

The Impact of Contemporary New Media Platforms on Traditional Female Views of Marriage and Relationships: A Case Study of Xiaohongshu

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Abstract. Currently, the digital wave is deepening at an unprecedented pace, reshaping people's lifestyles and values. Against this backdrop, Xiaohongshu (RED), as China's most representative social platform with a highly concentrated female user base, plays an increasingly prominent role in constructing and disseminating contemporary female views on marriage and relationships. This paper focuses on this phenomenon. By mining Xiaohongshu content and surveying its most engaged users, the study traces how contemporary young women's views on marriage and relationships have shifted in the new-media landscape, juxtaposes these changes with traditional expectations, and dissects their underlying drivers. The findings indicate that content produced and disseminated on Xiaohongshu subtly influences its female users, fostering the formation of new female perspectives on marriage and relationships. Crucially, users are not passive recipients of information. They actively participate in content production and dissemination by posting notes, liking, and commenting, forming a highly active and self-reinforcing content ecosystem. This not only amplifies the platform's influence but also consolidates the deepening of female perspectives on marriage and relationships and strengthens group identity. Therefore, the value of this study lies not only in revealing the phenomenon itself but also in its profound practical relevance. It offers both scholarly footing and actionable pathways for easing today's intensifying gender tensions, making the work acutely relevant to real-world reform.

Keywords: Xiaohongshu, Feminism, Views on marriage and relationships

1. Introduction

In contemporary society, where digital existence is increasingly pervasive, new media platforms have deeply intervened in the intimate relationship-building processes of young people, becoming key sites shaping their views on marriage and relationships. Xiaohongshu, as China's most representative female-oriented social platform, has gradually formed a unique "her economy" ecosystem. Its content ecosystem surrounding marriage and relationships significantly shapes the views of young Chinese women.

The concept of media ritual originates from James W. Carey's "ritual view of communication" proposed in the 1970s [1]. Carey argued that the ritual view is not about the spatial extension of messages but about the temporal maintenance of society. Media ritual refers to the symbolic and performative cultural practice process that emerges when audiences participate in a shared activity or event through mass media.

Cultivation Theory [2] was first proposed in the late 1960s by Gerbner and colleagues in research on the effects of television violence. The theory posits that for a society to exist and develop as a unified whole, its members need a "consensus." The content conveyed by mass media carries values and can influence audience cognition and attitudes in a long-term, subtle manner, thereby unconsciously shaping people's worldview and fostering "consensus" in modern society. In the new media environment, characterized by strong interactivity, high audience participation, immediacy, and bidirectional feedback, Cultivation Theory has evolved into "bidirectional cultivation" [3]. This means audiences can actively participate in the production and construction of online content, and media content and presentation adjust based on audience needs and feedback, creating a process of mutual cultivation and influence between audiences and media.

Focusing on the representative platform Xiaohongshu, this paper employs Media Ritual Theory and Cultivation Theory as analytical frameworks. It aims to reveal how the platform's recommendation mechanisms and content ecosystem act upon female users to alter their perceptions of marriage and relationships, thereby analyzing the mechanisms through which the new media environment deconstructs and reshapes traditional female views on marriage and relationships. This study primarily uses in-depth interviews as its research method. Seventeen deeply engaged female Xiaohongshu users aged 18-25 were interviewed, hailing from Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Hunan, Hubei, Jiangxi, Fujian, and other locations. This research holds significant practical importance for addressing the increasingly acute state of gender conflict in society and tackling social issues such as declining birth rates.

2. Xiaohongshu platform characteristics and marriage/relationship content ecosystem

2.1. Platform overview

According to the "2022 QianGuo Active User Trends Report," Xiaohongshu boasts an average monthly active user base of 200 million, with female users accounting for a high 70%. Among female users, 72% are post-90s generation. The platform has approximately 43 million stable content sharers, with female sharers making up 88.8%. Furthermore, user persona analysis within the report indicates that user focus on Xiaohongshu is predominantly on topics within the private sphere, such as skincare, makeup, and family/emotional issues. This demonstrates the high activity and engagement levels of female users on the platform. As marriage/relationship content is one of the main themes disseminated, it can largely represent the views of young women in this domain [4].

2.2. Marriage/relationship content ecosystem

According to the China Population and Employment Statistical Yearbook 2023, the nation's single population hit 240 million that year, with 51.3% of adults aged 25–29 remaining unmarried. The "China Population Census Yearbook-2020" notes that the average age of first marriage in China rose to 28.67 years in 2020, a near four-year delay compared to data from a decade earlier [5]. This series of statistical changes confirms the significant delay in young people's entry into marriage and relationships and the gradual normalization of "late marriage and late childbirth." Observing

marriage/relationship-related content published on Xiaohongshu over the past six months reveals increasingly diverse perspectives among young women. Marriage is shifting from a necessity to an option; the motivation for relationships is changing from marriage-oriented to emotion-oriented; and acceptance is growing for new relationship models like trial marriage, non-marriage, flash marriage, and naked marriage (marrying without material prerequisites). Some "post-00s" women explicitly express "fear of marriage and childbirth." Simultaneously, young women's mate selection criteria are shifting from instrumental standards (e.g., income, status) to expressive standards (e.g., emotional connection, personality) [6]. Romantic aspirations are shifting from "marrying well" to "doing well"—from securing a spouse to securing professional success. There is a demand for multiple compatibilities with a partner, including material, spiritual, and even educational background.

3. Xiaohongshu's impact on traditional female views of marriage and relationships

Firstly, Xiaohongshu changes or even overturns young women's blind reverence for traditional views on marriage and relationships. In interviews, respondent Ms. Song mentioned that young female users on Xiaohongshu reinterpret the traditional story of the "Cowherd and Weaver Girl", once praised as a tale of beautiful love, as a narrative of male imprisonment and control of capable women through marriage. This deconstructs the traditional view of women being dependent on and subservient to their husbands. Traditional family concepts are weakening, and relationship views are becoming more diverse.

Secondly, young women's views on sexuality are becoming more open and rational. Respondent Ms. Yang stated that although her personal views lean conservative, she still supports premarital sex. She believes that, given a stable relationship, premarital sex signifies a woman's recognition and affirmation of the relationship, but "does not signify an irrevocable commitment". Similarly, Ms. Gong mentioned in her interview that she could accept premarital sex under the premise of relationship stability and sufficient security provided by her partner.

Thirdly, by using Xiaohongshu, female users deepen their understanding of the costs associated with marriage and relationships and develop fear. Respondent Ms. Chen noted that content on Xiaohongshu directly addresses female dilemmas, such as greater difficulty in obtaining jobs, higher health costs associated with marriage and pregnancy, and the rising cost of living for young people. This leaves women with little time to cultivate romantic relationships [7], fostering significant fear and resistance towards dating and marriage, with the belief that "marriage will ruin one's future prospects".

4. Cause analysis

4.1. Rise of female consciousness and female dilemmas

Firstly, young women's cognition of marriage is undergoing a fundamental shift. In-depth interviews reveal that every participant is shaped by platform discourse: once-cherished "romantic ideals" [8] of marriage and intimacy collapse, partner expectations plummet, goodwill toward men erodes, and new sentiments—ranging from misandry to outright fear—take root. Secondly, the rise in female status coupled with increased marriage costs during social transformation, growing pressures from work and study, and persistent implicit gender discrimination in society [9] mean that marriage poses more risks than advantages for women. Platform dissemination further exacerbates this anxiety. Thirdly, the shift in views reflects women's struggle for bodily autonomy. Xiaohongshu analyzes numerous phenomena of objectification and disrespect towards female bodies for its users,

highlighting their pervasiveness [10]. Therefore, women's turn towards rejecting marriage stems from a pursuit of bodily autonomy, respect for and assertion of their rights, and resistance against patriarchal society.

4.2. Peer pressure and social anxiety

From the perspective of women's social status, women have long been subjected to various societal pressures. Recently, a prominent expert in the field of marriage and relationships in China released a research report Chinese Men and Women's Views on Marriage and Relationships. The report indicates that among nearly one million people surveyed, over 40% have experienced or are currently experiencing anxiety about marriageable age, with women reporting higher levels than men. Concurrently, anxiety about marriage and relationships shows a clear trend of affecting younger generations, from the post-70s to the post-90s; post-90s women have the highest proportion (50%) having experienced or currently experiencing such anxiety [11]. In the marriage market, younger women often have more mate selection opportunities. Consequently, women face higher age-related pressure. Furthermore, women are burdened with the traditional expectation of "managing household duties and raising children" (相夫教子), subjecting them to greater societal pressure within the context of marriage and relationships. This oppression fosters dissatisfaction among women regarding marriage and relationships.

4.3. Platform algorithms and dissemination mechanisms

Platform algorithms favor content with "contradictory tension" [12]. On one hand, the platform spotlights "picture-perfect" marriage scripts—celebrity-tier ceremonies, postpartum abs reclaimed in three months, and six-figure confinement centers—catapulting them into the public gaze and racking up millions of views. This raises women's expectations for marriage and relationships, creating a stark contrast with their actual lives. On the other hand, the platform also pushes "marriage/relationship trauma records," such as stories of "phoenix men" (men from humble backgrounds seeking upward mobility through marriage) deceiving partners, housewives doing chores, and pregnancy stretch marks, into trending topics, manufacturing anxiety about marriage and relationships among women. Driven by this algorithmic logic, prolonged engagement is harvested by amplifying both anxiety and desire—fueling a deepening dread among young women toward marriage and intimacy itself.

4.4. Circle interaction deepening views on marriage and relationships

Through its "circle-based" [13] interaction mechanism, the platform intensifies the dissemination of new female views on marriage and relationships and associated emotions within the circle of young women, creating an "echo chamber effect." Meanwhile, marriage-and-relationship influencers and feminist KOLs on Xiaohongshu relentlessly amplify young women's discontent and apprehension about intimate partnerships. New views on marriage and relationships become increasingly solidified within this young female circle, making resistance to marriage a kind of "ritual" among Xiaohongshu's female users.

5. Conclusion

Under the impact of the rapidly evolving new media wave, the views on marriage and relationships among contemporary young women are undergoing profound and unprecedented transformations.

Various social platforms, online communities, and short-video platforms, leveraging their immense penetration and influence, continuously deliver diverse information about marriage and relationships, lifestyle models, and even value judgments to female users. This environment has significantly reshaped women's cognition and expectations regarding love, marriage, and family, exerting a substantial influence on their views. This study reveals that the new-media ecosystem, by relentlessly spotlighting marital pressures and idealized scripts that magnify the distance to lived reality, fuels a deepening resistance among women to marriage and traditional relational expectations. This collective shift in mentality not only affects the life trajectories and choices of individual women but also poses new challenges to societal demographics, family structures, and even the long-term stability and development of society. Understanding how marriage and intimate relationships now function—and the tangled effects they exert—has become an urgent social imperative, one that demands clear guidance to ease the ambivalence and anxiety now shadowing young women's choices.

Effectively addressing this issue requires concerted efforts from all sectors of society. On one hand, relevant government departments and academia should proactively embrace and deeply research the new media ecosystem, including grasping its dissemination mechanisms, diffusion patterns, and user psychology, to correctly guide public opinion. Building on this, efforts should be made to actively advocate for and foster the establishment of open, equal, inclusive, and healthy views on marriage and relationships. This can be achieved through positive role model promotion, rational dialogue facilitation, and timely debunking of misinformation, striving to dissolve overly extreme sentiments in the online space, mitigate intense gender conflicts and hostility, and explore new views on marriage and relationships that align with the laws of contemporary development. On the other hand, there needs to be a comprehensive consideration of women's needs. Enhancing women's social status, providing them with adequate social security, fundamentally addressing and responding to their core concerns and developmental needs, and offering them a sense of security in making choices about marriage and relationships are crucial for promoting solutions. This necessitates comprehensive improvement and enhancement at the level of social policies and laws. Strengthening legal safeguards for women's autonomy in education, employment, and intimate partnerships—while building a comprehensive social-security net—will dismantle hidden gender bias, elevate women's social standing, and ease the financial and reproductive pressures confronting young women, laying the groundwork for resolving today's anxieties around marriage and relationships.

Simultaneously, it is important to note that this study has limitations regarding sample coverage due to practical constraints. The majority of interviewees were selected from relatively developed regions in Eastern China. Perspectives from women in central, western, rural areas, or regions with different levels of economic development were not sufficiently incorporated. The research conclusions are primarily based on interviews with women from economically developed Eastern China. These women, benefiting from better economic conditions, higher education levels, and more open social environments, may hold views on marriage and relationships that differ from those of women in less developed regions. Therefore, future research urgently needs to broaden the sample sources to include women from more diverse geographical backgrounds, enabling more comprehensive and objective studies. This will facilitate a more holistic understanding of the overall landscape of Chinese young women's views on marriage and relationships in the new media environment and allow for a more thorough comparison with traditional views.

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