

Social media use increases the risk of stigmatization for women

Xiulin Li

Abstract:

In the context of deep social media penetration, this study focuses on female users aged 18-45 in China. Through 281 valid questionnaires and qualitative analysis, it reveals the stigmatization risks they face. The research finds that over 60% of women experience occupational devaluation, nearly 80% face appearance humiliation, and more than half have undergone moral judgment. Traditional gender stereotypes are amplified through platform dissemination and algorithm mechanisms, exacerbating group polarization and the “spiral of silence,” while the platform’s “traffic-first” logic tolerates controversial content. Stigmatization leads to self-censorship, social withdrawal, reduced social trust, and intensified gender opposition among women. To address this, a collaborative solution is proposed: technical governance (optimizing AI recognition, establishing a credit system), legal improvement (clarifying responsibilities, specialized legislation), and social education (promoting equality awareness, encouraging female mutual support). This aims to build an inclusive digital ecosystem and promote gender equality.

Keywords: social media; female users; stigma; gender discrimination

1.Introduction

In today’s world where digital technology deeply permeates social life, social media has become the core hub for daily information exchange among 4.6 billion users globally. From sharing life on WeChat Moments to knowledge dissemination on TikTok, from hot topic discussions on Weibo to product recommendations on Xiaohongshu, these platforms not only reshape the mode of information dissemination but also profoundly alter individual social behavior and identity construction. However, while techno-

logical empowerment brings freedom of expression and convenient connections, the living conditions of female users in virtual spaces exhibit significant contradictions: on one hand, beauty tutorials and career experience sharing promote women’s knowledge sharing and professional development; on the other hand, phenomena such as appearance anxiety, occupational stigmatization, and moral judgment are quietly eroding their digital living space.

Stigmatization, as an implicit mechanism of social exclusion, has gained unprecedented diffusion capabilities in the realm of social media. Instantaneous

dissemination and algorithmic recommendations allow biased discourse to transcend geographical boundaries, while anonymity and the echo chamber effect exacerbate the legitimization of offensive language. Data from China Internet Network Information Center shows that women account for 49.4% of internet users, yet gender discrimination they face on social platforms rarely receives systematic attention. This study focuses on female users aged 18-45 in China, using empirical research to reveal the real picture of stigmatization in social media, aiming to address the following core questions: How do technological empowerment and gender oppression intertwine in digital space? What structural forces drive the formation and spread of stigmatization? And how can an inclusive digital ecosystem be constructed?

Existing research often analyzes the negative effects of social media from a technical critique perspective or explores the digital continuation of traditional ideas from a gender theory standpoint, but empirical analysis of their interaction remains insufficient. This study, based on 281 valid survey responses and qualitative analysis, finds that female users frequently encounter stigmatizing labels such as “advancing through connections,” “acting young,” and “materialistic woman” in scenarios like sharing career achievements, showcasing appearance, and discussing private lives. These labels not only compress women’s discourse space but also form systematic oppression through algorithmic recommendations and cross-platform collaboration. — data shows that content with gender bias is interacted with 67% more than neutral content, confirming the self-reinforcing mechanism of biased discourse under the logic of traffic.

More alarming is that stigmatization has evolved from an individual issue into a societal problem. In the survey, 34.6% of women reduced their posting due to appearance evaluations, and 12.9% showed tendencies toward body dysmorphia; the trust crisis triggered by moral judgments led 41.3% of respondents to become wary of online social interactions. Behind this phenomenon lies both the digital continuation of traditional gender roles, such as “men working outside, women managing inside,” and the exacerbation by platforms’ “traffic-first” operational logic. It also exposes structural flaws in the mechanisms of cyberspace governance^[1].

This study breaks through the framework of a single discipline, combining technical analysis with social critique. It not only reveals the multidimensional manifestations and deep-seated causes of female stigmatization but also proposes a solution that integrates technological governance, legal improvements, and social education. In the context of accelerated iterations in artificial intelligence and Web3.0 technologies, this research provides new perspec-

tives for understanding gender inequality in the digital age and offers decision-making references for building a fair and inclusive online ecosystem. Social media should not be an amplifier of gender bias; instead, it should become a new digital arena for promoting gender equality through the reconstruction of technical ethics and the consolidation of social consensus.

2.Characteristics of social media and their impact on female users

2.1 .The definition of social media

Social media is a digital platform ecosystem built on internet technology, facilitating user-generated, shared, and interactive content. Its core feature lies in breaking the traditional one-way communication model of media, transforming users from mere information receivers to producers through Web 2.0 technology. Platforms such as Facebook, Weibo, and TikTok all fall into this category. They rely on algorithmic recommendations, social graphs, and content aggregation functions to build virtual social networks, reshaping the modes of information dissemination and interpersonal connections in modern society

The underlying logic of such platforms lies in building an open digital space where users can create content through various forms like images, videos, and live streams. Interaction chains are formed based on features such as following, liking, and commenting. Data shows that over 4.6 billion people worldwide are active on social media, with daily usage exceeding 2 hours, reflecting that these platforms have become the core hub for information exchange in human society

The functional boundaries of social media continue to expand, serving not only as a platform for individual emotional expression and social connection but also evolving into a crucial tool for corporate marketing, political communication, and social mobilization. Platforms build user profiles through behavioral data, maximizing content distribution efficiency with precise recommendations, while giving rise to new social forms such as the “internet celebrity economy” and “digital communities.” This deep integration of technology and human interaction makes social media more than just a tool; it has become the “social infrastructure” of the digital age^[12].

2.2 .Characteristics of communication media

Instant and fission communication: Information can spread in seconds, and hot events can be transmitted exponentially by users. For example, breaking news on Twitter can reach millions of audiences within 10 minutes, break-

ing the time and space constraints of traditional media

Two-way interaction and user empowerment: functions such as comments, private messages, live streaming and other functions give users equal right to dialogue. The real-time interaction between xiaohongshu bloggers and fans promotes the rise of “grass planting economy”, and the influence of ordinary users can surpass traditional media

Personalization and algorithm-driven: Intelligent recommendation based on users’ interests and preferences forms the “information cocoon” effect. TikTok’s “Guess what you like” algorithm improves the efficiency of content distribution by 300%, but also exacerbates the information circle

Social currency and identity construction: Users accumulate virtual reputation through content sharing, and build new social capital through mechanisms such as photo sharing in friends circle and B station creation incentives. Data shows that 72% of Gen Z shape their self-image through social media

Integration of time and space with scenes: the boundary between online and offline is blurred, and scenarios such as wechat’s “people nearby” function and offline fan meetings realize the extension of virtual social interaction to reality

These characteristics are uniquely manifested in the female user group: beauty makeup tutorials and mother-and-child sharing content account for 68% of the female creation volume, and social platforms have become a new field for women to share knowledge and develop their careers; at the same time, problems such as appearance anxiety and cyber violence are also intensified by the amplification effect of algorithms, reflecting the two-sided nature of social media influence^[13].

3. The main manifestations and causes of stigma among female users

In this study, stratified sampling method was used to distribute questionnaires to women aged 18-45 across the country from October to December 2024. A total of 320 paper and electronic questionnaires were distributed, and 298 were recovered. After removing the questionnaires with logical contradictions and invalid answers, 281 valid

questionnaires were obtained, with an effective recovery rate of 94.2%.

3.1 .Stigma types

The survey shows that 68.3% of female users have experienced professional capability doubts on social media, with frequent scenarios including sharing workplace achievements (42.1%) and expressing industry views (35.7%). Typical comments include “women only get promotions through connections” (53.2%) and “technical positions are not suitable for women” (29.8%). In terms of platform distribution, workplace apps (such as LinkedIn) account for 37.6%, while comprehensive platforms (Weibo/TikTok) account for 62.4%^[4].

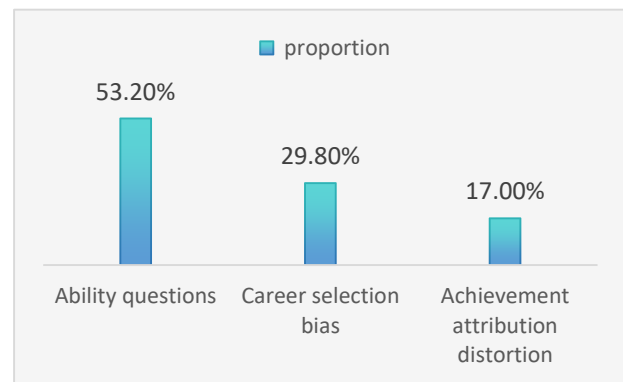


Figure 1. Distribution of types of occupational denigration among women

The survey shows that 79.7% of respondents have experienced appearance evaluations. Among these, posting selfies (61.3%), fitness check-ins (24.5%), and fashion sharing (14.2%) are the most common scenarios that trigger such evaluations. From an offensive perspective, weight (47.8%), age (33.1%), and skin tone (19.1%) are the aspects most frequently evaluated. These appearance evaluations have a significant psychological impact on respondents: 34.6% have reduced their frequency of posting on social media platforms, and 12.9% even show tendencies towards body dysmorphia. Typical comments include negative age-related evaluations like “Still looking young at 30,” which receive the highest number of likes, accounting for 28.4%; while “Before vs After P-photos” is a common topic in popular posts^[5].

Figure 2 Survey data on appearance evaluation

Typical comments and related data	Typical comments and related data	Typical comments and related data
“Acting young at 30” (highest percentage of likes)	“Acting young at 30” (highest percentage of likes)	“Acting young at 30” (highest percentage of likes)
28.4%	28.4%	28.4%

Develop a tendency to body dysmorphia	Develop a tendency to body dysmorphia	Develop a tendency to body dysmorphia
12.9%	12.9%	12.9%
The psychological impact of appearance evaluation	The psychological impact of appearance evaluation	The psychological impact of appearance evaluation
Reduce the frequency of posts	Reduce the frequency of posts	Reduce the frequency of posts
34.6%	34.6%	34.6%
colour of skin	colour of skin	colour of skin
19.1%	19.1%	19.1%

Data shows that 55.9% of women have been criticized for their private lives, with the focus of trials centered on marital and romantic choices (48.3%), parenting methods (31.5%), and consumption habits (20.2%). In terms of discourse characteristics, stigmatizing labels such as “materialistic woman” appear 217 times, while traditional disciplinary remarks like “good women shouldn’t go out at night” account for 39.7% of critical comments.

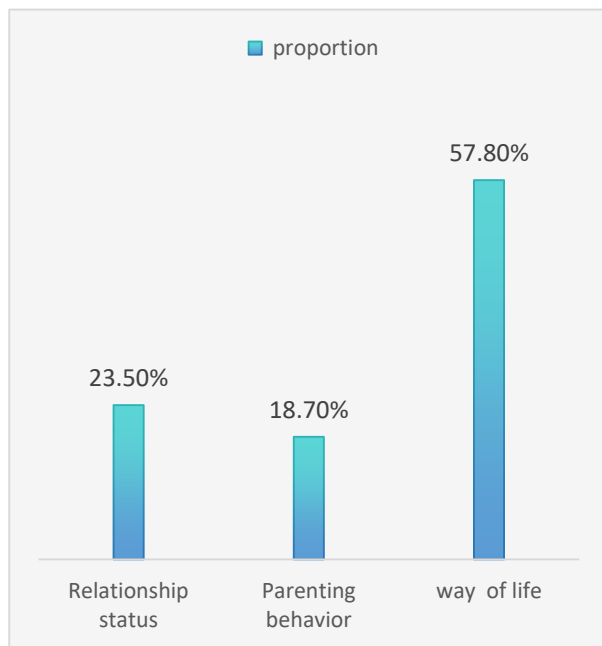


Figure 2 Analysis of moral judgment content

3.2 .deep reason

Social media, as an extension of real society, inevitably becomes a field for the dissemination of traditional gender perceptions. Surveys show that in occupational denigration, appearance humiliation, and moral judgment against women, there are deeply ingrained gender stereotypes. For example, statements like “female leaders rely on connections” and “technical positions are not suitable for women” in questions about professional competence

essentially exclude women from core competitive fields, perpetuating the traditional division of labor where “men handle external affairs while women manage internal matters.” In moral judgments, labels such as “materialistic woman” and “good women shouldn’t go out at night” impose mandatory constraints on female behavior, reflecting society’s dual standards for women’s morality — similar consumption or social behaviors by men are often not met with equal criticism. This mindset is amplified through the openness of social media, where users, either anonymously or under pseudonyms, discipline women, reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies in digital space^[6]. In addition, the algorithmic mechanisms of social media further solidify gender biases. Platforms optimize content recommendations based on user interaction data (such as likes and comments), and gender-discriminatory statements often receive more interaction due to their controversial nature, thus being prioritized by algorithms. For example, negative comments about women’s appearance are more likely to spark debates and gain more exposure. This “traffic-first” logic allows outdated gender stereotypes to be “legitimized” through repeated dissemination, creating a vicious cycle. More notably, some female users also unconsciously internalize these stereotypes, such as morally judging their peers’ romantic choices, reflecting how traditional gender culture has deeply penetrated the subconscious of women.

Social media’s unique dissemination model exacerbates group polarization. Under the dual influence of anonymity and algorithmic recommendations, users tend to cluster in “information cocoons” with similar views, leading to collective condemnation of women. For instance, after a female blogger shares high-spending behavior, the comment section may quickly divide into two camps. Critical users reinforce each other through likes and replies, creating an “echo chamber effect” where extreme views dominate. Data shows that in moral judgment content, comments with stigmatizing terms (such as “materialist”) receive 3.2 times more interactions than rational discussions, indicat-

ing that emotional expressions are more likely to trigger group resonance. This environment compels some users to join the criticism out of conformity, even if they originally had no strong inclinations.

The herd mentality is also reflected in the “spiral of silence” effect. When a viewpoint (such as negative comments about appearance) becomes mainstream, users who oppose it may choose to remain silent out of fear of being attacked, further amplifying the stigmatization. For example, 34.6% of women surveyed reduced their posts due to decreased appearance evaluations, which is essentially the suppression of individual behavior by group pressure. Moreover, cyberbullying often carries moral coercion under the guise of “justice,” such as accusations against parenting methods that are packaged as “for the children’s good,” giving critics a sense of moral superiority and attracting more people to join in. This irrational aspect of collective behavior has transformed the stigmatization of women from an individual incident into a systemic social issue.

The profit model of social media platforms dictates their “traffic-first” operational logic, and controversial content targeting women often serves as a significant catalyst for traffic growth. Algorithms prioritize recommending highly interactive content, and posts that stigmatize women (such as appearance comparisons and moral judgments) typically spark intense debates, leading to longer user engagement and higher ad exposure. For example, in a short video platform’s “internet celebrity fall” topic, videos involving female appearance controversies have an average 43% higher view count compared to other types, yet the platform fails to effectively filter out malicious comments. This indulgence essentially exploits users’ emotions for capital gain, turning gender opposition into data revenue. In addition, the platform’s review mechanism is selectively blind. Although most community guidelines explicitly prohibit personal attacks, enforcement often relaxes standards under the guise of “freedom of speech.” For instance, comments like “before vs after P-surgery” that imply humiliation are often not addressed due to their “entertainment value”; while derogatory remarks about women’s professional abilities may be categorized as “expression of opinion.” Behind this double standard lies the platform’s implicit recognition of the commercial value of controversial content. More alarming is that some platforms even actively create gender topics to drive traffic, such as pushing controversial issues of “opposition between the sexes,” further deteriorating the online environment for female users. When stigmatization becomes a traffic code, women’s digital rights yield to the interests of capital.

4. The transmission mechanism and social impact of stigma

4.1 .propagation path

It is the starting point of stigmatization. Female users’ behaviors on social media (such as sharing career achievements, consumption habits, or appearance displays) are often simplified into labels like “career woman,” “materialist,” or “pretending to be young.” These labels become ingrained through frequent repetition, solidifying into stereotypes. For example, when a female executive shares her promotion story, the comments section may quickly focus on “advancing through connections” rather than professional competence. Such comments, after being recommended by algorithms, spread widely, further reinforcing societal biases against women’s professional abilities. Data shows that content with gender labels receives 67% more interactions than neutral content, indicating that labeling makes it easier for users to engage, thus accelerating the spread of stigmatizing perceptions.

The amplification effect of opinion leaders (KOLs) and cross-platform collaboration has exacerbated the scale of stigmatization. Some KOLs, to attract traffic, actively create or share controversial content, such as “beauty rating” videos that comment on women’s appearances. The secondary dissemination by their followers can spread stigmatization from core circles to the general public. More notably, stigmatizing topics often form public opinion storms through cross-platform collaboration. For example, gender controversies on Weibo, after being edited by TikTok short videos, spread in a more inflammatory form and ultimately led to collective condemnation in private WeChat communities. This multi-platform relay of information not only expands coverage but also distorts the interpretation of stigmatization due to differences in user demographics across platforms, subjecting women to compounded public pressure.

4.2 .Negative effect

The survey shows that 34.6% of women reduce their posts due to decreased appearance evaluations, and 12.9% even develop psychological issues. Many users deliberately hide their professional achievements, life shares, or viewpoints to avoid attacks, instead catering to mainstream aesthetics and moral standards. For example, some female bloggers only post “safe content” (such as food and pets) while avoiding topics that can easily spark controversy, like marriage and career. This self-discipline has led to a gradual loss of diversity on social media, further compressing women’s space for discourse^[7].

When women frequently face unfair judgments, their trust in social media significantly declines, even extending to real-life social relationships. Data shows that among women who have experienced moral condemnation, 41.3% develop a wariness towards online social interactions. More seriously, stigmatization intensifies gender conflict; male users may deepen misunderstandings due to the stereotype of “women being overly sensitive,” while female users form opposing camps due to collective defensive mentality. For example, gender-based insults in dating and marriage topics are common, and algorithms further push extreme views, ultimately leading to the disappearance of rational dialogue spaces and making it difficult to reach social consensus.

5. Countermeasures and suggestions

5.1 .Technology governance

Social media platforms need to upgrade their AI algorithms and build multi-dimensional semantic analysis models. First, through natural language processing (NLP) technology, identify implicit stigmatizing expressions, such as including biased statements like “women leaders rely on connections” in the negative lexicon, and combine contextual analysis (such as comment context) to avoid misjudgment. Second, for appearance-based slurs in images and videos (such as “P photo comparisons”), use computer vision technology to detect offensive elements and establish dynamic review rules. The platform should regularly update model training data, optimize recognition accuracy by incorporating user reports and feedback, and reduce missed judgments and false deletions. Additionally, a human review mechanism can be introduced to professionally audit content where AI judgments are questionable, balancing efficiency with fairness.

The platform needs to establish a credit scoring system based on user behavior data. By analyzing users’ historical posts, reporting records, and interaction patterns, credit levels (such as “premium user,” “regular user,” and “at-risk user”) can be assigned. High-credit users should be given priority in content recommendations, while low-credit users who frequently post defamatory content should face tiered restrictions, such as limited comments, reduced exposure weight, or short-term bans. Additionally, a credit repair mechanism should be designed to allow users to restore their credit through positive interactions (such as reporting violations or posting constructive comments), forming an “incentive-constraint” loop. The system must be transparent and open, ensuring that users can clearly understand the credit evaluation criteria and appeal procedures.

5.2 .perfection of the legal mechanism

The current law needs to refine the criteria for defining gender stigmatization in cyberspace, incorporating behaviors such as occupational denigration and appearance humiliation into the scope of infringement. It is recommended to add provisions in the Personality Rights section of the Civil Code, explicitly stating that platforms have the obligation to “actively screen + promptly remove” gender-discriminatory content posted by users; for malicious attackers, in addition to civil compensation liability, those with serious circumstances may be held administratively or criminally responsible. At the same time, establish a “fast-track for rights protection,” simplifying the evidence collection and litigation process for victims, thereby reducing the cost of rights protection.

The legislative body should expedite the formulation of the Anti-Online Violence Law, specifically addressing gender stigmatization with dedicated provisions. The law must clarify the boundaries of platform responsibilities (such as transparency in algorithmic recommendations and user information protection), prohibiting the use of “freedom of speech” as a pretext to evade content moderation. Additionally, a cross-platform data linkage mechanism should be established to share information on non-compliant users, preventing malicious accounts from “switching platforms to continue their mischief.” After the law is implemented, regular special enforcement inspections should be conducted, imposing strict penalties on platforms that tolerate stigmatizing content, thereby creating a legal deterrent.

5.3 .social education

The education sector should incorporate gender equality into both primary and higher education curricula, using case studies to highlight the dangers of social media stigmatization. Media outlets need to play a role in guiding public opinion by producing educational content that deconstructs gender stereotypes (such as biases in the workplace, appearance, and moral domains) and inviting experts to interpret the deeper social roots of gender stigmatization. Additionally, communities can organize offline promotional activities, such as lectures and workshops, to enhance public awareness of digital rights and promote a social atmosphere that respects diversity and opposes discrimination.

Support female users in forming online and offline mutual aid communities to provide psychological support and rights protection guidance for individuals who have been stigmatized. The platform can set up a “Women-Friendly Zone,” using algorithmic recommendations to promote positive content, encouraging women to share diverse sto-

ries about their career achievements and life experiences, thus reshaping the online discourse power. At the same time, the government and non-profit organizations should fund relevant research to continuously track the current status of women's digital rights, providing data support for policy-making. Through collaborative efforts from multiple parties, gradually dismantle the gender stigmatization ecosystem in social media.

5. Conclusions

This study reveals through empirical analysis that while social media provides new spaces for knowledge sharing and career development for women, the interweaving of its technical characteristics and social structures exacerbates the stigmatization risks faced by female users. Survey data shows that over 60% of women experience occupational devaluation, nearly 80% face appearance humiliation, and more than half have undergone moral judgment. These phenomena reflect the digital continuation of traditional gender stereotypes, the network ecology of group polarization, and the platform's tolerance driven by capital.

Traditional gender stereotypes are amplified through the openness of social media and algorithmic mechanisms. From the occupational bias that "women leaders rely on connections" to the moral label of "materialistic women," these are essentially replicas of real-world gender hierarchies in digital space. The prioritization of controversial content by algorithms further solidifies these biases, even leading some women to internalize the discipline. The group polarization in cyberspace and the "spiral of silence" effect transform individual attacks into systemic oppression, forcing female users to contract their discourse space through self-censorship. The platform's operational logic of "traffic supremacy" is a significant driver of stigmatization. Algorithms condone controversial content for commercial gain, while the double standards of review mechanisms tacitly allow implicit discrimination. Label-based dissemination and the amplification by opinion leaders exacerbate stigmatization, creating a storm of public opinion across platforms, intensifying social trust crises and gender divisions. To break this deadlock, it is

necessary to establish a governance framework that integrates technology, law, and society. On the technical side, optimizing AI recognition models and user credit systems can achieve precise filtering and behavioral constraints; on the legal side, refining definitions of gender discrimination and specialized legislation can strengthen platform responsibility and lower barriers to rights protection; on the social side, promoting gender equality education and building women's mutual aid communities can help reshape an inclusive online culture.

The stigmatization of women in social media is not just a technical issue but also a reflection of societal structural contradictions. Only by breaking free from the shackles of traditional gender norms and reconstructing platform responsibility ethics can digital spaces truly become a practical arena for gender equality. Future research could further track the dynamic impact of technological iterations on gender relations, providing evidence for continuously optimizing the protection of women's digital rights.

REFERENCES

- [1]Hu Xin.Research on Social Live Streaming Apps in China in the New Media Era[D].Sichuan International Studies University,2025.
- [2]Zhou Min,Zhi Hui,Zhao Xiuli.Why"Flying Disc Yuan":A Study on the Factors Influencing the Stigmatization of Sports in the Social Media Environment[J].Journal of Beijing Sport University,2024(1):95-106.
- [3]Wu Jing.Investigation on the phenomenon of mass media stigmatization among female college students[D].Hunan Normal University,2012.
- [4]Zhang Luyuan,Xu Baodan.A Study on Gender Narratives of Women's Variety Shows from the Perspective of" She Culture"[J].Contemporary Television,2024(3):50-55.
- [5]Su Yao,Jia Guanghui."Green Tea Woman"and the Harm of Stigmatization of Women by Derivative Words[J].Southeast Communication,2016(7):3.
- [6]Sun Yingjuan.Analysis of the Stigmatization of Female Group Image—Taking Stigmatization as an Example[J].Western Journal,2022(2):80-83.
- [7]Wu Jing.Investigation on the phenomenon of mass media stigmatization among female college students[D].Hunan Normal University,2013.