# An analysis of how Chinese Netizens, especially men, react to feminism through social media

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#### **Abstract**

With the advancement of technology in recent years, social media has become an increasingly significant part of people's everyday lives, while feminism is beginning to be recognized as the flow of information becomes more accessible. However, unlike in the West, different Chinese have varying perspectives and views of feminism; some interpret it as a female advantage, while others see it as a remedy to help Chinese women awaken. By commenting on the work of gender-specific bloggers who share knowledge and content about feminism on Douyin (Chinese "Tiktok"), this study investigates how different types of people, particularly men, respond differently to feminism from three different perspectives. According to the data, the public mainly addresses bloggers through sexualization, ad hominem attacks, and patriarchal dismissiveness. With these three characteristics in mind, different men view bloggers who support feminism differently, resulting in more or less diverse remarks for or against them. This study categorizes comments from various guys under various bloggers' works presenting feminism in Douyin (China's "TikTok") and teaches viewers how to differentiate and recognize their categories.

Keywords: Feminism, China, Social media, Tiktok

## 1. Introduction

Through the past few years, with the development of new media and the spread of feminism, Chinese netizens have gradually begun to be exposed to and understand this concept. Although some see feminism as an aid to achieving equal rights for both men and women, it has been accompanied by a misconception and stigmatization by some people. Merriam-Webster Dictionary defined "Feminism" as "the theory of gender equality in the political, economic, and social spheres" and "activities organized in the pursuit of women's rights and interests." It was also the Buzzwords of the Year in 2017. In 2017, there were 70 percent more searches for "feminism" in the online Merriam-Webster dictionary than in 2016, and searches for the term spiked once after every feministrelated social event, said Pete Sokolowski, a Merriam-Webster contributing editor and lexicographer. (Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2017 Buzzword of the Year: "Feminism," Huanqiu, 2017)

Different from the West, due to the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, feminism has suffered great misconceptions and misinterpretations. Because of the variations of its literal and actual meaning, many women scholars don't agree with the "feminist" position. (Feminism, Baike.so.com) As feminism becomes localized in China, different people have diverse attitudes and opinions about feminism, and it has been brought from books to videos by many new media bloggers. Viewers

use Douyin (China "Tiktok"), Xiaohongshu, and other social media, but unlike standard definitions of knowledge, feminism has endured many misinterpretations and attacks from outside due to its literal meaning. The main perpetrators of these attacks are male Chinese netizens, who oppose and criticize the bloggers' content and the bloggers themselves caused by two different factors: Sexualization and Ad hominem. At the same time, some offer their thoughts based on the content shared by the bloggers and reasonably refute them. However, there are also male netizens who are supportive and positive towards these bloggers, and they will share their goodwill with their friendly comments under the works sent by the bloggers. Through the process of feminist communication, some of the opponents of feminism create an image of feminists that is the opposite of what they are by falsifying and distorting their actual meaning, thus inspiring more male netizens to join their anti-group, trapping them in echo chambers and deepening their prejudice and dislike of feminism by using their knowledge bias.

While numerous studies have shown that men's reactions to feminism quite different depending on a variety of factors, the emergence of a large number of opposing voices has also made the promotion of feminism in China challenging ----this is the reason why it is essential to understand the elements that influence men's reactions to feminism in Chinese social media. By analyzing different comments on the works of gender-specific bloggers on Douyin (China "Tiktok"), this study analyses the different

types of responses to feminism among male netizens in China and the main factors that drive them to react this way.

## 2. Literature Review

When receiving those opposite and critical voices, they are often directed in different directions of attack by various factors. Under the accounts of some female athletes such as Bufoni, some both offensive and aggressive sexual comments are accompanied by malice and targeting the athlete as a sexual punishment for online abuse by the commenters, (McCarthy, B. 2022) which is undoubtedly a form of sexualization and is one of the manifestations of the opposition to feminism by those extreme male netizens. The fact that some radical netizens often use "relexicalization" terms, which refers to the creation of new ways of expression to replace or oppose the old ones, such as "Chinese pastoral feminism" and "nu quan" to describe some women and feminists was revealed by analyzing the textual characteristics of male comments. (Hu, B., Luo, F., Peng, Z., & Lin, S. 2021) These two frontier new phrases have entirely deviated from the original meaning of feminism, the former referring to localized radical feminism in China while the latter to literal female boxing. And the comment "If you don't control public opinion, it will be controlled by 'nu quan'" undoubtedly brands all female netizens for whom feminism occurs as ultra-feminist. In contrast to ad hominem, re-lexicalization is an essential means of categorization; it also reflects the speaker's new understanding of things and provides a new speaking angle (Miao, 2017). During the "Yang Li" event, male netizens mainly use metaphorical approach to describe the meaning of "Yang deliberately provoked gender antagonism to earn profit from information flow when male netizens construct an image of pseudofeminists who speak up for profit (Hu, B., Luo, F., Peng, Z., & Lin, S. 2021). Just because of this, bigoted anti-feminists have been able to misrepresent female's advocacy for legal rights and gender equality in such a way as to stigmatize feminism and therefore solidify the audiences' stereotypes and prejudices toward women. (H.Liu&Pan, 2020)

Unlike sexualization, when skimming through the comments under many feminists' works, almost half of the opponents associate large negative comments with their attacks on bloggers, who tend to refute feminist arguments by abusing their appearance, academic abilities or simply based on their gender rather than arguing these facts reasonably. By analyzing these negative comments, it is no hard to find out that patriarchists fear the gradual awakening of women's sense of self through learning

feminism and thus participating in the movement for affirmative action, so they stigmatize Chinese feminism and suppress women's discourse with new stereotypes (Hu, B., Luo, F., Peng, Z., & Lin, S. 2021). To avoid that, their own choice to dismiss feminism is ad hominem. For example, in the "Yang Li" event, discourse became a weapon used by the two opposing sides to attack each other, to vent their emotions and to build men's collective identity (Hu, B., Luo, F., Peng, Z., & Lin, S. 2021). As readers can see through those comments, it is clear that many men are passive and ambivalent in facing the empowerment of women and the transformation of gender role models---they are dissatisfied with the arbitrariness of the old gender order and reluctant to give up their vested interests. Hence, they often unconsciously exaggerate the negative effects of disorder and misconduct in gender reformation (Jin, 1996). Due to the widespread existence of stigma, to buffer the anxiety and danger of perceivers, and better improve the sense of control and the actual control degree of perceivers through downward comparison based on the evolution and function theory of stigma research (Guan, 2007). Personally abusive is not uncommon in both entertainment and athletic circles, and gender-questioning and homophobic abuse that marks competitors as men, transgender or lesbian have long been employed to discredit women 'who challenge heterosexist normative systems' (Blinde and Taub, 1992: 151).

To understand and analyze the main elements some male netizens counter feminism extensively, it is not enough to just master relevant theoretical knowledge; we also need to explore more about the factors that support male netizens' judgments when they refute. This study will examine the elements that influence the different responses of male netizens to feminism in terms of categorizing the various comments under the works of feminist bloggers.

#### 3. Research Method

Due to the large number of Chinese netizens through different social media platforms, the target demographic of each platform varies. Therefore, this study mainly chose Douyin (China "Tiktok"), a mainstream videobased social media platform, as the focus of this research. Three bloggers of different genders who run their own accounts on Douyin platform were selected according to the feminism themes they share, and the comments from male netizens under their works were categorized and analyzed. (See Table 1 and Fig 1&2)

Name	Gender	Followers	Likes	Post Subject
PAN	Male	0.05m	0.475m	Feminism

Name	Gender	Followers	Likes	Post Subject
Hunshen meimao	Female	0.054m	0.525m	Feminism, Contemporary Art
Huolada muhouzi	Female	0.48m	7.443m	Feminism, Female Awakening

Table 1: Basic information and data of influencers and their themes





Fig 1. 3 Screenshots from three bloggers' comment sections, which represent support voices from some male netizens









Fig 2. 7 Screenshots from three bloggers' comment section which

represent opposing voices from some male netizens.

For the above table and screenshots from different gender bloggers, select comments with various attitudes by categorizing the comments individually, analyzing the elements that influence the formation of thoughts, and explaining why various male netizens react differently to feminism through social media.

As Sexualization, Ad Hominem, Legitimate Critique, and Support are the main elements of that comment, their main definition&categorization is based on the following: (1)Sexualization: Sexual objectification occurs whenever people's bodies, body parts, or sexual functions are separated from their identity, reduced to the status of mere instruments, or regarded as if they were capable of representing them. In other words, when objectified, individuals are treated as bodies, in particular, as bodies that exist for the use and pleasure of others. (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998, p. 269)

(2)Ad hominem: Ad hominem, Latin for "to the man," is when an argument is rebutted by attacking the person making it rather than the argument itself. It is another informal logical fallacy. (What is the Ad Hominem Fallacy? 2016) It can be divided into four kinds: tu quoque, circumstantial, guilt by association, and abusive ad hominem.

• The literal meaning of tu quoque is "You also." It is a response to a personal attack (or ad *hominem* argument)

that itself is a personal attack.

- Circumstantial ad hominem points out that someone is in the circumstances (for instance, their job, wealth, property, or relations) that they are disposed to take a particular position. It constitutes an attack on the bias of a source. As with other types of ad hominem attacks, it could be fallacious. It could be fallacious because a disposition to make a certain argument does not make the argument invalid; this overlaps with the genetic fallacy (an argument that a claim is incorrect due to its source). But it also may be a sound argument if the premises are correct and the bias is relevant to the argument.
- Guilt by association is essentially accusing the arguer because of his alleged connection with a discredited person or group, can sometimes also be a type of ad hominem fallacy when the argument attacks a source because of the similarity between the views of someone making an argument and other proponents of the argument.
- Abusive ad hominem argument (or direct ad hominem) is associated with an attack on the character of the person carrying an argument. Besides usually being fallacious, this kind of argument is counterproductive, as a proper dialogue is hard to achieve after such an attack. (Ad hominem Wikipedia)
- (3)Legitimate critique is essentially a reasonable refutation of a thing or concept based on objective facts, and its opposition is not derogatory in any way but is simply a matter of opinion.
- (4)Support is the expression of approval and support by people who share the speakers' ideas.

# 4. Findings

By analyzing the above comments, it is clear that there are four kinds of reactions caused by different dominant factors, which are sexualization, ad hominem, legitimate critique, and support.

#### 4.1. Sexualization

Sexualization is essentially an objectification of females by outsiders who force their aesthetic preferences on individuals to force them to present themselves following outsiders' demands. There is no doubt that those negative comments made under the bloggers' works always pursue their appearance or the sexualization of themselves with vulgar language that serves to retort or deliberately distort feminism. Skimming the comments above, some male netizens try to sexualize females or bloggers to degrade feminism.

In one example, a post by Huoladamuhouzi discussed the connection between the plot and real-life events regarding the film Lost in The Stars, one male respondent replied,

"So women should be obedient." [Here is why this is an example of sexualization]. Many other viewers of the original post responded to the comment, noting that it was sexiest. For example, another commentator said, "That's so sexist. It just proves what the blogger was saying!" It is not hard to find out that the motivation for this person's comment is to suppress women's free minds by warning them through the case analyzed by the blogger that if they don't submit they will suffer the same experience as in the case, which is certainly a threat, and demonstrates the underlying misogyny of this category of people.

In another example, a post by PAN, which said the examples of implicit discrimination in academia, one male netizen replied, "Some women will harass their leaders to cross the classes, change their fortunes, and become rich." [Here is also why this is an example of sexualization]. Many of the other audience of the post responded to this, noting that it was undoubtedly sexiest. In addition, another commentator said, "You use rare examples to negate the whole hard-working academic female group, use your superficial knowledge to belittle others, and elevate yourself, just like PAN said."

Women are the ones who will take their innocence and fabricate rumors.

The first example uses the word obedient to objectify women as subordinate to men, highlighting male dominance by sexualizing women. The second example imposes an individual's behavior on a group of women by stigmatizing them. In contrast, the third example distorts the image of women to impose their malice on them and create rumors, objectifying their bodies as tools for gossip.

#### 4.2. Ad hominem

Ad hominem is equal to personal abuse or personal attack; some male netizens who have knowledge bias tend to use this to judge or attack others. They usually avoid the key points and argue something irrelevant with you, and they also hold unwavering adherence to their inherited ideology to counter every voice they have heard. Referring to Tu Quoque, the comment style is quite different.

In one example, a post by Huoladamuhouzi discussed the connection between the plot and real-life events regarding the film Lost in The Stars, one male respondent replied," But you cannot meet that good kind of man yourself. Don't teach others not to look for it. And how did others manage to find this good man?" [Here is why this is an example of tu quoque].

In one example, a post by Hunshenmeimao, which discussed why the "Greasy Girl" video makes people uncomfortable, one male netizen replied," Boxer. .... Did you like a man who didn't like you and then you started getting back at society?" [Here is why this is an

example of tu quoque]. Some netizens like to judge a woman's success based on whether she has a mate of the opposite sex or not. In this comment, the netizen twisted the blogger's motivation to analyze the fact based on an objective analysis into revenge against society for not being loved by men. Also, it demonstrated the habit of some people intentionally changing the topic and distorting the meaning of the issue when discussing it.

From a post by PAN, which discussed career discrimination, one male respondent replied," Nothing would happen without hiring women, a separate compartment for women with a separate water fountain, just like segregation in the US." [Here is why this is an example of tu quoque].

Firstly, this comment refutes the female blogger's point of view by using his spouse as a judgmental standard, using bias to personally attack the other person. Secondly, it directly defines the action of the female blogger as she loves a ma but can't with him and uses verbal attacks on men to get her own way, which is certainly untrustworthy. The last comment demeans and shames women as sex-segregated objects. These male netizens ignore the basics but focus on off-topic things like their attack on bloggers instead of arguing the case itself.

Because of the echo chamber effect traps them under a large filtered bubble, leading their thinking to be more biased in expressing their objection. As for Circumstantial:

From a post by PAN, which responded to extreme comments that distorted the facts, one male netizen replied, "You're a foreign power, and you're tired of doing domestic work, right? (spy)" [Here is why this is an example of detailed].

In a post by PAN, which replied to the thing where he only mentions women's suffering and not men's suffering, one male respondent replied, "Your biggest problem is that you read a few books written by feminism and then keep talking to yourself there about how feminism is equal rights. I'm sorry to tell you that feminism is female privilege; you can go to Zhihu and search this question, and everyone there will tell you that feminism is not affirmative action." [Here is why this is an example of detailed]. Many of the other viewers of the original post responded to this comment. Some retorted, "Firstly, I'd like to ask how women can be privileged when they don't have equal rights?" Due to knowledge bias, the less knowledge a person actually has, the more they think they know. In social media, some online users take their ignorance for omniscience, ignoring the current situation and interpreting their concepts as facts to affect others.

In one example, a post by PAN, which said the relationship between science and feminism, one male

respondent replied," You're here to bullshit. How about sending it to the women in Syria who have been banned from going to university." [Here is why this is an example of circumstantial]. Many other viewers of the original post responded to this comment, noting that it was a kind of ad hominem. For example, another commentator argued, "It is weird to mention this; why not just focus based on the event?"

In a post from PAN, which said the oppression of women in the social and workplace, a male netizen answered, "Although all your works are stating that you do not engage in male-female rivalry, the content of your works are all demeaning men, engage in male-female rivalry, once the status of women is indeed low, but the current era, regardless of gender, are human, human nature is the same, and gender has nothing to do with it, no need for men and women to attack each other, there are scum women and scum men, do not say what women are awakening this slogan is quite ridiculous." [Here is the reason why this is an example of circumstantial].

The first comment based on the male blogger's status as an overseas student defines his sharing of feminism as spying to spread a reactionary narrative. The second attacked the male blogger's knowledge and gave the reviewer a very misleading view of feminism itself due to his knowledge bias. The third comment ignores the current situation women in their country face and sidesteps the issue by referring to women in other countries. The last comment defines the popularity of feminism as the cause of the dichotomy between men and women and uses the term "women's awakening" as a counter-argument.

Vary from the male bloggers, some female bloggers will delete some highly negative comments themselves, so it is not hard to find out what comments remain may not be that aggressive. About Abusive Ad *Hominem*, comments change again.

In a post from Huoladamuhouzi, which discussed the connection between the plot and real-life events regarding the film Lost in The Stars, one male respondent replied," So nice. The disappearance of you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you." [Here is why this is an example of abusive ad hominem]. Some netizens usually do not calmly communicate with discussants under some gender controversial issues. Instead, they choose to be aggressive in releasing their malice to other people, thus anonymously achieving their purpose of expressing their negative emotions on social media.

In one example, a post by PAN, which explained the real meaning of feminism, one male respondent replied," It's all about making women's money after all, just look at this little Korean parting of the head that caters to the Korean Wave." [Here is why this is an example of abusive ad

hominem]. Many of the other audience of the original post responded to this comment, noting that it was abusive.

The former outright cursed everyone, especially women who supported that female blogger, to disappear, i.e., death. The latter recklessly judged the male blogger based on his hairstyle for sharing feminism as a starting point to make money from women.

## 4.3. Legitimate Critique & Supports

Although feminism has suffered great objection during the dissemination process, it also received critical arguments and support. No matter how hard it goes, there are always some men who are not biased and willing to speak up for feminism and support it with their own words.

From a post by PAN, which responded to some extreme comments that distorted the facts, one male netizen replied, "I think some guys are afraid of female awakening, and the more women awaken, the more effort it will take to get women's attention, like a sign of incompetence. (Personal opinion, not necessarily right)." [Here is why this is an example of support]. Some commentators even responded with support. For example, one commentator said, "Not some; actually, most are afraid of it. I've talked about affirmative rights in my dorm as a guy, and most of them go on to attack feminism and other girls."

In a post by PAN, which discussed 2 wrong doctrines from Aristotle (384-322 BC), Greek philosopher, a man netizen, replied," I stand by your bro; there are too few who dare to say that you are very courageous." [Here is why this is an example of support]. Many of the other audience of the post responded to this comment. For example, another commentator said, "It's rare that you are a man."

From a post by PAN, which responded to extreme comments that distorted the facts, one male netizen replied, "It's not easy to look at gender issues that scientifically and rationally, and listening to you has given me more angles for thought." [Here is why this is an example of support].

In one example, a post by PAN, which replied to aggressive comments from a male netizen, one male respondent replied, "I've been forcibly dismissed as a man by a group of men, like you, and it's pathetic and silly to say I'm a woman when I don't agree with their views." [Here is why this is an example of support]. Many of the other viewers of the original post responded to this comment, noting that some of them have the same experience with him. For example, another male commentator said, "Me too. I even don't label my gender; I help a few girls out and then get called Lickspittle by the guys."

Another example, like the one above, has the same background. One male netizen replied," If you want to open the window, you have to lift the roof to make the window." [Here is why this is an example of support]. There are also many viewers arguing the event of selling sanitary napkins on high-speed trains.

From a post by PAN, which responded to some extreme comments that distorted the facts, one male netizen replied," I, as a man, also believe that feminism is about equality, not transgression, not only about having moral character but also about contributing to society and the state." [This is an example of legitimate critique and support].

Though some of the comments do not fully agree with the opinion of feminist bloggers, those male netizens are more willing to argue peacefully rather than war-like. They are up for reacting positively to feminism, which offers convenience to the dissemination and contributes to some extent to feminist literacy initiatives and knowledge science. Some online users choose to support bloggers after learning about feminism, mainly because they are willing to accept affirmative action and contribute to the advancement of the equal rights process. However, let's think of the motives in the opposite direction. Profeminist comments may also be a trap for some people with ulterior aims to gain the attention of other viewers, especially women.

#### 5. Limitation

This study does contain a few limitations. Due to the platforms' restrictive policies, several of the overly negative comments were blocked and deleted after review or after being reported by someone, and some bloggers manually deleted some of the highly offensive comments when they received them. Hence, the comments used in this study do not completely depict the verbal attacks and insults endured by feminist bloggers spreading feminism on social media. Furthermore, not all data is fresh because some comments were derived from works uploaded in late 2022 and early 2023.

The analysis of the findings has comparable constraints. Because some of the objectionable Chinese terms in the comments do not have a particularly comprehensive English meaning today, there is no way to precisely understand their original meaning, and the categorization of the comments may be somewhat biased. Owing to certain limitations in the material collection process, no suitable examples of reviews were found for guilt by association to be analyzed in the ad hominem in the finding section. Therefore, no examples and analyses of guilt by association exist in the research method and

discovery section. Due to the author's gender, she was unable to converse calmly and equitably with male respondents while analyzing their motivations. Hence, the analysis's conclusions are restricted. Moreover, because this study focuses on male netizens' reactions to the development of feminism in China's social media, the sample material mostly includes comments from male netizens rather than female netizens. Due to the diverse starting places of individual netizens' comments and the restrictions of time and network, it is difficult and not completely accurate to analyze their motives scientifically.

## 6. Conclusion

By analyzing and summarizing the findings above, it can be learned that in online spaces, where people disagree with another person's politics, some of them are more likely to insult that person on a personal level or change the subject than they are to engage with their argument. This fierce opposition to the growth of feminism on Chinese social media is also proof that there is still a long way to go before it can be propagated and that individuals may strive to discover and refine the adjustments required for feminism to be Chinese in China.

Based on the present state of feminism's expansion in China, I suggest improving this phenomenon. As for Douyin (Chinese Tiktok), -Instead of aggressively restricting the number of views and minimizing the visibility of such bloggers' works when debates occur, I hope the platform would provide some exposure assistance to feminist bloggers. Referring to the scholar group, we hope that scholars would pay greater attention to the numerous channels of feminist transmission and the stigmatization of feminism, thus assisting the uninitiated in truly comprehending the core of feminism rather than its literal definition. And for the general public, We hope the public would set aside their preconceptions and look at feminism objectively, attempt to understand and embrace it and contribute to the promotion of it.

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