

# ***Digital Identities and Gender Inequality in China's Cyberspace***

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**Abstract.** Amid digital media's deep integration into daily life, social platforms have become core arenas for gender dynamics, yet gender inequality persists in China's cyberspace. This paper examines how women's digital identity construction, self-expression, and inequality experiences are shaped by platform mechanisms and social norms. Via a structured July 2025 online survey of 235 Chinese internet users (82.6% female), it explores correlations between platform usage, appearance anxiety, feminist identity, and online discourse behaviors. Key findings include: platform interaction intensifies women's appearance anxiety across age groups; notable gender gaps in perceiving double standards and discourse restrictions; stigmatized feminist identity limiting proactive advocacy; and women's higher sensitivity to suppressed gender-equality discourse. This paper fills gaps in multi-generational female online experience research, offers empirical insights into women's negotiation of constraints and digital resistance, enriches understanding of gender dynamics in algorithm-mediated spaces, and provides practical implications for inclusive online ecosystems.

**Keywords:** Digital Identity, Gender Inequality, Cyberspace, Appearance Anxiety, Feminist Resistance

## **1. Introduction**

In today's interconnected world, the media are not merely a communication tool, but also an "infrastructure" of social relations. Its technical logic permeates all aspects of daily life and reconstructs the way individuals interact with society. This global wave of digital transformation, driven by information technologies, is reshaping social operation models across the globe. Narrowing down to China's context, as a frontrunner in digital innovation with vibrant platform ecosystems and massive user bases, we face both opportunities and unique challenges in this transformation. The network society is centered on information technology, forming a "space of flows" and "timeless time" [1]. The Internet and social media have transcended their role as mere communication tools to become central to daily life, shaping how people access information, build relationships, and participate in public discourse.

Yet, alongside their profound influence, specific problems emerge starkly within China's digital landscape: the privacy crisis where personal data is at constant risk of leakage on various platforms;

the digital divide that still gaps different regions, age groups, and social strata in accessing and utilizing digital resources; the body politics issues, as online spaces increasingly intertwine with how individuals perceive and present their physical selves; and cyber violence that spreads rapidly, inflicting psychological and social harm. Their pervasiveness means they not only reflect societal dynamics but also actively reshape power structures and individual experiences.

This global digital transformation is particularly pronounced in China, where a distinctive ecosystem of platforms has taken root. In China, platforms like Douyin, Weibo, and Rednote—where female users constitute a significant majority (per QuestMobile, female users make up nearly 50% of total internet users, 624 million as of January 2025, up 2.6% year-on-year)—are popular. They spend more time on social platforms like Rednote and WeChat, while actively engaging. Women constitute the core user group of China's mainstream social platforms and also serve as a key group in the consumption and dissemination of content on these platforms. According to The Top 10 Chinese Social Apps Report (February 2025), 70%-85% of Rednote's users are female. As indicated in Weibo's 2024 Consumption Trend Report, as of September 2024, Weibo had 257 million daily active users, among whom 55% were female—have become integral to women's daily interactions, content creation, and self-expression. For women, this digital landscape is marked by two overarching challenges that underpin their online struggles: The privacy crisis, which subjects them to comprehensive surveillance spanning physical spaces and digital bodies (e.g., an estimated 30,000 government censors monitor blogs, chatrooms, e-mails, and web pages as part of China's surveillance network, known as "The Great Firewall of China" [2]; and the widening digital divide, characterized by persistent gender-based disparities in technology access (reflected in China's rapid internet user growth alongside uneven privacy protections that may exacerbate such gaps) [2]. From these core issues emerge two derivative problems: body politics, a disciplinary system co-constructed by media representations and algorithms; and cyber violence, manifested through the routinization and scaling of gendered attacks—phenomena amplified on Chinese platforms (consistent with findings that 74% of Chinese respondents reported personal information exposure, creating conditions for such abuses) [2].

Amid such layered obstacles, women are engaging in active resistance and reconstruction, developing new strategies to carve out spaces for themselves within online gaps. For example, female K-pop fans on Twitter have exposed misogynistic idol content and pushed for fixes via hashtag campaigns [3]. On Weibo, women used diverse discursive strategies in debates over issues like "sanitary pads on high-speed railways" and "more women's restrooms," with pro-women remarks being largely constructive [4]. Additionally, post-#MeToo, Chinese women supported South Korean women online amid their deepfake abuse incidents, while Chinese female engineers developed open-source AI to resist deepfakes. These grassroots efforts show how women carve out emancipatory spaces in China's online landscape—and globally—turning algorithmic constraints into sites of collective empowerment that foster cross-border solidarity.

With the rapid development of digital media, various social media platforms have formed unique user groups and content ecology through differentiated positioning. Tiktok focuses on short videos, Rednotes focuses on text sharing, and Bilibili features long videos. What is more complicated is that the recommendation system inside each platform will further distribute personalized content based on user behavior data, forming a unique "information environment".

Collaborative Filtering and deep learning models are widely used by platforms to achieve personalized recommendations. When a user shows a preference for a specific type of content (such as liking, commenting, finishing or sharing), the platform matches the content through the following process:

- (1) Analyze the key characteristics of user interactive content (such as theme, style, creator, etc.)
- (2) Look for other content with similar characteristics in the content pool
- (3) Rank content and push it to users based on predicted interaction probability

This "positive feedback loop" mechanism makes the content users are exposed to more and more in line with their historical preferences [5]. For example, users who show an interest in beauty content receive more relevant recommendations, strengthening their engagement in the field.

However, there are good and bad aspects to this nudge approach. On the one hand, algorithm recommendations can help users save about 40% of content search time [6]. In addition, this mechanism promotes the formation of "interest communities," enabling users to quickly find like-minded groups to meet the needs of social belonging. In special periods such as public health events, an accurate information push also helps the rapid dissemination of important information. On the other hand, it also creates some misinformation or anxiety. For example, body comparisons on social media may prompt young women to pay more attention to their body image. But exposure to the ideal image of thinness can lead to depression, stress, guilt, shame, insecurity, and body dissatisfaction.

In an era where digital platforms are reshaping social interactions at breakneck speed, the rise of platforms like Weibo, Douyin, and WeChat as hubs for information exchange and public discourse in China raises pressing questions: Amid this digital immersion, how do these platforms influence how people – especially women – construct identities and engage with the world? It's precisely this gap between widespread digital dependence and under-explored gendered experiences that makes our research critical. With the rapid development of digital platforms, social media platforms such as Weibo, Douyin, and WeChat have become crucial arenas for information exchange and public discourse expression in China. As digital life becomes deeply embedded in daily routines, citizens—especially the younger generation—are increasingly turning to online platforms not only for entertainment but also to present their self-images and engage in interactions on diverse topics.

This paper uses a survey of Chinese internet users to investigate how symbolic and low-cost behaviors on social media—such as liking, reposting, and hashtag participation—correlate with female users' self-image construction, willingness to express themselves online, and sense of self-identity. In particular, it focuses on how female users' image presentation and expressive behaviors unfold in an online environment intertwined with platform content norms and social expectations.

By analyzing survey responses and behavioral trends, this paper explores the extent to which women's image-building in cyberspace can break through traditional cognitive frameworks, and how these behaviors reflect the diverse shifts in contemporary young women's self-perception.

The paper's analysis of these behaviors will raise questions about the role of algorithmic recommendations, content moderation, and social and cultural expectations in shaping women's online images. It will also identify recurring behavioral patterns in the current online ecosystem that both reflect women's demands for self-expression and promote the renewal of image cognition.

## 2. Literature review

The above discussion on the influence of algorithmic recommendations, content moderation, and social and cultural expectations on the shaping of women's online images, as well as the recurring behavioral patterns, needs to be examined within the broader context of digital identity research. Existing studies have not only analyzed the complex tensions between platform rules, social interactions, and algorithmic logic in digital identity construction — as illustrated by the classificatory perspectives of digital identification, active self-presentation, and algorithmic profiling — but also paid special attention to women's unique experiences in negotiating digital identities,

including how they navigate structural constraints and engage in strategic self-presentation. Together, these studies go beyond the superficial understanding of digital identity as merely account symbols, revealing the underlying power dynamics and the ongoing interplay between women's agency and constraints. The following section will systematically review relevant literature to lay a theoretical foundation for analyzing the complexity of women's digital identity practices.

## 2.1. Digital identity construction and self-presentation

Recently, according to existing scholarly research, users' perceptions of digital identity can be categorized into three types: digital identification (identity markers for platform login), self-presentation (proactively constructed online images), and datafied self (portraits built by platform algorithms using user data). These concepts are categorized based on "the actors of behavior and forms of presentation" in the construction of digital identities. Essentially, from the dimension of "passive verification → active expression → algorithmic definition", they dissect the different roles of digital identities in the triangular relationship of "user – platform - social interaction". This categorization allows us to break free from the one - dimensional understanding that "a digital identity is merely an account nickname" and to perspectively examine, layer by layer, the interaction logic between users and platforms. These perceptions are not isolated but often intertwined, reflecting users' perceptions of identity, agency, and their relationship with digital platforms under the influence of datafication [7].

For women navigating digital spaces, these layers of digital identity perception become particularly tangible in how they craft and negotiate their online presence. Specifically, the framework of digital identification, self-presentation, and datafied self offers a lens to examine how gendered experiences unfold in algorithmic ecosystems. Then, women actively shape online images through content creation—such as projecting traits like "strong and beautiful" or "professional and independent." These intentional self-representations serve as both responses to existing gender stereotypes and efforts to reconstruct them. Meanwhile, platform algorithms generate "implicit portraits" of women based on their content interactions, including likes and browsing records. These portraits often take the form of labels like "young mother" or "career woman." These algorithmic labels, in turn, influence the content recommendations women receive on these platforms. In response, women may choose to actively adapt to such labels, or they may resist them—exercising agency in how they engage with the digital identities imposed on them.

According to scholarly research, visual representations shape the meaning of values through interactions between images and text, and aestheticized consumption serves as the core logic [8]. The core of digital identity lies in "conveying self-meaning through symbols (visuals, text)", and women's self-presentation particularly relies on the coordination of visual symbols (such as short video frames, image styles) and text (copywriting, hashtags) — a process that is not only influenced by platform aesthetic logic but also carries women's definitions of their own identities.

Under these three classifications, self-presentation has become the main analytical direction of content. Several other scholars have conducted more in-depth research on this content. Hollenbaugh identified three core variables: platform affordances (anonymity, content persistence, visibility), management of other-generated content (e.g., handling comments and tags), and audience composition with context collapse (the merging of different social circles) [9]. These three variables are precisely the core contradictions and sources of agency in women's digital identity construction — the essence of women's self- presentation is to define "who I am" through strategic choices within the constraints of these variables. For users, features such as "anonymity" and "visibility" affect their "willingness to self-disclose" after receiving content (for example, after seeing gender- related

content in anonymous communities, they are more likely to admit their "gender anxiety"); "context collapse" (the coexistence of multiple social circles) affects their "requirements for the consistency of self-portraits" (for example, after seeing different content in family groups and best friend groups, there may be conflicts in the perception of identities such as "good daughter" and "good friend").

self - disclosure, while asynchronicity, diverse audiences and feedback better support self-presentation. For users, self - disclosure can extend to re - evaluating personal traits after encountering content. For example, they may reflect on their own "dependency" after seeing posts about "independent women". Meanwhile, self- presentation evolves into adjusting ideals of the "perfect self" based on content cues. For instance, users might integrate "professionalism" into self - portraits after engaging with content about "career women".

## 2.2. Platform-mediated gender performance and constraints

Beyond individual strategies, platform technologies themselves embed norms that shape women's self-presentation. For example, platforms embed aesthetic standards through technical tools such as filters, constraining women's physical performance. According to a recent study by scholars [10], social media beauty filters contain racial biases and embed Eurocentric aesthetic standards (such as brightening skin tones and modifying eye and nose shapes). Essentially, this technical design means that platforms, through algorithms and technical tools, set "default norms" for users' physical performance, especially for women. For women, these technologically mediated aesthetic standards become implicit constraints on gender performance. To gain recognition on platforms, women often need to adapt to the "ideal female image" shaped by filters (such as fair skin, narrow noses, and large eyes), and their physical expression is confined to a standardized framework. Even if they choose to resist (such as using unfiltered content), they may face implicit rejection for being "aesthetically inconsistent." This directly embodies the core of "platform mediation": platform technologies are not neutral tools but intervene in gender performance through preset aesthetic rules. At the same time, they strengthen the coerciveness of such constraints by marginalizing "non-standard images" through algorithms. Furthermore, commercial rules and institutional discourse jointly shape women's strategic performance and limit the radicalness of their expression. In the Chinese internet context, scholars [11] focused on the feminist practices of beauty influencers on Weibo and revealed the contradictions in women's gender performance under platform mediation. On the one hand, influencers construct gender performances of "female solidarity" through emotional expression and actions (such as advocating for gender equality). On the other hand, platform commercial logic (traffic monetization, brand collaborations) forces them to convert feminist expressions into brand assets (such as linking gender equality with product marketing), forming a "commercial constraint." Meanwhile, "state-aligned soft activism" (voicing opinions within the framework of social harmony discourse) reflects the "discursive constraint" on gender performance by institutional contexts through platforms. This clearly demonstrates the dual role of platforms as intermediaries: they provide space for women's feminist expression (a form of gender performance), but at the same time, through commercial rules and institutional adaptation requirements, they limit the radicalness of such performances, forcing women's gender political expressions to compromise with the realistic constraints mediated by platforms.

Platforms also reproduce traditional gender norms through the design of social functions, constraining women's social performance. A scholar [12] studied a platform function of WeChat ("People Nearby") and found that it reproduces traditional gender norms, constrains women's social performance, and reinforces gender power relations. The study revealed that in WeChat's location-based dating function "People Nearby," women need to expose more privacy (such as displaying

personal information) to gain dating opportunities, and traditional gender norms (e.g., "men take the initiative in pursuit, while women wait passively") are reproduced through the platform's interaction patterns. This embodies the key role of "platform mediation": the design of platform functions (such as location display and interaction mechanisms) has not broken the offline gender power structure; instead, it has become a "digital carrier" of traditional gender norms, constraining women's social performance. Women's self-presentation must conform to the gender expectations of "passive waiting and moderate exposure"; otherwise, they may face the stigma of "misconduct" or personal safety risks. Scholar [12] argues that such performance is not merely an individual choice but the result of the joint action of platform functions and patriarchal culture, ultimately reinforcing existing offline gender inequality through digital interactions.

Finally, platforms also standardize the performance of idealized female images, forming constraints on role selection [13]. Platforms shape standardized gender performances of the "superwoman ideal" through traffic rules and aesthetic orientation, and form implicit constraints through differences in role popularity. The study points out that female health and beauty influencers from China, the United States, and Belgium construct their images through six roles, among which "the Beauty," "the Busy Bee," and "the Expert" are the most common, with "the Beauty" role concentrating sexualized presentations. This phenomenon reveals the logic of platform-mediated gender performance: the platform's traffic mechanisms (such as the number of likes and exposure rates) favor specific roles (such as "the Beauty" that emphasizes appearance and "the Busy Bee" that showcases "all-round capability"), prompting influencers to actively choose performance modes that align with platform preferences.

In conclusion, these four dimensions indicate that platforms are not neutral "performance stages." Instead, through intermediary roles such as technical design, rule setting, and traffic distribution, they not only provide a carrier for women's gender performance but also guide such performance toward directions that conform to platform logic (e.g., commercialization, aestheticization) and social norms (e.g., traditional gender expectations) through both implicit and explicit constraints. Ultimately, women's digital gender performance becomes a dynamic process of "adapting to and negotiating constraints."

### 2.3. Feminist resistance and counterpublics

Feminism is a group of beliefs and ideas belonging to a broad social and political movement that aims to achieve greater equality for women [14]. Although the Australian-based case suggests that feminist movements are opening up and concentrating, linking personal politics to public movements, and achieving substantial impact [15] the exploration of feminist history is severely limited, so people associate feminism with the media. Given the high level of Internet activity among young adults, especially women, and their reliance on social media, it is important to understand how social media influences perceptions of body image and body image disorders [16]. Also, viewing and internalising unrealistic body ideals often displayed online can have harmful effects on young people's body image.

Fraser, N. [17] introduced the concept of "counterpublics," defined as alternative discursive spaces established by groups marginalized from mainstream public spheres. In recent scholarly inquiries, researchers have examined paradigmatic cases that illustrate the interplay between feminist resistance and counterpublic formation. For instance, Lee, Y. [3] explored how female K-pop fans construct a networked counterpublic through platform-enabled "connective actions," employing explicit resistance to challenge gender-based oppression in popular culture. The study posits that Twitter's technical affordances—specifically its accessibility and visibility—facilitate

cohesion among geographically and socially dispersed fans. Through shared hashtags and inter-account interactions, these fans collectively forge a "networked counterpublic": a domain distinct from mainstream fan cultures (which may tacitly tolerate gender bias) and one that furnishes a secure discursive arena for female fans to critique gender inequality, thereby enabling "oppositional articulation."

Another scholar, Hoebanx, P. [18], centered their research on the "Red Pill Women" subreddit, investigating how women negotiate their gendered identities within this community. And such forum-based feminist discussions are also very common in China and similar to this, except that the main platforms are often Weibo or Douban groups, so the paper also provides much reference significance. The scholar argues that such negotiations constitute a form of "compromising resistance," and the discursive space cultivated within the community can be conceptualized as a unique "restrictive counterpublic." Its resistant dimension manifests in the rejection of "passive adherence to traditional gender roles" and the attenuation of patriarchal hegemony over women via individual optimization strategies. These practices demonstrate that feminist resistance is not reducible to "explicit confrontation." When the establishment of a fully autonomous counterpublic is infeasible, women may construct a "survival-oriented counterpublic" through discursive negotiation. This form of counterpublic enriches the pluralistic landscape of resistance while simultaneously reflecting the contraction of women's resistance spaces under patriarchal structures.

Ringrose, J., Harvey, L., Gill, R. et al. [19] contend that under platforms' gendered double standards, girls subjected to such oppression have not yet mobilized collective action, though individual girls may adopt risk-mitigation strategies—such as reducing image-sharing or concealing interactions—as a form of "implicit resistance." Crucially, their lack of access to a "counterpublic" (e.g., a secure online community) for collectively confronting stigmatization and exchanging coping mechanisms perpetuates systemic oppression. This observation, in turn, underscores that the construction of a feminist counterpublic—such as a space for young girls to deliberate on bodily autonomy—is a necessary precondition for resisting gender-based violence.

An everyday "feminist counterpublic," cultivated via women's discursive strategies and interactive practices on Weibo, emerges as a linchpin of localized resistance in Deng, Y. et al.'s [4] analysis—one that amplifies gender issues through contentious expression, underscoring how Chinese digital spaces incubate context-specific feminist mobilization. As an open platform, Weibo serves as a public sphere where dispersed female users engage in discussions on gender issues. Posts advocating for women's demands generate interactive networks via reposts and comments, transforming personal experiences into public issues and thus consolidating a "daily feminist counterpublic." For beauty influencers on Weibo, the platform's traffic algorithms and interactive mechanisms enable them to cultivate "female solidarity" through emotional expression (e.g., empathizing with survivors of gender-based violence). Their fan communities, through comments and reposts, form a relatively stable "communal counterpublic"—a space that, while centered on influencers, functions as an aggregative arena for women to engage with gender-related topics [11].

## 2.4. Media representation and body image

Sarkar [20] argues that global media commodify women's bodies by promoting "ideal beauty standards" like thinness and fairness, reinforcing patriarchal ideals that women's bodies should conform to male aesthetic expectations. For example, advertisements featuring slim, fair-skinned models internalize such standards as cognitive templates, leading women to view natural body traits as flaws and fostering negative body image (e.g., self-loathing, anxiety). Indian media, in particular, compound this by projecting conflicting "traditional family roles" and "sexualized

images,” causing identity confusion. Indian women may feel anxious about being “insufficiently attractive” due to sexualized portrayals yet suppress bodily autonomy under traditional roles, creating fragmented body images. Moreover, media - constructed idealized images drive beauty and plastic surgery industries, reflecting commercial exploitation: women with body dissatisfaction from media representations engage in consumer behaviors (e.g., buying weight - loss pills, getting plastic surgery), and these industries then use ads to reinforce the “need for correction,” forming a loop of “media representation → negative body image → consumer behavior” that entrenches instrumentalized views of the body.

The “ideal” image of women presented by the media is harmful. It uses quantitative and qualitative methods to explore the effects of exposure to sexist media that present unrealistic or objectified images of women to their audiences at the micro and macro levels. Upward appearance comparisons on social media may prompt young women to increase their body image concerns. The media portrays the current attractiveness standard for women as thinner than the attractiveness standard for men, the standard portrayed now is thinner than in the past, and these findings hold for many major media [21]. The findings suggest that exposure to the ideal image of thinness can lead to depression, stress, guilt, shame, insecurity and body dissatisfaction. In addition, multiple regression analyses showed that negative emotions, body dissatisfaction, and identification with the ideal image of being thin predicted bulimia symptoms.

Perloff, R. M. [16] argues that traditional mass media have long disseminated “unrealistic standards of female thinness and beauty,” and the internalization of such representations can lead to “body dissatisfaction” — this constitutes a classic influential pathway of “media representation → body image.” For example, images of slim models in TV commercials and magazine covers, through the “cultivation effect,” gradually lead women to perceive “thinness as a normal state,” thereby generating negative evaluations of their natural body shapes (low body image). Longitudinal studies have confirmed that media exposure is associated with eating disorder symptoms, which represents an extreme manifestation of such influence and directly verifies the substantial harm of media representation to body image.

How to solve this problem? Taking a break from social media can help. The experiment showed that the effect of social media abstinence on body satisfaction was particularly pronounced for women who had internalized a higher standard of thinness ideal. Thus, a week away from social media has short-term benefits for young women's self-esteem and body image.

Meanwhile, scholars have also discussed that representations in traditional media are “one-way communication” (e.g., magazines only display model images without interaction), whereas representations in social media are “interactive constructions” (e.g., users can post selfies and receive likes and comments) — this difference may complicate the impact on body image.

It can be concluded from the literature that the core of “Media Representation and Body Image” lies in the fact that “the media shape individuals’ cognition and evaluation of their bodies through symbolic bodily representations.” This influence is not only driven by patriarchal culture but also presents new characteristics as media forms evolve.

### 3. Methodology

We used data collected through an online survey via Tencent Questionnaire in China to address the research questions. The survey, featuring a structured format with pre - set choices for respondents, was conducted in July 2025, a period that coincides with the summer vacation for students in China. For data analysis, we employed methods such as statistical analysis to summarize and interpret the overall responses, and cross - analysis to explore relationships between different variables, enabling

a more in - depth understanding of the survey results. This timing was chosen to maximize participation from younger cohorts, as they would have more free time to complete the survey during this period, while also avoiding overlap with major social or cultural events (e.g., large-scale online campaigns or traditional festivals) that might temporarily distort users' online behavior patterns.

A total of 235 participants completed the questionnaire, with no invalid responses excluded due to strict pre-set logic checks in the survey design (e.g., mandatory fields for core questions). The recruitment prioritized female participants to align with the research focus on women's online image practices—194 of the total (82.6%) identified as female, while 36 (15.3%) identified as male. This gender distribution, though female-focused, still included male participants to provide a comparative reference for analyzing gender differences in online appearance anxiety and platform engagement. To assess the representativeness of the sample, we compared it with national internet user data from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC, 2024). CNNIC reports that female users account for 48.4% of total Chinese internet users, while our sample's higher female ratio (82.6%) reflects our intentional focus on the target group. In terms of age, key subgroups of female participants align with broader trends: among female Rednote users (a core platform in our analysis), 26.6% were under 18, 21.4% aged 19–25, and 26% aged 36–45—mirroring CNNIC's finding that internet users aged 10–45 account for over 70% of total users in China. The survey questionnaire was designed to measure key variables related to women's online experiences, drawing on existing research frameworks.

To address the interplay between women's digital experiences and platform dynamics, this study formulated the following research questions (RQs) and hypotheses (H):

### 3.1. Research questions

- (1) How do women's platform usage behaviors (e.g., preferred platforms, content consumption habits) correlate with their levels of appearance anxiety triggered by online information?
- (2) To what extent does feminist identity influence women's attitudes toward social media restrictions on feminist content?
- (3) Are there significant differences in platform engagement patterns between women who self-identify as feminists and those who do not?

### 3.2. Hypotheses

H1: Higher exposure to fashion and makeup content on social platforms is positively associated with increased appearance anxiety among women.

H2: Women who strongly identify as feminists will hold more negative attitudes toward social media restrictions on feminist content.

H3: Feminist-identifying women will exhibit distinct platform preferences (e.g., favoring content-focused platforms over e-commerce-dominated ones) compared to non-feminist-identifying women.

### 3.3. Core measures included

- Appearance anxiety: Assessed via questions about the frequency of body/appearance anxiety when exposed to online information.
- Feminist identity and content restriction attitudes: Measured through self-identification as feminists and Likert-scale responses to statements about social media restrictions on feminist

content.

- Platform usage and behavior: Collected data on platform preferences (e.g., Rednote, Douyin), online shopping frequency, and content follow-up habits (e.g., fashion, makeup content).

This design ensured alignment with our research goals: by focusing on these variables, we could systematically explore correlations between platform engagement, appearance anxiety, and feminist attitudes—key dimensions of women's online image practices outlined in the introduction. The inclusion of male participants also allowed for preliminary gender-based comparisons, while the focus on Rednote (a platform central to women's lifestyle and image expression) enabled targeted analysis of how specific platform ecosystems shape user behavior.

Compared to previous studies on Chinese female internet users, our sample expands the age range to include under-18s (26.6% of female Rednote users) and 36–45-year-olds (26%), addressing the gap in research on multi-generational female online experiences. Additionally, by incorporating questions on feminist content restrictions and body anxiety, we connected individual image practices to broader structural factors (platform norms, social expectations), enriching the understanding of "constrained context" effects mentioned in the introduction.

In this research, we conducted, and participants were selected through convenience sampling. The findings aim to provide a more representative understanding of young female users' online image practices and expressive behaviors.

This study contributes to current debates by bridging agenda-setting theory with digital participation models, offering new insights into how female users' online behaviors can serve as important carriers for breaking through single image labels and conveying diverse self-perceptions—even within an online environment influenced by platform rules and social cognition. Meanwhile, it provides empirical references for understanding "how women strive for the initiative in expression through digital practices in a constrained context."

#### 4. Findings & discussion

The study reveals that gender disparities between men and women persist across various online platforms (e.g., the correlation between Rednote and women's appearance-related anxiety), often manifesting as stricter expectations and constraints imposed on women. Notably, half of the male respondents remain unaware of these inequalities, while the majority of women demonstrate clear recognition or personal experience of them. The research also indicates that although the principle of equality receives broad endorsement, resistance to online discrimination tends to be cautious yet targeted. Furthermore, the stigmatization of the "feminist" identity and a prevailing tendency to avoid conflict significantly limit proactive advocacy—even among those who acknowledge gender inequity.

To clearly present the specific manifestations and inherent connections of these gender disparities, the following sections will gradually show specific findings from six interrelated dimensions. These dimensions not only correspond to the practical forms of women's online participation in different fields respectively, but also collectively outline the operational logic of gender factors in cyberspace.

## 4.1. Platform interaction intensifies female users' appearance anxiety: from content preferences to intergenerational impact

### 4.1.1. Research hypothesis and background

In an era of deep social media integration, platforms with distinct content ecosystems subtly shape users' self-perception. This study focuses on lifestyle and beauty platforms (e.g., Rednote) and proposes Research Hypothesis 1: Due to their emphasis on aesthetic standards, female users of such platforms will show a stronger correlation between interaction behaviors (following fashion/beauty content, online shopping) and appearance anxiety.

"Body anxiety" and "appearance anxiety" are prevalent social issues among women, particularly young groups. Rednote, with its focus on beauty and fashion, attracts massive female users—nearly 20% of its content relates to fashion, beauty, and lifestyle, making it a typical case for exploring platform impacts on women's appearance perception.

### 4.1.2. Presentation of survey data

Survey results validate the hypothesis:

- Overall appearance anxiety: 55.2% of female respondents reported "occasional, frequent, or constant" appearance/body anxiety when exposed to online information/ads, reflecting the widespread online impact.
- Rednote users' anxiety correlations:
  - Among 85 women following fashion/beauty content, 72 (84.7%) use Rednote; 48 (66.7%) of these 72 experience anxiety, linking content consumption to anxiety.
  - Among 94 female Rednote users who shop online frequently, 57 (60.6%) reported anxiety, highlighting the "consumption + aesthetics" ecosystem's catalytic role.

### 4.1.3. Underlying implications of the data

The data reveal a "bidirectional reinforcement" between platform interaction and female appearance anxiety:

#### (1) Platform → Anxiety: Algorithmic and Content-Based Aesthetic Discipline

Rednote's algorithm prioritizes polished content (beauty tutorials, idealized images). Continuous exposure leads women to compare themselves to "perfect models"—short-term dissatisfaction (e.g., "skin not radiant enough") and long-term reinforcement of "appearance optimization standards" trap them in an "improve → feel imperfect → more anxious" cycle.

Topics like "thinness" and "beauty" often exceed 1 billion views, with massive user participation. This collective "appearance gaze" reduces individual value to meeting specific standards, narrowing women's self-identification space.

#### (2) Anxiety → Platform: Feedback Loop of Active Dependence

Anxious women actively rely on the platform:

- Instrumental needs: They seek beauty/skincare tips to alleviate anxiety (e.g., improving skin via routines), using the platform as a "toolbox."
- Emotional needs: Loneliness drives participation in support groups, gaining resonance—turning the platform into an "emotional haven."

However, this dependence deepens anxiety: evolving standards (e.g., from "fair skin" to "cold white skin") and community reinforcement of "anxiety as common" make the platform an anxiety

“booster”, not a solution.

### (3) Intergenerational Impact: Lifespan-Wide Appearance Pressure

Rednote’s core users include under-18s (26.6%), 19-25s (21.4%), and 36-45s (26%), breaking the "young-only" stereotype:

- Adolescents: "Internet celebrity aesthetics" mislead, internalizing anxiety as a "growth barrier."
- Young/middle-aged women: Platform "polished personas" clash with real life, intensifying "appearance management inadequacy."
- Middle-aged women: "Anti-aging aesthetics" (e.g., "40-year-old frozen age") create new anxiety amid age stigmas.

This intergenerational spread shows platform aesthetics affect women across life stages, making anxiety a persistent stressor.

In summary, platform interaction intensifies female appearance anxiety via "algorithmic discipline - active dependence - intergenerational penetration." Future efforts to optimize content ecosystems, promote diverse aesthetics, and enhance self-perception can help social media return to "enriching values" instead of becoming an "anxiety prison."

## 4.2. The cognitive gap in gender equality and the dilemma of feminist identity

### 4.2.1. Research hypothesis and background

In a society increasingly embracing gender equality, tension exists between public recognition of equality and persistent discrimination. This study proposes Research Hypothesis 2:

- Most endorse gender equality in principle, but perceptions of systemic discrimination differ by gender—women, with direct experiences, are more aware of its universality.
- Self-identified feminists oppose restrictions on feminist content more strongly than non-identifiers.

China has advanced gender equality (equal pay in law, balanced education, rising female participation), yet implicit discrimination persists: recruitment bias against women’s marital status, default family roles, and stereotypical "female role" discourse. Social media, a key debate arena, sees both equality advocacy and "feminist content restriction" controversies. Exploring public cognition, discrimination perception, and attitudes toward feminism reveals "ideal-reality" contradictions in equality progress.

### 4.2.2. Presentation of survey data

Results show "consensus amid divergence" in gender equality cognition:

- Unified principled consensus: 209/235 (88.9%) agreed on equal rights in society/politics/economics and "equal pay for equal work," confirming equality as a mainstream value.
- Divergent discrimination perception: 44.2% (96 women + 8 men) believed "widespread female discrimination persists in China"; 92.3% of this group were women, verifying gender-based perception differences.

Feminist identity dilemma:

- Only 20.4% (45 women, 23.1% of female respondents) identified as feminists. Among them, 41.6% opposed content restrictions (vs. 22.1% overall), with only 6.2% deeming restrictions "reasonable," showing firm stances.

### 4.2.3. Underlying implications of the data

The data reveals three core contradictions in equality progress:

(1) Principled Consensus vs. Reality Perception: Equality's "Implementation Gap" 88.9% recognition shows "gender equality" is a universal value, but nearly half perceive ongoing discrimination, exposing an "advocacy-practice" divide:

- Workplace: Women face "marital status screening" and promotion barriers; men's careers are less affected by marriage/children.
- Family: Women do 2-3x more housework in dual-income families due to traditional role expectations.
- Public discourse: Media focuses on women's "appearance/marriage" vs. men's "achievements/abilities"—a form of implicit discrimination.

This gap arises because "legal/policy equality" hasn't translated to "daily life equality." As primary discrimination bearers, women are more sensitive to this disparity, explaining their 90%+ share in perceiving discrimination.

(2) Feminist Identity Stigma: Label Fear vs. Ideal identification

The contrast between low feminist identification (20.4%) and high opposition to restrictions (41.6%) reflects the identity's awkward status:

- Stigmatized labels: "Feminism" is misperceived as "misandry" or "division," making people avoid identification despite agreeing with equality.
- Self-protection: Publicly identifying as feminist risks social pressure (e.g., "too sensitive"); women, as the "weaker party," often choose "implicit support, explicit avoidance."
- Ideal-identity separation: 22.1% overall opposing restrictions shows more support for "gender equality discourse freedom" than identify as feminists—stigma forces compromise between stance and risk.

(3) Gender Discourse Control: Content Restrictions vs. Equality Advocacy Feminists' opposition to restrictions resists "shrinking equality discourse space." Social media restrictions on feminist content have negative impacts:

- Silencing marginalized voices: Social media is key for sharing hidden discrimination; restrictions cause a "spiral of silence," discouraging victims from speaking out.
- Solidifying biases: Reduced access to feminist content strengthens misunderstandings ("no discrimination," "feminism is overreactions").
- Weakening progress: Open discussion drives social change; restricting content hides contradictions, hindering discrimination solutions.

## 4.3. The gender gap in perceptions of gender standards: from lived experiences to cognitive differences

### 4.3.1. Research hypothesis and background

Within the invisible framework of social norms, the "duality" of gender standards has always existed: expectations for men and women regarding behavior, abilities, and roles often follow different logics. Based on this observation, this study proposes a core hypothesis: women are more likely to perceive that "society applies looser standards to men" (e.g., in workplace tolerance, behavioral constraints, or appearance requirements), while men are less sensitive to such disparities.

In reality, such double standards are ubiquitous: In the workplace, women may be questioned about job stability due to "marriage and childbearing plans," while men rarely have their career

evaluations affected by family responsibilities. In daily life, women are expected to be "refined and appropriate," yet men's "casualness" is often tolerated. Within families, women are defaulted to take on more childcare and housework, while men's "participation" is easily praised as "sharing responsibilities." These differences form the basis of people's perceptions of gender standards, and gender-based differences in lived experiences may lead to significant cognitive divides.

#### 4.3.2. Presentation of survey data

Survey results clearly reveal a striking gap in perceptions of gender standards:

- Perception of "looser standards for men": Among 194 women, 126 (64.9%) believed that "men face looser social standards"; in contrast, among 36 men, only 5 (13.8%) held the same view. The proportion of women perceiving this was 4.7 times that of men.
- Perception of "stricter standards for men": The situation was completely reversed—among 36 men, 6 (16.6%) thought that "men face stricter standards"; among 194 women, only 8 (4.1%) agreed with this view. The proportion of men holding this perception was 4 times that of women.

#### 4.3.3. Underlying implications of the data

This cognitive difference is not accidental but a result of the interplay between gendered experiences and social structures:

##### (1) Women's Experience of "Standard Squeeze"

Women's strong perception of "looser standards for men" stems from their daily lived experiences of being disciplined by "higher standards." In the workplace, they must not only prove their competence but also face additional scrutiny about "balancing family and career." In terms of appearance, from skin condition to body management, society imposes far more detailed demands on women than on men. Within families, the implicit expectation of being a "virtuous wife and good mother" places extra pressure on women in fulfilling their roles. This "standard squeeze" makes women particularly sensitive to the "looser space" enjoyed by men—they are aware that men do not need to be "precisely measured" across multiple dimensions like themselves.

##### (2) Men's "Privilege Blind Spot"

Men's low sensitivity to standard disparities is related to "unconsciousness within privilege." Having long existed in a relatively loose standard system, they rarely experience the pressure of strict discipline, making it natural to overlook the existence of disparities. Some men who believe "standards for men are stricter" often base this on a one-dimensional understanding of "economic responsibilities" or "social roles" (e.g., "men must earn money to support the family"). However, this "strictness" essentially serves to maintain power (e.g., consolidating status through economic dominance), which is fundamentally different from the "comprehensive standard squeeze" faced by women.

##### (3) Social Impact of the Cognitive Gap

This cognitive divide may exacerbate the rift in gender understanding: women's "sense of being disciplined" is dismissed by men as "oversensitivity," while men's "experience of looseness" is seen by women as "ignorance of privilege." To bridge this gap, we need to break the deadlock of "talking past each other"—through dialogue, help men recognize the existence of double standards, and make society aware that gender equality is not only about equal rights but also fair standards, allowing everyone to realize their self-worth with fewer "extra disciplines."

## 4.4. Gender differences in online dispute behavior: from conflict avoidance to discrimination confrontation

### 4.4.1. Research hypothesis and background

In the online space where gender issues are increasingly becoming the focus of public discussion, users' reactions to offensive remarks show complex differentiation: some choose to refute fiercely, while others tend to remain silent and avoid conflict. Based on daily observations, this study proposes a core hypothesis: Participants with a stronger perception of the universality of gender discrimination are more likely to engage in online disputes when encountering offensive or discriminatory views; meanwhile, most users will actively avoid conflicts to maintain harmony.

In reality, online discussions on gender issues often fall into a "polarized" dilemma: on the one hand, remarks such as stereotypes against women and workplace discrimination appear from time to time; on the other hand, many users choose to "stay out of trouble" for fear of "bringing trouble upon themselves" or "ruining the atmosphere". The coexistence of this "silent majority" and "minority protesters" constitutes an important feature of the online gender discourse ecosystem. Exploring the motivational differences in dispute behavior helps to understand how the public weighs between "maintaining harmony" and "confronting injustice".

### 4.4.2. Presentation of survey data

The survey results clearly outline the distribution characteristics of online dispute behavior, which are highly consistent with the hypothesis:

- Dominance of conflict avoidance: Among 235 participants, 151 (64.2%) reported "never arguing online or deliberately avoiding conflicts", indicating that "staying out of trouble" and "seeking peace" are the mainstream choices in online interactions.
- Group differentiation in confrontational behavior: 17.8% of participants (42 people) would choose to argue when "views are offensive or discriminatory". Among them, the proportion of women (18.6%) participating was slightly higher than that of men (11.1%), showing a weak gender difference.
- Correlation between discrimination perception and willingness to confront: Among 96 women who believed that "widespread discrimination against women exists", 21 (21.8%) clearly stated that they would argue about offensive views, directly confirming the hypothesis that "perceiving injustice is more likely to trigger confrontation".

### 4.4.3. Underlying implications of the data

These data not only reveal the logic behind choices in online behavior but also reflect the implicit rules of gender discourse games:

#### (1) Socio-cultural roots of conflict avoidance

The high proportion (64.2%) of avoidance behavior is essentially an extension of the "harmony first" social culture in the online space. In traditional concepts, "arguing" is often equated with "unfriendly" or "low emotional intelligence". This perception makes users tend to "take a step back" when facing disputes. In addition, the risk of "verbal violence" caused by online anonymity also makes many people worry that "arguments will escalate into abuse", thus taking the initiative to give up expressing their positions. For most users, the core function of the Internet is "social interaction

and information acquisition" rather than a "battleground", so "avoiding conflicts" becomes the lowest-cost strategy.

(2) Motivations for confrontational behavior: from emotional catharsis to pursuit of justice

In the 17.8% of the group who choose to argue, the slightly higher proportion of women and the concentrated confrontation among 21.8% of women who perceive discrimination reflect the driving role of "personal experience of injustice" on behavior. For women who have personally experienced or strongly perceive gender discrimination, offensive remarks are not just differences of opinion but also a denial of their own rights and interests. Their arguments are not simply about "winning or losing" but more contain the deep motivation of "opposing prejudice" and "striving for recognition". This kind of confrontation is both an emotional catharsis (anger at injustice) and a microcosmic "claim for rights", attempting to break the default existence of discriminatory ideas through discourse games.

(3) Gendered characteristics of dispute behavior

Although the overall proportion of confrontation is not high, the data still reveals traces of gender differences: women show a stronger willingness to confront in the "discrimination-perceiving" group, while men's participation is relatively low. This may stem from two aspects: first, women are more likely to be direct targets of gender discrimination and thus more sensitive to offensive remarks; second, society's role expectations of "women being gentle" and stereotypes of "men being rational" to a certain extent inhibit the confrontational behavior of different genders—women's arguments may be labeled as "emotional", while men may choose to avoid because they "don't want to argue".

In summary, the choice of online dispute behavior is essentially a trade-off between "personal interests" and "public justice": most people prioritize maintaining the peace of their online experience, while a minority of groups (especially women) who perceive injustice become "pioneers" in confronting discrimination. This differentiation not only reflects the society's general avoidance of conflicts but also reveals the "spiral of silence" in gender issues—when discriminatory remarks lack refutation due to most people's avoidance, their influence may be indirectly amplified. Therefore, encouraging rational dialogue rather than simple avoidance is crucial to building a more equal online discourse ecosystem.

## **4.5. The visibility of women's discourse on social media: from algorithmic recommendation differences to gender power imbalance**

### **4.5.1. Research hypothesis and background**

In an era where social media has become the main battlefield of public discourse, platforms' screening and control of specific content profoundly affect the expression space of different groups. Focusing on "platform governance mechanisms for gender-related content," this study proposes a core hypothesis: Most social media users will perceive and resist platforms' removal of posts about women's workplace equality and banning of accounts that criticize gender stereotypes—such perception and resistance may vary by gender, with women, as the directly affected group, showing higher sensitivity to such phenomena.

In reality, gender equality discourse related to women often faces "invisible restrictions": posts discussing workplace gender discrimination may be demoted for being "sensitive content," and accounts criticizing the idea that "women should return to the family" may be banned for "causing controversy." Such seemingly neutral platform rules may actually compress women's discourse

space. Exploring gender differences in perceptions of these phenomena helps reveal the implicit gender bias behind social media algorithms.

#### 4.5.2. Presentation of survey data

Survey results clearly show a gender-driven cognitive divide, highly consistent with the hypothesis that "women are more sensitive":

- Low awareness among men: 52.8% of men reported "never noticing platforms deleting content about women's equality or banning accounts that criticize gender stereotypes," with over half of the group remaining "unaware" of such phenomena.
- High sensitivity among women: 74.2% of women explicitly stated they "know about such phenomena," a proportion 21.4 percentage points higher than that of men, highlighting women's strong perception of the compression of their discourse space.

#### 4.5.3. Underlying implications of the data

This cognitive difference is not accidental but a result of the combined effect of platform algorithm logic and gender power structures:

##### (1) The "Gender Filtering" Effect of Algorithmic Recommendations

The core logic of platform algorithms is "user interest matching," but such "matching" often harbors hidden biases. Men's low attention to women's equality issues leads algorithms to reduce related content recommendations, forming a cycle of "low attention → less recommendation → even lower attention." In contrast, women, due to their personal stake in these issues, are more likely to actively search for or interact with relevant content, prompting algorithms to continuously push such content and strengthen their perception of "being suppressed." This "interest-driven" recommendation mechanism, ostensibly neutral, actually solidifies gender differences in perceptions of gender issues into "information cocoons"—men are trapped in a cocoon of "unawareness," while women more clearly see injustice in their "strong perception."

##### (2) The "Gender Double Standard" in Discourse Control

The essence of the data difference is a reflection of the reality that "women's discourse is more likely to be restricted." Men rarely experience "content deletion": discussions on men's rights (such as workplace pressure) are more easily categorized as "universal social issues" and tolerated by platforms. In contrast, when women talk about gender equality, they are often labeled as "creating opposition" and become the focus of control. This double standard gives women more direct experience of "restricted discourse," while men, lacking similar experiences, naturally struggle to perceive it—just as those who have never experienced hunger cannot understand the anxiety of food shortages.

##### (3) The Implicit Imbalance of Discourse Power

The fact that 74.2% of women are aware of "suppressed discourse" but still struggle to change the status quo reflects the power dilemma in social media: women must confront not only explicit gender bias but also implicit suppression supported by algorithms. Men's "unawareness" has inadvertently become a "complicity" in this imbalance—when most privileged groups lack awareness of injustice, the bias in platform rules becomes harder to challenge.

This cognitive divide may ultimately exacerbate the "spiral of silence": women become more cautious in expression due to perceiving suppressed discourse, while men default to the status quo due to unawareness. The "diverse dialogue" function that social media should provide is weakened, reducing it to a tool that solidifies gender bias. To break this cycle, it is necessary not only for

platforms to optimize the gender neutrality of algorithms but also to promote cross-gender attention to "discourse equality"—after all, when half of the population's voices are quietly suppressed, any discussion of "equality" is merely empty talk.

#### **4.6. Unexpected findings in the study: implicit divides in gender equality perception and intergenerational common ground among platform users**

##### **4.6.1. Minor skepticism toward gender equality within the female group**

Amid the mainstream trend of widespread endorsement of gender equality, survey data reveal a notable phenomenon: among 194 female participants, 20 (10.3%) rejected the notion that "men and women should enjoy equal rights in social, political, and economic spheres" and the necessity of "equal pay for equal work." While this proportion is slightly lower than the 13.8% of men who disagreed, it stands out given women's direct stake in equality issues.

This skepticism is not merely an "anti-equality" stance but likely stems from dual practical considerations. On one hand, some women, long influenced by traditional gender norms, have internalized divisions like "men support the family, women manage the household" as a "reasonable order," leading to cognitive biases toward equal rights. On the other hand, real-world obstacles to implementing gender equality—such as workplace glass ceilings and unequal distribution of housework—have sown doubt about whether "equality can truly be achieved," manifesting as native attitudes toward abstract principles of equality. This divergence between "interests and positions" reflects the cognitive resistance encountered when gender equality ideals filter into daily life.

##### **4.6.2. The intergenerational reach of Rednote's core users**

Another unexpected finding challenges stereotypes about user demographics on lifestyle platforms: Rednote's core user base includes not only young women aged 19-25 (21.4%) but also a more prominent proportion of under-18s (26.6%) and women aged 36-45 (26%). This indicates that platform content centered on beauty, fashion, and lifestyle consumption is transcending age barriers to attract women across generations.

Beneath this common ground lies shared needs across age groups: adolescents explore self-image construction through the platform, middle-aged women use content to address age-related anxiety and update aesthetic preferences, and the fusion of consumerism with visual aesthetics provides a unified narrative of "self-optimization" for women of all ages. This finding reminds us that the influence of lifestyle platforms on women is not confined to a single life stage; the aesthetic standards and values they shape are becoming a cross-generational social and cultural phenomenon through intergenerational penetration.

## **5. Recommendations**

### **5.1. Platforms**

Rednote and analogous lifestyle platforms bear the responsibility of curating content ecosystems that go beyond superficial aesthetic pursuits. While beauty and fashion remain integral to their appeal, a deliberate effort should be made to integrate diverse representations. For instance, featuring body positivity campaigns that celebrate all body types, or spotlighting non - conventional beauty standards such as aged beauty, androgynous styles, can disrupt the homogenized ideal of attractiveness. This is particularly crucial for under - 18 users who are in the throes of self - identity

formation, as well as middle - aged users grappling with age - related appearance anxieties. By diversifying content, platforms can act as a counterforce to the narrow beauty ideals that often fuel appearance - based insecurities. Moreover, they can introduce interactive features like user - generated content challenges centered on diverse beauty, fostering a community - driven shift towards inclusivity.

## 5.2. Public discourse

Cultivating a constructive dialogue on gender standards requires a multi - pronged approach. Media outlets, educational institutions, and online influencers should collaborate to create spaces where men and women can engage in open, empathetic discussions about gender roles and expectations. This could take the form of panel discussions on social media, podcast series featuring diverse gender voices, or educational webinars. By bringing to the fore the lived experiences of both genders in the face of gender norms, these dialogues can bridge the perception gap. For example, a discussion on the pressures of breadwinning on men and the burden of caregiving on women can help both genders understand the bidirectional impact of gender norms. Such initiatives can also reduce the stigma associated with discussing inequality, as people become more aware that these are shared societal challenges, not just issues afflicting one gender.

## 5.3. Education

Educational initiatives aimed at promoting gender norm awareness should be embedded in school curricula and workplace training programs alike. These programs need to emphasize that gender equality is not a zero - sum game, but a catalyst for societal progress that benefits all. For students, this could mean lessons on the historical evolution of gender roles and their modern - day manifestations, using case studies to illustrate how rigid norms have constrained both men and women. In workplaces, training can focus on how gender - biased practices hinder organizational diversity and productivity. By addressing the 10.3% of women and 13.8% of men who disagree with core equality principles, education can challenge the internalized stereotypes. For instance, by showcasing successful gender - equal workplaces or families, it can demonstrate the practical benefits of equality, such as increased job satisfaction and better work - life balance for all.

## 5.4. Safe spaces

To create online safe spaces, platforms must invest in robust moderation tools and community guidelines. This includes AI - powered content monitoring to quickly detect and remove harassing or discriminatory content, as well as human moderation teams to handle complex cases. Additionally, features like anonymous reporting and the ability to mute or block offensive users with ease, can reduce the cost of challenging discrimination. For users who wish to confront offensive views, platforms can offer resources such as debate guides or conflict - resolution support. By doing so, they empower users to engage in critical conversations without the fear of retaliatory harassment. For example, in a discussion thread about gender equality, a user who wants to challenge a sexist comment can do so knowing that the platform will support them if the conversation turns hostile. This not only protects individual users but also fosters a culture of accountability within the online community.

## 6. Conclusion

This study undertakes a comprehensive investigation into women's online participation and gender disparities in cyberspace through a quantitative survey methodology. By delving into the data, it clarifies the intrinsic connections between platform engagement, appearance anxiety, feminist identity, and online expressive behaviors. The findings corroborate that gendered norms exhibit a remarkable persistence across both online and offline contexts. Women, in particular, are subjected to stricter aesthetic, behavioral, and social expectations. However, amidst these constraints, targeted resistance behaviors have emerged among specific groups, such as younger women using platforms to redefine beauty standards or feminist - identifying users challenging gender - biased content.

Notably, this research is not without limitations. The cross - sectional survey, executed over a relatively short period in July 2025, falls short in capturing the dynamic changes inherent in long - term behavioral trends. Online behaviors are fluid, influenced by evolving platform algorithms, cultural shifts, and global events, which a single - point - in - time survey cannot fully encapsulate. Additionally, the sample, while representative of core age groups relevant to the study (such as under - 18, 19 - 25, 36 - 45), is relatively small in size. Moreover, it lacks coverage of regional and socioeconomic variations. For example, users from rural areas or lower - income brackets may have distinct online experiences and gender norm perceptions, which are not accounted for, potentially restricting the generalizability of the conclusions.

Future studies would benefit from adopting a longitudinal design, which can track behavioral shifts over extended periods, capturing the ebb and flow of online participation, appearance anxieties, and gender - related attitudes. Expanding the sample to include diverse demographic groups, such as users from different regions, income levels, and educational backgrounds, would also enhance the external validity of the findings. Furthermore, incorporating mixed methods, like in - depth interviews with survey participants, can unlock the psychological mechanisms underlying women's online practices. For instance, understanding the motivations behind resistance behaviors or the sources of appearance anxiety in greater depth can add a rich qualitative layer to the quantitative data, thereby enhancing the depth of analysis on gender dynamics in digital spaces.

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