# “There’s No Way Out… This Phenomenon Is Everywhere”: Early-Career, Non-Managerial Chinese Women’s Experiences of Workplace Cyberbullying

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*Article*

# "There's No Way Out… This Phenomenon Is Everywhere": Early-Career, Non-Managerial Chinese Women's Experiences of Workplace Cyberbullying

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**Abstract**

Digital messaging applications structure everyday work in China, with WeChat often used via employees' personal accounts, organisational communication becomes merged with private life. This study uses interpretative phenomenological analysis to examine how workplace cyberbullying (WCB) is experienced and understood in routine WeChat-mediated work. Nine semi-structured interviews were conducted with early-career, non-managerial Chinese women (aged 26–32) who had experienced WCB. The analysis identified five themes showing that WCB was typically embedded in daily digital work practices rather than confined to isolated hostile incidents. Participants reported reputational attacks, public undermining, and exclusion in group chats alongside gendered degradation, such as sexualised rumours about promotion, as well as client-initiated online sexual harassment. They also recounted culturally normalised hierarchical cyber-control through monitoring of responsiveness, demands for deference in group spaces, and expectations of late-night and weekend compliance. Some accounts described paternalistic "dad-flavour" messaging that framed obedience as care or guidance. Work demands routinely crossed into participants' personal spheres through after-hours contact and corporate visibility requirements via personal accounts. Many participants avoided formal reporting, citing uncertainty about what counts as WCB, low confidence in organisational action, and the risks of challenging authority. Coping relied on venting, emotional detachment, avoidance, and technical workarounds, alongside a clear desire for organisational protection. These findings highlight the need for stronger digital communication governance, including clear policies on personal-account use for work, after-hours contact, mandatory corporate visibility practices, and escalation routes for client-initiated sexual harassment.

**Keywords**: workplace cyberbullying; digital communication; WeChat; mandatory corporate visibility; interpretative phenomenological analysis; toxic digital environment; China

## Introduction

Advances in digital communication have reshaped the spatial and temporal boundaries of contemporary work (Hu and Qian 2024), extending organisational control by enabling continuous access and monitoring (D'Cruz and Noronha 2013). These shifts may create additional opportunities for interpersonal aggression and gendered forms of mistreatment (Loh and Snyman 2020). Mobile messaging, workplace platforms, and always-on connectivity now permeate professional communication, often blurring the line between work and personal life (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Aroles 2020). As such, workplace cyberbullying (WCB) has become a growing concern.

WCB is commonly described as repeated harmful behaviour delivered through electronic channels in ways that make it difficult for individuals to defend themselves (Farley et al. 2016). It can involve exclusion from work-related communication, hostile or insulting messages, and public

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criticism in digital spaces (Ejaz, Razi, and Choudhury 2024). Because digital platforms are portable and always available, harmful interactions can extend beyond organisational boundaries and intrude into private spaces (Alrawashdeh et al. 2024). Such experiences of WCB have been linked to poorer job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Salazar et al. 2024) as well as impaired trust and morale within teams (Kallis and Meluch 2024). WCB has also been associated with emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and depression (Javed et al. 2023), with adverse effects on women in particular (Gardner et al. 2016). However, the pathways behind these gendered effects remain poorly understood.

Despite these documented harms, the theoretical development of WCB remains limited (Yan et al. 2025). A key issue is that standard definitions lag behind rapid technological changes. Digital communication practices evolve quickly, and earlier definitions fall short of certain practices that are now common in organisational life (Iftikhar et al. 2021). Furthermore, existing frameworks overlook subtle or relational forms of digital aggression, particularly in cultural contexts that privilege indirectness, hierarchy, and relational harmony (Kwan, Tuckey, and Dollard 2020). These omissions suggest that WCB may be more complex and context-dependent than current definitions capture.

These issues are especially salient in high power-distance contexts, where hierarchical expectations can shape how people interpret critique, monitoring, and refusal (Karatuna et al. 2020). China, for instance, portrays such a cultural context. Research on Chinese organisational culture harmony maintenance, conflict avoidance, and deference to authority stand as common norms (Dai and Chen 2017). Within such settings, managerial criticism can be presented as developmental feedback whilst it is experienced as demeaning or punitive (Seo et al. 2012). Employees may also endure unpleasant treatment to preserve harmony and avoid loss of face (Kwan, Tuckey, and Dollard 2020). Furthermore, high power distance can discourage reporting and increase tolerance of behaviours that would be labelled bullying elsewhere (Park et al. 2021).

China's digital work ecosystem can further shape how workplace interactions unfold. The near-universal use of WeChat and similar platforms has created an always-on communication environment that extends organisational reach into evenings, weekends, and personal spaces (Tian 2021). When work communication occurs in the same channel used for family and friends, employees may experience context collapse, making it harder to maintain personal boundaries (Marwick and Boyd 2011). These pressures may intersect with long-hour work mandates. For example, public debates around '996' have been used to legitimise extended availability in some workplaces (Liu and Chen 2025). The combination of hierarchical norms and pervasive digital contact can thus facilitate workplace mistreatment. Gender seems to further complicate this, as women face persistent inequalities in recruitment, promotion, and pay (He 2024). Some job advertisements explicitly prefer male applicants or limit the eligibility to early-career women without family responsibilities ( Liu 2024). Age and appearance of women can also mediate career opportunities (Zhang 2024). Despite high levels of educational attainment, women remain underrepresented in leadership roles, often expected to demonstrate loyalty, modesty, and emotional self-restraint in ways that differ from men's experiences (Liu 2024). Traditional gender norms and the discourse of "leftover women" continue to pressure early-career women to prioritise marriage and motherhood, shaping how they make sense of work, ambition, and self-worth (Gui 2020; Yang, Zeng, and Wang 2023). These dynamics reveal that women's workplace experiences are tied closely to broader cultural narratives and gendered expectations, which may influence not only their vulnerability to cyberbullying but also their ability to respond to it.

Despite this convergence of technological, cultural, and gendered inequities, research on WCB in China remains sparse. Previous studies were predominantly grounded in Western contexts (Aslam et al. 2024; Oguz, Mehta, and Palvia 2023), which stand significantly distinct in organisational norms and communication practices as compared to China. It is thus unclear to what extent these findings apply to the WCB in Chinese workplaces. Additionally, because most findings are drawn from quantitative methods, less is known about how gender, age, and job level intersect with power and culture to shape lived experience. As research synthesising gender, organisational hierarchy, and

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cultural context remains limited, there remain important gaps in understanding the experience of WCB in specific groups.

Qualitative studies, although scarce, can offer deeper insight into the specific sociocultural contexts surrounding WCB. For instance, studies including various professionals, including technicians, clinicians, and academics show that WCB often spills beyond formal boundaries with digital platforms used to enforce organisational control and intrude into private lives (D'Cruz and Noronha 2013, 2014; Heatherington and Coyne 2014; Forssell 2020; Naveed, Ali, and Aziz 2024; D'Souza et al. 2022). These studies demonstrate that cyberbullying cannot be understood without considering its social and organisational context.

To reiterate, qualitative research on employees' subjective experiences in specific cultural and organisational contexts remains rare. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provides a suitable approach to address this gap, as it focuses on how individuals make sense of their own experiences within their cultural, relational, and organisational contexts (Smith and Nizza 2022). It can illuminate forms of meaning-making that are difficult to capture through quantitative approaches and provide insight into how individuals interpret ambiguous or culturally coded behaviours. While IPA has previously been used to examine cyberbullying among UK workers (Heatherington and Coyne 2014), it has rarely been applied to non-Western contexts or to groups facing intersecting vulnerabilities. Early-career, non-managerial Chinese women represent one such group. They occupy organisational positions with limited authority, work within hierarchical cultures that discourage confrontation, and face gendered expectations around obedience and relational harmony. These factors may shape both their exposure to WCB and their interpretation of it. Yet no previous qualitative studies have explored their experiences through an interpretative-phenomenological lens.

The goal of the present study is to explore how early-career, non-managerial Chinese women define, interpret, and navigate WCB. Conducting IPA provides a detailed account of their lived experiences and how WCB shapes their professional and personal lives. Consequently, this study further aims to enhance understanding of WCB by considering digital mistreatment in relation to the cultural, hierarchical, and gendered organisation of work in contemporary China, while bringing forward the experiences of a group that is largely overlooked in previous literature.

## Method

### *2.1. Design*

This study adopted interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009) to explore how early-career Chinese women in non-managerial roles experience WCB. IPA is suited to examining subjective, context-bound experiences and the meaning individuals assign to complex or ambiguous events (Heatherington and Coyne 2014; Smith and Nizza 2022). It also enables attention to relational, cultural, and organisational dynamics that may be overlooked in quantitative approaches (O'Neill and Borland 2018). Its flexible and inductive nature allows unanticipated themes to emerge, which is important for investigating a developing phenomenon such as WCB (Smith and Osborn 2015).

### *2.2. Participants*

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling via a study-specific WeChat account. Inclusion criteria required that individuals be over 18, be Mandarin-speaking, be employed or recently employed in China, and have experienced WCB. Recruitment was initially open to all genders, although only women volunteered. Nine participants aged 26–32 were included; one additional participant was excluded to maintain homogeneity because she held managerial responsibilities. The final sample aligns with IPA recommendations for detailed idiographic analysis (Smith, Larkin, and Flowers 2021). Participants worked in a range of non-managerial roles across public, private, and international organisations. Demographic information is shown in Table 1.

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### 2.3. Definition of WCB

In view of ongoing definitional inconsistencies in the literature (D'Souza et al. 2018), we adopted Farley et al.'s (2016, 299) definition of WCB as "perceived negative acts conducted through technology in which the target has difficulty defending themselves." This definition incorporates core elements found across studies, including negative acts, digital channels, work relevance, and power imbalance. It was also consistent with descriptions used in Chinese media sources (e.g., China Youth Daily 2021; People's Daily Online 2020) and was deemed appropriate following pilot testing with three Chinese professionals.

### 2.4. Interview schedule and data collection

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed following Smith and Nizza's (2022) guidelines. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to describe significant experiences, how incidents unfolded, how they interpreted digital interactions, and how cyberbullying affected their work and personal lives. Questions also explored organisational responses, cultural influences, and coping practices.

Interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams between May and September 2024. Each lasted around one hour, was audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed automatically before manual accuracy checks. Online interviewing was appropriate given participants' geographical spread and familiarity with digital communication tools.

### 2.5. Data analysis

Analysis followed established IPA procedures (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009; Nizza et al. 2021). Each transcript was read multiple times while listening to the audio recording to maintain closeness to the participants' voices. Exploratory comments captured descriptive content, language use, and early interpretative insights. These notes informed the development of experiential statements reflecting both participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretations.

Experiential statements were clustered into personal experiential themes for each participant, supported with verbatim extracts. Only after completing each case individually did the cross-case analysis begin. Patterns of convergence and divergence were examined while remaining attentive to how experiences varied within the shared cultural and organisational context. Group experiential themes were developed through iterative discussion among the authors and grounded closely in participants' words.

### 2.6. Reflexivity

Reflexivity was integral to the research process (Clancy 2013). The first author's Chinese cultural background and experience working in Chinese-speaking contexts supported cultural sensitivity whilst requiring ongoing awareness of potential assumptions. A reflexive journal was kept throughout the analysis to document interpretative decisions, emotional responses, and assumptions. Discussions with co-authors, who brought diverse cultural and disciplinary perspectives, helped challenge interpretations and minimise bias. None of the authors had personal experience of workplace cyberbullying, which supported openness to participants' meaning-making and ensured that interpretations were grounded in the data.

### 2.7. Quality considerations

Quality was ensured through sensitivity to context, transparency, and methodological rigour, consistent with Yardley's (2000) principles and recent IPA guidance (Nizza et al. 2021). An idiographic commitment was maintained through detailed case-by-case analysis before cross-case comparison. Credibility was enhanced through systematic documentation of analytic decisions and reflective engagement with emerging interpretations. Member reflections were sought by inviting participants to review short interpretative summaries, supporting the plausibility of the analysis.

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*2.8. Ethics*

Ethical approval was granted by De Montfort University's Research Ethics Committee. Participants received detailed information before providing written consent. They were informed of their right to withdraw within the agreed timeframe. Pseudonyms were used, and identifying information was removed. Data were stored securely in line with university and BPS (2021) ethical standards.

**Table 1**. Demographic information of the participants (n=9).

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender identity | Education | Work location (city, province) | Job role/organisation type | Work experience |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Haha | 30 | Female | Undergraduate degree | Shenzhen, Guangdong | Marketing/domestic company | 7.5 years |
| Xiaoman | 26 | Female | Master's degree | Wuhan, Hubei | Public opinion analyst/domestic company | 2 years |
| Alicia | 31 | Female | Master's degree | Shanghai | Market analyst/International Company | 7 years |
| Ding | 32 | Female | Master's degree | Shenzhen, Guangdong | Accountant/domestic Company | 6 years |
| A | 31 | Female | Undergraduate degree | Zhejiang | Kindergarten teacher/private school | 9 years |
| Momo | 28 | Female | Master's degree | Shenzhen, Guangdong | Business liaison/foreign government agency | 3 years |
| Clare | 31 | Female | Master's degree | Shenzhen, Guangdong | Market analyst/international company | 3 years |
| Yolanda | 27 | Female | Master's degree | Zhuhai, Guangdong | Auditor/international company | 3 years |

## 3. Findings

The analysis identified five themes (see Table 2) that describe how early-career, non-managerial Chinese women experienced and made sense of WCB within predominantly digitally intensive, hierarchical organisations. Taken together, the themes show how everyday digital tools became channels for gendered control, boundary intrusion, and enforced conformity, and how participants tried to endure and cope within these conditions. These five themes are discussed in detail below.

**Table 2.** Superordinate themes and subthemes.

| Superordinate themes | Subthemes |
|---|---|
| The digital work environment is toxic! | • The digital attacks and reputational damage<br>• Constant digital surveillance and control<br>• Conformity pressures and emotional manipulation<br>• Hierarchical discrimination through digital channels |
| Cultural normalisation of hierarchical cyber control | • Cultural acceptance of constant digital surveillance<br>• Expectation of constant availability as a professional standard<br>• Normalisation of overwork as responsibility |
| Invasion of personal boundaries | • There are no boundaries<br>• Life is contaminated |

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| | |
|---|---|
| Enduring in silence | • Grappling with understanding and defining workplace cyberbullying<br>• Perceived inefficacy of organisational supports<br>• Sense of powerlessness and helplessness |
| Coping and ideal organisation supports | • Individual coping strategies<br>• Ideal organisational support |

*3.1. The digital work environment is toxic*

Participants described a digital work environment that felt "very toxic, very toxic," in Alicia's words, and from which they wanted to "escape." Everyday platforms such as WeChat were not neutral communication tools but central infrastructures through which rumours spread, reputations were attacked, appearances were scrutinised, and hierarchies were enforced. As early-career, non-managerial women, participants experienced these spaces as structurally unequal: they were constantly visible to others, easily targeted, and lacked the authority to challenge what was happening.

The routine use of personal WeChat for work groups and communications blurred any distinction between professional and private life. Within these mixed spaces, digital aggression could move quickly and persistently across any time and place. Participants understood these experiences not simply as interpersonal conflict but as part of a broader pattern in which gender, age, and junior status made them particularly vulnerable to reputational damage, constant monitoring, pressure to conform, and discriminatory treatment.

"I think that in situations like this (WCB), it's not a healthy work environment. It's very toxic, very toxic, so I would really want to escape from it." (Alicia)

3.1.1. Digital attacks and reputational damage

Digital chats and groups were used to undermine participants' reputations, competence, and scrutinise their bodies and sexuality. These attacks drew on common stereotypes about early-career women's promotion, appearance, and credibility, and travelled quickly through online networks that junior women could not access.

Clare described how rumours about an alleged affair with her superior circulated in online groups from which she was excluded:

"There were people behind my back, online, discussing in small groups about what my relationship with this superior is, and why I was suddenly promoted to be his assistant. I feel this is a form of cyberbullying against me because these things can ferment. Yes, once there's a hint of it, it will ferment and grow dramatically, and this is unfair to me."

She linked these rumours directly to wider assumptions about women's careers:

"Especially in many domestic companies, people think that if you can get promoted, it must be because you rely on your sexual appeal or some kind of personal connection. I guess many people have this kind of thought."

For Clare, the problem was not just an isolated rumour but a digital environment where sexist explanations for women's advancement were deemed normal. In her position, she lacked both the status and the access necessary to defend herself in these hidden online conversations.

Alicia described how colleagues used private messaging and group chats to spread gossip immediately after in-person conversations:

"After you finish talking to him about something, he immediately turns around and privately messages other colleagues to talk about it, gossiping… This happens in group chats … I think this is a form of bullying because I believe it will inevitably affect the offline relationship."

Here she emphasised how online exchanges contaminated face-to-face relationships, fuelling a climate of distrust. She also felt repeatedly targeted in group chats, where bullying was reframed as humour:

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"I always feel that whenever I post something, I get attacked. Yes, attacked, attacked; this is very classic and definitely a form of bullying. The other person might think it's a joke or just expressing their opinion, but I feel very misunderstood and that they are not tolerant of different opinions. This happens between superiors and subordinates too, but it's more common among colleagues, especially in WeChat groups where people attack each other."

Her repetition of "attacked, attacked" conveys the ongoing, cumulative nature of these incidents. The framing of aggression as "just a joke" made it harder to challenge without appearing overly sensitive, particularly in her junior position.

Gendered attacks also extended to appearance. Leon recalled the gossip about her weight:

"As a girl, sometimes you ate a bit more and gained some weight… people started gossiping about it… I took it to heart and started dieting."

Her phrasing "as a girl" indicates that she understood this scrutiny as gendered. Colleagues' comments in digital spaces led her to change her behaviour offline, showing how cyberbullying around body image could shape women's self-perception and everyday practices. For these early-career, non-managerial women, digital channels became venues where femininity and appearance were policed in ways that undermined their professional identity.

### 3.1.2. Constant digital surveillance and control

Participants described digital communication tools as mechanisms of continuous oversight. Being logged into WeChat, responding in group chats, and appearing "online" were taken as visible signs of diligence. As junior women with limited authority, they felt they had to be constantly available to avoid criticism, even when this harmed their health.

Xiaoman traced the normalisation of this surveillance to the pandemic, which persisted afterwards:

"Due to Covid-19, the existence of work communication software has normalised this… You only need to be reachable online to assign tasks to you; it envelops you at all times, anywhere."

The metaphor of being "enveloped" captures how work tasks and expectations wrapped around her entire life. She later reflected that she felt "completely powerless," and that the situation affected her "physical and mental health," leading her to eventually leave the job. For her, digital surveillance was more than an inconvenience; it was a structural condition that made the job untenable.

Alicia offered a more concrete picture of how this surveillance operated in daily practice:

"The boss will check if you are online. We found ways to keep the mouse moving; if I stepped away for even a moment, the boss would ask, Where did you go?"

Here, early-career staff devised small technical tricks to simulate "being at work," using collective ("we") strategies to take short breaks from managerial scrutiny. These shared tactics reveal both the oppression of digital monitoring and their quiet resistance.

Leon described the pressure created by having superiors overseeing every group chat:

"We basically have our superior in every group chat. If we don't handle issues immediately, we could get criticised for it."

For early-career non-managerial women, the awareness that any delay might attract criticism reinforced the feeling that being constantly reachable was an unwritten requirement of the role.

### 3.1.3. Conformity pressures and emotional manipulation

Alongside overt monitoring, participants described more subtle pressures to conform to managerial demands and group norms in digital spaces. Appraisals were often communicated through emojis and comments in group chats, sometimes followed by private messages. These cues shaped how early-career women believed they would be evaluated.

Haha explained how even simple acts such as sending birthday wishes in a group chat became standardised:

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"Everyone started conforming by sending the same emojis, the same messages, just copying and pasting, even for birthday wishes… You're afraid that if you say something wrong, you'll get a private message, and your boss will think you're immature and affect your job evaluation."

Her account shows how conformity was enforced through a shared fear of private reprimands and negative judgments. Being seen as "immature" was particularly threatening for early-career employees. To avoid this, "everyone" copied and pasted the same phrases, limiting their own expression.

She went on to summarise the overall effect:

"It's like training an army of conformists, everyone becoming the same."

Her comparison to an "army" shows how rigid and compulsory this conformity felt to her, with "everyone becoming the same" reflecting that individuality was being stripped away.

The militaristic drive for conformity appears to extend beyond explicit commands into subtle forms of conformity. To Haha, even small reactions from superiors, like liking or disliking a post in a work group, could set the tone for what was acceptable. This led her team to adjust their actions accordingly:

"If you post something in the group and the boss gives two thumbs-up, everyone gets excited… If you post something and the boss doesn't respond at all… we won't post that kind of thing again."

Haha's account shows how tiny digital gestures from superiors could carry outsized weight. The collective "we" in "we won't post that kind of thing again" suggests that early-career women adapted to these signals together to stay safe. Her contrast between excitement at a simple thumbs-up and withdrawal after no response conveys the insecurity about their standing and vigilance to the cues from above.

The pressure to conform extends beyond simple approval or disapproval. Alicia noted how flattery became a way to maintain favour with bosses, even during personal time:

"The boss encourages it, he likes it when people flatter him during their personal time, sending all sorts of messages… I think it cascades down to everyone."

This "cascade" shows that digitally mediated patterns of deference spread through teams. For early-career women, participating in this flattery became another form of emotional labour for career survival.

Notably, Yolanda considered her career advancement as closely tied to expectations of submissive behaviour:

"Our boss doesn't promote people based on performance, but on impression. He prefers those who are well-behaved, with no personality, who won't resist."

Yolando's use of "well-behaved" and "no personality" suggests that they were bound to suppress their individuality, whilst "won't resist" implies that compliance was valued over competence. Taken together, these reflections articulate the pressure on employees to submit to the manager's expectations. In Yolando's experience, this rendered her self-view of professional worth to be contingent on her conformity. The emotional labour involved in constantly managing impression, tone, and timing in group chats has made the digital workplace feel toxic and exhausting.

#### 3.1.4. Hierarchical discrimination through digital channels

Participants also described how formal hierarchies were intensified online. Job titles, seniority, and client power shaped who could be criticised and whose time was considered expendable. In their accounts, being early-career women in junior roles meant feeling positioned at the bottom of these digital hierarchies.

A, a junior teacher, contrasted her treatment with that of more senior colleagues:

"Experienced teachers wouldn't be treated as recklessly as they treat new teachers."

For her, online disrespect clearly followed lines of seniority rather than chance. Being "new" meant being exposed to harsher treatment from parents and colleagues, which appeared as a form of discrimination embedded in digital interactions.

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Yolando described a senior colleague from the Hong Kong office using his status to insultingly belittle and patronise her:

"He said, 'You must be new, right?... He used his senior title to push me around, but I feel like he only treated me that way after seeing my title… You really don't know what's going on now, you're really lousy. You people can't think.

These comments positioned Yolanda as naïve and incompetent, with her inexperience used as the basis for dismissal. The phrase "you people" marks her out as part of a devalued group, linked both to her mainland office and her junior status, so the insult shifts from an individual slight to a judgment about an entire category of workers. For an early-career woman at the bottom of the hierarchy, this kind of digital attack reinforced a sense of being treated as intrinsically inferior, as everyday online exchanges became a channel for structural contempt. She also expressed frustration with a superior who abused his power:

"He acts like a tyrant. What he says goes,… All the dirty work gets passed to us. It's exhausting, and we don't even learn anything."

Calling her superior a "tyrant" captures how unchecked his power felt. Her account shows that digital channels allowed instructions and "dirty work" to flow downwards quickly, with little room to refuse or negotiate.

Moreover, in a group chat, Clare shared an experience of feeling pressured to sacrifice her personal time for work as managerial control extended beyond the office:

"Our superior required us to work overtime on the weekend in the work chat… I said I had plans, and the boss immediately replied, 'What do you mean personal plans? You're working now."

Here, the boss's reply, "you're working now," collapses any boundary between Clare's weekend and the organisation's demands. As a junior employee, her position enables no legitimate claim to personal time, even on a weekend. Issued in a group chat, the message becomes a public reminder that private plans are subordinate to work and questioning this order invites rebuke. That way, the superiors could use the group chats to discipline others from asserting similar boundaries.

Among the common experiences of hierarchical control and discrimination, Clare experienced cyberbullying beyond the organisation. She reported that online sexual harassment was routine in her sector:

"This is very common in foreign trade, especially since I'm a woman… the chances of being sexually harassed online are just too high."

In one instance, a client threatened to replace her with someone more compliant:

"If you don't reply, I'll find another more obedient Chinese girl."

Her account shows that gender, nationality, and power came together in exchanges with overseas clients. The threat to "find another more obedient Chinese girl" used both her gender and Chinese identity to pressure her, anticipating Chinese women as compliant and replaceable workers rather than professionals. Clare's emphasis on "very common", pointed to a systemic pattern rather than a one-off incident, where early-career women are expected to absorb sexualised and demeaning behaviour to protect business relationships. Her experience shows that online communication can intensify gendered and racialised abuse beyond organisational hierarchies, creating unsafe conditions in which early-career women have little power to refuse or challenge such treatment.

### *3.2. Cultural normalisation of hierarchical cyber-control*

Participants interpreted hierarchical control as an ingrained part of their work environment. Shaped by cultural expectations of obedience to authority, compliance felt like a basic condition for keeping their jobs. Digital monitoring encroached on their personal space, as superiors monitored social media posts, online status, and response times overnight. Participants knew such scrutiny might be viewed as intrusive elsewhere but described it as "very normal" in their context. This shared acceptance strengthened the sense that resisting digital control was both risky and unlikely to succeed.

#### 3.2.1. Cultural acceptance of constant digital surveillance

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Participants consistently presented digital monitoring as "very normal", a practice linked to cultural norms of deference to authority. Clare contrasted Chinese expectations with her perception of Western workplaces:

"Superiors check your personal social media every day. But you have to understand that this is very normal in China... Many companies require this, and it's mandatory. This is a cultural difference. You work abroad, your superior probably wouldn't interfere with your private matters as much, but it's different here."

Her comparison suggests that she did not interpret surveillance as an individual manager's behaviour but as part of an established cultural pattern. This meant they had to accept the scrutiny as part of the job, even when it extended deeply into private life.

Haha described how this surveillance was enacted through relentless late-night supervision:

"The superior stays up late with you to finish the work review. Every moment they keep asking you, at 1 am, asking: 'Is the review done? If it's done, send it to the group now.' At 2 am, they ask again, 'Still not done? Hurry up and send it.' The superior is joining you in working excessively hard."

Haha's experience illustrates how pervasive this oversight was, with superiors expecting immediate replies and repeated updates late into the night. Her phrasing "joining you" reframed overwork as shared sacrifice rather than coercion, which made it harder to see the behaviour as unreasonable. The idea that the boss was also "working excessively hard" suggests that both managers and junior staff were caught in the same cycle of overwork and monitoring, which she saw as a highly competitive work environment, and, as an early-career woman, she had little choice but to go along with it.

Leon summarised the sense of resignation that accompanied these expectations:

"This is just how things are in our company, and the broader environment… like the nature of our work affects our personal lives. But for survival, you have no choice. You are forced to accept this reality."

Here, acceptance of surveillance became a condition for continued employment. Her use of "survival" conveys a deep internalisation of these norms that mandated unconditional compliance for early-career women.

### 3.2.2. Expectation of constant availability as a professional standard

Participants described being constantly available as a moral and professional expectation rather than a violation of boundaries. In their view, responding slowly or disconnecting after hours risked being labelled uncommitted.

Alicia articulated the link between responsiveness and professional worth:

"If you don't meet these demands, your superiors will complain that you lack team spirit, that you're not committed to your work, or that you're slow to respond. All of this counts."

"Counts" here indicates that responsiveness was not only desirable but part of performance evaluation. For early-career women striving to prove competence, this intensified the pressure to be always available.

Haha shared an instance of this expectation playing out in practice:

"I've expressed in some open discussions with superiors in the company… I asked, 'What's the point of doing project reviews at dawn? Why do we have to post the completed project review in the work group at dawn? Why can't it wait until the next day? What difference do a few hours make?' I've raised this concern."

Her challenge was met with a defence of hyper-availability:

"The superior responded that if one person chooses to complete and send the project review the next day, while another chooses to send it at dawn, the one who's willing to push themselves to do it very well should, of course, be rewarded."

Here, Haha shows that constant availability was treated as a sign of dedication. Those who pushed themselves to send reviews at dawn were viewed more committed and worthy of rewards.

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This created pressure on junior staff to be online at unreasonable hours, turning availability into a key measure of their worth in the company.

3.2.3. Normalisation of overwork as responsibility

Participants framed overwork as a structural feature of China's labour market, exacerbated by digital platforms that sustained it day and night. However, many internalised it as a personal responsibility rather than admitting the exploitation.

Ding described overwork as a basic feature of working life:

"The work environment in China is too competitive; everyone is overworked. Overtime is very common."

The wording "everyone is overworked" presents long hours as a shared condition rather than an abuse, making overtime feel like something workers must endure without question.

To Haha, this expectation had seeped into everyday life:

"This is the general trend, and everyone is like this. When you come to this city to survive, you have to do the same. No one thinks about separating work and personal life; it's just naturally accepted."

For her, overwork was tied to survival in the city. The idea that "no one thinks about separating work and personal life" suggests that boundaries are not only weak but also inconceivable.

Leon provided another perspective by viewing it as hopeless to push back against overwork:

"There's no point in complaining to the line manager because that's just the nature of our work… I know that complaining is useless. Since I chose this job, I have to bear this pressure."

She had come to see the heavy workload and long hours owed to her choice. Efforts to push back felt pointless, so "bearing the pressure" became part of her understanding of the role.

Yolanda was more openly critical, describing her industry as warped by these expectations: "Constant overtime is considered normal. The industry itself is quite distorted, but this distortion has made everyone think it's normal."

The phrase "this distortion has made everyone think it's normal" suggests that what should be viewed as an abnormal or unhealthy demand (constant overtime) has been internalised to the point of accepting it as standard. Yolanda highlighted how the industry's "distortion" had skewed perceptions of what is reasonable, with workers becoming desensitised to the unreasonable demands. This became tangible in her description of working through the Chinese New Year:

"For example, I didn't rest during the Chinese New Year. I worked from the third day of the new year to the seventh, and I worked so much I got sick. They only gave me 10 hours of overtime pay. It felt like a beggar."

Working through a major holiday, becoming ill, and receiving minimal overtime pay left her feeling humiliated. The comparison to "a beggar" captures both the economic and emotional devaluation she experienced despite her effort. For all the women in junior positions in this study, this shared story of overwork and "survival" formed the backdrop against which digital surveillance, late-night messages, and boundary violations were absorbed as part of "how things are."

Alongside these accounts of overwork, Xiaoman described a more subtle form of control that drew on familiar cultural roles:

"In China, we call this kind of man 'dad-flavour.' He acts as a father figure. He would constantly send me 'toxic chicken soup for the soul' (fake inspirational content), like '10 things you should know by age 20' and 'What kind of subordinates do leaders prefer'. He definitely wanted me to be more obedient to him."

Here, digital messages were used to push a paternalistic model of authority, where a senior man positioned himself as a "father" to whom an early-career woman is to listen and obey. This paternalism was clearly gendered, directed at these women who were expected to absorb unsolicited advice disguised as care. Digital channels permitted constant delivery of such messages, turning cultural authority into digitally mediated compliance.

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*3.3. Invasion of personal boundaries*

Participants experienced a profound invasion of their personal boundaries through digital means, in the form of a general loss of private space and specific corporate demands for visibility. Using personal WeChat accounts for all work communication forced a collapse between personal and professional domains.

3.3.1. There are no boundaries

Participants described work messages cutting into evenings, weekends, and family time, often arriving with an expectation of an immediate response. Because these demands came through their phones, there was no clear point at which the working day ended, and they felt unable to ignore them without risking criticism.

In A's experience, work repeatedly interrupted her intimate family life:

"I feel like there are no boundaries. My husband often says I pick up my phone at any time, and if I see something work-related, I'll handle it first and leave him aside."

This constant need to prioritise work illustrates that the expectation of constant availability had become ingrained in her daily life, with digital workplace demands fundamentally altering her ability to separate professional and personal life. Her compulsion to check and respond to messages reflects the broader challenge all our participants faced in maintaining work-life boundaries in their always-connected world.

Alicia described the emotional weight of being contacted at night:

"Even in the middle of the night, he would message me asking, 'Why didn't you respond?'"

The question from her superior implied that no time was off-limits. For Alicia, the intrusion was more than an inconvenience; it was about the superior's assumed right to question her availability at any hour.

3.3.2. Life is contaminated

Participants were required to use their personal WeChat accounts for work, which exposed their private profiles, social circles, and posts to colleagues and managers. Alicia articulated this loss of separation:

"We don't use a company WeChat; we use our personal WeChat... It's like your private life is exposed to the people in your work environment."

She later expressed her discomfort bluntly:

"I feel like my life is contaminated. I don't want anything work-related in my social circle because I feel my personal life shouldn't be defined by work."

Her use of "contaminated" conveys how work demands polluted spaces she considered her own. In her junior role, she lacked any leverage to opt out. For her, the collapse of personal platforms into workspaces rendered a constant visibility. Her declaration that "personal life shouldn't be defined by work" was not just about maintaining boundaries; it was a struggle to preserve her identity outside her professional role.

Beyond exposure, participants were required to use their personal WeChat Moments for company promotion. Ding described this mandate:

"The company writes articles for publicity and makes us share them on our WeChat Moments... If we don't post them, we get fined 20 RMB a day."

The fine added extra pressure, making employees feel coerced to do so, with little room for personal autonomy over their social media. Ding's objection was grounded in both privacy and fairness:

"I want my personal account for private use only. I don't want others, especially my colleagues, to know about it. By making me post company content, they're invading my privacy."

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Ding further revealed the extent of company oversight as they were required to provide proof of compliance:

"After posting, we have to send a screenshot to a specific person responsible for monitoring this."

This created a system of digital surveillance that extended into what was ostensibly a personal domain. Ding summed up her existential weight of this intrusion:

"It feels like I'm always working because my WeChat Moments have become all about work content."

Xiaoman echoed this sentiment and revealed how this digital coercion was systematically enforced through public tracking and shaming:

"Our department head made the entire marketing team post every ad on WeChat Moments every day, and the head's secretary would check... They even made a chart and announced who didn't share it."

This practice transformed private social media spaces into compulsory marketing channels and normalised public shaming as a management tool. The tracking chart reinforced collective discipline, while silence or non-compliance became visible and potentially career-damaging. Her frustration revealed both an economic and an ethical issue:

"My personal WeChat is mine. You didn't pay me for the ads, so why should I post them every day?"

Her statement points to a double violation: the company appropriated her personal digital space without compensation and treated her social network as a free marketing channel, where she could neither refuse nor negotiate, so compliance felt exploitative.

### *3.4. Enduring in silence*

Participants consistently described enduring WCB in silence because they saw no safe or effective alternatives. Silence stemmed from structural conditions: ambiguous definitions of WCB, ineffective organisational support, and a deep sense of powerlessness as early-career women navigating rigid hierarchies. These forces collectively normalised suffering and discouraged challenge. Their accounts show silence as a survival strategy rather than a personal preference.

#### 3.4.1. Grappling with understanding and defining WCB

Participants varied in their understanding of WCB. Some remained unsure, while others reached clearer definitions as they talked. This difficulty was tied to the way intrusive practices had become part of normal work expectations. Take Momo, who struggled to put her finger on exactly what counts as workplace cyberbullying:

"I didn't feel like it reached the level of bullying, and I don't know how to define it... I just felt disturbed. Does it count when they ask me to reply to clients at night? Is that bullying?"

Her hesitation reflects that normalised boundary violations blurred distinctions between "demanding work" and "cyberbullying". As an early-career employee learning the norms of her industry, she questioned her own interpretation.

Xiaoman initially relied on the interviewer to evaluate her experience:

"I'll describe the situation first, and you can decide whether it counts as cyberbullying."

But as she recounted the intrusion into her rest time, she recognised the behaviour more clearly:

"That was my rest time, I wasn't working yet, and I was still asleep, so I felt that he was being very impolite. It definitely disturbed my personal life, so I think it counts as bullying."

The shift from uncertainty to recognition shows how meaning-making occurred through reflection, not immediacy.

For A, whether something counted as cyberbullying depended on both her mood and workload.

"When I'm in a good mood, it doesn't count... but when I'm in a bad mood, it definitely does. When I'm extremely busy, it absolutely counts."

Her interpretation of cyberbullying seemed to rely on stress levels, workload, and emotional resources. For junior women already stretched thin, labelling something as cyberbullying often depended on the capacity they had left to reflect.

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Only Alicia expressed clear conviction:

"They control you to this extent, to the point where I think it's definitely bullying, workplace bullying, because they expect you to treat your personal social media like a platform for the company."

Even with high clarity, she still remained silent. This highlights that understanding alone was insufficient when structural constraints made speaking up unsafe.

3.4.2. Perceived inefficacy of organisational supports

With deep frustration and resignation, participants described formal organisational mechanisms as ineffective and untrustworthy, and their accounts showed a clear gap between what organisations claimed to offer and what employees experienced. Alicia's account illustrates this:

"The HR team is very gossipy... If you tell something to one person, basically, the whole company will know about it soon. Moreover, they don't really care; they just treat it like watching a joke unfold. I feel that it's impossible for our company's HR to empathise with you; they won't stand by your side… we used to have an annual survey… but they didn't make any substantial changes based on it. This is because HR is actually wearing the same pants as the boss. They don't stand with the employees."

Calling HR "very gossipy" shows she sees them as a source of rumours rather than support. The image of HR "watching a joke unfold" suggests that complaints are treated as entertainment, while "wearing the same pants as the boss" conveys her belief that they stand with management, not employees.

Yolanda echoed this systemic failure:

"We have some kind of hotline; I think it's the one you can call if you experience bullying… It's practically useless. Therefore, people don't really bother contacting this department. So, we feel that this department is just for show, and none of our colleagues has actually called it. They wouldn't want to make a big deal out of it either."

Her account reflects a collective understanding that the hotline had become symbolic rather than functional. Her remark that colleagues "wouldn't want to make a big deal out of it either" also points to fear of escalation and retaliation.

As the only participant who took action, A's experience with leadership further illustrates this systemic failure of support:

"When I was still a new teacher, I didn't dare to have much contact with the leadership. But now, if I experience any unhappiness, unfairness, or bullying-like situations, I would go directly to the leaders to talk about it. As for whether they make any substantial changes or not, most of the time they're just 'mixing mud with water', pacifying you, but not addressing the real issues."

A's account shows how, as a new teacher, she "didn't dare" approach leaders, capturing the fear and powerlessness she felt in her junior position. Although she now raises concerns directly, she still experiences the organisational response as unchanged. The idiom "mixing mud with water" conveys her belief that leaders intentionally attenuated the issue rather than solving it. For early-career, non-managerial women, this meant that raising concerns invited placation, not action, reinforcing silence.

3.4.3. Sense of powerlessness and helplessness

The most pervasive reason for silence was the deep sense of powerlessness participants felt within organisational hierarchies. Their narratives exposed how cyberbullying practices trapped them in situations they could not challenge, despite recognising their harmful nature.

Haha captured the inevitability of the powerlessness:

"This kind of bullying can be very subtle. It's not overt, but it makes you feel like there's nothing you can do about it. He doesn't actually insult you or make forceful demands, but you still feel pressured. But when he messages you, you just feel like you have to do it. If you don't, it won't be good, so you just quietly accept it, but it does put a lot of pressure on you."

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The fear that "it won't be good" hints at implicit retaliation and unequal power dynamics. Her words, "you just quietly accept it" and "it does put a lot of pressure on you," show the psychological burden of compliance, where silence becomes a distressing survival strategy.

While Haha's experience revealed powerlessness through subtle coercion, Alicia described how surveillance mechanisms reinforced this helplessness:

"In a work group chat, if you don't reply immediately, they take a screenshot... Even if you try to report it, it doesn't help because that's just how they operate. They would send it to the boss and say, 'Look at her work attitude,' implying that you should be available 24 hours online for your job."

Her account shows how screenshots turn routine chat into "evidence," with colleagues sending them to managers to enforce constant availability. "That's just how they operate," suggests that this peer monitoring is normalised and not open to challenge. When others say, "Look at her work attitude," intrusive checking is treated as legitimate, whereas a person who does not respond immediately is framed as in the wrong. The result is a toxic digital environment where being "available 24 hours online" is treated as a shared expectation, and junior women are closely watched if they fall short.

Moving beyond specific workplace practices, To Yolanda, this sense of powerlessness impacted every aspect of human existence:

"Because of our jobs, as you know, there's no such thing as human rights. You don't even have basic human rights. You don't have time for basic sleep, so how could you possibly have time to care for your physical or mental health? But I think work is more important. There's not much energy left. I didn't have time to deal with [bullying] during that period because I was so busy. I didn't even have time to collect my parcels, clean up, or do laundry for many days, so how could I have time to... In the hierarchy of needs, most people are just trying to meet the lowest level, basic survival and making a living. How could you possibly pursue anything higher? You have to meet the basics first."

Yolanda's stark declaration that "because of our jobs... there's no such thing as human rights" reveals not just personal experience but a systemic dehumanisation affecting her entire professional group. Her reference to "basic survival" reveals that the combination of overwork, digital intrusion, and authoritarian expectations leaves no energy for confronting cyberbullying. For her, silence was not a choice but the only feasible response to normalised exploitation.

### *3.5. Coping and ideal organisational supports*

Participants relied primarily on individual coping strategies to manage workplace cyberbullying, while expressing limited confidence in the possibility of genuine organisational change. Their coping practices reflect attempts to retain small pockets of autonomy within systems that constrained their agency as junior women. When imagining ideal organisational support, participants consistently prioritised enforceable boundaries, clear policies, and legal protections, though many doubted these changes could occur in their work environments.

#### 3.5.1. Individual coping strategies

Participants described psychological and practical strategies to endure cyberbullying, though these often offered only temporary relief. The common thread across accounts was adaptation rather than resistance, shaped by their limited power within hierarchical workplaces.

A described a form of emotional self-talk to blunt the impact of digital aggression:

"Those things don't matter; I keep telling myself they don't matter. And there's no way out because I can't escape this environment... You have to make a living, and this phenomenon is everywhere."

A's response indicates that she is caught between resistance and acceptance. Repeating "I keep telling myself they don't matter" suggests an ongoing effort to blunt the impact of what is happening, while "there's no way out" and "this phenomenon is everywhere" reflect a clear sense that she cannot escape these conditions. Her strategy is to detach emotionally while accepting that she must stay and "make a living" in an environment she believes she cannot change.

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Haha also relied on emotional detachment. Describing herself as a "robot" signals a more extreme form of emotional shutdown, where feeling less becomes the only way to keep functioning at work:

"The people you meet at work won't be with you for long... I've turned myself into a robot to do this job. Don't bring emotions into it, don't let it affect me."

By suppressing emotional responses and dehumanising herself, she attempted to protect herself from the workplace digital toxicity. She also avoided sharing her experiences more broadly and, like most of the participants, accepted them as part of the environment:

"I don't really talk to my friends or family about it because I know it won't help, and I understand this is part of a bigger environmental trend."

She internalised her individual suffering as a wider structural problem, reinforcing the sense that personal action would not be enough to change conditions.

Xiaoman demonstrated a different form of distancing, describing a subtle form of digital resistance aimed at preserving small pockets of control:

"There's the read receipt feature, so often, even if I've seen the message, I deliberately don't open it because I don't want them to know it's been read, so I won't feel obligated to reply."

This tactic helped her delay demands temporarily but did not change the underlying dynamic.

Ding was the only participant able to establish firm boundaries due to the nature of her back-office role:

"I've built this persona where you can contact me during work hours, but after work, you can't reach me. After hours, don't talk to me about work."

Ding benefited from the nature of her job, which allowed stricter work–life separation, a luxury others did not describe. Her ability to enforce this boundary shows that coping resources depended on job structure and how unusual it was to be able to say no to after-hours contact.

### 3.5.2. Ideal organisational support

Participants imagined change at several levels. Some felt that only stronger labour laws on hours and overtime could make a real difference, and were frustrated that unions offered little real protection. Others focused on organisational policies, such as clear limits on after-hours contact and proper psychological support for those affected. At the same time, several were sceptical that such changes were realistic within China's entrenched work culture. Their views frame WCB as something that demands structural reform and a shift in organisational priorities towards employee well-being, not just productivity.

Xiaoman outlined a foundational need for legal reform:

"I think if China could introduce a law to guarantee two-day weekends, an 8-hour workday, and overtime pay for hours beyond that, and penalise companies that don't comply, that would be the most effective way to improve the situation."

Her reference to national regulation underscores her sense that organisational practices were embedded within broader cultural and institutional norms. The cultural context became even more significant when connected to her later criticism of unions as merely symbolic rather than functional:

"I don't really understand what unions are for. We have one, but all they do is hand out some oil and gift boxes during festivals. If unions were really there to protect employees..."

Others emphasised the need for organisational boundaries. Ding argued:

"To reduce cyberbullying, there should be rules that prevent people from contacting colleagues about work outside of working hours."

Clare highlighted the importance of psychological support and proper investigation:

"You need to investigate and address the situation quickly, and provide psychological support to the victim. I think that's really important."

Although they articulated what good support would look like, several participants doubted its feasibility. Leon summarised this scepticism:

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"After work, you shouldn't have to deal with your phone... but this isn't realistic. There's no way to change company culture."

Her resignation reflects the broader sentiment that while participants could imagine better organisational structures, they did not expect them to materialise within environments where overwork, hierarchy, and pervasive digital control were normalised.

## 5. Discussion

This study explored how early-career, non-managerial women in China experienced WCB through daily digital contact. WCB is often defined as intentional and repeated negative acts delivered through digital channels (Einarsen et al. 2020). While this act-based definition supports survey measurement, it may not capture the organisational and technological conditions that normalise harmful practices and make them difficult to contest (Vranjes et al. 2017; Yan et al. 2025). Participants' accounts instead positioned WCB as embedded in ordinary workflow coordination (Forssell 2020). Digital affordances made availability visible and interpretable, expanding managerial reach beyond working hours (Tian 2021) and intensifying control over employees with limited organisational leverage (D'Cruz and Noronha 2014).

### *5.1. Platform-mediated appraisal and the enforceable electronic leash*

Our findings extend the concept of the electronic leash (D'Cruz and Noronha 2013) by showing how tethering became enforceable through platform features that make availability publicly observable. Participants described an interactional space of permanent observability, produced by online status cues, read receipts, and group visibility (Tian 2021). In this setting, responsiveness functioned as a visible marker of "work attitude" (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Aroles 2020), and delays were treated as evidence of poor commitment and therefore open to correction or sanction in group spaces (Tian 2021). Building on tethered work (D'Cruz and Noronha 2014), the accounts specify an evaluative mechanism: visibility cues not only enabled contact, but they also turned response timing into a basis for moral judgement and managerial discipline. This aligns with the notion that surveillance can be framed as legitimate or even good management, normalising expectations of constant responsiveness (Kayas 2023).

Participants also described "dad-flavour" management (die wei), experienced as suffocating paternalistic supervision enacted through messaging. Paternalistic leadership is commonly theorised as combining strong authority with leader benevolence (Pellegrini and Scandura 2008), whilst Chinese models differentiate authoritarianism, benevolence, and moral leadership (Farh and Cheng 2000). Participants' accounts, however, emphasised moral instruction and correction with little benevolence, aligning more closely with an authoritarian mode that demanded obedience. These practices reinforced the gendered substructure of the organisation (Acker 1990). The "ideal worker" entailed total availability with minimal outside obligations, a model historically aligned with masculine life patterns (Williams 2001). Women with caring and family responsibilities are commonly deemed inadequate at work, hence warranting closer supervision or correction (Kelly et al. 2010). In participants' accounts, male supervisors used late-night moral instruction and "inspirational" messages to secure visibility and compliance. Non-response was interpreted as disrespect or ingratitude, restraining the early-career women's capacity to refuse.

### *5.2. Triple marginality and gendered reputational harm*

Although recruitment was open to all, only women volunteered in the current study. The all-female nature of the sample may indeed indicate a particular configuration of vulnerability. According to the notion of double marginality proposed by Maor and Rozmann (2024), marginalisation is shaped by the intersection of minority status and gender. Extending on this view, we propose that our participants occupied what we term as triple marginality: a precarious intersection of gender (female), age and career stage (youth/early career), and organisational rank

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(non-managerial), consistent with the intersectional approaches examining the role of multiple statuses in shaping the workplace experience (Atewologun, Sealy, and Vinnicombe 2016). Unlike older or male colleagues who may have more scope to negotiate boundaries, these young women had limited room to refuse demands, challenge public scrutiny, or contest reputational narratives. This is consistent with the finding that vulnerability can vary with organisational position and power (Forssell 2020). Together with the demand for evaluability amplifying this exposure, visibility cues made commitment publicly legible (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Aroles 2020) whilst group spaces enabled rapid collective judgement about legitimacy and "work attitude" (Tian 2021). Refusal could therefore be read not only as boundary-setting but as a failure to conform to expected behaviours of subordinate deference.

Gendered reputational harm was a salient pattern in participants' accounts. Sexualised rumours, including insinuations that promotion depended on sexual relationships with superiors, mirror evidence that slut-shaming operates as a gender-based insult that undermines women's professional credibility (Hess 2016). Research on hierarchical workplace relationships similarly suggests that women perceived as "close" to senior men can face reputational penalties and negative competence judgments (Hart and McLaughlin 2024). Group chats intensified these dynamics because rumours could circulate quickly and leave durable traces available for recirculation, raising the costs of reputational repair and fostering social exclusion (Tian 2021).

Participants also described technology-facilitated sexual harassment delivered through routine work messaging, including client-initiated contact framed as business. Research shows that everyday messaging tools can increase perpetrator access and enable persistent contact beyond formal encounters (Flynn, Powell, and Wheildon 2024). Moreover, digital communication can extend harassment across time and space, weakening boundaries between work and private life (Henry and Powell 2018). These accounts indicate why gendered harms can be difficult to address when embedded in routine coordination and filtered through organisational incentives to maintain client relationships (Yan et al. 2025).

### *5.3. Context collapse and appropriation of private digital life*

Participants described context collapse, where multiple audiences converged in the same messaging spaces, complicating boundary management, and self-presentation (Marwick and Boyd 2011). Using a single channel for managers, colleagues, clients, family, and friends made separation difficult in practice (Tian 2021) and for employees with limited organisational power, this raised the interpersonal and occupational costs of boundary-setting (Forssell 2020). Constant online visibility thus made any delays and disengagement exposed to interpretation and sanction (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Aroles 2020).

Accounts also moved beyond intrusion into appropriation. Participants described compulsory use of personal social feeds for corporate promotion, enforced through fines and public compliance tracking. This echoes coercive acquaintance advertising, where workers' private networks become organisational resources accessed through pressure rather than consent (Yuan, Li, and Zeng 2018). Such digital wage theft includes not only employees' unpaid time but also the extraction of value from personal relationships and social networks (Tippett 2018). Participants' descriptions of "contaminated" life capture how private identity and relationships became sites of organisational evaluation and production (Tian 2021). This is consistent with accounts of digital labour in which communicative and reputational work is misrecognised and treated as "just communication" (Hu and Qian 2024). Participants' ongoing monitoring of group spaces, response curation, and emotional regulation further indicate a gendered form of digital labour that is expected yet rarely acknowledged (Hu and Qian 2024). For our participants, this gendered digital labour also involved performing compliant femininity online, for example, copying and pasting birthday wishes to a supervisor to avoid standing out and reduce scrutiny, and to present as a "dutiful daughter" in relation to senior male authority. This echoes women's "second shift" of unpaid labour undertaken after paid work

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(Hochschild and Machung 1989), here taking a digital form through vigilance and reputational management beyond working hours.

*5.4. Definitional ambiguity, norm-based justifications, and constrained voice*

Most participants struggled to name what was happening, with recognition emerging through accumulation and later reappraisal. Definitional ambiguity affects recognition, reporting, and measurement in WCB research (D'Souza et al. 2018). In this study, ambiguity was interwoven with norm-based justifications. Harmful practices were framed as mentoring, urgency, professionalism, or dedication, mirroring organisational gaslighting dynamics that encourage targets to doubt their interpretation of harm (Sweet 2019). This helps explain why identification and reporting of WCB remain weak despite widespread digital communication (Yan et al. 2025).

Participants' sense-making unfolded within overwork norms, where extended availability was read as employability and commitment (Zheng and Qiu 2023). Late-night messaging turned response timing into a visible sign of loyalty (Tian 2021), while visibility cues amplified the reputational risk attached to refusal (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Aroles 2020). Power imbalance rendered silence as a survival strategy. Status-based silencing helps explain why lower-status employees can struggle to have harm taken seriously within hierarchies (Pruit, Pruit, and Rambo 2021). Participants' distrust of HR also made speaking up feel risky and aligns with institutional betrayal, where organisational responses can make things worse and undermine confidence in formal support mechanisms (Smith and Freyd 2014). Dehkharghani et al. (2023) similarly link employee silence to expectations of futility and weak consequences for perpetrators.

*5.5. Coping, micro-resistance, and the limits of individual strategies*

Participants managed WCB through emotional regulation, informal support, and small technical adjustments to platform visibility. Venting to family and psychological distancing helped manage anger and humiliation (D'Cruz and Noronha 2013). "Becoming a robot" captured deliberate emotional numbing, consistent with evidence that avoidance and disengagement are common coping responses in cyberbullying contexts (Machackova et al. 2013). Participants also described micro-resistance through message and presence management, such as delaying message opening or manipulating online status to reduce scrutiny without direct confrontation. This aligns with accounts of everyday resistance that protect the self through small acts within unequal power relations (Johansson and Vinthagen 2016). Yet participants were clear about the limits. These tactics helped them endure day-to-day exposure but did not interrupt surveillance, repair credibility harms, or create safer routes to reporting. Fear of gossip discouraged seeking support at work, consistent with evidence linking WCB with lower workplace social capital (Alrawashdeh et al. 2024).

Participants' accounts of "ideal support" located solutions in organisational governance and accountability rather than individual resilience, anticipating the theoretical and practical implications discussed below.

*5.6. Theoretical implications*

The present study highlights the need to address the multidimensional nature of WCB so that appropriate safeguarding and protection mechanisms can be built. Firstly, our findings suggest reframing WCB beyond isolated hostile digital acts by individuals. In this context, WCB also operated as platform-mediated control enacted through everyday coordination and justified as ordinary management practice. Although act-based definitions remain useful for identifying harmful behaviours (Einarsen et al. 2020), they can under-specify organisational and technological conditions that render harm routine and difficult to contest (Yan et al. 2025). Our analysis therefore supports conceptualising WCB as partly produced through organisational purposes and legitimacy claims attached to digitally mediated control, not only through hostile message content (Kayas 2023).

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Consequently, this requires attention to norm-based justifications that keep harm deniable as "professionalism" or "good management" (Sweet 2019).

In addition, the current study refines the electronic leash by specifying how tethering becomes evaluative. Prior work framed tethered work as technology-enabled reachability that reduces employees' ability to disengage (D'Cruz and Noronha 2014). Here, visibility cues created a trackable record of compliance used to judge "work attitude" and legitimacy in group spaces (Tian 2021). This places WCB within evaluative infrastructures that convert responsiveness into a proxy for commitment, linking WCB mechanisms to wider debates about how monitoring becomes routine and defensible (Kayas 2023).

The findings extend situational opportunity accounts by clarifying how "guardianship" is organisationally produced. Oguz, Mehta, and Palvia (2023) propose that WCB becomes more likely when targets are visible and accessible and when capable guardianship is weak. Accordingly, messaging affordances in the present context increased visibility and accessibility through continuous observability (Tian 2021), whereas guardianship was narrowed due to distrust in formal support and perceptions of reporting as risky or futile (Smith and Freyd 2014). Thus, our findings suggest that "guardianship" should be built on trusted HR processes to encompass protection from retaliation and clear managerial accountability (Dehkharghani et al. 2023).

Triple marginality is another notion proposed here to provide an intersectional specification of vulnerability in platform-mediated work. More clearly, early-career status and non-managerial rank intersected with gendered expectations that made refusals riskier and reputational harms more consequential. This is consistent with the frameworks viewing organisations as gendered systems in which standards of competence and loyalty are produced through unequal relations (Acker 1990). The theoretical implication for WCB is that in platform-mediated organisations, gendered reputational discipline and technology-facilitated sexual harassment can operate as routine control practices that police women's legitimacy and punish boundary-setting, rather than sitting outside WCB as separate "gender issues". Sexualised rumours can function as credibility attacks (Hess 2016), and routine messaging can extend harassment across time and space (Henry and Powell 2018; Flynn, Powell, and Wheildon 2024).

The findings also strengthen the case for culturally informed WCB frameworks that can capture context-specific configurations of platform affordances, organisational hierarchy, and gendered expectations. By offering detailed accounts from a specific cultural and sociodemographic group, this study responds to calls for more qualitative examination of WCB (D'Souza et al. 2022). It also shows how qualitative work can advance theory by making organisational norms, gendered expectations, and everyday coordination practices analytically visible (Acker 1990; Forssell 2020). IPA contributes to this agenda by tracing how targets come to recognise and name ambiguous digital mistreatment over time, and how their sense-making is shaped by hierarchical relationships along with gendered and organisational expectations. This process-focused account (Smith and Nizza 2022) also helps explain why some harms remain deniable and difficult to evidence when WCB is operationalised solely as discrete negative acts (D'Souza et al. 2018).

### *5.7. Practical implications: gender-sensitive digital governance*

The findings of this study underscore that WCB in this context is not merely an issue of interpersonal "netiquette", but a structural manifestation of gendered digital labour (Hu and Qian 2024). Consequently, organisations must move beyond generic anti-bullying policies and implement gender-sensitive digital governance that addresses the organisational and technological conditions shaping harm (Yan et al. 2025). This matters because visibility and responsiveness are produced through rules, accountability, and leadership practice, not personal traits of employees (D'Cruz and Noronha 2013; Hu and Qian 2024). Organisations should decouple responsiveness from moralised commitment by setting clear response-time expectations, limiting after-hours messaging, and holding managers accountable for modelling these practices (D'Cruz and Noronha 2013). Monitoring and correction should not be treated as proxies for performance or loyalty (Kayas 2023). Where digital

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reachability is normalised, right-to-disconnect protocols can reduce ambiguity about availability and limit retaliatory interpretations of non-response in these settings (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Aroles 2020).

Prevention should explicitly address gendered harms including reputational discipline and sexualised credibility attacks (Hess 2016; Hart and McLaughlin 2024), appearance-based commentary, and paternalistic monitoring framed as care. Also, research on gendered organisation suggests that formal rules alone may not shift everyday practice unless organisations name and challenge these norms directly (Powell et al. 2019). Clear boundaries for client communication are also needed, by using official channels only where possible, limiting after-hours contact, and offering managerial back-up and confidential support when staff receive harassment through routine work messaging (Flynn, Powell, and Wheildon 2024). Without governance that redistributes responsibility from targets to organisations, "coping" becomes another layer of unpaid gendered digital labour (Hu and Qian 2024). Additionally, prohibitions are needed against "coercive acquaintance advertising" (Yuan, Li, and Zeng 2018). Organisations must stop viewing employees' personal social media accounts as corporate assets. Mandating the posting of corporate marketing material on personal accounts, and especially fining employees for non-compliance, should be classified as a form of digital wage theft (Tippett 2018) and an invasion of privacy.

Finally, organisations should treat reporting credibility and protection as part of prevention. Where employees perceive HR as aligned with management, formal systems can make things worse and undermine confidence in organisational support, consistent with institutional betrayal dynamics (Smith and Freyd 2014). Reporting mechanisms, therefore, require confidentiality, protection from retaliation, transparent follow-up, and clear consequences for perpetrators. When employees expect futility and retaliation, withholding voice becomes a rational response (Dehkharghani et al. 2023). These recommendations align with prevention-oriented calls to specify organisational accountability as digital tools increase reachability and blur responsibility for harm (Yan et al. 2025).

### *5.8. Limitations and future research*

This study's idiographic strength is also a boundary on what it can claim. The sample comprised early-career, non-managerial women working in urban areas in relatively developed regions of China. This homogeneity supported interpretative depth, yet it limits transferability to groups whose work conditions, labour protections, and digital practices may differ. Self-selection may also have shaped participation, with women facing structural inequalities more motivated to take part (He 2024; Liu 2024). Future qualitative work could use purposive sampling to build homogeneous sub-samples across sectors, contract conditions, and regions- and conduct separate idiographic analyses before comparing patterns across contexts (Smith and Nizza 2022; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009).

Although recruitment did not exclude men, only women volunteered, limiting what can be inferred about men's experiences of WCB in comparable roles. Masculinity norms may discourage men from disclosing victimisation, and willingness to report mistreatment may be gendered (Salazar et al. 2024). Future studies should therefore recruit male professionals deliberately and examine how disclosure norms and perceived status risks affect recognition and reporting (Salazar et al. 2024). Further intersectional work should also assess whether the triple marginality configuration identified here is compounded by other forms of vulnerability, such as employment precarity and the vulnerability of minoritised groups.

The non-managerial participants also constrain what can be inferred across organisational hierarchies. Junior employees often have fewer safe options for refusal (Forssell 2020), and platform-mediated visibility can make compliance publicly evaluable (Leclercq-Vandelannoitte and Aroles 2020). Future research should examine WCB across hierarchical levels to clarify how power structures shape exposure and interpretive labour (Forssell 2020) and how organisational controls enable or constrain capable guardianship in platform-mediated work (Oguz, Mehta, and Palvia 2023). Multi-perspective designs incorporating managers, HR, and leaders would help clarify how digital complaints are assessed for credibility and what constraints shape responses (Plimmer et al. 2022),

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including when organisational systems become trusted or distrusted by targets (Smith and Freyd 2014).

Recruiting via WeChat strengthened ecological validity for the setting (Tian 2021), but the findings may be less transferable to workplaces using other platforms with different technological affordances. Future studies should compare WCB across multiple platforms and organisational cultures, specifying how affordances such as group observability, durable traces, status indicators, and cross-platform reach shape control, deniability, and reputational harm.

The data were collected during rapid technological and social change, when organisational reliance on mobile messaging continues to intensify. Longitudinal qualitative designs, including repeated interviews, diaries, and experience sampling, could track whether constant connectivity intensifies, stabilises, or shifts as organisational norms and employee expectations change (Celuch et al. 2024). Quantitative work could then test the prevalence and boundary conditions of the mechanisms identified here, using measures that capture accumulative, ambiguous, and governance-linked harms that are difficult to code as discrete incidents (Yan et al. 2025).

Comparative cross-cultural work would strengthen theory development by separating what is driven by platform affordances from what is sustained by cultural and organisational expectations about deference and responsiveness (D'Cruz and Noronha 2013). Cross-cultural bullying research indicates that sources, antecedents, and coping can vary across cultural clusters, including differences linked to power distance and performance orientation (Karatuna et al. 2020). Studies that contrast higher and lower power-distance settings could clarify whether similar mechanisms of visibility-based discipline emerge elsewhere (Yan et al. 2025) and how organisational controls and capable guardianship operate under different legal and normative regimes (Oguz, Mehta, and Palvia 2023).

A further priority is that technology-facilitated sexual harassment remains underexplored relative to other forms of WCB (Flynn, Powell, and Wheildon 2024), particularly in client-facing contexts where organisational incentives may dampen intervention. Future work should develop preventive measures that protect junior women without shifting the costs onto them through informal coping labour.

Finally, emerging technologies add urgency as AI, in particular, has been viewed as both a potential detection tool and a source of new risks that include intensified monitoring and harassment through deepfakes, impersonation, and algorithmic surveillance (Yan et al. 2025). Given that surveillance itself was experienced as a mechanism of control, future research should evaluate AI-enabled governance interventions alongside their privacy, power, and gendered consequences rather than assuming technical solutions are inherently protective.

## 6. Conclusion

This study shows that, for early-career, non-managerial women in China, WCB was not experienced as an occasional or repeated conflict between individuals. It was tied to everyday messaging-based coordination that made availability and responsiveness visible, measurable, and open to judgment. In this setting, the electronic leash tightened through permanent observability, where response timing and online presence served as proxies for commitment and professionalism, justifying correction, ridicule, or sanction. As work and personal audiences converged in the same digital spaces, participants recounted context collapse and the erosion of boundaries that would otherwise protect private time and relationships. Organisational demands also moved beyond intrusion into appropriation when personal accounts and networks were treated as corporate resources. Participants' accounts suggest that the unpaid gendered digital labour extended beyond mandatory corporate visibility to include vigilance, impression management, and emotional regulation required to stay credible and avoid sanction in always-on digital spaces.

The accounts point to what we term as triple marginality, where gender, youth/early-career status, and low organisational rank can intersect to limit refusal and raise the reputational costs of boundary-setting. In that context, silence did not reflect consent. Participants described withholding voice as a pragmatic response to status asymmetry, weak protection, and anticipated backlash. Their

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coping and micro-resistance, including emotional numbing and small forms of visibility management, helped them get through daily exposure but did not change the conditions that made the harm routine.

Importantly, this study offers to reframe WCB as a socio-technical problem of power and governance as much as behaviour, while giving voice to a group that is still often treated as peripheral in management research. Participants' efforts to preserve emotional resources by "turning into a robot" show the human price of work organised through permanent visibility and reputational threat. Organisations need to dismantle the digital architectures and managerial practices that disguise exploitation as professional dedication, rather than leaving those with the least leverage to carry the burden through private coping.

Supplementary materials: Study data and a full transcript analysis can be accessed via Figshare: https://doi.org/10.21253/DMU.30364141.v1

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