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SELF-PRESENTATION ON XIAOHONGSHU: HOW CHINESE WOMEN SHAPE
SELF-IMAGE AND IDENTITY THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA

Master Thesis

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I have written this Master Thesis independently. Any ideas or data taken from other authors or other sources have been fully referenced.

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Abstract

In recent years, digital platforms have played a key role in shaping gender norms and self-representation, especially among young women. Drawing on Goffman's theory of self-presentation, Bordo's concept of body discipline, and Gill's postfeminist sensibility, this study examines how beauty standards and gender discourse operate on Chinese social media. Focusing on the platform Xiaohongshu, the research explores how Chinese women navigate appearance anxiety and social expectations in online spaces.

This study analyzes the comment sections of ten highly interactive posts related to physical appearance. Using a mixed-methods approach, it combines word frequency and co-word network analysis (via the Chinese text analysis tool Gooseeker) with qualitative interpretation of typical comments. This approach reveals how platform algorithms and user interactions reinforce a strong link between appearance, confidence, and social recognition.

Findings suggest that while some users attempt to challenge dominant beauty ideals through "authentic" self-expression, such content is often absorbed into the platform's commercial logic. Concepts like "health" and "self-discipline" frequently appear, indicating that appearance management is internalized as both a moral and social norm. As a result, Xiaohongshu becomes a space where self-expression, social validation, and appearance anxiety are deeply intertwined.

This study highlights the complex digital experiences of Chinese women, who continuously negotiate between resistance and conformity. It offers new insights into gender, body politics, and media culture in East Asia.

Introduction

In recent years, a clear global trend has emerged as the widespread use of digital social platforms has made women's modes of online self-presentation increasingly diverse. Social media has evolved beyond a personal communication tool to a public arena that shapes aesthetic preferences and gendered identities (Duffy & Hund, 2015; Rettberg, 2017). As scholars have observed, visual-based platforms such as Instagram and TikTok have amplified this shift by encouraging the curation and performance of femininity in highly visible ways (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2020).

In China, Social media platforms have expanded rapidly. According to the 52nd China Internet Development Report (China Internet Network Information Center, 2023), as of June 2023, the number of internet users in China reached 1.079 billion, with an internet penetration rate of 76.4%. This rapid growth has influenced various aspects of users' daily lives. In particular, Wang, Li, and Chen (2024) found that social media use is increasingly linked to appearance anxiety among urban adolescents. This relationship highlights the dual pressures women face, which Fisher and Smith (2022) argue result from intensified social expectations on these platforms.

Among Chinese social media platforms, Xiaohongshu¹. According to the "2025 Active User Research Report (Xiaohongshu Platform)" released by Qiangua Data Platform, is one of the fastest growing, with over 300 million monthly active users by the first quarter of 2025. Compared with other platforms, the proportion of female users on it is significantly higher, at 71.98%, with young women from first - and second-tier cities with a relatively high level of economic development are the main user group. And related topics like "beauty, weight loss, and fashion" have long topped the trending list, making Xiaohongshu an ideal platform for observing the relationship between body image, and consumer culture.

While existing studies have examined the impact of social media on women's body image, much of this research has focused on content produced by influencers or the

¹ Xiaohongshu (小红书, literally "Little Red Book") is a Chinese social media and e-commerce platform launched in 2013, combining user-generated content with product recommendation and influencer marketing.

recommendation mechanisms of platforms (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Cohen et al., 2017; Anixiadis, 2019). In contrast, the analysis of comment sections as spaces of user interaction and negotiation has received limited attention. These sections not only allow users to express emotions and personal viewpoints but also function as important discursive arenas where aesthetic standards are circulated, social norms are reinforced, and subtle acts of resistance may occur (Scott, 1985; McRobbie, 2009; Banet-Weiser, 2018). Therefore, an in-depth analysis of the linguistic practice in the comment section helps to have a clearer view of how women construct their self and identity in daily communication, while responding to the pressure of mainstream aesthetics.

Against this background, this study will explore how women showcase themselves, express body anxiety, and engage in the interactive culture of consumerism on Xiaohongshu by analyzing the comment sections of popular posts. Specially, this study aims to answer the following three core questions: (1) How do women present themselves on Xiaohongshu; (2) How do beauty and fashion trends influence this self-presentation; (3) How does the platform environment shape and interact with women's self-perception and aesthetic discourse? Together, these questions provide insight into the interactive logic between Xiaohongshu's platform mechanisms and users' aesthetic practices. This paper uses a mixed-methods strategy, combining quantitative text analysis with qualitative semantic interpretation. The goal is to identify overall user trends and gain a deeper understanding of individual experiences.

In response to the above research questions, this paper will first review the relevant theoretical background, clarify the research perspective and conceptual framework. Then, the specific methods and data sources will be introduced, followed by a presentation of the linguistic practices of Xiaohongshu users in the comment section through text analysis. Within this theoretical framework, this paper further discusses how women build their self-awareness in platform interactions. Finally, the contribution and limitations of this study are summarized, and future research directions are suggested.

Keywords: Xiaohongshu; self-presentation; appearance anxiety; postfeminism;

digital gender culture

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1. Literature Review

This study begins by reviewing research on social media and body image, which has largely focused on Western platforms like Instagram and Facebook. These studies offer key insights into visual culture and social comparison but are shaped by Western cultural norms and platform logics. However, such research often reflects Western cultural contexts, in which individualistic values, platform logics, and beauty ideals may differ significantly from those in East Asian settings. Recognizing these differences helps highlight the need to study non-Western platforms such as Xiaohongshu in China. Rodgers (2016) proposed an integrated model revealing the interplay between internet use, body image concerns, and eating disorders. In the same year, Holland and Tiggemann's (2016) systematic review pointed out that visual content on social media continuously reinforces social standards of the idealized body, thus deepening individuals' insecurities. Cohen, Newtonian John and Slater (2017) further found that young women who engage in appearance-related activities on Facebook and Instagram report higher levels of physical dissatisfaction and anxiety.

More recently, Hawes, Zimmer-Gembeck, and Campbell (2020) further identified social media use was positively related to appearance rejection sensitivity, anxiety and depression. As shown in the studies above, social media plays a key role in shaping women's body image and appearance anxiety. These studies commonly use Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory as theoretical basis and explain how users produce negative self-evaluations "upward comparison" when facing idealized images. Although some researchers suggest that the impact of idealized images varies from person to person (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015), the overall trend shows that higher frequency of social media use is strongly associated with greater appearance sensitivity and self-doubt. While most current scholarship centers on social media platforms dominated by Instagram and Facebook, relatively little attention has been paid to regions with different digital ecosystems. East

Asian countries such as China, Japan, and South Korea each have their own dominant platforms shaped by local cultural values and platform logics. Among these, this study selects China's Xiaohongshu as a case to examine how platform-specific practices and aesthetic discourses contribute to body image anxiety in a non-Western platform environment.

In East Asia, appearance anxiety is shaped not only by media exposure but also by cultural ideals that reflect Confucian values and collectivist norms. As Jung and Lee (2009) observe, these norms often promote thinness, youth, and self-discipline as desirable traits for women. Stojčić et al. (2020) further highlight that such values influence how women evaluate their bodies as forms of social capital. Building on these cultural foundations, recent research has examined how traditional and globalized beauty standards shape body image in East Asian media contexts. Zhang and Wahab (2024), in their review of research on Chinese women's body image, noted that contemporary aesthetic standards are shaped by both Western media and globalization. However, the traditional ideal of being "pale, young, and thin" still prevails and continues to be reinforced through various media, becoming a key cultural factor contributing to appearance anxiety. Women from Korea, Japan, and China are represented with distinct beauty ideals in media portrayals: South Korea is known for its cosmetic surgery culture, Japanese society values proper diet and body control, and China places greater emphasis on image editing and filter beautification (Yoon & Kim, 2020; Ando et al., 2021; Jung, 2018).

Yoon and Kim's (2020) systematic review highlighted that South Korean women are under intense social and marital pressure behind the phenomenon of cosmetic surgery, making it a regular social practice. Ando et al. (2021) found that young Japanese women, while pursuing modern feminine ideals of attractiveness and independence within consumer culture, are also constrained by social expectations of conformity and normativity, creating a tension between self-expression and collective ideals. Notably, the body positivity movement in Japan has limited influence, and its cultural visibility remains far lower than in Western contexts. Meanwhile, the ideal beauty of Chinese women reflects a dual logic of local consumer culture and global aesthetic convergence. Jung's (2018) research shows that

although the beauty ideals of young Chinese women today are increasingly aligned with Western standards, their body consciousness remains shaped by local social structures and the gender order. Overall, the culture of appearance in East Asia is marked by strong social comparison and self-discipline. This anxiety is further reinforced by the amplification effects of social media.

Recent scholarship has begun to focus on the role of Chinese social platforms, especially Xiaohongshu, in shaping appearance anxiety. Lang et al. (2023) found that browsing body-positive posts improves women's body satisfaction, reduces body image anxiety, and plays a protective role. In comparison, a questionnaire survey conducted by Xu and Wang (2022) among female college students in Shanghai revealed that the frequency of using Xiaohongshu was significantly linked to appearance anxiety, but it did not directly lead to an increase in consumption behavior. Liu and Li's (2024) study suggested that Xiaohongshu continues to promote the "pale, young, and thin" aesthetic ideal, keeping women caught between consumerist desires and the male gaze in a post-socialist context. However, Zhang et al.'s (2021) experimental study argued that an idealized body image is not always negative. For users with smaller self-differences, viewing idealized content can even enhance self-confidence and body satisfaction. In general, existing research provides initial evidence of Xiaohongshu's influence on women's body anxiety. Nevertheless, most studies emphasize surveys, blogger-generated content, or trending hashtags, while systematic analyses of the comment section as an interactive space remain limited. Research on local social platforms is also less developed compared with the in-depth exploration of Instagram and Facebook in Western contexts. Empirical studies examining how young women present themselves, express emotions, and negotiate identity in social media comments are still at an early stage of development.

Building on this gap, the present study focuses on how users discuss appearance, express anxiety, and seek recognition in comment sections. This gap is important because the comment section represents a space where users interact with peers, share experiences, and negotiate aesthetic norms, which provide insights that cannot be captured through surveys or

content analysis alone. To address this gap, the present study focuses on Xiaohongshu comments as the research object. It combines text analysis with a critical theoretical perspective, aiming to explore how beauty standards are discussed, reinforced, or contested in these interactions. Examining these dynamics provides insight into how platform-mediated social mechanisms shape appearance-related concerns among young women in this specific cultural and digital context.

From a theoretical perspective, this study constructs an analytical framework centered on the viewpoints of three key scholars to understand the self-construction process of women on social media. Firstly, Goffman (1959) proposed the theory of the “front stage” and the “back stage”, suggesting that individuals present a managed image in public situations (the front stage), while expressing a more genuine self in private settings (the back stage). In the context of social platforms, users’ posts often represent a refined form of “front stage” performance, while comment sections may function more as a “back stage” space for emotional expression and identity negotiation. Secondly, Susan Bordo (1993) regarded the body as the central site of cultural discipline, arguing that the female body is shaped by both aesthetic norms and consumer culture. This perspective is particularly prominent in the current digital platform environment, where women’s pursuit of the “ideal body” reflects the persistence of internalized discipline. Thirdly, Angela McRobbie (2009) developed the concept of “post-feminist consumer culture”, emphasizing that women are constrained by implicit gender norms and social expectations even within what appears to be free consumer choice. Such apparent freedom is celebrated within platform discourse, which in turn reshapes the mechanisms of gender discipline. Together, the theoretical frameworks of the three scholars mentioned above provide a critical feminist lens for understanding women’s self-presentation, aesthetic negotiation, and social expectations in digital spaces.

To broaden the analytical lens, this study draws on several complementary perspectives. Hochschild’s (1983) theory of emotional labor emphasizes that individuals must continually regulate their emotions during social interactions to meet the expectations associated with their social roles. The anxiety, exhaustion, and self-denial that women

experience while maintaining beauty on the Xiaohongshu platform can thus be understood as a form of platform-structured emotional labor. While Bourdieu's (1984) discussion of cultural capital highlights the symbolic value of physical characteristics such as appearance and demeanor, it also shows how these attributes function as resources for gaining recognition and social advantage. In the context of Xiaohongshu, the idea of treating makeup as a form of "basic etiquette" reflects women's active management of their bodily capital. In addition, embodiment theory provides another useful lens by proposing that the body is not merely a biological entity but a site where social and cultural meanings are inscribed. Csordas (1990) argues that the body serves as the primary medium of human experience and cultural practice, emphasizing that physical experience constitutes a tangible response to social norms and identity formation. Finally, Banet-Weiser's (2018) concept of the economy of authenticity sheds light on how digital platforms encourage the presentation of a "real" self, while simultaneously shaping what is perceived as desirable, authentic, or normative within online cultures.

Taken together, these perspectives constitute the theoretical foundation of this study. They guide the design of the analytical framework, which integrates feminist, cultural, and emotional dimensions to examine the interplay between aesthetic discourse, gender discipline, and female agency in the Xiaohongshu comment space. The overall framework is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

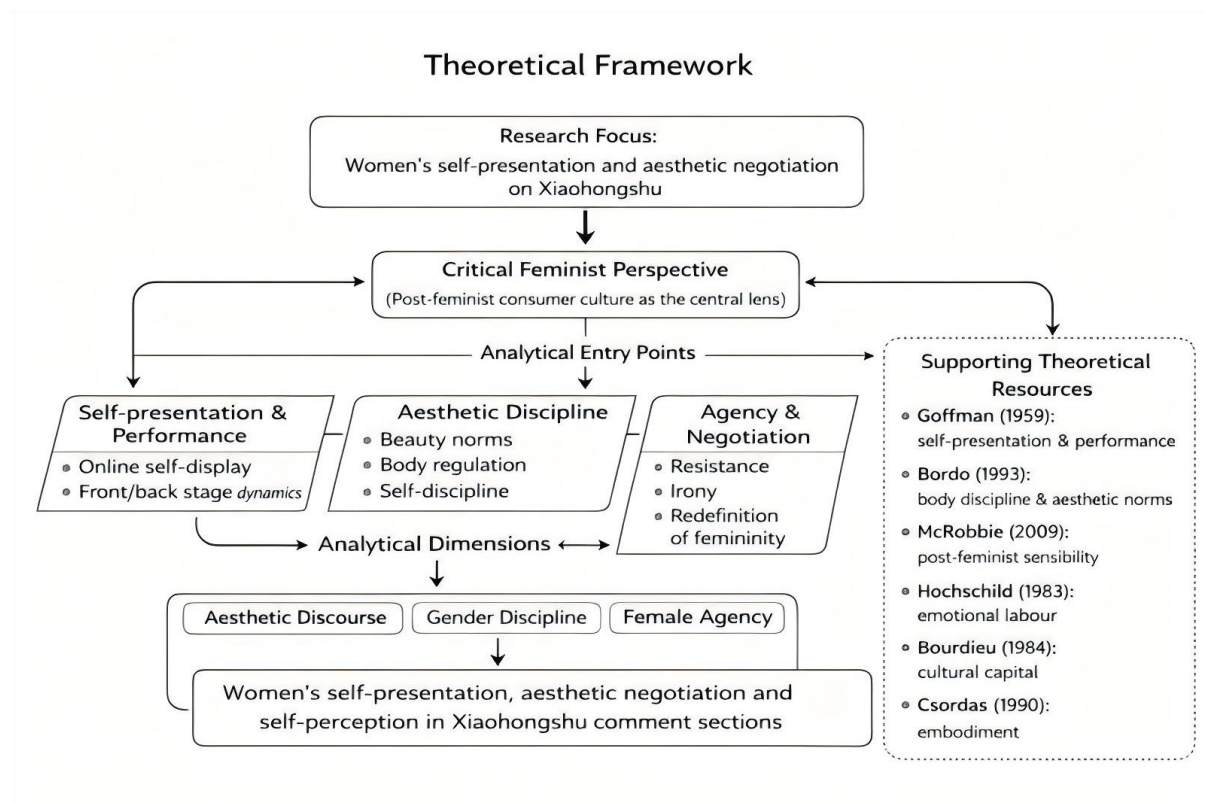


Figure 1. Analytical Framework for Examining Self-Presentation, Self-Image, and Identity among Chinese Women on Xiaohongshu

The figure presents the analytical structure of the study, outlining how women's self-presentation and identity construction on Xiaohongshu are examined through a critical feminist perspective. The framework foregrounds post-feminist consumer culture as the overarching lens and organises the analysis around interconnected analytical entry points and dimensions. Relevant theories are incorporated as supporting resources that contextualise and inform the analysis without serving as its primary organising principle.

2. Methods

2.1. Data Collection

This study adopts a hybrid approach, combining quantitative text analysis with qualitative semantic analysis to investigate how Chinese women present themselves on the Xiaohongshu platform, as well as the aesthetic logic and platform dynamics behind these practices. First, posts were selected based on both popularity and relevance. Popularity was measured by the number of likes, comments, reposts, and bookmarks, while relevance was

determined through manual screening to ensure the posts focused on themes such as appearance, beauty routines, and body image. Keyword filtering was then conducted using trending terms on Xiaohongshu, including “weight loss”, “appearance anxiety”, “cosmetic surgery”, “photo editing”, “makeup”, and “weight standards”. These keywords were chosen to capture multiple dimensions of appearance-related concerns observed on the platform, allowing the study to remain data-driven while later relating findings to relevant theoretical frameworks. To maintain timeliness, posts published between 2023 and 2025 were selected to capture the most recent trends on the platform. Besides, to ensure that the selected posts have sufficient discussion and interactivity, the following three strict screening criteria have been set:

1. Each post must have received over 1,000 likes and comments.
2. The main content of the post should focus on women's appearance, dressing suggestions or discussions related to body image.
3. The comment section contains must contain diverse opinions and even disputes, with high value for semantic analysis.

Based on the above criteria, 20 posts were initially screened, and then 10 representative posts were selected to best capture different discussion themes, ensuring that they show both commonality and variability. Unlike most previous studies that used questionnaire surveys or analyzed a large volume of posts containing specific keywords, this study focuses on an in-depth analysis of highly interactive comment sections, which can more directly capture users' true voices and emotional expressions. A Chinese web crawler tool called Houyi Crawler² was employed to collect the comment data from the 10 selected posts. This tool is widely used in research on Chinese social media platforms. It not only efficiently extracts public comment content ensures a high level of data completeness and accuracy. However, due to anti-crawling restrictions on Xiaohongshu, it was not possible to collect all comments for posts with a substantial number of interactions or those flagged by the platform

² Houyi Crawler (后裔采集器) is a Chinese web-scraping tool used to extract publicly available comments and metadata from online platforms.

as containing sensitive content.

In this study, “sensitive content” refers to comments automatically restricted by Xiaohongshu. For example, the Chinese term “脱美役” (pinyin: tuō měi yì, English translation: “quitting beauty duty”) was flagged because the character “役” originally refers to “military service” or “war”, which can be associated with politically sensitive terms. In this case, the platform likely misclassified the post as containing politically sensitive content or promoting extreme feminist views, limiting access to the comments. While this restriction slightly reduces data set completeness, the majority of public comments were successfully retrieved, providing sufficient data for semantic analysis and allowing the study to capture general discussion trends on the platform. Another post related to: “普女” (pinyin: pǔ nǚ, English translation: “average-looking women”) was published relatively recently. After removing many invalid replies, only 472 valid comments were retained. A valid comment in this study refers to one that contains substantive content related to appearance, beauty routines, or body image, excluding empty messages, advertisements, or off-topic replies. The remaining eight posts each generated between 700 and 1,000 valid comments. Table 1 summarizes the data collection results for all 10 posts.

Table 1

Overview of the Selected Xiaohongshu Posts

Post ID	Date Posted	Post title	Likes/ Comments	Comments (valid)
P1	2024-03-13	男人为什么都要找微胖的女生 Why do all men want 'slightly chubby' girls	1,296 / 3,156	1,270
P2	2023-08-03	女生多少斤才算胖 What weight counts as fat for girls?	29,000/ 4,056	5,70
P3	2025-08-29	不服美役后更自卑了 Quitting 'beauty duty' left me more insecure	1,628 / 1,248	7,03
P4	2025-06-13	我们都有不化妆的自由 We're free not to wear make-up	1,305 / 1,259	4,72
P5	2025-08-18	大家都忘了漂亮跟丑之间还有个普通的 Everyone Forgets There's Average Between Pretty and Ugly	8,468 / 1,442	7,60
P6	2025-03-05	外貌是我人生中一场不会停止的阴雨 Appearance Feels Like a Never-Ending Rain in My Life	12,000+/ 1,402	7,60

P7	2025-01-27	整容半生归来仍是普女 Cosmetic Surgery for Life, Still Average	12,000+/ 2,971	1,420
P8	2025-01-26	不要低估一个普女高考完想要爆改的决心 Never Underestimate How Far Average Women Will Go to Glow Up	59,000+/ 2,818	1,850
P9	2024-12-29	一生要出片的中国女人勇闯冰岛零下 Chinese Women Who Must 'Get the Shot' Take on Iceland	1,197 / 2,927	1,300
P10	2025-02-17	小红书——ED 重灾区 Xiaohongshu—Hotspot for Eating Disorders	7,631 / 3,163	1,040

Note. This table provides an overview of the Xiaohongshu posts selected for analysis, including posting dates, thematic focus, and levels of user engagement. All post titles, keywords, and user comments in Tables 1–6 are originally in Chinese and are presented with corresponding English translations.

Source: Compiled by the author from Xiaohongshu (accessed in August 2025).

2.2. Data Processing and Analysis

Given the large volume of comment data collected, this study adopts a combined quantitative and qualitative analysis approach to ensure that the research and analysis process is both objective and systematic. The first step of quantitative analysis is to clean the text collected from the comment section. After removing stop words, punctuation, emojis, and image elements, the remaining valid comments are used for analysis. Although the number of comments collected for each post varies, all ten selected posts contain more than 400 valid comments for analysis.

The second step imports the valid comments into the Chinese text analysis software “Gooseeker”³, which generates word-frequency tables and co-word networks to identify high-frequency words and their semantic associations. This method reveals the high-frequency words in the text and the associative structures among them, providing a preliminary outline of the main discussion topics. At this stage, the analysis draws on Susan Bordo’s (1993) theory of body discipline to identify disciplinary keywords such as “thin”, “pale”, and “delicate”, and to analyze their semantic network structures in the comment data.

³ Gooseeker (集搜客) is a Chinese text-mining software for keyword frequency and co-word network analysis.

After the quantitative analysis, a qualitative contextual interpretation is conducted. Between 50 and 100 of the most-liked and most representative comments from each post are manually extracted for close qualitative analysis. To ensure representativeness, comments were selected to cover a range of positions (supportive, neutral, and critical) and to capture the diversity of user expressions in tone, stance, and rhetorical style. Meanwhile, attention should also be paid to the opposing voices in the comments, such as “refusing beauty labor vs. performing beauty labor” and “accepting one’s average appearance vs. persistent appearance anxiety”. These comments are often more representative of current social consensus, popular online values, or controversial opinions. In this way, it is possible to capture the rich semantic variations and nuances unique to the Chinese context, which automated data analysis alone cannot achieve, such as irony, humor, emotional tone, and cultural metaphors.

Finally, the two approaches are integrated. To reduce subjective bias, this study adopts a sequential process: first quantitative analysis, followed by qualitative analysis, and then their combination. This method prevents one-sided subjective interpretations and allows typical phenomena to be demonstrated through selected comments. The purpose is to identify overall trends and associated topics from quantitative data and then supplement and explain specific most-liked comments through qualitative analysis, making the findings more contextual and persuasive.

2.3. Ethical Considerations

Firstly, The researcher acknowledges that extensive and long-term engagement with Xiaohongshu has provided them with a deep understanding of the platform’s culture and user dynamics. In this context, it is recognized that the researcher’s gender, cultural background, and other factors may influence the interpretation of the comments during analysis. Therefore, during the stages of text coding and analysis, it is necessary to remain open and critical, and to avoid preconceived subjective judgments. Drawing on this reflexive perspective, the researcher adopts a critical and reflexive perspective in selecting theoretical frameworks and analyzing the comment data, to carefully interpret how Xiaohongshu’s platform mechanisms interact with users’ aesthetic practices, rather than merely describing surface-level

phenomena.

Secondly, this study strictly followed the ethical guidelines for social media research (see Townsend & Wallace, 2016). All data used in this study were obtained from publicly accessible posts and comments and did not involve any private accounts or closed groups. To protect user anonymity, direct URLs are not provided. To further protect user privacy, usernames and any personal identifying information of users whose comments were deleted at the time of data collection will not be disclosed, and no information that could trace back to specific individuals will be revealed. The comments referenced in this study are only for academic research purposes and will not be used for commercial or other non-academic purposes. In addition, this study acknowledges a potential ethical concern: although comment sections are public, users may not expect their comments to be cited in academic research. To reduce such risks, all citations in this study are anonymized to protect sensitive personal information and avoid overemphasizing a few extreme views.

3. Empirical Analysis of Comments on Selected Xiaohongshu Posts

Based on a preliminary textual analysis of comment data from ten popular Xiaohongshu posts, five distinct emotional and expressive orientations were identified in users' discussions. These orientations reflect users' self-presentation strategies (Goffman, 1959), embody the internalization of bodily discipline (Bordo, 1993), and illustrate women's self-negotiation within post-feminist consumer culture (McRobbie, 2009). Accordingly, the ten posts were divided into five categories for further analysis: appearance anxiety, authentic expression, long-term struggles, beauty/fashion ideals, and social values. Instead of following a pre-defined theoretical framework, the classification of these five categories was generated from the data itself, based on recurring discussion patterns and shared meanings in the comments. In the following analysis chapter, these five types of themes will serve as analytical units. The analysis combines word frequency statistics with representative comments to illustrate how female users construct, negotiate, and reflect on their self-image on the Xiaohongshu platform.

3.1. Anxiety-focused posts

Anxiety-focused posts P1 *Why do all men want 'slightly chubby' girls*, P2 *What weight counts as fat for girls*, and P3 *Quitting 'beauty duty' left me more insecure* address issues related to weight, beauty standards, and body image. Together, reveal female users' ongoing dissatisfaction and anxiety about their appearance on Xiaohongshu, highlighting a repeated pattern in which external appearance-based evaluations lead to personal insecurity and self-questioning. The word frequency analysis indicates that terms such as 体重 (pinyin: tǐ zhòng, English translation: "weight"), 曲线 (pinyin: qū xiàn, English translation: "curve"), 他人 (pinyin: tā rén, English translation: "others"), 男人 (pinyin: nán rén, English translation: "men") and 焦虑 (pinyin: jiāo lǜ, English translation: "anxiety") appear frequently across all comments (see Table 2). Among them, "weight" is the most frequently occurring word (336 times), and, together with "curve" and "anxiety", it forms a high-frequency semantic cluster that shows how users' concerns about body shape and weight are closely tied to anxiety triggered by external evaluations. Users frequently compare "the ideal body shape in others' eyes" with their own body conditions in the comments, which contributes to the construction of a distinct social comparison framework. This suggests that, in female users' everyday discussions, the tension between external standards and self-perception has become a continuous emotional influence. Below are the word frequency statistics and co-word network analysis results produced by "Gooseeker".

Table 2

High-Frequency and Co-occurring Words in Anxiety-Focused Posts

High-frequency Word (Chinese)	Frequency	Key Co-occurring Words (Chinese)	Explanation (English)
体重 (Weight)	336	减肥 (Weight loss), 焦虑 (Anxiety), 标准 (Standards)	Serves as a direct indicator of appearance-related anxiety
曲线 (Curve)	269	身材 (Body Shape), 漂亮 (Beautiful), 完美 (Perfect)	Symbolizes appearance ideals and bodily self-control

他人 (Others)	163	认可 (Approval), 喜欢 (Like)	External evaluations act as core points of reference
男人 (Men)	119	眼光 (Gaze), 审美 (Aesthetics)	The "male gaze" shapes women's self-perception
焦虑 (Anxiety)	74	自卑 (Inferiority), 压力 (Pressure)	Internalized emotional reactions and self-denial

Note. This table presents high-frequency words and their key co-occurrences in anxiety-focused posts, reflecting recurring references to body norms, external evaluation, and emotional responses.

Source: Data collected via Houyi Crawler and analyzed with Gooseeker; compiled and calculated by the author (accessed in August 2025).

Based on the results presented in Table 2, users' discussions can be categorized into three major semantic clusters: "male gaze", "external standards", and "self-doubt". In the text, "others" frequently co-occurs with 认可 (pinyin: rènkě, English translation: "approval") and 喜欢 (pinyin: xǐhuān, English translation: "like"), indicating that external evaluation has been internalized by many users as a key standard for measuring self-worth. Meanwhile, the strong association between "anxiety" and emotionally charged words such as 自卑 (pinyin: zìbēi, English translation: "inferiority") and 压力 (pinyin: yālì, English translation: "pressure") suggests that negative emotions are continually amplified through social interactions and repeatedly reproduced in the communication process. This finding is in line with Bordo's (1993) argument regarding "body discipline". She asserts that the female body is subjected to continuous discipline within dominant social aesthetic discourses, and that individuals' self-perceptions and emotional experiences are often deeply shaped by external standards. Moreover, drawing on Goffman's (1959) self-presentation theory, this phenomenon can be further understood. On the Xiaohongshu platform, the main content of a post functions as a "front stage", where users present an idealized self-image through text and images. Conversely, the comment section resembles the "back stage", where users express anxiety, engage in self-deprecation, or seek emotional resonance, thus revisiting and redefining their self-image.

Judging from the most-liked representative voices in the comment section, discussions in anxiety-focused posts primarily revolve around two interconnected perspectives. The first involves satirical and critical commentary on social and male standards:

“我看男的多少公斤都不焦虑。”

(Men never stress about their kg) (P2, 2800+ likes)

“男人说的‘微胖’是90斤。”

(When men say, ‘slightly chubby,’ they mean 45 kg) (P1, 180+ likes)

“160cm 120斤，前凸后翘，很喜欢现在的身材。”

(160 cm, 60 kg, proud of my curves) (P1, 700+likes)

These comments ironically and humorously express resentment toward the right to judge appearances, acting as a symbolic form of resistance.

The second, in turn, is characterized by the internalization of anxiety and self-comparison:

“女生只用是否漂亮来审视自己。”

(Girls judge themselves only by looks) (P3, 9000+ likes)

“没体验过其他带来的成就感，只体验过美貌的反馈。”

(I've never felt achievement from anything but beauty) (P3, 2100+ likes)

“我161，38公斤正常吗？”

(I'm 161 cm, is 38 kg, is that normal) (P2, 170+ likes)

These comments reflect the dual dilemma contemporary women face between “free expression” and “being gazed at”. On the one hand, they gradually become aware of the one-sidedness and irrationality of mainstream aesthetic standards; on the other hand, they find it difficult to completely shake off the influence of this evaluative system. The discussions in the comment section thus reveal a pattern of “empathetic anxiety”, in which individual feelings of anxiety are amplified through interaction and further spread via emotional resonance and imitation, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of collective emotion. In the context of such posts, anxiety is not only an emotional response but has also become a

form of self-presentation. By openly expressing their unease and personal struggles, women seek understanding, emotional connection, and a sense of belonging or recognition within the online community. As Goffman (1959) emphasized, an individual's performance is not a one-way presentation of self, but a process of interaction and meaning making negotiated with others.

Overall, anxiety-focused posts reveal an inherent tension in women's self-presentation on the Xiaohongshu platform: while they question externally imposed aesthetic norms, they continue to engage in self-comparison to evaluate how reasonable these standards appear to be. Self-deprecation and empathy expressed in the comments section offer a brief emotional release for anxious users but may also inadvertently deepen users' internal acceptance of the "ideal body" standard. This suggests that appearance anxiety is more than an individual psychological experience; it is also a social emotion shaped through the interaction of social structures and cultural norms.

3.2. Authentic Expression Posts

There are two posts categorized under authentic expression: P4 *We're Free Not to Wear Makeup* and P5 *Everyone Forgets There's Average*. The repeated references to 化妆 (pinyin: huà zhuāng, English translation: "makeup"), 普通 (pinyin: pǔ tōng, English translation: "ordinary"), and 自由 (pinyin: zì yóu, English translation: "freedom") in the two posts highlight how women on social media are caught between expressing their true selves and conforming to societal expectations. Compared to anxiety-focused posts, these discussions exhibit a milder emotional tone, though they still reflect the enduring influence of appearance norms at a subconscious level.

Among the approximately 1,170 valid comments on the two posts, the most frequent words were "makeup", "ordinary", "good-looking", "going out" and "freedom" (see Table 3). Notably, "makeup" appeared 851 times, making it the most frequently used term, and was strongly associated with words such as 自信 (pinyin: zì xìn, English translation: "confidence"), 变美 (pinyin: biàn měi, English translation: "enhancing one's appearance"), and 喜欢 (pinyin: xǐ huān, English translation: "like"). This co-occurrence pattern suggests

that many users perceive makeup as a positive means of self-enhancement, rather than simply yielding to external expectations.

At the same time, the word “ordinary” appeared 338 times, ranking as the second most frequent term. It was often used alongside words like 大多数 (pinyin: dà duō shù, English translation: “majority”), 外表 (pinyin: wài biǎo, English translation: “appearance”), and 缺陷 (pinyin: quē xiàn, English translation: “defect”), indicating that some women attempt to cope with the psychological pressure and anxiety caused by mainstream aesthetics by embracing the identity of being ordinary. “Freedom”, although appearing less frequently (103 times), carries significant emotional weight. This term forms a contrasting semantic relationship with words such as 自我 (pinyin: zì wǒ, English translation: “self”), 尊重 (pinyin: zūn zhòng, English translation: “respect”), and 不喜欢 (pinyin: bù xǐ huān, English translation: “dislike”), revealing an underlying resistance to the social gaze and beauty standards.

Table 3

High-Frequency and Co-occurring Words in Authentic Expression Posts

High-frequency Word (Chinese)	Frequency	Key Co-occurring Words (Chinese)	Explanation (English)
化妆 (Makeup)	851	自信 (Confidence), 变美 (Enhancing one's appearance), 喜欢 (Like)	A daily practice for enhancing self-confidence and managing personal image.
普通 (Ordinary)	338	外表 (Appearance), 缺陷 (Defect), 大多数 (Majority)	Serves as a self-acceptance label to ease appearance anxiety
漂亮/好看 (Good Looking)	249	享受 (Enjoy), 心情 (Mood), 皮肤 (Skin)	Positive feedback between physical attractiveness and mental comfort
外出 (Going out)	175	上班 (Going to work), 习惯 (Habit), 评价 (Evaluation)	Reflects the everyday internalization of social discipline
自由 (Freedom)	103	自我 (Self), 尊重 (Respect), 不喜欢 (Dislike)	Embodies a reflective and resistant attitude toward makeup norms

Note. This table presents high-frequency words and their key co-occurrences in authentic expression posts, highlighting recurring references to self-confidence, daily appearance practices, and personal agency in negotiating beauty norms.

Source: Data collected via Houyi Crawler and analyzed with Gooseeker; compiled and calculated by the author (accessed in August 2025).

The comment data suggest that the discussions mainly fall into two categories. One group argues that makeup serves as a source of confidence and represents active management of one's self-image:

“女生没几个丑的，打扮后都能好看。”

(Few women are truly ugly; with makeup, anyone can look good) (P5, 10,000+ likes)

“不化妆会觉得脏，只有化妆才清爽。”

(Without make-up I feel dirty; only with it do I feel fresh) (P4, 1800+ likes)

“有痘痘，不化妆就不敢和人对视。”

(I have acne, no make-up, no eye contact) (P4, 90+ likes)

However, another group views makeup as a form of external regulation imposed on individuals:

“我觉得出门化妆是一件很享受的事儿。”

(Putting on makeup before going out feels nice) (P4, 90+ likes)

“化习惯了，不化妆出门就像没穿衣服。”

(Used to makeup, going out without it feels like being undressed) (P4, 30+ likes)

These comments reflect a phenomenon of habitual discipline experienced by women in their daily lives. Many users' regard makeup as a basic social etiquette when going out, with some even believing that not wearing makeup is equivalent to running naked, which they consider disrespectful to others. This view reflects a real-world manifestation of Bourdieu's (1984) concept of body capital, in which appearance and deportment are not merely individual traits but are also socially endowed with exchange value. Makeup is thus no longer a simple personal choice but a widely accepted and internalized code of conduct.

Within the daily routines of going out, working, and socializing, women gradually integrate appearance management into their system of self-discipline, thereby forming a behavioral pattern that appears natural yet is deeply socialized.

Meanwhile, the frequent appearance of the word “normal” in the comments reflects the emergence of a new psychological coping mechanism. For example, one user wrote:

“98%都是普通人，卸妆后丢在人群中就找不到。”

(98% are average; without makeup, you'd get lost in the crowd) (P5, 2800+ likes)

This kind of expression endows ordinariness with a positive meaning, allowing individuals to construct a sense of inner balance that helps them reconcile appearance anxiety with social expectations. By identifying with an ordinary level of personal appearance, users develop a form of self-acceptance marked by resistance to perfectionism. Through this process, they reconstruct their self-worth by aligning with a collective identity. This kind of identification is not merely a form of self-consolation but also reflects a new logic of social distinction: the refusal to pursue perfection becomes a valid choice, through which ordinary people acquire a sense of moral superiority.

This phenomenon aligns closely with Banet-Weiser's (2018) analysis of the economy of authenticity in brand culture, which highlights how individuals negotiate self-presentation through claims of realness. Building on this, the platform, through algorithms and user feedback mechanisms, encourages the display of one's authenticity and ordinariness, transforming unadorned appearances into a new form of consumable identity. On the surface, users appear to reject traditional ideals of embellishment and beautification, seemingly defying mainstream norms. However, they are drawn into a new set of aesthetic standards centered on “natural beauty” promoted by the platform.

“没有漂亮的义务。”

(No one's obligated to be pretty) (P5, 1200+ likes)

“普通人化妆跟素颜出门其实没区别，想化的就化，不喜欢就不化”

(For ordinary people, makeup or no makeup makes little difference. Do it if you want, skip it if you don't) (P4, 600+ likes)

This conversation reflects women's reconsideration of whether self-presentation must conform to social expectations. They explore the decision to wear makeup or not, questioning the mandatory connection between traditional appearance regulations and societal norms. The frequent co-occurrence of terms such as "makeup", "going out", and "evaluation" in the data highlights the disciplinary influence of social activities on appearance management behaviors. Simultaneously, the co-occurrence of words like "freedom", "respect", and "dislike" suggests user's underlying resistance to being watched and pressured by social expectations.

Such a seemingly contradictory expression precisely embodies the "postfeminist sensibility" described by Gill (2007). Within this framework, women are encouraged to demonstrate independence, confidence, and a sense of control in the name of "autonomy" through self-management and self-presentation. However, this kind of freedom does not entirely arise from individual choices but is conditioned by social structures and cultural norms. The expression "we all have the freedom not to wear makeup" on Xiaohongshu does not represent a complete rejection of norms. Rather, it functions as a negotiation through discourse that both challenges social expectations and involves a degree of adaptation and acceptance. Thus, discussions related to authentic expression on the Xiaohongshu platform reveal a complex process of "authenticity negotiation". Female users attempt to redefine themselves through keywords such as "ordinary", "freedom", and "no makeup", but this expression of the "real self" does not fully escape the aesthetic logic shaped by platform rules and algorithmic recommendations. Even when the choice to wear makeup is framed as personal, it still carries hidden expectations of "looking natural" and "appearing attractive without makeup".

3.3. Long-term Struggle Posts

Two long-term struggle posts, P6 *Appearance Feels Like a Never-Ending Rain in My Life* and P7 *Cosmetic Surgery for Life, Still Average*, reveal women's profound fatigue and sense of powerlessness in managing appearance and constructing self-identity. In contrast to the short-term emotions centered on "anxiety" or "authentic expression" discussed above, this type of comment highlights a more enduring and intractable predicament. This emotional

state combines an obsession with “becoming beautiful”, which eventually leads to psychological fatigue.

The word frequency analysis indicates that the high-frequency words in these two posts include “good-looking”, “self”, “anxiety”, “appearance”, “change” (see Table 4). Among them, “good-looking” appears 648 times and is often accompanied by words such as 自信 (pinyin: zì xìn, “confidence”), 努力 (pinyin: nǔ lì, English translation: “effort”), and 优点 (pinyin: yōu diǎn, English translation: “advantage”), reflecting the societal belief that “becoming beautiful” is a goal attainable through personal effort. The word “self” occurs 487 times and is frequently associated with expressions such as 素颜 (pinyin: sù yán, English translation: “no makeup”), 内在 (pinyin: nèi zài, English translation: “inner self”), and 他人 (pinyin: tā rén, English translation: “others”), revealing the persistent conflict between individual self-perception and external evaluation. In addition, “anxiety” and “appearance” appear 198 and 188 times respectively, indicating the strong disciplinary power of appearance standards on individuals. The word “change” occurs 132 times and is often used together with words such as 整容 (pinyin: zhěng róng, English translation: “cosmetic surgery”), 调整 (pinyin: tiáo zhěng, English translation: “improve”), and 提升 (pinyin: tí shēng, English translation: “enhance”), suggesting that, for most commentators, changing one’s appearance has become the primary strategy for coping with appearance anxiety.

Table 4

High-Frequency and Co-occurring Words in Long-term Struggle Posts

High-frequency Word (Chinese)	Frequency	Key Co-occurring Words (Chinese)	Explanation (English)
好看 (Good-Looking)	648	自信 (Confidence), 优点 (Advantage), 努力 (Effort)	Viewed as a sign of effort and social worth
自己 (Self)	487	素颜 (No makeup), 他人 (Others), 内在 (Inner self)	Torn between self-view and others’ judgment
焦虑 (Anxiety)	198	问题 (Issue), 自卑 (Inferiority), 内耗 (Emotional Struggle)	Ongoing tension showing inner pressure

容貌 (Appearance)	198	长相 (Appearance), 化妆 (Makeup), 普通 (Ordinary)	A visual measure comparing self and others
改变(Change)	132	整容 (Cosmetic Surgery), 调整 (Improve), 提升 (Enhance)	A main way to ease anxiety and gain approval

Note. This table presents high-frequency words and their key co-occurrences in long-term struggle posts, illustrating recurring themes of self-evaluation, ongoing emotional tension, and strategies for managing appearance-related anxiety.

Source: Data collected via Houyi Crawler and analyzed with Gooseeker; compiled and calculated by the author (accessed in August 2025).

The discussions in the comment sections of Posts P5 and P6 reveal two sharply contrasting perspectives. Comments in P5 emphasize that appearance is closely linked to social opportunities, with beauty remaining the most direct form of social capital in the real world.

“长得好看的人际关系就是会更顺利。”

(Good looks make social relationships much smoother) (P6, 3600+ likes)

“外貌确实是吸引人的第一因素，青春期的我总是为长相自卑和身材焦虑。”

(Looks are what attract first; I used to hate how I looked as a teen) (P6, 500+ likes)

In contrast, comments in P6 express satire and reflection on the long-term pursuit of beautify.

“50 岁整容半生，真的牛。”

(Half a lifetime under the knife—look at that, still 50, amazing) (P7, 9600+ likes)

“素颜已经很美，改一下觉得自己哪里都不好的心态。”

(You're already gorgeous with a bare face; fix the never enough mindset) (P7, 850+ likes)

A common emotional pattern emerges from these comments. On the one hand, women recognize the importance of appearance in social interaction and identity construction; on the other hand, they experience exhaustion and powerlessness in the never-ending process

of self-repair. This repetitive cycle of “effort—anxiety—more effort” embodies Hochschild’s (1983) concept of emotional labor, where individuals continuously regulate their emotions and behaviors to meet external expectations, making emotional strain a socially accepted cost.

Semantically, the co-occurrence associations of “good-looking—effort—confidence” and “anxiety—changing—cosmetic surgery” reveal a logic of “active discipline”. In the process of becoming beautiful, women do not consciously choose but see it as a long-term social responsibility they must fulfill. At the same time, the semantic connection between “appearance—ordinary—makeup” reveals how appearance-related discussions function to reproduce social hierarchies. In this context, “ordinary” is not a neutral term but carries an implicit meaning of being “barely acceptable but not ideal”. This suggests that women’s understanding of appearance on social media remains grounded in the social gaze.

The key term “Self” connects two main themes in the semantic network. From one perspective, it appears with words like “no makeup” and “inner self”, expressing a desire to return to an authentic self. From another perspective, it often appears alongside terms such as “anxiety” and “change”, reflecting the emotional struggles individuals face in managing their appearance. This dual emotional experience reflects a core idea in embodiment theory: the individual body both reflects social and cultural structures and serves as the place where emotions, power, and meaning come together. In this context, appearance is not just something shown to others but a clear expression of social norms influencing the body.

Posts about long-term struggle reveals the structural paradox between the “effort to become beautiful” and the “persistence of anxiety” among female users on Xiaohongshu. While users are granted a sense of subjectivity through the belief that “appearance can be changed”, they remain trapped in an external evaluative system that continually reinforces the feeling of never being good enough. “Becoming beautiful”, therefore, is no longer an autonomous choice but is shaped by an invisible hand into an ongoing task. This constant pressure to keep improving has effectively become a new form of emotional labor for contemporary women.

Moreover, this type of post further demonstrates how “persistent anxiety” itself has become socialized and structurally embedded. Female users on the platform respond to anxiety by striving to become beautiful, yet they fall into a new form of disciplinary logic through the ongoing process of self-repair centered on appearance.

Here, emotional labor is not only externalized and objectified but also continuously circulated and reinforced, driven by platform algorithms. Compared with the previously discussed “anxiety-focused” and “authentic expression” posts, this type of discourse moves beyond the individual level to reveal a widely internalized social-emotional mechanism. The following “Fashion/Ideal” posts will further explore how appearance discipline, under the combined influence of visual culture and consumer trends, is transformed into a collective pursuit of idealized images.

3.4. Fashion/Ideal Posts

Posts under the “Fashion/Ideal Posts” category (such as P8 *Never Underestimate How Far Average Women Will Go to Glow Up* and P9 *Chinese Women Who Must 'Get the Shot' Take on Iceland*) showcase visual content centred around 变美 (pinyin: biàn měi, English translation: “enhancing one's appearance”), 爆改 (pinyin: bào gǎi, English translation: “drastic transformation”), and 出片 (pinyin: chū piàn, English translation: “capturing visually appealing shots”) on the Xiaohongshu platform. These posts often communicate the idea that beauty can be learned and through study and emulation, using formats such as 妆前妆后对比反差大 (pinyin: zhuāng qián zhuāng hòu duì bǐ fān chà dà, English translation: “dramatic before-and-after makeup comparisons”), 穿搭模板 (pinyin: chuān dā mó bǎn, English translation: “outfit templates”), and 美妆教程 (pinyin: měi zhuāng jiào chéng, English translation: “beauty tutorial”).

Word frequency analysis shows that high-frequency words in these two posts include “good looking”, “makeup”, “change”, and “strange” (see Table 5). Among them, “good looking” appears 147 times, often alongside words such as 技术 (pinyin: jì shù, English translation: “techniques”), 教程 (pinyin: jiào chéng, English translation: “tutorials”), and 羡慕 (pinyin: xiàn mù, English translation: “envy”), suggesting that users generally perceive

“becoming beautiful” as a technical skill that can be learned and replicated. The word “makeup” appears 118 times, frequently co-occurring with terms like 自信 (pinyin: zì xìn, English translation: “confidence”), 邪术 (pinyin: xié shù, English translation: “magic-like techniques”), and 多样性 (pinyin: duō yàng xìng, English translation: “diversity”), indicating that female users are using beauty practices and stylistic changes to redefine and enhance their self-image.

However, the appearance of opposing words such as 奇怪 (pinyin: qí guài, English translation: “strange”), 夸张 (pinyin: kuā zhāng, English translation: “exaggerated”), and 难看 (pinyin: nán kàn, English translation: “ugly”) reveals some users’ discontent with a template-driven aesthetic. These comments suggest that within a platform culture dominated by visuals, a standardized aesthetic ideal is not universally accepted. Some users have begun to express resistance and reflection on a singular standard of beauty.

Table 5

High-Frequency and Co-occurring Words in Fashion/Ideal Posts

High-frequency Word (Chinese)	Frequency	Key Co-occurring Words (Chinese)	Explanation (English)
好看 (Good Looking)	147	技术 (Techniques), 教程 (Tutorials), 羡慕 (Envy)	Seen as a skill that can be learned and mastered
化妆 (Makeup)	118	自信 (Confidence), 邪术 (Magic-like techniques), 多样性 (Diversity)	Represents using skills to express oneself and build confidence
高考 (Gaokao)	51	大学生 (University Student), 解放 (Release from constraints), 风气 (Trend)	Effort and success metaphor applied to appearance change
奇怪 (Strange)	41	风格 (Style), 反差 (Contrast), 改造 (Transformation)	Reflects the pursuit of noticeable difference and self-improvement
变化 (Change)	33	吓人 (Scary), 夸张 (Exaggerated), 难看 (Ugly)	Expresses dislike and criticism of over-the-top visual styles

Note. This table presents high-frequency words and their key co-occurrences in fashion/ideal posts, depicting recurring references to skillful appearance management, self-expression, and the pursuit of distinctive or improved looks.

Source: Data collected via Houyi Crawler and analyzed with Gooseeker; compiled and calculated by the author (accessed in August 2025).

The comment section reveals two completely different voices:

One group of commenters endorses the confidence and satisfaction brought by 爆改 (“drastic transformation”), seeing it to express individuality and build self-confidence. For example:

“小麦色妆容，我觉得很好看啊。”

(Tan makeup looks great to me) (P8, 140+ likes)

Another group criticizes such content as exaggerated, repetitive, and even anxiety-inducing.

“穿成这样拍不美，反而违和。”

(Dressing like that looks off, not pretty) (P9, 11,000+ likes)

“文案一直在宣传容貌焦虑。”

(The caption keeps selling look-anxiety) (P8, 700+ likes)

This division in comments is clear. On one side, the platform encourages female users to “become better selves” through discourses such as “tutorials”, “drastic transformations”, and “capturing visually appealing shots”, promoting consumer behavior, imitation, and constant effort. On the other side, these trends lead to ongoing comparisons, triggering anxiety and trapping users in a relentless “beauty competition”. As a result, even while users try to show confidence and uniqueness, they may end up repeatedly following algorithm-driven visual trends, which limit true diversity in how they present themselves. This situation can be explained using McRobbie’s (2009) concept of the “Top Girl”. She argues that modern women are encouraged to demonstrate autonomy and control through appearance management, tutorial learning, and style updates, thereby proving their social

value. However, these choices remain subject to dual discipline from social expectations and algorithmic mechanisms.

The concept of “aesthetic labour” proposed by Elias and Gill (2018) helps to reveal the structural nature of becoming beautiful practices on social media. On the Xiaohongshu platform, women are not only responsible for maintaining their appearance, but also actively involved in producing visual content. They function as both personal brand operators and aesthetic labor within the platform. From a broader perspective, Horkheimer and Adorno’s (2002) theory of the “culture industry” offers a useful framework for understanding what can be called “tutorial aesthetics.” While users appear to freely choose their styles and images, they are in fact reproducing aesthetic trends driven by platform algorithms. Over time, this leads to a set of predictable and easily replicated visual symbols. In this system, practices like “drastic transformation” and “capturing visually appealing shots” are not just forms of personal creativity, but also outcomes of cultural reproduction, reflecting how platforms shape collective aesthetic values through standardized content.

In a wider East Asian cultural context, Kinsella’s (1995) research on Japan’s “cute (Kawaii) culture” shows how women are encouraged to gain social recognition through “consumable personalities.” Although this model appears to support individual expression, it is often based on highly uniform aesthetic templates. The popularity of “drastic transformation” and “capturing visually appealing shots” on Xiaohongshu can be seen as a localized version of this East Asian feminine identity within digital culture.

3.5. Social Values Posts

Posts in Category Social Values Posts (P10 *Xiaohongshu: Hotspot for Eating Disorders*), shift the discussion focus from individual physical experiences to broader concerns related to social values and platform structures. The title itself carries a critical tone, as the user describes Xiaohongshu as a “hotspot for ED”, signalling doubt about the platform’s aesthetic logic and content direction. This post received over 7,600 likes and more than 3,100 comments (including 1,040 valid ones), showing that such topics resonate strongly with female users. Through word frequency and co-occurrence analysis, the top five

keywords “weight loss”, “weight”, “anxiety”, “health” and “aesthetic” appear most frequently (see Table 6). Together, they form a semantic chain of appearance discipline, self-suppression, and health damage. Among them, “weight loss” (136 times) often co-occurs with terms such as 节食 (pinyin: jié shí, English translation: “dieting”), 控制 (pinyin: kòng zhì, English translation: “control”) and 热量 (pinyin: rè liàng, English translation: “calorie”), highlighting the close link between body management and restrictive eating practices. The term “weight” (102 times) frequently appears alongside 自律 (pinyin: zì lǜ, English translation: “self-discipline”), 身材 (pinyin: shēn cái, English translation: “body shape”) and 变瘦 (pinyin: biàn shòu, English translation: “becoming thinner”), suggesting that many female users associate self-discipline with beauty. In addition, the strong co-occurrence among “anxiety”, “health” and “aesthetic” reflects a growing awareness among users of the distorted beauty standards promoted on the platform. While they recognize these standards as problematic, it remains difficult to fully escape their influence.

Table 6

High-Frequency and Co-occurring Words in Social Values Posts

High-frequency Word (Chinese)	Frequency	Key Co-occurring Words (Chinese)	Explanation (English)
减肥 (Weight Loss)	136	节食 (Dieting), 控制 (Control), 热量 (Calorie)	Self-restraint is perceived as the only way to achieve the ideal body
体重 (Weight)	102	身材 (Body Shape), 自律 (Self-discipline), 变瘦 (Becoming Thinner)	Equated with life management and self-control
焦虑 (Anxiety)	79	平台 (Platform), 传播 (Dissemination), 障碍 (Barrier)	Spread and reinforced by platform mechanisms
健康 (Health)	75	问题 (Issue), 生病 (Illness), 饮食 (Diet)	Overshadowed by the thinness standard
审美 (Aesthetic)	38	畸形 (Distortion), 流行 (Trend), 病态 (Pathology)	Irony and resistance toward popular beauty norms

Note. This table presents high-frequency words and their key co-occurrences in social values

posts, revealing recurring references to self-discipline, platform-mediated reinforcement of body ideals, and critical attitudes toward popular beauty norms.

Source: Data collected via Houyi Crawler and analyzed with Gooseeker; compiled and calculated by the author (accessed in August 2025).

Analysis of the comments indicates that this group of discussions reflects a collective awareness of Xiaohongshu's aesthetic environment.

“在小红书上正常食量都会被说吃得多。”

(On Xiaohongshu a normal meal is called ‘eating too much’) (P10, 400+ likes)

“大家都觉得瘦了就会漂亮，实际上瘦了该丑还是丑。”

(People think being thin means being pretty, but if you're ugly, you're still ugly)

(P10, 10,000+ likes)

Many users show a clearer understanding of the platform's implicit regulation of the body. Some point out that the algorithm-driven “diet culture” has turned eating into a moral act, where normal eating habits are often seen as a lack of self-control. Others directly challenge the dominant notion that “thinness equals beauty”, using satirical remarks such as “Even if you're thin, you can still be ugly”. Together, these voices suggest that female users are gradually shifting from anxiety about their own bodies to reflection and resistance toward these aesthetic norms.

Semantic co-occurrence analysis shows a strong link among 焦虑 (pinyin: jiāo lù, English translation: “anxiety”), 平台 (pinyin: píng tái, English translation: “platform”), and 传播 (pinyin: chuán bō, English translation: “dissemination”), suggesting that the platform itself is viewed as a medium that spreads appearance anxiety. The cluster connecting 健康 (pinyin: jiàn kāng, English translation: “health”), 问题 (pinyin: wèn tí, English translation: “issue”), and 生病 (pinyin: shēng bìng, English translation: “illness”) highlights concerns about eating disorders and psychological strain. This finding echoes the social comparison perspective proposed by Fardouly and Vartanian (2016), which emphasizes how emotional responses to appearance-related content perpetuate anxiety through repeated comparison.

However, there are also a few different voices. For instance, one user wrote, “有人通过掌控体重获得掌控人生的快乐。”

(Some feel in control of life by controlling their weight) (P10, 20+ likes)

Although this comment received limited attention, it offers a meaningful perspective.

It reflects how some users seek self-efficacy and a sense of order in life through bodily control. This expression of “positive discipline” suggests another dimension of appearance anxiety: when confronted with aesthetic pressure, some women regard controlling their bodies to cope with the uncertainty of everyday life rather than simply yielding to external expectations. As Bordo (1993) noted, the body is not only the object of discipline but also a crucial site where individuals exercise agency. This kind of comment therefore does not reject mainstream ideals entirely but reveals a more nuanced reality. While women remain situated within the cultural framework of thinness as beauty, they also strive to reclaim self-control and meaning within those constraints.

From a social and cultural perspective, calling Xiaohongshu a “hotspot for eating disorders” is not an exaggeration but reflects a collective sentiment. The platform’s algorithm links self-discipline with beauty by promoting content focused on “weight loss” and “calorie control”, encouraging a value system that takes pride in thinness. These dynamics shape individual’s bodily perceptions and exemplify the power of “aesthetic capitalism” (Lipovetsky, 2015), encouraging women to invest in their bodies as sites of self-worth. Additionally, the doubts about popular aesthetics in the comments can be regarded as a reverse revelation of the “body discipline” mechanism discussed by Bordo (1993): when the body becomes a medium for display and consumption, health and self-perception gradually give way to those appearance standards that can be quantified and disseminated. The irony and resistance from Xiaohongshu users indicate that under aesthetic pressure, they are beginning to seek new expressions of subjectivity, which is a kind of growing critical awareness of bodily norms with a critical consciousness. In summary, posts related to social values reveal how Xiaohongshu’s aesthetic culture shapes users’ views on body and health in a wider context. Female users do not passively accept platform content; rather, through irony

and resistance, they actively participate in reshaping the platform's discourse. Xiaohongshu thus magnifies appearance anxiety while serving as a public forum for debating and challenging body politics.

From this perspective, Xiaohongshu functions not only as an amplifier of appearance anxiety but also as a mirror reflecting broader social changes. The platform intensifies the aesthetic pressures faced by women while simultaneously providing a public space for expression and negotiation. Here, women's bodies are no longer merely objects of observation but serve as mediums through which they actively construct their identities and negotiate social relationships. Through the process of being "seen", they also learn to "see themselves" with greater clarity.

4. Discussion

Through a detailed analysis of the comment sections under ten popular appearance-related posts on Xiaohongshu, this study not only applies the core theoretical frameworks of scholars such as Goffman (1959), Bordo (1993), and McRobbie (2009) to the context of Chinese social media but also highlights new manifestations and adaptations of these frameworks in a non-Western setting. Goffman's (1959) concept of "back stage" is not entirely private on Xiaohongshu; instead, it is shaped by algorithmic recommendations and the visibility brought by the like-ranking system, resulting in a form of "semi-public" performance.

Bordo's (1993) notion of "body discipline" has evolved into an everyday aesthetic pressure, where users come to regard practices such as makeup and weight loss as a form of "basic etiquette", reflecting a deep internalization of disciplinary norms. McRobbie's (2009) idea of "post-feminist negotiation" is similarly evident in the coexistence of discourses such as "makeup as personal freedom" and "refusing the obligation to be beautiful". However, these narratives remain constrained by platform mechanisms, producing an illusory sense of freedom, as users' choices, whether to engage in makeup, weight management, or other appearance practices, are subtly guided by algorithmic promotion of mainstream aesthetics,

social comparison pressures, and platform moderation.

Taken as a whole, these findings reveal a central tension faced by contemporary women in the digital context: Xiaohongshu, as a female-dominated social platform, not only shapes perceptions of appearance through technological and cultural mechanisms but also provides a space for negotiation and resistance. In response to the research questions, the following analysis examines this tension through three interrelated perspectives. First, it investigates the interactive dynamic between platform algorithms and women's self-presentation, showing how technical mechanisms shape aesthetic expression and elicit negotiation by users. Second, it considers the social transformation of "beauty" within the platform ecosystem, illustrating how beauty shifts from an individual aesthetic pursuit into a commodified form within the emotional economy. Finally, the discussion turns to the construction of female subjectivity, analyzing how women redefine themselves through a dynamic interplay between discipline and resistance.

4.1. Platform Mechanism: The Tension Between Algorithmic Discipline and Self-Presentation

The findings from the previous chapter indicate that Xiaohongshu, as a social media platform predominantly used by women, fosters a form of content production and aesthetic expression that goes beyond simple self-display. Instead, it is shaped by both socio-cultural structures and technological mechanisms. While female users present themselves with narratives of confidence, freedom, and authenticity, they are simultaneously drawn into an algorithm-driven system of aesthetic production.

From the platform's perspective, Xiaohongshu's recommendation algorithm reinforces the logic that "visibility equals value". Content that generates high engagement rates, such as dramatic transformations, visually appealing imagery, weight loss journeys, and makeup tutorials, is more likely to be promoted by the algorithm. This gives rise to a reward-based aesthetic cycle, in which users, in pursuit of recognition and exposure, are encouraged to produce content aligned with the platform's aesthetic preferences. As a result, beauty standards are continually reinforced and replicated, while appearance anxiety becomes

a widespread emotional anxiety in the user community.

While female users are subject to disciplinary forces, they are not merely passive recipients. Analysis of the comment sections reveals an ongoing negotiation between compliance and resistance. Users actively question external beauty norms such as “thinness equals beauty” and “makeup as obligation”, while simultaneously reinterpreting concepts like “ordinary”, “real,” and “freedom” through irony, teasing, and self-mockery. This reflective expression constitutes a form of micro-resistance against dominant discourses and exemplifies McRobbie’s (2009) notion of “post-feminist negotiation”, whereby women do not simply capitulate to consumer culture or freely express themselves but rather seek to redefine their subjectivity within existing disciplinary frameworks through everyday linguistic practices.

Extending this line of thought, the frequent references to “body control” and “image management” in anxious and idealized posts extend Bordo’s (1993) theory of “body discipline” into the digital realm. Xiaohongshu is no longer just a channel for disseminating appearance standards; it translates abstract disciplinary power into tangible emotional experiences via algorithmic recommendations, curated topics, and interactive feedback loops. The users’ exhibition of “controllable bodies” thus performs a “performative self” shaped both by societal expectations and platform algorithms. This performance is more ritualized than offline interactions and more deeply entrenched within disciplinary structures, making resistance more challenging.

Therefore, the platform should not be seen as purely oppressive. It functions as an interactive space that both reinforces appearance norms through a reward-based aesthetic cycle and allows women to express emotions and reflect on their experiences. This contradiction reflects Banet-Weiser’s (2018) view that the “authenticity” promoted on social media is not simple or natural. On Xiaohongshu, users’ expressions of “being real” are shaped by what the algorithm rewards and what gains visibility. In this process, authenticity becomes a way to maintain attention and stay active on the platform, rather than a form of purely personal expression.

4.2. Emotional Economy: The Socialization of Beauty through Platform Interaction

In the ecosystem of Xiaohongshu, “beauty” is no longer just a personal aesthetic choice. It has become a platform-based emotional asset that can be exchanged for visibility and recognition. Through likes, comments, saves, and algorithmic promotion, beauty gains measurable social value. As a result, women’s self-presentation becomes embedded in the platform’s emotional economy. Appearance management is closely tied to social interaction, creating a new form of dependence between emotional expression and identity construction.

This emotional economy operates primarily through algorithm-driven emotional feedback. The platform tends to recommend posts that are emotionally charged and receive high engagement. Content expressing anxiety, envy, or self-mockery is more likely to be promoted and seen. Over time, continuous exposure and comparison draw users into what Hochschild (1983) describes as “emotional labor”. Female users maintain their visibility and social presence by displaying anxiety, projecting confidence, or seeking emotional resonance. In this context, “beauty” is no longer only about looking good. It becomes part of everyday behavior, shaped by users’ desire for attention and the platform’s interaction mechanisms.

Another layer of this emotional economy lies in the emotional framing of consumption. On Xiaohongshu, hashtags such as “becoming more beautiful”, “skincare”, and “radical transformation” are positioned as signs of self-improvement. The act of sharing personal experiences and recommending products is not only about consuming brands but also about consuming emotional narratives and social identities. This dynamic reflects Illouz’s (2007) critique of emotional capitalism: when emotional experience becomes inseparable from consumer behaviour, women’s sense of confidence increasingly relies on commercial logic. In this context, “confidence” itself becomes a purchasable and shareable product, embedded in content such as skincare advice and makeover stories.

In addition, the emotional intensification of social comparison creates a self-reinforcing loop within this economy. Terms like “others”, “approval”, and “envy” frequently appear in posts related to anxiety and social validation, revealing how Xiaohongshu constructs a constant space of comparison. Users measure their self-worth by

comparing appearances and body images, seeking emotional identification through resonance with others, or even finding reassurance through others' insecurities. This mechanism not only deepens appearance-related anxiety but also echoes the findings of Fardouly and Vartanian (2016), who argue that idealized online images fuel upward social comparison, trapping users in a cycle of continuous self-evaluation.

Overall, "beauty" on Xiaohongshu is no longer simply an aesthetic standard but has become a central component of the platform's emotional economy. Through algorithmic mechanisms, the platform materializes emotions and transforms anxiety into market demand via interactive feedback loops, thereby creating a content cycle driven by users' feelings. In this process, women's emotional expressions gain both social recognition and economic value within the platform's ecosystem. As Eva Illouz (2007) noted, when emotions become commodified, individual sincerity and anxiety are transformed into exchangeable social currency. The simultaneous dissemination and "healing" of appearance-related anxiety on Xiaohongshu exemplify the operation of this emotional circular economy.

4.3. Negotiation and Resistance: Redefining Female Subjectivity

The previous analysis indicates that women's appearance expression on Xiaohongshu is neither a simple act of discipline nor passive acceptance, but rather a dynamic process of negotiation and resistance. Within the social media environment, women face the pressure of being constantly "observed" while striving to assert control over their self-presentation. This seemingly contradictory behavior forms an autonomous discourse on "beauty". Women's negotiation is particularly evident in the coexistence of compliance and resistance. In posts related to appearance anxiety or authentic self-expression, many women, although influenced by dominant beauty standards such as the belief that "losing weight makes one look more energetic" or "makeup enhances one's appearance", embed subtle resistance through self-mockery, irony, and other discursive strategies. For example, under the post P2 titled *What weight counts as fat for girls*, a teasing comment challenges the "male gaze" ("Men say 'slightly fat' is 45kg"). Similarly, in the post "The freedom of not wearing makeup", there is an affirmation of an "ordinary identity" ("Everyone is an ordinary person, and they look good

without makeup”). These seemingly fragmented expressions exemplify what de Certeau (1984) termed “everyday symbolic resistance”, which is not a direct confrontation of the existing order but a subtle undermining of the absolute authority of aesthetic standards through language. Women do not entirely reject the mainstream framework but instead create spaces for self-expression within it, maintaining psychological self-consistency.

The negotiation process also involves a dilemma around the idea of “authenticity”. What started as Xiaohongshu users’ search for “authenticity,” “ordinariness”, and “freedom”, originally meant to challenge traditional beauty ideals, has turned into new kinds of restrictions shaped by the platform’s logic. As Banet-Weiser (2018) points out, social media “authenticity” is no longer simple self-expression, but a performance influenced by algorithms. Labels such as “no makeup”, “no photo editing”, and “genuine sharing” have gradually become forms of cultural capital that can be consumed. Phrases like “ordinary people can also take beautiful photos” and “confidence without makeup”, while questioning the idea of “perfect beauty”, also create new standards of “natural beauty”. This behavior, which seems to resist control, in fact traps women within a softer but still powerful aesthetic system where resistance and discipline coexist.

At a deeper level, this negotiation can also be understood as part of a post-feminist contradiction in how female subjectivity is shaped by platforms. As Gill (2007) notes, women today are encouraged to see themselves as freely choosing to become beautiful and managing their own freedom. However, the “freedom” on Xiaohongshu is influenced by social and market forces. Women maintain their online presence through content creation and interaction. Their decision to share anxiety and reflect on beauty standards becomes a kind of hidden labor built into the operation of platforms and commercial systems. This work not only helps with emotional self-adjustment but also continuously produces content for algorithms and brands. As McRobbie (2009) describes, women’s identities are formed through cycles of “freedom, discipline, and self-management”. Even moments of resistance or agency remain connected to consumption and the emotional economy.

Conclusion

This study reveals how Chinese women express appearance anxiety, negotiate self-identity, and engage with mainstream aesthetic discourses within the digital environment of Xiaohongshu. Women's discussions about appearance are not isolated individual acts but part of a complex network shaped by platform algorithms, social norms, and cultural expectations.

Under the platform's "visibility logic", bodily discipline has gradually become integrated into everyday online self-expression. Comment-section discussions around topics such as "weight", "curves", and "anxiety" demonstrate users' awareness of aesthetic pressure yet also show how they are passively drawn into competition over appearance through algorithmic recommendation and social interaction. Moreover, while notions of "authentic expression" initially challenged mainstream ideals through ideas of being "ordinary", "no makeup", and "freedom", such expressions have quickly been commercialized and turned into new sources of online visibility. These dynamics suggest that even in seemingly autonomous acts of expression, women remain constrained by gendered frameworks of presentation, and the line between resistance and conformity becomes increasingly blurred.

Furthermore, the platform's emphasis on the discourse of "self-discipline" transforms appearance anxiety from a structural issue into an individual responsibility. The frequent association of "self-discipline" with "beauty" and "success" in comment sections reveals the shaping logic of the neoliberal self in the digital context. Women gain social recognition through body management, yet in doing so, they further internalize social norms and weaken their reflection on structural inequality. These expressive practices illustrate how women continuously negotiate on the platform about "how to be seen" and "how to see themselves". They move constantly between anxiety, relief, emotional resonance, and the pursuit of ideals, demonstrating not only a critical awareness of gendered discipline but also the constraints on freedom of expression imposed by platform mechanisms. This tension does not suggest the absence of subjectivity; rather, it highlights the complexity and agency of female identity within digital culture.

Returning to the first question posed in the introduction: how platform-level dynamics shape young women's appearance concerns. This study finds that the concern is not simply brought to Xiaohongshu by users; it is actively shaped by the platform's technical routines. Algorithmic preference for "transformation", "weight loss" and "no makeup" posts grants these themes sustained visibility, while the comment reward system converts bodily self-talk into measurable feedback. Over time, the platform's coupling of visibility and emotional resonance normalises appearance anxiety as an everyday idiom of feminine self-evaluation within the Chinese digital context. The analysis thus offers the exact insight promised earlier: the mechanisms that recommend and rank content are the same mechanisms that quietly set the terms for what counts as an acceptable or troubling body, and continuously re-import fashion and beauty trends into users' self-presentation routines.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in its examination and adaptation of Western theories such as physical discipline, post-feminism, and the authenticity economy within the context of Chinese social platforms. This reveals localized characteristics of platform mechanisms in the reconstruction of female subjectivity. Methodologically, the research moves beyond the conventional focus on bloggers' content by analyzing comment sections as spaces of user negotiation and emphasizes the role of interactive language in shaping gender discourse. Empirically, it addresses a gap in the analysis of comment sections on Chinese social platforms and broadens the scope of gender studies in East Asian digital culture.

However, this study has some clear limitations. The platform's anti-crawling measures restrict the completeness of the comment data. The anonymity and fragmentation of user identities hinder a deeper understanding of the subjects expressing themselves. Additionally, the research focuses primarily on female users and excludes the expression practices of other gender groups. Future research could expand the sample scope, compare body discourse practices across different genders and age groups on the platform, and explore cross-cultural similarities and differences in the discourse of "appearance and femininity" among China, South Korea, and Japan. It could also examine how "anxiety transmission"

manifests in various social contexts.

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Resümee

Enesepresentatsioon Xiaohongshu's: sotsiaalmeedia roll Hiina naiste enesekuvandi ja identiteedi kujundamisel

Viimastel aastatel on digitaalsed platvormid mänginud olulist rolli sooliste normide ja eneseesitluse kujundamisel, eriti noorte naiste seas. Tuginedes Goffmani enesepresentatsiooni teooriale, Bordo kehadistsipliini kontseptsioonile ning Gilli postfeministlikule tundlikkusele, uurib käesolev töö, kuidas iluideaalid ja sooline diskursus toimivad Hiina sotsiaalmeedias. Uurimuses käsitletakse kuidas Hiina naised navigeerivad välimusega seotud ärevuse ja sotsiaalsete ootuste vahel veebikeskkondades keskendudes platvormile Xiaohongshu.

Käesolev töö käsitleb kümnet füüsilise välimusega seotud, suure interaktiivsusega postituse kommentaaride seksiooni. Kasutades kombineeritud meetodit, ühendab see sõnasageduse ja kaas-esinemisvõrgustike analüüsi (Hiina tekstianalüüsi tööriista Gooseeker abil) tüüpiliste kommentaaride kvalitatiivse tõlgendamise. Selline lähenemine näitab, kuidas platvormi algoritmid ja kasutajate omavahelised interaktsioonid tugevdavad seost välimuse, enesekindluse ja sotsiaalse tunnustuse vahel.

Tulemused viitavad sellele, et kuigi mõned kasutajad püüavad domineerivaid iluideaale vaidlustada autentse enesekuvandi kujundamise kaudu, neelatakse selline sisu sageli platvormi kommertslikku loogikasse. Sellised mõisted nagu „tervis“ ja „enesedistsipliin“ esinevad sageli, viidates sellele, et väljanägemisega seotud käitumisnormid võetakse omaks nii moraalsel kui ka sotsiaalsel tasandil. Selle tulemusena kujuneb Xiaohongshu'st ruum, kus eneseväljendus, sotsiaalne heakskiit ja välimusega seotud ärevus on omavahel tihedalt põimunud.

Käesolev uurimus toob esile Hiina naiste keerukad digitaalsed kogemused, milles nad pidevalt laveerivad vastupanu ja kohandumise vahel. Uurimus pakub uusi teadmisi soo, kehade poliitika ja meediakultuuri kohta Ida-Aasias.

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