

A study on female lifestyle narratives and the construction of freedom consciousness on social media

Zhilin Dong*

Department of Psychology, University of Toronto Scarborough, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Abstract. The impact of social media on female expression, self-construction has received widespread attention. But existing research still had an insufficiency in the relationship between content features and the construction of freedom consciousness. This paper examines how social media shape the female lifestyle narratives and the construction of freedom consciousness. The study concludes that although social media provides a place for showcase oneself, platforms reinforce standardized and aestheticized modes of expression methods, invisibly constrains the freedom consciousness of women. Based on the findings, this study offers the following recommendations: optimize the algorithm mechanism for greater content diversity, while also encouraging female users to recognize how platforms shape expression, and develop a stronger self-awareness.

1 Introduction

Social media has become an essential avenue for users to self-present themselves and interact with other users. Notably, females are more prevalent on platforms like Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Instagram, where they share most aspects of their lives with users. The most commonly shared aspects are beauty, fashion, fitness journeys, curated lifestyles, and other self-disciplined habits. When observed from the surface, social media platforms encourage users to engage in self-expression and also become more creative and innovative. However, a deeper exploration suggests that there is homogeneity and conformity. Therefore, it becomes necessary to examine the paradox between presumed social media freedom and the homogeneity of content to promote authentic self-expression and creativity. The study explores the intersection between social media use freedom and women's lifestyle narratives on social media. The basis of the analysis is to understand female social media users' self-perception, behavioral patterns, psychology, and ways they influence perceived freedom by identifying the underlying challenges, analyzing them, and proposing viable solutions.

The study utilizes a content analysis approach to examine Xiaohongshu, Douyin, and Instagram social media platforms, focusing on circulated female lifestyle posts. The analysis involves textual and visual aspects to obtain recurring themes and stylistic patterns. Notably,

* Corresponding author: jendong0308@gmail.com

more focus is on users' tone, language, influencer engagement, and aesthetic framing. In examining implicit ideological messages and the construction of feminine ideals, the focus is on keywords, emotional undercurrents, and trends.

2 Characteristics and Mechanisms of Social Media Content

Social media content entails certain features that are responsible for shaping content creation through algorithmic design and user engagement metrics. These are features that encourage female users to curate content based on what algorithms favor to gain visibility, approval, and rewards. As such, it becomes necessary to understand the social media content features and development trends, ways the social media users' persona becomes shaped by algorithmic mechanisms, and what guides expressions in the social media platforms.

2.1 Content features and development trends

A notable characteristic of social media use is the algorithmic homogenization of content. The reliance on social media algorithms shapes how content is developed and disseminated, favoring material with broad appeal rather than individual uniqueness. The idea is to reinforce trends and ensure users conform to platform-specific norms. The homogenization of content showcases a situation where originality and personal expression are suppressed, as content creators favor algorithmic optimization. In femininity and beauty, other major characteristics are aesthetic and lifestyle standardization. Regarding femininity and beauty, social media algorithms amplify dominant cultural norms based on aesthetic codes and lifestyle formats [1]. Such a basis is problematic because it leads to circulating standardized ideals instead of social media platforms' ability to foster personal expressions and choices.

Similarly, influencer engagement, platform incentives, and social media influencers are central to circulating homogenized content. When there is a replication of trends that yield high engagement, the result is a feedback loop where users post similar content, leading to homogeneity and the ability to reach as many users as possible, thus reinforcing lifestyle ideals to emulate. Such a basis determines how the social media platform rewards social media influencers. The replication nature of trendy content creates a copy-paste culture of digital femininity [2]. It is a digital culture that depends on what is trending instead of authentic content. Social media content creators can measure their success through the number of likes, followers, and shares of their content with other users. Such tracking aims to help them analyze how trendy their content is and figure out ways to improve it for maximum engagement.

2.2 Shaping the self through algorithm mechanisms

Algorithmic pressures and content feedback loops shape the current self. To align with trending aesthetics and lifestyle ideals, social media influencers have to engage in continuous self-surveillance. Algorithm-driven visibility is responsible for the standardized feminine and beauty ideals visible through skincare routines to maintain youthfulness [3]. These fashion hauls promote manufacturers' brands and minimalist home tours that showcase the ideal feminine chores and femininity [4]. It is a trend highlighting dominant aesthetic values of possessing a thin, white, youthful body and having a particular lifestyle in one's home. Social media influencers are the most commonly relied upon social media users to promote these ideals, as other social media users strive to emulate their lifestyle. As such, they can feign experiences and even curate content to gain followership, likes, and visibility that earns them economic gains.

In addition, engagement-based visibility is due to the emphasis on dissemination mechanisms, which makes users curate their lives to align with what algorithms favor. They must engage in morning routines such as physical exercises, dieting, beauty, and weight loss journeys to fit the dominant narrative of ideal beauty and lifestyle. Inherent in the pursuit of attaining the perfect femininity is consumerism. As women strive to maintain their youthfulness, they purchase anti-aging beauty products, thus promoting consumerism. The main reason is that users may perceive their consumerism as voluntary since it aligns with their goals of achieving certain beauty and feminine ideals [5]. However, the platform's infrastructure prompts them to conform due to the incentives they receive from their curated self-representation. The strategy is to provide a win-win situation where females attain the beauty and feminine look they seek, and the beauty companies boost their profitability along with social media platforms. In essence, these are mechanisms for disseminating content that promotes consumerist behaviors. As such, social media users are part of a system designed to boost consumerism by providing beauty options and guidelines to empower them.

2.3 Guiding expressions on social media

Social media platforms use direct and indirect dissemination mechanisms to impact user expressions. Social media influencers, also known as key opinion leaders (KOLs), are responsible for providing explicit advocacy and act as explicit content disseminators. They help determine social media users' significant decisions, such as what to wear, eat, and apply as beauty products and lifestyle. Relying on social media influencers is a form of soft authority where social media users perceive their lifestyle as ideal and possible to emulate to remain trendy [2]. Although it is a direct approach that guides social media expression through influencers, inherent in it is a much more powerful force of a system designed to manipulate influencers and other users for the benefit of social media companies and businesses.

Moreover, social media platforms employ ambient marketing strategies such as emotional appeal, aesthetic curation, and aspirational storytelling. These subtle techniques and marketing strategies rely upon seductive imagery and peer validation instead of coercion to shape female social media users' perceptions of beauty, success, and wellness [6]. Although these aspects may not reflect individual desires, the internationalization of their necessity prompts women to embrace them due to the embedding of algorithmically preferred ideals. This process creates a psychological environment where conformity is no longer perceived as pressure and feels voluntary. Algorithmic dissemination shapes what is shared and produced due to the reinforcement of emotional resonance and aesthetics.

3 Impacts and Contradictions of Social Media Content

While social media users remain largely oblivious to how the characteristics and mechanisms of social media content impact their usage, a paradox exists between the ideal of freedom and conformity in social media platforms. Social media promises users a democratic engagement where they can engage in self-expression and have a choice of what they post. However, when it comes to female users, their posts align with market demands and social media algorithms. In practice, this promise is constrained by underlying structures such as platform algorithms, market forces, and normative expectations. The implication is that they do not have freedom over what they post or share because they have to follow established guidelines for them through social media. While women's expression appears liberating, it is essentially governed by social media's invisible expectations [7]. It creates a situation of discipline-desire dichotomy, which limits authenticity and choice. Women must ensure they curate their

content to meet prevailing ideals instead of authentic desires. The more their content mirrors societal expectations, fit bodies, curated aesthetics, and motherhood perfection, the more visibility and validation they receive. Besides, they also have to fabricate narratives to derive benefits from users' consolation messages, which increases traffic flow into their pages, thus heightening their possibility of gaining economically from the platform.

Consequently, the disguised nature of freedom consciousness results in a mode of discipline masked as self-improvement. These curated vulnerabilities attract supportive comments and increased traffic, ultimately boosting economic gain. As such, freedom becomes commodified—what appears as personal disclosure is often a strategic move within a broader capitalist framework. Freedom on such social media platforms is performative, as even when women have a choice, it must fit within the established social media boundaries [8]. It is the main reason why influencers meticulously document morning routines, not as spontaneous actions but as moral rituals that project discipline, self-worth, and control. Such dominant discourses controlling choice and freedom are responsible for social media influencers who wake up early to share their morning routine, not as a personal habit but as a moral imperative.

An important impact of such contradiction is that social media freedom is an illusion. Users believe they have a platform where they can express their ideas or pieces of art without fear of contradiction while working within narrow confines dictated by the platform's architecture and capitalist imperatives. The paradox is that the same tools that support and promote freedom of expression are the same that enforce conformity, commodification, and self-surveillance.

When it comes to the psychological impacts, they are multifaceted, given the diverse nature of social media users and the differing nature of their usage. One impact is the possibility of developing body dissatisfaction and anxiety. When users face the repetitive nature of social media influencers' idealized lifestyles, they may develop anxiety, a sense of inadequacy, and dissatisfaction with their bodies [1]. Some social media influencers aim to gain profitability from what they post, meaning that it does not have to be authentic as long as it earns them such gains. Therefore, they curate content, fabricate lifestyles, and showcase daily routines that are nonexistent to them for the recognition and visibility necessary to gain economically from social media. However, since social media users are unaware of the omitted lifestyles and imperfections hidden behind projected perfectionism and struggles, they compare their lifestyle with others, eventually taking a toll on their psychological well-being. Another significant impact is on identity fragmentation. The tendency to construct an identity based on consumerism and external validation results in the fragmentation of the female users' sense of self [9]. The result of such behavior is that they struggle between expressing their authentic desires and obtaining social media approval.

In addition, women also experience obsessive self-surveillance as they strive to keep up with other social media users through the way they dress, their body size, and their diet. For those who fail to keep up with the trending lifestyle, there is a higher possibility of developing low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and depression. Such a situation mirrors Foucault's panopticism, as these females ensure that when seen, there is no judgment based on their looks and behavior [5]. The implication is that such females struggle to afford beauty products, wear designer clothing, and attain the ideal beauty standards to fit in the mainstream. For those who lack the necessary finances, the result is the development of mental illness, such as withdrawal from social media or depression.

4 Implications and Recommendations

4.1 Algorithm mechanism optimization

There is a need for social media companies to reform their homogenizing algorithm features that reward conformity over creativity. The tendency of social media users to see and produce similar content has to do with the social media platform features that prioritize sharing, following, and liking content. With such a focus, users find producing authentic and creative pieces on the platform challenging. While engagement metrics are critical for social media platforms to gauge their effectiveness, they are responsible for fostering user content uniformity. Social media companies should recalibrate these systems to reward diversity, authenticity, and creativity [2]. Social media should be a platform where users from different parts of the world learn from each other due to the richness of diversity. As such, the platform should be able to accommodate such differences by focusing on improving user creativity and innovation over conformity to prevailing trends [10]. Besides, such a move will work towards reducing the mental health issues associated with social media comparisons, such as the representations of femininity and lifestyle. In essence, these tech companies should introduce algorithmic diversity indexes, reduce emphasis on aesthetic-based engagement metrics, and provide visibility boosts for original or vulnerable content

4.2 Enhancing women's self-awareness and autonomy

All media users, including women, should be empowered to reclaim digital autonomy. Thus, a focus on education, creating awareness, and offering community support are some of the ways that can be used to empower female social media users. Media literacy skills and a space for discussing digital usage challenges can help female social media users open up about their struggles and learn better ways to overcome them. The interventions must focus on pressing issues, such as challenging beauty standards, constraints of choice in creating content, and the ability to decode implicit messages. As such, to help these female social media users, a critical approach can be to rely on workshops, mentorship programs, or peer discussions aimed at empowering them to move past their challenges. The focus of the training can be on how to critically decode content, how to choose authenticity over performance, and how to engage without succumbing to curated pressures. It is an important way to help them question what they see and make independent choices that have nothing to do with conformity [7]. The goal of empowerment should be to enable female users to question dominant beauty standards, participate in workshops, mentorship programs, and peer groups, and recognize the value of imperfection and vulnerability. Besides, it is critical to ensure these users understand that imperfections are part of humanity and diverse life experiences, along with the need to become authentic and all-natural to humans. In fact, by embracing such aspects, these female social media users can become critical in the resistance process of social media's homogeneity, which can work towards prompting reforms. Such an understanding can help the users engage in sharing their authentic stories, using the platform to create awareness and enable a shift from curating content to authentic expressions. Given the diverse nature of social media users, if social media users embrace their individuality and vulnerability, it can work towards creating an inclusive online community. Hence, pursuing education should cultivate a consciousness of internal freedom by recognizing that freedom is not merely the ability to post but to choose one's narrative without fear of judgment or exclusion.

5 Conclusion

Social media has revolutionized how users interact and communicate with each other.

Women have gained visibility, expressed themselves, and benefited financially. However, it has not been without challenges as social media platforms' algorithms control what users can post, limiting autonomy, authenticity, self-expression, and choice, such as the standardized model of femininity and beauty. It is a situation that forces female social media users to self-monitor, curate, and often sacrifice authenticity to meet the criteria of the engagement algorithms. With such suppression, such females may find that they are struggling with identity issues, self-worth, and mental well-being. As such, the existing paradox between freedom and conformity requires interrogating how it impacts female social media users' identities, choices, and psychological well-being. An effective way is to foster diversity, authenticity, and broader representations of femininity so that the goal becomes to reform algorithmic biases and support women's freedom consciousness for healthier and more inclusive online communities.

References

1. Chen, S., van Tilburg, W. A., & Leman, P. J. Women's self-objectification and strategic self-presentation on social media. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* **47**(2): 266-282 (2023)
2. Baker, S. A., & Rojek, C. 2020. Lifestyle gurus: Constructing authority and influence online. John Wiley & Sons. Google Books
3. Liao, S. Wang Hong fashion culture and the postfeminist time in China. *Fashion Theory* **25**(5): 663-685 (2021)
4. Noguti, V. Consumption of marketer-generated content: consumers as curators of marketing messages that they consume on social media. *European Journal of Marketing* **56**(12): 3545-3567 (2022)
5. Hosseini, B. Women's survival through social media: A narrative analysis. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* **25**(2): 180-197 (2019)
6. Li, Y. Identity construction in social media: A study on blogging continuance. *Behaviour & Information Technology* **41**(8): 1671-1688 (2022)
7. Askanius, T. Women in the Nordic Resistance Movement and their online media practices: between internalized misogyny and "embedded feminism". *Feminist Media Studies* **22**(7): 1763-1780 (2022)
8. Petersson McIntyre, M. Commodifying feminism: Economic choice and agency in the context of lifestyle influencers and gender consultants. *Gender, Work & Organization* **28**(3): 1059-1078 (2021)
9. Weir, A. 2024. An Exploration of the Impacts and Influences of Consumer Capitalism on Young Women and Their Identity: Critical Criminology within the Cultural Boundaries of Social Media
10. Mahammed, N., Klouche, B., Saidi, I., Khaldi, M., & Fahsi, M. 2023. Enhancing Social Media Profile Authenticity Detection: A Bio-Inspired Algorithm Approach. In the International Conference on Machine Learning for Networking. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland 32-49