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Alipay adds “beauty filters” to face-scan payments: A form of patriarchal control over women’s bodies
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In July 2019, the Chinese mobile payment application, Alipay launched a new update that incorporated “beauty filters” into its face-scan payment system. The “beauty filters,” which beautify users when they make payments via the application, have been well received by the market. News coverage shows that the number of Chinese users who use Alipay face-scan payments increased by over 100 per cent within weeks of the update being launched, and the number of women users, in particular, increased by 123 per cent (Bing Li 2019). While acknowledging that the recent update of Alipay may enhance Chinese women’s inclusion in technology use, I argue that the update paradoxically facilitates control over women’s bodies by promoting the male gaze-based aesthetics of beauty, which confines Chinese women to forms of femininity that reiterate patriarchal values. Yet, different from similar findings by existing literature based on an observation of Western neoliberal capitalism (Ana Elias and Rosalind Gill 2018), this control is engineered by an indigenous socio-technological process, which is influenced by the specificities of post-reform Chinese gender politics (Harriet Evans 2008).

To unpack the patriarchal logic of design embedded in Alipay face-scan payments, this essay draws on a techno-feminist analysis. Techno-feminism examines the mutual shaping of technology and gender in given socio-cultural contexts (Judy Wajcman 2006). As a theoretical approach to the “intersecting vectors of gender and technology studies,” techno-feminism analyses how technology is engineered to elevate or hinder women users’ agency (Tina Sikka 2017, 110). Deborah Johnson (2010) claims that technology can be “feminist” as long as it increases women’s socio-political status, enhances equitable gender power relations, or favours women users. However, the design of technology is a socio-technological process that is not only orchestrated by mainly men engineers but also serves to uphold patriarchal capitalism that advocates male-dominance in the socio-economic infrastructure of society (Judy Wajcman 2006). As Safiya Noble and Brendesha Tynes (2016) suggest, this process determines that male values often persist into technology, facilitating the establishment of gender power relations in people’s technology use.
Alipay provides an up-to-date example for a techno-feminist analysis of technological design in the Chinese context. It is widely acknowledged that the recent update of Alipay is a response to the results of media research, which showed that many Chinese women were reluctant to use the previous version of Alipay face-scan payments because they feared they might look “ugly” when subject to face-scan cameras (Qian Wen 2019). “Using [Alipay] face-scan payments, you now look even prettier than with a beauty camera. I bet this will impress all of you!” said Alipay’s official social media channel after the “beauty-filters” update was made available. The sub-text of this social media campaign reveals Alipay’s attempt to use the “beauty-filters” design to encourage Chinese women’s adoption of its face-scan payments, a technology invented to facilitate a convenient mobile payment process.

From a techno-feminist perspective, we can see the integration of “beauty filters” in Alipay face-scan payments as pointing towards a patriarchal rationale of technological design. Nowadays, “beauty filters” are a standard add-on in digital cameras. Mainly targeting women, “beauty filters” are designed to enable users to display a “perfect” appearance (Ana Elias and Rosalind Gill 2018). Resonating with the male gaze-based ideals of femininity in the fashion and beauty industry, the display of a “perfect” appearance encouraged by “beauty filters” renders “the female body and face […] as a site of crisis and commodification” (Ana Elias, Rosalind Gill, and Christina Scharf 2017, 16). The “beauty-filters” design appears to address women’s anxiety about their bodies, but it paradoxically amplifies this anxiety by defining their unaltered appearance as imperfect and undesirable. Feeding into this logic, the updated Alipay application facilitates the further entrenchment of chauvinist expectations of femininity in Chinese society by turning women’s use of face-scan payments into a technologically enhanced process of self-monitoring. In this process, women users are reminded of these expectations by their “perfectly” altered appearance displayed on the mobile screen. The border of the patriarchal control of Chinese women’s bodies is thereby extended into their daily routines when they use the application to make a purchase. This control has been masked within the feminist rhetoric of enhancing women’s agency in technology use, which is contextualized against the backdrop as pseudo-feminism hijacks the voice of liberal feminism.

In existing feminist literature, commonly cited critiques of pseudo-feminism are largely based on an observation of the increasing compatibility between feminism and femininity in Western postfeminist popular cultures (Melanie Kennedy 2018). The gender
politics behind this compatibility is exploited by Western neoliberal capitalism, explaining how businesses propagate pseudo-feminist ideologies to target women consumers (Catherine Rottenberg 2018). Yet, such feminist critiques often rely heavily on examples from the white communities in major Western democracies (Catherine Rottenberg 2018). Limited scholarly attention has been paid to the Global South, where indigenous gender issues are shaped by their differing modernization processes (Altman Yuzhu Peng 2019).

What makes the case of Alipay salient is the socio-political process behind the scenes, which is specific to post-reform Chinese gender politics. Since the reform of China’s economy in the 1980s, men employees become privileged because men are perceived to possess the personal qualities and technical skills valued by the labour market (Harriet Evans 2008). Traditional Chinese gender norms, which highlight yin-yang (female-male) complementary, become revived in the process, urging women to once again “take on attributes of care, emotionality, communicativeness, and gentleness deriving from their role as reproducers and nurturers” (Fengshu Liu 2014, 20). However, the Chinese government avoids critical discourses of gender in its administration, because contemporary gender inequality is effectively legitimated by the reform, meaning that critical discourses of gender might encourage wider criticisms of its reform policies (Harriet Evans 2008). In this way, the hijacking of feminist voices by pseudo-feminism in China reveals “the [Chinese] government’s strategic bargain whereby greater consumption and lifestyle choices are offered to the populace in exchange for the suppression of political rights” (Cara Wallis 2015, 226–27).

As the most popular Chinese mobile payment application, adopted by over 520 million users, Alipay has dramatically changed how purchases are made in China (Gladys Pak Lei Chong 2019). Its business success is inseparable from the Chinese government’s favourable policies for its parent company (Bingchun Meng and Yanning Huang 2017). As such, the above techno-feminist analysis of Alipay, which reveals that pseudo-feminist ideologies may take the form of technological design to rationalize the control of Chinese women’s bodies, underscores the entangled relations between neoliberal capitalism and authoritarianism in the revival of patriarchal values in China today. In this way, it sheds new light on a much-needed intellectual intervention in existing techno-feminist studies by challenging the Western-centric research tradition in the field.
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