

# The Social Media Visibility and Justice Propositions in the Subway Upskirting Incident

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**Abstract:** The subway upskirting incident in China sparked widespread attention and became a hot topic in online public discourse, leaving a lingering negative impact. Examining this incident, which continues to draw attention, reveals a close relationship between social media and visibility. This paper focuses on this case study and explores the notion of visibility in the context of social media and the justice propositions it reflects, through theoretical analysis and case discussions. The paper argues that while social media provides visibility, it does not automatically guarantee justice, and its implications need to be contextualized within the specific socio-cultural landscape of the times.

**Keywords:** Social Media; Visibility; Justice

## 1. Introduction

On June 7, 2023, a female graduate student from Sichuan University posted on the Weibo platform, suspecting that she had been upskirted by a male migrant worker while riding the subway. Although the girl did not find any upskirt images when she checked the worker's phone, she referred to him as a frustrated "lewd old man" in her Weibo post. After the post was published, the girl faced overwhelming criticism, and under pressure, she offered an apology, which ironically triggered a new round of public judgment. Chinese official media, such as the *People's Daily*, characterized it as the "subway upskirting incident gone wrong". Examining this incident and the ensuing storm of public opinion, it is closely related to the visibility brought about by social media. Drawing on Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic*, which views clinical medicine as a perspectival technology that embodies the production of disciplinary visibility [1], and Dayan's clear depiction of visibility as the basic right of

citizens, encompassing the "right to be seen, the right to be seen in one's own way, and the power to confer visibility" [2], the theoretical construction of "visibility" becomes increasingly profound. From this perspective, it can be said that this incident is highly correlated with the empowerment of visibility through social media, and the conflicting discourses presented therein highlight the current societal concerns in China.

## 2. Subway Migrant Workers: the Visibility Empowered by Social Media at the Grassroots Level

In the context of China's urban-rural dual structure, migrant workers who have migrated from vast rural areas to cities have long been invisible. Traditional mass media rarely presented them in a positive light. However, all of this has been completely overturned in the era of social media. In the age of social media, everything can be easily captured and instantly shared on the internet, reaching a wide audience. In China, with the widespread adoption of mobile internet and smartphones, platforms like Douyin and Kuaishou have revolutionized the visibility of grassroots communities. Delivery riders, construction workers, truck drivers, whose lives were rarely in people's sight, are now flourishing on various platforms, where their daily lives, emotions, and experiences are showcased in front of the lens. Events such as the heroic act of a Hangzhou delivery rider saving a life, after going viral on social media, receive coverage from mainstream media, resulting in a media resonance that amplifies their impact. However, this visibility has also exposed long-standing spatial justice issues within the urban-rural dichotomy. The binary relationship between cities and rural areas has created a perception that urban spaces belong exclusively to urban dwellers, cultivating a sense of territoriality among city dwellers.

Such spaces are seemingly considered the rightful domain of urban residents, and should not be encroached upon by rural migrants. In this social framework, rural migrants who come to the cities for work are perceived as outsiders. They are characterized as an unwelcome group that disrupts the cleanliness and order of the city. Consequently, when instances arise such as migrant workers choosing to sit on the floor of the subway to avoid dirtying the seats, the media often portrays them as individuals who spontaneously care for the urban environment. This further reinforces the media image of migrant workers as “dirty”, cementing the notion that they are not deserving of such urban spaces, as if they are incompatible with this environment.

In this particular incident, the girl described the migrant worker as a “lewd old man” who attempted to take inappropriate photos. To some extent, this perpetuates the stereotypical image of migrant workers held by urban communities. If this event is verified, it will further solidify the notion that migrant workers are physically and morally “dirty.” Interestingly, in the images of the incident, we can see the migrant worker conforming to the image often portrayed by the media, squatting on the ground. The underlying issue of spatial justice remains unresolved and continues to be a structurally challenging problem.

### **3. Visible Justice: Who is Insulted and Harmed**

Although “the ability to see and be seen in the city remains a prerequisite for empowering marginalized groups” [3], in this incident, it is unlikely that the migrant worker would willingly choose to be seen in this manner. Similarly, the girl who arrogantly criticized the migrant worker from a moral high ground, after being engulfed in public opinion, may have chosen to apologize and cease her online presence, but as the focus of public scrutiny, she cannot escape the watchful eyes of netizens. This is closely associated with the culture of surveillance brought about by social media. David Lyon argued that sharing in itself is a form of exposure, and the necessity of sharing has to some extent contributed to the emergent surveillance culture of today, with social media being synonymous with this act of sharing [4]. Ordinary internet users actively

participate in this surveillance practice [5], forming a participatory surveillance culture [6]. The result of this is that both parties involved in this incident are troubled by the visibility imposed upon them.

“How we become visible, and how we make ourselves visible, or conceal our visibility” [4] is not only a technical issue but also a moral one. In the subway upskirting incident, both parties involuntarily became visible and demonstrated their efforts to conceal their visibility. The girl, through her textual description on Weibo and supporting images, attempted to set an agenda of “seeing is believing”, exposing the migrant worker’s actions in an effort to subject him to moral punishment. By violating the privacy and image rights of the worker, she sought to invoke sustained online surveillance on him. In the initial context of the incident, it is evident that the migrant worker was the one clearly insulted and harmed.

When the girl’s Weibo post started to gain attention and sparked discussions online, the migrant worker himself remained unaware of his newfound online recognition, which confirms that visibility does not necessarily eliminate injustice and may even exacerbate it [3]. As the public began to question the girl, the discourse escalated, and the entire internet formed a liquid surveillance over her. Criticism, attacks, and even malicious defamation flooded towards the girl. At this point, we can see that the situation has veered off its initial course, with the proliferation of online rumors and a shift towards a state of chaos. Through continuous surveillance and labeling of the girl, a form of “label activism” has emerged, leading to a public judgment against her. The girl, who initiated the incident, become a victim of harm herself.

In this context, “internet rumors will construct identities through fictional scenarios, filtering, deleting, and amplifying certain information to provoke public feelings of sadness and anger. Through public trials, satirical mockery, emotional manipulation, offline movements, and other forms of protest and resistance, the incident gradually escalates to a stage of venting and struggle” [7]. Based on the visibility provided by social media, the personal dispute between the two individuals transforms into a public event. The involvement of the public in the incident adds

complexity to its nature, leading to an ethical dilemma of surveillance [8]. This creates a challenge to justice, as all participants in the incident believe that they are exercising judgment based on justice, but the result is that justice becomes obscure.

#### **4. The Collision of Visibility Issues: Female Risk Perception in the Risk Society and Underlying Narratives in the Post-truth Era**

The attention drawn by the subway upskirting incident was largely due to the identities of the individuals involved. The girl was a well-known graduate student from a prestigious university, currently interning at Tencent, which starkly contrasted with the identity of the other party as a migrant worker. The subsequent development of the incident was visibly influenced by the narrative surrounding their respective identities. In this context, identity is not merely a label, but it also encapsulates people's societal role perceptions associated with that identity, along with a set of social values and cognitive structures intertwined with it. The intense conflict depicted in this incident is fundamentally a collision of visibility issues that precisely connects with the societal cognitive structure, thereby triggering a torrent of public opinion.

The actions of the girl were, in and of themselves, an exaggerated response within the overall context of the risk society. With the support of readily available and increasingly convenient and stealthy recording devices in today's technological landscape, society has, to a certain extent, transformed into what Foucault referred to as the "panopticon". Surveillance cameras hanging overhead, smartphone cameras, and even undetectable upskirting devices—all of these mean that anyone's body can be captured by others. The images and footage obtained from such recordings can be used for social control or commercial purposes, satisfying voyeuristic or even pornographic interests without consequences. Profiting from the material obtained through upskirting has given rise to an infamous gray market industry. This is the risk landscape of a post-industrial society, which significantly heightens women's perception of risk, and their intense reactions may lead to unforeseen consequences. The viral storm triggered by the girl's actions in

this incident serves as a stark illustration of this reality.

The current rise of feminism, combined with this heightened awareness of risk among women, has sparked intense reactions that are driven by both self-security measures and the pursuit of women's rights. As a graduate student in journalism, the girl is well-versed in media rules and skilled at constructing narratives that highlight gender disparities. However, her biggest challenge lies in not fully understanding the logic of the current Chinese internet discourse, which suggests that when it comes to issues involving the lower social strata, the underprivileged often possess a natural moral advantage and narrative confidence, fueled by the user structure of the Chinese internet.

In the end, the gendered narrative constructed by this girl ultimately failed, compounded by uncomfortable memories brought about by certain exaggerated aspects of feminism and the societal pressures brought about by ongoing social transformations. When people discovered that the migrant worker, typically seen as a disruptor of urban order, was actually a silent victim harmed by the gendered narrative, but unfamiliar with the workings of the Internet's underlying dynamics, their cognitive structures were shattered. They voiced their support for him, granting "empowerment through visibility" to grassroots opinions [9]. Among them were genuinely empathetic individuals seeking justice, but there were also those who took advantage of the situation to vent their frustration and spread rumors and falsehoods. "Whoever can successfully create a sensation on the internet gains dominance" [10]. The girl initially garnered attention but failed to gain dominance, as it was seized by netizens who empathized fully with the migrant worker. At this point, the actual facts seemed to lose significance. What mattered more was what people believed to be the truth, as it provided an outlet for their emotions, exemplifying the dynamics of a post-truth society. The netizens who converged around this incident formed what Bauman referred to as a "nail community" through mobilization based on shared sentiments. The limited number of netizens who protested on behalf of the girl became silenced, further confirming the concept of the "spiral of silence". In the end,

the whereabouts of the truth remained unclear to the majority.

### 5. Conclusions

The subway upskirting incident, which occupied the Chinese online discourse for a considerable period, underwent a transformation from being a spectacle observed by “onlookers” to individuals actively engaging in the issue. Some were able to express their viewpoints rationally, while many others used it as an opportunity to vent their frustrations. It appeared that everyone was advocating for their own sense of justice. However, as the incident unfolded, not only did the truth become increasingly obscured, but the question of whether justice was truly served, and whether it provided solace to society and people's hearts, remained unresolved. Therefore, examining the subway upskirting incident reveals that the visibility brought by social media does not automatically translate into justice or injustice. It is intertwined with complex social contexts, and its ultimate direction depends on society and the era itself.

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