

Commerce Meets Activism: #StopMenstrualShaming and the Dynamics of Feminist Advocacy on Xiaohongshu

YUEJIE GU^{*1}

YING YANG

ARIEL SAIYINJIYA

WANYU WU

QINGYUN CHEN

SIQI CHEN

IOANA LITERAT

Teachers College, Columbia University, USA

Using the lens of commodity feminism and the case study of menstrual shaming, this article investigates feminist expression on the Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu—a commercially focused platform used primarily by women. Analyzing 329 posts and 10,336 comments under the hashtag #StopMenstrualShaming, our research foregrounds the salient role of Xiaohongshu in making women's issues visible. The findings highlight how Xiaohongshu users shared societal critiques in varied creative forms while using the platform as a space of solidarity and connection. At the same time, the commercial ethos of Xiaohongshu casts feminist messages in a commercial light, which shapes both the expression and reception of feminist discourses on the platform. Through this case study, our research illuminates the complex dynamics of Chinese digital feminism more broadly, specifically the practice of feminist activism on a consumption-focused social media platform.

Yuejie Gu: yg2877@tc.columbia.edu

Ying Yang: yy3251@tc.columbia.edu

Ariel Saiyinjiya: sn3004@tc.columbia.edu

Wanyu Wu: ww2642@tc.columbia.edu

Qingyun Chen: qc2317@tc.columbia.edu

Siqi Chen: sc5080@tc.columbia.edu

Ioana Literat: il2311@tc.columbia.edu

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In October 2020, Chinese blogger Liang Yu, a women's rights advocate, posted on the social media platform Xiaohongshu a picture of the Menstrual Pad Mutual Help Box designed by a middle school teacher to provide menstrual pads to students who forget to bring theirs to school (May & Chien, 2020). This solution, and the larger issue of menstrual shaming that it spoke to, ignited much discussion on the female-oriented platform and beyond it. Then, in September 2022, a Xiaohongshu user posted about her experience of being unable to purchase menstrual pads on a high-speed train in China, arguing that "menstrual pads are a necessity, just like food and water, and are an essential item that women need" (personal communication, September 24, 2022). Her post went viral in China, stirring a vivid debate about the availability of sanitary products and revealing the stigmas associated with them (Zhang, 2022). Both of these high-profile examples foregrounded the enduring salience of menstrual shame in contemporary China—and in both cases, the social media platform Xiaohongshu, a female-centric and consumption-oriented platform, was the impetus and key site for this wider cultural conversation.

This research examines the intersection of feminism and commercialism in the contemporary Chinese social media sphere through the lens of menstrual shaming. We focus on the immensely popular but under-researched platform Xiaohongshu, a Chinese social media and e-commerce platform that targets young female users. The platform serves as a central venue for Chinese social media users to share their personal experiences and video and image reviews of various commercial products—especially in the areas of fashion, beauty, gastronomy, and tourism; users can also purchase goods and services directly on the platform. Our research focuses on the hashtag #StopMenstrualShaming and examines, through a qualitative analysis of user posts and comments, how Xiaohongshu users advocated against period shaming and menstrual stigma, while operating within the platform's commercial ethos.

As previous research—in China and elsewhere—has well established, social media plays a significant role in supporting and amplifying activism (Dejmanee, Zaher, Rouech, & Papa, 2020; Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault-Welles, 2020; Kim & Kim, 2023; Li & Li, 2017; Liao & Luqiu, 2022; Mundt, Ross, & Burnett, 2018; Xue & Rose, 2022). Hashtags are a vital tool in this context, helping spread awareness and connecting disparate voices around shared social and political goals. As Jackson and colleagues (2020) have written, "hashtag activism" can lead to tangible results both online and offline. However, research on hashtag activism and online political expression (Lane, Do, & Molina-Rogers, 2022; Lane et al., 2019) has been firmly grounded in Western contexts. In China, the few studies that address these dynamics focus on older, more established platforms, such as Weibo (e.g., Liao, 2019; Xue & Rose, 2022), and the creative adaptation of hashtags to eschew government censorship (e.g., Zeng, 2019). In a popular study on Weibo, Liao (2019) analyzed the #IAmGay hashtag, which emerged on Chinese social media in response to the censorship of LGBTQ+ content by the Chinese government. Illuminating the affective and connective dimension of hashtag activism, the hashtag was used to share personal stories and experiences of coming out and to express support for LGBTQ+ rights in China.

Here, we turn our attention to feminist discourse to examine activism against menstrual shaming on the female-oriented platform Xiaohongshu. Our analysis shows how Xiaohongshu users deployed the #StopMenstrualShaming hashtag to increase awareness about menstrual health and hygiene, galvanize support for the cause, and challenge the cultural stigmas associated with menstruation in China. In doing so, we aim to illuminate the complex dynamics of Chinese digital feminism more broadly and how these play out on an understudied but increasingly popular social media platform—a platform that is shaped primarily by a commercial scope yet, as we show here, gives voice to robust, creative, collective political expression. Building on the framework of commodity feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2012) and expanding it to the context of China, we argue that within the contemporary Chinese sociopolitical context, commercialism may serve as a vital bridge to bring feminist issues to the forefront. Given the lower media visibility and public support for women's issues in China, platforms like Xiaohongshu offer a much-needed space for feminism to gain visibility and traction. As our findings show, this blend of feminist expression and consumer culture on Xiaohongshu creates a digital environment where discussions about feminism are accessible and can potentially influence a broader understanding and support for feminist issues.

Background

Menstrual Shame in China

Menstruation, a natural reproductive physical phenomenon, is often surrounded by stigma. This public attitude around menstruation leads to women feeling apprehensive about discussing it in public, hiding menstrual products, and feeling ashamed of experiencing periods (Schooler, Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2005). Although the stigma associated with menstruation persists (Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011; Schooler et al., 2005), Western countries have gradually adopted more open attitudes, addressing issues like menstrual poverty and access to clean menstrual products (Guo et al., 2022). In China, however, menstrual shaming remains a significant social issue. Although some provinces (e.g., Hubei, Shanxi, and Ningxia) have begun promoting menstrual leave (Worley, 2017), the general attitude toward menstruation remains predominantly negative.

Indeed, in China, within the context of a male-centric sexual culture heavily influenced by Confucianism (Ji & Norling, 2004; Zheng, 1994), menstruation and its products have traditionally been considered dirty and contaminating (Chu, 1980). Consequently, menstruation is treated as a taboo topic. Linguistically, many euphemisms have been created to replace the word "period" (yuejing, 月经). For example, Chinese women and girls tend to refer to menstruation as "that thing" (nage, 那个), "the great aunt" (dayima, 大姨妈), or "the old friend" (laopengyou, 老朋友), among others (Guo et al., 2022). As suggested by Jiang (2019), these euphemisms serve the purpose of avoiding embarrassment in public spaces and enabling women to discuss cultural taboos. The religious interpretation of menstruation, linked to the yin-yang principle, also plays a significant role here. Within the binary opposition of yin and yang, women and blood fall into the yin side of the dichotomy; hence, women during menstruation are perceived as weak, cold, and pale (Chu, 1980). Religious traditions and beliefs further stigmatize menstruation as impure and profane. Menstruating women are traditionally prohibited from entering public temples or participating in religious ceremonies. Some temples even display explicit warnings to discourage the

“unclean” from entry (Chu, 1980). Official policies also reflect and reinforce this stigmatizing attitude, such as a rule established by the Chinese Advertisement Association in 2008 that prohibits advertisements for menstrual products from displaying blood in red colors instead, encouraging the use of blue to create a more comfortable feeling (Guo et al., 2022).

However, as illustrated by the two opening examples, in recent years, Chinese social media platforms have become important spaces for discussing menstruation-related topics and making menstruation more visible in Chinese society (Guo et al., 2022; Yang, Qiu, & Zhu, 2021; Zhang, 2022). For instance, in 2016, Chinese athlete Fu Yuanhui’s disclosure that she was menstruating during her swimming competition sent ripples across Weibo and helped demystify the use of tampons (Gharib, 2016). Furthermore, the aforementioned controversy over whether sanitary products should be sold on Chinese trains resulted in an initial barrage of negative responses on social media but eventually led to the successful introduction of sanitary products on high-speed railways (Zhang, 2022). Recent research shows that social media might also provide an opening for men to discuss these topics as well. A recent study found that male users on Zhihu, a Chinese Q&A social platform with more than 220 million users, broke the customary silence around menstruation, turning to the platform to discuss ways to support their menstruating partners. At the same time, sexist dynamics were reproduced in this context as well, as other male users approached the topic with levity and misogyny, thus potentially reinforcing menstrual stigma (Yang et al., 2021).

The Rise of Feminist Discourse in Chinese Online Spaces

As a growing body of literature has well established, digital platforms have the potential to spread feminist ideas widely, influence new gender paradigms, engage diverse constituencies, and enable innovative protest tactics (e.g., Baer, 2015; Barker-Plummer, 2017; Gerbaudo, 2022). In the Chinese context, the younger generation has experienced a significant rise in their awareness of feminism through social media platforms, as Chinese Internet users (especially women) have been increasingly willing to discuss gender issues online (Li, 2021). Research has shown that young Chinese women often express themselves more openly and confidently through social media, creating distinctive identities through strategic self-presentation techniques. In doing so, they construct a form of “digital feminism with Chinese characteristics,” in line with the “harmonious society” entrenched in Confucian principles (Chang, Ren, & Yang, 2018, p. 325).

Given their ability to connect disparate voices and foster “collective story-telling” (Gerbaudo, 2022, p. 2), hashtags have become a key tool for digital activism (Haßler, Wurst, Jungblut, & Schlosser, 2021; Jackson et al., 2020), including around gender issues (Baer, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2022; Jackson et al., 2020). In China, the first major hashtag activism campaign on feminist topics came to prominence in 2018, with the rise of #metoo on Weibo. Inspired by the #MeToo movement in the West, Chinese scholar Luoqianqian revealed on Weibo that her former professor had sexually assaulted her, and the professor was ultimately dismissed from his post and placed under investigation. Since then, more and more women in China have participated in the #MeToo movement, with the hashtag itself becoming a trending topic in both mainstream and social media (Liao & Luqiu, 2022). While the widespread use of #MeToo on Chinese social media brought gender issues to the foreground and marked the beginning of

a powerful societal conversation (Tan, 2018), the hashtag has since been heavily censored, pushing activists to use creative strategies—e.g., the use of the hashtag #米兔 (mi tu, which directly translates to “rice bunny”) as a homonym of #MeToo—to eschew government control (Tan, 2018; Zeng, 2019). However, despite attempts to limit the spread of specific hashtags, it is worth noting that the Chinese government has displayed, in general, a growing tolerance toward feminist discourse (Tai, 2015) while maintaining strong control over the media.

Xiaohongshu and Commodity Feminism

Within the growing ecosystem of Chinese social media, this study highlights Xiaohongshu, a female-centric Chinese social media and e-commerce platform that centers on creating and sharing content (i.e., pictures, text, and video posts) around various topics, including fashion, beauty, and education. However, despite the growing diversity of content on the platform, Xiaohongshu’s ethos is primarily commercial. Targeting young, urban female users, the platform taps into an emerging female-centric consumption model (often dubbed the “SHE Economy”; Lian, Chen, & Zhang, 2021) and builds a bridge among brands, influencers, and audiences (Song & Lu, 2021). With its worth surpassing 10 billion USD, Xiaohongshu is the most valuable digital media platform for advertising in China (Lian et al., 2021).

The unique gender composition on Xiaohongshu, where female users make up 70% of its 200 million monthly active users, shapes a distinctive social media environment (Douhua, 2022). In contrast to the patriarchal characteristics that still dominate Chinese society, Xiaohongshu promotes women’s independence and mutual support (Zhou, Wang, & Zimmer, 2022); it allows women to construct identities that are respected by others (Shi, Sui, Tang, & Wang, 2021). However, it is important to note that these dynamics happen within a distinctly commercial context, thus fueling the larger criticism of Chinese contemporary feminism as neoliberal and overly focused on empowerment via consumption (Li & Li, 2017; Peng, 2021). Recent empirical research has begun to illuminate the complexity—and limitations—of female self-representation on Xiaohongshu. For instance, employing a Foucauldian lens to analyze discourses surrounding postpartum recovery on Xiaohongshu, Liu and Wang (2022) found that the platform did not empower mothers or subvert traditional gender norms; rather, it helped construct a “docile postpartum body” and played into dominant ideologies of femininity and motherhood (p. 2286). Liu and Li (2023) reached a similar conclusion in their investigation of female representations on the platform: They found that Xiaohongshu helped materialize and reinforce a “pale, young, and slim” beauty ideal, positioning young Chinese women as “docile bodies” within a sexualized and consumerist context (p. 16).

Writing on the intersection of feminism with consumer culture, albeit in a Western context, Banet-Weiser (2012) has argued that contemporary feminism has become deeply intertwined with and often co-opted by commercial interests, leading to a form of “commodity feminism” where feminist ideals are marketed and consumed without necessarily challenging broader structures of inequality. In this context, social media platforms—especially those like Xiaohongshu that prioritize visual content—become spaces for performing feminism, fostering a more superficial engagement with feminist ideas and undermining the transformative potential of feminist activism. In this foundational work and in her more recent writing (e.g., Singh & Banet-Weiser, 2022), Singh and Banet-Weiser (2022) highlight the significant role of the medium

in framing and addressing gender and social inequality, stressing the need for platform-specific understandings.

Here, heeding this invitation, we build on Banet-Weiser's (2012) insights about the intersection of feminism and commercialism on social media and consider these dynamics within the unique context of China, where the feminist movement is still maturing (Lou, 2023). Focusing on the issue of menstrual shaming—a relatively unexplored and sensitive topic on Chinese social media—our research spotlights the activist dimensions of Xiaohongshu and how this consumption-oriented platform gives voice to societal critique and solidarity within a distinctly commercial context. Significantly, in contrast to previous work on Xiaohongshu, our interest is not only in the content of female representations but also in the use of the platform (including hashtags, genres, and expressive features) to craft these representations and make connections around this important topic. Finally, by analyzing comments and posts, we foreground the interactive and community-building elements that are core to understanding feminist expression within the commercial context of Xiaohongshu.

Methods

Data collection for this study was conducted through Qiangua (<https://www.qian-gua.com>), a platform used extensively by Xiaohongshu content creators. Beyond the ability to download Xiaohongshu content, Qiangua provides tracking of metadata like follower counts, likes, comments, reposts, and favorites, which creators typically leverage to devise marketing strategies. To facilitate our research, we purchased the Qiangua premium service that allowed us to download Xiaohongshu posts and metadata in Excel format. The data collection was performed in October 2022 and included all the public posts under the hashtag #StopMenstralShaming within the past year (the maximum timeframe allowed by Qiangua).

Our corpus thus consisted of 329 public posts shared under this hashtag (of which 225 were image posts and 104 were video posts; see Figure 1 for a few representative examples), along with the 10,336 public comments on these posts. Based on the gender self-identification shown on their profile pages, we noted that the majority of users who shared the posts in our corpus (i.e., 219 of 329) self-identified as female.² The posts were organized into a data spreadsheet, along with pertinent metadata such as the title, format (video or image), posting date, number of likes, reposts, comments, and collections, as well as any accompanying hashtags. This comprehensive data set, encompassing posts, comments, and metadata, served as the foundation for our analysis.

² Among the remaining 110 posts, 59 were posted by organizational accounts, and 10 were posted by users who had hidden their gender on their profile pages.

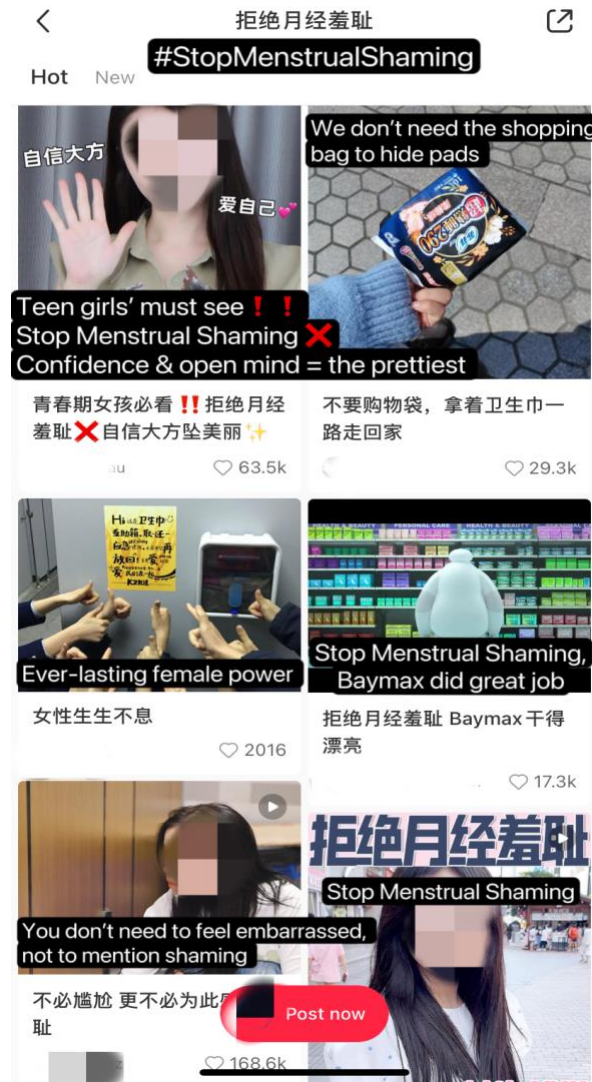


Figure 1. Screenshot of #StopMenstrualShaming posts on Xiaohongshu (personal communication, October 18, 2022).

Our analytical approach was informed by thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was a fitting choice for this study because it allowed us to identify patterns and themes within the data, providing a detailed and nuanced understanding of the subject matter. The core objective of our analytical process was to "identify, analyze and report patterns" in the data, offering a description of the data set in granular, nuanced detail (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79; Literat, 2021). Additionally, this method enabled the examination of both content and form, which was particularly relevant for investigating the communicative and activist dynamics within the Xiaohongshu community. Furthermore,

given the nature of the content on Xiaohongshu, we integrated principles from multimodal critical discourse analysis, as posited by van Leeuwen (2014). This allowed us to illuminate the intricate interplay among text, visuals, and sound and focus on the structural composition of Xiaohongshu posts.

Thus, throughout the analysis process, we focused on both the content of the posts and comments and how users attempted to share, inform, and mobilize the community around the topic of menstrual shame. We also considered the relationship between comments and the corresponding videos they were posted on to ensure a holistic understanding of the discourse. After individually analyzing the data and compiling extensive notes, we collaboratively identified recurring themes, which were then organized through cross-case coding. This process involved categorizing similar content and forms (Braun & Clark, 2006) under 16 codes, such as self-blame, intrasexual disciplining, peer-to-peer education, creative reenactment of personal experiences, etc. Refining and combining these initial codes, we synthesized them into three overarching themes: the creative uses of the platform for societal critique, the development of solidarity and community, and the deployment of feminist messages as a commercial strategy. The evolution from subthemes to main themes was marked by an evaluation of their interrelations and their collective relevance to the central research question. The findings are presented below, supported by relevant examples and quotes that were translated by the authors into English.

Although our data were publicly posted, we are mindful of the ethical considerations surrounding the use of social media data in academic research, particularly given the culturally taboo and personal nature of the topic (Franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer, Ess, & Association of Internet Researchers, 2020). To respect the privacy of the users, we chose to omit or blur usernames when presenting our findings, as well as blur any faces appearing in the screenshots. This decision was made to maintain the confidentiality of the participants while still providing a rich view of the content and conversations taking place on Xiaohongshu.

Findings

Societal Critique in Diverse Creative Forms

Our findings spotlight Xiaohongshu as a dynamic platform for feminist activism, where users tap into the platform's creative affordances to express societal critique and calls for action—for example, calling on Chinese society to normalize periods; calling for mutual respect between men and women and between older and younger generations; and calling for authorities and people in power to make necessary policy changes. Significantly, these critiques and calls for action were expressed in various genres and modes of address (video selfies, art, infographics, skits, etc.) with Xiaohongshu users taking full advantage of the expressivity affordances of the platform.

Given the personal nature of the topic, video selfies, filmed in a confessional style, addressing the camera, were particularly popular in our corpus. For instance, a video selfie—titled “Why do you call it ‘Aunt’? Stop MENSTRUAL shaming!” (personal communication, October 5, 2022)—argued that, to normalize periods on a societal level, people should stop using euphemisms for menstruation (e.g., “that” or “aunt”) and instead use the term “menstruation” itself: “The word ‘menstruation’ seems to have become a banned word, [and] the words ‘aunt’ and ‘that’ seem to be synonymous with it . . . But is menstruation really shameful?

Menstruation deserves to be discussed and faced openly!" (personal communication, October 5, 2022). Toward the conclusion of the video, the user urged everyone to adopt the phrase "Stop menstrual shaming" instead of "Stop 'Aunt' shaming." Commenters readily expressed agreement, with one commenter stating, "Personally, I rarely refer to it as 'aunt,' I consistently use the term 'menstruation'" (personal communication, October 5, 2022). Subsequent comments echoed these sentiments (e.g., "I feel the same way." "Same for me."), highlighting a sense of resonance and solidarity around these messages.

In other video selfies, Xiaohongshu users shared personal anecdotes of their experiences with menstrual shame while addressing the larger sociocultural dynamics behind this stigmatization. In particular, users shared how the lack of discussions about these topics at home and the stigmatizing attitudes of mothers and older female relatives had negatively impacted their menstrual experiences, particularly in their teen years. For example, the video selfie captured in Figure 2 used a distorted lens effect to illustrate the creator's experience of being reprimanded by her mother, grandmother, and mother-in-law: they all advised her against discussing menstruation openly and reinforced the idea that it is a taboo subject that ought to be kept private.



Figure 2. A video selfie, with a distorted lens effect, critiquing the intrasexual disciplining by older relatives and the taboo nature of menstruation at home (personal communication, October 3, 2022).

A prominent means to critique the stigmatization of periods was the practice of sharing art (e.g., menstrual-themed paintings, photographs, illustrations, poetry, etc.) that highlights the beauty and naturalness of menstruation instead. In particular, tapping into the visual ethos of Xiaohongshu, users relied on art and illustrations to convey this message (see Figure 3). For instance, a user created satirical illustrations to critique the use of “invisible powder”³ as a means of hiding menstruation in Chinese society; her illustrations depicted, in a traditional style, women with bloodred cheeks and the “invisible powder” that can cover up the red color when patted on the face. In a different example, another user created and shared original illustrations depicting the physiological process of menstruation as a way of educating and combating stigma.



Figure 3. Visual artistic approaches to destigmatizing menstruation: a satirical illustration critiquing the use of “invisible powder” to hide menstruation (left) and an infographics to enhance menstrual knowledge (right; personal communication, September 25, 2022).

Another, more specifically targeted, type of societal critique was aimed at men. For this type of critique, posts often took the form of skits to creatively depict the fact that men belittle or ridicule women’s menstrual experiences. For example, the video skit in Figure 4 (left) showed a man witnessing a female coworker suffering from menstrual cramps and blaming her for being spoiled and exaggerating her pain. Other videos used an interview format to showcase men’s limited understanding of menstruation and detrimental attitudes toward it. In the second video screenshotted below (Figure 4, right), a female user interviewed a man about how he perceived menstruation. The man stated that he “will not talk about menstruation with women because I can understand it, but don’t know any information and what I can do.

³ In Chinese culture, the metaphor of “invisible powder” represents a desire by mainstream society to render invisible the things that they do not want to acknowledge: in this case, menstruation.

Thus, it is better to keep this topic in female groups” (personal communication, September 30, 2022). Interestingly, the man’s face was concealed by a digital mask, probably to minimize discomfort and the potential offense that may arise from showing men discussing menstruation.



Figure 4. Creative means of critiquing men’s attitudes: a skit of male colleagues dismissing and ridiculing women’s menstrual pain (left); an interview revealing men’s misconceptions and misunderstandings about menstruation (right; personal communication, September 30, 2022).

Finally, many videos under #StopMenstrualShaming directly appealed to authorities, urging them to enact crucial policy reforms around menstruation. The “high-speed train menstrual pad” incident mentioned in the opening of this article is a representative example, and a considerable amount of posts mentioned this incident, giving out further advice for public transportation companies. Posts calling for structural changes often compared the situation in China to other countries that had more progressive policies around menstruation. For example, a post titled “Free Menstrual Products Delivery | France is making efforts to liberate women” highlighted the effective practices of the French government and schools in combating menstrual shame. The post called on the Chinese government and educational institutions to implement similar policies. The user specifically mentioned Université Paris-Saclay’s initiative of distributing free menstrual products monthly and expressed the desire for Chinese schools to “openly and sincerely address menstruation in every sex education class.”

Fostering Solidarity and Community Around Menstrual Awareness

Building on the critical and activist aims laid out above, a powerful dynamic observed in the data was how posts and comments fostered a sense of female solidarity, peer-to-peer education, and mutual support. Numerous posts advised young girls on how to protect their bodies during periods and how to face real-life situations of being insulted, humiliated, or blamed for menstruating. These posts stressed values of self-acceptance, self-care, and self-love. Creators used comforting words to tell the audience that menstruation is normal and beautiful and that there is a feminine power embedded in it (“In your body lies the law of the moon’s ebb and flow”; “I love my female characteristics” (personal communication, October 5, 2022). For instance, the poem below—which again emphasizes the prominence of artistic approaches in the corpus—framed the period as transcendental and empowering:

A long time ago, it proved that I
became a young girl,
A gentle and well-behaved
young girl depicted in portraits.

But I am sharp,
Like the pain battling within my
lower abdomen.
But I am free,
Like the wound flowing between
my legs.

My body is
A homeland,
My blood is
A mother river.

Many posts attempted to foreground shared experiences around menstruation and create a sense of solidarity that way. For example, a post titled "Did you also secretly hide your menstrual pad this way?" (personal communication, September 14, 2022) pointed out that women face similar challenges around menstrual shaming. Almost a third of videos in the corpus mentioned the "black bag" that women are often advised or told to use when buying menstrual pads at the supermarket. While depicting such scenes, posts used language like "Have you ever witnessed or experienced this kind of moment?" (personal communication, February 5, 2022).

Solidarity was also cultivated by emphasizing not only a shared gender identity but also gender difference, in opposition to men. The phrase "we girls" was commonly used, invoking a sense of sisterhood. Additionally, themes of gender confrontation were prominent. Examples include titles such as "Why bother arguing with men?" (personal communication, March 3, 2022) and "Me, being taught by BOYS how many menstrual pads I should use per day??" (personal communication, April 9, 2022) These framings tended to position men in direct opposition to women, fostering a sense of solidarity among women.

Significantly, the theme of female solidarity was strongly reinforced via the discussions in the comment sections. For instance, comments seeking help, such as "my male classmates laughed at me because I accidentally dropped my menstrual pad on the ground . . . What should I do?" (personal communication, September 20, 2022) garnered numerous replies offering advice and solutions like, "Stand up to him! Don't be afraid! If he doesn't respect you, there's no need to respect him. You should also enlighten him about all the scientific facts of menstruation!" (personal communication, August 18, 2022). On posts that conveyed personal experiences or traumas, comments offered comfort and support, sharing similar personal experiences and providing suggestions. For example, on the aforementioned video about intrasexual disciplining in Figure 2, comments suggested similar experiences of being shamed by older women in their lives: comments discussed being persecuted by female physical education teachers or getting

accused by their own mothers of being “unclean” on their period. Throughout the data, comments frequently received affirming responses such as “yes!” “same!” or “+1.”

Finally, the diversity captured in the corpus made a powerful statement about the universality of menstrual shaming, underscoring the theme of solidarity and connection. This was conveyed both by the diversity of creators represented in the data (e.g., young girls, wives, mothers, all experiencing the same issues) and by the connections drawn in other contexts (e.g., challenges experienced by women in countries like India and Venezuela, where menstruation is taboo, but also positive experiences from countries like France and the United States). These different levels of diversity encouraged viewers to see themselves as part of a global community of women, who should all be able to discuss menstruation openly and speak up for their needs.

Selling Empowerment: Feminist Messaging as Commercial Strategy

As mentioned previously, Xiaohongshu is a hub for commercial activities, and we observed a strong interplay between feminist and consumerist messages in our data. In fact, approximately half of the posts in our corpus were tied to product promotion, whether by brands or by influencers.⁴ As we will discuss later in this section, these promotional posts were met with mixed reactions from Xiaohongshu audiences.

For one, our corpus included posts by companies selling menstrual products, which used the #StopMenstrualShaming hashtag to signify an alleged commitment to feminist values. A notable example is a brand selling disposable period underwear, whose slogan was “Please congratulate me, this is the first time I have my period.” As a marketing tool, this slogan encouraged girls to embrace their period with confidence, challenging societal norms. Similarly, leading with messages about empowerment, other menstrual product companies represented in our sample announced charity initiatives, such as providing free menstrual pads to girls in need. As we will address further in the discussion, these tactics raise questions about the commodification of feminist values and the tension between genuine support for feminist causes and the use of these causes for commercial gain.

Beyond menstrual product companies, influencers also promoted products using discourses of feminism and empowerment. Their #StopMenstrualShaming posts often advocated for women and girls to practice self-care during menstruation through the use of various hygiene products. Some of these posts also went beyond individual discourses via self-care and included broader messages of social critique and collective empowerment. For instance, one influencer’s post centered around the concept of “protection”: Her post promoted a specific brand of menstrual pads that offered overnight leakproof protection, while also advocating for the protection of girls in Chinese society and calling for the provision of menstruation education in middle schools.

⁴ It is important to note that Xiaohongshu enforces a clear distinction between paid and organic content. Paid advertisements, including pop-up and integrated ads, must be explicitly marked as such, adhering to regulations against misleading language (Verot, 2023). Additionally, the Qiangua platform, which we used for data collection, differentiates sponsored from non-sponsored content, allowing us to assess its prevalence in the corpus.

However, in addition to the (perhaps expected) promotion of hygiene products in our corpus, our analysis revealed the more subtle ways Xiaohongshu's commercial ethos shaped the conversation about menstrual shaming on the platform—even when no product was being promoted. An example is the video in Figure 5 below, which appropriated a well-known video genre on Xiaohongshu—that of beauty product reviews—to educate about menstruation. The creator of this video introduced a new lipstick color, which she called “period red,” encouraging girls to talk about their bodies with confidence. Next, she educated her audience about menstrual health through lipstick colors, dabbing different lipsticks on the back of her hand to explain which menstrual blood colors were normal and which might warrant a visit to the doctor. Also noteworthy are the reactions to this post: even though the creator was not promoting any lipstick brands but rather using them for educational purposes, some Xiaohongshu users in the comments were trying to figure out the brands and color codes of the lipsticks used in her demonstration.



Figure 5. Using lipsticks to educate about menstruation (personal communication, October 4, 2022).

Indeed, beyond illuminating the intertwinement of feminist and commercial messaging in the posts themselves, our analysis of user comments allowed us to understand how this interplay was interpreted and received by audiences. Although, based on the comments as a whole, most users seemed to applaud the use of this commercial platform for feminist activism, our data also included some critical voices. For instance, in one post (see Figure 6), an influencer used menstrual pads as earrings and as a necklace, writing “Stop Menstrual Shaming” in bold red lettering on the pads to draw attention to the issue. This

sparked diverse reactions in the comments section, with some viewers labeling the act as “totally unnecessary” and merely a bid for “attention and sensationalism” (September 7, 2022). It is worth noting that the crux of the matter was not the acceptability of menstrual shaming as a topic of discussion, but rather the way it was portrayed by an influencer, who—critical voices claimed—might be creating provocative content for attention and, consequently, profit. At the same time, a substantial number of users rallied behind the influencer, challenging these critiques and affirming the appropriateness and significance of these actions. Interestingly, the influencer who created the post joined the debate in the comments, replying that *“By provoking discussion and attention, I have achieved my goal.”* While her reply seemingly stressed the value of making menstrual shaming visible, it can also be interpreted as an attempt to attract attention in terms of clicks and profit. In the commercial environment of Xiaohongshu, both goals are hard to separate from one another, and audiences are well attuned to this.



Figure 6. An influencer using menstrual pads as jewelry to advocate against menstrual shaming (personal communication, September 7, 2022).

Another controversial case represented in our data had to do with male influencers promoting women's intimate products. A male influencer named Dundun faced criticism for selling tampons during a Douyin livestream, with some detractors deeming it “dirty” and questioning the appropriateness of a man

selling women's sanitary products for profit. However, when a video addressing the backlash against Dundun was shared on Xiaohongshu, the reaction was starkly different (personal communication, July 5, 2022). The majority of comments rallied in Dundun's defense, arguing that there was nothing inappropriate about his selling tampons; rather, it was something that "should be encouraged." This contrast illustrates that Xiaohongshu's community is notably open to embracing commercial activities—even in this contentious scenario of a man selling women's hygiene products—when such activities contribute to a feminist cause, such as openly discussing menstruation and combating deeply entrenched stigma.

Discussion

This study analyzes the discourse surrounding menstrual activism on Xiaohongshu as a window into the current dynamics of digital feminism on Chinese social media. Our analysis of posts and comments under the hashtag #StopMenstrualShaming illuminates the role of this platform in emboldening female users to voice their perspectives in bold and creative ways, thus fostering a sense of solidarity and mutual support. Our findings show how Xiaohongshu, a platform with a strong commercial focus, can also function as a powerful canvas for collective political expression by enabling users to "deliberately connect to an assumed like-minded audience with similar beliefs through the use of shared symbolic resources" (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019, p. 1988). With its primary user base being young urban women, Xiaohongshu has the potential to be a particularly significant space for Chinese digital feminism. Indeed, our findings confirm this potential, spotlighting the richness of feminist discourse on the platform and how it fosters women's empowerment and mutual support (Zhou et al., 2022). At the same time, these exchanges happen within a distinctly commercial context, and, as our analysis shows, this commercial ethos shapes both the packaging and interpretation of feminist messages on the platform. While the platform renders topics such as menstrual advocacy more accessible and gives voice to feminist messaging, its focus on consumption casts feminist messages in an inescapable commercial light.

As Banet-Weiser (2012) has argued, this commodification of feminism raises important questions about the authenticity and impact of feminist movements in digital spaces. Significantly, commodification can dilute the political potency of feminism, reducing it to a set of aesthetic or consumer choices rather than a movement for social change. Banet-Weiser acknowledges the important role of social media in facilitating the rapid spread of feminist messages and in raising awareness but argues that virality can sometimes strip complex ideas into oversimplified or decontextualized slogans, contributing to a superficial engagement with feminist principles. What is more, she worries that the dynamics of social media create a detrimental feedback loop: As feminist hashtags and movements gain traction, brands may adopt feminist rhetoric more aggressively, further entrenching feminism within a commercial framework (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

However, this perspective assumes a very different sociopolitical context than the one in which Xiaohongshu operates. In China, where feminism is not as widely supported or made visible in mainstream media, it can be challenging for feminist voices to be heard and for feminist ideas to gain traction. In this context then, Xiaohongshu allows for feminist discussions to take place in a commercial context (and even in commercial *genres*, as in the example of the lipstick swatches deployed for educational purposes) that is deemed safe by mainstream values, thereby making feminism more visible and accessible to the public.

This visibility, though commercially flavored, can play a significant role in normalizing feminist conversations and ideas, providing an essential platform for voices and discourses that might otherwise be marginalized.

Thus, while we remain keenly attuned to the important critiques surrounding the neoliberal flavor of contemporary Chinese feminism (Li & Li, 2017; Peng, 2021), we join a growing chorus of scholars who see platforms like Xiaohongshu as pivotal in leveraging the “SHE economy” (Lian et al., 2021; Song & Lu, 2021) to provide spaces for expression and community among women. For instance, Gong (2022) has argued that Xiaohongshu plays a key role in encouraging interaction among women, empowering them to voice their perspectives, and fostering a sense of community—all key ingredients for fomenting feminist action. Similarly, also writing about Xiaohongshu, Lian and colleagues (2021) have argued that women view consumption not merely as a commercial activity but as a platform for expressing their unique identities, marking their individuality. Alongside our research, such perspectives highlight the need to better understand the complex relationship between consumption and feminism in contemporary China and the role that popular platforms like Xiaohongshu play in materializing (and shaping) this relationship.

Indeed, a close look at our findings complicates or challenges certain tenets of commodity feminism, as envisioned by Banet-Weiser (2012). While the commodification of feminism is seen to reduce it to a set of aesthetic or consumer choices rather than a movement for social change, our data show a significant focus on structural change, as Xiaohongshu users share bold social critiques, propose policy changes, and call on authorities to enact specific actions. Similarly, while there is concern about social media simplifying complex issues and leading to a superficial engagement with feminist topics, here we see an impressive degree of depth and range as Xiaohongshu users tap into the creative affordances of the platform to discuss menstruation-related topics in depth in various genres and modes. Moreover, while our analysis foregrounded the significant role of influencers in this context, showing how the authenticity of feminist commitments has indeed become entangled with personal branding strategies, it also shows how these influencers’ strategies are questioned and challenged by an astute audience rather than being passively absorbed.

Beyond enhancing our understanding of the interplay between feminism and commercialism in the contemporary Chinese Internet sphere, our study also reveals current discourses surrounding menstrual shame in China and the role of social media in this context. Of course, given our choice of hashtag to focus on, the users represented in our data (as both creators and commenters) are particularly outspoken about the topic of menstruation and thus do not fully embody the breadth of social attitudes toward this issue. However, what our analysis certainly clarifies is the potential educative role of social media in this context. Given the lingering stigma around menstruation, social institutions like schools and families are not rising up to the task of educating on menstrual issues. Indeed, our data quite clearly—and poignantly—foregrounded such failures, as Xiaohongshu users shared their experiences of being shamed, reprimanded, dismissed, or silenced when experiencing menstruation. In contrast, social media platforms like Xiaohongshu can effectively bridge this educational gap by offering more accessible, engaging, and relatable guidance on menstruation. In this sense, with Chinese Internet users showing increased willingness to discuss gender issues online (Li, 2021), social media can represent a vital educational resource, becoming a space where women’s issues are discussed openly and given the attention they deserve.

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