reality — from her body to every woman's.

4. Social Practice and Power Relations Analysis

Under this gendered, morally framed stigmatizing symbolic practice, there must be deeper and more layered social factors at work. The following discussion integrates social culture, platform rules, and algorithmic mechanisms, and unfolds along four dimensions.

4.1 Semantic Fixation and Moral Association: "Cābiān" Interpreted by Platform Rules

In discussions of the "Jingchuan Liyu cābiān" controversy, about 65.3% of users associated the meaning of the "cābiān" symbol with sexual implication, moral decay, or soft pornography, and among highly interactive posts about 66% expressed agreement with this view. This discursive contestation derives not only from the ambiguity symbolized by its semantics of "borderline behavior," but also from the ambiguity of external standards for definition. A review of major social media moderation rules shows that most platforms do not provide specific criteria for judging sexually suggestive or pornographic content, either setting behavioral boundaries according to "whether the audience feels it is appropriate", or prohibiting the publication of "any content that causes sexual associations"

In today's social media, although "cābiān" content is ostensibly prohibited, in practice it still constitutes a large portion of traffic-attracting material and receives traffic tilts. When such high-attention, high-traffic tilts are superimposed on vague rules that resist consensus, different subjects will inevitably generate diverse understandings of, and doubts about, the "cābiān" symbol — why can a stigmatized symbol like "cābiān" be directly applied to various subjects, and why does the symbol often appear as a positive, laudatory descriptor in comment areas under male-produced content? And to date, why have large-scale debates about whether men's "cābiān" behavior accords with moral norms never erupted on social media?

4.2 Practical Suppression: Local Contexts and Dominant Discourse

Yet as the previous analysis indicates, platforms' rules for the review and governance of "cābiān"-adjacent liminal content remain ambiguous. Because neither platform nor policy clearly distinguishes artistic expression, behavioral freedom, and soft pornography, in actual operations liminal expressions labeled "cābiān" are often simply categorized as "vulgar" and thereby restricted or punished. The very act of platform moderation already constitutes a confirmation ritual for gendered, moralized, absolutely stigmatizing discourse: every notice that "a video failed review" reinforces the disciplinary cognition of "what counts as a proper body."This process is highly dependent on local cultural contexts: for example, the Xiaohongshu Community Convention requires content to "conform to the core socialist values," yet in enforcement partial exposure of women's body parts such as camisoles is treated as "vulgar," while the pass rate for shirtless male fitness content does not fall but rises. This difference in adjudication profoundly reflects gender difference. As Chen Long puts it: gender difference is not only the root of inequality in relations between the sexes, social life, and discursive practice, but also the foundational basis upon which male-centered social knowledge and discourse systems are constituted.

4.3 Cognitive Divergence: Unequal Power and Practices of Symbolic Resistance

Synthesizing the above, several notable power asymmetries appear in the discursive practices and interactions of this "cābiān" discussion: first, group vs. individual, manifested as the group's one-way judgment of the individual; second, authoritative institutions/platforms vs. content producers, manifested mainly as coercive rules squeezing free expression; third, male vs. female, concretely manifested as the low degree of moral association attached to men and the preferential treatment they receive in content production and public response.

Moreover, users' responses to "jiǎnchá" do not stop at emotional or aggressive language. An analysis of the gender power structure behind the symbol reveals the rationality of "anti-jiǎnchá": "jiǎnchá" objectifies the female body into "male property," thereby denying women the right to decide over their own bodies and assigning that right to external adjudication; at the same time, patriarchy successfully internalizes bodily shame into women's self-discipline, requiring women to constantly monitor their words and deeds to avoid being labeled "cābiān."

Of course, beyond the sensitivity of gender issues, the sexual issues implicated by the "cābiān" symbol's association with "sexual suggestion" remain taboo in public discussion. The logic used to stigmatize the "cābiān" symbol essentially reads "cābiān = sexual suggestion = moral decline," which invites the question: compared with elements such as violence/bloodshed in non-mainstream artistic expression, why is society more sensitive to sexual elements—does this derive from a culture of sexual shame? Yet sexual attraction and sensual expression are natural human rights, and sexual activity is

normal in human society. Thus, users who strongly oppose treating "sexual suggestion" as a moral stain are invisibly set in opposition to those nurtured by traditional Confucian thought.

4.4 Reproducing the "Cābiān" Label: Capital's Appropriation of Stigmatizing Discourse

Although the "cābiān" symbol represents ambiguous, liminal behavior, there are in fact platforms that explicitly regulate "cābiān," defining clear boundaries for the chest, back, buttocks, and other areas to standardize dress requirements, with illustrated examples of sensitive attire (for example, Bilibili stipulates that the neckline be within 3 cm below the collarbone). While the quantification of exposed area is relatively progressive at the level of rules, it arguably fuels the precise calculus of "borderline aesthetics": creators test the edges through garment tailoring (e.g., bare shoulders without cleavage), or wrap sexual suggestion in the legitimate guise of "dance instruction" or "fitness display." Such intermediate zones that evade moderation yet precisely reach specific audience cognitions are common. In essence, this strategy is what Bourdieu calls a "symbolic compromise"—securing cultural legitimacy through the equivocality of signs.[7] In response, some users employ "ironic mimicry," posting exaggerated, deliberate "cābiān" performance videos and tagging or calling out moderators to "please ban me," as a way to express dissatisfaction with arbitrary and unjust moderation standards.

4.5 The Female Performance Dilemma: Traffic's Regulation of Discursive Interaction

Today, searching "cābiān" as a keyword on Douyin yields results of which over 90% are images or short videos that use women's bodily features or soft-pornographic suggestion as selling points—a phenomenon of encoded bias.

Under "creator incentive programs" on Douyin, Weibo, Xiaohongshu, and other social media, bodily performance is quantified into economic capital convertible into cash, creating a new binary dilemma for women—either accept the rules of the game of symbolic capital, or be excluded from visibility by the system. It is undeniable that, beyond giving some traffic tilts to controversial "cābiān" content, human bodies themselves carry sexual allure; public attention naturally gravitates toward highly controversial events and ambiguous "borderline behaviors." Because creators can monetize based on clicks, follower counts, and other traffic metrics, some women deliberately use bodily performance to gain attention. Research shows that platforms prioritize traffic distribution according to "completion rate > likes > comments > shares." Within this mechanism, so-called "cābiān" content can significantly raise completion rates through front-loading visual stimulation (e.g., highlighting bodily features within the first 5 seconds), ultimately driving commercial monetization.

Yet when women treat physiological sexed features as a strategy to gain attention and recognition, they in effect become accomplices in the suppression of women's rights—what appears to be free choice in bodily performance is in fact the internalization of an external gaze into self-objectification. Meanwhile, platforms quantify the value of women's accounts and bodies into computable commodities through data metrics such as likes and follower counts, plunging women into a vicious cycle of self-objectification and loss of subjectivity. It is precisely such repeated, knowingly transgressive liminal behaviors that advance the stigmatization of the "cābiān" symbol step by step and solidify the public's cognition of what the symbol denotes.

Moreover, the "cābiān" label is not removable at women's discretion. Within stigmatizing symbolic violence, once branded with "cābiān," a user not only suffers cyber-violence but is also down-ranked in algorithmic recommendation. When female users try to invoke Article 20 of the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests—"Discrimination based on gender is prohibited"—to lodge complaints, platforms often shirk responsibility in the name of "avoiding escalation" and "respecting diversity," refusing to delete stigmatizing content. This reveals the practical reality of the difficulty of gender "equality": commitments to equality at the level of law are dissolved by technical systems' "case-by-case handling," while, at the moral level, "freedom of speech" degenerates into a tool to suppress women's voices.

5. Conclusion and Postscript

Combining the research findings with reality, we see that under the superposition of algorithmic bias, moderation mechanisms, and economic interests, a phenomenon-level "snowballing of traffic" is easily triggered: to gain exposure, creators proactively use the "cābiān" symbol, proactively publish "cābiān works," and proactively reinforce sexually suggestive elements in their creations; at the same time, users develop aesthetic habits under algorithmic feeding, not only cementing the misrecognition "cābiān = female body = sexual suggestion," but also reinforcing traditional gender frameworks' discipline of women's images through "anti-cābiān" discursive practices.

At present, indeed some men and women are constrained by platform algorithms and are forced to choose between "self-objectification" and "marginalization," using "erotic capital" as a traffic signboard to seek the favor of traffic. But social media is not the only path to "making it"; knowingly doing what one should not in self-deception will, in the end, bring backlash.Under the supremacy of interests, how to uphold morality and the bottom line is a question all laborers should

contemplate.

In sum, the violent transformation of the "cābiān" symbol requires not only rectifying its symbolic meaning, but also optimizing technical architectures and strengthening proper critical consciousness. Only when these three forces combine can a path toward equal dialogue be opened through the fog of algorithms, transforming social media from a hotbed of the reproduction of violence into a testing ground for gender emancipation.

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