

# ***Unpacking Gender Norms in China: A Discourse Analysis of Opposition Voices to Selling Sanitary Products on Trains***

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**Abstract:** Recently, there has been an online debate about whether sanitary pads should be sold on China's high-speed trains. In this paper, the author puts a major focus on those distasteful and malicious comments by male participants in this controversy and examines how these reflect the conflicts and complexity that exist underneath gender roles for women in contemporary Chinese society. Discourse analysis is used in the study. Twenty-five social media posts and comments are systematically coded according to their tones, themes of opposition, and implied gender dynamics. As a result, it is discovered that a large number of comments exhibit gender stereotypes and are insensitive to women's needs; this reveals the general negligence about and misconceptions regarding women's sanitary needs. Additionally, the predominant tone of these comments is sarcastic and hostile, which shows adherence to traditional gender role norms and disdain for public discussion on women's health issues. Concerns about economics and practicality are also mentioned but tend to be lost amid the overall dismissal of women's needs. This study reveals how public awareness and attitudes toward women's sanitary needs are influenced by the tension between traditional gender views and progressive social thought.

**Keywords:** Social Media, Gender Dynamics, Public Health Policy, Menstrual Needs, Content Analysis.

## **1. Introduction**

Social media has provided a broad platform for marginalized groups to speak from personal experiences, challenge the mainstream, and promote social change [1]. Recently, a heated discussion emerged on various social media platforms in China about whether sanitary pads should be sold on trains. China Railway offers services of selling a variety of foods, drinks, entertainment items, local souvenirs, etc. on trains, but feminine hygiene products like sanitary pads or tampons are not specifically provided. Triggered by a woman's social media post about her experience of being unable to find sanitary products on a high-speed train in emergency need, some suggested that the service of selling sanitary pads should be made available on trains as they seem to be a basic necessity for women. However, this proposal was met with unexpectedly strong opposition, mainly from males, including outright insults towards women advocating this change. This study aims to explore how the opposing comments and attitudes in the online discussion about women's sanitary needs on Chinese trains reflect the collision between modern societal thought and advocacy for women's rights against traditional gender views, and how they represent the underlying motives and social attitudes towards

gender roles and women's rights. This phenomenon is significant as it deeply demonstrates the obstacles faced by female social workers advocating for women's rights on social media platforms and how information technology and media in the digital age, rooted in oppressive social structures, expand the power gap between men and women [2]. It not only involves practical daily needs but also reflects the deep divisions and complexities in contemporary Chinese society's understanding of gender roles and women's rights. The debate over whether sanitary pads should be sold on trains transcends mere convenience, touching upon broader social issues such as gender equality, recognition of women's needs in public spaces, and public discussion of female physiological characteristics. Notably, the strong opposition and aggressive comments from men reveal the entrenched nature of gender stereotypes.

## 2. Hypothesis

Regarding the research question mentioned above, the hypothesis is as follows: In the online discussion about whether it is appropriate to sell sanitary pads on China's trains, the opposing comments from male participants reveal the tension between traditional gender views and the modern societal recognition of women's rights. Despite the increasing support for women's rights, particularly in education and health, accompanying societal calls for gender equality, traditional perceptions of women's roles and needs still have a profound impact [3]. The gender stereotypes and misunderstandings of women's needs in these comments might indicate this. This hypothesis aims to explore how this tension reflects the progress and challenges of Chinese society in terms of gender equality and women's rights, and how these notions are maintained and expressed in the current social context.

## 3. Method

In this study, discourse analysis is selected as the research method. The decision to use discourse analysis is based on several key considerations. Firstly, discourse analysis allows for a deep exploration and understanding of textual data on social media, aiding in providing insights into the underlying attitudes and notions behind these discussions. Secondly, the structured approach of discourse analysis can extract information directly from the original data, i.e., social media posts and comments. This method of direct engagement with firsthand materials ensures that the research findings are closely aligned with the actual discussions and modes of expression.

The study conducts detailed coding and analysis on a random selection of 24 social media posts and comments from mainstream Chinese social media platforms (Weibo, Zhihu, Douyin, etc.) that reflect negative stances such as questioning, opposing, and non-acknowledgement regarding the advocacy of selling sanitary pads on trains. The focus is on their manifestations of gender stereotypes, misunderstandings of women's needs, and the tension between gender equality and traditional views. These comments will be categorized according to predefined themes and codes to systematically analyze the data. The code scheme is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Code Scheme.

Category	Subcategory	Description
Tone	Aggressive/Hostile	Indicates a confrontational or unfriendly tone
	Sarcastic/Mocking	Use of irony or sarcasm to mock or convey contempt
	Concerned/Serious	Expressing genuine concern or a serious demeanor
	Informative/Neutral	Providing information in an unbiased, objective manner
Theme	Biological Misconceptions	Misconceptions regarding the biological necessities of women
	Entitlement	Accusations of unreasonable expectations or dependency
	Comparison	Comparing the needs of different genders
	Neglect of Feminine Needs	Trivializing or ignoring women's specific needs
	Social or Cultural Norms	Reference to cultural or societal expectations
	Nonsensical Assertion	Over-exaggerating arguments to the point of absurdity
Gender Dynamics	Practical Concerns	Concerns related to practicality or economic
	Reference to Gender Equality	Discussions or mentions of gender equality
	Stereotyping	Perpetuating stereotypes about either gender
	Insensitivity	Showing a neglect or lack of sensitivity to women's sanitary needs

#### 4. Findings

After coding the 24 posts/comments according to the code scheme, the main findings are as shown in Table 2 and Table 3. From Tables 2 and 3, it is evident that the dominant tones adopted by opponents in the online discussion about whether it is appropriate to sell sanitary needs on trains fall into two main categories: "Sarcastic/Mocking" and "Concerned/Serious". In the realm of social media, while marginalized groups have found a platform to express and legitimize their experiences, challenging the mainstream narrative [1], they also frequently encounter controversies from opposing forces [4], even criticism from within their support base [5], and online hate and harassment [6]. This aligns with the observed tones of "Sarcastic/Mocking" and "Concerned/Serious," reflecting the complex interplay and clash of different voices on social media regarding women's issues [7]. This means that while social media provides a space for the promotion of women's rights, it also attracts opposition and backlash from people who believe in traditional gender roles. This distribution of these tones captures the duality and complexity of this discussion. On one hand, the format of "Sarcastic/Mocking", which makes up a larger percentage, reflects a dismissive attitude toward this problem. Sarcastic tones generally include neglecting women's sanitary needs and mocking the advocates. Many commentators question why women cannot simply carry their own sanitary products, suggesting that

this is a problem for women themselves. On the other, the “Concerned/Serious” tone indicates a sincere effort to tackle an issue, suggesting that participants are trying to understand and address the problem. Although this type of comment may still contain doubts about women's needs, it is often based on considerations of the actual situation, such as concerns about waste of resources, rather than mere gender discrimination.

Table 2: Categorization of Opposing Comments.

Translated Social Media Post/Comment Content	Tone	Theme	Gender Dynamics
“Letting go of what's forgotten is a personal error! Even men understand menstrual cycles can shift. Women adore purses, so adding a pad isn’t much. If your cycle is too irregular, that's a health concern, not a societal burden. It's surprising how a personal lapse becomes a public issue!”	Aggressive/ Hostile	Biological Misconception s/Dismissal of Feminine Needs	Stereotyping
“Is it too much to carry your own pad? Why expect help at every turn? Such grown-up infants.”	Sarcastic/ Mocking	Entitlement	Stereotyping
Use the saying against rapists - “Uncontrollable things should be eliminated.”	Sarcastic/ Mocking	Cultural or Social Norms	Stereotyping
“Disgusting.”	Aggressive/ Hostile	-	Insensitivity
“As a man, should I ask for sex toys on trains? Can I claim my rights too?”	Sarcastic/ Mocking	Gender Comparison	Stereotyping
“Stocking pads for a few might lead to waste and financial loss. In emergencies, just use paper.”	Concerned/ Serious	Economic or Practical Concerns	Insensitivity
“Vaginal muscles are smooth muscles, right? They control contractions. Isn’t that clear?” (Implying control over menstrual flow.)	Sarcastic/ Mocking	Biological Misconception s	Insensitivity
“If women get free pads, should men get free cigarettes? Pads aren’t a necessity, addiction is.”	Sarcastic/ Mocking	Gender Comparison	Reference to Gender Equality
“The world is ruled by fools. Next, we'll need supermarkets on trains for every need - gays, tall, short, various ethnicities. It's endless.”	Sarcastic/ Mocking	Social or Cultural Norms	Insensitivity
“Why stop at trains? Demand pads on planes, buses, cinemas... And what about diapers? It's endless political correctness.”	Sarcastic/ Mocking	Social or Cultural Norms	Insensitivity

Table 2: (continued).

“What if you forget your due date and need to give birth on a train? Should each carriage have a maternity ward?”	Sarcastic/ Mocking	Nonsensical Assertion	Insensitivity
“Isn't it inappropriate to sell such items on trains? Carry your own. Blood is unsafe, and trains are public.”	Concerned/ Serious	Social or Cultural Norms	Insensitivity
“Not everyone on the train is a woman, so why sell pads?”	Neutral/ Informative	Practical Concerns	Reference to Gender Equality
“Selling pads on trains is resource wasteful. Will lipsticks be next?”	Concerned/ Serious	Practical Concerns	Insensitivity
“Shouldn't pads be a staple for girls when going out?”	Neutral/ Informative	Entitlement	Stereotyping
“Considering size, type, and hygiene, will anyone trust pads sold on trains? Cleanliness is a priority for girls.”	Concerned/ Serious	Practical Concerns	Stereotyping
“Trains can't sell everything. It's not a gender issue.”	Neutral/ Informative	Practical Concerns	Insensitivity
“Women can suggest, but rail services decide. It's their call, not a debate. ”	Neutral/ Informative	Social or Cultural Norms	Reference to Gender Equality
“Given the personal nature of pads, how can rails cater to all preferences? Open a supermarket carriage?”	Concerned/ Serious	Practical Concerns	Insensitivity
“I want to smoke on the train, what about my rights?”	Sarcastic/ Mocking	Gender Comparison	Reference to Gender Equality
“In essence: If I want it, it should be there. If not, I'll make it a moral issue.”	Sarcastic/ Mocking	Social or Cultural Norms	Insensitivity
“Why not sell fridges, washers, TVs on trains next?”	Sarcastic/ Mocking	Nonsensical Assertion	Insensitivity
“Whether they sell it or not doesn't bother us. The issue is their victim mentality and moral superiority.”	Neutral/ Informative	Social or Cultural Norms	Stereotyping
“Has collective menstruation just started? Old trains never sold pads for long journeys.”	Sarcastic/ Mocking	Social or Cultural Norms	Stereotyping

Table 3: Quantitative Analysis of Themes in Opposition Comments

Category	Subcategory	Occurrences
Tone	Aggressive/Hostile	4
	Sarcastic/Mocking	8
	Neutral/Informative	6
	Concerned/Serious	6
Theme of Opposition	Dismissal of Feminine Needs	3
	Entitlement	3
	Comparison	3
	Practical Concerns	6
	Social or Cultural Norms	5
	Nonsensical Assertion	2
Gender Dynamics	Insensitivity	12
	Stereotyping	8
	Reference to Gender Equality	4

According to the data, “Social or Cultural Norms” is the most common theme of opposition. In other words, many comments reflect that people's reservations about women's sanitary needs are deeply affected by traditional cultural values and social mores. One comment, for instance, implies that women should have their own sanitary products and not expect public spaces to get involved in private matters. There are some places in which women may not enter temples or engage in religious activities such as making offerings to ancestors and deities when they have their menstruation [8]. Therefore, there are in fact many men who grow up amidst such cultural environments and they treat the period as a dirty thing and not something that should be talked about openly. Furthermore, “Practical Concerns” are another common theme of opposition. Women's demands must often be adjusted by economic and pragmatic considerations rather than being given on the basis of respect for women's rights. These opinions reflect a limited understanding of the value of meeting women's needs and stabilizing gender distinctions. Second, the “Comparison” entry in comments shows that much opposition to opposing views is not entirely based on practical considerations but has deep roots in traditional fixed concepts for gender roles and resistance against women's equality. For instance, some comments suggest concerns about female rights being elevated too high by comparing what men and women need. Some people believe that satisfying the needs of women will sacrifice the benefits of men. This kind of thinking reflects people's misunderstanding of gender equality, for it indicates that the interests of men and women are antagonistic when it comes to issues involving gender.

As for gender relations, the two most frequently appearing categories are “Stereotyping” and “Insensitivity.” Such comments usually display traditional views of gender roles and women's needs. For example, there are some comments assuming that women should be able to solve their own sanitary needs or suggesting that women are expected to be independent and self-sufficient. Comments like these show gender stereotypes. Meanwhile, “Insensitivity” comments reflect a lack

of awareness or empathy for women's sanitary needs, such as questioning the necessity of public services providing sanitary pads and showing disregard for women's physiological characteristics and needs. The coexistence of these attitudes reflects the transition in societal thoughts on gender roles and the recognition of women's rights, while also showing the reality that traditional views are still deeply rooted in certain groups.

By combining the analysis of "Themes" with "Gender Dynamics", a more complex picture emerges: Not every opposition comment is fully based on the truth. Some opposition has deep roots in the clinging to traditional gender roles and fundamental misconception of period and women's sanitary needs. This link shows that in today's Chinese society, although women's rights and equality are increasingly valued and supported, traditional views on women's roles and needs still pose challenges to these rights and needs. Also, these statements show the collision of ideas of modern societal thought and traditional ideas of gender roles. These reflections echo the research hypothesis that such opposing reactions in male participants reflect the conflict between traditional views of gender roles and contemporary society's recognition of women's rights.

## 5. Conclusion

The analysis of these comments reveals the progress and challenges faced by Chinese society in terms of gender equality and women's rights. This largely aligns with the hypothesis of this study that, despite the increasing support and advocacy for women's rights, traditional views on women's roles and needs still pose a significant obstacle to the realization of these rights. The tension surrounding the debate over whether sanitary pads should be sold on trains not only unveils individual attitudes but also reflects broader societal views and challenges, indicating that Chinese society still faces complex barriers in advancing gender equality and respecting women's rights. The persistence of gender stereotypes, misunderstandings, and disregard for women's needs, as well as the adherence to traditional gender roles evident in the comments underscore the challenges to gender equality and women's rights in contemporary China. These findings provide a deep understanding of the current gender dynamics in Chinese society and emphasize that much effort is still needed to promote gender equality and women's rights.

When conducting discourse analysis of social media posts and comments, especially on sensitive topics such as gender and public health policies, there are several limitations to the study. First, there might be biases in the selection of sample posts and comments. The sample of 24 social media posts and comments may not represent the views of a broader population. This selection might only reflect the most outspoken or extreme opinions, rather than balanced societal attitudes, especially without fully considering cultural nuances or specific social contexts. Subtleties of language, humor, sarcasm, and cultural references may be misunderstood or overlooked. Limitations of digital communication analysis are also present. Online comments may not accurately reflect individuals' true beliefs or attitudes, as people may express more extreme views online. This could lead to an overestimation of negative sentiment. Social media trends and discussions are fluid and can change rapidly. This study captured only a snapshot in time, and the popularity of attitudes or certain opinions could change, making these findings less relevant over time.

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