

The pink tax and gender equality: structural contradictions and institutional reconciliation in socioeconomic systems

Shengbin Wang

Qingdao Film Academy, Qingdao, China

aillencroft@163.com

Abstract. In the post-"She Era" marked by the rising awareness and influence of women, issues surrounding gender equality and female consumption have garnered sustained societal attention. As the economy represents the core of public livelihood, daily consumption constitutes the most direct economic participation for individuals. Numerous female consumers and scholars have observed pervasive and recurring manifestations of the pink tax phenomenon within the current consumer economic system. This study examines the contradictory relationship between the pink tax and gender equality from a macro socio-economic perspective, proposing multidimensional optimization strategies. Building on previous research literature, this paper analyzes the impact of the pink tax on gender equality in market systems through lenses including mass influence marketing, female consumer psychology, and gender politics. By implementing legal regulations, corporate pricing transparency, and consumer collaborative oversight, it advocates establishing a tripartite governance framework. Ultimately, this approach aims to foster sustainable economic development while eliminating gender discrimination in consumption, thereby ensuring women's rights and interests are equitably safeguarded within economic domains.

Keywords: Pink tax, women's rights, gender equality, economic development strategy

1. Introduction

The term "pink tax" refers not to an actual tax, but rather to a gender-differentiated pricing system for products and services. Current research predominantly focuses on analyzing female consumption psychology, corporate marketing strategies targeting women, and the influence of gender on consumption patterns. Most studies extend from traditional consumption frameworks, leaving significant gaps in understanding the emergence and dissemination mechanisms of the pink tax in recent years. Additionally, theoretical explorations of the contradictions between this phenomenon's impacts on women's rights, cognitive equity, and gender equality remain scarce, as do strategies for reconciling economic development with gender parity in consumption. This paper centers on the pink tax, dissecting systemic consumption traps targeting women and proposing pathways to achieve gender equality in consumer markets.

In today's hyperconnected digital society, consumption transcends mere acquisition of necessities, evolving into a pursuit of novel, trend-driven goods that fulfill desires for social identity and temporal belonging. Contemporary media platforms amplify brand narratives and consumption aesthetics, ostensibly reflecting women's elevated social status [1].

Observations of Douban group discussions and online influencer analyses reveal gender-based pricing disparities in China's consumer market, where women pay premium prices for products of equivalent quality or specifications [2]. Empirical evidence from countless consumers confirms the objective existence of the pink tax. Capitalizing on female consumption preferences, social conformity tendencies, and aspirations for refinement, businesses strategically guide women into pre-engineered "consumption traps." Modern e-commerce platforms increasingly integrate social interaction, content sharing, and purchasing functions. While user-generated "must-buy" recommendations enrich marketing ecosystems, they simultaneously cultivate fertile ground for the pink tax's unchecked proliferation.

Gender equality is a measure of social civilization and progress. The principle of gender equality has been enshrined in the Constitution of our country as a basic national policy. The General Secretary has proposed that safeguarding women's rights and interests must be elevated to the will of the state, and women's causes should develop in tandem with the economy and society [3]. People's attitudes towards gender equality have put forward newer perspectives and demands, covering consumption, family structure, power, education, communication methods, and various other dimensions. If not coordinated, this will lead to the inability of society to develop in a balanced manner in the long run, and even result in stagnation. Pricing strategies are the most

direct means for businesses and capital to manipulate the "pink tax", and these phenomena undoubtedly constitute gender discrimination. When consuming, women often have to give up their exclusive and preferred demands as women in order to obtain more favorable products. Although research on consumerism is abundant both at home and abroad, there are still neglected areas regarding the relationship between the "pink tax", women's consumption, and gender equality, as well as the new changes in women's consumption status and existing problems [2]. It is urgently necessary to address the "pink tax" to prevent it from greatly affecting women's consumption concepts for establishing themselves in society and even hindering the accumulation of basic resources for their long-term development.

2. The Concept and manifestations of the pink tax

2.1. The definition of the pink tax

The term "pink tax" broadly encapsulates manifestations of gender inequality in pricing practices. For comparable or identical products, businesses establish gender-differentiated pricing, with female-targeted goods often priced twice as high as male equivalents, forcing women to bear gender-specific surcharges. Corporations fabricate pseudo-justifications for price disparities through gendered packaging tactics (e.g., "female-exclusive" overdesign) and ingredient mystification marketing. Societal stereotypes coerce women into aesthetic labor (e.g., inflated costs for cosmetics and skincare) and commodify emotional labor through ritual-driven consumption (e.g., gender-based holiday gift pricing). Capital exploits women's recognition of symbolic value (e.g., "essential items for refined women") to induce non-rational consumption, extracting premium profits.

2.1.1. An in-depth analysis of the relationship between the pink tax and gender equality

Fundamentally, the pink tax constitutes a gendered political economy cloaked in price discrimination, rooted in the collusion between capitalist mechanisms and patriarchal social structures. While contemporary women have gained improved educational access and employment opportunities, persistent disparities in career advancement and equal pay perpetuate economic vulnerability. The pink tax accelerates female impoverishment by inflating living costs and nonproductive expenditures, widening wealth disparities relative to men. Simultaneously, it reinforces appearance-centric norms, compelling women to subsidize male-centric aesthetic preferences. Mass media further perpetuates this exploitation through "beauty" narratives targeting gender-disadvantaged groups [4]. This phenomenon not only generates consumption debt and excess financial burdens but also enforces compliance with patriarchal fantasies of femininity while demanding continued service labor.

2.1.2. Provide theoretical basis and practical suggestions for coordinating the relationship between the two

The core issue of gender politics lies in the systemic subordination of women. Women's disadvantaged status relative to men is not biologically predetermined but structurally engineered through patriarchal binary systems to consolidate male dominance [5]. Feminist economics emphasizes that gender inequality transcends conventional metrics like wage gaps and labor participation rates, demanding critical attention to women's economic agency and decision-making autonomy [6]. The notion of "consumer choice" often functions as an illusion of empowerment. While women dominate household purchasing decisions, this responsibility primarily channels family funds into consumption rather than wealth accumulation. Addressing the pink tax thus constitutes an intervention in household-level economic inequities.

2.2. The performance of the pink tax in different industries

Modern sociocultural shifts have intensified women's bodily discipline under the guise of self-care. Industries weaponize gendered consumption vulnerabilities, with apparel, skincare, cosmetics, and jewelry dominating female-targeted e-commerce sectors. The female body itself becomes commodified through proliferating beauty, weight-loss, and cosmetic surgery markets, transforming corporeal management into profit-generating enterprises [7].

2.2.1. Health exploitation and gender discrimination in female care products

Recent scandals, such as substandard materials in sanitary pad production causing gynecological harm, exemplify corporations externalizing health risks onto individual "consumption choices." Practices like menstrual stigma further entrench patriarchal surveillance norms. Controversies surrounding domestic brands like Florasis—featuring infantilized models in kneeling poses with bound hands using ribbons, alongside lipstick designs resembling male genitalia—reveal cultural violence perpetuating stereotypes of female submissiveness ("lolita," "pale-thin-youthful") and normalizing pedomorphic aesthetics. Such narratives amplify age-related anxieties and discrimination. The duality of female consumption—simultaneously agential and exploitative—defies binary categorization, existing instead as an entangled "both/and" paradox [5].

2.2.2. Quantify the technical rationality of price discrimination

Female consumers frequently engage in emotionally driven purchasing behaviors, wherein product nomenclature, aesthetics, packaging, or service rituals trigger impulsive acquisitions that eclipse rational evaluations of product efficacy. This semiotic consumption entrenches women within passive consumption dynamics, prioritizing symbolic value over functional utility [8]. Empirical observations reveal young women increasingly substituting male shaving products (e.g., Gillette Venus replaced by Nivea Men's Shaving Foam) for gendered depilatory goods, achieving superior results at fractional costs. Manufacturers justify female-targeted depilatory premiums through pseudoscientific marketing narratives (e.g., botanical extracts for gentler skin compatibility), while empirical analyses demonstrate identical active ingredients and inferior performance compared to male counterparts, despite price differentials exceeding 200%-300%. This exemplifies the pink tax's operational logic: leveraging gendered semiotics to legitimize value extraction while perpetuating patriarchal-capitalist exploitation through manufactured necessity.

3. The contradiction between the pink tax and gender equality

3.1. Contradictions at the economic level

The material base determines the superstructure, and the elevation of women's status is inextricably linked to economic autonomy. The pink tax operates as a counterforce to women's economic empowerment, systematically eroding their capacity for wealth accumulation, practical financial literacy, and growth consciousness. Prolonged exposure to this mechanism subtly undermines the foundational pillars of female independence—economic self-sufficiency and sociopolitical agency. The battleground of gender politics manifests acutely in consumer economies, where control over collective consumption patterns serves as a trans-class oppression tool.

3.1.1. The pink tax's economic seizure and consumption squeeze on women

Gendered political frameworks artificially construct "commodity preferences" and "demand hierarchies" across sexes. Through pricing strategies, ingredient mystification, and ideological marketing, female cognition and corporeality are reduced to quantifiable consumption signifiers. Macroeconomically, this weakens women's collective economic leverage to reinforce patriarchal-capitalist hegemony; microeconomically, it strips female consumers of purchasing sovereignty. Consequently, disproportionate income allocation to basic gendered necessities (e.g., hygiene products) constricts investments in education, healthcare, and personal capital formation. Women are forced to expend cognitive labor optimizing price-performance ratios and evading pink tax surcharges—a hidden tax on temporal and mental resources.

3.1.2. Imbalance in market resource allocation and alienation of product markets

Healthy market operations require authentic supply-demand alignment. However, the pink tax's profitability incentivizes shortcut-driven business models that destabilize resource allocation efficiency. When products become vessels for gender warfare rather than value carriers, consumer rights mutate into covert exploitation protocols. This distorts market ecosystems "innovative" predatory marketing simulates sectoral vitality while accelerating resource misallocation and demand-supply decoupling. Chronic market distortion ultimately erodes demand signal clarity, diminishing systemic credibility and adaptive capacity—a death spiral for sustainable economic iteration.

3.2. Contradictions at the social level

The societal contradiction of the pink tax lies in capital's strategic transmutation of gender discrimination into an illusion of female consumer autonomy, thereby evading gender-political accountability. By framing gendered pricing as "free market choices," systemic oppression—manifested through price wars and quality manipulation in female-targeted goods—is recast as individualized economic burdens, absolving institutional responsibility. This mechanism perpetuates patriarchal impositions: reinforcing appearance hierarchies (e.g., beauty standards), bodily discipline (e.g., aesthetic labor), and the emotional labor of maternal roles. Female consumption is engineered to construct artificial differentiation—businesses produce desire-aligned commodities that coerce non-rational purchases to satiate socially manufactured vanity and status competition [9]. Capital thus extracts dual value: siphoning women's consumption power and emotional labor while systematically constricting their socioeconomic agency across other domains, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of exploitation.

4. Strategies for coordinating the relationship between pink tax and gender equality

The relationship between the pink tax and gender equality serves as a barometer of societal governance efficacy. Addressing the systemic gender discrimination underlying the pink tax is critical to optimizing socioeconomic operational efficiency. Strengthening women's control over economic resources elevates their cognitive agency as economic actors—a process central to dismantling patriarchal economic hierarchies. Female consumption is not an isolated phenomenon but intricately linked to male consumption patterns through interdependencies that mutually reinforce market dynamics. Only by unleashing women's consumption potential can a gender-inclusive virtuous cycle emerge within consumer markets. Given that female consumption demand critically impacts macroeconomic stability—directly correlating with GDP growth and post-crisis recovery [10]—combating the pink tax constitutes an urgent imperative for safeguarding gender equity in the new era. This necessitates implementing multidimensional governance frameworks, including rigorous mitigation strategies targeting consumption irregularities, gender-audited fiscal reforms, and gender-responsive economic policies to recalibrate market ethics.

4.1. Legal policies and the enterprise level

4.1.1. Formulate laws, regulations and government regulatory policies

Legal frameworks constitute the primary safeguard for consumer rights, necessitating targeted legislative and policy architectures to curb market irregularities. Firstly, amend the "Price Law" to mandate product pricing based on substantive content and intrinsic value, explicitly prohibiting gender-based price discrimination and institutionalizing gender equity in consumer markets. Simultaneously, impose fines of 3-5 times illicit gains on businesses engaging in pink tax practices, incentivizing consumer whistleblowing through monetary rewards. Secondly, market regulatory authorities should establish specialized divisions and databases for monitoring gender-based price disparities and ingredient equity, requiring enterprises to submit verifiable data on gender-differentiated products, including composition, dosage, and cost-pricing matrices—during compliance audits. Thirdly, interdepartmental coalitions (e.g., Women's Federations, Commerce Bureaus) must systematically eradicate gendered product differentiation, institutionalizing the elimination of sex-based pricing and formulation discrepancies as a long-term governance objective. State-led market regulation—via legal, policy, and economic instruments—enhances market order integrity, protects lawful operations, and fortifies consumer rights protection [10].

4.1.2. Corporate social responsibility and gender equality marketing

As primary market stakeholders, enterprises must embed state-endorsed gender equality into corporate social responsibility frameworks. Primarily, adopt gender-audited pricing models that rigorously align product costs with market prices, eliminating discriminatory margins through enhanced pink tax compliance reviews. Concurrently, pioneer gender-neutral product design paradigms, redirecting R&D investments toward substantive innovation rather than gendered market segmentation. Prioritize iterative upgrades of high-quality goods to deliver superior value at reduced costs, thereby elevating corporate citizenship and public trust. Secondly, increase female representation in executive and R&D roles to dismantle manufacturing-sector gender segregation while accurately addressing female demand vectors and advancing pluralistic aesthetic narratives. Sustained optimization of business environment policies—synergizing market efficiency with state oversight—will catalyze gender parity acceleration effects [3].

4.2. Consumer level

4.2.1. Enhance female consumers' awareness of the pink tax

With the rise of female economic empowerment and feminist consciousness, women increasingly discern consumption traps, recognizing the ideological underpinnings of consumerism [10]. In the digital era, online platforms have catalyzed awareness of the pink tax's manifestations in commercial sectors, empowering women to reject gender-labeled price premiums. This cognitive awakening marks a critical shift: once-effective corporate tactics, such as pseudo-feminist "female-exclusive" marketing, are losing efficacy. On female-dominated social media (e.g., Xiaohongshu, Weibo, Douban discussion forums), users collaboratively expose market malpractices through "cautionary tales" and "product endorsements," guiding peers toward cost-effective alternatives. This collective action not only reflects enhanced consumer agency but also epitomizes the assertion of female autonomy.

4.2.2. Consumers' resistance and choice strategies

Following cognitive awakening, pragmatic resistance follows organically. First, adopt comparative shopping strategies—leveraging both physical stores and e-commerce platforms—to audit gender-differentiated products for price-volume-ingredient parity, optimizing cost-efficiency. Second, upon identifying "pink premiums," prioritize male-coded alternatives to compel corporate strategy recalibration. Third, sustain patronage of transparent, ethics-driven brands to incentivize market innovation, marginalizing exploitative enterprises through selective consumption. Fourth, exercise skepticism toward trend-driven purchases, deconstructing advertising semiotics to prioritize authentic needs over symbolic consumption. Cultivate value-centric, optimistic, and sustainable consumption ethics that transcend patriarchal-aesthetic compulsions.

5. Conclusion

This study posits the pink tax as a covert exploitation mechanism targeting female consumers in contemporary markets, fundamentally reflecting institutionalized gender discrimination and rigid power structures within current socioeconomic systems. The analysis unfolds through four dimensions: the social manifestations of the pink tax, the imperative of gender equality, its economic contradictions, and proposed resolution strategies.

A tripartite governance framework encompassing legal regulation, corporate accountability, and consumer activism must be established. Governments should amend the "Price Law" to eliminate gender-based pricing loopholes, implement dynamic regulatory mechanisms through centralized databases, and enforce substantial penalties via cross-departmental collaboration. Corporations must adopt ethical practices by delabeling gendered products, disclosing cost-pricing rationales, and authentically addressing female needs. Consumers should leverage comparative platforms to identify discriminatory pricing, engage in collective boycotts to reshape market norms, and ultimately forge an equitable consumption ecosystem through synergistic legal enforcement, commercial self-discipline, and civic empowerment.

The phenomenon originates from capitalist production's alienation—weaponizing "gender-specific customization" to justify price discrimination and quality compromises, while perpetuating the commodification and disciplining of female bodies through stereotyped perceptions. This research advances traditional gender equality discourse by introducing economic perspectives to decode contemporary gender politics, positioning consumption equity as a critical frontier for substantive equality. Future investigations may expand into techno-capitalist domains (e.g., algorithmic pricing biases in AI-driven markets) and global intersections of ethnicity/class. As regulatory technologies mature, the pink tax's manifestations across industries may be systematically dismantled. Ultimately, combating this phenomenon transcends market fairness – it constitutes a fundamental recalibration of women's economic sovereignty and a materialist progression toward gender justice.

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