“Poor Sons, Rich Daughters”: Chinese Parenting Discourse on Social Media (2010–2025)

Anonymous ACL submission

Abstract

This study examines a widely circulated parenting maxim in contemporary China—“poor parenting for sons, rich parenting for daughters”—to provide an up-to-date account of how gendered parenting norms are debated on social media. We combine LLM-assisted annotation, topic modeling, and semantic co-occurrence network analysis to trace the structure and evolution of discourse across 331,737 posts from Sina Weibo, Zhihu, and RedNote (2010–2025). Our analyses surface layered asymmetries in attention and evaluation, including the dominance of daughter-focused discussion, the durability of aspirational “Rich Parenting” frames, and a temporal convergence toward endorsing Rich Parenting for both genders. We further identify an emergent theme of “Self-Indulgent Rich Parenting,” indicating a shift from child-centered prescriptions toward individual self-investment.

1 Introduction

Gendered parenting, raising sons and daughters according to different expectations, remains a salient feature of Chinese family life. Understanding how the public discusses, endorses, or challenges such norms offers a window into the reproduction and negotiation of gender ideologies in contemporary China. “Poor parenting for sons, rich parenting for daughters” (qiongyang er, fuyang nü) is one of the most widely circulated expressions of this gendered logic, and has generated extensive debate on social media in recent years. Yet how this discourse is structured, which targets receive more attention, and which stances attract support or opposition, has not been systematically examined.

This study makes three contributions. First, we provide a large-scale computational analysis of gendered parenting discourse in China, a domain previously examined primarily through qualitative methods or small-scale surveys. Second, our findings challenge the surface symmetry of the phrase “Poor parenting for sons, rich parenting for daughters,” revealing that public discourse centers disproportionately on daughters, with a particular anxiety about “Rich Parenting for daughters.” Third, we document the semantic migration of “Self-Indulgent Rich Parenting” from a parenting prescription to a discourse of female self-empowerment, offering empirical evidence for understanding how traditional gender norms are contested and repurposed in digital spaces.

2 Background

“Poor parenting for sons, rich parenting for daughters” is a widely circulated parenting maxim in Chinese society that prescribes gender-differentiated child-rearing strategies. The literal logic suggests that sons should be raised with material restraint and mental toughening, while daughters should be cultivated with broader horizons and refined tastes. Underlying this norm is an implicit assumption about divergent life trajectories for the two genders: sons are expected to bear economic responsibilities and endure social competition, whereas daughters are presumed to need the ability to “discern character” and resist material temptation (e.g., the enduring “talent-and-virtue” ideal that evaluates men by talent and women by virtue; Liu, 2024). In recent years,traditional gender norms has sparked considerable debate on social media, with some endorsing it as traditional wisdom and others critiquing it from a gender-egalitarian perspective (Shen & Jiao, 2024). Understanding the structure and evolution of this discourse can shed light on how gender norms are reproduced and negotiated in contemporary Chinese society.

Existing research on gender preferences in China has predominantly focused on quantifiable behavioral indicators. Demographic studies have documented the imbalanced sex ratio at birth and its

social consequences (Ebenstein, 2010; Edlund et al., 2013). Economic research has found that families with sons exhibit higher savings rates and lower consumption rates compared to families with daughters, attributing this pattern to competitive pressures in the marriage market (Wei & Zhang, 2011; Li & Wu, 2017; Tani et al., 2023). Educational sociology has examined gender disparities in parental investment in children's education (Buchmann et al., 2008; Liu et al., 2021). However, the discursive dimension,how the public discusses, evaluates, and contests gendered parenting norms,lacks large-scale data analysis. This dimension is related to but irreducible to behavioral indicators: discourse both reflects and constitutes attitudes (Phillips & Hardy, 2002; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

This traditional discourse faces multiple tensions in contemporary China. First, the intensification of educational competition,often characterized as involution, has reshaped parenting into a highly instrumental endeavor, placing immense pressure on parents to accumulate various forms of capital for their children (Kipnis, 2011; Zhang & Bray, 2017; Lin, 2018; Deng et al., 2024). Second, the widespread dissemination of gender-egalitarian ideas on digital platforms has posed direct challenges to the logic of gender-differentiated parenting (Li & Li, 2017; Wu & Dong, 2019; Gan, 2021; Mao, 2020). These tensions are not static but unfold dynamically at specific historical junctures; tracing the temporal evolution of discourse helps identify critical moments of attitudinal transformation. How do these tensions manifest in public discourse? Is the actual discursive structure of this seemingly symmetrical phrase also symmetrical? What patterns of attitudes emerge across different stances? These questions drive the present analysis.

3 Methods

3.1 Data Collection

We collected Chinese social media posts from three major platforms — Sina Weibo, Zhihu and RedNote — via a crawler-based pipeline. The keyword queries *Poor Parenting* and *Rich Parenting* were used to retrieve the posts. The collection period spanned from 2010 to September 2025, resulting in 331,737 posts after data was aggregated across platforms.

3.2 Data Preprocessing

We applied a unified preprocessing workflow to all posts: This involved: (i) removing noise (e.g. spam, boilerplate and irrelevant artefacts); (ii) normalising text (e.g. punctuation and character normalisation); (iii) filtering stopwords using a curated stopword list; and (iv) segmenting Chinese words with Jieba. The processed corpus was then used for annotation and analysis.

3.3 Data Annotation

To enable structured analyses, we annotated each post with a three-level, hierarchical label set. This set captured topic type, stance, and target. First, we determined whether each post primarily discussed Poor Parenting, Rich Parenting, or was unclear. Based on this classification, we labelled the attitudinal stance towards the focal parenting practice as support, opposition, or unclear. Finally, we annotated the intended target group — whether the post framed the practice as directed towards boys, girls, or neither — so that stance and target were interpreted with respect to the identified parenting frame. We implemented this procedure using an LLM-assisted annotation pipeline with human verification. We designed prompt templates and invoked GPT-5-Nano-2025-08-07 via the API to assign labels.

Previous studies have shown that LLMs can effectively support annotation in computational social science, with LLM-generated labels often demonstrating reasonable agreement with human judgements (Ziems et al., 2024; Pangakis & Wolken, 2024). Our stance labelling follows the established stance detection paradigm in NLP (Mohammad et al., 2016; ALDayel & Magdy, 2021), adapted for use in parenting discourse. To assess reliability in our setting, we manually inspected a sample of posts and compared human judgements with LLM-generated labels. The label definitions, prompt design and validation protocol are summarised in Table 1.

3.4 Semantic Co-occurrence Network Analysis

Semantic co-occurrence network analysis was first performed to characterise evaluative language surrounding Poor Parenting and Rich Parenting. We operationalised discourse contexts along two dimensions: stance (support versus oppose) and target (boys versus girls). Within each stance–target

Component	Accuracy	Macro-F1	Label	F1	Support (n)
Topic type	0.743	0.652	Unclear	0.810	173
			Rich Parenting	0.689	65
			Poor Parenting	0.458	23
Stance	0.766	0.716	Unclear	0.823	181
			Support	0.691	65
			Opposition	0.634	15
Target	0.866	0.716	Unclear	0.913	208
			Boys	0.412	16
			Girls	0.824	37

Table 1: LLM-assisted annotation reliability on a human-validated sample ($n = 261$). We report component-level Accuracy and Macro-F1, and per-label F1 with support.

condition, we identified the top co-occurring adjectives associated with poor parenting and rich parenting. The selection of adjectives considered the following three factors: (i) semantic relevance to the focal concept; (ii) TF–IDF values to emphasise condition-specific salience; and (iii) frequency to ensure robustness. These adjectives were then used to construct condition-specific co-occurrence networks, enabling us to compare association patterns across stances and gendered targets.

3.5 Topic Analysis

We conducted a topic analysis using the BERTopic model. The model was configured to automatically infer the number of topics from the corpus. Following topic induction, we performed manual clustering to merge semantically similar topics into higher-level thematic groups, applying the grouping criteria summarised in Table 2. We report the semantic content of the resulting topic clusters (based on representative terms and exemplar posts) and analyse shifts in temporal distribution across 2010–2025/09, highlighting how the prevalence of major themes evolves over time.

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 Temporal Trends in Stance and Gendered Targets

During the period from 2016 to 2025, clear temporal patterns emerged in the way Chinese social media users discussed poor and rich parenting in relation to stance and gender. Figure 1 shows that discourse in favour of rich parenting remained consistently dominant throughout the decade, with support for Poor Parenting typically forming the second-largest stream. However, the relative ordering changes towards the end of the timeline: since September 2024, opposition to Poor Parenting has overtaken support for it, indicating a recent shift towards explicitly rejecting Poor Parenting rather than merely endorsing Rich Parenting. Collectively, these stance trajectories suggest an overall normative shift in public discourse towards endorsing affluent parenting as the preferred approach.

The gender-specific trends shown in Figure 2 support this interpretation. Discussions of Rich Parenting for girls are the most salient and persistent topic throughout the period, whereas Poor Parenting for girls remains consistently marginal. For boys, the discourse shows an interleaving pattern: the early years are characterised by a stronger emphasis on poor parenting, but this advantage erodes over time, with Rich Parenting becoming more prominent by 2025. Therefore, the decade-long dynamics point to a broad convergence: regardless of whether the target is boys or girls, the discourse increasingly shifts towards Rich Parenting.

4.2 Semantic Co-occurrence Network Analysis Results

Across stance-conditioned networks, we observe a sharp lexical asymmetry in the ways in which users justify or reject Poor Parenting. There is also a comparatively aspirational — and more lexically stable — framing of Rich Parenting (see Figure 3). In the "Support Poor Parenting panel", the most prominent adjectives emphasise frugality and character building, such as cherish, healthy, thrifty, positive, and gentle. This suggests a moralised defence that frames poor parenting as disciplined and beneficial. In contrast, the "Oppose Poor Parenting" panel is dominated by stigmatising descriptors such as cheap, vulgar, and withered, as well as references to poverty.

This indicates that opposition is often expressed

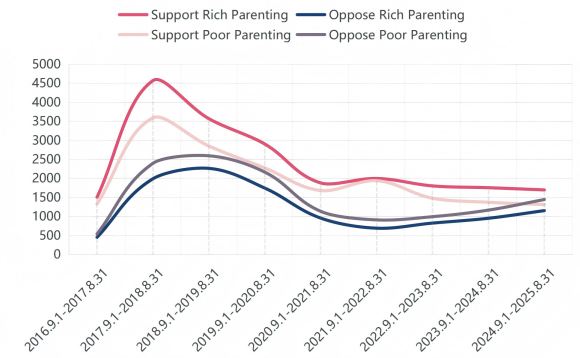

Figure 1: Temporal distribution of stance toward poor parenting vs. rich parenting (2016–2025).

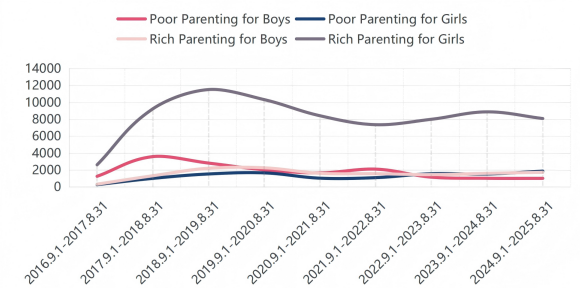

Figure 2: Temporal distribution of gender targets in poor parenting vs. rich parenting discourse (2016–2025).

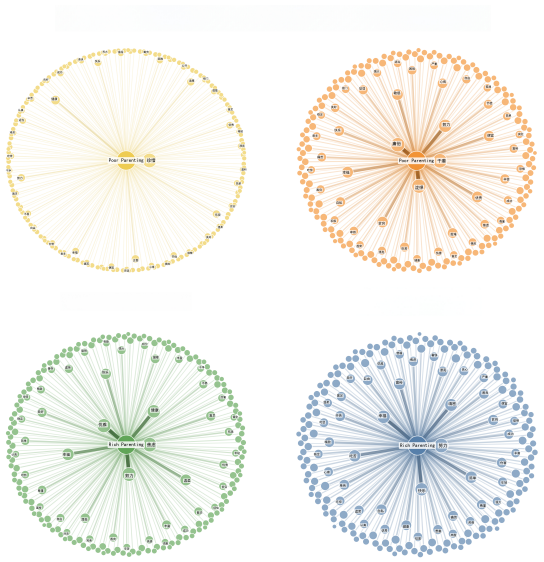

Figure 3: Adjective co-occurrence networks conditioned on stance.The four panels correspond to: top-left Support Poor Parenting, top-right Oppose Poor Parenting, bottom-left Support Rich Parenting, and bottom-right Oppose Rich Parenting.

through class-coded and derogatory imagery rather than neutral disagreement. This rhetorical pattern aligns with the temporal shift in Figure 1, where opposition to Poor Parenting overtakes support after September 2024. This is consistent with a shift from less endorsement to more explicit delegitimisation. Meanwhile, both the support and opposition networks for Rich Parenting remain centred on broadly aspirational attributes, such as happy, healthy, elegant, happiness, and effort, with anxious appearing prominently as well. This suggests that even critiques often operate within the same achievement-and-wellbeing vocabulary, rather than rejecting the desirability of Rich Parenting outright (see Figure 3).

Further analysis of gender-conditioned networks reveals that the decade-long convergence towards Rich Parenting (Figure 2) is underpinned by distinct evaluative vocabularies for girls and boys (Figure 4). The Rich Parenting network for girls is densely organised around refinement and wellbeing, with the most salient terms being meticulous, beautiful, happy, healthy, and happiness. In contrast, Poor Parenting for girls is anchored in hardship and constraint (e.g. hard, not easy, cheap, and poverty). This lexical contrast aligns with Figure 2, where discussion of Poor Parenting for girls remains consistently marginal, while Rich Parenting for girls is the most persistent hotspot. For boys, the networks are comparatively closer: Poor Parenting for boys foregrounds endurance and toughness cues (e.g. bitterness, bravery, strictness), while Rich Parenting for boys emphasises happiness, effort and affluence/sudden wealth, mirroring the interleaving temporal pattern in Figure 2, where the early emphasis on Poor Parenting for boys gradually gives way to richer forms of parenting by 2025.

Taken together, the semantic networks suggest that the aggregate trend documented in Figures 1–2 — a normative drift towards endorsing rich parenting regardless of the child's gender — is supported not only by shifting volumes over time, but also by a robust association between Rich Parenting and aspirational descriptors. There is also an increasingly stigmatising lexicon that frames Poor Parenting, especially for girls, as socially undesirable (Figures 3–4).

4.3 Topic Modeling Results

Our BERTopic pipeline initially produced 402 fine-grained topics, which we then consolidated into eight interpretable macro-topics (T1–T8; see Table 2). Figure 5 plots the cosine similarity matrix among these macro-topics and shows moderate semantic overlap overall (most cells in the

ID	Topic name	Initial topics	Posts
T1	Girls' Gender Socialization	8;12;24;26;35;42;46;50;52;56; 68;71;83;84;89 91;99;107;109; 114;123;124;128;136;141;145; 146;151;159;161;170;171;187; 195;202;206;210;226;233;236; 239;242;246;259;260;264;273; 297;307;331;332;336;342;350; 355;359;364;366;381;383;394; 400;10;69;119;335;55;178;374	61,411
T2	Self-Indulgent Rich Parenting	11;133;186;18;53;72;118;188; 235;262;320;337;340;362;34 127;238;37;96;315;395	16,645
T3	Children's Intimate-Relationship Concerns	22;28;32;101;102;104;116;122; 138;192;211;243;279;326;334 353;38;148;173;271;371;49;318; 74;108;176;387	13,531
T4	Traditional Gendered Parenting Roles	2;111;115;285;296;360;376;385	11,696
T5	Boys' Gender Socialization	4;39	9,158
T6	Warm Parenting	16;36;88;167;168;312;379;94;152;157;224;344	6,045
T7	Rich Parenting & Moral Decline	25;64;175;60;135;208;249;286;393	4,522
T8	Father Absence	27	2,755

Table 2: Manual clustering summary of BERTopic topics (initial topics = 402).

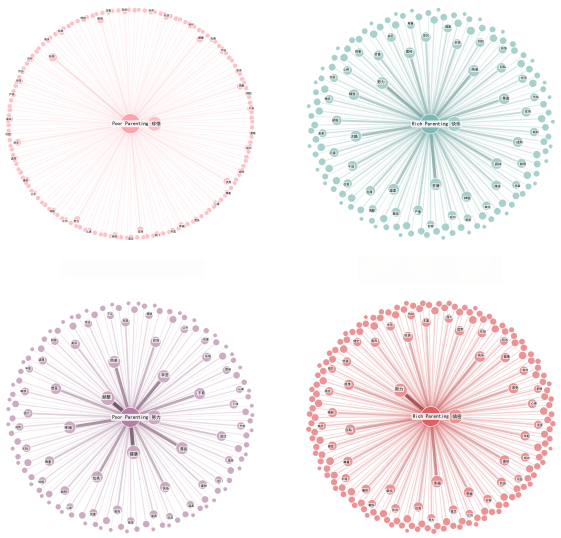

Figure 4: Adjective co-occurrence networks conditioned on gender target.The four panels correspond to: top-left Poor Parenting for Boys, top-right Rich Parenting for Boys, bottom-left Poor Parenting for Girls, and bottom-right Rich Parenting for Girls.

off-diagonal range are mid-to-high), suggesting a shared lexical backbone across otherwise distinct strands of the parenting debate. Notably, T1 (Girls' Gender Socialization) is among the most centrally connected themes (i.e., relatively high similarity with multiple topics), indicating that girl-focused socialization talk co-occurs with broader discussions of parenting rationales and perceived downstream outcomes. In contrast, T4 (Traditional Gendered Parenting Roles) shows weaker similarity with several other topics, implying that it is a more ideologically specific cluster rather than primarily a discourse about practice.

Temporal patterns further clarify shifting discourse priorities. Figure 6 (100 % stacked proportions) shows that T1 (Girls' Gender Socialization) remains dominant over time, consistent with earlier time-series evidence that Rich Parenting discourse especially when gendered toward girls occupies a persistent central position (Figures 1–2). Meanwhile, T5 (Boys' Gender Socialization) appears more intermittently and gradually declines in relative prominence as Rich Parenting related talk expands, aligning with the decade-long trend to support Rich Parenting regardless of child's gender. Figure 7 reveals additional late-period

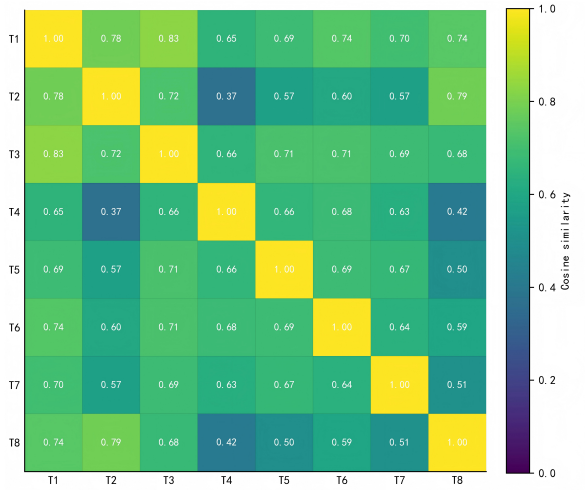

Figure 5: Topic similarity heatmap (cosine similarity).

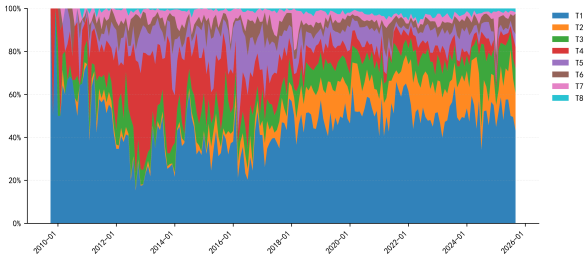

Figure 6: Temporal evolution of macro-topics

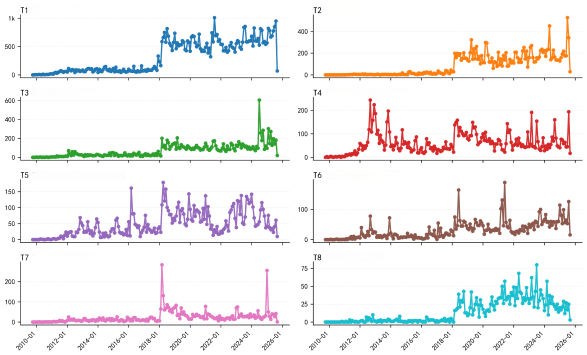

Figure 7: Temporal evolution of macro-topics

changes in absolute volume: T2 (Self-Indulgent Rich Parenting) becomes more visible in later years, while episodic spikes in T3 (Children's Intimate-Relationship Concerns) and T7 (Rich Parenting & Moral Decline) indicate recurring anxiety about relational and moral spillovers. Taken together, these topic trajectories reflect the stance-level shift that has occurred since late 2024 (Figure 1): Rich Parenting is increasingly functioning as the default reference point, while concerns about moral decline and relationship risks are emerging as salient counter-narratives within an overall discourse landscape that leans towards Rich Parenting.

4.4 Discussion

This study provides a large-scale empirical test of the popular maxim "raise sons frugally, raise daughters affluently" and demonstrates that it operates asymmetrically and dynamically throughout history. Firstly, the discourse's centre of gravity is clearly on affluent parenting for girls, which remains the most persistent and salient focus throughout the observation period. However, longitudinal evidence also suggests an important shift: over time, Rich Parenting for boys increases and eventually surpasses Poor Parenting, resulting in an emerging, gender-neutral norm that can be summarised as Rich Parenting for both boys and girls. In other words, rather than sustaining a stable, gender-differentiated prescription, the maxim increasingly functions as a discursive entry point into a broader moral economy of parenting, in which Rich Parenting becomes normalised as the desirable default strategy. This shift is consistent with the temporal patterns documented in Figures 1–2, suggesting that the slogan's apparent symmetry conceals an evolving trend towards convergence rather than balance (Westrupp et al., 2022).

Secondly, examining the intersection of the parenting frame, stance and gender target clarifies how this convergence is produced rhetorically. In the parenting–stance intersection, discourse around rich parenting — whether supportive or critical — tends to unfold as a vision-oriented narrative centred on desirable end states, such as happiness and well-being. This discourse simultaneously incorporates anxiety about the feasibility and cost of achieving these ideals. In contrast, Poor Parenting exhibits a much sharper split between support and opposition. Supportive discourse is largely moralised, emphasising virtues such as thrift, discipline, and character building (Kalil, 2014). In contrast, oppositional discourse disproportionately uses class-coded stigma, employing degrading and stratified language to mark poor parenting as socially unacceptable. In the parenting–gender intersection, boys and girls are embedded in different evaluative regimes. For boys, Poor Parenting is justified through masculine-coded cultivation (e.g. diligence, toughness and perseverance), whereas Rich Parenting more often foregrounds positive emotions and quality of experience. For girls, discourse overwhelmingly focuses on rich parenting, framing it in terms of health, refinement and del-

icate cultivation. In contrast, Poor Parenting for girls is characterised by negative evaluations and hardship narratives (e.g. suffering and poverty), consistent with the broader asymmetry that treats Poor Parenting for girls as normatively suspect (Lin, 2018). Together, these interactional patterns help to explain why the trends in stance and volume (Figure 1–2) tilt towards rich parenting: the pro-rich frame is stabilised by aspirational vocabulary that remains persuasive even under critique, while the anti-poor frame is reinforced by stigma that increases the social cost of endorsement.

Finally, topic modelling contextualises these patterns within broader thematic dynamics. Echoing the overall stance and gender trajectories, the topic structure reveals a broad shift towards themes centred on Rich Parenting, but also shows periodic waves of Rich Parenting anxiety — recurring concerns about moral consequences, relational risks, and the pressures of doing Rich Parenting correctly. Importantly, the rise of Rich Parenting for oneself as a prominent theme in the later period is also observed. This arguably signals a reorientation of life-course priorities in a low-fertility context, as parenting children is no longer treated as the central life project. Individuals are increasingly articulating a claim to the legitimacy of directing time, money and emotional resources towards self-investment (Zhang et al., 2025). Consequently, the discourse not only reproduces traditional gendered parenting norms, but also documents how parenting language is being repurposed to negotiate contemporary pressures, such as intensified competition, shifting gender ideologies and emerging individual-centred narratives of value and agency.

Limitations

Our study has several limitations that qualify the scope of the evidence and suggest directions for future work. First, the corpus is collected via keyword queries and restricted to three major platforms (Sina Weibo, Zhihu, and RedNote). As a result, our dataset may under-represent relevant discussion that uses indirect phrasing, sarcasm, images/memes, or platform-specific euphemisms, as well as discourse occurring in private channels or offline settings. In addition, platform governance and moderation practices can shape visibility and survivorship of posts over time, which may affect observed temporal trends.

Second, although we adopt LLM-assisted annotation with human validation, label noise remains possible—especially for implicitly stated stances, mixed evaluations, and posts where the target (boys vs. girls) is only weakly implied. The validation sample is modest relative to the full corpus, and class imbalance (e.g., many *Unclear* cases and small minority labels) likely depresses per-label performance for rarer categories. These constraints mean that fine-grained estimates (e.g., for less frequent stance–target combinations) should be interpreted cautiously.

Third, our semantic co-occurrence networks and topic modeling involve methodological choices that can influence results. Adjective extraction and segmentation (via Jieba) may miss multiword expressions, slang, or context-dependent meanings, and co-occurrence links cannot distinguish endorsement from quotation or irony without deeper pragmatics modeling. Similarly, BERTopic outputs depend on embedding and clustering settings, and our manual clustering of topics into macro-topics, while transparent and interpretable, introduces subjectivity (Liu & Wei, 2023). Replications using alternative tokenizers, embedding models, and stability analyses would strengthen confidence in the robustness of the thematic structure.

Finally, our analyses are descriptive rather than causal. We identify systematic asymmetries and temporal convergence in discourse, but we do not attribute these changes to specific exogenous events or mechanisms. Future work could incorporate event-centered designs, richer multimodal signals (images and memes), and cross-platform comparisons with additional sources to better isolate drivers of change and evaluate the generalizability of the observed patterns.

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