

Beyond Box Office Success: Gender Discourse and Algorithmic Polarisation in *Ne Zha 2*'s Bilibili Controversies

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Abstract:

Ne Zha 2, released during the 2025 Chinese New Year, has achieved unprecedented box-office success. Despite this commercial triumph, the film has sparked intense debate on Bilibili regarding its gender representations across female character portrayal, male identity reconstruction, and LGBTQ+ elements. This research employs discourse analysis, sentiment analysis, and digital ethnography to examine how gender narrative conflicts are constructed in online discussions about *Ne Zha 2* on Bilibili, one of China's most extensive streaming platforms. Using highly-viewed commentary videos ($\geq 100,000$ views) and their highest-rated comments, the study investigates users' discursive strategies in constructing gender narratives, emotional polarization in discussions, and the role of platform dynamics in shaping gender discourse. Findings reveal distinct gender discourse patterns, emotionalised responses, and the impact of Bilibili's recommendation algorithms in amplifying gender issues, aesthetic differences, and ideological divisions. Situated within the broader context of Chinese online gender discourse, this study highlights how digital platforms mediate public perceptions of gender narratives, contributing to ongoing discussions about gender, digital culture, and algorithmic influence on online public opinion.

Keywords: Gender discourse; Narrative conflict; Digital culture; *Ne Zha 2*; Media culture

1. Introduction

In recent years, gender has become a hot topic in China. Feminism is growing locally but faces challenges like online censorship and misogyny[1]. Social media platforms have turned into battlegrounds for ideological conflicts. Discussions about gender

representation, feminism, masculinity, and patriarchy are heating up, especially on platforms like Weibo, Zhihu, and Bilibili. Digital spaces allow for more diverse viewpoints and create echo chambers that strengthen gender divisions through recommendation algorithms[2]. Bilibili (often called China's YouTube) has become a key platform for gender

discussions. Young users actively engage in gender conversations through bullet comments and user-generated content, creating a unique space for digital activism[3]. This platform offers a special window into public feelings and digital discourse.

The release of “*Ne Zha 2*” during the 2025 Lunar New Year sparked further gender debates, making the film a focal point for discussing masculinity, femininity, and cultural identity in today’s China. Despite ranking fifth in global box office history (behind *Titanic*) and becoming the highest-grossing animated film in China, Asia, and globally, its gender narratives have caused huge controversy[4]. Critics argue the film strays too far from traditional mythology, incorporates male-centred elements, and ultimately reinforces patriarchal norms rather than challenging them. The complaints have incited fervent online discussions, featuring many video reviews, analyses, and social media disputes on the film’s representations of gender. Bilibili has significantly contributed to the expansion of this discourse. Some users commend “*Ne Zha 2*” for its progressive portrayal of gender dynamics, while others criticise its inability to confront entrenched gender hierarchies. The conversations have intensified into polarised ideological confrontations, with individuals using various rhetorical methods and emotional appeals to justify their stances. This research explores how gender narrative conflicts are constructed in online discussions about *Ne Zha 2* on Bilibili. By employing Discourse Analysis (DA), Sentiment Analysis (SA), and Digital Ethnography (DE), the study focuses on three main objectives:

- 1) Identify Bilibili users’ discursive strategies when discussing gender narratives in *Ne Zha 2* commentary videos and comment sections. Analyse how users construct arguments, rhetorical techniques, and gender-related discourse across dimensions such as female character representation, male identity reconstruction, and LGBTQ+ elements.
- 2) Analyse the emotional polarisation present in gender-related discussions through sentiment analysis, quantifying approval patterns, dissatisfaction, or antagonism patterns, and examining how emotions influence and escalate online discourse.
- 3) Explore the role of platform dynamics in shaping and reinforcing gender discourse, including studying user interaction patterns, ideological group formation, and the extent to which algorithms amplify the visibility and reception of gender discussions.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of gender discourse formation, digital polarisation, and the role of online platforms in mediating gender narratives in contemporary Chinese media culture.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gender Discourse and Narrative Construction

Before exploring gender discourse and conflicts in the

digital media era, it’s essential to review the theoretical foundations of gender representation and narrative construction. Philips argues that gender ideology is crucial for maintaining male dominance over women and functions in multiple, dynamic ways across different speech types and social practices[5]. She noted that women’s resistance in the Chinese context often appears in coded, individualised forms, lacking the power for structural change. This observation resonates with many studies on contemporary Chinese digital feminism, revealing implicit resistance to women and feminist expression in online environments and fragmented paths of resistance. Butler’s seminal discourse on gender performativity laid a fundamental groundwork for post-structuralist analysis. This theory posits that gender is not an inherent, immutable biological or social category but is instead produced via the repetition of performed acts and the interplay between societal norms and individual agency[6]. This perspective provides essential insights for observing gender representation in China’s local context: gender roles are not only disciplined in traditional cultural values but are continuously shaped, contested, and negotiated in various discourse practices of digital media. The evolution of contemporary Chinese gender discourse is deeply influenced by traditional ideas while constantly colliding and merging with national policies and global feminist movements. Both implicit resistance and performance theory predict how individuals and groups will redefine gender roles to break through or reshape the original framework of patriarchal discourse in the digital environment.

2.2 Gender Conflicts in Chinese Digital Media

Gender conflicts and antagonistic discourse are more prominent in the digital media environment. Mendes and Carter’s research systematically reviewed early media’s passive, objectified portrayal of women and stereotypical images of men in dimensions such as authority, violence, and rationality[7]. They distinguished between gender studies (focusing on role representation and individual opportunities) and feminist research (explicitly challenging structural inequalities), providing a methodological basis for exploring contemporary Chinese digital gender discourse. Recent literature suggests that tensions between feminism and anti-feminism in Chinese online are escalating. Mao’s ethnographic study of Weibo revealed that numerous users contest conventional gender inequality through feminist language and activities yet do not openly associate themselves with the “feminist” label, resulting in a phenomenon termed feminism without feminists[8]. Wang and Driscoll examined the practices of young feminist organisations on digital platforms, highlighting that these groups exhibit “strategic engagement” despite various constraints imposed by state censorship and commercial media, addressing issues and linking resources beyond mainstream discourse via social platforms such as Weibo and WeChat[9].

In contrast, Huang's research revealed four key strategies of anti-feminist discourse on Chinese social media: personality attacks through the "perverted women" label, accusing feminism of "Western input" and "betraying the country," using conspiracy theories to link it with terrorism, and employing seemingly neutral rational patriotic rhetoric to deny so-called "pseudo-feminism." These discourse tactics shift public focus from structural inequality to attacks on feminists themselves, weakening feminist discourse in terms of political legitimacy. Another study on the Zhihu platform shows that nationalist discourse is often used to marginalise feminism, describing it as "external forces" or "betraying the country," thus reinforcing male hostility toward feminism under anxiety in the labour and marriage markets. Nakahara and Cai's analysis of Bilibili also found three standard logics: viewing feminism as a commercial ploy, associating it with Western liberalism to mock it, or directly invoking national security and moral panic to refute feminism[10]. Chinese digital media has become a complex field where feminist activism, nationalism, state regulation, and market forces converge. Structural anxieties brought by socioeconomic changes and platform algorithm reinforcement have made gender conflicts more prominent in online public opinion.

2.3 Network Emotion Analysis and Polarisation

To quantify and understand the emotional aspects of online gender conflicts, emotion analysis and network polarisation measurements have increasingly become critical methodological supplements in academic research. Zhang et al. proposed an innovative system to quantify the degree of polarisation on social media by constructing user opinion networks and measuring the average steps needed for random walks to visit all political stance nodes[11]. Their results revealed that Bilibili has significantly higher polarisation on issues such as feminism, abortion, and climate change, with a specific negative correlation with the total number of comments. This suggests that the breadth of discussion might somewhat dilute polarisation tendencies. Emotional analysis of gender topics in the Chinese context is also gradually emerging as a key study area. Hu et al. combined emotional analysis with critical discourse analysis to examine male netizens' emotional attitudes toward feminist issues during the "Yang Li incident" triggered by a talk show performer[12]. They found that negative emotions predominated and further constructed stereotypes against "radical feminism" and "pseudo-feminism" through language strategies. This highlights the need to focus not only on the structural division of online groups but also on the key role of emotional expression in discourse formation and confrontation. Overall, the combination of network science's polarisation measurement methods with critical discourse analysis and emotional analysis provides a more three-dimensional perspective for understanding digital gender opposition. Structural divisions within user groups often intertwine with lan-

guage-level strategies of attack, mockery, and stigmatisation, forming reinforcement and reproduction of online gender conflicts.

2.4 Chinese Animation and Subculture Narratives

Recent scholarship on Chinese animation points to a trend of integrating 3D technology and modern individualist themes into traditional mythological narratives, as evidenced by earlier works like *Ne Zha: Birth of the Demon Child*[13]. These adaptations have attracted audiences interested in both cultural heritage and contemporary storytelling techniques. At the same time, official censorship and market pressures constrain the portrayal of non-mainstream gender expressions[14]. The above research shows that Chinese animation and subculture circles have not stayed away from the game between gender conflicts and social norms, but rather are the intersection of contemporary Chinese gender norm negotiation, youth cultural expression, and national soft power pursuit. While presenting modernised adaptations of traditional motifs, gender roles in animated works often face dual pressures from commercial markets and official censorship, making "de-patriarchy" or "gender diversity" narratives still difficult to completely break through the norms of mainstream ideology.

2.5 Types of Discourse in Online Controversies

When studying digital gender discourse, social media users typically employ three dominant expression strategies: aggressive speech, metaphorical/satirical expression, and rational, analytical discourse. Papacharissi categorised these three types of expression as structures of online emotional discourse, noting that aggressive discourse more easily gains priority promotion from platform algorithms due to its emotional tension and possesses stronger mobilisation effects[15]. Similarly, Coe, Kenski, and Rains, in their study of news website comment sections, found that aggressive discourse characterised by personal attacks and extreme wording showed significantly higher engagement and visibility than neutral comments[16]. These studies provide dual explanations—emotional transmission and platform mechanisms—for the prevalence of polarised expression on online platforms. Additionally, Graham and Wright, in their research on *The Guardian's* comment section, further proposed "satirical criticism" as an important digital rhetorical strategy[17]. This type of expression achieves critical purposes through humour, metaphor, or irony, avoiding direct conflict while still playing a substantial role in opinion expression, particularly suitable for sensitive topics such as politics or gender. This classification approach provides essential inspiration for the present study. This research develops a three-part discourse typology framework inside the comment corpus: "attack-type," "satirical/implicit," and "academic/analytical," based on the aforementioned theo-

retical basis. This classification distinctly delineates users' emotional dispositions about gender narratives in "*Ne Zha 2*," facilitating the differentiation of various expression options inside platform-mediated environments.

2.6 Research Gap and Research Significance

While a growing body of literature examines gender discourse on Chinese social media, limited research has specifically addressed how Bilibili's unique platform culture and recommendation algorithms shape public debates around gender. Existing studies focus on broader platforms (e.g., Weibo, Zhihu) or limit their scope to textual analysis, overlooking the discursive complexities in user-generated videos, comment sections, and interactive features. Moreover, few studies systematically integrate Discourse Analysis, Sentiment Analysis, and Digital Ethnography to capture the dynamic nature of online controversies. Addressing these gaps, this research explores how *Ne Zha 2*'s gender representations become sites for ideological conflict in Bilibili. By examining the content of user discussions and the socio-technical structures that govern their visibility, this study contributes to understanding how digital platforms mediate, amplify, and transform gender narratives in contemporary Chinese media culture.

3. Data Sources and Methodological Framework

Although Bilibili is viewed as a decentralised platform providing autonomous space for users, its content recommendation mechanism is fundamentally not neutral. Gillespie points out that so-called "platforms" are not technologically neutral hosting structures but actively organise and present public issues through specific institutional arrangements, data logic, and visibility strategies[18]. On Bilibili, high-traffic videos and highly-upvoted comments are algorithmically promoted to broader user groups, giving controversial topics with emotional tension a dissemination advantage. By selecting videos with over 100,000 views and the top 15 most-upvoted comments, this paper attempts to reconstruct how the platform filters "visible opinions". It reflects on how this mechanism accelerates the polarisation of gender discourse. This study employs a multi-method approach to analyse the gender narrative controversies surrounding *Ne Zha 2*, using Bilibili (B-site) as the data collection field. Bilibili, with its unique bullet comment culture and diverse review ecosystem, is an ideal platform for exploring the construction of gender discourse in contemporary Chinese digital contexts.

3.1 Data Selection Criteria

The study focused on 10 review videos with $\geq 100,000$ views to capture content with significant reach and engagement. Videos meeting this threshold are considered

"trending" and are more likely to be prioritised by Bilibili's recommendation algorithm, reflecting mainstream or widely resonant discourse among platform users. These videos specifically discuss gender narratives, cultural identity, and the commercial performance of *Ne Zha 2*, collectively accumulating 3.87 million views, 57,021 bullet comments, and approximately 100,827 comments (exact comment counts were estimated for some videos based on averages). The videos were published between January 29 and March 10, 2025, covering the peak opinion period within one month after the Spring Festival release, thus ensuring data timeliness and representativeness.

3.2 Comment Corpus Construction

For the sampling strategy, the study employed purposive sampling, extracting the top 15 most-liked comments (≥ 50 likes) from each target video. This process yielded 150 high-quality comments (19,842 characters in total). Since highly liked comments often exemplify dominant or widely shared viewpoints, they offer a concentrated lens on how platform users frame and engage with gender discourse. This approach aligns with the theoretical assumption that prominently endorsed comments carry substantial influence and exhibit strong social representativeness among the audience.

3.3 Data Preprocessing and Analysis and Focus of Analysis

Python's jieba word-segmentation tool (version 0.42.1) was used, complemented by the Harbin Institute of Technology's Chinese general stop-word library, to remove common fillers, ensuring precise keyword extraction. The SnowNLP library (version 0.12.3) calculated sentiment, assigning 0 to purely negative and 1 to strictly positive. To address irony, meme culture, and contextual nuances (e.g., "the mother's sacrifice is just fine"), 15 samples (10% of the total) were manually corrected, thereby increasing analytic precision. Following Fairclough's (1992) Critical Discourse Analysis framework, open coding and thematic categorisation were conducted, classifying comments into three discourse patterns: (1) attack, (2) satirical/implicit, and (3) academic/analytical. Multiple researchers coded independently, and cross-validation was used to ensure reliability.

The study zeroes in on the gender narrative conflicts elicited by *Ne Zha 2*, encompassing feminist interpretations, critiques of maternal sacrifice, concerns about the male gaze, and the perceived narrative absence of ordinary characters. Both quantitative metrics (e.g., sentiment distribution, keyword frequencies) and qualitative interpretations (e.g., discourse patterns) are presented in the findings. The most contemporaneous and pertinent discussions regarding the film were captured by completing all data processing and analysis before March 31, 2025. This integrated approach offers a comprehensive perspective on the real-time evolution and polarisation of gender

discourse on one of China's most influential digital media platforms.

4. Data Analysis: Construction of Gender Narrative Conflicts

4.1 Classification and Rhetorical Features of Discourse Patterns

Through critical discourse analysis, this study found that 150 highly liked comments present three main discourse patterns. These patterns not only reflect users' different understandings and evaluative positions on "*Ne Zha 2*'s" gender narratives but also reveal power mechanisms operating around gender issues in contemporary Chinese cyberspace. As shown in Table 1, the quantity distribution, proportion, rhetorical features, and typical cases of each pattern display distinct differences. Attack-type discourse (60 comments, 40.0%) dominates in this study's corpus, with core features being emotional expression and frequent use of binary opposition rhetoric. This type of discourse often directly targets feminist ideas or plot stereotyping issues, constructing an "us-them" oppositional framework. For example, "Feminism ruined the movie, it's disgusting" (2,561 likes, from "Spring Festival Films, Feminism, and Cute-speak Literature") uses strong negative words like "disgusting" and "ruined" to stigmatise "feminism," constructing a binary opposition between "feminism" and "ordinary viewers," reflecting strong resistance to gender ideological intervention in film creation. Similarly, "Cultural workers must have culture!" (12,944 likes from "How Feminism Crashed the Film Market") strengthens the discourse's aggressiveness through commanding tone and exclamation marks while implying questioning of creators' cultural literacy. This type of discourse reflects how antagonistic discourse constructs legitimacy and mobilisation power around gender issues in the digital media context.

Satirical/implicit discourse (52 comments, 34.7%) employs more subtle but equally effective criticism strategies, primarily expressing dissatisfaction through humour, metaphor, or frivolity, thereby avoiding direct conflict while achieving critical objectives. For example, "Ne Zha is only three years old, did you think about him being three when shipping CP?" (1,493 likes, from "The Root of Emotional Discomfort in *Ne Zha 2*") cleverly uses an age

joke to tease the CP (character pairing) marketing phenomenon between Ne Zha and Ao Bing. It appears to be a light-hearted tease, but is a profound question of the conflict between commercial marketing and the original spirit. Another example, "A delicious bowl of beef noodles, yet they insist it beats world cuisine" (1,939 likes, from "When Will This Farce End"), uses a daily food metaphor to imply the phenomenon of excessive praise in film evaluation, subtly but powerfully criticising the complex psychological mechanisms behind cultural inferiority and exaggeration. The rhetorical strategies of this discourse type reflect Chinese internet users' strategic avoidance and creative expression when speaking on sensitive issues, forming a special form of resistance discourse.

Academic/analytical discourse (38 comments, 25.3%) reflects the rational thinking and structural criticism capabilities existing among user groups. This type of discourse emphasises the application of theoretical frameworks, concept analysis, and dissection of the text's internal logic. The demise of the mother serves as a narrative device that propels the male protagonist's development, as articulated in "Evolution of Heroes—When 'Mother's Sacrifice' Becomes a Trope" (4,985 likes). This analysis employs principles from narratology and gender studies to scrutinise the role of maternal sacrifice and its contribution to the narrative framework of male character evolution. Likewise, "Chen Tang Pass citizens attend the Li family son's birth ceremony, yet all perish without concern" (1,745 likes, from "*Ne Zha 2* is Excellent, But I Don't Like It") illustrates the systemic disregard for ordinary characters in mainstream cinematic narratives from a narrative ethics standpoint, exemplifying structural critical discourse practice. The existence of this discourse type indicates that even on digital platforms with obvious emotional tendencies, there still exists space for rational analysis and deep criticism, providing richer dimensions for public discussion. The coexistence and interaction of these three discourse patterns constitute a complex discourse ecology surrounding "*Ne Zha 2*'s" gender narratives, reflecting contemporary Chinese internet users' multiple positions and expression strategies on gender issues. Meanwhile, the dominant position of attack-type discourse (40.0%) also reveals the high sensitivity and controversy of gender issues in current Chinese cyberspace, a phenomenon worth deep consideration against the broader background of social-cultural transformation and value concept changes.

Table 1. Discourse Pattern Classification and Examples n=150 Coded Comments.

Pattern	Number	Percentage	Example Comment	Likes	Video Source
Attack-type	60	40.0%	"Feminism ruined the movie, it's disgusting"	2,561	Spring Festival Films, Feminism, and Cute-speak Literature
Satirical/implicit	52	34.7%	"Ne Zha is only three years old, did you think about him being three when shipping CP?"	1,493	The Root of Emotional Discomfort in <i>Ne Zha 2</i>
Academic/analytical	38	25.3%	"The mother's death is actually a narrative tool, driving the male protagonist's growth"	4,985	Evolution of Heroes—Mother Sacrifice Trope

4.2 Keyword Analysis and Semantic Network of Gender Issues

To gain a deeper understanding of the semantic structure of “*Ne Zha 2*” comment discourse, this study conducted keyword extraction and frequency statistical analysis on the corpus using jieba word segmentation. As shown in Table 2, the distribution and co-occurrence relationships of the top 20 high-frequency words reveal a complex semantic network intertwining multiple dimensions of gender, culture, and commerce. These keywords reflect the core issues and focus of discussion and embody the mutual penetration and competition relationship of different value dimensions. From a character-centric perspective, “*Ne Zha*” emerges as the central word, appearing 85 times and running through nearly all comments, running through almost all comments and forming the core node of the entire discussion. Related words such as “*Ao Bing*” (20 times) and “*father-son*” (18 times) further outline the popularity of discussions about the film’s character relationship network. Notably, the high frequency of the word “*mother*” (38 times), forming a semantic cluster with words like “*tool character*” (15 times) and “*sacrifice*” (13 times), directly points to the core controversy of gender narratives—the functional positioning and value shaping of female characters in the narrative.

From the film evaluation dimension, words like “*movie*” (62 times), “*plot*” (58 times), “*box office*” (45 times), and “*special effects*” (28 times) form an assessment framework for the film’s overall quality and commercial performance, reflecting users’ multi-level attention to the film.

Words like “*common people*” (35 times) and “*Chen Tang Pass*” (32 times) point to the problem of ordinary characters being marginalised in the narrative, forming a critical dimension opposed to protagonist-centrism. From an ideological level, words like “*feminism*” (25 times), “*culture*” (22 times), “*confidence*” (16 times), “*ideology*” (11 times), and “*tradition*” (10 times) form a complex semantic field around cultural identity and gender politics, reflecting that *Ne Zha 2* has triggered not just an evaluation of a single film but a deeper debate about gender value orientation in contemporary Chinese cultural production. The frequent appearance of “*feminism*” (ranking 9th) mainly reflects the prominent position of gender ideology in contemporary film evaluation systems. This phenomenon warrants further analysis from cultural studies and gender politics perspectives. An analysis of these keywords’ co-occurrence relationships and semantic associations reveals that the commentary surrounding “*Ne Zha 2*” represents a multi-dimensional framework for meaning construction. This framework encompasses various dimensions, including gender narratives (such as “*mother*,” “*feminism*,” “*tool character*”), cultural identity (including “*culture*,” “*tradition*,” “*confidence*”), and commercial performance (like “*box office*,” “*special effects*”), which interconnect and exert mutual influence, creating a complex discourse ecosystem. This multi-faceted discourse illustrates the trend of diversification and complexity in evaluation criteria for contemporary Chinese film and television, emphasising that gender narratives have emerged as a crucial aspect in such evaluations.

Table 2. Top 20 Keyword Frequencies n=150 Coded Comments.

Rank	Keyword	Frequency	Rank	Keyword	Frequency
1	Ne Zha	85	11	Ao Bing	20
2	Movie	62	12	Father-son	18
3	Plot	58	13	Confidence	16
4	Box office	45	14	Tool character	15
5	Mother	38	15	Growth	14
6	Common people	35	16	Sacrifice	13
7	Chen Tang Pass	32	17	Trope	12
8	Special effects	28	18	Ideology	11
9	Feminism	25	19	Tradition	10
10	Culture	22	20	Character	9

4.3 Sentiment Analysis: Emotional Polarisation Phenomenon in Gender Narrative Evaluation

4.3.1 Overall Distribution and Polarisation Features of Comment Sentiment

This study applied sentiment analysis methods to quantitatively measure the sentiment tendencies of 150 highly

liked comments, with results showing comment sentiment presenting apparent negative dominance and polarisation features. As shown in Table 3, in the overall sentiment distribution, negative emotions (score <0.5) dominate, reaching 90 comments, accounting for 60.0%; positive emotions (score >0.5) account for 38.0% with 57 comments, while neutral emotions (score =0.5) account for only 2.0%

with 3 comments. This negative-leaning sentiment distribution deserves interpretation from multiple angles.

First, a significant feature can be observed in negative emotion comments: these comments mainly concentrate on criticisms of gender narrative problems and plot logic. For example, “The mother’s sacrifice is just fine, but the next second it’s brotherhood again” (13,196 likes, from “Evolution of Heroes,” corrected score 0.30) reflects viewers’ dissatisfaction with the film’s improper handling of emotional transitions, especially the discomfort with the narrative quickly shifting to male character relationships after a female character’s sacrifice. Similarly, “Feminism ruined the movie; it’s disgusting” (2,561 likes, score 0.12) presents a strong aversion to feminist intervention in film creation through extreme emotional expression. The high number of likes for these negative comments (13,196 and 2,561, respectively) indicates that this emotion has received considerable resonance and recognition among platform users, reflecting that negative emotions surrounding gender narratives have a solid group foundation.

Second, positive emotional comments mainly relate to the film’s technical achievements, visual presentation, and commercial success. For example, “The special effects are explosive; watching it with great enjoyment” (1,497 likes, from “How Feminism Crashed the Film Market,” score 0.78) reflects high recognition of the film’s visual effects; “*Ne Zha 2* is a visual commercial film, proving domestic films can also make popcorn movies” (2,231 likes, from “Cultural Inferiority Complex Behind Excessive Praise,” score 0.65) expresses affirmation of domestic film technical achievements. Notably, these positive comments can receive high likes even under videos with obviously negative-leaning titles (such as “How Feminism Crashed the Film Market”), indicating that users can positively recognise the film’s technical achievements while criticising gender narratives, demonstrating the multi-dimensionality of evaluations.

Third, although neutral emotion comments are rare (only 3, accounting for 2.0%), they convey important information. For example, “*Ne Zha 2* is a good film, but saying it’s in the world’s top ten is a bit much” (2,694 likes, from “Cultural Inferiority Complex Behind Excessive Praise,” score 0.50) attempts to maintain rational restraint while affirming the film’s achievements, avoiding excessive praise or depreciation, reflecting a relatively balanced evaluation position. The minimal proportion (2.0%) of balanced perspectives in overall comments indirectly indicates the prevalent phenomenon of emotional polarisation in contemporary online discussions. This polarisation feature of sentiment distribution has a particular inherent connection with discourse pattern distribution: attack-type discourse (40.0%) is often accompanied by strong negative emotional expressions. In comparison, academic/analytical discourse (25.3%) presents relatively balanced emotional tendencies more often. This correlation suggests that there may be a mutually reinforcing mechanism between emotional polarisation and discourse pattern choice, which

warrants further exploration from media psychology and digital ethnography perspectives.

4.3.2 Sentiment Differences and Polarisation Mechanisms in Issue Stratification

To deeply understand the internal mechanisms of emotional polarisation, this study further analysed comment sentiment by issue. As shown in Table 4, sentiment distribution under different issues presents significant differences, revealing emotional differentiation and group position opposition phenomena in gender-related discussions. In feminist issues (30 comments), sentiment distribution shows an obvious negative bias: negative emotions account for 70% (21 comments), positive emotions account for only 20% (6 comments), and neutral emotions account for 10% (3 comments). This highly negative emotional tendency reflects the intense controversy and opposition around feminism in current Chinese cyberspace. Notably, even comments positively evaluating feminist issues have relatively low likes (such as “Female character portrayal is not bad,” with only 205 likes). At the same time, negative evaluations often receive higher likes (such as “Feminism ruined the movie,” with 2,561 likes). This significant difference in like numbers indirectly reflects the possible gender concept tendencies among platform user groups.

Similarly, in maternal sacrifice issues (35 comments), negative emotions also dominate (65%, 23 comments), positive emotions account for only 25% (9 comments), and neutral emotions account for 10% (3 comments). Typical negative comments like “Yin Furen’s death feels like a tool character” (4,389 likes, score 0.35) directly question the narrative functionalisation of the mother character, while positive comments like “Maternal love is truly great” (1,835 likes, score 0.70) give affirmation from the perspective of traditional maternal values. This emotional differentiation reflects users’ different interpretations of maternal sacrifice narrative—some criticise the instrumentalization of characters from a feminist perspective. In contrast, others praise maternal sacrifice from the perspective of traditional filial culture, reflecting the complex intertwining and tension between traditional and modern gender concepts in contemporary Chinese society.

The special effects/box office issue (40 comments) presents a sentiment distribution contrary to the above issues: positive emotions dominate (60%, 24 comments), negative emotions account for only 35% (14 comments), and neutral emotions account for 5% (2 comments). This suggests that “*Ne Zha 2*” has been well-received for its technical accomplishments and commercial success; viewers have generally praised the film’s impressive visual effects and strong box office performance. “The plot doesn’t match the special effects” (1,277 likes, score 0.40) is one of 35% of the negative comments in this otherwise positive issue, suggesting that some viewers are critical of the film’s content-to-form mismatch. Most notably, the citizen neglect issue (25 comments) has the highest negative emotion rate at 85% (21 comments), with positive emo-

tions at only 10% (3 comments) and neutral emotions at 5% (1 comment), making it the category with the highest proportion of negative emotions among all issues. Typical negative comments like “Do Chen Tang Pass citizens count as seaweed?” (1,734 likes, score 0.25) sharply question the film’s disregard for ordinary character portrayals through the internet popular phrase “count as seaweed” (homophonic with “count as love”). This highly negative emotional tendency reveals users’ deep dissatisfaction with mainstream commercial films, neglecting the fate of ordinary people, reflecting potential people-oriented care and critical consciousness.

The cultural confidence issue (20 comments) presents a relatively balanced sentiment distribution: negative emotions account for 55% (11 comments), positive emotions account for 40% (8 comments), and neutral emotions account for 5% (1 comment). This relatively balanced distribution reflects users’ complex attitudes toward cultural confidence issues. There are positive encouragements

like “Cultural confidence is daring to create” (2,570 likes, score 0.68), and also rational criticisms of excessive confidence like “A bowl of beef noodles beating world cuisine” (1,939 likes, score 0.45), reflecting the multiple cultural positions and reflective abilities existing in user groups. A vital phenomenon emerges through a comparative analysis of sentiment distributions across various issues: issues surrounding gender narratives (feminism, maternal sacrifice) and social care issues (citizen neglect) are often accompanied by higher proportions of negative emotions. In comparison, higher proportions of positive emotions accompany technical achievement issues (special effects/box office). This differentiated sentiment distribution reflects the multi-dimensional evaluation system of contemporary Chinese audiences for film and television works. While recognising technological progress, they raise more critical requirements for gender expression and social care dimensions, demonstrating the complexity and diversification of audience group evaluation standards.

Table 3. Issue Sentiment Distribution n=150 Coded Comments

Issue	Count	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Example Comment	Likes	Score	Video Source
Feminism	30	20%	70%	10%	“Feminism ruined the movie, it’s disgusting”	2,561	0.12	Spring Festival Films, Feminism, and Cute-speak Literature
Maternal sacrifice	35	25%	65%	10%	“Yin Furen’s death feels like a tool character”	4,389	0.35	Evolution of Heroes—Mother Sacrifice Trope
Special effects/box office	40	60%	35%	5%	“The special effects are explosive, watched it with great enjoyment”	1,497	0.78	How Feminism Crashed the Film Market
Citizen neglect	25	10%	85%	5%	“Do Chen Tang Pass citizens count as seaweed?”	1,734	0.25	Brief Review of <i>Ne Zha 2</i> (Criticism-oriented)
Cultural confidence	20	40%	55%	5%	“A bowl of beef noodles beating world cuisine”	1,939	0.45	When Will This Farce End

4.4 Relationship between Video Themes and Gender Discourse

To further reveal the temporal dynamic features of *Ne Zha 2*-related discussions, this study divided samples by video release time into three stages, analysing the evolution trajectory of emotional tendencies. This time dimension analysis provides an essential perspective for understanding public opinion evolution mechanisms. In the early stage (January-early February, three videos, 45 comments), sentiment distribution is relatively balanced: positive evaluations account for 45%, negative assessments account for 50%, and neutral evaluations account for 5%. Discussions in this period mainly revolved around the film’s special effects performance and market performance, reflecting the relatively objective and comprehensive nature of early evaluations. Users focus more on the film’s visual presentation, production standards, and commercial value, with

relatively less attention to gender narrative issues.

In the second stage (mid-February, four videos, 60 comments), sentiment distribution goes downhill as discussions go deeper: positive evaluations drop to 35%, negative evaluations climb to 62%, and neutral evaluations fall to 3%. The public’s attention moved from technical to content-related concerns during this time, as more critical conversations centre on gender narrative issues, particularly the maternal sacrifice motif. Specifically, films with explicit themes such as “Evolution of Heroes—When ‘Mother’s Sacrifice’ Becomes a Trope” sparked a great deal of critical discourse around tales of maternal sacrifice, which in turn drove the spike of negative feelings. In the late stage (late February-early March, three videos, 45 comments), negative emotions intensify: positive evaluations decrease to 33%, negative evaluations rise to 65%, and neutral evaluations are only 2%. Discussions in this stage extend to broader issues like “citizen neglect” and

“excessive praise,” with more obvious emotional polarisation phenomena. Discussions around the fate of “Chen Tang Pass citizens” have become a new focus of criticism, driving the continued rise of negative emotions.

This negative evolution trend of emotional tendencies over time reflects the typical development logic of online public opinion: from the relatively balanced early stage to the emotional polarisation of later stages, from surface technical evaluation to deep narrative criticism. This phenomenon may be related to the following factors: First, as discussions deepen, more hidden narrative problems are uncovered, leading to the expansion and deepening of criticism perspectives; second, the cumulative effect of online discussions means that later speakers often further deepen criticism based on previous criticisms, forming a progressive development of criticism; third, platform recommendation algorithms may tend to push emotional, controversial content, further strengthening the spread and accumulation of negative emotions. This time dimension of emotional evolution provides important insights for understanding opinion formation mechanisms in digital media environments. It reveals how online discussions gradually evolve from initial surface evaluations to deeper critical discussions and the dynamic mechanisms by which emotional polarisation is progressively strengthened in this process.

4.5 Lgbtq+ Elements and Symbol Contestation of Diverse Gender Identities

About 15% of highly-liked comments involve the “ambiguous relationship” or CP (character pairing) feeling between *Ne Zha* and Ao Bing, constituting a special sub-text interpretation practice. This interpretation practice mainly manifests as two competing symbol contestation strategies. On one hand, fan groups construct LGBTQ+ symbolic meanings through detailed interpretation, viewing character interactions as implying same-sex emotions. For example, bullet comments like “broke down at the eye contact,” comment terms like “I ship it,” and various CP derivative names (like “Bing Zha”) constitute a set of fan discourse systems. Through this system, user groups construct their own emotional narratives in the gaps of official narratives, demonstrating viewers’ positive expectations and creative acceptance of gender-diverse expressions. On the other hand, critical groups interpret these CP elements as commercial “queerbaiting” strategies, considering them lacking sincere gender equality care. Comments like “*Ne Zha* is only three years old, did you think about him being three when shipping CP?” (1,493 likes, score 0.32) question the ethics of CP marketing by reminding of character age; “Deliberately blurring Ao Bing’s gender is just to sell CP” (987 likes, score 0.29) directly points out dissatisfaction with commercial strategies. These criticisms reflect some users’ vigilance against superficial LGBTQ+ elements, demanding more sincere, profound gender-diverse expressions.

The interpretation of CP (character pairing) elements not only reflects audience expectations for expressions of gender diversity but also exposes the strategic manipulation of gender issues by commercial content creators. Nakamura (2015) proposes that symbolic inclusion often becomes emotional labour passively undertaken by minority groups on social media platforms and digital media, especially when platforms utilise the interactivity and topical nature generated by gender minorities to boost traffic performance without truly providing an equal discourse space[19]. This capitalised expectation and depoliticised symbolisation manifest in *Ne Zha 2* through the starkly different interpretations of CP hints between fans and critics, mirroring the discussions and conflicts regarding gender symbols within the platform-based cultural industry. This symbol contestation around LGBTQ+ elements, along with feminist criticism and maternal sacrifice discussions, constitutes the three dimensions of gender narrative controversy in *Ne Zha 2*, jointly reflecting the complex intertwining relationship between contemporary Chinese popular culture and gender politics. It is noteworthy that these three dimensions are not isolated but are interconnected. For example, some comments juxtapose “queerbaiting” and the weakening of female characters, treating both as different manifestations of commercial strategies. This reflects a systematic critical awareness of gender politics in commercial filmmaking.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of discourse power, gender politics, and communication patterns yields several significant insights into the complex mechanisms underlying gender narratives in contemporary Chinese digital media. The research identifies a multifaceted discourse ecosystem characterised by the coexistence and interaction of confrontational, satirical, and analytical communication patterns through which users negotiate gender narratives. The prevalence of confrontational discourse (40.0%) alongside the dominance of negative emotional expressions (60.0%) highlights the emotional polarisation characteristic of Chinese social media discourse. Rather than diminishing Bilibili’s function as a public forum, this emotional landscape demonstrates how the platform serves as a dynamic arena where diverse perspectives actively engage with one another. The controversy surrounding *Ne Zha 2* transcends mere film criticism, reflecting deeper sociocultural tensions in contemporary gender politics. User critiques regarding the limited functionality of female characters, repetitive maternal sacrifice narratives, and commercially-motivated LGBTQ+ references illuminate not merely a progressive-conservative dichotomy but also significant ideological divergences among progressive viewers—particularly regarding perceived “queerbaiting” practices. These discussions illustrate how younger, digitally-native audiences increasingly demand substantive and equitable gender representations in popular media, rejecting su-

perfidial inclusivity. Platform mechanics serve as crucial factors influencing the content and structure of gender discourse. The theme selections of content makers, the amplification processes of popular comments, and recommendation algorithms operate in concert to exacerbate issues. Content that provokes emotional reactions generally results in increased engagement metrics, establishing a feedback loop in which user interactions and platform design together influence the creation of public opinion. The gender narrative controversy surrounding *Ne Zha 2* fundamentally represents the complex interrelationship between Chinese popular culture, gender politics, and digital communication ecology. As gender consciousness evolves, audience expectations transcend token inclusivity, demanding authentic portrayals of women, men, and LGBTQ+ characters. This transformation in audience expectations reflects the evolving gender norms in Chinese society while highlighting the transformative influence of digital platforms on public discourse formation.

Despite its contributions, this study presents several methodological limitations that require acknowledgment. The analytical focus on highly liked Bilibili comments potentially overrepresents provocative viewpoints, as platform algorithms and user behaviour patterns typically privilege contentious content. Nevertheless, these prominent comments effectively capture dominant positions within the online environment, aligning with the research objective of examining contested gender discourses. The integrated methodological approach combines critical discourse analysis, sentiment analysis, and digital ethnography to examine online gender discourse dynamics comprehensively. Yet, challenges persist in synthesising computational methods with qualitative interpretation. Future research trajectories might address these limitations through algorithmic refinements for detecting contextual nuances and sarcasm or through developing more robust theoretical frameworks that systematically connect textual data with broader sociocultural determinants.

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Appendix

This appendix documents the ten Bilibili videos selected as primary data sources for this study. Each video contains commentary on *Ne Zha 2*, with content specifically addressing issues of gender representation, ideological polarisation, and digital discourse. The top 15 most-liked comments were extracted and processed from each video for sentiment and discourse analysis. All data were collected between January and March 2025.

No.	Video Title (English Translation)	Channel Name	Sampled Comments	URL
1	Brief Review of <i>Ne Zha 2</i> (Critique Style): Sea Monster Child and Its Flaws	Baitaonai	15	Link
2	The Spring Festival Movie Season, Self-Admiration, and “Cutesy” Literature	Faya Faya	15	Link
3	From the Counter-Trend Rise of <i>Ne Zha 2</i> : How Did Feminism Crash the Market?	Fengyan Fenghua	15	Link
4	The Evolution of Heroes — When “Mother’s Sacrifice” Becomes a Trope	Heizhishanwufachenmo	15	Link
5	<i>Ne Zha 2</i> Is Excellent, But I Don’t Like It	IBqihaowanjia	15	Link
6	When Will This Farce Finally End	Jinggaixiaozi	15	Link
7	<i>Ne Zha 2</i> and the Billion-Yuan Box Office: Is It Self-Indulgence?	Quannei Lilaoshi	15	Link
8	The Cultural Inferiority Complex Behind the Excessive Praise of <i>Ne Zha 2</i>	Sushi Shidian	15	Link
9	A Rather Personal Rant: <i>Ne Zha 2</i> and CP Fans (Please Don’t Read)	Tong Yingying	15	Link
10	The Root of Emotional Discomfort in <i>Ne Zha 2</i> : Aesthetic Dilemma of Animation	Yuanfang Aguai	15	Link

Note: The content of these videos was not directly quoted in this paper. Anonymised user comments were extracted and processed as part of a self-constructed dataset. All data collection concluded in March 2025. URLs are provided for transparency and review purposes only.