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Female Body Hair in Digital Spaces:

A Qualitative Analysis of #ArmpitHairFreedom on Rednote

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Abstract

This thesis examines how meanings of female body hair are constructed, negotiated, and contested within digital spaces in contemporary China, focusing on the #armpithairfreedom on Rednote. While existing research on body hair and digital feminism is largely grounded in Western contexts, this study addresses a critical gap by situating analysis within China's culturally specific and platform-regulated environment.

Drawing on a qualitative, social constructivist case study approach, the research analyzes 319 user comments collected from three highly engaged posts under the hashtag. Through a coding process, the study identifies key discursive patterns, emotional expressions, and participation logics that shape how female body hair is understood and debated.

The findings demonstrate that body hair is mainly framed through hygiene discourse, aesthetic norms, and gendered expectations, often producing stigma and self-surveillance. At the same time, users actively contest these meanings through personal storytelling. However, even seemingly resistant discourses frequently reproduce disciplinary norms through post-feminist framings of "choice". Furthermore, the study highlights the role of affective publics and digital storytelling in fostering community formation, while also showing how participation is shaped by platform affordances and constraints, including algorithmic visibility and censorship. In this context, small-scale acts such as commenting and tagging acquire political significance.

Overall, this thesis contributes to feminist media studies by demonstrating how digital body politics are locally negotiated within constrained environments, where resistance and discipline operate simultaneously.

Keywords: body hair, social media, digital feminism, discourse analysis, China

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Introduction

In contemporary societies, women's bodies are increasingly subject to various forms of modification and regulation. Among these practices, the removal and management of body hair remain among the most normalized and least questioned (Tiggemann and Hodgson, 2008a). Body hair is a natural physiological phenomenon, regardless of a person's age, race, or gender. Although it is a natural phenomenon, it is still often considered a problem, especially for women.

The norm of hairlessness has re-emerged as a deeply ingrained and widespread norm, and is rapidly spreading around the world (Braun et al., 2013). Research data indicates that many practices influence women's participation in hair removal: "friends (73.1%), family (43.0%), magazines (9.6%), the internet (5.3%), and television (16.3%)" (Bercaw-Pratt et al., 2012, p.13). These influences collectively strengthen the idea that hairless skin represents hygiene, femininity, and social acceptability. As a result, body hair becomes a socially regulated site where gender norms are continuously produced and maintained.

Within the Chinese context, these dynamics take on distinct historical and cultural forms. Traditional Confucian values emphasize female humility, proper conduct, and the concealment of physical imperfections (Man, 2019). Within the Confucian framework, female body hair has long been considered unsightly or a sign of a lack of femininity. However, until recent decades, open discussion about body hair remained relatively limited. It was only with the rise of globalized marketing hair removal brands that hair removal became a necessary symbol of hygiene and elegance for Chinese women (Ma, 2025). In this sense, contemporary norms around body hair in China emerge from the intersection of traditional gender expectations and globalized beauty discourses.

At the same time, the norms surrounding armpit hair have been challenged in recent years. In June 2015, Chinese feminist activist Xiao Meili launched an "Armpit Hair Contest" on Weibo (BBC China Blog, 2015). The contest invited women to post photos of themselves with unshaved armpit hair, challenging the growing societal notion that female body hair is unclean or uncivilized. The contest garnered thousands of responses, sparking both enthusiastic

support and sharp criticism. Another activist, Li Tingting, also participated, posting a photo of herself with unshaved armpit hair along with the slogan “punish domestic violence and love armpit hair”. Despite having previously been detained for organizing feminist activities, Li Tingting continued to use online social media campaigns to oppose the disciplinary influence that armpit hair norms impose on women.

More recently, discussions around female body hair have increasingly shifted to lifestyle-oriented platforms such as Rednote (Gu et al., 2024). With over 70% female users, Rednote provides a relatively private space for women to share personal experiences, ask questions, and voice their protests (Vzkoo, 2025). Within this environment, the #armpithairfreedom has developed as a place of ongoing discussion, where users share personal experiences, exchange advice, and negotiate meanings associated with body hair. Unlike organized activist campaigns, this hashtag represents a more decentralized and everyday form of engagement, driven by user-generated content rather than coordinated political action.

The topic of body hair avoids direct political attention, it has become one of the spaces for the relatively free dissemination of feminist discourse. Body activists are beginning to leverage social media platforms that favor them to gain more attention and “renegotiate” the beauty ideals in society by emphasizing the diversity of standards for body image, beauty, and health (Afful and Ricciardelli, 2015, p.454).

The importance of this study lies in the fact that existing research has failed to adequately address several issues. First, academic literature on female body hair and grooming norms still relies heavily on Western empirical evidence, drawing on surveys, interviews, and media content from the UK, US, and Australia (Fahs, 2011; Terry and Braun, 2016, 2016). However, the Chinese context presents a different analytical framework, combining Confucian gender expectations that frame femininity through body etiquette norms with state regulation. This Chinese context can influence discourse on body hair and determine how it is spoken, to whom it is spoken, and the risks involved.

Second, while scholarship on digital feminism in China has expanded in recent years (Chang, 2025; Li and Li, 2017), I found that these studies tend to focus on broader platform dynamics,

censorship avoidance strategies, or cross-platform activism. Little attention is paid to the micro-discourse processes by which body norms are constructed, represented, and contested within specific label spaces.

In conclusion, armpit hair holds a unique symbolic status. People frequently discuss armpit hair in topic of summer clothing culture and carrying the meaning of hygiene and breaking gender rules, making it a highly discussed topic among women.

The contribution of this thesis is therefore threefold. Empirically, it provides one of the few in-depth qualitative analyses of body hair discourse within a Chinese social media context, offering insight into how gender norms are negotiated under platform-specific constraints. Theoretically, I applied concepts such as pollution (Douglas, 2003), stigma (Goffman, 1963), and affective publics (Papacharissi, 2016). To extend research on body hair in social media to the digital body politics of China. Importantly, rather than simply applying these theories, the study examines their limits and transformations in the Chinese context, where visibility, expression, and participation are shaped by both cultural expectations and platform governance. Finally, at a conceptual level, the study contributes to debates on digital feminism. I explore how resistance and discipline coexist within the same discursive practices.

Research Questions

This study is guided by three research questions:

1. How are meanings of female body hair constructed and negotiated through discourse in the #armpithairfreedom comment space on Rednote?
2. How do comment interactions reproduce and normalize disciplinary body norms, contributing to processes of self-surveillance and self-regulation among users?
3. How do comment-based interactions facilitate (or limit) the formation of shared understanding and community under the platform-specific conditions of Chinese social media?

The first question focuses on how audiences construct the symbolic meaning of female body hair through everyday discourse. The second investigates how comment interactions reproduce disciplinary expectations surrounding femininity, hygiene, and bodily presentation, while also shaping processes of self-monitoring and self-regulation. The third question moves beyond individual expression to explore whether hashtag interactions can generate forms of collective understanding, emotional connection, or community under the specific social and platform conditions of Chinese digital media.

These questions will be answered through close qualitative analysis of 319 user comments collected from three posts on Rednote under the *armpithairfreedom* hashtag. The analysis draws on theoretical frameworks including symbolic pollution, stigma, disciplinary power, affective publics, and digital feminist activism. I apply them to the specific cultural and platform context of contemporary China.

My paper is divided into several parts. First, in the literature review, I introduce theoretical concepts and empirical evidence from previous research in six areas. These include the social and political significance of female body hair. Feminist debates about body hair and discipline. Media resources on social media platforms. Digital narratives and emotional publics. Online feminist action and its limitations. And the specific conditions of digital feminism in China. These frameworks collectively provide the necessary conceptual tools for analysis.

In the methodological section, I explain the rationale for employing qualitative analysis, social constructivism, and a case study design. In this section, I explain why these chosen methodologies are suitable for focusing on how the meaning of comments and discussions within hashtags is generated through language and interaction. I also detail the case and data selection criteria and explain how the recursive coding process shifts from raw comment data to thematic analysis.

The analysis section is divided into four main parts. The first part explores how the meaning of female body hair is discursively constructed through hygiene discourse, aesthetic norms, stigma, and resistance to anti-norms. The second part explores the emotions expressed by

women in comments and how they establish emotional connections through these emotions.

Part Three explores digital narratives within the hashtag domain, analyzing how digital storytelling forms communities and, in some cases, reproduces norms that seem to be challenged. Part Four focuses on the logic of engagement. In this chapter, I discuss how users understand the importance of their comments and the debate between speech on hashtag and slacktivism under the censorship conditions of Chinese platforms.

The conclusion returns to the three research questions, synthesizes key findings, reflects on the research's theoretical and empirical contributions, and points out directions for further research.

Literature Review

This literature review builds the conceptual foundation for the empirical analysis. It proceeds in six thematic steps. First, this literature review traces how female body hair has been governed by aesthetic norms, stigma, and disciplinary power. Second, I examine competing feminist perspectives on grooming and the critique in post-feminist agency discussion. Third, in this section, I consider how platform affordances shape visibility and participation in digital spaces. Fourth, it explores how digital storytelling and affective publics enable emotional connection and collective identity. Fifth, it reviews the literature on online feminist activism and the debate over hashtag activism and slacktivism. Finally, I situate these debates in the specific context of digital feminism in China, where censorship and Confucian gender norms shape the conditions of expression. Together, these frameworks provide the theoretical vocabulary for analyzing how body hair is constructed, negotiated, and contested in the #armpithairfreedom comment space on Rednote.

Women's Body Hair

Women's bodies have historically been constrained by normative aesthetic standards. Sociologist Synnott (1987) views hair as a "most powerful symbol of individual and group identity", and therefore holds social and cultural significance. Building on this, Cash (2001) argued that grooming practices are deeply tied to self-perception and body image. Together, these perspectives position body hair as a key site where the social regulation of femininity becomes materially visible.

However, the significance of body hair extends beyond identity expression to the realm of discipline. The grooming, alteration, and removal of body hair have historically appeared throughout human civilization as a culturally coded form of bodily discipline (Ramsey et al., 2009). Since the late twentieth century, hairlessness has increasingly been established as a gendered aesthetic norm, with smooth skin becoming synonymous with femininity (Basow and Braman, 1998; Tiggemann and Kenyon, 1998). This change demonstrates that body cleanliness is associated with moral and social acceptability.

Crucially, this aesthetic norm is closely intertwined with heteronormative expectations. The norm specifically targets leg and underarm hair, framing female hair removal as essential for achieving a beauty standard defined through a male gaze. Men prefer women without armpit and leg hair because they find clean-shaven women more sexually attractive (Prokop, 2016). Men also perceive women who don't remove armpit and leg hair as less attractive, less sociable, less intelligent, and less hygienic (Riddell et al., 2010, p.121). As a result, women are often motivated to shave or remove hair in order to enhance sexual attractiveness and avoid negative judgment within heterosexual settings (Tiggemann and Hodgson, 2008b). To conclude, Women may internalize societal expectations that equate hairlessness with appropriate femininity, coming to monitor their own bodies according to the logic of the male gaze.

However, body hair management is closely connected to stigma and the fear of becoming what Fahs (2011) calls the “dreaded other.” Wolf (2008) argued in her book that “there is a secret ‘underlife’ poisoning our freedom. Infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control (pp.9–10).” She argued that the beauty standard functions as a patriarchal system, this system in the name of personal choice, imposes self-hatred and bodily discipline on women (p.12). Fahs (2011) further pointed out that women are under social surveillance and feel pressured to conform to the hairless norms that society and their peer groups do and “hairy women are rated as less sexually attractive, intelligent, sociable, happy, and positive compared to hairless women (p.454).” Therefore, hair becomes a site where women are both objectified and self-disciplined, as Hildebrandt (2023) pointed out, body hair is a place of control and repression, maintained through women's self-surveillance of their bodies. Grooming practices are often framed as personal care, yet they also reflect deeper forms of self-regulation shaped by social expectations (Smolak et al., 2014).

Existing literature begins to show a contradiction. While body hair is subject to normalization and discipline, it also possesses symbolic and political potential. Synnott (1987) noted that a woman's choice to retain body hair can signal a feminist commitment, thereby transforming

hair into a form of political expression. Thus, the body functions both as a political symbol and a site of political practice in its own right. Other researchers extend this symbolic dimension toward pathology and shame. As DeMaria and Berenson (2014, p.2) observe, “pubic hair removal is now a contemporary trend, with total hair removal increasing in popularity.” The standard of total hair removal often influenced by health, beauty, and partner expectations. Researcher Labre (2002) also pointed out that the practice of removing female body hair is linked to information within popular discourse, as body hair is socially constructed as a ‘problem’ that needs to be ‘solved’. Women are guided to focus on management and correction techniques. In this sense, the discourse quietly defines hair as something that must be dealt with. The logic of ‘problem–solution’ turns a natural bodily feature into an object of continuous attention and intervention.

While Tondeur (2015) documents the serious social control imposed on women through the association of female body hair with masculinity and pathology (pp.37–53). Similarly, participants in Bercaw-Pratt et al.’s (2012) study founded that women themselves often internalize such judgments, and may considered hair in areas such as the genital region, upper lip, and abdomen socially inappropriate (p.13). This internalization of judgment shows that the regulation of women’s bodies no longer relies only on external pressure or male preference, but increasingly operates through women’s own perceptions of what is appropriate. Women begin to monitor their own bodies according to these standards, treating hair removal as a necessary part of being socially presentable. Swain’s (2016, p.444) team further argues that body hair removal practices have rapidly become normalized for women and men, even as body hair remains symbolically coded as masculine.

Douglas’s (2003) concept of purity and danger offers a deeper understanding of why body hair, especially underarm hair, produces such strong social reactions. Douglas pointed out that dirt is “matter out of place.” Something becomes dirty when it does not fit cultural categories or symbolic boundaries. In this sense, armpit hair is viewed as unhygienic because the body hair disrupts cultural categories and symbolic boundaries. Armpit hair is not biologically unclean, yet it becomes socially constructed as such because it violates the expected

appearance of the female body. Body hair is particularly unsettling because it exists in a symbolic in-between state. It grows from inside the body yet appears on the outside. It is both part of the body and something that seems to sit on the body. It belongs neither fully inside nor fully outside. This ambiguous status makes it difficult to categorize. For women, whose bodies are culturally expected to appear smooth, controlled, and contained, visible underarm hair breaks this sense of order. Following Douglas, the female body is constructed as a site requiring purification and control.

The discomfort expressed in everyday talk is actually about a kind of disturbance. Armpit hair exposes the natural body in a place where society expects evidence of control and maintenance. In this way, removing hair is both a beauty practice and a means of restoring symbolic order.

Furthermore, Goffman's concept of stigma further explains how this symbolic disturbance translates into social judgment. Goffman (1963) described stigma as "an attribute, behavior, or reputation which is socially discrediting in a particular way (1963, p.3)." The concept of stigma clarifies how taboos enforce societal norms, compelling individuals to conceal aspects of their identity deemed undesirable. In the western context, when women display underarm hair, they risk being seen as careless, unfeminine, or socially inappropriate. Goffman explained the idea of spoiled identity, which means stigmatized individuals internalize broader cultural standards of normalcy, applying those standards to themselves even when they can't meet them. The hair itself becomes a spoiled identity that threatens how others interpret their character. To avoid this, women may hide or remove body hair because they want to prevent social discrediting. Goffman also argues that body signs are intended to expose the unusual and negative aspects of the moral standing of those people who made the rules. Applied to female grooming, stigma helps explain why women conceal hair to preserve feminine propriety and avoid social discrediting. These theories are especially useful for understanding how people react to posts of armpit hair in online spaces. The comments become a space where users collectively reinforce ideas of purity, propriety, and acceptable femininity through everyday language.

Body Feminism Perspectives

Debates around women's body hair within feminist scholarship are often framed between social constraint and individual agency. I found that there are two main opposing viewpoints that differ in terms of agency and influence, and learning the debates between the two perspectives is highly relevant to understanding online discussions about armpit hair.

One perspective argues that women's grooming practices are shaped by external social pressures. Rodgers (2025) argued that every part of a female's body may be modified and changed throughout her life. Hair removal, painting, cleaning, and deodorizing are part of a repetitive cultural routine that keeps the female body youthful, smooth, and manageable. Similarly, Labre (2002) further argues that the media normalize these practices by presenting hair removal as a basic element of daily hygiene. In this view, women do remove body hair because they live in a culture where a natural female body is treated as unacceptable. The female body, in its natural state, becomes something that must be constantly corrected. Within this perspective, the absence of body hair is actively produced through cultural expectations that position the natural body as undesirable.

Radical feminist perspectives extend this critique by framing body hair removal as a form of patriarchal control (Sastre, 2014). Radical feminists argue that the natural female body, which is unshaved, unmodified, and visible, holds political significance precisely because it resists these norms. Jeffreys (2005) argued that practices of bodily regulation, including hair removal, are not neutral aesthetic choices but forms of social control that reinforce gender inequality. From this perspective, the idea that the female body requires constant maintenance is about the production of a disciplined and socially compliant femininity. Radical feminists therefore emphasize the political potential of rejecting these norms. Allowing body hair to remain visible becomes a symbolic act that challenges the expectation that women must continuously modify their bodies for public acceptance (Jeffreys, 2005).

However, another perspective emphasizes agency and personal choice. Now, not removing body hair may be seen as a form of resistance by feminists to current beauty norms, as women

with feminist attitudes are considered more likely to accept body hair. For instance, as Kwan and Trautner (2009) have studied how women use hair to convey political messages or assume specific identities, arguing that choosing not to remove hair can be read as resistance to social norms, while choosing to remove body hair can still be framed as an expression of autonomy. Kwan and Trautner's idea may support more closely with post-feminism.

Post-feminism presents itself through the discourse of female power, individualism, empowerment, and self-control (Banet-Weiser, 2018). From a postfeminist perspective, women shift from objectification to subjectification, emphasizing individualism, choice, and empowerment, and transforming the dominant paradigm (Gill, 2007). The power of bodily confidence shapes women into confident subjects who shape their bodies according to their own will (Orgad and Gill, 2021). An empirical study also suggests that body hair is a site of agency and personal choice. They think women should be able to do whatever they want with their body hair (Terry and Braun, 2016). Women who remove body hair claim to control their bodies through their own, personal, and unique form of hair removal (Li and Braun, 2017).

At first glance, these two perspectives seem opposed. One view grooming as oppression, while the other views it as empowerment. Yet, this opposition becomes less absolute when examined through Foucault's concept of disciplinary power.

Foucault (1979) argued that under the body norm of power, conformity is achieved through force and internalized self-governance. So, the female body has become a site of constant surveillance, whether women are trying to resist the norm or not. To fulfill the tasks of modern digital society, society needs docile bodies. Smooth skin becomes a marker of purity, control, and civility, while visible hair becomes a form of symbolic pollution that threatens gender order. People begin to monitor themselves according to social norms, believing they are acting freely. Applied to female grooming, this means that women may genuinely feel they are making personal choices, while those choices are already shaped by cultural expectations of what a proper female body should look like.

In this sense, agency and discipline are not opposites. They can coexist within the same action. A woman who shaves her underarm hair may feel she is exercising personal choice while simultaneously performing the norm society expects. A woman who refuses to shave may see herself as resisting, but she is still responding to the same system of norms.

Drawing on Michel Foucault's (1979) concept of disciplinary power, the female body can be seen as a site of regulation, where grooming functions as a form of self-governance. The digital social media space becomes a place where disciplinary power operates through everyday language. Users guide, persuade, and normalize certain ideas about the female body to others. Therefore, agency and discipline may coexist within the same act. This Foucauldian insight is central to the present analysis, which examines how both conformist and resistant expressions in comment sections are shaped by a shared disciplinary framework.

Participatory Culture and Platform Visibility

To understand how body hair becomes visible and interactive in digital environments, it is necessary to consider the role of platform structures in shaping user participation. The concept of media affordances (Boyd, 2010) provides a useful framework for understanding how social media platforms enable and constrain specific forms of interaction.

With the popularization of social media, the use of affordance theory in social media research has grown significantly (Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga, 2020; Earl and Kimport, 2011). To define media affordance, based on previous findings, Ronzhyn et al. (2023) summarized and proposed a definition of affordance, they argue that "social media affordances are the perceived actual or imagined properties of social media, emerging through the relation of technological, social, and contextual, that enable and constrain specific uses of the platforms (p.3178)." The definition is important because it reminds us that affordances are shaped by how users understand and act within the platform.

Researchers have identified several core affordances of social media platforms. Treem and Leonardi (2013) emphasize visibility, editability, persistence, and association, while Schrock (2015) highlights portability, availability, locatability, and multimediality. These frameworks

help explain how users present themselves, interact with others, and build connections online. Specifically, visibility means that a user's actions become observable to others, such as posting, commenting, or liking, thus enabling them to work on their identity through public performance. These attributes collectively shape how women on Rednote strategically showcase their body hair choices to a presumed audience, edit their self-narratives, and connect with like-minded individuals through hashtags like #armpithairfreedom. In all these attributes of social media platforms, visibility, in particular, has been studied as a key dimension of how identities and interactions are represented on social platforms (Treem and Leonardi, 2013).

At the same time, affordances such as hashtags facilitate the formation of temporary publics. Earl and Kimport (2011) studied the affordances of the internet and digital media in controversial political contexts and concluded that people are increasingly using online platforms for innovative forms of protest. In contentious political contexts, Deseriis (2021) argues that certain affordances of digital platforms have a democratizing effect by lowering the barriers to public participation. By “digital democratic affordances”, Deseriis (2021) means the platform features that make it easier for ordinary audiences to speak, be seen, and organize, even without needing access to traditional gatekeepers like newspapers or television. For example, the hashtag itself is a democratic affordance. Because any audience can create one, and over time, it can gather enough posts to become a visible public conversation. Similarly, retweeting or reposting allows a single user to amplify a message far beyond their own followers. These features give mobilized publics new tools to coordinate and make their voices heard. From this perspective, affordances shape on how people communicate and participate in public life.

It is equally important to recognize that affordances do not guarantee visibility media affordances enable groups or individuals to achieve visibility online, while only a small portion receives widespread attention, most users remain within a limited group of followers. Therefore, we must emphasize that technological availability within the online public does not guarantee “tremendous visibility,” but rather provides the “possibility” (Boyd, 2010).

Most users remain within limited circles. On Rednote, #armpithairfreedom may create the possibility for users to find each other and be seen. But whether this possibility actually translates into visibility, and how audiences understand and navigate this gap is an empirical question that my analysis will address.

According to Boyd (2010), the use of social platforms like Rednote allows the online public to function as a traditional public, bringing individuals together for social, cultural, and civic purposes and helping them connect with a world beyond their close friends and family. For this study, the hashtag creates what Livingstone (2005) calls an “imaginary community”, meaning individuals who come together around “a common understanding of the world, a shared identity, a claim to inclusiveness, a consensus regarding the collective interest (2005, p.9)”. In my case, on Rednote, the hashtag creates such an imagined public. Women who post under this tag may not know each other, but they share an assumption that others will see, understand, and respond to their experience.

Overall, media affordance theory helps me explain why the comment sections under these posts become an important space of interaction. Visibility allows users to display their bodies. Association through hashtags connects strangers into a temporary public. Together, these affordances make it possible for grooming norms, advice, support, and resistance to circulate in everyday comments.

Social Media Storytelling

Social media platforms give women the opportunity to discuss and create conditions where personal stories can travel, connect strangers, and form emotional ties. On Rednote, storytelling about underarm hair transforms intimate bodily experiences into publicly recognizable experiences, allowing audiences to interpret these experiences through the storyteller’s perspective. The development of digital media has expanded the possibilities for individuals to express their thoughts, feelings, and everyday experiences online. As Miller (2025) notes, activists increasingly adopt digital storytelling to accelerate movements and

mobilization. Lambert (2012) similarly observed that people began to “wake up to the power of their own voice (p.4)” on digital platform.

In the context of online hashtag activism, storytelling often leads to emotional reaction. Castells (2012) pointed out that social movements are emotional movements, and the success begins when “emotion(s) are converted into action (p.13).” Therefore, through storytelling, participants can use their own experiences to express their thoughts, and a movement can become “more representative, enthusiastic, and hopeful (pp.15–16).” When women share photos, feelings, and experiences about their body hair, they are inviting others to feel embarrassment, anger, pride, or relief together, and making the issue more relatable than abstract debate. Thus, personal stories turn individual concerns into collective causes.

Storytelling also encourages creative participation by framing lived experiences as shared narratives (Davis, 2002). Lambert categorized digital storytelling into several types: me story, my story, our story, their story, and no story (2012, pp.43–46). He argues that people online mostly use our story approach to tell stories. This is because “we easily hear stories told in “we” form when these contexts are provided, and we sense that the author’s connection to the community is an integral part of message (2012, p.45)”. It’s true that many women do not simply say ‘this is my hair,’ instead, they write in a way that invites others to recognize the same pressure, shame, or resistance. Through this, those posts become more than self-expression but also become a call for recognition and participation.

Scholars have shown that storytelling reshapes who can speak in public. First, Couldry (2008) argues that digital storytelling challenges traditional mass media formats, allowing the “ordinary” to be heard and reshaping hierarchies of voice (2008, pp.383–384). Therefore, for women discussing a typically private topic, public storytelling disrupts norms of silence. Second, storytelling also helps build dialogue across users. Lambert (2012) thinks digital storytelling enables people to build communication and dialogue among themselves by sharing life experiences and developing an understanding of collective causes. Therefore, digital storytelling fosters understanding among people of different cultures, classes, and

generations. According to Lambert's argument, women tell their stories on digital platforms to call for greater understanding and participation, and to fight for their rights.

Affective Publics

But why do emotions drive participation? To answer this question, Papacharissi (2014) proposed the concept of "affective publics". Papacharissi argued that "media typically invite audiences to consume content via affective relationships developed with particular media genres and media personas (2014, p.21)". Therefore, media can maintain and perpetuate these emotions in various ways, subsequently cultivating users' feelings, emotions, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. As Scholz (2012) states, digital media attracts emotional engagement by utilizing both emotional and other forms of labor.

According to Papacharissi (2014), affective publics form when people connect online by sharing feelings, opinions, and personal stories. She argues that "affective publics materialize uniquely and leave distinct digital footprints (p.127)" and support connective action. The armpit hair freedom movement clearly fits this description. Hashtag armpit hair freedom is built on personal posts where women share photos and stories about their body hair. The posts carry strong emotional messages about body autonomy and challenge traditional beauty standards.

However, following Papacharissi's (2014) analysis, we should also consider the limits of such online movements. The power of this affective public is mostly symbolic. It works by changing the meanings of words and images within the platform. The campaign is good at creating discussion and building a sense of shared experience. On Rednote, content can be moderated or removed. This affects how far the message can spread. Therefore, while the armpit hair hashtag is a powerful example of digital feminist expression, its ability to create lasting social change remains uncertain. Its true impact lies in how it slowly changes public conversation and normalizes new ideas about women's bodies in China.

Digital Activism and Feminist Resistance Online

In recent years, the social media environment has become the main place for some social movements resisting body norms (Gill & Elias, 2014). Joyce (2010) argued that the widespread adoption and use of digital technology in social and political endeavors, movements, and radical campaigns has begun to attract increasing attention worldwide. Online campaigns such as #Januhairy or #HairyLegsClub have drawn attention to body hair freedom. By facilitating rapid and inexpensive communication across geographical boundaries, the network has proven to be a useful tool for quickly and effectively organizing collective action and resistance (Joyce, 2010, p.101).

The global impact of user-generated content has fueled radical movements online, often referred to as “digital activism” (Mendes et al., 2019). McCaughey and Ayers (2003) described online activism as a “politically motivated movement that relies on the internet,” and activists have begun to use the internet and its “technology” to achieve social change (p.71). Online activism is a politically motivated movement that relies on the internet, using strategies ranging from internet-enhanced offline campaigns to fully internet-based organizations.

Furthermore, Earl and Kimport (2011) pointed out the difference between low leveraging of the affordances of the web and high leveraging of the affordances of the web. Low leveraging uses the internet primarily to share information and attract audiences. High leveraging builds movements entirely through online communication and organization. Together, these concepts clarify why body-related feminist movements increasingly emerge online, as digital platforms lower barriers to participation and enable distributed forms of collective action.

Digital activism also shapes how identity and participation are formed. Summers (2010) found that young women use online discussion posts to negotiate and construct their understanding of feminism and women’s identity on the internet. Sastre (2014) similarly argues that online feminist body movements challenge narrow ideals of beauty by making visible bodies that do not conform to mainstream norms. When women post images of body hair through social media movements, they question which kinds of bodies are permitted to be seen.

However, previous studies are almost exclusively based on Western platforms such as Instagram or Twitter, where posting body hair can be more directly framed as activism. In the Chinese context, the meaning of such action is different. Participation often takes a quieter form. Posting, tagging, and sharing personal stories become ways to express resistance while avoiding direct confrontation, such as using hashtag.

Critique of Hashtag Activism and Slacktivism

Critiques of hashtag activism remain significant and must be kept in view when evaluating participation under #armpithairfreedom. Critics of digital activism have labeled hashtag activism a form of “slacktivism”, means engaging in low-cost, low-risk online activism (Lee and Hsieh, 2013). As Lee and Hsieh (2013) explained, slacktivism is more applied to the small acts on social media, such as liking the posts on the social media platform or forwarding the articles and videos about a particular movement. In many Western contexts, this critique assumes that users have access to more direct and institutionalized forms of political participation, making online gestures appear superficial.

Gerbaudo (2012) similarly argued that while social media appears to offer everyone a voice, expression is also unequal. Because while digital feminist action enables disadvantaged women to reach a wider audience, not all women can participate equally in online activities. Schuster’s (2013) research found that online feminist activism fails to reach underserved populations in underdeveloped regions, creating a “generational divide” between traditional older feminists and younger feminists active on social media. Meanwhile, feminist hashtags also attract backlash. As Gill (2016) noted, “for every feminist ‘win’, an outpouring of hate, ranging from sexual harassment to death threats against those involved, for every instance of feminist solidarity, another of vicious trolling (2016, p.613).” Therefore, it is important to recognize that whatever benefits hashtag feminism may bring, it only applies to a very limited percentage of the global population.

These critiques about slacktivism are important. However, they need to be calibrated to context. What appears as slacktivism from a Western perspective takes on a different meaning

when offline activism and explicit feminist mobilization are difficult or dangerous. In contexts where public protest is restricted, small digital acts may represent one of the few accessible forms of political expression available, and their value lies not in individual impact but in cumulative visibility and community maintenance.

Taken together, this literature demonstrates that digital feminism is highly complex. It expands participation and visibility, yet also remains contested and uncertain in its political impact. While #armpithairfreedom may be dismissed as a form of slacktivism in other contexts, within Rednote it operates as a form of mediated civic engagement. It allows women to participate in public discourse, recognize one another, and gradually construct a counter-public around bodily autonomy. In this sense, the hashtag functions as a civic tool that enables forms of activism under conditions of censorship and limited offline opportunities for feminist expression.

Digital Feminism in Chinese Context

Although a growing body of research has examined digital feminist activism in Western contexts, much less is known about how similar practices unfold on Chinese platforms such as Rednote. Unlike Instagram or Twitter, social media in China operates in a highly controlled, censored information environment. Feminist activists navigating this space often struggle to express dissenting views directly. China's centrally controlled socio-political environment has constrained overt feminist protest and public demonstration, leading activists to turn to online civic engagement as an alternative form of resistance (Chang, 2025).

Rednote, with its large female user base, plays a particularly significant role. Platforms like Rednote are increasingly recognized as important venues for expressing feminist ideals, promoting self-acceptance, and showcasing diverse body types (Gu et al., 2023). And social media platforms like Rednote can empower women by promoting self-acceptance and showcasing various body types (Lin, 2023).

Demographic reports show Rednote's unique gendered composition. According to a Vzkoo (2025) report, Rednote has over 300 million monthly active users, over 71 percent of whom

are women aged 18 to 34. As a platform with a large female user base, Rednote is a major site for feminist expression and feminist-related activity (Long, 2023). Scholars have found that positive messages on Rednote encouraging people to reject the objectification of women and respect bodily freedom are on the rise. In the Chinese context, similar content related to rejecting the obligation of beauty and bodily freedom has appeared on social media (Lang et al., 2023).

As a socialist country, China has seen feminism originate from national liberation and socialist modernization (Luo and Hao, 2007). Due to China's centrally controlled socio-political environment (Li and Li, 2017), radical feminist movements and protests have faced government punishment, forcing Chinese feminists to turn to the internet (Yuen, 2015). As Yang (2014) said, Chinese government see feminism as "a threat to domestic social stability, national security, and the credibility of law enforcement authorities (p.115)" However, as Li and Li (2017) argue, the new generation of Chinese feminists has created a pressure mechanism to seek accountability from the government through online civic engagement.

Digital feminism in China operates under distinct conditions compared to Western contexts. Government censorship and platform governance shape the limits of feminist expression. As Tan (2017) argued, activists need to hide from strict government censorship and surveillance, Chinese feminists need to use digital disguises and social media to fight with the government. The forms of resistance in Chinese feminist activism are integrated into women's daily lives, reflecting tendency towards a compromised everyday resistance (Chang, 2025), with resistance often occurring in daily life rather than in overt political protest.

Meanwhile, government control has worsened misogyny. With its deeply rooted cultural and philosophical origins in Chinese society, Confucianism has long influenced gender norms and expectations (Yu, 2015) and holds that women should embody virtues such as obedience, humility, and dedication to the family. In Confucianism, a "good woman" is virginity, kind, thrifty, and obedient (Chang, 2025). As Han (2018, p.745) said, "in the Chinese context, what online feminist activism has brought about is not social change but the spread of backlash against feminism and misogynist action."

Under these conditions, hashtags function as strategic devices for visibility, safe expression, and algorithmic amplification. In Chinese feminist online communities, using hashtag is a way that Chinese girls hide from censorship and strategies to expand visibility with algorithms. To conclude, hashtags perform three strategic functions for Chinese feminist activists.

First, hashtags offer a way to avoid direct censorship while still connecting content to sympathetic audiences. Observations of feminist hashtag use on Chinese social platforms show that activists deliberately use coded or indirect hashtags to discuss sensitive topics. Chang's (2025) study shows that activists use creative hashtags to reach targeted audiences and also can shield content from removal.

Second, hashtags help Chinese women leverage platform algorithms for broader visibility. As Chang (2025) argued, given that Rednote's recommendation systems prioritize connections between content with shared tags and user interests, adding a relevant hashtag increases the chance that posts appear in more users' feeds. From this perspective, some Chinese females tried to increase the visibility because it increases the likelihood that broader audiences will encounter and reconsider cultural norms about body hair, beauty, or gender roles. In China's digital ecosystem, visibility is itself a kind of political resource, even if it does not directly translate into offline protest or policy change.

Third, many Chinese women understand hashtag as a form of activism in themselves, precisely because other avenues of resistance are restricted. The #MeToo movement in China provides a clear example. The original #MeToo tag was censored on platforms like Rednote, pushing activists to adopt coded forms such as the "rice bunny" (in Chinese, 'rice (米)' pronounced like 'me' and 'bunny(兔)' pronounced like 'too') emoji to continue the movement and build online awareness of sexual harassment (Chang, 2025). This strategic adaptation shows why Chinese women creatively use digital platforms to sustain feminist discourse despite censorship.

Within this highly controlled digital environment, hashtags become strategic tools that help women avoid censorship, reach sympathetic audiences through algorithms, and create spaces

where shared experiences can be seen and acknowledged. For many Chinese women, using a hashtag is a deliberate form of digital activism that asserts presence, challenges social norms, and slowly shifts what is considered acceptable public discourse about women's bodies.

Research Gap

Existing research provides strong evidence that body hair is governed through aesthetic norms, gendered expectations, and disciplinary logics. Research also shows that digital platforms foster feminist activism and facilitate new modes of participation. However, I find some gap, firstly, most existing studies are Western, overlooking Chinese cultural and digital environments. Secondly, under-arm hair, as a distinct and symbolically charged topic, is underexplored.

This study addresses these gaps by examining how Chinese women negotiate and resist in armpit hair discourse on Rednote. Online spaces allow new forms of visibility and identity performance (Sastre, 2014), while “hashtag feminism” enables collective resistance to gendered norms (Dixon, 2014). Situated at the intersection of feminist media studies and body politics, my study will add new knowledge on how users interpret, resist, or reproduce beauty norms through everyday digital practices. By tracing how visibility, stigma, empowerment, and resistance interact within a censored environment, I will connect feminist debates to localized Chinese digital experiences. This study will show how women interpret, negotiate, and potentially transform beauty norms in contemporary Chinese social media.

Methodology

This chapter provides further details of the methodological framework and empirical materials employed to address the central research question: How do users construct, negotiate, and contest the meaning of female body hair within the hashtag #armpithairfreedom on Rednote. To answer this question, the study adopts a qualitative, social constructivist, case study approach, enabling an in-depth exploration of how meaning is produced through language, interaction, and platform-specific affordances in digital environments.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, this chapter outlines the methodological paradigm supporting the research, and justifying the adoption of a qualitative and social constructivist stance. Second, this chapter discusses the methodology guiding the analytical perspective. Third, this chapter details the research design, including case selection, data collection procedures, and sampling strategies. This is followed by a step-by-step explanation of the data analysis process. Finally, the chapter reflects on methodological limitations, researcher positionality, and ethical considerations.

Qualitative Research

In this study, I use a qualitative study to explore how women discuss and debate female body hair under the hashtag #armpithairfreedom on Rednote. Qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to research questions concerned with meaning, experience, and social processes (Creswell and Poth, 2016). Similarly, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) define qualitative research as “studies things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (p.10).” Therefore, qualitative research fits very well with my research, because I want to understand the significance of armpit hair for women, and how they interpret armpit hair freedom in the phenomena of social media comment sections. For example, when users mention hygiene, attractiveness, or personal choice, the analytical focus is more on understanding what assumptions audiences rely on, how they position the speaker, and how other users respond.

Qualitative methods are particularly valuable in contexts where existing knowledge remains

limited or fragmented (Gillham, 2000, pp.10–11). While previous studies have examined body hair norms and digital feminism, relatively little research has explored how these issues are negotiated through everyday interactions in the Chinese social media environments. What's more, as Gillham (2000) argues, qualitative methods also enable researchers to “get under the skin of a group or organization to find out what really happens” and “to view the case from the inside out: to see it from the perspective of those involved” (p.11). Based on this, qualitative research provides a better understanding of how women discuss their understanding, negotiation, and experiences regarding underarm hair freedom in social media hashtags.

This approach is further supported by research on digital media, which emphasizes the importance of qualitative methods for capturing the complexity of online communication. Bouvier and Rasmussen (2022) argue that qualitative methods capture meaning constructions that quantitative approaches would flatten. Through their analysis of civic debate and activism on social media, they demonstrate that qualitative methods enable researchers to capture how participants build solidarity and challenge norms (pp.25–26). Applied to the present study, this perspective shows the importance of analyzing comment sections as dynamic spaces where users actively interpret and negotiate social norms.

Social Constructivist Approach

This study is also based on a social constructivist approach. Social constructivism holds that knowledge and meaning are not simply discovered or found in the world. They are actively produced through social interaction, language, and shared cultural practice (Berger and Luckmann, 2011). In other words, the way people understand reality is shaped by history, culture, and ongoing communication.

Social constructivist approach is relevant to the study of female body hair because body hair's meaning depends on the context in which it is discussed. What is considered natural, acceptable, or undesirable is not determined biologically, but socially constructed through shared understandings. As Crotty (1998) explains that meaning does not exist independently of minds that know or construe it (pp.42–63). Crotty's argument suggests meaning is

constructed, making it essential to examine the processes through which such constructions occur. Therefore, adopting a social constructivist approach allows research to focus on how body hair is given meaning by comments and language.

Language plays a central role in this process. As Burr (2015) emphasizes in his research on language within social constructivism, language is never neutral but is always situated within power relations. In the context of Rednote, the social constructivist approach can focus on the role of commenting on language and power relations. It allows me to observe how an individual's expression of freedom regarding armpit hair is constrained and influenced by their environment.

In this sense, social constructivist approach helps my research understand the language of comments on social media platforms and observe the process by which the nuances of meaning in comment sections are constantly generated, stabilized, and debated.

Case Study

This research also adopts a case study design focused on the #armpithairfreedom on Rednote. Case study research is particularly useful for examining complex social phenomena within their specific contexts (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

In this study, the case is defined by both platform and topic. Rednote as a gendered digital space, and #armpithairfreedom as a site of discussion about body norms. This scope focus allows for an in-depth examination of how discourse operates within a specific socio-technical environment. As Hancké (2009) argued, a case study is research that has its “object of research limited in time and space” and enables the researcher to say, “something meaningful beyond the case in question (2009, p.62)”. Researcher who choose to conduct a case study must think about the issues in a specific time scope and space (2009, p.47).

At the same time, this approach requires careful reflection on its limitations. The findings of this study are not intended to represent all Chinese women or all social media platforms. Instead, the aim is to generate analytical insights into how meanings are constructed within a particular setting. Following Flyvbjerg (2001), the value of case studies lie in their ability to clarify mechanisms, relationships, and patterns that may be transferable to similar contexts. I

agree with Flyvbjerg (2006) that although the results of case studies may not seem as universal as data from the natural sciences, I argue that case studies are a useful method for my research. This is because my aim is not to explore a universal phenomenon, but rather to delve into how women use social media hashtags on Rednote to express their views on body hair.

Case study methods play a crucial role in context-dependent analysis, allowing me to gain a more nuanced understanding of society and the real world (Flyvbjerg, 2001). In the Chinese context, women's attitudes toward armpit hair are shaped by mainstream aesthetic norms, Confucian gender expectations, and platform governance. The posts and comments under this hashtag provide rich material to examine how everyday expressions intersect with broader disciplinary structures. This is what Harding (2008) calls a "bottom-up" research approach. By starting with women's lived experiences and their digital expressions, I can try to explain how power operates through mundane, everyday practices, rather than overt political confrontation.

However, I remain critically aware that a "bottom-up" approach does not automatically mean the findings are emancipatory. Online expression can reproduce the norms it seems to challenge. Therefore, my analysis critically examined both moments of resistance and instances of normalization.

Material: Platform, Posts, and Comments

Platform Selection

Kozinets' (2010) proposes that online communities selected for research should be relevant, active, interactive, substantial, heterogeneous, and data-rich (p.89). Based on Kozinets' argument, I chose #armpithairfreedom as the site to do the research. The #armpithairfreedom meets Kozinets' criteria because this hashtag is active, has high engagement, and contains diverse perspectives. As of the end of February 2026, this hashtag had 257,000 discussion posts and 82.146 million views.

The #armpithairfreedom represents a space that is relatively visible yet not fully censored, where discussions of female body autonomy can take place. Studying this specific tag,

therefore, allows me to examine how resistance is articulated within tolerated boundaries. It's a space where we can see the line between acceptable and unacceptable discourse negotiated in real time.

Post Selection

I selectively chose three posts based on four criteria. First, each post had to demonstrate high engagement, to qualify for the “Most Popular Posts” category. Second, all selected posts were non-commercial and non-promotional. Third, to minimize time discrepancies, only posts published within the six months from September 2025 to February 2026 were included. Fourth, these three posts were chosen as starting points for different discourses: personal narratives, informational posts, and requests for help.

The decision to work with three posts follows qualitative research logic. In qualitative discourse research, small, information-rich cases are preferred over large-scale scraping when the goal is to identify patterns of meaning production rather than frequency distribution (Staller, 2021). For my purpose, which is to understand how meaning is constructed, a deep dive into a few rich examples is more effective than a shallow overview of many. The three selected posts provide variation in tone, self-presentation style, and audience engagement, while remaining manageable for the close reading that qualitative analysis requires.

Comment Selection

From each post, the first ten top-level comments (sorted by “most relevant”) were selected, along with second-level replies to those comments. As Feng and Chen (2025) argued, the reason I chose the first ten comments is because, first, on Rednote, comments ranked at the top are algorithmically amplified and therefore more likely to shape the interpretive frame of subsequent viewers. If visibility equals discursive power, then highly ranked comments hold greater potential to influence collective understanding (Williams, 2025). And second, early visible comments often set the tone for subsequent engagement. They function as interpretive anchors that guide later responses (Allon et al., 2022).

Second-level replies were also included. Because second-level replies show how agreement, discipline, resistance, and emotion are negotiated through back-and-forth dialogue. Therefore,

the final comments consisted of three original posts, a total of thirty top-level comments, and all second-level replies. To sum up, the final sample consists of 683 comments.

Data Collection

Posts were identified through Rednote's search function using the hashtag. I manually reviewed posts before data extraction to ensure relevance and diversity. Posts were selected from the top-ranked most popular thread downward. After reviewing the available of post types, three distinct communicative modes were chosen: a personal narrative, an informational article on female body hair, and a help-seeking post.

Since Rednote itself does not provide the source code for scraping data, I chose to use auxiliary tools to scrape the data. All data were collected using the Bazhuayu Data Collection Tool (see appendix 5). Bazhuayu Data Collection Tool is an external web crawler tool that is not part of Rednote. It works by inputting web pages containing Rednote posts and then scraping web data from those pages. Only publicly available posts were accessed.

The decision to include three different genre posts was made after consideration. Personal narratives tend to focus on affect and identity work. Informational posts often mobilize knowledge claims and normative positioning. And help-seeking posts typically invite advice and moral evaluation. Including all three allows for comparison across different rhetorical contexts, which strengthens the analytical depth of the study.

Although the use of a data collection tool improves efficiency, it also introduces methodological mediation. What becomes data is already filtered by the platform's ranking algorithm. Therefore, the dataset reflects on user discourse and algorithmic prioritization. The "most relevant" or "most popular" sorting mechanism privileges comments that receive higher engagement, which may support dominant or emotionally resonant viewpoints. As a result, marginal or less popular voices may remain invisible within the dataset. In other words, my sampling strategy captures algorithmically amplified discourse rather than the full spectrum of opinions. To reduce this limitation, alternative strategies could have been employed, such as collecting comments through chronological sorting, manually sampling lower-engagement posts, or comparing multiple sorting categories across different moments

in time. However, due to the platform's interface restrictions, the instability of algorithmic feeds, and the limited scope of this project, it was difficult to obtain a fully non-algorithmic sample. Therefore, in this study, I do not claim that the sample is representative, but rather regard the dataset as a reflection of the most socially influential form of discourse presented by the platform itself.

But critically, the limitation is analytically productive. Since one of my research concerns involves female civic engagement and the construction of digital agreement, analyzing algorithmically prioritized comments allows me to understand which discursive strategies gain support and shape collective interpretation.

Another critical reflection concerns time. Data collection occurred within a limited time frame. Hashtag discourse is dynamic and can shift in tone depending on external events, platform governance changes, or broader political climates. Therefore, the dataset represents a temporal snapshot rather than a stable or permanent discursive formation. In addition, given the amount of content, attempting to code everything at once would risk prioritizing breadth over interpretive depth. Instead, working with a smaller sub-sample enables close reading and theoretical grounding. It helps identify recurring discourse patterns and test whether the initial codes hold up when extended to the remaining data.

Finally, I recognize that my position as a Chinese female researcher who is familiar with Rednote culture shapes both access and interpretation. My insider familiarity facilitates contextual understanding of slang, irony, and culturally specific references. However, it may also incline me toward sympathetic readings of feminist expression. As Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argue, the notion of 'the space between' which enables researchers position themselves as 'insider-outsider' can help to mitigate this problem. For me, Dwyer and Buckle's argument means I can use my insider knowledge for contextual understanding while maintaining the critical distance of a researcher. Throughout my coding, I have remained reflexive about my interpretive assumptions, constantly questioning whether my reading is supported by the data or influenced by my own position.

Coding Process and Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Kuckartz's (2014) recursive coding approach. I analyzed the articles, and user comments under the selected Rednote hashtag. For Kuckartz (2014), the process is a systematic, circular one in which I move back and forth between my data and emerging concepts, rather than coding in a single, straight line. Which means code data, step back to review what you have found, revise your codes, then go back to code more data with the revised framework (Kuckartz, 2014 Chapter 3). Qualitative textual analysis method allows me to identify thematic patterns and discursive strategies in a way that is both grounded in the data and informed by my theoretical framework.

The coding process had three phases. In the first phase, I conducted open coding, assigning initial descriptive tags to each comment. In the second phase, I did focused coding, grouping the initial codes into broader thematic categories. In the third phase, I engaged in a theoretical dialogue, connecting the emerging categories to the key concepts developed in the literature review. This three-phase process ensured that the analysis moved from description to interpretation in a structured way.

The total amount of data is 683 comments. However, I manually removed 364 comments in Excel that consisted only of emojis (63 comments), images (138 comments), or meaningless comments (163 comments), such as those mentioning friends' accounts or containing offensive language. In that way, I narrowed down the material amount to 319 comments.

All 319 comments were coded manually in an Excel spreadsheet with a separate column for numbering and categorization. In the open coding phase, I identified the recurring expressions and statements and grouped them into five themes. The result was five themes and twenty-three sub-categories. Representative comments from each category were selected for the codebook, which is included in the Appendix 1.

However, my use of Kuckartz's framework differs from his original intention. Kuckartz (2014) designed recursive coding primarily for analyzing interview data, in which the researcher collects all data first and then begins analysis. In this study, I applied the same logic to social media comments across three posts representing different genres.

Theme	Explanation	Categories
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Discourse Frameworks on Body Hair	Captures how commenters construct body hair through language	“Hygiene Discourse” constructs body hair through cleaning discourse; “Aesthetic Standard Reference” invokes female appearance norms; “Masculinity Association” links body hair to gender identity; “Natural/Normal Defense” treats body hair as a biologically normal phenomenon; “Medical Framework” utilizes scientific authority; and “Problem Framework” treats hair issues as matters requiring intervention
Emotion and Identity Expression	Summarizes the emotional dimensions of the comments	Shame/embarrassment, confidence/pride, fear of judgment, anxiety, and encouragement
Advice and Norms	Interpersonal norms in comments	“Polite Advice” softens the mandatory nature of norms with goodwill; “Risk Warnings” predict social consequences; “Conditional Acceptance” grants freedom first, then withdraws it; “Personal Choice Frameworks” emphasizes individual autonomy; and “Self-Management Conversations” describes personal grooming habits but does not generalize
Interaction	About comments that respond to the context of the communication itself	“Resistance” directly challenges other commenters; “Story Sharing” introduces personal experiences; “Hashtag/Visibility Awareness” discusses the strategic use of hashtags; and “Platform Awareness” refers to algorithmic content moderation
Participation Logic	The thoughts expressed in comments regarding participation in the hashtag #armpithairfreedom	“Speaking as Action,” which suggests that expressing opinions under hashtags can bring about change; “Doubt about Impact,” which argues that the effectiveness of speaking only under hashtags remains questionable; and “Small Acts,” which refers to the desire to boost popularity and support through likes and comments

It's worth to mention that all original comments are in Chinese. Therefore, all quoted examples in this thesis are translated from Chinese into English.

Ethical consideration

In this study, I follow the ethical standards for qualitative digital research on publicly available social media content, as outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) (Franzke et al., 2020). All data were derived from posts on the Rednote platform. These posts were publicly accessible at the time of collection without requiring login, subscription, or registration. According to institutional guidelines on social media research, such publicly available data does not require formal ethics committee review. However, considerations regarding privacy, anonymization, and potential harms are still necessary (Webb, 2025). Users post in open digital spaces but may not anticipate their comments being extracted for academic research. Therefore, all usernames have been anonymized, and any directly identifiable information has been removed from cited comments. At the same time, I informed the blogger about the relevant research.

However, I considered the potential risks of discussing feminist resistance movements given the political context in China. While the hashtag is currently not censored, political sensitivity remains. Therefore, I avoid quoting content that could reveal user identities. Although user identities and post content are publicly visible on the platform, I present the content using pseudonyms. Furthermore, in translating and quoting post text, I have paraphrased and summarized their expressions to reduce identifiability.

Because social media platforms have their own privacy policy standards, my research process complies with Rednote's privacy policy, respecting content ownership and copyright. The platform's anti-scraping mechanisms were never triggered during the data collection process. Therefore, it is reasonable within the boundaries permitted by the platform.

Analysis

In the analytical section, I organize my discussion around those themes that emerged from the recursive coding process. In the analytical section, I examine the discursive frameworks that imbue body hair with meaning, particularly hygiene discourse, aesthetic norms, and post-feminist choices. I also explore the emotional dimension of these discussions, focusing on how shame, anxiety, and confidence function as mechanisms of self-discipline and resistance. Next, I analyze digital narrative as a form of community building, exploring how personal narratives can sometimes replicate normative constraints while simultaneously creating emotional solidarity. Finally, I explore the logic of participation itself, understanding how users interpret the political significance of speaking, tagging, and commenting in a censored digital environment.

Constructing the Meaning of Female Body Hair

Hygiene Discourse and Symbolic Pollution

During the open and focused coding stages, there is a kind of pattern that occurred often, which is female body hair was discussed through references to cleanliness, hygiene, and bodily maintenance. One of the most dominant patterns identified in the data is the use of hygiene discourse to frame female body hair. Comments frequently associate visible armpit hair with ideas of “uncleanliness,” or lack of bodily maintenance. For instance, in the storytelling post, one user commented: *I’m not saying you must shave, but honestly it looks a bit unhygienic*. Another commented: *Girls should at least keep themselves clean*. Or comment like: *People may think you don’t take care of yourself*. In the help-seeking post, a commenter similarly said: *If you don’t shave, it might make others uncomfortable, especially in summer*.

To interpret this pattern, I draw on the anthropological concept of symbolic pollution developed by Mary Douglas (2003). In her book *Purity and Danger*, Douglas argues that ideas of dirt and pollution are not primarily about hygiene or physical contamination, but about social order. Dirt is “matter out of place,” meaning that something becomes perceived as dirty when it disrupts established cultural classifications. In other words, the sense of pollution emerges when an object crosses symbolic boundaries that structure a social system.

In this context, the concept of “matter out of place” provides a way to interpret why female body hair becomes such a persistent topic of regulation online. According to this view, body hair is acceptable in private or on men, but not on a woman’s publicly exposed body. Because it is perceived as “out of place,” it invites repeated comments, advice, and discipline.

Armpit hair is biologically natural and grows from the body itself, yet it becomes visually visible on the surface of the skin. However, as Toerien and Wilkinson (2003) argue at the beginning of the 20th century, within dominant representations of femininity, smooth and hairless skin has become a correct visual signal of female body, and this viewpoint remains relevant today. When visible armpit hair appears in public images posted online, it disrupts this aesthetic expectation (Kent, 2024). In this case, female body hair becomes symbolically “out of place” because it challenges the culturally normalized image of feminine smoothness. When visible body hair appears in images shared online, it violates this expectation, producing discomfort that is subsequently articulated through the language of hygiene.

However, I extend Douglas’s (2003) framework by situating it within a digital platform-mediated context. Douglas studied pollution in a background that more than 50 years ago. The hashtag environment of #armpithairfreedom is different. It is a space where these classifications are actively contested. Some users challenge the hygiene framing directly. They are particularly visible in the informational post, where scientific knowledge is used to reframe body hair as neutral or functional: *Body hair is natural. We can’t ignore our hair.* Or by providing physiological explanations for the existence of armpit hair. Those arguments have particularly appeared in the informational post, where users draw on physiological explanations to legitimize body hair. For example, one comment explains: *Armpit hair helps reduce friction and protects the skin.* Another adds: *From a medical perspective, there is no need to remove it.*

Here, by using biological knowledge, users attempt to reposition body hair as a neutral or even functional aspect of the human body. I argue that this strategy also have limitations. To analyze this change, I drew upon Lupton’s (2012) research on the authority of medical and scientific discourse in everyday life. Lupton argues that scientific knowledge often serves as a rational legitimacy, enabling individuals to justify their actions and resist social norms

(pp.137–165). According to her, citing scientific research can be a strategy to resist mainstream aesthetic standards, by relying on scientific evidence, female will accept that body hair requires explanation to be acceptable.

From those comments, I argue that “matter out of place” is redefined through the interaction on the social media platform. Therefore, the meaning of “clean” or “dirty” in Chinese digital social media context is actually co-produced through everyday communication.

Aesthetic Standards, Gender Norms, and Stigma

Beyond hygiene, body hair is also framed through aesthetic standards and gender norms. Many comments reference what a “normal girl” should look like. For example, one commenter writes: *Most girls wouldn't go out like this*. Another states: *It doesn't look very attractive*.

These statements seem not framed body hair as dirty, but rather as aesthetically undesirable. Therefore, those kinds of comments reinforce the idea that femininity is something that must be visually performed according to shared standards. In addition, the evaluative framework is further strengthened by the frequent association between body hair and masculinity. Several comments directly describe visible armpit hair as “looking like a man” or “not feminine.” For instance, one user comments:

This kind of look feels a bit masculine. Another writes: *It just doesn't feel like I should look like that. I don't like myself looks like a man, that's disgusting*.

The comments I quote showing that Armpit hair appears in discussions on the Rednote hashtag in the form of dirty, taboo, or masculine. I argue that the explanation of whether body hair is dirty or natural is not universally accepted. The interpretation of body hair in online users' communication practices is always open to be reinterpretation. In extending Douglas's (2003) concept, I argue that symbolic pollution in digital environments operates less as a fixed classification and more as a controversy process, in which meanings are continuously rearticulated through interaction.

Hygiene discourse ties into ideas around stigma. Goffman's (1963) argued that stigmatization

is a process through which certain bodily features are socially unacceptable. And stigma may marginalize those people with unacceptable characteristics. In Rednote comment section analyzed, stigmatization often works indirectly. For instance, statements such as: *People may think you don't take care of yourself*. This kind of comment brings in a wider social judgment. I argue that the commenter transfers potential shame onto the woman in an indirect way.

However, it can be seen in the comments that stigma can also be negotiated. Some users answered potential indirect judgment, writing comments such as: *It's okay if you're confident enough* or *You just have to be prepared for others' opinions*.

These statements suggest that stigma is anticipated and managed at self-level. Here, stigma becomes a psychological condition that shapes how individuals relate to their own bodies (Kågström et al., 2025). And also demonstrates how interaction within the hashtag space guides users toward self-monitoring and self-regulation.

Disciplinary Power and the Post-Feminist Framing of Choice

However, I found that while users claim for personal decisions regarding body hair management to challenge the stigma of body hair being dirty or unhygienic, the kind of 'personal choice' content suggests that body hair needs a reasonable justification. In other words, body hair becomes acceptable only if it can be justified. Yet the act of justification itself reveals the problem, we do not justify things we truly see as normal. Women must prove that their body hair is 'natural' or 'functional'. I argue that 'personal choice comments' shows the workings of disciplinary power, where body hair is only acceptable under certain conditions. The responsibility for proof of legitimacy is still on women, but this responsibility for proof itself is actually a form of regulation.

As I found, even within supportive comments, body hair is often framed as a matter of personal choice. Many comments that seem supportive actually place full responsibility on individual women: *It's your own decision* or *As long as you feel comfortable, it's fine*.

These comments seem to defend freedom. Yet, this way also transfers the responsibility from society to the individual. However, We can understand women's autonomous choice regarding body hair through post-feminist critique. Following Dobson (2015), analyzing the digital

media practices and forms of expression created by women can help us understand how women shape and present themselves and the potential power struggles within a “post-feminist” cultural context. Gill (2007) offers a framework here, defining post-feminism is rephrasing societal constraints as individual choice, to explain post-feminism, she stated that mediated self-presentation may point to some form of female bodily empowerment and disciplinary practices. For example, one woman explained why she shaved her armpit hair by saying:

I have the right to decide how I want to treat my body. It's my choice. I shave my armpits in the summer because it doesn't look good in clothes.

From Dobson's perspective, observing women's expressions on digital platforms and applying Gill's post-feminist argument, this woman sees her decision as an expression of her inner self and a manifestation of her true identity. However, this authenticity itself is a performance shaped by post-feminist culture. In post-feminism, the personal choice masks the social pressures that compelled her to make that choice.

Gill proposed the concept of the “postfeminist sensibility” (2007, p.153), which she identifies as a distinctive cultural logic operating across media and everyday life. Central to Gill's argument is the idea that the normative disciplining of the female body is no longer experienced as external compulsion, but as something women want for themselves (pp.155–156). Under this logic, in Rednote #armpithairfreedom, removing body hair is no longer an obligation imposed from outside. Women are free to choose because they want to feel clean, attractive, or confident. The disciplinary norm becomes invisible because it is internalized.

Gill (2007) draws on Foucault's (1979) concept of disciplinary power to explain this. Foucault (1979) argued that bodies are continuously monitored and regulated through social norms rather than direct force. In the content I analyzed, the comment sections function as a micro-level site of discipline, where users collectively participate in defining and enforcing standards of bodily appearance. Importantly, the disciplinary process operates through indirect judgments and shared social norm expectations. No one forces women to shave. But the constant presence of hygiene comments, aesthetic comparisons, and advisory language creates

a social pressure that is hard to ignore. The clearest evidence of this post-feminist appears in comments about personal choice is for example:

I agree, I'm confident I won't shave my armpits. So what? Because I like it. Don't criticize my actions. That's what is called true freedom.

In conclusion, my analysis of the comments shows that the discursive of female body hair is achieved through a complex interplay between symbolic classification, stigmatization, and disciplinary power. While the #armpithairfreedom provides space to challenging mainstream norms, it doesn't completely escape the evaluative framework that constructs these norms. The armpit hair freedom hashtag becomes a space for ongoing negotiation, resistance, and coexistence with discipline.

Emotional and Identity Formation in Body Hair Discourse

Building upon the previous section, in this section I transfer focus from the meaning of body hair to the emotions women express about it, and how those emotions shape identity.

Throughout the comments, I found that female users expressed emotions such as shame, anxiety, confidence, and support, and used these emotions to construct and negotiate their identity as women.

Shame, Anxiety, and Internalized Surveillance

A common emotional pattern in the dataset is the expression of shame and embarrassment, often presented indirectly. For example, in the help-seeking post, the poster asked in her article: *Would it be strange if I didn't shave my body hair? Would people feel uncomfortable seeing me?* In this post's comments section, users replied such as: *I also feel strange wearing sleeveless clothes like this* or *People will look at me strangely, it's unavoidable*.

Even without clearly using words like shame or embarrassment, some of those comments construct body hair as something that should be hidden. What is analytically significant here is that these comments show that visible body hair invites social scrutiny. In this sense, shame operates not only as an emotion but as a socially organized expectation embedded in everyday language.

At the same time, some users explicitly disagree with this view, stating: *There's nothing to be ashamed of. It's just hair* or *Why should we be embarrassed about something natural?* The different opinions suggest that people's emotional responses are not uniform, but rather controversial. Emotional meanings are actively negotiated rather than fixed, and the comment space functions as a site where competing emotional interpretations coexist and interact.

Besides shame, another strong emotional pattern is anxiety and fear of judgment, especially in posts seeking help. Many users don't express clear opinions but instead ask questions or seek reassurance: *Will others think I'm weird?* or *I'm worried about what others think*.

As revealed by Goffman's (1963) concept of internalization, some comments showed self-regulation. A female user imagines how others notice her and adjust her behavior before any

direct interaction occurs, she wrote this comment: *I really don't dare wear sleeveless tops without shaving. It feels like the whole world is watching me.*

In this comment, “*the whole world*” doesn’t refer to actual people, but to an internalized, imagined audience. This imagined audience demonstrates how surveillance becomes internalized, aligning with Foucault’s (1979) argument that disciplinary power operates most effectively when individuals begin to monitor themselves. Therefore, self-discipline isn’t achieved through real punishment, but through the anticipation of judgment, thereby making women complicit in self-surveillance (Foucault, 1979). The emotions contained in the comments posted by female users are very complex. I argue, on Rednote, users exchange opinions, gain new perspectives, and at the same time, they often reflect on themselves, are influenced by other viewpoints, and may even discipline themselves with other users. I argue that emotional exchange becomes a mechanism through which discipline is reproduced at the micro level of interaction.

I use Goffman’s (1963) concept of “stigma” to explain body hair shame from another perspective. According to Goffman, body features can lead to negative social judgments. Stigma is not inherent to the body itself, but rather arises from social interactions. Stigma weakens the identity of the stigmatized individual and excludes them from the larger social group that is considered as normal. In my analysis, I use stigma to explain how armpit hair becomes a visible marker. When female users express embarrassment in comments, they are responding to anticipated social judgment. In this sense, as Goffman (1963) describes, shame plays a role in internalized social control. Goffman argues that stigmatized individuals internalize broader cultural standards of normalcy and then apply these standards to themselves, even though they know they cannot meet them. Therefore, even without direct criticism, social media comments guide women to monitor and regulate their bodies.

However, the application of stigma theory in this context also requires extension. Goffman’s original framework often assumes a vertical structure of judgment, where stigma is imposed by dominant groups. In the Rednote context, stigma circulates horizontally among users themselves.

Take one example from the comments. To avoid misunderstanding, I will explain the context first. One comment argues that women can wear sundresses in summer even if armpit hair is showing. Another user, whom I will call A (pseudonym) replied: *I support your freedom, but you should really consider other people's feelings. It's not advisable to do this in the summer.*

In the context of Rednote, stigma originates externally and also spreads and intensifies horizontally among women. Many comments reinforcing shame don't come from men but from other female users. I paid special attention to the comment users I categorized under "stigma", excluding accounts that didn't explicitly state their gender on their profiles, I found that 72% of them were female users. Women's participation in stigmatization during the communication process complicates the description of body hair norms as patriarchal discipline.

Simultaneously, stigma is actively negotiated within Rednote's hashtags. Comments refuting the shame surrounding armpit hair demonstrate that stigma can be challenged in discourse. One comment in response to A stated: *It's my body hair, why would I shave it off? Don't be so possessive of other people's hair, if you don't want to look, then don't!*

What's more, the data I collected also included expressions of confidence and disobedience. One user stated: *So what? I love all the part of my body. I will show my body hair. I'm a woman, not an egg.* Others share their own experiences: *I stopped shaving too, and I feel much freer now.*

Therefore, I argue stigma is actually a dynamic process within the hashtag space, constantly generated and debated through interaction. In my analysis, some of the negative emotions, such as anxiety and embarrassment, expressed in the comments are products of the disciplinary process. Women anticipate others' judgments and adjust their behavior before any direct interaction occurs. Success and failure in internalized stigma complicate oppressive discipline. Same social media platform can both monitor and allow for contestation. The same comment section can both humiliate women and allow them to fight back. Here, discipline shows as a negotiation area where women simultaneously experience, resist, and reshape the norms that govern their bodies.

Thoits (2011) points out that what drives stigmatized individuals, or those outside the stigmatized group, to resist is “the encounter” of “a series of events”. Awareness of the profound impact of inequalities such as “stereotypes, social rejection,” and “differential treatment” leads individuals to “commit” to challenging the stigmatization of individuals and improving their conditions in society (2011, p.22). I agree with Thoits’ argument. In the analysis of commentary language, Women’s body rights activists face stigmatization and misunderstanding, but under the hashtag #armpithairfreedom, I can still see emotional negotiation and self-awareness about body hair in their own experiences and stories.

From Individual Emotional Expression to Collective Identity

Looking back to comments analysis, across all comments I collected, emotional expression is closely tied to identity construction. Audiences position themselves in different ways. They might see themselves as confident individuals, as cautious negotiators, or as anxious participants seeking validation. These identities change depending on interaction.

In my analysis, I will use collective identity as a theoretical perspective, drawing on Gerbaudo’s (2024) research on individual testimony movements in digital action. In digital media studies, collective identity is often understood as the process through which individuals come to recognize themselves as part of a group through shared narratives, symbols, or experiences (Gerbaudo and Treré, 2015). Gerbaudo (2024) argues that when people share personal stories on social media, these individual posts are grouped under a hashtag. In his research on #MeToo, Gerbaudo argues that different individual experiences under the same hashtag can create an “impression of repetition”, thus contributing to the formation of a collective identity (Gerbaudo, 2024, p.4915). Applied to #armpithairfreedom, when audiences post about armpit hair, they begin to interpret their experiences as shared by the group under the hashtag.

However, my understanding of collective identity differs slightly from Gerbaudo’s focus. Gerbaudo focuses on how individual expressions are collected as samples to construct group identity. For me, I want to focus on another aspect. I extend Gerbaudo’s concept by placing emphasis on identities and interactional negotiation. In my analysis, collective identity is

formed through direct interaction between users. In these interactions, emotional expression is affirmed, questioned, or reinterpreted within the collective.

For example, when one user expresses anxiety or self-doubt: *I felt really bad when I hesitated about whether I should shave my armpit hair. I wanted to go out without shaving, but I didn't have the courage.* This comment becomes an invitation for others to respond. Often through reassurance, shared experience, or encouragement. For example, the reply to this comment expressed encouragement, and the use of “sister (姐妹)” at the beginning created a sense of closeness between the commenter and the respondent: *Sister, don't be anxious, let's take it slow, nothing happens overnight!* Through collective emotional exchange, the personal emotions become part of a shared emotional system. In the process, audiences express and also collectively construct their identity.

Mendes et al. (2018) argue that interaction can have a significant impact on individual participants. For example, in their study, one of their respondents stated that she began to identify with herself after sharing her story on social media, suggesting that identity is acquired through interaction in digital discourse. In Rednote's context, collective identity within the hashtag space is influenced by how users interact with each other, their emotional identification, and their positioning in the conversation. Importantly, this process is not static. Users may shift from hesitation to confidence, or from neutrality to support, based on others' responses to their comments. Therefore, I argue that collective identity is not immutable but rather a fluid and negotiated process.

Digital Storytelling and The Community

In this section, I change from analyzing emotional and identity to examining a specific comments content that appears frequently across all three posts: story sharing. Personal storytelling is one of the most common and most engaged forms of participation in the dataset. I argue that storytelling in this hashtag space both empowers women's voices and reproduces normative constraints. The two processes coexist and cannot be separated.

Personal Narrative and the "Our Story" Model

Some personal storytelling narrative comments received high levels of engagement and gained lots of replies and discussions. Such as: *I stopped shaving my armpits in the fourth year of university, and some people started talking about body hair shaving with me.* And the reply to this comment said: *I feel the same. My university roommate recommended hair removal cream to me, but I'm just too lazy to shave my armpits. And I don't want to do that.*

These quoted comments express their emotions and their struggle with body hair stigma by sharing their experiences and stories on social media platforms. Digital storytelling is a powerful way available to women challenging body hair norms and one of the most effective mechanisms through which those norms are reproduced (Miller, 2025).

To analyze this pattern, I draw on Lambert's (2012) concept of digital storytelling. Lambert defines digital storytelling as a practice through which ordinary people use digital media to narrate personal experience, create meaning from lived events, and share those meanings with wider communities. Mass media once decided whose stories were told and in what form, nowadays, digital platforms give ordinary people the tools to "become storytellers again" (p.5), reclaiming a form of self-expression.

Lambert (2012) identified what he calls the "our story" mode. In this mode, the storytellers talk about their own stories from personal experience but in a way that invites others to recognize themselves. Lambert observes that "we easily hear stories told in 'we' form when these contexts are provided, and we sense that the author's connection to the community is an integral part of the message (p.45)". Therefore, the story is personal, but its audience is collective.

The storytelling post I collected is a clear example of this model. The blogger shares her own experiences: a male colleague told her to shave, a female teacher commented on her underarms, and a man she met said her photo “looked good” but could “take care” of the underarm area. She responds to each person with humor and defiance¹:



Image 1: storytelling post *Don't be so controlling about other people's armpit hair* (see translation in Appendix 3)

A female user commented under this post: *Our stories are so similar! I have a great chat with my crush, but he brings up why I don't shave my armpit hair. What a bummer...* In this post and this comment, storyteller retell their own story, showing their transition from anxiety to acceptance of visible body hair. This post and comment could be understood as a form of Lambert's "Our Story" model (2012, p.45). Female users narrate their story in the first person, meanwhile they point to a shared "we (our)". Here, "we" is a group of women experiencing similar social pressures and trying to escape them. Replies under this comment, including "I agree" and "That's me," confirm this shared identification. The personal stories become a resource for collective understanding.

However, my understanding of digital storytelling differs somewhat from Lambert. Lambert's (2012) framework is primarily developed within the context of guided digital storytelling

¹ Since the blogger's own photo appeared in the post, after obtaining her consent, I am reproducing the post here with her face covered

workshops. In a structured and purposeful environment, community members tell their stories with clear goals such as support and reflection. But the comment sections of hashtags on the social media platform Rednote are different. The comments and posts here are unstructured and driven by dynamic changes in attention and engagement. In comments section, not all storytellers here have political motives or reflective distance. Many people are simply responding to how they feel in the moment. This means that the democratic and emancipatory potential that Lambert identifies in digital storytelling has not been fully realized in this context.

Stories and Affective Publics

The comments on Digital Storytelling contain many different narrative approaches. Some are resistance. One commenter whose comment was later deleted by the platform said in a later reply:

I really don't understand why so many offenses against women aren't banned on Rednote, but a comment supporting armpit hair freedom is banned. I was just telling a true story. This society is ruined.

Real personal stories expressed online can connect readers to a wider sense of injustice. I draw on Papacharissi's (2014) concept of affective publics to analyze these comments. Papacharissi argues that digital publics are formed through shared emotions, where personal expression becomes a way of connecting individuals into loose networks. In the context of Rednote, digital publics are formed through shared emotions (Papacharissi, 2016). Following Papacharissi's thought, resistant comments create emotional resonance around women's actual thinking about their experiences in society. Social media improve feelings of engagement and form a community, giving the storytelling public a way to experience stories by becoming part of the story (Papacharissi, 2014).

One comment said: *Who cares what others think? Do they deserve it?* And one of the reply comments was: *Yes, when I tell myself 'I don't care' I feel much freer now.* In those comments, women use digital storytelling to express themselves. Their emotions, thoughts, and resistance, all revolve around a shared goal, creating a collective on social media. Women use

digital storytelling in the comments to express themselves, can inspire and support others. For example:

I've discussed body hair with a friend. I asked her if I should be more radical and fight against these social norms by refusing to shave my armpits. But we haven't reached an answer. My mother said she didn't shave her armpits when she was young, but nobody stared at your body hair then. Anyway, I hope all women have the right to choose—for aesthetics, for health, or for other reasons. I look forward to the day when we work together to change social norms!

As Castells (2012) argues, social movements originate from emotions such as empathy, which translate into action. Action can then be transformed into “deliberate” (pp.15–16). Since storytelling and self-narration make more emotional responses, we can say that in the case of Rednote #armpithairfreedom, women used digital storytelling to create emotional connections and form an affective public (Papacharissi, 2016).

However, I use Papacharissi's framework, which differs from her original context.

Papacharissi (2014, 2016) developed the concept of affective publics through the study of political hashtag movements, where emotional narratives drive mobilization toward clear political goals. The #armpithairfreedom is not a political movement in the same sense. It is a space where women make every day bodily decisions under social pressure. Emotional connection in #armpithairfreedom doesn't lead to a collective action. This hashtag is a form of affective solidarity, even if its political impact is limited.

Many of the comments expressed that Rednote, as a social media platform, provides them with a “community” that makes them feel less alone. For example:

I live in a small county town where people aren't as open-minded. I'm glad I can find girls on social media who don't shave their armpits like me. Being different is lonely but I can discuss here.

This demonstrates that Rednote, through #armpithairfreedom has become a “community” for women participating in the discussion. This hashtag creates a sense of comfort and encourages greater participation. In the analysis, many storytelling comments were followed

by thank-you messages. This demonstrates that Rednote is viewed as a “community” for women participating in the #armpithairfreedom discussion. This hashtag creates comfort and encourages wider participation. In the analysis, many storytelling comments were followed by thank-you messages.

Combined with my analysis in the previous section *Contesting Stigma: Resistance and Confidence*, Thoits (2011) mentions that when a group of stigmatized individuals resists together, “understanding,” and “support,” emerge among those people, and bring empowerment (pp.15–16). Therefore, through personal narratives in digital storytelling on the Rednote platform, other viewers using this hashtag can engage more and be empowered.

Stories and Normative Reproduction

Alongside the stories that make audiences become affective publics, there’re also some comments that contain alert storytelling. These stories recount the commentators’ own negative experiences and social judgments. Therefore, I’ve summarized these stories into a kind of alert storytelling comment. For example:

I tried not shaving once, but I saw people staring at me. My hometown and society aren’t open enough to allow me to ‘armpit hair freedom’. So, when I was in my small town, I shaved.

I stopped shaving for several months, but other people’s comments made me very uncomfortable, so I started shaving again.

The comments I cited are telling personal stories. But they function as warnings. Alert storytelling criticized women by describing the social cost. Like the stares, the discomfort, and the result of return to shaving the body hair.

I draw primarily on Couldry’s (2008, 2010) theorization of voice and storytelling. He argues that storytelling is a means of self-expression and a fundamental practice through which individuals construct themselves as social beings capable of being heard. Couldry distinguishes between the concepts of having a voice (the technical ability to produce and disseminate narratives) and making one’s voice heard (narratives are not only produced and

disseminated, but also recognized by others as legitimate descriptions of experience).

Based on Couldry's argument, under #armpithairfreedom, the technical affordances of Rednote allow all users to share stories. But not all stories can be recognized, amplified, or capable of changing how others understand the social world. As Wang and Huang (2024) show, when a message confirms a pre-existing belief, it can have an impact even if this message doesn't appear frequently. Alert storytelling is effective because they draw on lived experience and confirms what many women already fear. One alert story can reinforce caution across audiences. For instance:

To be honest, many stories shared online have made me realize that society isn't as accepting of armpit hair as I thought. I never imagined that anyone would gossip about someone just because of the armpit hair.

Building on Lambert (2012) and Papacharissi (2016), both authors pointed out that the content of the stories is politically significant. And Lambert's framework focuses on storytelling as a means of democratization, while Papacharissi's framework tends to view emotional connection as a mean of promoting public participation. Based on both of them, I also argue that storytelling can open up possibilities and close them down. Resistance stories and alert stories coexist in the same comment section. Emotional connection can build solidarity or reinforce fear, depending entirely on the content of the story.

While alert storytelling has negatively impacted women's choices in life, I've found that many responses to alert storytelling comments include encouragement or well-intentioned suggestions. Alert storytelling comments sometimes don't contain malice or intentional stigmatization. Compared to malicious comments stigmatizing armpit hair, responses to alert storytelling comments are not direct rebuttals. For example, one response tells her own story while offering a well-intentioned rebuttal to the alert storytelling comment:

I understand. But if you really don't want to shave your armpit hair, please continue. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. I shared my thoughts on armpit hair freedom with my friends and let more people know about it. Maybe one day we can change this Social discipline.

As Couldry (2008) argues, the potential of digital narratives in democratic participation depends on whether genuine dialogue can take place between different experiential narratives (pp. 381–388). Under #armpithairfreedom, women are listening to different storytelling, challenging conventions, and rethinking their bodies.

Participation Logic: Visibility, Doubt, and Small Acts

In this section, I focus on how audiences understand and evaluate their own participation in the hashtag space. Some comments are about the act of participating in #armpithairfreedom discussion. I organize this section around three categories from my coding: Speaking as Action, Doubt about Impact, and Small Acts.

Speaking as Action: Searchability and Visibility

In the Informational post:



Image 2: Informational Post *Who created the “armpit hair stigma”?* (see translation in Appendix 4)

In the comments of this post, there is one comment expressing a clear support of speaking online with a hashtag of Armpit Hair Freedom: *Up! Really helpful! I wish more people knew.* On Chinese social media, the word “Up” appears to show that this comment wants to increase the popularity of the post.

To understand the comment I quote, I draw on the concept of media affordances (Boyd, 2010). Boyd identifies four key affordances of social network sites that distinguish networked publics from earlier forms of public space: persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability (pp.46–48). Here, I would use more on searchability. Boyd (2010) pointed out that searchability refers to the fact that content in the online public sphere is accessible through search, meaning that users can actively search for content generated at a particular

moment using keywords, hashtags, or topics, even if they are not physically present at the time. In other words, content becomes part of a searchable archive that can be accessed, recirculated, and reinterpreted over time.

Searchability can be analyzed using the hashtag feature on Rednote. Hashtags are searching mechanism. Posts with hashtags allow existing followers to discover the post and comments, and also allow anyone searching for or browsing the #armpithairfreedom hashtag to find it. The act of commenting becomes a way to push the post higher within algorithmic ranking systems, thereby increasing its exposure to other users who may encounter it through search or browsing (Chan et al., 2025). In this sense, using hashtags makes content easier to find. It can extend the potential reach of a comment or story from its immediate context to the broader public sphere of the hashtag network.

The comments in the “Speaking as Action” category reflect users’ awareness of how this works. These kinds of comments understand that adding a comment can makes the discussion more findable for others. For example: *I searched this hashtag and found so many posts like this. That’s why I am adding mine too, so more people can find it. Or Keep commenting. Keep this visible.*

These comments show an understanding of searchability. Audiences recognize that each new comment contributes to a growing, searchable archive of discussion about female body hair. I argue that the goal of “speaking as action” comments is cumulative visibility over time. As Treem and Leonardi’s (2013) identified, visibility is a key feature of social media. Every comment that is posted adds to a visible, persistent record of women’s experiences and opinions. From this perspective, each comment adds to a cumulative record that shapes what content can be seen within Rednote #armpithairfreedom.

However, my understanding of media affordances in Rednote #armpithairfreedom case is different with Boyd. Boyd (2010) viewed media affordances as relatively stable features of platforms. But in the context of Chinese social media, media affordances aren’t fully stable or predictable. Visibility is shaped by user activity and by the systems of governance, including content moderation and algorithmic filtering. As a comment expressed: *Why was my comment*

deleted by Rednote? I will keep commenting! I'm going to increase the popularity of this hashtag.

Shi's (2025) research on the governance of Chinese social media platforms shows that the government plays a significant role in shaping online visibility through online authoritarianism. In this context, the searchability of #armpithairfreedom and the visibility of comments are influenced by political factors. Posts and comments change due to algorithms that restrict tags or suppress content. According to the China Digital Times' (2022) encyclopedia entry on Rednote's censored content, the government has stated that platforms need to pay attention to statements involving extreme feminism and to be wary of misleading content that violates public order and good morals.

Therefore, to increase the visibility of their comments, women used homophones in Chinese. For example, as shown in the comment below, feminism is written as “女权”. To avoid further censorship, the commenter used the homophone “拳” (quán) instead of “权” (quán). Here, “拳” means fist in English.

My comment has been deleted. Just because I said I'm a '女(Girl)拳(Fist)'. I'm commenting again to support this hashtag, I support armpit hair freedom. Be careful, comments might get censored.”

As Chang's (2025) research on #MeToo, which also demonstrates how women in the Chinese context use homophones like “米(rice)” (Chinese pronunciation: mǐ) and “兔(bunny)” (Chinese pronunciation: tù) to represent “Me” and “Too.”

To conclude, social media algorithmic systems can amplify certain forms of content while making others invisible (Tufekci, 2015, pp.213–216). To me, while users can increase visibility by adding comments, the actual reach of hashtag still depends on factors beyond government and platforms control. #Armpithairfreedom can be influenced by external interventions, thus being expanded, limited, or reshaped.

I argue that, on the one hand, each comment contributes to visibility. On the other hand, the comments operate within a system where visibility is uncertain. Therefore, “speaking as

action” reflects engagement with platform affordances and an attempt to navigate censorship limits. In this sense, audiences actively understand and utilize media affordances through comments, increasing visibility, and contributing to #armpithairfreedom. Audiences participate in shaping a discursive space that is both collectively constructed and structurally constrained.

Doubt About Small Actions: Slacktivism

This awareness of constraint produces another category of comments: doubt. For example:

While it might sound a bit negative, I really feel it's pointless to just discuss it here. Many people in society still hold outdated views, regardless of gender.

Even if we click 'like' and send comments to increase the popularity of hashtags, so what? Doing it only online is useless.

As the cited comment shows, the audience directly questions the value of online discussion. In the case material, such doubt comments point to some perceived constraints, which are, first, the filtering role of platform algorithms. Second, the demographic concentration of Rednote users (primarily women). And the broader political environment that restricts public discourse. Together, these factors produce a gap between digital visibility and offline transformation. Therefore, some audiences question whether participation in hashtag discussions can have any meaningful impact.

I draw on the concept of “slacktivism.” Lee and Hsieh (2013) define slacktivism as high-visibility, low-cost forms of digital participation that may not lead to meaningful action in hashtag activism. Within slacktivism framework, actions such as liking, sharing, or commenting are often seen as the most minimal, low-cost form of engagement, requiring little cognitive or emotional investment (Papacharissi, 2014). Applied to this case, audiences recognize that engaging with a hashtag may create a sense of participation without necessarily altering the structural conditions that shape their everyday experiences.

However, while the concept of slacktivism provides a useful starting point, I critically accept it in my case of #armpithairfreedom. As Greijdanus et al. (2020) argued, much of the early

literature on slacktivism tends to frame digital participation in binary terms. Either effective activism or ineffective slacktivism.

In my example of comments that I both doubted and actively participated in, the binary interpretation of Slacktivism ignores how users understand and use hashtags in the Chinese context. For example, statements like: *I don't know if it will help, but I'm giving this post a like to show my support*. This kind of comment demonstrate a low-investment yet intentional form of participation. While participating, audiences also question the limited impact of their actions. This contradiction avoids me from simply defining slacktivism as an ineffective activism.

In the context of Rednote, Zhang (2026) argued that press “likes” are not politically neutral. Huang (2023) similarly shows that small and seemingly passive acts of participation contribute to the formation and maintenance of collective identity over time. Engagement actions such as likes, comments, shares, play a direct role in shaping visibility. Platform algorithms use these signals to determine what content is promoted, sustained, or suppressed. In this sense, even minimal actions contribute to the circulation and persistence of discourse.

From this perspective, I re-examine whether the concept of slacktivism is suitable for China's social media environment. The value of participation in comments is reflected in the posts' outcomes and sustainability. Audiences maintain the visibility of hashtags through continuous likes, comments, and interactions, thus enabling the topic to continue spreading.

In this sense, the discussion surrounding #armpithairfreedom illustrates the conflict between policy restrictions and audiences. Slacktivism should be understood as a perspective for understanding how audiences deal with this contradiction. Small actions may not bring about change on their own, but those actions are part of an ongoing process in which visibility is generated, maintained, and debated over time.

Conclusion

My analysis above explores the discussion of women's armpit hair under the hashtag #armpithairfreedom on the new media platform Rednote. By analyzing the comment sections of three posts representing different communication types: *personal narrative post*, *informational post*, and *help-seeking post*, I analyzed the intertwining of women's emotions, the meanings they evoke, and their social media engagement with armpit hair. I also explored how Rednote has constructed a complex and controversial digital public sphere around women's armpit hair. In the conclusion, I will review and summarize answers to my three research questions. By summarizing the main findings of the four analytical sections, I will reflect on how these findings show the state of contemporary Chinese feminist digital activism.

Answering Research Questions

My research enabled me to have results related to (RQ1) the construction and negotiation of female body hair meaning in the #armpithairfreedom comments. (RQ2) The disciplinary body norms and self-regulation generated in comments. (RQ3) And the collective identity and emotional community construction generated in comments.

For the first research question, analysis shows that within the #armpithairfreedom, the meaning of female body hair is formed through active and continuous co-production within different discursive frameworks. The most dominant of discursive framework is the hygiene discourse, where armpit hair is considered unclean or indecent. The hygiene framework of female armpit hair reflects society's symbolic reaction to being considered inappropriate and polluted. Female body hair disrupts the social norms expectation of a smooth, restrained female image, triggering discomfort. This discomfort is expressed through the discourse of armpit hair cleaning.

Meanwhile, some audiences cite medical or scientific authorities to redefine body hair as a biologically normal phenomenon and a functional protective factor. Other audiences directly challenge aesthetic norms, asserting bodily autonomy and refusing the obligation to explain the legitimacy of armpit hair. However, the claim that body hair is acceptable is based on

scientific theory. It still means that accepting women's armpit hair requires a legitimate reason. This confirms that disciplinary norms are reproduced through resistance, as the act of defending armpit hair itself affirms its need for defense.

More importantly, the negotiation of meaning doesn't occur only at the level of individual comments but through interactional sequences. Users respond to each other, reinterpret earlier statements, and reposition themselves in relation to others. In this process, meaning becomes relational. A single comment may transform its meaning depending on how it is taken up by others. Discourse in the hashtag space is not static but continuously reworked through dialogue.

Therefore, the meaning of female body hair is generated and reproduced in an ongoing and controversial process through comments and interactions. The dominant norm is not fully rejected but remains influential. In this sense, resistance does not stand outside power.

For the second research question, the findings highlight the subtle and complex nature of disciplinary norms in the comment space. Unlike traditional models of power that emphasize top-down control, the comments show that much of the pressure comes from within the community itself. Comments describing armpit hair as unhygienic, socially risky, or discouraged are typically expressed with concern, advice, or care.

Furthermore, the data show that there are also stigma-reinforcing comments commented by female users. Women's control over other women is not through blame and discipline, but through conditional acceptance and well-intentioned advice. This mechanism is more difficult to identify and resist than direct against. This finding leads me to conclude that women experience patriarchal oppression and female-centric pressure in their social discipline. This is one of the most important empirical contributions of my study.

Stigma operates not through direct confrontation but through anticipated judgment. Many comments express the internalization of an imagined audience, resulting in self-restraint that precedes and often surpasses any actual social sanctions. I found that a story about being stared at for not shaving armpit hair reinforced alert among many readers, confirming a pervasive anxiety, even without any intentional oppression from any commenter.

However, discipline and resistance coexist in comments. Comments expressing confidence in armpit hair indicate that stigma is being actively challenged. Stigma is a structural rather than personal perception, prompting some users to refuse to apologize for visible body hair.

Audiences may internalize norms in one moment and challenge them in another.

Therefore, stigma can also generate resistance, leading viewers towards self-affirmation. The main theoretical extension of Goffman's stigma model is, in digital social media comment sections, stigma is dynamic and interactive, rather than static. It is imposed, negotiated, and challenged. This interactivity means that the disciplinary power of online norms is constrained by the discourse context, post type, and the emotional investment of participants.

For the third research question, the analysis shows storytelling helps individual expressions transform into a form of collective identity. Drawing inspiration from the "Our Story" model, women invite others to find resonance by recounting their experiences of social pressure, negotiation, or resistance. Responses to shared experiences mark the beginning of collective identity, which is a process that transforms personal comments into a shared discourse community. This affective public is primarily maintained by shared emotions rather than shared political stances.

The community formed under the #Armpithairfreedom lacks organizational structure, explicit political demands, and the ability to exert collective pressure outside the platform. However, this community allows a sense of social pressure felt personally to be shared, seen, and discussed. For Chinese women whose offline feminist choices are structurally limited, visibility in online hashtags is very important. For many female audiences, the primary value of engaging with the topic is not political influence, but emotional identification, forming an emotional group and gradually bringing about change.

Importantly, the form of community is sustained through agreement and interaction itself. Even disagreement, doubt, and hesitation contribute to the visibility and continuity of the discussion. Community, in this sense, is not defined by consensus but by participation.

Further analysis of the participation logic reveals that some viewers view their comments as a positive contribution to increasing their visibility. Comments can improve content's ranking

and popularity in algorithmic algorithms, increase topic search rankings, and keep arguments alive.

However, this strategy is structurally constrained. The Chinese government's surveillance of "extreme feminist" content means that visibility using this tag is conditional and highly controversial. Users employ coded language (e.g., homophones) to avoid censorship.

What's more, some audiences comment while expressing doubt about whether such actions can lead to meaningful change. Audiences are aware of algorithmic systems, censorship, and limited reach, yet they continue to engage. Small actions such as liking or commenting are not seen as meaningless, but as one of the few available ways to maintain visibility within a restricted environment.

Critiques of "slacktivism" can describe the gap between digital participation and political change. But as an evaluation framework, it doesn't apply to the Chinese context, where small-scale digital actions are often one of the few safe forms of participation. The cumulative effects of sustained engagement with tagging activities, such as maintaining visibility and building emotional solidarity are significant precisely because other options are so limited.

In this sense, community building under #armpithairfreedom is about sustaining a space where discussion remains possible. Visibility itself becomes a form of practice, and participation becomes a way of keeping the issue alive.

Reflections

Using empirical case studies, I illustrate how body hair norms are generated, reinforced, and challenged through everyday discourse on a mainstream Chinese social media platform. This finding fills a gap in existing academic research on the discourse surrounding women's armpit hair on social media within a Chinese context. Existing research focuses on Chinese digital feminism, primarily concentrating on platform dynamics and action strategies, while ignoring the discursive processes of constructing and resisting body norms. I argue that the Rednote comment section is not just a communication platform, but also a site for feminist negotiation. In Rednote, ordinary audiences (rather than just celebrities or professional activists) comments drive a change in the cultural discourse surrounding women's bodies.

For broader research on women's body hair, I demonstrate the value of analyzing body hair discourse in a censored digital environment in China. Most existing work on this topic is based on Western background. By focusing on Rednote, this study highlights how cultural norms, platform logic, and state regulation interact to shape discourse in specific ways. The findings suggest that discussions of the body cannot be separated from their social and political environment. The unique combination of Confucian gender norms, platform commercialization, and state censorship on Chinese social media platforms creates a discursive environment that does not simply reflect Western debates on body hair and feminist action. Therefore, research on Rednote requires a unique analytical framework, focusing on the specific ways in which visibility, resistance, and community operation occur under political constraints.

However, I also discovered some limitations in my reflections. First, the comments I collected were only a snapshot in time; I only selected the three most popular posts from the six months prior to the collection date. But the discourse surrounding hashtags is dynamic, shifting with specific viral events, platform governance changes, or broader political events. Therefore, my analysis can only show the discussion among Chinese women on #armpithairfreedom within a certain period and cannot represent the overall situation. The posts I selected and the comments I collected are limited in time. I argue that analyzing the same hashtag over several months or even years could reveal how discourse evolves and how external pressures influence the spread and silence of opinions.

Second, this study is limited to textual comments. The visual dimension of the hashtag, such as the armpit hair photos posted by the original blogger, was not analyzed. Although my study focused more on in-depth analysis of comment content, a multimodal analysis combining image content with comment discourse could more richly and completely elucidate how women construct meaning regarding the topic of armpit hair freedom. The relationship between the visual presentation of body hair and the discourse responses is also an important question.

Third, in my reflection, I realized that my research failed to consider the perspectives of the audience themselves. I had interpretive conclusions from the analysis of comment content

regarding the audience's actions when posting the comment. But the shortcoming is that these interpretations cannot be verified against the commenter's intentions or experiences.

Therefore, I argue that combining interviews with the audience, or engaging in digital ethnographic interactions with regular participants in the hashtag, could add important dimensions that are difficult to capture through simple commentary analysis.

Finally, I analyze the context of Chinese social media platforms, and I argue that comparative studies with other platforms could strengthen the discourse analysis of Chinese women online. Comparing #armpithairfreedom with similar body hair hashtags on less censored platforms (such as Instagram or Twitter, which are not accessible in China) would help clarify the specific impact of the Chinese digital environment. Focusing only on Rednote makes the analysis somewhat superficial.

To sum up, the #armpithairfreedom did not bring about any direct or measurable political change. It neither changed laws, nor changed institutional norms. But the hashtag expanded the scope of Chinese women's discussions about their own bodies, giving them a space to speak up for what they wanted. This shift may be insignificant in terms of changing social norms, but it is significant as a first step towards women's empowerment. In my analysis, I analyzed and reflected on the posts and comments associated with hashtag. I do not view this hashtag as a failed example of tag activism, but rather as a form of discursive practice. In the Chinese context, where the space for feminist expression is limited and highly controversial, this form of practice is of great significance.

As a Chinese woman, I argue that research on feminist hashtags in China is very meaningful. Given China's internet censorship system, feminist research on social media platforms is quite unique, indicating the potential of this field. I hope more people will pay attention to the awakening of Chinese women's power on social media and work together to create a new landscape.

For this reason, #armpithairfreedom should be understood not as a marginal or trivial topic, but as an important entry point into the study of gender, power, and digital life in contemporary China.

Appendix

Appendix 1. Pilot code book

Themes	Categories	Definitions	Examples
Discursive Framings of Body Hair	Hygiene Talk	Associating armpit hair with cleanliness, uncleanliness, odor, and freshness	Armpit hair looks dirty, and in some TV series, there are scenes where male characters lick female characters' armpits. I find that disgusting and unacceptable.
	Beauty Standard Reference	Mentioning female attractive, and normal girl should present like	Whether others shave or not is none of my business, and I won't comment, but I do feel that showing armpit hair is a bit unsightly.
	Masculinity Association	Associating armpit hair with "looking like a man" and "not feminine"	Do girls really have such thick armpit hair? That's so strange!
	Natural/Normal Defense	Considering body hair as natural and normal	The world should stop pretending that women don't have armpit hair.
	Medical or Scientific Framing	Explaining the existence of body hair using physiological knowledge	Everyone should know that humans have evolved for thousands of years, and armpit hair must have served a purpose; otherwise, it would have disappeared long ago. Come on, read after me. The functions of armpit hair: Heat dissipation and protection: Armpit hair helps sweat evaporate, regulates body temperature, and reduces skin friction damage to the armpit. Protective barrier: It blocks bacteria, dust, and other foreign objects from entering the skin, <u>reducing the risk of infection</u> .
	Problem Framing	Describing body hair as a problem that needs to be addressed, improved, or solved	Armpit hair should be shaved off, you should really take care of your appearance.
Emotional and Identity Expression	Shame/Embarrassment	See armpit hair as a thing embarrassing and awkward, and don't want it to be seen	My armpit hair is really long, but I feel it's unsightly and embarrassing, so I don't dare to wear tank tops.
	Confidence/Pride	Expressing that having underarm hair is something to be proud of	So what? I'll just show it (armpit hair).
	Fear of Judgment	Worry about public opinion and judgment	But I really don't dare to wear sleeveless tops in the summer if I don't shave my armpit hair, it feels like the whole world is watching me.
	Anxious	Show great anxiety about underarm hair and try to seek understanding or advice from other women	Sometimes I really don't want to shave my armpits, but I'm too scared. Does anyone understand?
	Encouragement	Try to comfort and support women	Everyone has body hair. whether or not to shave it is your own choice. Just respect your own preferences.

Themes	Categories	Definitions	Examples
Advice and Regulation	Polite Advice	Expressing advice or using a "for your own good" approach	While I support freedom of armpit hair, I think it's best to avoid it, it can be quite unpleasant
	Risk Warning	Reminding that having underarm hair is often viewed negatively by the public	You decide what's best for your armpit hair, but I decide what's best for my aesthetic.
	Conditional Acceptance	Agreeing with some points but with a shift in perspective, the final conclusion remains that continuing to support "freedom to have underarm hair" is not recommended	I think it's fine to shave or not normally, but it's necessary to shave for formal occasions, such as when celebrities attend galas or similar events.
	Personal Choice Framing	Emphasizing that whether or not to keep underarm hair is a personal choice, and one should only focus on their own perspective	Whether or not to shave your armpit hair is your own choice.
	Self-Management Talk	Mentioning underarm hair management as a form of body care and grooming for women	I selectively shave my armpits. But I think it's really a personal choice. For example, I shave before dates, but leave them on for work. I never judge whether other people shave or not, as long as you don't come up to me with personal opinions.
Interaction	Resistance	Resistance and debate emerged in the comments section	Who do you think you are? Why should I listen to you? Are you trying to dictate things to women?
	Story Sharing	Comments included personal experiences	Every time I swim or wear a tank top, I struggle with the decision of whether or not to shave. Rationally, I know it's better not to shave (it increases the risk of infections/body odor, and although I swim casually, I don't need to worry about body hair affecting my speed). But on the other hand, long-standing societal habits (or perhaps it's a prevailing notion about women's appearance?) dictate that shaving armpit hair is "good-looking," and in swimming pools and in everyday life, most women shave their armpits. This really, I hope more people can see this post and similar tags. If it's true freedom, it's not about dictating whether or not people should shave their armpits, but about giving them
	Tag/Visibility Awareness	Some suggested posting more similar posts with this hashtag to increase visibility and raise awareness	
	Platform Awareness	Some mentioned that Rednote uses its algorithm to recommend or delete posts based on the sensitivity of the topic	Has Rednote deleted a lot of posts? I often see similar posts that haven't been deleted.
Participation Logic	Speaking as Action	They believe that posting itself is meaningful, and that simply making a voice heard is meaningful	(Post like) This is very meaningful! It would be great if more people could know about it.
	Doubt about Impact	They question whether such small-scale, hashtag-based posts can truly change anything	Although it may sound a bit negative, I really think that just discussing it here is useless. Many people in society still hold old ideas, regardless of gender.
	Small Acts	They mention that simply liking or commenting is hoped to be seen as participation in the movement, increasing traffic and attention	Give you a like to show my support.

Part 2

Appendix 2. Informed Consent

As participants are informed about the nature and objectives of the research. They are asked explicitly for their consent in participating in the master's dissertation study. In this appendix, I present the text I have made use of to contact the blogger who showed her photo in this study. This text is translated from Chinese to English:

Hi! My name is Jia Ziyi, and I am currently doing my master study in Media and Communication Studies at Lund University. I am writing the master thesis topic related female armpit hair comments discussion on Rednote #armpithairfreedom. I noticed that your article has received a lot of attention, and the comments are very valuable for research. For this reason, I was wondering if I could obtain your consent to use your post as part of my study. If you agree, I will guarantee the anonymity of your image, username, and profile picture. I look forward to your reply, thank you!

Appendix 3. Storytelling post translation

Don't be so controlling about other people's armpit hair

Recent stories:

1. Attend a gathering organized by a friend (who is also a colleague). A male colleague leaned over and said: "girl, you're so pretty, why don't you shave your armpit hair?" I said: "why do I need to shave? Is it because your hair is too thick that it makes you look less masculine?"
2. Practice Pilates: My female teacher said: "nn (this blogger's name), you have a great figure, but you need to take better care of your underarms. I said: "I don't care. How should I manage my underarm hair? Should I dye it?"
3. A handsome guy saw this photo. That handsome guy said to me: "It looks good, but the underarm area could take care." I asked him: "Do you shave your armpits?" That handsome guy says he won't shave. I said: "I wouldn't shave either, please don't be so controlling about other people's armpit hair."

Appendix 4. Informational post translation

In 1915, Gillette, the American company, launched the first razor specifically for women. An American fashion magazine published an advertisement for this razor, called Milady, featuring a model in a fashionable low-cut sleeveless evening gown, arms raised, revealing smooth armpits. The ad read, "A beautiful addition to the dressing table, and a solution to an embarrassing personal problem."

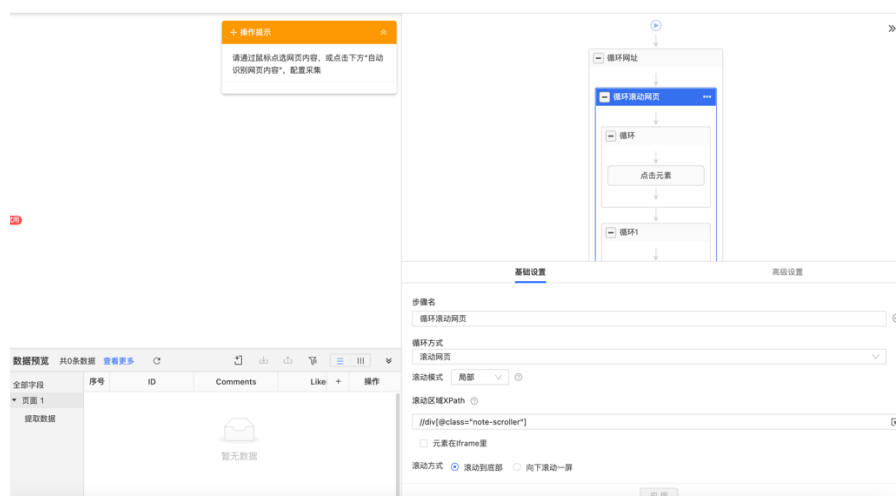
In 1917, another company launched a powerful advertising campaign targeting women in North America to increase razor sales, promoting the idea that armpit hair was inelegant, offensive, and masculine, and must be eliminated or hidden. Two years later, its razor sales doubled.

Simultaneously, along with armpit hair, leg hair, pubic hair, and all other hair except for head hair and eyebrows disappeared.

The “armpit hair shame” has spurred women to place an excessive emphasis on underarm care—many women have shared various bizarre methods: some bleach their underarm hair, some apply various skin-tone patches or plasters, apply foundation to even out their underarm skin tone, and some even singe their underarm hair with a lighter...

Some say that the “armpit hair shame,” like “diamond worship,” is one of the most brilliant marketing scams of the 21st century.

Appendix 5. Bazhuayu Data Collection Tool



To maintain anonymity, this image is a newly created illustration

Bazhuayu Data Collection Tool is an external data capture tool of different social media platform. URLs belonging to social media posts can be used to automatically scrape different data. In this scraping exercise, I used a scrolling loop to collect comments and their secondary comments.

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