

Exploring Feminist Perspectives: The Discourse on Childbirth and Motherhood in Internet Media Platforms

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Abstract:

This study delves into the evolving landscape of feminist discourse among young Chinese women, as manifested on Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), a prominent social media platform in China. Through a qualitative analysis of user-generated content, the research uncovers key themes that reflect the contemporary state of feminist thought and its intersection with the unique socio-cultural dynamics of modern China. These themes include reclaiming autonomy in childbirth, the critical role of economic autonomy as a feminist imperative, the complex interplay between economic independence and feminist ideals, and the reconceptualization of motherhood within traditional and contemporary narratives. The study reveals a nuanced tapestry of perspectives, highlighting the progress and challenges in the feminist movement, the evolving understanding of women's roles and identities, and the unique blend of global feminist ideologies with local cultural contexts. This research contributes to the broader discourse on feminism, offering insights into the diverse and dynamic ways young Chinese women engage with and shape feminist thought in the digital age.

Keywords: Feminist Discourse, Chinese Women, Motherhood

Introduction

The evolution of feminist thought has been a cornerstone in shaping contemporary discourse on gender, identity, and social roles. From its early waves advocating for women's suffrage and legal rights to more recent focuses on intersectionality and systemic inequalities, feminism has continually adapted and responded to the changing landscapes of society and culture (Jackson, 2018). This dynamic progression has influenced policy and societal norms and deeply impacted how women's experiences, such as childbirth and motherhood, are perceived and discussed.

Feminist discourse on childbirth and motherhood has undergone significant shifts across the different waves of the feminist movement. Early feminists focused on achieving basic legal rights and protections surrounding childbirth, such as access to pain relief during labor, safe medical facilities, and policies supporting maternal health (Rothman, 1982). Second-wave feminism built upon these foundations by bringing issues like reproductive rights, birth control, and women's healthcare autonomy to the forefront, framing control over childbirth as vital to women's liberation (Oakley, 2016). Contemporary and postmodern feminist lenses have delved deeper into the complexities of women's childbirth and mothering experiences, exploring how they may be impacted by intersecting factors like race, class, culture, and sexuality (Collins, 1994; O'Reilly, 2016). There is also an increased focus on listening to women's first-hand birthing

narratives and critiquing medicalized views of childbirth (Beckett, 2005). Overall, evolving feminist thought has profoundly shaped the practical and discursive landscapes surrounding childbirth and motherhood.

This evolution of feminist perspectives has actively influenced and contested dominant medical discourses on childbirth and motherhood. Feminists have challenged the paternalistic 'authoritative knowledge' of the medical establishment by emphasizing women's lived experiences and embodied knowledge (Davis-Floyd, 2001). For instance, the natural childbirth movement advocated by feminists resisted the over-medicalization of birth and called for more woman-centered care (Wagner, 2006). Feminist scholars have also highlighted how medical discourses throughout history have frequently pathologized female reproductive capacities, portraying them as inferior or dangerous compared to male physiology (Martin, 1987). However, some feminists critique perspectives that sentimentalize or essentialize women's birthing experiences, arguing for a more holistic understanding (Liamputtong, 2006). Through sustained analysis and critique, feminist theorists have played a vital role in problematizing medicalized constructions of childbirth while promoting more inclusive, empowering frameworks.

In recent decades, young feminists have brought fresh and evolving outlooks to discussions of childbirth and motherhood. While second-wave feminism was often divided on issues like reproductive rights and motherhood as a patriarchal institution (Hirsch, 2014), contemporary

young feminists largely embrace reproductive autonomy and freedom of choice, fighting for access to contraception, abortion, and affordable childcare as necessary prerequisites for true choice (Baumgardner, 2011; Willis, 2014). There is more emphasis on listening to the diverse voices and experiences of women across lines of difference, acknowledging that mothering looks different for young mothers, single mothers, queer mothers, mothers of color, and others (Kinser, 2010; O'Reilly, 2016). Some tensions remain, however, around whether voluntarily becoming a mother confines women to traditional gender roles or notions of intensive mothering (Gürtin, 2014; Peskowitz, 2005). Yet many young feminists seek to denaturalize the maternal instinct, deconstructing essentialist notions of motherhood (Kinser, 2010). Overall, young feminists continue to diversify and catalyze new dimensions in feminist dialogues on childbirth and motherhood, pushing for more nuanced, inclusive understandings of women's reproductive lives and choices.

In parallel, the rise of internet media platforms has revolutionized how information is shared and consumed, significantly impacting public discourse. McKinney (2015) highlights how network thinking has been a feature of feminist activism and knowledge production even before the advent of the Internet. These platforms have become vital spaces for feminist voices, enabling the dissemination and exchange of ideas at an unprecedented scale (Davis, 2019). The internet has thus played a crucial role in both echoing and challenging traditional feminist narratives, offering a diverse array of perspectives that contribute to a more nuanced understanding of women's issues.

Childbirth and motherhood, central themes within feminist discourse, have found a particularly resonant space on these digital platforms. These topics, deeply intertwined with notions of female identity, autonomy, and body politics, are now discussed more openly and diversely than ever (Wernimont & Flanders, 2010). The portrayal and discussion of these experiences on internet media platforms offer a unique lens through which to examine the current state and future directions of feminist thought. By exploring how childbirth and motherhood are articulated and debated in these online spaces, this study aims to uncover how feminist perspectives are shaped by and contribute to these discussions. This exploration is crucial, as it not only reflects the evolving nature of feminist discourse (Horbury, 2014) but also highlights the impact of digital media as a transformative tool for social and cultural understanding. Through this analysis, the study seeks to provide deeper insights into the intersection of feminism, digital media, and women's lived

experiences in the context of childbirth and motherhood.

Method

In this qualitative study, we embark on an exploratory journey into the intricate landscape of feminist discourse on childbirth and motherhood, as manifested on Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), a prominent social media platform in China. This platform, celebrated for its dynamic engagement and as a cultural touchstone among young Chinese women, offers a fertile ground for examining contemporary feminist narratives. Our methodological approach is anchored in a nuanced textual analysis of carefully selected discussions, employing a strategic, purposive sampling method. This involves a meticulous curation of posts, guided by a range of carefully chosen keywords and hashtags related to our themes. We prioritize discussions that have sparked significant user engagement, such as those with high likes, comments, and shares, ensuring that our analysis is rooted in the community's most influential and resonant conversations.

Our data collection spans an entire year, allowing us to capture the evolving nature of the discourse and ensuring that our insights are current and historically contextualized. The heart of our analysis lies in a dual approach: a rigorous thematic analysis coupled with a critical discourse analysis. We systematically code and categorize the data through thematic analysis, identifying emerging patterns, themes, and narratives that offer insights into how childbirth and motherhood are framed within feminist discourse. This process is iterative and reflexive, allowing for the evolution of our understanding as new themes emerge from the data. Complementing this, our discourse analysis delves deeper into the linguistic and communicative nuances of the discussions. We scrutinize the language, rhetorical strategies, and narrative styles adopted, aiming to unearth the underlying cultural norms, power dynamics, and social assumptions embedded within the discourse.

Ethical rigor is a cornerstone of our methodology. We approach our data with the utmost respect for the privacy and dignity of the individuals behind the posts. This involves stringent de-identification procedures to ensure anonymity and the careful use of direct quotes to preserve the integrity of the participants' voices while safeguarding their identities. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that our study, while rich in its exploration of feminist perspectives within the Xiaohongshu platform, has its limitations. Focusing on a single digital arena, our study captures a specific snapshot of feminist discourse, which may not fully represent the diverse perspectives and experiences across different social media platforms

or cultural contexts. Nonetheless, our study offers a deep, contextualized understanding of how childbirth and motherhood are navigated and articulated within the realms of feminist thought in the digital age, as reflected in one of China's most influential social media platforms.

Result

Our comprehensive analysis of discussions on Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book) has unveiled a rich and dynamic tapestry of feminist perspectives on childbirth and motherhood, deeply embedded in young Chinese women's experiences and cultural contexts. This exploration has brought to light the intricate ways in which global feminist ideologies are interwoven with and adapted to China's specific cultural, social, and political landscapes. The discourse on the platform is a vivid reflection of this blending, showcasing how users negotiate and reinterpret feminist ideals within the framework of evolving Chinese family dynamics, societal expectations, and the changing role of women in society.

The role of Xiaohongshu as a digital space for feminist community building and activism is particularly noteworthy. It serves as a hub for sharing personal stories, advice, and support, fostering a sense of solidarity among users. This digital community building is significant in a context where traditional media may not fully capture the diversity of women's experiences and viewpoints. Discussions on the platform span a broad spectrum of motherhood experiences, from the joys and challenges of parenting to the complexities of balancing motherhood with personal and professional life. These conversations often center around redefining motherhood, challenging traditional norms, and advocating for a more inclusive understanding of what it means to be a mother in contemporary China.

Moreover, the influence of technology in shaping perceptions of childbirth and motherhood emerges as a critical theme. Online resources, social media narratives, and digital communities significantly influence users' understanding and expectations of motherhood, highlighting the transformative power of digital platforms in disseminating information and shaping public discourse. Additionally, many discussions extend beyond personal experiences to advocate for broader policy and social changes, such as improved maternity care, supportive workplace policies for mothers, and greater societal recognition of women's reproductive rights and health needs.

The discourse on Xiaohongshu mirrors the ongoing dialogues in global feminism while highlighting specific issues pertinent to Chinese society, such as gender equality, reproductive rights, and the impact of socio-

economic changes on women's roles. The platform serves as a microcosm of the larger feminist movement, reflecting its diversity and unity in addressing common challenges women worldwide face. This analysis not only contributes to the academic field of feminist studies but also offers valuable insights for policymakers, healthcare providers, and social activists seeking to understand and support the needs and aspirations of women in contemporary Chinese society.

The results are organized into several key themes, each representing a significant aspect of the discourse.

Theme 1: Reclaiming Autonomy in Childbirth

In the discussions on Xiaohongshu, a prominent theme emerged: women's strong desire to reclaim autonomy in childbirth. This theme reflects a significant shift towards individualism in the context of childbirth, with women expressing a clear preference for freedom and understanding in their birthing choices. The conversations on the platform revealed a deep-seated aspiration for an independent lifestyle, which extends into childbirth and motherhood.

Women on Xiaohongshu frequently discussed their desire for control over their childbirth experiences, challenging traditional practices and societal norms that often dictate birthing. This desire for autonomy is not just about the choice of birthing method but also encompasses a broader demand for respect and agency in all aspects of the childbirth experience. Women shared their aspirations to make informed decisions about their bodies and their births, emphasizing the importance of being active participants rather than passive recipients of healthcare.

A discussion initiated by user Zhang Min (pseudonym) highlighted this issue. Zhang shared her experience of feeling marginalized during her hospital visits, where healthcare professionals often dismissed her preferences for a natural birth. "I felt like my voice didn't matter, that I was just another patient to them," Zhang recounted. Her experience echoes a broader sentiment among women on the platform, advocating for a healthcare system that respects and prioritizes women's choices and voices in childbirth.

The discussions also highlighted a trend toward personalization in childbirth experiences. Women expressed a desire for birthing plans that align with their individual needs and preferences, whether that means opting for natural birth methods, choosing specific pain management techniques, or deciding on the birthing environment. This trend reflects a broader cultural shift towards individualism, where personal choices and preferences are increasingly valued and respected. A thread started by Chen Yu (pseudonym) detailed her

journey of crafting a birth plan that suited her unique needs, including specific pain management techniques and the choice of a birthing partner.

The theme of reclaiming autonomy in childbirth also intersected with discussions about the over-medicalization of birth. Many women advocated for a more balanced approach that recognizes the natural process of childbirth while still providing access to medical support when necessary. This perspective is not a rejection of medical intervention per se but rather a call for a more nuanced approach that respects the natural birthing process and minimizes unnecessary interventions.

Theme 2: Economic Autonomy as a Feminist Imperative: Navigating Contemporary Social Dynamics

A profound theme emerges in the realm of Xiaohongshu's vibrant discussions, underscoring the critical role of economic autonomy in shaping contemporary feminist narratives and social dynamics among young Chinese women. This theme delves deep into the evolving consciousness of financial independence, not merely as a personal achievement but as a fundamental feminist imperative that intersects with China's broader societal and cultural transformations.

The discourse on Xiaohongshu vividly illustrates how economic self-sufficiency has become a pivotal lens through which young women view and navigate their societal roles, particularly about traditional expectations around marriage and motherhood. This perspective reflects personal aspirations and a strategic response to the evolving societal landscape, where traditional norms are increasingly questioned and redefined. The narratives shared by users on the platform echo a strong sentiment that financial independence is a key enabler of autonomy, empowering women to make choices that were once constrained by societal and familial expectations.

The discussions reveal a nuanced understanding of how economic autonomy is intrinsically linked to the broader feminist movement and its goals. Women on Xiaohongshu articulate their experiences and choices in the context of a larger dialogue about women's rights and gender equality. The platform becomes a space where financial independence is celebrated as a means to challenge patriarchal structures and assert control over one's life decisions, particularly in the realms of reproductive rights and family planning. For instance, the assertion by a user that "Being able to support myself means I have the strength to say no to marriage and childbirth" is not just a statement of personal preference but a reflection of a growing feminist consciousness that values economic empowerment as a critical tool for challenging traditional

gender roles.

Moreover, the narratives on Xiaohongshu highlight the transformative impact of economic independence on women's personal and social identities. Financial autonomy is portrayed as a catalyst for redefining womanhood in contemporary Chinese society, allowing women to explore and embrace diverse life paths beyond the conventional frameworks of marriage and motherhood. This shift indicates a larger global trend where economic empowerment is increasingly recognized as a cornerstone of feminist progress, enabling women to assert their rights and make informed life choices.

Theme 3: Redefining Empowerment: The Complex Interplay of Economic Autonomy and Feminist Ideals in Modern China

In the digital conversations on Xiaohongshu, a compelling theme emerges, portraying the intricate relationship between women's economic autonomy and the evolving narrative of feminism in contemporary society. This theme, deeply rooted in users' personal experiences and reflections, underscores the growing emphasis on financial independence as a cornerstone of empowerment and a tool for challenging traditional societal norms, particularly around marriage and motherhood.

The discourse on Xiaohongshu vividly illustrates this shift, as young Chinese women increasingly view economic self-sufficiency as a key to personal freedom and informed life choices. For example, one user's statement, "My financial independence is my power to choose my life path," encapsulates the sentiment of empowerment throughout the platform. This narrative reflects a broader societal transformation where economic autonomy is not merely a personal achievement but a critical aspect of feminist empowerment.

However, this discourse also surfaces a nuanced concern within the feminist movement: the potential oversimplification and glorification of the "strong, independent woman" archetype. While celebrating financial success, the platform often portrays an idealized image of women who seemingly overcome all challenges through their wealth and independence. This narrative, while empowering on the surface, risks oversimplifying the diverse and complex realities of women's lives. For instance, a popular post on Xiaohongshu showcases a successful entrepreneur who seamlessly balances career and personal life, perpetuating the notion that financial success equates to holistic empowerment. This portrayal, though inspiring, may inadvertently marginalize the experiences of women facing systemic barriers that cannot be overcome solely through financial means.

The glorification of the "wealthy, powerful woman"

archetype in Xiaohongshu raises critical reflections on the radicalization of feminist ideals. It suggests a narrative where financial success is seen as the ultimate form of liberation and empowerment, potentially neglecting other essential dimensions of feminist struggle, such as social equality, political representation, and cultural change. This overemphasis on economic autonomy risks reducing the feminist discourse to a singular focus on material success, overshadowing the multifaceted nature of feminist goals and achievements.

Theme 4: Reconceptualizing Motherhood - Affirmation and Aspiration within Traditional Discourses

Another profound and multifaceted theme revealed how a segment of women engage with and redefine the concept of motherhood within traditional frameworks. This theme is characterized by a nuanced affirmation and aspiration towards motherhood, not as a societal imposition but as a deeply personal and self-fulfilling journey. These discussions intriguingly illustrate a departure from traditional societal constraints, with women reinterpreting the role and responsibilities of motherhood through the lens of personal life experiences and the pursuit of individual values.

The conversations on Xiaohongshu reflect a complex interplay between traditional perceptions of motherhood and contemporary feminist thought. Women are not merely accepting the traditional roles assigned to them; they are actively reshaping these roles to align with their aspirations and life experiences. For instance, narratives shared on the platform often depict motherhood as a transformative journey that brings about personal growth, self-discovery, and a deeper understanding of one's identity. This perspective is eloquently captured in posts where users describe motherhood as a path to uncovering strengths and aspects of their identity that were previously unknown or unacknowledged. Li Hua writes in a widely shared post, "Motherhood, for me, was a conscious choice, a journey I embarked on for personal fulfillment. It wasn't about adhering to societal norms but embracing a role that I find intrinsically rewarding." Her narrative is a testament to the growing trend of viewing motherhood as a path to personal growth and self-discovery rather than a societal expectation.

A particularly striking aspect of these discussions is expressing a desire for motherhood outside the conventional family structure. This trend, evident in numerous posts and comments, indicates a significant shift in societal attitudes. Women are increasingly seeking to embrace motherhood independently, challenging the traditional narrative that equates motherhood with

marriage and a nuclear family. This sentiment is not just about defying societal norms but also about redefining what family and motherhood mean on a deeply personal level. The platform features stories of women who articulate their desire to experience motherhood's unique bond and love, independent of a traditional family setup or a male partner.

The discourse on Xiaohongshu also brings to light the emerging phenomenon of single motherhood by choice, a clear indication of changing societal attitudes towards family structures and the role of women. This trend is not merely a challenge to societal norms but a redefinition of family and motherhood from a personal standpoint. A particularly striking discussion thread on Xiaohongshu involved women debating the merits and challenges of single motherhood. One user, Chen Ming, commented, "The idea of raising a child without a partner initially seemed daunting, but I realized that what matters most is the love and stability I can provide. Our society is changing, as are the definitions of family and motherhood." This conversation reflects the evolving attitudes towards family structures and the role of women in contemporary Chinese society.

Women are increasingly vocalizing their desire to have children without the perceived necessity of a male partner, reflecting a shift in the understanding of what constitutes a family. This perspective is vividly illustrated in interviews and personal stories shared on the platform, where single mothers, by choice, discuss their decisions to embrace motherhood driven by a deep maternal instinct and desire rather than societal pressures or traditional family expectations.

Discussion

The discourse on Xiaohongshu, encompassing themes of autonomy in childbirth, economic independence, and the redefinition of motherhood, offers a profound reflection on the progress and development of feminism, particularly in modern China. This reflection delves into how these themes not only represent the current state of feminist thought but also highlight the challenges and complexities inherent in the ongoing evolution of the feminist movement.

The desire for autonomy in childbirth, strongly voiced by women on Xiaohongshu, serves as a barometer of feminist progress. It reflects a significant advancement in women's rights, where making informed choices about one's body and childbirth experience is increasingly recognized as a fundamental right. However, this progress is not without its challenges. The struggle for autonomy in childbirth also highlights the persistent patriarchal attitudes in healthcare and societal norms, indicating that feminist

advocacy must continue to address these deep-seated issues.

The emphasis on economic autonomy as a feminist imperative underscores a crucial advancement in women's empowerment. Financial independence is celebrated as a key enabler of freedom and choice, reflecting a significant shift from traditional dependency roles. However, this focus on economic autonomy also brings to light the complexities and potential pitfalls of the feminist movement. Glorifying financial success risks overshadowing other critical aspects of empowerment, such as emotional well-being, social support, and community engagement. It raises questions about the inclusivity of the feminist movement and whether it adequately addresses the needs and realities of all women, especially those facing systemic barriers beyond financial constraints.

The evolving discourse on motherhood, particularly the trend toward embracing motherhood outside traditional family structures, illustrates the diverse frontiers of feminism. This theme reflects a progressive shift in societal attitudes and a broader acceptance of varied family models. However, it also underscores the ongoing challenges in the feminist movement, particularly in balancing the celebration of motherhood with the advocacy for women who choose not to be mothers. The discourse on motherhood in modern China is a microcosm of the global feminist challenge: accommodating and respecting a wide range of women's choices and experiences.

The synthesis of themes from Xiaohongshu reveals both the achievements and ongoing challenges of the feminist movement. While there is evident progress in autonomy and economic independence, the movement grapples with inclusivity, diversity, and the intersectionality of women's experiences. The discussions on Xiaohongshu highlight the need for a more nuanced and inclusive approach to feminism that recognizes the varied and complex realities of women's lives across different cultures and social contexts.

In conclusion, the reflective analysis of the feminist discourse on Xiaohongshu provides valuable insights into the progress and development of feminism in modern China. It underscores the achievements of the feminist movement while also highlighting the need for continued advocacy, inclusivity, and a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences of women. This reflection is crucial for shaping the future direction of feminist thought and action, ensuring it remains relevant, responsive, and inclusive of all women's voices and experiences.

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