Feminist Voices under the Lens of ‘Barbie’: An Analysis of Discourse Transmission and Mass Resonance in XiaoHongShu

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Abstract.
Social media platforms are revolutionizing the way users communicate by increasing the exposure to highly stigmatized issues in the society. Feminism is one such topic that recently took over social media. This paper studies the attributes of XiaoHongShu user toward the feminism related topics, by content analysis of the online posts via #Barbie on XiaoHongShu, a sharing platform. The findings show that majority of XiaoHongShu user have positive attitudes to feminism-related topics in Barbie movie by analyzing the posts and comments are shared on this platform. Besides, XiaoHongShu commentators are mainly focused on eleven topics related to feminism: gender consciousness and self-perception, gender equality and affirmative action, gender discrimination, gender violence, gender roles, body perception and self-confidence, gender image, gender economics, female autonomy, female bonds and friendship and others. This research indicated that social media platforms have proven to be fertile ground for movements such as feminism, facilitating the dissemination of perspectives and the fostering of dialogue.

Keywords: Feminism, Barbie, Mass media, XiaoHongShu

1. Introduction
In recent years, social media platforms have become the main channel for people to share and obtain information. XiaoHongShu, as an emerging social media platform, provides a channel for spreading discourse. In the context of the new era, the concept of equality between men and women in China has gained a kind of legitimacy, and the concept of gender equality in society has continued to advance and develop, which has laid the foundation for feminism’s development. As of June 2022, the size of China’s Internet users has reached 1.051 billion (CNNIC, 2023), of which 51.4% are male and 48.6% are female, which is basically consistent with the ratio of men and women in the overall population, and to some extent verifies that there is no obvious bias or restriction on Internet use by people of different genders.

Internationally, scholars have delved into research investigating a variety of social media practices of feminism, including feminist blogs [1], popular feminist hashtags [2-4], and the use of social networking platforms such as WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube and Tumblr to convey feminist messages, images, and identities [5,6], and how the discussions affect feminist-related movement like #metoo [7,8]. In China, more and more scholars have also begun to look at the media practices and roles of feminist discourse in the new media landscape. Some studies have shown that feminist discourse discussions on media platforms can influence the thoughts and behaviours of media users, e.g. the attention, attitudes and discussion of feminist online discourse actions among female college student groups have a positive effect on the willingness to “speak out” [9]. Besides, research on women’s topics based on the XiaoHongshu platform has also begun to appear, such as feminism research [10], women’s media image research [11], women’s image construction [12] and self-presentation [13], and female body image anxiety phenomenon [14] and female identity [15].

Previous research has focused on the role of online feminist discourses on young women’s groups. Dai (2023) found that female university students’ attention, attitudes and discussion of feminist online discursive actions had a positive effect on willingness to speak out [9]. Nevertheless, there is a lack of research on how online feminist discourse influences audience behaviour offline. Besides, in a study by analysing data on girls’ participation in feminist activism (social media post interviews and reflective discourse texts) on social media like Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, found that girls’ strategic choices shape the types of feminism seen on various social media platforms, these distinctive discourses may be related to the platforms’ language, culture and social interaction styles (Jessalynn Keller (2019), the findings raise the need for further attention to be paid to whether the expression and shaping of feminist sentiment on social media...
platforms is influenced by specific platform structures and characteristics[6]. Feminism is often used as an important framework for exploring issues such as gender equality, women’s rights, diversity of female roles, and empowerment in the film industry in existing research. In recent years, the Barbie brand has gradually introduced some storylines related to women’s rights and diversity. The Barbie movie attempts to reflect on traditional gender roles and stereotypes. By portraying female characters as ambitious, intelligent, and versatile, movies can help eliminate stereotypes about women and encourage girls to pursue various interests and professions. However, the “Barbie” movie has also sparked some controversy, and many feminists have criticized the “Barbie” movie and related toys, believing that their appearance standards, body proportions, and other factors still strengthen the unhealthy body image to a certain extent, thereby affecting women’s self-esteem and image confidence. Currently, academic discussions about the movie are mostly focused on the economic and educational fields, In the field of mass communication, it is still in an “absent” state.

At present, the academic research on new media platforms mainly focuses on such platforms as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Weibo, Tiktok, while the research on the media presentation and discourse communication of XiaoHongShu is relatively scarce. However, it is against this backdrop that XiaoHongShu, as a vibrant social media platform, has gradually emerged among Chinese users in recent years. There is currently a lack of in-depth exploration of the platform’s communication effectiveness and audience resonance. In the past, research only focused on the image of female media and the analysis of female user behavior, there was a lack of in-depth analysis of male users, as well as a survey of female offline behavior and its impact on feminism in society. The research significance of exploring the XiaoHongShu platform cannot be underestimated, especially in terms of media practice, this study lies in filling the academic gap in the dissemination of feminist discourse on the XiaoHongShu platform.

Based on the mentioned research background, innovative points, and previous practical support, the researcher aims to conduct an in-depth research on the dissemination of feminist discourse and public resonance of the Barbie movie on the XiaoHongShu platform, to reveal the association between the movie and feminist views, to analyze the dissemination mode and expression of views of the discourse, to parse the public’s emotional attitudes, and ultimately to reveal the impact of these discourses on the development of feminist discourse in society. Given the xiaohongshu's significance for highlighting the pervasiveness of feminism, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How socially engaged is the feminist conversation about the Barbie movie on the XiaoHongShu? What are the main topics and keywords in the posts that relate to feminism?
2. What contexts and emotional colors are used by posters on xiaohongshu when discussing feminist topics? Are the emotions expressed positive, negative or neutral?
3. What are the attitudes (support, opposition, or neutrality) and emotions of the audience towards these feminist topics? Are these related to the audience’s personal background?
4. Will the audience change their behaviors or thoughts in real life as a result of engaging in discussions on feminist topics on XiaoHongShu?

2 Methodology

Based on the nature of the platform and sample categories to be studied in this article, a combination of manual and software assistance will be used to collect and analyze samples.

2.1 Data collection

This paper collected the posts and their comments related to the feminist topics under #Barbie#, #BarbieMovie# in XiaoHongShu. The data set for content analysis is from the Bazhuayu website (https://www.bazhuayu.com), Wenjuanxin (www.wjx.cn) is used to collect questionnaires from XiaoHongShu or WeChat users. 133 posts and 9337 first-level comments in XiaoHongShu are collected from 21 July 2023 to 4 August 2023 (two-week period after the release of the Barbie movie). Needed to be stated, the data were manually cleaned to remove the invalid microblogs with tags only, deleted original texts and repeated postings in order to ensure the quality of the data. A total of 226 questionnaires with 0.917 Cronbach alpha coefficient are distributed from 23 August 2023 to 30 August 2023 after remove invalid samples ( questionnaires completed by those who had not known about the Barbie film, those who did not know anything about feminism at all, and those who had not watched and heard about the Barbie film on social media platforms at all). Besides, the researcher conduct semi-structured interviews, involved obtaining information from 5 XiaoHongShu users(including 3 female and 2 male) whose posts are hot, in order to gain insight into XiaoHongShu’s users’ attitudes towards the development of feminism in Barbie film.

2.2 Data Analysis

Data analysis involves three stages. In the first phase, text
mining is performed to determine the semantic insights of the posts and comments, and the feminism-related topics are categorized to help us do further research. In the second stage, sentiment analyses are used to determine XiaoHongShu users’ opinions about feminism-related discussion about Barbie movie. In the third step, context analysis are used to determine the impact of feminist topics related to Barbie movie on XiaoHongShu on its users through the information obtained from semi-structured interviews and questionnaires.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Data Description
Figure 1 shows that 85.78 per cent of the respondents to the questionnaire were female and 14.22 per cent were male respondents. The age distribution shows a decreasing distribution centred on the age stage of 18-24 years old, and the demographic characteristics basically conform to the overall characteristics of the core user group of XiaoHongShu.

The overall overview and basic information of this sample questionnaire is given below:

Figure 1-1 Gender distribution of the questionnaire sample for the survey on the feminist discourse of “Barbie” film in the XiaoHongShu.

The age distribution of the questionnaire samples is mainly concentrated in the age stage of 18 to 24 years old, followed by 25-34 years old, 35 years old and under 18 years old accounted for 3.56%.

Figure 1-2 Age distribution of the sample of the questionnaire for the survey on the feminist discourse of the “Barbie” film in the XiaoHongShu.

The educational level of undergraduate education is the main group of people, accounting for 72.44% of the total, followed by master’s degree (31.11%), and doctoral degree accounted for 2.67% only.

Figure 1-3 Distribution of educational qualifications of the questionnaire sample for the survey on the feminist discourse of “Barbie” film in the XiaoHongShu.

Survey respondents came from 88 cities in 29 provinces in China (of which 40 users came from first-tier, super first-tier and second-tier cities, and 49 users came from third-, fourth-, and fifth-tier cities) and 8 survey respondents came from overseas (the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, and South Korea).

The study interviewed five respondents in order to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of the Barbie film and related feminist topics on XiaoHongShu’s users. Below is background information about the interviewees:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1 Background information of interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondent</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviewee 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.2 Text mining results

Feminist relevant topics in the “Barbie” movie
This study summarizes the keywords and content of feminism-related XiaoHongShu’s posts about the “Barbie” movie. Eleven categories are classified: gender consciousness and self-perception, gender equality and affirmative action, gender discrimination, gender violence, gender roles, body perception and self-confidence, gender image, gender economics, female autonomy, female bonds and friendship, and the others.

(1) Gender Awareness and Self-Awareness This classification mainly deals with women’s awareness of gender differences in society, culture, and product design and how these differences have affected their lives and experiences; the female situation, the shackles compliance training for women in society, and the gender value constraints. Calls for women to accept themselves, to know and love themselves.

(2) Gender Equality and Affirmative Action This category is mainly about protecting women’s basic rights and interests (e.g., providing paid maternity leave and menstruation leave in the workplace; women’s participation in politics; calling on women to fight for their due rights, resources, and support in society to improve the quality of women’s lives; participating in affirmative action campaigns to devote themselves to the cause of feminism (in-depth study of related topics, participation in the creation of related cultural works, etc.); encouraging female students to speak up, share their experiences, discuss, and criticize, and other related content. and other related content, in this study, the participation of XiaoHongShu in the discussion of political topics or public issues will also be categorized into this classification; encouraging the construction of a non-patriarchal, non-matriarchal, and egalitarian society.

(3) Gender discrimination This classification is mainly focuses on several major topics such as employment discrimination, unfair gender distribution of educational resources, and female chastity discrimination (menstruation shame, breast development shame, and gynecological shame et al.).

(4) Gender violence This classification is gender-based violence, including but not limited to sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence, male coagulation, female competition under the discipline of patriarchy, etc.

In the content analysis of the XiaoHongShu, there are also emerging issues such as cyber harassment covered;

(5) Gender roles This classification are mainly about gender-based division of labor; the division of family roles (including the discussion of the family responsibilities that both genders should assume, the responsibilities of the role of mothers, and other issues);

(6) Body perception and self-confidence This classification mainly involves the discussion of topics related to female body domination and freedom of display; the phenomenon of female dwarfing the self; and the influence of family of origin on self-archetypes.

(7) Gender image This classification includes not only the media construction of female but also male image, as well as the topic of gender stereotypes, which is most dominantly reflected in the discussion of Barbie’s body shape, appearance, and quality in the content analysis of XiaoHongShu. Besides, he topic of the image of feminists and the discussion of well-known figures who support feminism are put in this classification;

(8) Gender Economics This classification involves the discussion about movies driving women to consume fashion products and how these products affect girls’ self-esteem and self-worth.

(9) Female autonomy This classification is mainly concerned with women’s autonomy in appearance (mainly in the context of a discussion about a woman’s right not to wear high heels) as well as in the pursuit of various aspects of life (mainly focus on ideals, careers, clothing, makeup, etc.).

(10) Female bonds and friendship This classification is mainly about mothers teaching their daughters, female solidarity, friendship relationships, rights issues in emotions and other topics related to women’s rights and attitudes towards marriage;

(11) Others This classification is mainly about content unrelated to feminist topics, including interactions between posters and commentators, sharing of movie lines, roles, plot analysis, comparisons with other feminist cultural works, similar entertainment video and audio, and poetry recommendations.

Figure 3 above is a visual display of the words mentioned most frequently in user’s posts and comments.
Users attach importance to feminism-related words such as “female”, “patriarchy”, feminism”, “perfect”. These keywords cover 10 categories of topics (except for “others”) related to feminism in Barbie’s movie by XiaoHongShu’s users.

**Table 2 Word frequency statistics of posts and comments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>words</th>
<th>frequency</th>
<th>words</th>
<th>frequency</th>
<th>words</th>
<th>frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>Patriarchy</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>Feminism</td>
<td>84</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perfect</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Patriarchal</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
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<td>Feminist</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Mother/Mom</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>Self</td>
<td>40</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Awareness</td>
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<td>Awakening</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Equity</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Sister</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Brave</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Male-gaze</td>
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<tr>
<td>Constriction</td>
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<td>Dilemma</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Chase</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Beautiful</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Unfavorable-situation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Grow</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Identities</td>
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<td>Ability</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Break</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>Core</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>self-confidence</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>High heels</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pretty</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>The Second Sex</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>Identify</td>
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<td>Individual</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Stereotype</td>
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<tr>
<td>The First Sex</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Vagina</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Tie</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3 Sentiment analysis

The sentiment of posts and comments extracted by Baidu NLP API. For the feminism-related discussion on XiaoHongShu. Results are shown in Figure 3 with the following observations. It was found that the sentiment tendencies of XiaoHongShu users towards feminism-related discussion were skewed positive, and neutral sentiments were less expressed. Besides, most of the respondents of questionnaire was showed their positive attitude, some of them believe that XiaoHongShu has a positive effect on the dissemination of feminist view and affirms that feminist discourses related to film on XiaoHongShu will have some degree of influence on the discussion of feminism in society.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physiology</th>
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<th>Entitle</th>
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<td>Campaigns</td>
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<td>Shame</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Govern</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Equalitarianism</td>
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<td>Production</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cohesion</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Weird-power</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Human-right</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Consumerism</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Affection</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Manipulate</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Repress</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Subjugate</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Obligation</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seize-power</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Existentialism</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1-5 Emotional attributes of posts (left) and emotional tendency of comments (right) for Barbie movie in XiaoHongShu

However, the results of the questionnaire showed that, excluding those who expressed positive attitudes, the rest were neutral, whereas for the content analysis of the posts and comments, about one-third of them have a negative attitude towards feminism-related discussion.

Figure 1-5 Questionnaire Respondents’ Emotional Tendencies Toward Topics Related to Barbie Movie Feminism

More than 90 per cent of XiaoHongShu users who
have seen Barbie’s film and posted about it said that the emotional words they used to express their attitudes in the discussion were “Encourage and support”, and about a third of the users’ attitudes in their posts were “Humor”, “Angry” and “Concern” in order. The following are typical positive evaluations: “This film can be used as a feminist primer or a feminist universal values propaganda film.” “This film is not just for women, it’s to tell the society that everyone is an individual, you are not dependent on anyone and it has nothing to do with gender”, the value of life should be to try to be everything you want to be”. “The point that particularly struck me after watching Barbie was the fact that women have always given their all to create a world for women.” Negative comments on the film’s feminist-related topics are not negligible. The following are typical negative evaluations: “This film create a situation where men and women are pitted against each other”, “There’s also too little shown of the difficult parts of real-world women”, “The short-lived “patriarchal kingdom of Ken” in “Barbie World” is a childish, even infantilised male compared to reality.” “The film seems to have been deliberately dumbed down.”

3.3 The Role of Social Media for Feminist Communication

In the analysis of questionnaire, more than 91% believed that social media platforms such as Xiaohongshu had a positive effect on the dissemination of feminist views. 3% believed that it did not, and 5% said they were not sure. These respondents believe that feminist discourse on Xiaohongshu has increased attention to feminist issues (89.55%), raised public awareness of feminism (77.11%), facilitated social discussions on gender equality (73.63%), and triggered reflections on sexism (58.71%). The social media’s big data push mechanism divides the audience groups of feminist topics, resulting in a stratified phenomenon of feminism conveyed by social media, with both deep and shallow. While Barbie is marketed to the public, users with different depths and shades of feminist interpretations watch a feminist-colored movie at the same time, and this context is one of the reasons for the mixed reviews of Barbie on Xiaohongshu.

The majority of the respondents believed that the feminism-related discussions had an impact on their opinions (78.61%) or behaviors (74.63%). They believe that these discussions have, to varying degrees, made them more aware of gender equality, inspired a desire for self-fulfillment, increased awareness of gender stereotypes, triggered thinking about the image of women in the media, and deepened their support for women’s rights and interests in order. In the interview, two respondents explained their changes in other aspects: “It has made me realize that as a women, we have a lot of autonomy and that they can give value to themselves instead of being restricted and limited by patriarchy” (Interviewee 2), “It has made me understand that women are a situation. That being female is a situation.” (Interviewee 5). At the behavioral level, more than 65% believe that the movie has inspired their own social engagement, and 40-50% believe that it has influenced their philosophy of family education (48.26%), inspired artistic creation (67.16%) and changed their consume attitudes (42.29%).

3.4 Personal context shapes perspectives

The study found that users in older age groups appeared to be more conservative about the role of Xiaohongshu, on the development of feminism in society as opposed to younger people. Users aged 18-25 are relatively optimistic that feminist topics on Xiaohongshu have a positive effect on the development of feminism in society, with more than 90% of respondents. On the contrary, more than a quarter of respondents over 35 years old thought that the impact was average (21.5%) as well as small (27.4%). This is also reflected in the fact that nearly 30% of them answered “No” to the question “Do these feminist
discussions have an impact on opinions or behaviors?”. Surprisingly, the authors predicted that respondents in developed region (Tier 1, New Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities) would be more knowledgeable about feminism compared to Tier 3, 4 or 5 respondents. However, it turned out that there was no significant difference in the level of knowledge about feminism between these two segments of respondents.

4. Conclusion

Social media enables individuals to recognize the importance of feminism. The research in this paper focuses on this particular topic, emphasizing how users on these platforms share their experiences and respond to the experiences shared by other users. This research suggests that the Xiaohongshu platform enables individuals to share their personal stories in depth, with a tendency to court other users to discover the power of women and increase gender equality awareness. Disregarding the negativity towards different aspects of these personal experiences, the individuals on these platforms are very hopeful that these stories will lead to real change in current society. I hope that my work helps to start a discussion between individuals in society as well as researchers and legislators to come up with new laws and regulations to protect female’s right in society.

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