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Social media construction of sexual deviance in Hong Kong: a case study of a Facebook discussion

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This study explores how social media constructs sexual deviance and violence against women. Based on vigorous debates on Facebook about the cheating of case two Hong Kong celebrities, we analyzed how cheating and promiscuity are constructed as sexual deviance on social media in Hong Kong through a politics of claims-making. Research has demonstrated how promiscuity and cheating are facilitated through the Internet. It has yet to show how social media sustains compulsory monogamy and constructs promiscuity and cheating as deviance to induce violence against women. Our study contributes to understanding how CM is sustained and how it constructs sexual deviance in scoial media. We discovered that discussing taboo sexual practices through Facebook involves mainly punitive informal social control and only strengthens the stigmatization of them, regulating gender and sexual morality, sustaining compulsory monogamy, and oppressing women and practitioners of marginalized sexual behaviors. We call for updated measures on social media outlets like Facebook to regulate cyber violence and encourage civilized discussions on taboo sexual topics.

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Introduction

Modern society has long stigmatized non-consensual non-monogamy (NCN) and promiscuity. NCN is also known as cheating or infidelity in which "one or both partners have outside sexual or romantic partners without the permission, knowledge, or consent of their primary partner" (Walker, 2017, p. xxi). Such stigmatization has various implications. Stigma prevents divorced gays and lesbians (Hoy 2018) and sexual violence survivors (Di Lellio et al. 2019) from living in equal terms with others. Verbal attacks that target cheaters lead to psychological distress for defiant individuals. And in most cases, women are being attacked (Walker 2017). Unfortunately, there has been little research about how social media (SM) sustains compulsory monogamy (CM) and constructs sexual deviance to induce violence against women. To fill this research gap, this paper explores how NCN and promiscuity are constructed as deviant in SM in Hong Kong (HK). We studied the meanings some HK netizens had given to NCN and promiscuity by analyzing a Facebook discussion (the Discussion) on a quadrilateral relationship between four celebrities. This paper identifies a politics of claims-making which strengthens the stigmatization of the two sexual practices through both protective and punitive informal social control (ISC) (Emery et al. 2015, 2017, 2018; Emery and Wu, 2019). Emery et al. (2015) refers to protective and punitive ISC as "a soft, protective approach and a harder, more punitive approach" (p. 160), respectively. For example, in the context of child maltreatment control, the former approach aims "to protect the child and give the parent space to consider his or her actions," while the latter "attempts to deter further abuse by invoking social sanctions that will be costly to the abusive parent" (p. 160). The latter approach has elements of "threats of clear sanctions in the face" (p. 160). The paper contributes to a new understanding of how CM is sustained in SM and constructs sexual deviance through such politics in which punitive ISC dominates. Furthermore, such stigmatization mainly impacts women and people engaging in marginalized sexual practices. We advocate measures that would allow online space for discussions on taboo subjects to encourage civilized dialogue so that we can reduce violence against women and people who engage with alternative sexual practices online.

Compulsory monogamy: a feminist critique

This paper holds that the stigmatization of sexual deviance is one of the ways through which CM regulates gender and sexual morality in modern societies. Like others (e.g., Emens 2004; Heckert et al. 2010; Schippers 2016), we borrow Rich's (1980) theorization of compulsory heterosexuality (CH) to interrogate how CM organizes the importance and visibility of NCN and women's promiscuity, and constructs them as deviant through ISC. Like CH, CM is a system of gender and sexual values which label NCN immoral (Emens 2004). We are interested in knowing how NCN and promiscuity are denounced through CM narratives on Facebook. We use "cheating" to mean infidelity and NCN in what follows.

Sexual deviance: non-consensual non-monogamy and promiscuity.

It is important to understand how cheating is socially sanctioned. CM excludes non-monogamy through western ideas of romance, religious doctrine, laws that criminalize adultery, and scientific knowledge (Emens 2004). Existing laws also discouraged discussions about any alternatives to monogamy. Without any way to imagine alternatives, society equates cheating to "the betrayal of a sacred promise" (Emens 2004, p. 72) and institutionalizes this idea in law. In HK, married individuals can ask for divorce if their spouse is found to have cheated (Matrimonial Causes Ordinance, 1972). CM also positions cheating as immoral as it lacks loyalty and honesty, rendering an individual unethical (Schippers 2016; Willey 2015).

Many cultures assume "true love" to be central to monogamy (Rothschild 2018; Sheff 2014) and imply intimate romances outside monogamy lack true love. Respect is regarded as a fundamental characteristic of a moral partner (Walters and Valenzuela 2019). In this sense, one should not cheat because cheating reflects a lack of love and respect. Cheating is least acceptable when it is resulted from a cheater's own desire (Macauda et al. 2011). In this sense, CM imposes self-surveillance that ensures couples discipline themselves in order to be socially accepted.

Cheating is said to walk alongside promiscuity (Jones and Paulhus 2012). Promiscuity can be divided into emotional promiscuity and sexual promiscuity. Sexual promiscuity involves "engagement in noncommittal sexual activities, with non-monogamous partners (e.g., one-night stands) and with multiple partners" (Poppi 2020, p. 925). Emotional promiscuity is the "tendency to fall in love easily and often" (Jones and Paulhus 2012, p. 2). In this study, we use 'promiscuity' to refer to both types, as they often occur simultaneously (Jones and Paulhus 2012). Many societies regard promiscuity as "bad sex" (Rubin 1984). Moreover, most cultures assume a "desire for romantic and erotic intimacy with only one other person [which] is natural and unaffected by economic, social and political patterns of a culture" (Heckert et al. 2010, p. 264). Therefore, CM essentializes the deviance of promiscuity because it refuses prolonged and/or one-on-one erotic engagements. Promiscuity can be associated with other major deviant behaviors like drug abuse and violence (Poppi 2020) and homosexuality, adversely impacting the rights and lives of doers (Klesse 2005; Pinsof and Haselton 2017). The stigmatization of promiscuity is also found to have an unjustified assumed correlation with academic failure, and it mainly impacts women (Clonan-Roy et al. 2016).

Our study fills a gap in depicting how the SM, especially Facebook, constructs the deviance of promiscuity and cheating. Much research has been done on how such construction takes place through traditional media. For instance, when exposed to TV materials about cheating, women who were previously cheated on and had high cheating concerns expressed lower tolerance for cheating, thereby negatively evaluated their romantic partners (Alexopoulos and Taylor 2020). Also, the mass media representation of promiscuity has been associated with "premature" sexual activity such as underage sex (Bell and Seale 2011). Promiscuity is also frequently associated with sexually transmitted diseases in the mass media (Dworkin and Wachs 1998). As an extremely popular form of media, it becomes important to study whether the relationship between the SM and the stigmatization of cheating and promiscuity is similar to findings about traditional forms of media.

It is widely known that the SM also influences the construction of gender and sexuality. For instance, during COVID-19, hypermasculinity has been found to dominate on Instagram and Facebook, reinforcing normative characteristics and roles of men (Al-Rawi et al. 2022). Heteronormativity in Thailand is strengthened when fans of some Thai idols prioritize heteronormative images of their idols on Twitter (Smutradontri and Gadavanij 2020). Facebook becomes an extension of "the closet" among homosexual individuals, who feel pressure to present themselves according to social norms so as to create or maintain social relationships on Facebook (Rubin and McClelland 2015). Despite the insights on how the SM contributes to the strengthening of gender and sex norms, studies have yet to show promiscuity and cheating are constructed as deviance on the SM

and induced violence against women and individuals who engage with these practices.

"Feminized" surveillance. Research has shown that cultural norms regarding promiscuity and cheating result in negative assessments of women more than men. Women who are sexually deviant receive more policing through harsh labeling than men in the workplace (Hess 2016) and in university (Knox et al. 2008). In this regard, women are either "faulty partners" who drive their men away, promiscuous "sluts" who sleep around, or "invaders" who "rob" men from other women. The heteronormative and monogamous values in promiscuity discourses constantly police women and their femininities, sexualities, and desires (Klesse 2005; Schippers 2016; Walker 2017; Willey 2015; Wolf 2011). Today, slut-shaming is used to denounce women's competency and intelligence, negatively influencing their careers (Hess 2016) to sustain the status quo. Nonetheless, despite the social pressure, promiscuous women strategically negotiate spaces to continue their multiple sexual relationships as well as redefine their roles and identities to advocate gender equality and resist stigma (Ho 2006; Walker 2017). Today, the Internet is one tool such women may find useful.

The emergence of SM immensely shapes today's sexual landscape, especially for women, who are more likely to be impacted by sexism and cyber harassment (Henry and Powell 2015). Heteronormativity and sexist stereotypes toward women are continuously constituted through netizens' interaction in SM (Bailey et al. 2013). However, research has yet to analyze how women are policed through the construction of sexual deviance in SM. Therefore, we analyze the narratives in the Discussion to understand how the stigmatization of cheating and promiscuity is discursively constructed through a Facebook discussion.

The case—"On-Sum Affair"
This study analyzed a very substantive set of comments from a Facebook discussion about a quadrilateral relationship between two celebrity couples ("the Case") which aroused extensive debate in the HK public. In 2019, a quadrilateral affair in HK's entertainment industry, "*On-Sum* Affair" (the Affair) (安心事件), became public. The Affair involved local TV star Jacqueline *Wong Sum Wing* (Sum) and pop singer Andy *Hui Chi On* (On). On is 21 years older than Sum, and they were filmed cheating on their partners during a taxi ride. Sum was the girlfriend of another famous local TV star, Kenneth Ma, and On has been the husband of Sammi Cheng, a Cantopop queen renowned Asia-wide. In the taxi-cam footage, Sum took the initiative to seduce On, who pleasantly (as shown in the footage) accepted the seduction (Apple Daily 2019). Sum was widely deplored as a slut, and On was referred to as a scum. On took a hiatus from his career and hid from the public for almost a year. Sum fled back to Canada to avoid the embarrassing spotlight. Sum disappeared from HK's television scene, but On has gradually reappeared in gigs and TV shows in HK. Sum was married to another pop star in HK in 2023, but remained widely scorned. Her return to the entertainment industry has been deemed difficult still.

Two months after the taxi-cam episode, an eminent scholar in HK ("the writer") wrote a Facebook post entitled "*I Support Jacqueline Wong*" in response to the Affair and defended Sum. The post ignited online discussion which captures HK people's perceptions of cheating and promiscuity. Our research aims to examine the stigmatization of cheating and promiscuity in HK, and explore how Facebook discussions highlight the intersection of gender, sexuality, and CM in constructing cheating and promiscuity as deviant. We ask the following research questions:

(1) How do some HK netizens perceive cheating and/or promiscuity in the case of a celebrity quadrilateral relationship?
(2) How is the stigmatization of cheating and/or promiscuity gendered on Facebook?
(3) How are individuals who practice cheating and/or promiscuity in HK marginalized?

Methods
A qualitative content analysis was conducted to analyze the meanings of cheating and promiscuity in "The Discussion." This method "provides profound insights into a situation which is not limited by existing viewpoints or methodologies" (Lai and To 2015, p. 138). The following sections outline our sampling and analytic strategies.

Sampling
Sampling of Facebook discussion. The present analysis was not a pre-planned study. We encountered the Facebook post and chose to analyze its resultant discussions because it was the *only* known occasion where this celebrity matter was analyzed using a feminist framework of love, sex, and marriage to provoke thoughtful discussion, rather than becoming another topic for gossip. In early August 2019[1] the writer authorized our use of the comments on her Facebook post for this scholarly interrogation before she made the post and comments private in 2020. We obtained ethical approval from our institution and began our study.

Our case uses a very substantive set of comments on the subject matter. Case study can generate vicarious experience (Donmoyer 2000). Similarly, we believe our case study helps readers expand their way of thinking to comprehend a phenomenon from a perspective not visited before in a deeper manner, rather than reaching a "generalizability" aimed at by traditional social scientists.

Sampling of comments. To maximize the depth of the case we studied, we included all 194 comments as our sample, comprising 92 main comments and 102 sub-comments, created before September 12, 2019. We studied all comments on the Facebook post to construct a comprehensive picture of the public's response to the Case. Only comments containing substantive text were included in the analysis; 10% of comments included irrelevant emojis, random names, and duplicated comments, which were removed from the analysis. The review and content analysis began in late September 2019 and were accomplished by late August 2020.

Analytic technique
Coding. The first and second authors coded the data to ensure research trustworthiness, reflexivity, "systematicity, communicability, and transparency" (O'Connor and Joffe 2020, p. 1). They conducted an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). The first author developed categories freely during the open coding stage (Burnard 1991). The inductive analysis helped her "highlight similarities and differences across the data set," "summarize key features of a large body of data," and "generate unanticipated insights" (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 37).

In her initial code development and thematization, the first author scanned through the raw data, and produced a codebook and meta-themes. Fifty-four codes were developed in the initial analysis and were categorized into three groups: (1) commenting style, (2) latent theme, and (3) general attitude. She read not only the semantics but also the latent messages in the comments. Since some of the comments had multifaceted meanings, she gave more than one latent theme to a comment that bore multiple meanings

during interpretation. Then the latent themes were coded. During code assignment, previous comments from repeated commentators provided context for the interpretation. The second author independently followed the same procedures.

In the second phase, the first author re-read the codes meticulously to produce more precise codes for all three categories. This revision also eliminated extra codes to keep codes concise and distinct. The second author independently followed the same procedure. Both authors then discussed and resolved all cross-coder discrepancies. A finalized set of codes was then progressively abstracted into seven meta-themes which are illustrated in the "Results" section.

Results

We found that, through a politics of claims-making, the commentators of the Discussion created and sustained discursive boundaries that encouraged CM and hence vilified cheating and promiscuity. Our analysis demonstrates that the commentators were mostly unsupportive of On/Sum and the writer, with 50 and 47 unsupportive comments respectively. 56 comments presented pure antagonism, topping all types of comments. These quantitative accounts are important as they demonstrate that commentators overwhelmingly condemn cheating and promiscuity. Meanings commentators gave on the subject of cheating and promiscuity included: (1) the degree to which cheating is ethical, (2) the degree to which promiscuity is ethical, (3) the degree to which cheating compromises true love, (4) negative consequences of cheating to individuals, (5) the impact of cheating on existing HK family structure and children, (6) who is/are accountable in a cheating incident, and (7) erotic freedom and freedom in general, in personal relationships and in politics. The analysis below highlights the meanings (1–7) commentators gave to cheating and promiscuity, how the two sexual practices are scorned/supported, and how commentators expanded the space of their stances through a politics of claims-making.

Building and strengthening invincible positions. Commentators would define and buttress their stances using reasons and justification which, we argue, are characteristics of protective ISC for CM in SM. Some commentators deployed legal reasons (regardless of their validity) to justify the deviance of promiscuity and cheating. Z0023 mentioned in comment 17-10, "… In legal terms, adultery is a reason for divorce. Any child conceived by a "little third"[2] is called a "love child". These are some legal protections for the wife and her children." Using a legal framework, whether or not the law really exists, could strengthen the commentators' arguments because the law is an authoritative reference.

In a large proportion of the comments that dealt with the ethics of cheating and promiscuity, commentators reiterated their ideas using emotions. In comment 17-5, Z0023 explained, "As a parent, I just want to protect our family structure for the next generation…. Our children should grow up in a safe society!' This shows that some commentators use their worries, a form of emotional navigation, as a persuasive soft power to impact/control the audience of the Discussion. Others would mobilize an ethics of care to defend faithfulness and honesty. Consider narratives in comment 14:

> Sum is free to love On, but she must also respect Cheng and Ma…. Marriage should not take away our freedom but if one commits to a marriage, one must respect their partner. It's OKAY to undergo multiple-partner relationships with others, but one must obtain consent. But of course, Sum and On understood very well that they wouldn't obtain that consent, so they chose dishonesty. What made them wrong was their dishonesty. (Z0061)

A partner's respect and faithfulness equate to care. And in our data, the bypass of consensus as a disrespectful act in cheating was used nine times to explain the illegitimacy of cheating. Cheating was constructed as illegitimate since it involves disrespect and shows no care.

Also, some commentators would use insulting analogies to criticize women's promiscuity. Sum was metaphorically dehumanized as a "*gaai*" (a hen, meaning "whore"). In comment 17-17, Z0102 mentioned, "…if we can't control our animal instincts and behave morally, we are merely creatures…." Sum deserved the condemnation because "she got herself fucked proactively!" (comment 119). Promiscuous women are strongly condemned in Hong Kong because they let their sexual desires and sexual proactiveness run wild, thereby polluting their chastity. It also shows that promiscuity is viewed as an abusive form of erotic freedom that destroys *the* Family. Condemnation that mentioned On was minimally present (less than ten mentions), but those that *focused* on him were nowhere to be found in the Discussion.

Additionally, some commentators defined love in their own sense for denouncing cheating. Z0102, for instance, commented, "…one-day cheating makes two people shameless creatures. One year makes them sex partners. One life makes it true love. Have Sum and On been together long enough?" These commentators created a cultural hierarchy for true love, lowering the social status of any form of short-term partnership (including cheating), thus constructing the cheating relationship as deviant.

In contrast, both Z0051 and Z0053 wrote the most (16 times) to defend the writer and On/Sum, erotic freedom, and alternative views of family and marriage. For example, Z0053 explained, "our ideas of marriage are the product of social construction; they are not given to us naturally, so why do we have to follow these rules? And why are you guys correlating the worsening of the safety of society with the appearance of a "little third"? How are they related?" Z0051 and Z0053 continuously tried to, involving the use of reason, deconstruct the ideas of love and marriage of the commentators who were against cheating and promiscuity. However, since the counter-On/Sum narratives and anti-cheating or promiscuity narratives were much more intense and frequent (50 vs. 26 comments) in explaining the ethics of cheating and promiscuity, On/Sum-supportive claims remained a minority.

Forming boundaries and alliances. Commentators built boundaries and alliances in their reciprocal exchanges within threads (comments that consisted of sub-comments). We found that a stronger alliance was built among the commentators who opposed On/Sum or the writer, in both multi-commentator and one-on-one commentator threads. In most of these threads, wherein commentators of different stances existed, commentators who opposed On/Sum or the writer dominated. Thread 17 was the longest among all multi-commentator threads. It discussed the ethicality of cheating and promiscuity and their impact on family and marriage. But Z0053 was the only commentator to support On/Sum in thread 17 and "battled" three other commentators of the opposite stance. Commentators of the same stance would build a strong identity (Ho and Tsang 2012) by acknowledging, defending, and encouraging one another in a thread. Toward the end of thread 42, another multi-commentator thread, Z0051 and Z0068 attenuated their conflict. They began to understand each other's rationale, but Z0083 provoked Z0068 by adding, "Z0051 is just being cunning here by shifting meaning. Don't let her divert your focus!" Then Z0068 reignited her antagonism toward Z0051. Alliance building among commentators was present throughout the Discussion. Since the stronger side (in terms of the number of members) is the side that opposed

On/Sum or the writer, they built a stronger alliance through mutual-echoing in the threads.

An alliance for a stance was also formed between one-on-one commentator threads through which a single commentator exchanged with another commentator to reinforce each other's views. In thread 86, Z0044 mentioned, "Moral retard is as horrible as immoral retard" to condemn the writer's support for Sum. In the same thread, Z0015 replied, "Because she is a leftard!" This kind of commentator-to-commentator mutual reinforcement, which was mostly unsupportive of On/Sum or the writer, was scattered throughout the Discussion. All these alliances further strengthened the boundaries between chastity and promiscuity, and loyalty and cheating.

Expressing impartiality was one way to break down the boundaries between commentators. A few tried to defend Sum and her promiscuity by expressing impartiality. For example, in comment 32:

> …I don't understand why Sum was the only bad person…. We can also say that Cheng is responsible. A wife should play her role well, so her husband doesn't sway… (Z0079)

Unfortunately, impartial comments mostly received no attention since they did not fit into any poles. Additionally, wife-blaming was present in the Discussion and husband-blaming was non-existent.

Dissolving boundaries? Mutual understanding helps deliberation and may create spaces for the coexistence of different positions (Holdo 2019). Talking is a prominent element of protective ISC (Emery et al. 2015). Unfortunately, the commentators demonstrated low motivation for mutual understanding in the Discussion, and only Z0051 expressed comprehensive information to help communicate ideas to others. Consider comment 73-3:

> I think we are already engaging in a certain democratic practice through discussion…I used homosexuality as an analogy because there is a long history of demonization of homosexual eroticism [which resembles the stigmatization of cheating nowadays]. You asked if I would still support homosexuality when it's opposed by most of the public. I will. Many of my friends and students are homosexual and I want them to be happy…. What matters to me is how people react to cheating and a "little third." When the majority is against a "little third," his/her supporters will get immediate condemnation. This is not a democratic culture I understand. (Z0051)

Z0051 tried to persuade Z0106 with reason and politeness in support of the erotic freedom of individuals with marginalized sexual identities and to protect their wellbeing. Nevertheless, Z0051 was the only person who elaborated, politely explaining her viewpoint.

Sustaining boundaries: bad manners. In the Discussion, the commentators' aggressive manner dominated. They were characterized by emotional venting (Rösner and Krämer 2016) that turned complex social issues into simple dichotomies of good/bad, moral/immoral, and so forth. We found that commentators' manner is a major factor that impacted the development and quality of the Discussion, as hostility was frequently used to strengthen their viewpoints, and sustain the discursive boundaries that divided them.

Despite a civilized start, the Discussion quickly transformed into disputes involving personal attacks and judgmental and sardonic comments. Around half of the commentators used hostility in their explanations. In comment 17-15, Z0053 argued, "Z0023, being a wife just make you a legal whore[3], how noble are you?" Some of the very few commentators supporting On/Sum would use offensive language to trivialize the privileged status of the wife. Out of the 56 times of antagonism, 44 comprised personal attacks, judgmental and/or sardonic comments. The personal attack included calling the writer or Sum: bitch, old/ugly bitch, retard, witch, beast, pathetic, mental, shameless, disgusting, illiterate, and lowbred.

From approximately the 40th comment onwards, the comments trended from civility toward purely personal attacks. The same situation occurred in most of the comment threads. For example, thread 17 began with mostly rationality. However, hostility rapidly came to dominate midway and remained toward the end of the thread. See comments 17–28 to 17–31:

17–28: Z0053, are you blind so you can't see people's writing clearly? Please consult a medical doctor if you are sick…or if you have mental issues!… (Z0102)

17–29: Z0053, I think I am casting pearls before swine like you! Your type of "little third" is typical. All "little third" like to force the whole world to think there is love between themselves and the man they snatch… (Z0023)

17–30: Z0023, your repeated use of such attitude only showed us that you are lowbred. (Z0053)

17–31: Being intelligent is key. Don't you know we use our brains, but not our eyes, to comprehend words? … Hi childish, your secondary school-level debate style is so old school! (Z0053)

We found that commentators of any stance would deploy hostility. The quality of the Discussion drastically deteriorated. It further polarized and sustained their perspectives; as an altercation lacking substance, it may become harder for commentators to consider the complexity of the issue.

Power asymmetry sustained. The Discussion demonstrates that power inequality between people with conventional values of love, sex, and marriage and those who practice alternative lifestyles of love, sex, and marriage continued to exist, and Facebook further strengthened it. Generally in Hong Kong, cheating and promiscuity are already condemned. People who openly engage in these practices are few and unpopular, whereas the discourses against these taboo sexual practices are socially favorable. Normative sexual practices and their practitioners have a higher social status, thereby subordinating deviant sexual practices. This is extended to the space of Facebook. Although the Facebook post we studied was publicly open for all to comment on, not all could join the Discussion. In fact, some On/Sum supporters did not feel they could join this discussion. Z0059 explained, "My friend also supports Sum, but she dares not to speak up" in comment 30. This comment demonstrates that the stigmatization of cheating and promiscuity leads to participation imparity (Fraser 1997) on Facebook, highlighting that CM's hegemony (Anderson 2010) has suppressed expression freedom in the virtual world. We believe the Discussion has strengthened power asymmetries between different sexual practices, and their participants and supporters.

Discussion

Compulsory monogamy constructs sexual deviance. The above analysis shows that Facebook strengthens CM, facilitating the construction of cheating and promiscuity as deviance through punitive control. Evidently, the Confucian emphasis on harmony and hierarchy remains influential, with its influence on gender, family, and sexual values (Ho et al. 2018). The commentators' narratives toward cheating align with Emens' (2004) argument that cheating is deviant because it does not have legal status. Moreover, this research supports Walker's (2017) argument that cheating is considered unethical because it shakes the established family structure, and because the cheaters and the "intruders" undermine family stability.

Furthermore, CM relies on social conformity to draw a moral boundary between good and bad netizens (or citizens).

In our findings, CM's construction of moral boundaries involves respect, honesty, and consensus, which form the ethics of care required in romantic intimacies. Just as Walters and Valenzuela (2019) argued, many commentators believed respect, honesty, and consensus signified a partner's love and were the prerequisite for erotic freedom in either monogamy or non-monogamies. In this case, cheating and promiscuity are stigmatized because the cheaters and the "intruders" are untrustworthy, disrespectful, hard-hearted, and selfish.

The analysis shows that the "primary" relationship is regarded as superior because it has "true love." Intimacies that are short-term and/or outside the primary relationships were perceived to consist only of lust. This aligns with previous findings suggesting the romantic ideal of true love remains dominant in romantic intimacies (Rothschild 2018; Sheff 2014). In HK, heterosexual marriage is still the dominant family culture and life-long romantic relationships are almost exclusively for married heterosexual couples. Any romances outside such a framework are rendered inauthentic, merely pleasure-seeking, illegitimate, and cheap.

These findings may have implications for heterosexual marriage between a homosexual individual and an uninformed heterosexual partner. In a society where CH goes hand-in-hand with CM, closeted homosexual individuals automatically become unethical when they pursue an extra-marital same-sex relationship because cheating becomes mandatory for them. The heterosexual spouse unfairly faces double trauma from being cheated on and being deceived about the sexuality of their partner (Zhu 2018). However, the Discussion did not cover this aspect. Further studies are needed to explore whether netizens are more forgiving toward the inevitable cheating among homosexual individuals.

The gendered consequences of CM. We found that HK's morality continues to impose harsher social expectations on women than on men, so the stigmatization of cheating and promiscuity impacts women to a greater extent. Our analysis shows that *all* disparaging comments in the Discussion targeted women, regardless of their roles in the Discussion and the Case. It supports previous findings that suggest "retraditionalized gender hierarchies and inequalities are manifested in online contexts" (Henry and Powell 2015, p. 758). In our data, the "mistress" and the wife in a triangular heterosexual relationship were referred to as "*gaai*" and "legitimate *gaai*" respectively. As Chang (1999) suggests, wives are often blamed when husbands pursue intimacies outside marriage. Similarly, some commentators stated that Cheng led On to stray because she was incompetent. Moreover, Sum was particularly demonized and trivialized.

Additionally, women's provocativeness was condemned. Women political leaders generally are treated hostilely worldwide (Bigio and Vogelstein 2020). Similarly, in our data, 33 of the 47 times the writer was criticized, commentators used personal attacks and/or judgmental and sardonic language. Commentators saw the writer as a leading voice that gave compassion to a promiscuous "intruder" and because she was seeking attention by writing about Sum. In this case, a women Key Opinion Leader is demonized in HK for challenging conventions and advocating for deviant sexual practices. Women's sexual, social, and political provocativeness remain widely criticized. Their femininities are further under surveillance on the Internet. SM can facilitate cyber violence that disproportionately impacts women.

Compulsory monogamy and alliance building on Facebook
Facebook re-marginalizes taboo sexual practices and women. This study examines how CM intersects with SM in constructing the deviance of cheating and promiscuity. We argue that the SM is different from traditional media, e.g., newspaper, in strengthening CM because on an SM like Facebook, user interactions are spontaneous and simultaneous, making it easier for different stances (and their influence/power) to surface and be reinforced. The discursive position of different sexual practices (taboo or conventional) certainly plays a primary role in this process, but it is, we argue, a politics of claims-making on Facebook that plays a specific role to strengthen CM since the "nature" of Facebook discussion tends to be favorable for commentators to build alliances, and therefore further sustain a politics between different sexual identities/practices.

In the Discussion, the commentators expanded the space for their diverging attitudes toward deviant sexual practices through a politics of claims-making which consequently remarginalized cheating and promiscuity and their participants, especially women. Research has shown that "asymmetries in power offline are being replicated online" (Dahlberg 2007, p. 838) and the dominant discourse of a topic is usually favored. In this case, it was done mostly through punitive ISC: when used by both sides of the commentators, aggression by the stronger side in the claims-making process easily threatened and attenuated commentators in the marginalized position, thereby further polarizing viewpoints. Facebook's comment-intensive nature and the ways posts and comments operate have facilitated this situation.

We have not discussed how features of a Facebook post work, as it has been researched elsewhere (e.g., Nylén et al. 2015). But to give an example, Facebook activates "comment ranking" for each user automatically (Facebook 2002). The most visible comments are those that have more Likes, are posted by viewers' friends, or are determined by Facebook to be more relevant to users. The rest is automatically hidden. This favors dominant moral values in garnering support because they consistently receive more Likes.

Moreover, the response to a Facebook post is often spontaneous and high-volume, encouraging misreading, hostile, and impulsive and aggressive behavior (Barlow 2003). Our findings resonate with Ordoñez and Nekmat (2019) that hostility prevails in Facebook commenting. Its escalation may be due to the use of fake profiles. We could not verify the authenticity of the Facebook profiles in the Discussion, but pseudo-identity on Facebook reduces netizens' social burden (Sarikakis and Winter 2017) for offensive commenting. The commentators may have also sustained their viewpoints "to save face or to defend a position" (Makau and Marty 2013, p. 75). It does not help nourish a culture of rational discussion between diverging positions. On the contrary, echo chambers on Facebook give rise to affective polarization (Ordoñez and Nekmat 2019), which is exactly the case for the Discussion. Our data shows that some netizens with a discredited stance chose not to speak up because they fear cyberbullying by people endorsing the dominant discourse (Hampton et al. 2014). As a result, marginalized discourses continue to garner little attention and die out. We identified that Facebook discussions sustain CM and the stigmatization of deviant sexual practices, oppressing the identities and practices of marginalized genders and sexualities, especially women, through informal punitive control.

Domination of punitive ISC means a difficult way-out. This study identified protective and punitive ISC's role in strengthening the social stigma toward cheating and promiscuity in SM. Punitive ISC like personal attack dominated the Discussion. Protective and punitive ISC have different characteristics. We found that protective ISC was not necessarily softer but was clearly more civilized. As shown in our findings, Z0023 uses legal reasons to protect a wife and the monogamous marriage. It was not a soft expression but it

was civilized. In both positions of defending cheating and promiscuity or protecting social order, some commentators used reasons in a firm and strict manner. Another softer way was by clearly presenting their intentions, desires, and needs to persuade their counterparts sincerely. We consider this a crucial element of effective protective ISC in SM, with or without using emotion. However, sincere persuasion was extremely rare.

Soft ISC was significantly outnumbered by punitive ISC in the Discussion. Reason and explanation rapidly disappeared. Harsh and abusive disagreements involving personal attacks and judgmental and sardonic language quickly dominated perspectives on cheating and promiscuity, and on Sum and the writer. We believe the overwhelming presence of punitive ISC was because a hard sanction is easier to perform and facilitated by Facebook's operation. It is direct and convenient, and it vents commentators' anger. In contrast, protective ISC involves considerable understanding, reciprocity, persuasion, and lengthened elaboration (Emery et al. 2015), which Facebook does not favor. This requires immense modesty to minimize emotive language and the desire to win in a dialogue, as well as patience and faith in the opponent's willingness to listen. It becomes more challenging to sustain protective ISC because of the established polarization and the rapid development of the Discussion. We believe that the extensive disgust and anger, deprecation of opponents, and pure sanction may also be due to the firmly established right/wrong binary, dominated by moral conservatives. In addition, the overwhelming use of punitive expression also strengthens the stability of the moral boundary because it reduces space for exploring alternative perspectives (Dahlberg 2007). In the context of such an environment, a claims-making politics was able to facilitate the ally-building process revealed in our study, which ultimately favored the dominant discourse.

Moreover, we believe that the mixing of reason and sarcasm, generally, in HK Chinese and Cantonese easily antagonizes people. Rather than practicing both forms of ISC separately all the time, they were sometimes blended. For example, when some commentators used a legal framework to defend conventional family values, they would call the "intruder" a "little third." In this regard, patronizing languages were embedded in civilized communication. According to our everyday observation, the culture of denouncement is deeply rooted in the language use (both English and Cantonese) for casual communication in HK, which can facilitate antagonism in many discussions. Given Facebook's hostile environment and the enormous effort required, it is challenging to carry out and sustain protective ISC in an online discussion, especially on such a taboo topic.

Limitations and future research direction. This study was inevitably restricted by some limitations. Our analysis was based on comments in a Facebook discussion. We did not examine the comments made by those who shared the post to their profiles, since privacy settings made many of these shares untraceable. But we are aware that other views on the cheating and promiscuity scenario could potentially be found on those profiles. If we were to examine each of their profiles, we might be able to interpret their narratives differently.

Therefore, our data cannot tell us the perspectives of the commentators in other areas of Facebook. Nevertheless, as "truth is not static nor objective" (Duffy et al. 2021, p. 456), we appreciate that the comments being analyzed were how the commentators chose to express themselves in the context of the Discussion. Therefore, we argue that the narratives depict a trend of technology-facilitated violence against women and individuals engaged in sexual deviance, especially cheating and promiscuity, in present-day HK—a trend that has been underexplored. Our research thus contributes to a scholarly discussion about the construction of sexual deviance in the intersection of CM, gender and sexuality, and SM. Future research can include SM to understand the complex relationship between different social institutions in constituting the stigmatization of sexual deviance and the oppression of women and people engaging in marginalized sexual practices. More importantly, this informs a new research direction on how the incivility of online discussion impacts taboo sexual practices.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that SM, especially Facebook, is unfavorable for discussing taboo sexual topics as it facilitates the construction of sexual deviance and exacerbates power asymmetries. Our study contributes to understanding how CM is sustained in SM and constructs sexual deviance on it. The Discussion was originally a meaningful initiative that could have increased HK people's understanding of cheating and promiscuity, and to destigmatize these behaviors. Unfortunately, it became a battlefield that encouraged violence against women and people engaging in marginalized sexual practices. Some might argue the writer should not have published her essay there, but others could suggest Facebook seem the best channel for a topic to receive quick and vast attention, especially in a small city like HK. In a conservative place like this where polyamory remains extremely deviant, individuals are left with very little choice but to cheat if they want to be non-monogamous. The current ecology of similar SM will only worsen the stigma and psychological wellbeing of cheaters. Therefore, it makes sense to consider measures that would allow space for similar discussions to encourage civilized dialogue and cultivate understanding.

We advocate that Facebook and other similar SMs develop new functions for users to prevent/reduce uncivilized online practices when they conduct "serious" discussions on a topic. Many Facebook groups (closed or open) enforce house rules that forbid uncivilized language and comments; violators are removed from the groups. Many forums on Reddit enforce similar practices to keep discussions constructive. However, general posts on Facebook do not have such an option. SM platforms like Facebook should integrate similar practices as an official function for users to activate when they create new posts, even if not part of a group with established rules. Hosts should make available clear ground rules for discussion. A system of appeal should also be available to reduce the chances of canceling marginalized voices. An intervention like this might not be perfect, especially if we consider its implications for freedom and democracy. More discussion is needed to operationalize a solution, especially for nurturing a civilized discussion environment rather than censoring opinions, so that we can reduce violence against women and people who engage in alternative sexual practices.

Notes

1 The writer's post was created on June 2, 2019. It had been open to the public until early July 2020 and its privacy was set as "friends-only" out of the writer's concerns for her personal safety. The Discussion ceased before early July 2020 and our data collection

and analysis were completed before the change of the privacy setting. We still consider the Discussion as a public sphere activity during that time frame, and thus also consider the data collected as public.

2 "Little third": English translation of the Cantonese term, *siu saam* (小三). The term originated from a Taiwanese TV drama (SETN, 2020). It was first used to describe the "intruder" in a monogamous marriage. The term became popularly used in most Chinese societies, including Hong Kong and Mainland China, to refer to "the bad little third." In the remaining contents, we adopt this colloquial term, "little third", to denote "intruder", "mistress", "secret lover", or similar identities.

3 In Hong Kong, selling sex is taboo and misconceived as illegal.

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Competing interests
The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval
This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Hong Kong (Ethics approval number: EA210132).

Informed consent
Informed consent was not obtained for this study as it analyzed public data available on the Internet.

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