

Podcasting women's pleasure: Feminism and sexuality in the sonic space of China

Sexualities

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sex**Fan Yang**

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Abstract

This article sheds light on the landscape of sex-positive podcasts for women in mainland China, with particular emphasis on the podcast Bitch Up (2015–2022). Drawing on the sexualization of popular culture in China since the 1990s, we trace the origins of sex-positive podcasting back to late-night radio to show how the celebration of women's sexual pleasure in podcast form builds an erotic sonic space that engages with feminist discourses of liberation through pleasure. Through historical and discourse analysis, we argue that Bitch Up sought to establish a new sexual norm that moulds the orgasmic body as female and reconfigures pleasure as an act of women's self-determination. Refusing to conflate sexual celebration with sex education, Bitch Up discovered and nurtured an appetite for sexual pleasure and expressivity amongst Chinese women that contributes to understanding the complexities of feminism, erotics and politics in contemporary China.

Keywords

Bitch up, erotic sonic space, female sexual pleasure, orgasmic body, sex-positive podcasts

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Introduction

Launched in December 2015 on NetEase Cloud Music in mainland China, the *Bitch Up* (婊酱) (2015)¹ podcast produced 150 episodes with an unapologetic focus on female sexual pleasure and women's sexual adventures, before ending in March 2022.² Hosted by three Chinese women calling themselves Jess, Niaoniao and Teacher Yun, the podcast reclaimed the stigmatized term 'bitch' (婊) for Chinese audiences as a marker of women's erotic independence and sexual subjectivity, sharing information about sexual techniques and detailing the experiences of the hosts and guests, most of whom were women. Dismissive of what passes for sex education in the mainstream media, the hosts positioned *Bitch Up* as more daring and liberated than previous discussions of Chinese female sexuality, drawing on Western discourses of sexual autonomy and taking advantage of the fact that two of the three hosts at the time were based in the Netherlands. *Bitch Up* thus took a radical approach to progressive feminism produced under diasporic conditions but made locally accessible, and attractively exotic, to mainland Chinese audiences. In the context of stringent state-led controls on sexual expression across Chinese media platforms, as well as an arguably new era of online debates about feminism and nationalism under Xi Jinping's traditionalist third term, it is worth examining *Bitch Up* as a form of radical sex-positive feminism that was allowed – at least for some time – to operate on the Chinese media margins in the loosely regulated but accessible zone of podcasting. We argue that, by embracing discourses of feminist self-determination in its address to Chinese audiences, *Bitch Up* sought to establish a new sexual norm that reconfigured women's autonomy in terms of pleasure and the orgasmic female body. From a media perspective, it is important that this endeavour was launched in the sonic space, where a tradition of communal sex-talk had already been established on radio, even as the rise of podcasting from the mid-2010s gave it a new edge of erotic intimacy.

In contrast to other sex-positive podcasts such as *Heat Wave Radio* (热浪电台) and *Bibi Moment* (哔哔时刻), which have retained a strong connection to public education and intimacy consultancy in order to be allowed to operate, *Bitch Up* framed itself as resistant to providing sex education in favour of celebrating women's sexual pleasure. The education mandate, as accepted by *Heat Wave Radio* for instance, offers a work-around to censorship strategies in a state where all pornography is illegal and functions as a flexible means to shut down eruptions of sex-positive activism. A more Western-oriented feminist approach, like that adopted by *Bitch Up*, tends to align pleasure with feminist 'liberation', embracing the risk of censorship as part – and as proof – of its radical platform. Indeed, *Bitch Up* was banned from *Lizhi* (one of the most popular audio platforms) in 2017 after producing 89 episodes, and then banned from NetEase Cloud Music in June 2019, before being allowed to return temporarily in August 2020 (Niao, 2017). Although *Bitch Up*'s co-hosted format ended for good in March 2022, it made the most of its production conditions – namely, the early lack of regulation of Chinese podcasting as well as the hosts' diasporic position – to nurture an appetite for unbounded sexual expressivity amongst Chinese women.

As we will show, this emancipatory approach to women's sexual pleasure under conditions of unpredictable state censorship is in many ways a continuation of the 1990s'

sexual revolution in China, influenced by both consumer capitalism and Western pro-sex feminism (Farrer, 2007; Pan, 2007). Where Bitch Up differs, as is evident in its tagline ‘the one and only sex-positive podcast in China’, is in its outspoken celebration of sensational and even supposedly deviant sexual pleasures for women. However, this also turns out to be prescriptive, since the energetic embrace of a woman’s right to pleasure in this case produces a demand that all women should claim, possess and exercise the orgasmic body. An examination of Bitch Up in the context of sex-oriented podcasting, then, helps to map the connections and disjunctions across the complicated terrain of feminism, erotics and politics in contemporary China.

Changing attitudes to sexuality in mainland China

According to Pan (2007), the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a sexual revolution in mainland China, demonstrated by a paradigm shift away from reproduction-centred sex toward diversified, pleasurable relationships and the higher visibility of sexuality in public discussion and publications. Such a rapid change in attitudes to sexuality can be accounted for by a number of interconnected factors (Pan, 2006, 2007): the shift to a market-driven economy, the development of individuality as people were disembedded from working units and family, greater mobility of the population due to urbanization, the implementation of the one-child policy as well as changing attitudes to gender roles (Honig and Hershatter, 1988). The rising sense of sexual liberation, which in turn led to the sexualization of popular culture, accelerated in the 21st century as a result of the spread of internet access, the rise of consumerism and the greater impact from the West, which is positioned geo-politically as the barometer of sexual freedom (Huang, 2013; Pan and Hung, 2013). This impact was implemented not only through cultural products such as TV shows, movies, fashion magazines and novels, but also through global capital. Western foundations dedicated to the prevention and cure of AIDS supported the establishment of sex-related NGOs and LGBTQ organizations in mainland China, which in turn propelled topics such as sex work and sexual minorities into public discussion and academic research (Bao, 2018; Huang, 2020).

Since 2000, the sexual landscape in mainland China has become more diversified and interconnected with growing discourses of feminism, LGBTQ issues and sex education (Huang, 2020, 2022). High-profile feminist events have promoted women’s sexual autonomy, such as Eve Ensler’s play *The Vagina Monologues* being performed by professional, amateur and university theatrical troupes in the original and adapted Chinese versions since 2001 (Rong, 2021). Documentaries, recitations and workshops based on *The Vagina Monologues* helped to publicize notions of anti-sexual violence and female sexual pleasure, although the latter occasionally led to the cancellation of shows on the grounds of pornographic ambiguity (Rong, 2021). The understanding that women have full claim to their bodies and their sexuality has been circulated in recent years through a wave of activities, such as anti-sexual harassment campaigns and legislation as well as digital feminist activism in the form of #MeToo and #Naked Chest Against Domestic Violence (Hou, 2020; Qi et al., 2020). This wave of protections for women’s sexual freedom, as supported by scholars, activists, feminist organizations and netizens, was

eventually picked up by entrepreneurs. Bringing sexual self-empowerment into the mainstream through commercial promotion, entrepreneurs launched women-specific businesses in the booming industry of sex products, sex consultation/therapy and dating apps.

It is within this more sexualized culture that sex-positive podcasts began to build substantial audiences when podcasting emerged as a new medium in the 2010s. Of these podcasts, Bitch Up drew approximately 100,000 subscribers on Chinese domestic podcasting apps³ (Niao, 2018), making it one of the most popular if not the earliest sex-oriented podcast. Tagging itself as ‘the one and only sex-positive podcast in China’ on its logo, Bitch Up wilfully distanced itself from predecessors such as Bibi Radio (later known as Wild Sisters), a sex-focused podcast run by the sex-toy company Shise Chunsun (十色春筍), which had attracted tens of thousands of listeners before Bitch Up uploaded its first episode in late 2015. Having stated or implied in interviews that Chinese culture was sexually ignorant before the launch of Bitch Up, the hosts nonetheless failed to explain what shaped their own sexual subjectivity, given the fact that their sexual adventures started in China. To address this failure, we begin by situating sex-positivism within a historical context of Chinese media, linking podcasts to the new generation of women’s writing and late-night radio in the 1990s. We then analyse the feminist framework of sex-positive discourses used on Bitch Up in the context of related debates and similar podcasts. Our analysis throughout this article adopts discursive and historical methodologies based on data collected from podcasts and related social media platforms, audio archives and interviews available online or in podcast programs. The data set includes all Bitch Up episodes, accessed on Apple Podcasts, of which approximately a tenth were transcribed for analysis.

Let’s talk about sex: Late-night radio and women’s body writing

During the sexual revolution of the 1990s, rapid transformations in media as well as a new generation of women’s writing paved the way for what would become feminist sex-positive podcasting in the 2010s, even though the podcasts themselves neglected this connection. Sexuality entered into public discussion largely through the medium of newspapers, television, novels and radio in the 1990s. As noted above, the political-economic momentum for the rise of sex-talk was provided by the accelerated transition to capitalism, consumerism and individualism, as a result of which marriage, intimacy and sexuality became the major concerns of an individual’s life, in place of socialist politics. Responding to such changes, the *Beijing Youth Newspaper* started a column called ‘Oral Record’ in 1997, anonymously publishing people’s stories about intimacy, marriage and sex, which were later anthologized as a best-seller entitled *Absolute Privacy* (Farrer, 2002). Numerous newspapers and reality TV shows such as ‘Perfect Holiday’ followed suit, giving rise not only to the sexualization of popular culture but also to self-reflexive public discourse about voyeurism in the media (Chen, 2006).

In radio, which has a strong genealogical role in the sonic space of sex-talk, dozens of late-night talk-back shows appeared in mainland China in the 1990s and remained popular until the 2000s, when the Internet replaced radio as the main venue for communication

about intimacy and sexual experience. During this period, media technology and content developed in tandem; that is, the rise of talk-back radio helped to sustain the growing conversation about intimacy and sexuality, and vice versa. The direct cause for the spread of talk-back broadcasting in this period was the improvement of telecommunications technology (Erwin, 2000), since the wider installation of telephones in private spaces made it easier for listeners to call a radio station to confide their stories. The permissive combination of verbal intimacy and anonymity contributed to the popularity of hotline counselling in late-night shows (Erwin, 2000).

Framed and justified as a form of sex education that met urgent social needs, late-night talk-back radio 'provided individuals with desperately needed knowledge about sexuality, love, relationships, marriage, and family, in a decade that saw many people disembedded from traditional/socialist ways of life, and seeking guidance as a result' (Sun and Lei, 2017). Almost every municipality aired one or several radio programs that addressed intimacy and sexuality, among which 'Tonight's Whisper' on Beijing Radio, 'Midnight 1 + 1' on Guangzhou Radio, 'Eden Mailbox' on Hangzhou Radio and 'Emotional and Sexual Person' on Shanghai Oriental Radio were the most popular (Pengpai, 2019). Program hosts were either sex experts, medical doctors or professional anchors with a certain level of sexual knowledge; often these anchors would invite guests to join the discussion and provide professional advice, particularly in relation to public health issues such as STDs (Sun, 2006). The discussions drew on knowledge from physiology as well as psychology, sociology, ethics and politics, with often surprising results, such as the approval of gay marriage by guests on the show ('The Lover' Program Group 《性情中人》节目组, 2004).

Few archived radio programs remain from the 1990s, but the audio content was transcribed, edited and published as books by some radio stations. For instance, an edited transcript of the program 'Emotional and Sexual Person', published as *Tonight, We Talk about Sex* (今夜, 我们谈性, 'The Lover' Program Group 《性情中人》节目组, 2004), reveals the hot topics aired two decades ago, ranging from pre-marital sex, homosexuality, sexual fantasy and casual sex to S/M and fetishism. In the transcripts, the latter two topics are notably pathologized and treated as sexual deviance, to be distinguished from the positive and tolerant attitudes shown toward other sexual behaviours and identities. On the one hand, the discursive landscape of talk-back shows was characterized by the aim of solving sexual problems, with callers seeking help, consolation and empathy rather than boasting about sexual adventures. On the other hand, as shown by 'Tonight's Whisper', which experimented with shared stories of pleasure so that listeners with sexual problems could benefit from good role models (Sun, 2006), the overly generous sharing of detailed sexual experiences by an enthusiastic audience placed the hosts in an awkward situation. Often, the hosts had to insist they were engaged in health education rather than pornography (Sun, 2006), with the program 'Emotional and Sexual Person' even organizing sex education workshops among university students ('Emotional and Sexual Person on Campus', 2004).

Initially limited to newspapers, magazines, TV and radio, public discussion of sexual pleasure spread to novels and the internet in the late 1990s and 2000s. This period saw the rise of 'body writing' (身体写作), a genre of sexually unabashed, thinly veiled

autobiography by novelists like Wei Hui and Mian Mian that subjectively celebrates the young, sophisticated and sexy female body (Zhu, 2004), but ‘does not necessarily grant women agency’ (Ferry, 2003). Mu Zimei, the most controversial figure of body writing, began by keeping her sex diaries in a blog format, later published as the book *Love Left* (遗情记); she also uploaded her sex tapes (in audio form), which went viral on the internet (Farrer, 2007). Such sensational (self-)exposure was interpreted as feminist sexual liberation, challenging patriarchal norms and countering grand narratives with women’s private stories (Zhang, 2004; Zhong, 2004; Zhu, 2004). At the same time, body writing was accused of actively embracing the male gaze and commercializing women’s bodies for male consumption and profit (Ferry, 2003; Mi, 2006). It is worth noting that body writing was a feminine practice, as attested by the fact that, although male writers enthusiastically adopted the concept and also produced erotic texts the genre was restricted to women’s writing, in media and public discussions (Mi, 2006).

The practice of women revealing their sexual adventures in public during the wave of body writing is the direct progenitor of today’s sex-positive podcasting. The difference, however, is that feminist sex-positive podcasts are more diversified in their acceptance of ‘deviant’ topics and westernized in their perspectives. Moreover, the dialogic nature of podcasting turns the previously individual female authors’ erotic performances into a collective celebration of women’s sexuality that is participated in by hosts, guests and audiences. Within this atmosphere of collective celebration, sex-talk also becomes more technical, with hosts defining categories and explaining sexual techniques in the spirit of women sharing knowledge with women. At the same time, the marketability of female sexual experience remains, as does its appeal to male as well as female audiences. All of these factors contribute to an exotic and hypersexual representation of female sexuality, as we will see.

Bitch Up and erotic sonic space

A decade after its decline, late-night radio witnessed a revival in the podcast. The latter could be seen as an online, pre-recorded version of radio with greater portability, intimacy and accessibility (Berry, 2006). Because its production and distribution model breaks with the traditional gate-keeping of media institutions, the accessibility of podcasting means that podcasters have the freedom to create while listeners have the freedom to consume (Berry, 2006). Since podcasts in China were largely available by subscription to audio platforms, with the platforms acting to some degree as moderators, the discursive space was enlarged tremendously in comparison to state-owned radio (Yang, 2022). When launching Bitch Up, the podcasters did not face concerns about regulation from NetEase Cloud Music, nor did they seek to distance themselves from pornographic ambiguities as ‘Tonight’s Whisper’ did a decade previously. At the same time, the hyper-intimacy of podcasting, created both by listening through headphones and the ‘double-ended domestication’ of production and consumption practices, brings podcasters and listeners closer to each other than radio broadcasting (Berry, 2016: 14). The ‘non-intrusiveness, affective resonance and enveloping nature’ of podcasts makes them ‘particularly suited to capturing intimate personal narratives’; thus, podcasting is widely used as a medium to

tell personal stories and convey intimate, sometimes erotic feelings (Korfmacher, 2020; McHugh, 2014: 154).

The erotic sonic space of *Bitch Up* is similarly marked by double-ended domestication, with podcasters producing programs from home rather than a recording studio, and fans listening mostly through headphone channels isolated from the public. The sense of domestic privacy is an important part of the framing of the podcast, as emphasized by the hosts in the first episode, when they speak of their motivation to share private talk about sexuality as their reason for starting *Bitch Up*. To them, podcasting does not differ from their everyday, real-world chats, merely extending such talk by recording and uploading it (with slight editing) to the internet for a broad audience. Framing the program as unmediated in this way allows audiences to have a sense of being invited into the hosts' home for intimate chats. An illustration of this appeared in episode 15, when, in the middle of what had been an offline conversation around the table with her friends, the host suddenly started recording with her mobile phone when discussion turned to the colour of the vulva, which she thought would be an interesting topic for the show. The sounds of women laughing, mouths chewing, glasses clinking and chairs scraping situates listeners, too, at the dinner table, making them feel as though they have just turned up and may drop in a line or two.

Projecting the authenticity of bedroom talk, the erotic sonic space is constituted by a trilateral exchange of sexual confessions from podcasters, guests and the audience, whose privacy is protected by anonymity. Whether host, guest or audience member, all participants are equally encouraged to confess details of their sexual encounters without concern for exposure or shame, in the spirit of sophisticated girls celebrating their sexual desires together. Nonetheless, this exuberant mood in the sonic space is maintained by anonymity; interlocutors either use nicknames or English names on the show (except for a couple of celebrities) and none of the three anchors uses her real name, calling themselves Teacher Yun, Jess and Niaoniao.⁴ People's identities are further anonymized by the lack of images, thanks to the non-visual nature of audio. When requested by the audience, Teacher Yun rewarded her fans with a flirtatious photo of her legs, but that was the extent of her self-identification. Anonymity in this context serves a larger purpose, namely, to guarantee the honesty of erotic confessions, which has at times been vehemently protected by the hosts of *Bitch Up*. For instance, when a guest on episode 144 'Family Slave' was exposed as having presented a fantasy of a sex slave experience as a real-life event, the hosts were enraged because they felt the authenticity of *Bitch Up* to be threatened. In the two subsequent episodes, they demanded that the guest reveal his actual life behind the slave fantasy.

The authenticity and intimacy of the erotic sonic space are facilitated by the involvement of audience members as co-confessors. Certain special episodes such as 'Sexy Q&A' and 'Teacher Yun Reads Secrets' bridge the podcasters with the audience through collective, anonymous sex confessions. Having gathered questions, problems and secrets from the audience on multiple social media platforms, the hosts then read these out in the program and respond to them, in an interaction that is similar to late-night radio but differs due to the fact that the podcasters are eager to relate their own sex experiences and flirt with the audience. In episode 35, a listener's anxiety about losing her ability to be aroused

after frequent masturbation is taken seriously by Niaoniao but is used as an opportunity for flirtatious fun by Teacher Yun, who demonstrates how husky her voice gets after too much orgasmic moaning. The authoritative air of sex consultation thus gives way to jokes, flirtation and exchanges of secrets, strengthening the intimacy between host and audience.

Vocal affect is also an important aspect of the intimacy of the erotic sonic space. Niaoniao's voice in particular sounds soothingly feminine, pitched to be both innocent and arousing. Indeed, as mentioned by Niaoniao in her interview on the podcast [Renxing \(2019\)](#) (episode 5), some male audience members masturbate while listening to the show. Women, however, do so as well, as suggested by a female fan who confessed to engaging in sexual fantasies when aroused by sound, particularly by husky voices. The fan found Niaoniao's voice 'so lovable' and later shared her experience of coming to orgasm induced by the sound of her moaning. Although *Bitch Up* is not edited for the purpose of arousal, the feminine voice feeds into the eroticism of the sonic space, seemingly unintended but welcomed.

Feminist bitches

The eroticism of the sonic space is highly gendered in *Bitch Up*. With late-night radio, women tended to call in seeking advice regarding marriage and emotion ([Sun and Lei, 2017: 30](#)), while '[a]lmost all calls about sex were made by men', sometimes on behalf of a girlfriend or wife ([Erwin, 2000: 154](#)). By contrast, the all-female hosts of *Bitch Up* invite mostly female guests to tell their erotic stories and, in so doing, aim to reach out to 'bitches' tuning in. By reclaiming the stigmatized term 'bitch' in the program title, the podcasters signal their intention to embrace a sophisticated and desiring female subjectivity, while rejecting traditional femininity aligned with sexual innocence and passivity. To Niaoniao, 'bitch' is a complimentary term, denoting a woman's ability to demonstrate confidence, power and self-acceptance; moreover, in her interview with Bie Renxing she suggests using the term 'bitch' to replace 'dick' (屌), a positive word meaning cool and ass-kicking in Chinese. This bitched-up eroticism dovetails with discourses of feminized, pleasure-driven liberation in mainland China of the late 2010s. According to a recent survey on people's attitudes towards women's sexual initiative and pleasure, there has been a steady increase of positive attitudes amongst women across birth cohorts ([Yu et al., 2022: 308](#)). Although Yu and Xie do not offer a diagnosis of this increase, it would not be a stretch to claim that women's increasingly pro-sex attitudes can be related to decades of feminist discourse.

The *Bitch Up* podcasters openly embrace a feminist identity. In episode 65, entitled 'feminist bitch', the renowned feminist activist Xiao Meili was invited to talk about feminist activism in mainland China. She gave credit to *Bitch Up* for teaching women to masturbate and to date, on the grounds that building female sexual autonomy is crucial to feminism at large. The hosts and guest thus acknowledged each other's contribution to the feminist cause in the sexual and social realms, respectively, shaking hands over their shared aims. What did not appear in the show, however, was any indication of the disputes that exist, especially between what is known as the 'feminist camp' (女权派) and the 'sexuality camp' (性学派) in Chinese academia. In 2014, 256 feminist scholars and

activists signed an open letter to the Ministry of Education, demanding that the ministry establish a mechanism to prevent sexual harassment on campus (New Media Women, 2014). Scholars of sexuality, however, put off by what they deemed to be ‘excessive concern’ with sexual harassment, drafted and disseminated a ‘Response to Anti-Sexual Assault’ on social media platforms. In their response, they accused the anti-sexual harassment campaigners of glossing over their dependence on traditions of female chastity and instead proposed a plan for universal sex education (Fang, 2014). The antagonism between the two stances gave rise to the different camps as well as to a wave of debates both within academia and on social media (Qi, 2018; Song, 2014) about how to frame sexuality, whether as danger (manifesting as sexual harassment) or as pleasure (prompting sex education). Feminist scholars do allow for female sexual pleasure but with restrictions out of concern about exploitation, while sex-positive scholars argue that such restrictions would be unnecessary if only sexual consent were agreed upon.

In keeping with the sex-positive approach, the Bitch Up podcasters repeatedly emphasize sexual consent in order to limit anxieties about the potential for sexual violence and exploitation, but this also casts their feminism in a particular light. Sexual consent, if verbally agreed between participants in an encounter, aims to guarantee safe sexual behaviour and hence security for sexual pleasure. With such protocols in place, it should become possible to enjoy S/M behaviour and even engage with women’s fantasies about rape, as discussed in episode 119, entitled ‘coerced pleasure’. Although conscious of women’s risk of falling victim to rape, Niaoniao defends her right to enjoy coerced pleasure, separating it from the real crime of rape through repeated emphasis on sexual consent. The question, however, of whether an individual can give sexual consent under conditions of structured gender inequality remains undiscussed. Feminist critique has emphasized that ‘[t]he ubiquity of sexual danger and humiliation in a patriarchal surround’ (Vance, 1984: 5) may deny women under patriarchy the ability to freely grant sexual consent. Downplaying masculine privilege in a sexual relationship in order to celebrate female sexual pleasure can thus be problematic. Indeed, the greater the focus on pleasure, the more an examination of (gendered) power and privilege becomes necessary, not least because the adventures touted by sexually liberated women often celebrate the same practices – such as swinging, kink, S/M and orgies – that have traditionally been bolstered by men. In claiming an exuberantly active role for female sexual pleasure, Bitch Up risks conflating women’s sexual liberation with what Angela McRobbie has termed the position of ‘the phallic girl’, who ‘seeks to emulate male behavior’ and ‘appears to have gained equality in that she can play them at their own game’ (McRobbie, 2007: 733). The phallic girl challenges conventions of femininity centred on passivity and chastity; however, ‘having assumed some male privileges’, the phallic girl ‘finds no reason to challenge masculinity per se’ (McRobbie 2007: 733).

This is where the feminist reclamation of the stigmatized term ‘bitch’ has an unanticipated effect. Targeted at ‘bitches’, Bitch Up soon garnered more male than female listeners, 75% to 25%, as acknowledged by the hosts (episode 5). While the podcasters have claimed that the sexual conservatism of women may explain this gender gap (episode 5), the show’s mode of celebrating sexual pleasure for women undoubtedly also proves pleasurable to men. The Bitch Up hosts do not attempt to exclude men from the

conversations, as we have seen from the mention of male involvement in some of the episodes. At the same time, the podcasters never waver from the main purpose of the program, which is to celebrate sexual pleasure for women by women as framed with feminist discourse. Although it is not possible to say whether male listeners engage solely for sexual gratification or other reasons, there is a claim to be made that even eavesdropping on feminist discussions of sex will shift (men's) perceptions of what women want and how they experience pleasure. Being a 'phallic girl' in McRobbie's terms may not challenge masculinity per se, but allowing men to listen in, whatever their own pleasurable response, widens the possibilities of who may learn from the podcast.

The new sexual norm

The political edge of the Bitch Up podcast lies in how it uses its audio platform to break with traditional approaches to sexual pleasure and display a range of possibilities for putting female desire into practice. However, not all sexual expressions are equally valued. While opening up a space for the articulation of female sexual desire, Bitch Up actually creates a new sexual norm with its own set of valuations. In a challenge to mainstream conventions of sexuality, this new sexual hierarchy dismisses heterosexual monogamy, whose sexual aim is reproductive rather than pleasure-seeking, and instead celebrates pan-sexual, open relationships which include sexual practices that have commonly been pathologized. The process of becoming aware of one's desire and putting it into (better) practice is deemed to be a journey of sexual awakening and liberation. As such, the new sexual norm prescribes that the more lustful and sexually adventurous a woman becomes, the more liberated and self-fulfilled she will be. If a woman is not sexually active, according to this new norm, her desire must have been smothered by patriarchal culture. What is not asked here, however, is where such a desire comes from, just as the Bitch Up hosts did not ask after the genealogy of their own desire for female desire. While rejecting the compulsory heterosexuality of reproductive patriarchal culture, then, Bitch Up's own discourse paradoxically compels listeners to sexually liberate themselves in the erotic sonic space.

Compulsory sexuality refers to a framework in which 'all people are or should be sexual' and 'sexuality is or should be important to everyone' (Gupta, 2015: 140). It not only regulates sexual expression from the outside, such as through peer pressure, but also evokes and demands sexual engagement through the rhetoric of sexual autonomy. In Bitch Up, the hypersexual imperative is constituted through three means: the sensationalism of desire, the orgasmic body and exotic sexual experimentation. Of these, the imperative to 'be sexual', while seemingly liberating, relies on sensationalizing sexual desire. Whereas Bitch Up starts with the aim of sharing information about orgasms (episode one), this soon becomes caught up in an amplification of taboo-breaking, ending in episode 150 with a 'menstrual blood slave', a story shared by a man who is obsessed with masturbating with women's bloody sanitary pads. Sexual adventures need to be progressively sensationalized to feed listeners' appetite for more stimulating and rarely practiced sex, thereby departing from everyday bedroom talk to deliver sexual display in the audio sphere. One of the podcasters even

complained about how exhausting it was to fulfil the audience's appetite for ever more transgressive dirty talk; the endless excitement-hunting game prompted her to start a new podcast (which is much less popular than *Bitch Up*) called *God, Love, Play, Money* (神爱玩财), with more diverse topics on intimacy and spirituality. The hypersexual imperative also puts pressure on the hosts in episode 36 of *Bitch Up*, when they share their transition from polygamy to monogamy in a way that is laden with anxiety about regression. They are aware that this episode does not sound 'bitchy' and risks being labelled as the reverse of emancipation. It is fair to say that at this point the hosts find themselves unfavourably caught up in the very sexual hierarchies that they have established.

Second, *Bitch Up* aims to mould the desiring woman as an orgasmic body. Although the 150 co-hosted episodes of *Bitch Up* mention a diverse range of sexual fantasies, practices and techniques, its core value can nevertheless be boiled down to the pursuit of orgasm. The longer, more intense and more unusual the orgasm, the more pleasure it generates and the more it demonstrates a satisfying intimate relationship. The obsession with orgasm is apparent in the titles of episodes such as 'ah I come', 'ah, I come again!', 'six-hour climax after a long drought' and 'five hours are not my longest'. Confessions about the details of orgasm are enthusiastically elicited by the hosts with admiration and applause. An orgasmic body is thereby constructed for sexualized female subjects as an imperative of sophisticated liberation. This 'transforms orgasm from pleasurable option, into a requirement which individuals have an obligation or responsibility to deliver' (Frith, 2015: 22). In turn, the stories and performances serve as an orgasmic technology whose function is to measure the frequency, duration and multiplicity of orgasm, making sexual pleasure both quantifiable and in constant need of improvement. Since an orgasm does not come automatically, the orgasmic labour required to achieve a 'phenomenal fireworks-like finale' (Frith, 2015: 83) corresponds to the rhetoric of self-improvement of aspirational young women, who seek to amplify their sex drive in the endless pursuit of pleasure.

This orgasmic imperative was reflected upon in episode 76, in which a guest questioned the *Bitch Up* hosts' insistence on a 'proper' orgasm. According to her accusation against the hosts, 'you told me that an orgasm does not matter, while showing off your own orgasms, which is hypocritical!' The hypocrisy was admitted by Jess, who seemed to understand the bind between self-expression and sexual expressivity. On the one hand, *Bitch Up* promotes diversity by respecting individuals' practices based on sexual self-determination and consent. Indeed, the hosts sometimes play the role of therapists, offering encouragement such as 'just be yourself!' On the other hand, *Bitch Up* constantly feeds into the myth of the amazing orgasm as proof of the best sex, thus creating an anxiety of under-performance. Behind the myth of best sex, an implicit discrimination is forged against those pathetic orgasm-less women who must be either morally bound or sexually ignorant, and thus need to be liberated to be self-pleas(ur)ing subjects. However, despite accusing *Bitch Up* of hypocrisy, this guest ended up strengthening the myth of great orgasmic sex by sharing her experience of achieving whole-body multiple orgasms (100 orgasms an hour, according to her) with the help of a neurologist, who had her bound, hypnotized and aroused through touch over her entire body. Moving beyond the

genital-only obsession to include the whole body as a site of climactic pleasure, the guest seems to redefine orgasm, but in the process she raises the threshold by unveiling a hyper-orgasmic body that operates without end and comes with scientific certification from a sex expert's laboratory. This presentation was not calculated to ease the orgasmic performance anxiety of listeners. The message is clear: pathetic orgasm-less women are still pathetic, unless they, too, can discover a superpower hidden within their body.

Such stories of hours-long orgasms connect to the third hypersexual imperative, namely, the geopolitical exoticization of sexual adventure. Two of the Bitch Up hosts were residing in the Netherlands during the production period (although one later returned to mainland China) and the majority of guests who shared their sexual experimentation live temporarily or permanently in the West. For the Chinese audience, their narration offers an exotic peep into the liberated West, where pornography and sex-clubbing are largely legal. Their privilege of being able to engage, at least aurally, with something that is illegal in mainland China enhances the pleasure of taboo-breaking, but it also reinforces the binary opposition between the liberated West and conservative China. In episode 130, which presents an interview with a U.S. American porn actor, the hosts agree with the interviewee when he takes pride in his freedom to act on his sexual drive while dismissing more sexually conservative cultures, such as China. He defends his liberal position with the claim that (Western) medicine has proven the health benefits of daily sexual intercourse. Such a statement is undoubtedly Western-centric (Van Gulik, 2003), but more problematically it serves to support the myth of a fully liberated West, which in turn fuels the enthusiasm of the hosts and guests of Bitch Up to enlighten people living in China with their erotic experiences. In episode two, for instance, entitled 'we really are in a Dutch brothel', the hosts visit a well-maintained brothel in Amsterdam where sex workers have both self-esteem and security. While this may not be exotic within the Dutch space, the title of the episode – 'we really are in ...' – indicates to Chinese listeners that something amazing, indeed mythological, will be revealed. It is worth noting, however, that this is an upmarket brothel, and that class and racial differences in sex work (even in the Netherlands) were swept aside under the term 'Dutch brothel', leaving listeners with an exoticized view of how 'liberated' sex and sex work is in the West.

Aftermath: Pornographic ambiguities

The sex-positive podcasts that have continued after Bitch Up are not so unabashedly erotic; rather, they tend to reside on the boundary between pornography and 'healthy' sex-talk. Positioned as providers of sex education or intimacy consultancy, podcasts such as Heat Wave Radio and Bibi Moment trace an arc back to late-night radio, but now with a focus on feminized eroticism. This lighter touch of sex-positive podcasts is mainly caused by their aim to serve the general public rather than a group of people hunting for sexual adventures. Targeting the general public, moreover, is driven by the commercial agenda behind these podcasts. For instance, Heat Wave Radio is sponsored by Yummy, the platform that sells sex therapies, online/hands-on sex courses and sex toys. Catering to the appetite of ordinary women, Heat Wave Radio fosters more feasible aspirations for sex and sex techniques in order to commodify Yummy products. Although Bitch Up also sold

sex toys and consultancy on its WeChat account, the business closed without making much money. This lack of success seems to reflect the different market positions and levels of commercial ambition, with Bitch Up more keen on slutty sharing and Yummy more keen on selling sex products.

The pivot to the general public, as both Heat Wave Radio and Bibi Moment have done, also results from increasingly strict regulation of erotic expression on podcast platforms. A crackdown on audio platforms and programs was organized by the Cyberspace Administration of China in 2019, particularly targeting historical nihilism and pornography (Zhao, 2019). It was during this wave of regulations that Bitch Up was banned from NetEase Cloud Music, although it still remains accessible through Apple Podcasts. The lack of clear governmental rules, however, especially related to the vague boundary between pornography and ‘healthy’ sex-talk, leaves this boundary for podcasters to navigate, leading to self-censorship on erotic content and a tendency to offer sex ‘advice’ in the guise of commercialized education. In this grey area, Bibi Moment is less ‘dirty’ even than its predecessor Bibi Radio, while Heat Wave Radio uses sex education as a shield to legitimize its spicy talk. Nonetheless, sex-oriented podcasting for and by women remains active in the mediascape of mainland China.

While Bitch Up ran its course and eventually succumbed to censorship, it was able to take advantage of a less regulated period in Chinese podcasting as well as of its hosts’ diasporic position to discover, nurture and celebrate an appetite for female sexual pleasure and expressivity amongst Chinese women. In self-consciously addressing an audience of ‘bitches’, Bitch Up directly challenged patriarchal conventions of feminine chastity and submissiveness, although arguably at the cost of entrenching new hierarchies and myths of sexual pleasure built around an endlessly orgasmic female body. While the feminism of such eagerly sex-positive discourse is open to debate, there is much to be said for the Bitch Up hosts’ willingness to embrace a feminist stance and to break the social silence around women’s sexual pleasure by leveraging the intimate sonic capacities of the podcasting medium. As we have shown, Bitch Up was neither the first nor the last media output in China to engage audiences in bedroom talk, but it marks a juncture in the late 2010s when celebrating women’s sexual desire and experiences was both possible and popular. While the weaponization of pornographic ambiguity in relation to censorship and the increasing regulation of podcasting platforms has driven sex-positive podcasters to legitimate their output – either as sex education or through commercialization, or both – it would be wrong to assume that sex-positivity for women has gone underground in mainland China or, worse, that it never existed at all.

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Notes

1. Both the English and Chinese titles are used in the lead-in to the podcast, but the Chinese title is more frequently referred to by the hosts.
2. From May 2023 until the time of writing (September 2023), 11 new episodes of Bitch Up were released with Niaoniao as the sole host. In May 2023 Niaoniao also started a new podcast called Niao Sheng Niao Qi (鸟声鸟气) on a domestic platform, concentrating on similar themes but with less erotic content than Bitch Up. According to Niaoniao, the new podcast aims to be more inward-seeking than sex-focused, indicating a shift away from the highly sexualized format of Bitch Up.
3. The subscription data suggests that the majority of listeners were in mainland China, although many from the Chinese diaspora tuned in as well.
4. It was not until 2018, when Jess started Octopus Awareness, a community aimed at raising awareness about sexual intimacy, that she revealed her real name, but then for use in Octopus Awareness only; for slutty sharing on Bitch Up, she preferred to use Jess.

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