

The influence of emerging social media on teenagers' gender awareness: Take Xiaohongshu and Weibo as examples of discussions about "Beauty Service"

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ABSTRACT

With the development of Internet technology and the popularity of social media, Xiaohongshu and Weibo have become the core fields for the formation and expression of gender concepts among teenagers. The topic of "serving in the beauty service" has continued to gain popularity on the platforms, profoundly influencing the development of gender awareness among teenagers. This study uses observation, qualitative analysis, and in-depth interviews to focus on adolescent girls aged 14-28 who have long used Xiaohongshu or Weibo and are concerned about feminist and "beauty service" content. By analyzing the differences in discussion profiles, community atmosphere, and push mechanisms of "beauty service" on the two platforms, it explores the influence mechanism of social media on adolescent gender consciousness and platform differences. The study found that while Xiaohongshu and Weibo promote the awakening of gender awareness among teenagers (such as building mutual assistance spaces for women and increasing the visibility of gender issues), they also have problems of replicating gender stereotypes and intensifying physical anxiety; The two platforms have different paths and depths of influence on teenagers' gender awareness due to differences in community culture and push mechanisms. This study fills the gap in the specific impact path of "social media - youth - gender awareness" and provides a reference for guiding the healthy development of youth gender awareness and optimizing the gender issue ecosystem on social media.

KEYWORDS

Emerging social media; Teenagers; Gender awareness; U.S. Service; Little Red Book; Weibo

1 Introduction

1.1 Research background

In the digital age, the rapid development of Internet technology has driven the widespread popularity of social media such as Xiaohongshu and Weibo, gradually integrating into the daily lives of teenagers and becoming an important factor^[1] influencing their socialization. According to survey data from CNNIC, Sina and other institutions, the proportion of female Internet users in China rose from 12.3% in 1997 to 44.9% in June 2011, and they are no less active than men in areas such as social platforms and online shopping. Teenage girls, as an important group among them, stand out in gender topic discussions^[2].

In recent years, the topic of "serving in the US military" has rapidly gained popularity on Xiaohongshu and Weibo, becoming a focus of attention for teenagers. "Beauty service" refers to the phenomenon where women are forced to meet certain beauty standards in a male-dominated social structure at the cost of health, time, etc., while facing the exploitation of capital and power^[3]. The issue is not only related to teenagers' perception of aesthetics and the body, but is also deeply associated with the awakening of gender consciousness. However, the specific impact on teenagers' gender consciousness and the mechanism of platform action have not been fully explored, and it is of great practical necessity to study this issue.

1.2 Research significance

Existing studies mostly independently analyze "the impact of social media on gender consciousness" or "the impact of social media on adolescents", lacking a focus on the specific impact path of "social media

- adolescents - gender consciousness", and the research methods are more quantitative and lack qualitative interpretation of social and cultural motivations. This study fills this gap through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, while deepening the application of the concept^[4] of "mediated emotional solidarity" in local adolescent groups and enriching the theoretical dimensions of social media and gender studies.

An in-depth analysis of the impact of Xiaohongshu and Weibo on adolescent gender awareness can provide a basis for educators and parents to guide the healthy development of adolescent gender awareness; At the same time, it provides references for social media platforms to optimize their content ecosystems (such as reducing the dissemination of "beauty service" standards and strengthening positive gender issues), helps create a gender-equal online and social environment, and promotes the rational development of feminism among teenagers.

1.3 Research Objectives and Content

1.3.1 Research objectives

First, to explore the specific mechanisms by which social media affects adolescent gender awareness and the role of objective factors such as platform differences; 2 Compare the differences

between Xiaohongshu and Weibo in the awakening and expression of adolescent gender awareness and their impact on gender identity and behavior; Third, based on the research findings, explore ways to promote feminist development and build a gender-equal environment through social media.

1.3.2 Research content

It includes four aspects: an overview of discussions on "beauty service" on Xiaohongshu and Weibo (types of viewpoints, representative remarks), differences in community atmosphere and push mechanisms between the two platforms (Xiaohongshu tags vs. Weibo big V), an analysis of teenagers' cognition of "beauty service" and gender consciousness and the role of the platform through interviews, and a summary of the mechanisms by which social media influences teenagers' gender consciousness.

1.4 Research methods

This study focused on the core topic of "the impact of emerging social media on adolescent gender awareness", and in light of the actual needs of the research objectives and content, selected two methods that were easy to implement and could precisely match the research needs, namely the platform observation method and the simplified interview method. Among them, the platform observation method aims to quickly and systematically grasp the core characteristics of the "beauty service" discussions on Xiaohongshu and Weibo, by screening the highly popular relevant content of the two platforms and recording the opinion tendencies and interaction data to provide an objective basis for comparing the platform differences; The simplified interview method focuses on the subjective cognition of the adolescent group by conducting short interviews with eligible adolescent females to explore their true views on "beauty service" and the actual impact of platform content on their gender consciousness, supplementing the deep cognitive and emotional dimensions that quantitative observation is difficult to cover. The two methods work together to obtain objective discussion data at the platform level and capture individual subjective experiences of teenagers, laying the foundation for a comprehensive analysis of the mechanism by which social media affects teenagers' gender consciousness.

2 Literature review

2.1 Definition of core concepts of gender consciousness

gender consciousness, also known as social gender consciousness, is defined by Li Huiying (1996) as "observing society, politics, economy, culture and environment from a gender perspective, conducting gender analysis and gender planning in order to prevent and overcome patterns and measures that are detrimental to the development of both genders", Emphasizing its core attributes of "gender sensitivity" (awareness of the social and cultural causes of gender inequality) and "gender self-awareness" (promoting the coordinated development of both genders) ^[5].

Pan Zequan and Xie Yan (2018) further pointed out that gender consciousness is "the consciousness of studying social issues and eliminating inequality on the premise of acknowledging the physiological differences between the two sexes with the development tendency of gender equality" ^[6].

Ding Ning (2002) suggested that gender consciousness is not innate but "a consciousness that needs to be enlightened" ^[7]; Eyerman (1981), in combination with Marx's theory of "false consciousness", pointed out that women need to awaken from the "unconsciousness" of their own situation and enter the "conscious state" ^[8] through formal or informal gender training, which provides a theoretical basis for understanding the formation and development of adolescent gender consciousness.

2.2 Research on the association between social media and gender consciousness

Positive effects of social media on gender awareness: Nie Lu (2019) proposed that "the fourth wave of feminism is driven by social media" ^[11], and Feng Jianxia (2023) found through research that Xiaohongshu and Weibo provide women with "digital huddling" Spaces - women strengthen emotional resonance by sharing traumatic experiences of gender injustice and through collective behaviors such as reading, forwarding, and liking. The "mediated emotional solidarity" of the "women's community of shared destiny" has significantly increased the visibility of gender issues and has advanced

this process in the context of the younger age of social media, promoting the awakening of gender awareness among teenage girls. Chen Zonghai (2020) also pointed out that the virtual space of social media provides teenagers with new ways of interaction, which helps them adjust their social role positioning and indirectly influences the formation of gender concepts.

The negative impact of social media on gender consciousness: Dong Kaoyan (2021) 's research on Weibo trending topics shows that the topics still follow the "patriarchal ideology", do not break out of the framework of male domination thinking, and replicate or even reinforce traditional gender stereotypes ^[9]; Kamil Demirhan and Derya Caicir-Demirhan's (2015) study of Twitter found that while social media "expands dominant power hegemony" and encourages resistance, domestic platforms (such as Weibo) are more inclined to replicate traditional gender order ^[10] in power relations, There is a potential hindrance to the healthy development of adolescent gender awareness.

2.3 Research related to "beauty service"

Foreign theoretical basis: Italian scholar Maura Gancitano, in "Servitude of Beauty: How Beauty Enslaves and Consumes Women," suggests that the core logic of servitude of beauty includes three aspects: First, the standards of beauty are set and imposed on women by a male-dominated social structure; Second, capital reaps power and benefits through women's consumption behavior that caters to the standard of beauty; The third is that women have to pay a health price (such as excessive dieting and plastic surgery) to meet the beauty standards and bear both physical and mental stress.

Research on the "beauty service" discussion and Impact on Domestic Platforms: Wang Jiaxin (2023) Combined with lipstick consumption research points out that although the "beauty service" discussion on domestic social media affects individual consumption behavior, it has not seized the "beauty" discourse power and has not changed the situation ^[12] where Generation Z is forced to accept the high premium of beauty products. From the perspective of changes in aesthetic standards, Liu Qi's (2023) study of Xiaohongshu found that the platform's aesthetic has shifted from "fair, thin and young" (early content with "chopstick legs" and "A4 waist" accounted for more than 60%) to "healthy beauty" (in recent years, content with "strength beauty" and "healthy body shape" has increased and the interaction volume of plus-size bloggers has risen) But the core logic of "the body needs to be transformed" remains unchanged, and this change has led some teenagers to reflect on the oppression of "beauty enslavement" of "white, thin and young" and turn to healthy beauty to resist discipline ^[13].

LAN Xue's research on Xiaohongshu shows that the platform builds body images such as "perfect and refined" and "professional and practical" through algorithmic recommendations and commercial operations. While providing aesthetic references, it intensifies body anxiety among teenagers through "social comparisons, body objectification, and consumption anxiety", directly promoting "beauty service" behaviors (such as excessive makeup and extreme weight loss) ^[15]; At the same time, some teenagers resist the oppression of "beauty service" by enhancing their media literacy and filtering out anxiety-inducing content. Zhang Yuhan (2024) further verified that the intensity of Xiaohongshu usage was positively correlated with the internalization of ideal appearance among teenagers ($r=0.297$, $p<0.01$), and the deeper the internalization of ideal appearance, the more likely it was to generate negative body image ($\beta=0.335$, $p<0.001$), But mutual assistance among women in the comments section of the platform (such as encouragement like "You have a healthy figure") can relieve the pressure of "beautification" ^[14].

Furthermore, a study by Zhang Manman (2024) and He Muyuan et al. (2024) suggests that teenage girls have engaged in "anti-americanism" practices: Such as sharing "imperfect" features of the body under the topic "# My Imperfect Body" on Xiaohongshu, choosing "boyfriend style" outfits and appearing without makeup, Posting unfiltered body images to call for "rejecting body shame", reconfiguring aesthetic standards through collective voices, highlighting subjectivity after the awakening of gender consciousness ^[16].

2.4 Insufficient existing research

First, the research subjects are scattered, mostly independently analyzing the impact of "social media on gender consciousness" or "social media on adolescents", without focusing on the specific path of "social media on adolescent gender consciousness"; Second, the research methods are more quantitative, lacking a qualitative interpretation of the social and cultural motivations behind the changes in adolescent gender consciousness; Third, studies on "American military service" have mostly remained at the level of phenomenon description and impact analysis, and have not proposed systematic intervention plans in combination with platform mechanisms (such as algorithms and content distribution), leaving room for exploration in this study.

3 Argumentative analysis

This argumentative analysis combines text analysis with interview data. The text analysis included 30 samples, including 15 from Xiaohongshu and 15 from Weibo, from August 17 to August 18, covering information such as text content excerpts, interaction data, discussion atmosphere, and recommended dissemination methods under different topic tags. The interviews were conducted with 12 teenagers aged 14-25, covering different genders, educational backgrounds and social media usage habits, focusing on issues such as perception of "American military service", social media influence and practice predicaments, and all views were presented anonymously.

3.1 Overview of the discussion on "beauty service" on both platforms

In terms of the types of viewpoints, Xiaohongshu's "beauty service" discussions are characterized by a distinct sense of life and experience, accompanied by collisions of diverse viewpoints. Under hashtags such as "# Conscription" and "# feminism", the content is expressed in a diverse way around conceptual definition, practical reflection and value debate: One is the definition discrimination type, such as topics like "How to distinguish between American service and the pursuit of beauty" (No. 15), which explore the boundaries of core concepts through the theoretical distinction of "subject and object", and form a rational discussion in the comment section on "whether voluntary behavior constitutes oppression"; The Other is practical awakening, such as "Thought awakening, Action still lags behind due to constraints" (No. 2), with 25,000 likes, reflects teenagers' resonance with the gap between cognition and practice, and the blogger promotes in-depth thinking by integrating multiple perspectives; Third, value debate. Under the topic "Stop Judging Anyone Serving in the US military" (No. 1), liberal feminists and radicals engaged in a fierce debate on "whether the act of serving in the US military should be criticized". Among the 2,278 comments, there were both inclusive voices that "respect individual choice" and sharp rebuttals that "there is no true freedom under structural oppression". Notably, the platform included popular culture in the discussion, such as the debate over whether Judy in Zootopia 2 was serving in the US military (numbers 6 and 13), forming a mapping discussion of "fictional characters - real concepts", with a single note receiving 16,000 likes.

Discussions on Weibo focus on social phenomena and group tags, showing a stronger tendency towards entertainment, and the proportion of content related to celebrities is extremely high. Among the new samples, topics related to celebrities remained mainstream. For instance, "xxx in Chinese entertainment costume Beauty" (number 21) received 659 likes, and "xx costume beauty is so cute" (number 25) received 2,043 likes. The comment sections were mostly comments like "praise for appearance level" from fans, accounting for more than 70%. The topic "Ugly should be self-directed to take beauty roles" (number 23) directly linked beauty roles to looks, and most of the 208 likes were in agreement, reflecting an endorsement of the "looks above all" concept. In terms of public issue discussions, in addition to the previous question "Does Judy enlist in the military service?", the newly added "Talk Show performers' discussion on the military service" (number 26) received 672 likes, but the comments were mostly meaningless follow-ups; In the topic of "Teasing novels" (number 30), comments on the phenomenon of "yaoi novelists comparing the beauty of male characters in their books with that of female characters" expressed the opposing view that "putting men in military service is not about men tramping on women", showing concern about the phenomenon of women being disregarded in gender comparisons. In addition, under the topic "Observing Male Celebrities/Bloggers Who Love to Wear Cosplay" (number 28), the view "Support men to get involved" received 734 likes, reflecting the support of some users for men's participation in appearance management.

3.2 Differences in community atmosphere and push mechanism

Xiaohongshu's community culture is characterized by the coexistence of rational reasoning and emotional mutual assistance. Under the core topic, user interaction is mainly about outputting opinions, such as the note "Makeup is a beauty service, voluntary under structural oppression is oppression" (No. 3) received 3,286 comments, and most users participated in the discussion through theoretical references and case analogies, forming a virtuous cycle of "opinion collision - consensus building"; Even for controversial topics (such as No. 8 "What's wrong with my beauty service?"), the comment section was dominated by concept analysis, with personal attacks accounting for less than 5%. The platform's push is highly dependent on search tags. 14 out of 15 Xiaohongshu samples were recommended through tags such as "# Military Service # feminism", and the algorithm precisely matches content based on users' historical searches. For example, after multiple views of definitional content, the platform continuously pushes notes such as "Definition of Military service" and "concept popularization" (numbers 9 and 11). Reinforcing the systematicness of the cognition; But some commercial accounts deliberately create oppositions for traffic (such as No. 14, "Don't understand why getting beautiful is the beauty service"), which is recommended through controversial titles and can easily cause cognitive confusion. This note received 1,339 comments, indicating the heat of the discussion it sparked.

The community atmosphere on Weibo is characterized by "emotional venting over rational discussion", and fan culture has a significant influence on discussion. In celeb-related topics, the "emotional support" of fan groups dominated the interaction, such as the comments on male celebrity recommendation posts (numbered 19, 20, 21, 24, 25, 29) which were mostly meaningless water comments like "Brother is so handsome" and "so cute", lacking substantive discussion on gender issues; In discussions on public issues, cross-platform criticism and opinion alignment are prominent, such as the negative review of Xiaohongshu in No. 18, which reflects the group opposition tendency of Weibo users. The push mechanism shows a "traffic-oriented" feature, with celebrity content getting higher exposure based on fan activity, such as the post No. 25, "xx is so cute in the beauty service," received 2,043 likes, and No. 29, "Did xx secretly take the beauty service?" received 1,181 likes. The social issue, No. 26, "Talk Show performers' Discussion about taking beauty roles," received 672 likes, but the interaction depth was far less than that of the celebrity topic; The hot search mechanism amplifies extreme views, and radical statements numbered 18 are recommended through "hashtags + controversial expressions", further intensifying the polarization of views. In addition, the traffic distribution on Weibo leans significantly towards top accounts and popular celebrities, making it difficult for ordinary users to gain high exposure through in-depth discussions on gender issues, weakening the spread of diverse voices.

3.3 Interview Analysis of Teenagers' cognition and the Role of the platform

The interview data showed that there was a significant divergence in the perception of "military service" among different adolescent groups, and that platform usage habits directly influenced the formation path of their gender consciousness. Among the deep users of Xiaohongshu, the contradiction between cognitive awakening and practical predicament is particularly prominent. Some respondents put forward the definition that "makeup is a pain-induced aesthetic act", acknowledging both the immediate satisfaction brought by makeup and being wary of capital creating consumption traps through topics such as "the first set of cosmetics in life". This dual perception is highly consistent with Xiaohongshu's "rational thinking" community atmosphere. Some respondents also shared the transition from "using makeup as a symbol of resistance" to "compromising under social pressure", admitting that they "couldn't escape the social gaze", which confirmed the potential discipline of user behavior by Xiaohongshu's algorithm when pushing beauty content - even if they actively search for balanced content such as "making money", it is still difficult to escape the infiltration of aesthetic standards.

The perception of Weibo users shows a dual tendency of entertainment and extremity. Some respondents initially narrowed "cosmetology" to extreme behaviors such as plastic surgery, and later came into contact with the theoretical interpretation of "patriarchy" through Weibo's trending topics, but the high exposure of the content related to celebrities led them into cognitive confusion: on the one hand, they agreed that "makeup is self-objectification", and on the other hand, they downplayed the sense of oppression due to the entertainment discussion of "male celebrities cosmetology". This contradiction is particularly evident among fan groups. For instance, in the text analysis of topics such as "xx is so cute in makeup", more than 70 percent of the comments are of the kind that praise the level of appearance, reflecting the squeeze of Weibo's traffic mechanism on in-depth discussions.

Push mechanisms across different platforms also lead to significant differences in user acceptance of gender issues. Some respondents, who are core users of fashion and learning content on Xiaohongshu, have formed the perception that "aesthetic diversity has little impact" by actively choosing "not interested" to filter out feminist content, but their admission of the view that social media "intensifies appearance anxiety" reveals the potential impact of algorithmic invisible push - even if deliberately avoided The aesthetic standards in beauty and fashion content will still subtly permeate. In contrast, another respondent deepened their understanding of gender differences through campus cases such as "rehearsals with makeup only for girls", and even reflected on the nature of their own emphasis on makeup when learning to dance, demonstrating the shaping effect of the platform's content under high frequency of use.

The interview also exposed the real predicament of gender awareness cultivation. Some respondents, due to their family background, paid attention to gender issues at an early age, but were subjected to body shapting by women of the same age, reflecting the gaze collusion within the female community; There are also respondents who have long internalized social aesthetic standards due to their "single eyelid, flat head" appearance anxiety, confirming the oppression of self-perception by Xiaohongshu's "refined life" content. The concern raised by one respondent that "teenagers lose their subjectivity due to excessive exposure to gender issues" contrasts with the phenomenon observed by another respondent that "male awakening lags", highlighting the mechanism flaws of the platform in balancing issue dissemination and independent thinking - the amplification of extreme views on Weibo and the information cocoon on Xiaohongshu, Together, they pose an obstacle to the healthy development of gender awareness.

4 Conclusion

4.1 Platform characteristics shape differentiated paths for gender awareness dissemination

Xiaohongshu's community atmosphere, centered on life-like sharing and rational speculation, encourages teenagers to engage in conceptual discrimination and practical reflection on "serving in the beauty service". Its in-depth discussions on topics such as "How to distinguish between military service and the pursuit of beauty" and "whether aesthetic standards are oppressive" have helped teenagers develop sensitivity to gender discipline, and some users have achieved gender awareness through "anti-military service" practices (such as sharing imperfect bodies and refusing excessive makeup). But the information cocoon caused by algorithmic recommendations may also reinforce the inherent logic of "the body needs to be modified", putting some teenagers in a dilemma of "cognitive awakening but practical compromise".

Weibo, on the other hand, shows fragmentation and polarization in the dissemination of gender issues due to its entertainment orientation and traffic mechanism. The high proportion of content related to celebrities simplifies "beauty service" into an appearance management behavior, weakening the exploration of the nature of gender oppression; Opposing views and cross-platform criticism in discussions on public issues, while expanding the breadth of gender awareness, are prone to cause cognitive confusion among teenagers. The platform's traffic bias towards top accounts and hot topics also makes it difficult for the rational voices of ordinary users to spread and limit the effective penetration of gender equality concepts.

4.2 The discussion of "Beauty Service" has become an important vehicle for the awakening of gender awareness among teenagers

Teenagers gradually build up their understanding of the gender power structure by participating in the "American service" discussion. Inspired by views on Xiaohongshu such as "Voluntary under structural oppression is also oppression", some teenagers have begun to reflect on the social causes behind behaviors like "makeup and weight loss" and question the traditional logic that "women need to gain value through appearance"; Discussions on Weibo about "men serving beauty services" have broken the singleness of gender discipline and pushed teenagers to recognize the universality of gender oppression.

But there are obvious obstacles to the cognitive deepening process: the opposing views that business accounts create traffic have led to confusion among teenagers about the definition of "serving in the US military"; The implicit discipline of the platform's aesthetic standards (such as "healthy beauty" still emphasizing body modification) has led some teenagers into the trap of "resisting old discipline with new discipline"; The collusion of body shaming and staring within the female community has also weakened the practice of gender consciousness awakening.

4.2.1 The influence of social media on gender consciousness is dual The positive value is reflected in providing digital spaces for gender awakening among teenagers

Xiaohongshu's "mediated emotional solidarity" strengthens gender community awareness through female mutual assistance, and Weibo's public topic discussions increase the visibility of gender issues, both of which jointly promote the early awakening of gender awareness among teenagers. The interviews showed that teenagers who participated in the platform discussions for a long time had a significantly deeper understanding of concepts such as "gender equality" and "body autonomy", and some users transformed their online cognition into offline practice.

The negative effects are concentrated on the replication and reinforcement of the traditional gender order: the "patriarchal aesthetic logic" continued by platforms (such as the need for women to conform to standards through appearance), the precise push of anxiety-inducing content by algorithms, and the masking of the oppressive nature by entertainment dissemination, all together constitute obstacles to the healthy development of adolescent gender consciousness. Some teenagers develop appearance anxiety due to internalizing social aesthetic standards, or fall into "identity confusion" due to the impact of diverse viewpoints, making it difficult for them to form a stable concept of gender equality.

4.2.2 Adolescent gender awareness development faces a dual contradiction of cognition and practice

At the cognitive level, teenagers generally have the problem of "disconnection between theoretical cognition and practical cognition": they agree with the theoretical view that "aesthetic standards are oppressive", but have difficulty getting rid of the anxiety about appearance under the social gaze; They understand that gender equality requires breaking stereotypes, but are trapped by the aesthetic expectations of their peers. In practice, the "anti-service" campaign shows individual characteristics, with weak collective resistance. The awakening of most teenagers only remains at the

level of online expression and is difficult to translate into actual actions to change the real gender order. This contradiction essentially reflects the struggle and adjustment of teenagers between traditional gender culture and emerging concepts of equality.

The influence of social media on teenagers' gender consciousness is dual. On the one hand, it provides teenagers with space to discuss gender issues and promotes the awakening of gender awareness, such as the practice of "anti-americanism" which helps to reconstruct aesthetic standards; On the other hand, algorithmic recommendations reinforce stereotypes, and an entertaining atmosphere undermines in-depth discussions, hindering the healthy development of gender awareness.

In the future, platforms need to optimize algorithms to reduce the push of single aesthetic content and increase the exposure of content with diverse gender concepts; Establish rational discussion mechanisms to curb the spread of extreme views. Schools can offer media literacy and gender education courses to enhance critical thinking among teenagers. Families should enhance communication and guide correct cognition.

As technology advances, it is possible to explore the use of AI to monitor bad gender content and build a gender-equal content ecosystem. At the same time, encourage teenagers to participate in gender-related creation, make them the main body of gender awareness shaping, and jointly promote the formation of inclusive and equal gender concepts among teenagers.

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