

# Research on the Stigmatization Behind the ‘X-male’ Lexicon

Xiaoyi Wang<sup>1</sup> & Jing Chen<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Southwest University, China

Correspondence: Xiaoyi Wang, Southwest University, China.

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## Abstract

This article explores the intricacy of the emergence of misandria labels in China’s social media platform. We analyze the coinage background and discourse practice features behind misandria labels of ‘X-male’ lexicon such as ‘fènghuáng nán’ and ‘wéisuó nán’, on Weibo platform, from which we collected corpus. Our investigation reveals that the misandria labels of ‘X-male’ lexicon manifest stigmatization, including implicit and intertwined stigma, alongside the separation between public stigma and self-stigma. We argue that this kind of stigmatization may stem from the disruption of traditional Chinese social norms, the dominance of the capital market economy, and the amplification companied by social media, leading to trust crisis in Chinese society during the transitional period. Benefiting from our research, we can better comprehend the status of men in contemporary China, and lay the foundation for social initiatives toward gender equality.

**Keywords:** Chinese, neologism, stigmatization, X-male

## 1. Introduction

Verbal sexism, as an indicator of gender inequality, has been intensely debated in the several decades. Research in the 1970s increasingly highlighted the significant impact of gender on speech and language use (Thorne & Henley 1975). Subsequently, during the 1980s, interdisciplinary investigations and social practices across various fields gained prominence (Kramarae & Henley, 1983). Influenced by the second-wave feminist movement, research on the intersection of gender and language continued to expand (Hellinger, 1985). In the 1990s, gender-based linguistic sexism became a central focus of discourse analysis (West 1992; Gastil, 1990). This was followed by the emergence of new theoretical perspectives on gender and language, allowing for the reconceptualization of theoretical structures and assumptions (Henley & Kramarae 1991; Ahl, 2006). Notably, there was increased interest in recognizing gender categories and the role of language in the discursive construction of gender identity, leading to a renewed wave of research on language and gender (Weatherall, 2002; Menegatti & Rubini, 2017).

Research on gender and language in China has generated substantial data on sexism, particularly concerning the influence of early patriarchy on the writing system (Ettner, 2002). This research has explicitly demonstrated sexism through terms of address (Ettner, 2002; Zhang, 2002), investigated situational gender discourse styles (Shi & Zhang, 2004), and explored sociolinguistic aspects, such as sex as a variable in language attitudes (Lung, 1997a), phonetic variation (Chen, 1985), and speech style (Light, 1982). Recent research has examined gender sexism in language from a sociolinguistic perspective (Li, 2013; Silva, 2023).

Although extensive research has garnered attention in Chinese gender asymmetry, a paucity of study shed light on that asymmetry regarding stigmatization perspective. The term “stigma” originates from ancient Greece, referring to a special mark or brand imprinted on the human body to signify disgrace or a bad reputation. For example, slaves, traitors, or criminals were marked as inferior in class or status. Today, stigma represents a social attribute that subjects its possessor to a loss of identity, social reputation, or social value during daily communication and social interactions (Erving Goffman, 1963). (B.G. Link & J.C. Phelan, 2001) define

stigmatization as the use of insults and derogatory labels by stigmatizers to evaluate the stigmatized, leading the stigmatized to internalize the insult and derogation, resulting in self-deprecating psychology. This process can lead to the rejection or discrimination of the labeled person by the public. While a few studies have focused on issues related to gender identity, power, and the political economy of gender in contemporary China (Zhang, 2002; Shi & Zhang, 2004), most studies reluctant to confront the changing socioeconomic and ideological context that has led to gender dynamics.

China has witnessed significant changes in its socioeconomic landscape since the reform and opening-up policy, including advancements in education and employment opportunities. The abolition of practices such as polygamy and foot-binding, which were major aspects of Chinese patriarchy, has contributed to the liberation of women's minds (S. Mann, 2011:12; Castro, 2020). The dismantling of the traditional "difference preface pattern" rooted in the agricultural economy has transformed post-reform China into a stranger-oriented society (Fei Xiaotong, 1998). This transitional period in China is characterized by shifts in social ideology and behavior. The dominance of the market economy has led to increased social mobility and personal awareness, resulting in a society where individuals are unfamiliar with one another, thereby creating a crisis of social trust (Pasek, M., 2015; Verza, 2018). Consequently, people often resort to labeling others as a means of self-defense and psychological equilibrium (Freud A., 1937).

This study investigates verbal misandria in online social media platforms against the context of post-reform China. Specifically, we focus on pejorative labels in the 'X-male' lexicon and argue that stigmatization is prevalent in this lexicon. Drawing from data collected from Weibo, a major social media platform in China, we contend that the 'X-male' mode constructs a misandry category that exacerbates the crisis of social trust. This paper introduces a novel perspective in investigating the social status of Chinese men while laying the groundwork for social initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality.

## 2. Data and Methods

Jing-Schmidt & Hsieh, (2018) contend that neologisms, more than any other linguistic element, offer an immediate and precise reflection of societal changes and the prevailing zeitgeist. Chinese internet neologisms originate from widespread online discourse and self-expression among everyday language users, encapsulating the essence of contemporary Chinese society in their unique social dynamics.

### 2.1 Data Collection and Cleaning

The corpus for this study was obtained from Weibo, an online application similar to Twitter, known for its spontaneous emergence of collective discourse in Chinese online communities. The publicly accessible corpus was collected by searching for Weibo blog posts containing the keyword 男 (nán), 'male.' Data retrieval started on May 1, 2023, through manual keyword searches.

To avoid duplications, we specifically focused on 'original' blog posts, excluding any reposts (i.e., blog posts that included and commented on an original blog post). We gathered 800 relevant instances of stigmatization regarding 'X-male' lexicon for analysis on July 30, 2023.

The corpus collection was conducted in May 2023 and repeated in July 2023. In cases where blog posts were unavailable, they are presented as direct quotations in Chinese characters with pinyin and translations, while available documents are explained in translation.

### 2.2 Data Annotation

Based on the gathered stigmatization data of the 'X-male' lexicon, manual classification was carried out according to the stigmatized content. The data was categorized based on the semantic content reflected by the 'X' root, receiving seven categories:

- 1) Personality and temperament: Coquettish guy (mēnsāo nán), mommy guy (mābǎo nán), sissy guy (niángpào nán), pretentious guy (zhuāngbī nán), greasy guy (yóunì nán), hypocritical guy (xūwéi nán), scheming guy (xīnjīnán), and more.
- 2) Behaviors: Self-abuse man (zìnuè nán), domestic-violence man (jiābào nán), gambler man (dútú nán), drug-addict man (xīdú nán), Affair Emperor (wàiyù dì), Robbery Man (qiángjié nán), Alcoholic Man (xùjiǔ nán), Naked Man (luónán), Stealing Man (dàoqiè nán), and more.
- 3) Lifestyle: Masturbation man (lūguǎn nán), widowed man (guǎ nán), and more.
- 4) Survival situation: Spare boy (bèitāi nán), downcast emperor (luòpò dì), and more.
- 5) Physiological characteristics: Color-blind man (sè máng nán), impotent man (yángwéi nán), premature-ejaculation man (zǎoxiè nán), toothpick man (bàoyá nán), and more.
- 6) Diseases: Hepatitis-B male (yígān nán), AIDS male (àizī nán), halitosis male (kóuchòu nán), dementia male (chīdāi nán), and more.

- 7) Identity tags: Construction-site male (gōngchéng nán), married male (yǐhūn nán), rural male (nóngcūn nán), divorced male (lǐhūn nán), and more.

Furthermore, another distinctive category involves metaphors with highly condensed semantics. These metaphors contain condensed semantic content, leading to the amalgamation of multiple meanings within a single word. In the realm of cognitive linguistics, humans leverage their existing knowledge to process, interpret, and express novel concepts, establishing connections between two cognitive domains (Bernstein et al., 2011).

For instance, within the ‘X-male’ lexicon, the term ‘phoenix male’ (fènghuáng nán) draws upon the meaning of the well-known saying “golden phoenix flying out of the mountain nest.” This metaphorical usage symbolizes individuals who originate from rural areas, successfully pass the college entrance examination, and eventually thrive in urban environments, thus reshaping their life trajectories. Similarly, ‘Mama’s boy’ (mābǎo nán) refers to a specific type of man who has been excessively pampered since childhood, lacking independent thinking and decision-making abilities, and remaining under parental control in terms of finances, thoughts, and behavior.

### 2.3 Corpus Analysis and Stigmatization Features

In accordance with cognitive psychology, the frequency, as a structural attribute of a category, exerts influences on the learning and cognitive representation of that category (Rosch & Mervis, 1975). Table 1 illustrates a total of seven categories within the ‘X-male’ lexicon in the dataset.

Seven categories are not equally frequent. A closer examination shows a highly skewed distribution. Three high-frequency items, bolded in Table 1, have a total of 733 tokens and account for 91.7% of the entire dataset. By contrast, the rest of four categories only have 63 tokens, and account for 8.3% of the dataset. It is clear that the personality and temperament occupies the most of the entire dataset, having a total of 515 items and accounting for 64.4%. and the behaviors category is the second most of the total items, accounting for 16%. Next category is identity tags having a total of 90, accounting for 11.3% of the entire dataset.

Table 1. 7 categories of 800 ‘X-male’ lexicon

Item	X-Male	
	Count	Percent (%)
Personality and temperament	<b>515</b>	<b>64.4</b>
Behaviors	<b>128</b>	<b>16.0</b>
Lifestyle	3	0.4
Survival situation	5	0.6
Physiological characteristics	53	6.6
Diseases	6	0.8
Identity tags	<b>90</b>	<b>11.3</b>
Total	800	100.0

This distribution underscores two key points. Firstly, stigma tends to be implicit. Secondly, the content of stigmatization is notably diverse and extensive. Based on the data presented above, it becomes evident that stigmatization exhibits the following characteristics.

To start, the ‘X-male’ lexicon distinctly exhibits the characteristics of stigmatization. The stigmatization associated with the ‘X-male’ lexicon manifests attributes encompassing a broad spectrum of subjects. In terms of the quantity of stigma, the incidence of male stigmatization is on a noticeable rise. Any individual or collective entity shows the potential for becoming a subject of stigmatization. It is no longer confined to specific groups, extending its scope to a broader range and more inclusive categories. And the content of stigma extends from traditional specific traits (disability and disease) to various aspects of social constituents, including cognition, emotion, behavior, personality, and temperament. Particularly conspicuous is the stigmatization of the ‘X-male’ lexicon against the context of personality and temperament, illustrated by examples (1) and (2).

- (1) 妈宝男只感恩自己的父亲母亲，岳父岳母在他眼里连狗都不如。

The “mama’s boy” expresses gratitude solely towards his biological parents, regarding his in laws as inferior even to dogs in his eyes.

- (2) 这辈子被骗得最惨的一次就是信了一个装逼虚伪男说的 keep real.

The most devastating deception of my life occurred when I believed in a pretentious and insincere man who preached the principle of “keep real.”

In (1) and (2) the terms “mama’s boy” and “pretentious” mentioned in the post are internal stigmatizations, denoting men lacking independence and possessing a hypocritical personality and disposition.

Secondly, the ‘X-male’ lexicon distinctly exhibits features of intertwined and interlaced stigma. Traditional stigma typically involves derogatory and offensive attitudes from socially superior and mainstream groups directed towards less privileged and vulnerable communities, resulting in a unidimensional and unidirectional stigmatization dynamic (Haight, 2018). In the case of the ‘X-male’ lexicon, stigmatization encompasses not only derogation and insults from superior and mainstream groups but also satire from vulnerable groups and non-mainstream communities towards superior group members. Even the general populace participates in this mutual stigmatization process, forming a bidirectional and multifaceted paradigm (Brohan et al., 2011). By ridiculing and satirizing the impugned men, the stigmatizers derive a degree of satisfaction, subjective well-being, and self-fulfillment for themselves, enhancing their sense of control over the defamed and their ability to cope with uncontrollable situations (Thomas & Wareing, 1999).

The maligned individuals in the ‘X-male’ lexicon may not necessarily belong to disadvantaged groups; paradoxically, they may be part of more privileged strata in certain contexts. They become the subject of ridicule due to their own behavior or personality traits, highlighting their lack of acceptance in specific groups. Among these individuals, some frustrated or disadvantaged groups, driven by envy or anxiety, attribute similar appellations to male groups, such as ‘domestic-violence man’ (jiābào nán) and ‘obscene man’ (xiàliú nán), to find psychological solace or alleviate their psychological burdens and anxieties, as exemplified in (3) and (4).

(3) 这种油腻男怎么天天上热搜

‘Why is a greasy man so popular every day?’

(4) 猥琐男能不能离我远一点啊

‘Can the sleazy man stay away from me?’

In post (3), the man in a prominent position is subjected to stigmatization, while in post (4), the blogger attempts to defend herself by employing stigmatization tactics.

Thirdly, the stigma phenomenon associated with the ‘X-male’ lexicon deeply embodies implicit characteristics. Traditional stigmatization tends to feature explicit stigma, primarily targeting the physical or disease-related attributes of the stigmatized (Corrigan & Watson, 2002). In contrast, implicit stigma involves more concealed or hidden forms of stigma, arising from the inherent nature of speech, occupation, behavior, or geographic region. It represents an indirect form of stigma that only becomes apparent after extensive interaction and engagement between the communicating parties (van Beugen & Evers et al., 2016). This suggests a social tendency to avoid socializing with men based on considerations of potential social risks, as exemplified in (5) and (6).

(5) 白富美或者上岸的捞女好好把钱藏好，小心小白脸和凤凰男，不要因为任何原因给男人花钱。

‘Bai Fumei or the successful gold digger hide your money well, be careful the kept man and the phoenix man, and don’t spend money on men for any reason.’

(6) 被上海人吓死了 某人一到上海就被猥琐男搭讪。

‘Frightened to death by Shanghainese, a person was accosted by a sleazy man upon arrival in Shanghai.’

Finally, the phenomenon of stigmatization in the ‘X-male’ lexicon distinctly highlights the separate features of public stigma and self-stigma. In traditional stigmatization, public stigma and self-stigma were closely intertwined. Stigmatizers would hurl insults and labels at an individual or group, leading the stigmatized person to experience feelings of inferiority and shame due to the public denigration. Moreover, subsequent social exclusion and discrimination would further intensify the self-evaluative impact of stigma, resulting in increased self-mockery, self-deprecation, and diminished dignity among the stigmatized members (Ali et al., 2012).

In the current era of profound social transformation, a division between public stigmatization and self-stigmatization become apparent (Steiger et al., 2022). While a minority of individuals or groups subjected to insults and labels may indeed struggle with reduced self-esteem and diminished self-efficacy, the majority of stigmatized individuals appear to ignore negative self-deprecation and low self-esteem. In some cases, they might even actively seek to avoid stigmatization. To evade unfavorable repercussions, they intentionally conceal their identities, modify their behaviors, or maintain social distance, all in an effort to align their conduct with public expectations (Toubiana & Ruebottom, 2022).

Regarding terms like ‘effeminate guy’ (mēnsāo nán) and ‘coddled guy’ (mābǎo nán), while these labels exist in online interactions and society, diverse contemporary lifestyles and values allow individuals to rationally justify their choices and behaviors. Moreover, they can strategically manage their public image by intentionally

concealing their identities and controlling their words and actions to avoid stigmatization.

### 3. Discussion

Indeed, the emerging online neologisms provides the general public with opportunities to articulate their emotions and viewpoints. Simultaneously, the dissemination of these neologisms serves as mirror reflecting the reality of social groups during a specific era. Furthermore, to a certain extent, these neologisms mirror the psychological inclinations of these social groups (Bearman, Steve; Neill Korobov; & Avril Thorne, 2009). What kind of social problems and emotional psychology are hidden in the stigmatization phenomenon regarding 'X-male' lexicon?

#### 3.1 Unfamiliarity Results in Trust Crisis

A sense of trust in reliable individuals and systems, reflecting belief in integrity, compassion for others, or the validity of abstract principles (Bearman et al., 2009). In traditional Chinese society, known for its "difference preface pattern, strong regionalism and close-knit communities prevailed. Social bonds were predominantly established through blood relations, family ties, and geographic proximity (Fei Xiaotong, 1998). Rooted in a 'small-scale peasant economy,' villagers shared ancestral lands and coexisted for generations, resulting in clearly defined and unified norms and customs. The strong sense of familiarity and trust in the community allowed traditional trust to operate implicitly and unquestionably, with behavioral norms and interactions being accepted seamlessly (Triandis 1989; Oyserman & Kemmelmeier, 2002).

However, contemporary China is undergoing comprehensive transformation across economic, social, ideological, and behavioral dimensions. The dominance of the market economy leads to increased social mobility and individual autonomy (Kshetri, 2014). Consequently, the traditional acquaintance-based society shift towards a stranger-oriented one. This transition involves a gradual reduction, and in some cases, criticism and rejection, of traditional social bonds centered on blood relations, kinship, and geographic proximity (Brohan et al., 2011).

In this stranger-oriented society, faith manifests as an abstract trust system based on contracts and legal agreements among individuals, refer to as 'institutional trust.' This trust is universal and lacks emotional bias. Contractual relationships, upheld by legal authority, effectively facilitate trust among strangers (Pasek, 2015). The decline of the traditional acquaintance-based society and the concurrent trust crisis during China's transition to a stranger-oriented society serve as the root cause of the stigmatization phenomenon (Wang, 2015). During the period of trust crisis, individuals resort to labeling and stigmatizing others as a form of self-defense and psychological equilibrium (Freud, 1937). Stigmatization reveals a distinct division between internal and external groups, highlighting concealed disparities in values and guiding stigmatization criteria. Despite global diversity in social values, they often clash with mainstream culture, resulting in criticism and exclusion (Greenaway & Cruwys, 2019).

#### 3.2 The Multi-Value Pattern Under the Logic of Capital

Contemporary China is rapidly transforming into a society where traditional bonds based on blood, geography, and kinship are gradually weakening (Chan, 1994). Traditional social norms and institutions are eroding, while the market economy reinforces personal interests and self-worth (Yang, 2016). Different classes and interest groups are using new media to promote ideologies aligned with their interests, resulting in ideological diversity and increased clashes among different belief systems (Cunningham, 2005). In the modern era, influenced by capitalist logic, interpersonal relationships become more materialistic (Chen, Zhihong et al., 2013). Social structures and interest orientations stemming from the capitalist market have fostered gender concepts tailored to the market economy's needs. Driven by media and capital, the contemporary 'female economy' functions as a mechanism for amplifying gender and social status disparities among both men and women, attracting attention and yielding greater profits (Efobi et al., 2018).

At the same time, as the modern women's liberation movement advances, women's political standing has improved, and women have moved beyond domestic boundaries to actively contribute to social development. This has enhanced women's rights to express opinions and raised awareness of self-expression (Duflo, 2012; Mehra, 1997). Diverse viewpoints reflect distinct individuals' value criteria and consciousness. In such a social pattern, a variety of value systems have collectively emerged. Under the market economy, the coexistence of multiple value systems may lead to conflicts (Kasser et al., 2007). In today's materialistic environment, driven by economic interests and personal growth, people's values are on the brink of collapse (Kasser, 2016). Moral responsibilities and beliefs take a backseat, yielding to an excessive tolerance for moral leniency. This tolerance arises from economic benefits and improved social status through moral deviations and social detachment. Such excessive tolerance for moral ambiguity and skepticism inevitably triggers moral conflicts and societal disharmony, worsening social distrust and stigmatization. The coexistence and conflicts of multiple value systems partly contribute to the crisis of social trust (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997).

#### 3.3 Media Impact Effect

The trust crisis in China's transitional period has been exacerbated by the influence of internet media. Online information, facilitated by network technology, is characterized by its ability to engage the public. It can swiftly distribute information across extensive temporal and spatial dimensions (Carroni & Paolini, 2020). This accelerates the impact of communication and significantly amplifies the spread of stigmatization. Certain mass media platforms, in particular, play a significant role in setting agendas. The continuous coverage of specific events in news reports deepens audience impressions and enhances their importance in the public sphere. Essentially, news media portrayal acts as a catalyst for shaping and intensifying public sentiment (Amaldoss & Shin, 2021). Practically, numerous media outlets, influenced by consumerism and market-driven economics, prioritize profit maximization over social responsibility and professional ethics. They selectively emphasize unconventional and sensational social incidents to capture public attention (Hefner et al., 2016). Occasionally, they resort to repetitive coverage of particular cases to evoke resonance among the audience, thereby perpetuating enduring stereotypes. This erosion of interpersonal trust has exacerbated the societal trust crisis (Du, Li & Varshney, 2019).

Simultaneously, internet-based media provides rapid access to current information, and its virtual and anonymous attributes have profoundly reshaped human society. Serving as the primary platform of real-time information retrieval, the online domain renders each piece of information a potential source (Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Individuals may form cognitive judgments based on the 'seeing is believing' principle. The proliferation of information has increased the complexity of information processing, and reducing the capacity of effective management (Jensen et al., 2019). Furthermore, the internet's anonymity and virtual environment encourage users to express their emotions without being accountable, fostering an atmosphere of irresponsibility and introducing specific social risks (Lea, Spears & De Groot, 2001). Labeling behavior amplifies tension in networked information and worsens social injustice. An illustrative case is the release of the film *Lost in the Stars* (《消失的她》), which incited users on prominent online platforms to voice concerns about men and social sentiments. Through the influence of these platforms, the prevailing atmosphere of social distrust solidifies further. Male stigmatization on Weibo has exacerbated gender inequality, as in (7) and (8).

(7) 延迟看《消失的她》 又穷又坏的凤凰男真的是太下头了

'I delayed watched *Lost in the Stars*, the negative portrayal of the 'Phoenix Man,' who is both impoverished and morally questionable.'

(8) nt 女主.....别太爱了哒姐 混混凤凰男真的就那么香吗? 罚你看一遍《消失的她》

'nt heroine...don't love too much, sis, is the rebellious phoenix man really that appealing? You are fined to watch *Lost in the Stars*.'

Concurrently, a substantial portion of online users emotionally resonated, consistently reinforcing biased viewpoints in their comments. This persistent reaffirmation heightens individuals' perceptions of risk, thus exacerbating the social trust crisis and the propagation of stigma.

#### 4. Conclusion

Language use is habitual, posing challenges in eradicating verbal misandry when it becomes ingrained in vocabulary (Tatman, 2017). The fate of these derogatory terms in lexicography remains uncertain, but their morphological and stigmatized productivity highlights their popularity in Chinese online communities. The dissolution of traditional social norms and institutional structures in China may a source of stigmatization directed towards 'X-male' lexicon. A multifaceted value system influenced by capital disseminates this stigmatization, exacerbating the societal trust crisis. Additionally, wireless communication's distinct nature influences language use. Online mass communication's speed and reach accelerate the propagation of appealing neologisms, especially those aligning with community interests. Conversely, virtual discourse's anonymity removes conventional social constraints, impacting interpersonal engagement customs seen in face-to-face interactions. These factors contribute to the persistent perpetuation of verbal misandry within China's wireless networks. (Major & O'Brien, 2005). The journey towards attaining gender equality and reconstructing social trust remains considerably extensive.

Attaining gender equality and reconstructing social trust demand substantial efforts. To address verbal stigmatization and restore social trust fabric, it is imperative to institute a comprehensive social trust framework and promote collective actions against verbal misandry (Wang, Li, Yiu & Hui, 2017). Constructing a mainstream value system and regulating information reporting are also essential. Most importantly, netizens must refuse to be complicit in verbal misandry to effectively eliminate these stigmatizing behaviors. There is still a long way to go, but by taking these measures, progress towards a more equal and trusting society can be made.

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