Analysis of Gender Discourse Bias and Gender Discrimination in Social Media: A Case Study of the TikTok Platform

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Abstract: In the contemporary landscape of new media, social media platforms, particularly exemplified by TikTok, offer female users accessible and cost-effective means for self-expression and communication. However, this study reveals that such platforms, despite their apparent openness and liberality, have not effectively challenged or changed the persistent and deep-rooted issue of gender discrimination that women face. This research adopts a qualitative content analysis and specifically focuses on the TikTok platform, where female users frequently encounter various forms of gender discourse bias and discrimination. The findings suggest that female users on TikTok often face stigmatization through the internet lexicon and the commodification of physical appearance, reflecting broader societal issues of gender inequality and objectification. Simultaneously, a segment of the female user base on TikTok is actively engaging in challenging and negotiating these entrenched stereotypes, striving to redefine their representation in the digital space. Furthermore, the research highlights how the anonymity of the internet, the media's role in encoding and perpetuating gender stereotypes, and the consumerist traps set by capitalist market dynamics collectively contribute to an illusory facade of gender equality. This facade obscures the underlying realities of discourse bias and gender discrimination that persist in the digital realm.

1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, social media has become pivotal in shaping interactive experiences globally. Among the popular social media platforms, TikTok has grown rapidly and has become a new attractive social media platform for young generations. In 2023, TikTok had 1.5 billion monthly active users and is expected to reach 1.8 billion by the end of 2024 (Curry, 2024). In China, TikTok is accessed by over 750 million users daily (Curry, 2024). Therefore, this study focuses on TikTok, where 48% of its users are female, providing a significant platform for engaging in a diverse global dialogue (Ceci, 2024). However, the simplicity of TikTok's interface, the varied educational backgrounds of its users, and the platform's commercial elements contribute to a notable disparity in content quality and interaction levels. This research aims to critically examine the dynamics of female representation and discourse within such a new media environment.

TikTok's algorithm, designed to cater to individual user preferences, inadvertently leads to the creation of 'echo chambers' (Lee & Abidin, 2023).This effect is especially pronounced among women engaging with specific topics like parenting, where they receive an increasing number of related video suggestions. Such a mechanism can restrict their exposure to diverse viewpoints, potentially narrowing their discourse and exposing them to outdated or biased perspectives.

Additionally, the passive consumer role assumed by the majority of users on TikTok empowers a minority of influencers or 'opinion leaders' with significant agenda-setting power (Stahl & Literat, 2023). The TikTok Data Report (Miaozhen, 2018) reveals that only 4.7% of top content creators command the attention of 97.7% of the platform's total followers. In an environment with such uneven user education levels and lagging gatekeeping mechanisms, there is a heightened risk of negatively influencing female values and perspectives. The large number of 'onlookers' find themselves in a passive, accommodating position, inadvertently ceding discouse authority to a minority of 'opinion leaders'.

However, limited research has explored the specific ways these limitations manifest in gender bias and discrimination on TikTok. While studies exist on echo-

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chambers and influencer power, a deeper understanding is needed regarding how these factors uniquely impact female discourse and representation on the platform.

This research is anchored in a theoretical framework that combines Symbolic Interactionism, Social Constructionism, and Gender Discrimination Theory, which aims to examine the intersection of new media, gender representation, and social influence. It raises critical questions about the current media landscape: despite its prosperity and apparent advocacy for women's freedom, does it genuinely address the deep-rooted issues of marginalization of female voices and gender discrimination? The primary objectives of this research are to explore how the unique dynamics of TikTok as a social media platform contribute to shaping female discourse, to assess the extent of gender bias and discrimination within this digital space, and to understand the implications of these dynamics for the broader societal context of gender equality. This inquiry is crucial for reassessing whether modern media environments truly improve the unequal status quo of women's discourse and gender discrimination.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Development of Women's Discourses on TikTok in China

Discussions about women's rights began gaining traction in China during the 1980s. However, the traditional media landscape remained dominated by male perspectives. This trend was echoed in a 1995 study encompassing 71 countries, which found that only 17% of news topics globally pertained to women. In Asia, the situation was even more pronounced, with female journalists comprising a mere 14% (Madgavkar et al., 2019). Even at the beginning of the 21st century, women accounted for just 25% of the subjects featured in news reports. Political and economic news were overwhelmingly male-centric, with over 80% of the protagonists being men (Madgavkar et al., 2019).

The reason caused this phenomenon can be linked with features of women's language. The empowerment of women is established through the acceptance of female perspectives, intricately intertwined with our use of language, which conveys referential meanings and attitudes. The notion that women are inconsequential to crucial life matters, often relegated to the sidelines while men take the lead, forms the foundation of what is termed "women's language". This language reflects the marginalization and helplessness experienced by women, evident in the manner in which they are expected to communicate (Balamurali et al., 2023).

Women are often compelled to speak in a manner deemed appropriate for their gender, which involves avoiding the expression of strong emotions, favoring uncertainty over assertiveness, and elaborating excessively to justify ideas considered "trivial" in the context of the "real" world (Balamurali et al., 2023). The language surrounding women implies an objectification rooted in their sexual nature, necessitating euphemistic expressions, while their social standing is portrayed as derived from and dependent on male figures. Consequently, women's identities are linguistically obscured, and language itself acts as a barrier to recognizing them as significant individuals with distinct viewpoints (Balamurali et al., 2023).

The rise of new media technologies in recent years has ushered in a significant shift. The interactive nature of various social media platforms has provided a valuable space for women to express themselves and shape their self-presentation. This has demonstrably contributed to an improvement in their social status. Women have transitioned from passive audiences to active participants, with their voices gaining increasing power.

TikTok, a popular social media platform, provides a compelling example of this trend. Women contribute a substantial 67.8% of the platform's content (Wu & Zhang, 2019). The hashtag #meetthemostbeautifulworkers has garnered over 1.29 billion views, highlighting the prominence of female workers in diverse video categories (Wu & Zhang, 2019). This surge in female content creation has garnered significant societal recognition and appreciation.

The internet user base reflects a similar shift. In 2004, women constituted only 39.2% of Chinese internet users. This figure has climbed significantly in recent years, reaching close to 48% according to the latest data. On TikTok alone, nearly 140 million women actively engage by publishing short video content or interacting with others' works, impacting over 500 million users within China (Curry, 2024). Notably, female users exhibit a higher daily interaction rate compared to their male counterparts.

Furthermore, examining accounts with over 100,000 followers reveals a pattern of female creators receiving significantly more likes (2.4 times), comments (1.8 times), and followers (1.8 times) per day compared to male creators (Wu & Zhang, 2019). This platform has empowered previously unheard voices, enabling women to engage in discussions on critical social issues, express their opinions with newfound self-awareness, and showcase their diverse identities.

The rise of TikTok has introduced a new dynamic in women's discourse. Unlike traditional platforms, TikTok's short-form video content allows for quick and engaging dissemination of information. This format, however, often necessitates a more superficial treatment of complex topics due to time constraints (Zeng, 2023). Consequently, TikTok content tends to focus more on relatable snippets of women, practical tips, and visual

portrayals of parenting life, which can sometimes gloss over the deeper nuances of women's experiences (Zeng, 2023).

At the same time, the professionalization and self-representation of women in media have been the strength of TikTok due to its business function. The dominance of certain narratives, particularly those that align with commercial interests, can overshadow diverse women's discourse, especially those that do not conform to conventional or marketable standards (Wegener et al., 2023). This can contribute to a narrow understanding of gender bias, marginalizing alternative experiences and perspectives.

2.2. Gender Dynamics on TikTok

With the development of social media, micro-narratives are evolving into a trend of expression. It aims to tell stories using digital tools that combine text, images, videos, and sound. The micro-adjusting capability of social media constitutes a significant force in showcasing oneself, understanding personal experiences, and connecting with others (Li et al., 2023). In the sphere of social media and gender representation, scholarly discourse has extensively explored the influence these platforms exert on shaping gender norms and stereotypes. As Lee and Abidin (2023) articulates, social media like TikTok have democratized content creation, yet simultaneously, they risk perpetuating entrenched gender stereotypes. This dichotomy is particularly evident in contexts where women act as both consumers and subjects of consumption (Wu & Zhang, 2019). Such dynamics are crucial in understanding the representation of women on platforms with a predominantly female user base.

Fuchen Wang (2021) highlights how personalized algorithms on platforms like TikTok can restrict users' exposure to diverse viewpoints, potentially entrenching existing stereotypes and biases. The phenomenon of algorithmic personalization leading to 'echo chambers' has been well established in the literature. This effect is particularly pronounced among female users, as noted by Bakshy, Messing, and Adamic (2015), where regular exposure to similar content types may inadvertently narrow their discourse and reinforce existing biases.

Furthermore, the comment function fosters multi-layered dialogues, yet due to a lack of understanding and knowledge, audiences inevitably fall into narrow viewpoints. A cyclic effect can be observed through 'grouping' to resist divergent opinions in comments, leading to a reinforcement of initial emotional attitudes and a rejection of opposing views from 'others' (Li et al., 2023). Emotional reactions have supplanted rational discourse, becoming the primary form of engagement for online audiences. Specific information, emotions, and beliefs are concentrated outside the participants' traditional cultural identities, leading to an 'echo chamber' effect where emotions play a significant role and other opinions struggle to enter (Li et al., 2023).

Addressing the digital divide, Hargittai (2006) sheds light on the impact of user demographics, particularly educational background, on the consumption and interaction quality of social media. This divide is starkly visible on platforms such as TikTok, where the low entry barriers attract a diverse user demographic (Van Deursen et al., 2015). The platform's appeal to a broad range of users underscores the need to examine the quality of interaction and content, especially from a gendered perspective.

The agenda-setting role of influencers on social media platforms is a burgeoning area of study. Influencers can significantly shape public discourse (Woelke & Koch, 2016). This is particularly evident in TikTok, where a small percentage of influential users wield disproportionate power over the platform's discourse (Sachs et al., 2021). The influence of these 'opinion leaders' is crucial in understanding the dynamics of gender discourse on such platforms.

The evolution of gatekeeping in the digital era is a critical aspect of media studies. Shoemaker and Vos's (2009) exploration of gatekeeping highlights how traditional mechanisms have adapted to the digital space. Platforms like TikTok, with delayed or inadequate gatekeeping mechanisms, can allow content that negatively influences the values and perceptions of female users.

Finally, the role of critical media literacy, particularly for female users of platforms like TikTok, is highlighted as a crucial countermeasure to combat gender biases and stereotypes. Gill (2012) advocated for the empowerment of women through enhanced media literacy, suggesting that it could mitigate the negative impacts of biased content and foster a more balanced gender discourse. It indicated the pressing need for further research into how these dynamics affect women's participation in social media and the broader implications for gender equality in the digital realm.

2.3. Gaps and Theories

While existing studies provide insights into gender bias and discrimination on social media, there's a gap in understanding how these phenomena manifest specifically within the Chinese cultural context. Given the unique sociocultural landscape in China, including traditional gender norms and the influence of state censorship, exploring how these factors shape gender biases and discrimination in women's discourse on platforms like TikTok in China is essential.

To explore the problem above, this study delves into the complexities of gender bias and discrimination faced by women in online discourse through the lens of symbolic interactionism. This theory posits that meaning is

constructed and negotiated through social interactions. Here, women, aware of societal expectations and potential biases, might tailor their online self-presentation. This adaptation, influenced by the perceived expectations of others, can shape how they are subsequently perceived and interact within the online space.

However, for a comprehensive understanding, symbolic interactionism needs to be complemented by other theoretical frameworks. Gender Discrimination Theory sheds light on the underlying societal structures that perpetuate prejudice, explaining the root causes of online harassment and stereotypical portrayals women encounter. Social Constructionism adds another layer by revealing how societal norms and cultural expectations construct the very concept of gender, potentially limiting female expression and reinforcing a passive position in online interactions.

Therefore, while symbolic interactionism offers valuable insights into the dynamic nature of online self-presentation, a holistic analysis necessitates the combined application of these complementary theories. This theoretical framework examines the intersection of new media, gender representation, and social influence. This multifaceted approach paints a clearer picture of the interplay between individual actions, societal structures, and the constructed nature of gender, ultimately leading to a more nuanced understanding of the challenges women face in online discourses.

3. Methodology

In this study, qualitative content analysis is utilized to delve into the representation and discourse surrounding women on the TikTok platform, providing an in-depth understanding of gender dynamics in this digital realm. Because of the feature of TikTok, which has large numbers of short videos and cannot be searched by a fixed time, it is difficult to select the samples from a fixed period using systematic random sampling (TikTok, 2020). Therefore, this analysis will leverage a hybrid sampling approach, combining purposive sampling with the dynamic capabilities of TikTok's 'For You' system (TikTok, 2020).

The initial purposive sampling technology was informed by the key video labels particularly relevant to female users that resonate with the study's thematic focus. This selection is informed by criteria such as the prominence of female subjects within these videos, themes related to women's issues, and the level of user engagement indicated by views and shares. The objective is to encompass a diverse spectrum of content that varies from entertainment-focused to more serious discussions pertinent to gender discourse.

After TikTok getting familiar with the themes of content, snowball sampling was applied instead of a purposive sampling process. The feature of TikTok's 'For You' system ensures the randomization of video recommendations based on user preferences, which inherently diversifies the pool of content and prevents echo chambers, thereby supporting the snowball sampling strategy to produce an unbiased and heterogenous sample (TikTok, 2020). It effectively circumvents the challenges associated with fixed-period sampling and systematic random sampling, thus enchancing representativeness, and mitigating selection bias.

Meanwhile, three coders collaborate in the selection of videos to further safeguard against subjective bias. This triadic approach ensures a balanced and comprehensive collection process, where each coder's selections are tempered by collective decision-making.

After the selection process, a comprehensive content analysis is conducted. This involves a detailed examination of both the visual and auditory elements of the videos, focusing on how gender roles and stereotypes are portrayed, alongside the narrative styles employed. In parallel, the comments sections of these videos are scrutinized to understand the nature of user interactions. This phase is essential in gauging how societal attitudes towards women, including potential biases, are reflected in these interactions.

The study further extends to a discourse analysis, which involves dissecting the underlying messages, societal norms, and power structures evident in the content. A significant aspect of this analysis is exploring how TikTok, as a platform, shapes and influences the public discourse on women and gender issues.

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations are paramount, particularly in terms of respecting the privacy and anonymity of the content creators and commenters. The study ensures that sensitive data is handled with utmost care to avoid misrepresentation or harm to the subjects involved. It is also acknowledged that, despite the thoroughness of the methodology, there are inherent limitations typical of qualitative research, such as potential subjectivity and the possibility that the findings, derived from the selected samples, might not fully represent the diverse experiences of women on TikTok.

This methodological approach is designed to offer a nuanced and comprehensive exploration of female representation and discourse on TikTok, contributing valuable insights into the complexities of gender dynamics in modern digital media. The findings are expected to enhance the broader understanding of gender representation in social media contexts, highlighting both the challenges and opportunities presented in the digital age for gender equality.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1. The Stigmatization of Internet Vocabulary

With the rapid development of the Internet environment, the emergence of new Internet terminologies has evolved into a dynamic cultural phenomenon constantly in flux. Particularly notable is the proliferation of online vocabulary associated with female images, a substantial portion of which carries negative connotations that stigmatize women. Even seemingly neutral terms have been imbued with derogatory undertones in online discourse. Symbolic interactionism posits that individuals construct meaning through social interactions, and the derogatory labels assigned to women on social media platforms are symbolic representations of societal beliefs and prejudices.

For instance, a search for the term 'female driver' on TikTok, a popular social media platform, yields results such as 'female driver kills someone', 'female driver funny video', and 'female driver driving accident'. These videos, along with others bearing similar labels, often portray female drivers as 'road killers', perpetuated by select news events and a plethora of spoof plot videos. Furthermore, comment sections are inundated with derisive remarks directed towards female drivers, exemplified by statements like 'Cherish your life and stay away from female drivers'. In extreme cases, male commentators' resort to attacking female physiology.

These interactions reflect the symbolic construction of women's driving abilities as inherently inferior and dangerous. Through repeated interactions and reinforcement, these symbolic labels become ingrained in social discourse, shaping perceptions of gender roles and behaviors. Besides, by attributing negative traits and behaviors to female drivers and TikTokers, online users perpetuate discriminatory attitudes and reinforce existing gender hierarchies.

Moreover, the term 'green tea bitch' is frequently employed in casual comments about female bloggers. This derogatory term characterizes a woman who outwardly appears pure and refined but is purportedly duplicitous and conniving behind the scenes. On online platforms, netizens often label bloggers as 'green tea bitches' based solely on superficial assumptions about their appearance and speech, erecting barriers that impede women's ability to express themselves freely. These stigmatizing terms contribute to the reification of women's bodies and sexuality, portraying them as commodities to be leveraged for personal gain.

Generally, we observe how gender discrimination operates through social practices and institutions, manifesting in language, behaviors, and societal norms. The derogatory term 'green tea bitch' exemplifies the intersectionality of gender and class, as it reinforces stereotypes about women's perceived deceitfulness and reinforces class-based power differentials.

In the online arena where conflicts between young men from lower socioeconomic backgrounds in urban China and the privileged class are often played out, new media serves as both a platform for catharsis and visibility. However, it also perpetuates the marginalization and denigration of numerous female figures. This complex interplay between gender politics and class relations in contemporary China underscores the multifaceted nature of online discourse.

The use of derogatory labels like 'female driver' and 'green tea bitch' reflects the construction of gendered identities and stereotypes within online communities. These labels are not inherent truths but socially constructed representations that perpetuate harmful gender norms and inequalities. Moreover, Social Constructionism highlights the fluidity and contingency of meaning, suggesting that these derogatory terms can evolve and change over time as social dynamics shift.

4.2. The Resistance to Stereotypes by Women: The Case of Female PhDs and Influencers

The resistance of women to entrenched stereotypes, shaped by male-centric aesthetics, value systems, and long-standing cultural influences, is a critical issue in gender studies. Historically, women, as the 'observed', have been forced into numerous stereotypes, such as the belief that 'a woman with less talent is a virtue', and the stigmatization of female PhDs. The latter group, particularly, has seen a shift in recent years with the rise in educational levels, gradually becoming a more common societal group.

On the TikTok platform, an increasing number of female PhDs are engaging in self-presentation and expression through short videos and live streams, challenging the preconceived notions of female PhD holders being academically adept but lacking emotional intelligence, being older and unmarried, or being serious and uninteresting.

A notable example is Professor Chen Guo from the Philosophy Department at Fudan University, who gained popularity on TikTok for her confident, knowledgeable, and optimistic teaching style. Her account, featuring her lectures, amassed nearly a million followers, with videos receiving over three million likes. Such influencers leverage their knowledge to enhance their self-worth and create influential voices for themselves.

Female PhD users on TikTok document various aspects of their lives, from their research activities, showcasing interesting, humorous, and multifaceted images, to their personal lives involving family, friends, and

romantic relationships, conveying positive energy. By presenting a diversified image of themselves, they aim to dissolve societal stereotypes and prejudices against female PhDs and deconstruct negative labels jointly shaped by media and society.

Papi, an internet celebrity, gained fame for her persona that embodies talent, family, marriage, and financial independence. Her choice of social topics brought women's discourse into the public domain, challenging the absolute authority of male discourse on public issues and representing a pushback against women's marginalization. However, Papi's decision to give her child the father's surname led to her trending on social media, highlighting a new variant of patriarchal ideology. Such acts stigmatize feminism, intrusively interfere in others' marital and reproductive choices, and crudely equate naming rights with gender equality, illustrating the persistent challenges in achieving true gender parity. These dynamics are indicative of the ongoing struggle for women to establish their voice and authority in the digital age.

In the context of female doctorates challenging stereotypes on platforms like TikTok, symbolic interactionism elucidates how these women utilize their online presence to redefine societal perceptions of highly educated women. By presenting themselves as confident, knowledgeable, and multifaceted individuals, they seek to reshape the symbolic meanings associated with female academic achievement, thereby challenging traditional gender roles and expectations. While, the verbal violence directed women, such as questioning their ability to balance work and family responsibilities, perpetuating inequalities, and hindering women's autonomy and agency, it reflects deeply ingrained gender biases and societal expectations.

However, the derogatory comments aimed at female doctorate users and influencers on TikTok are not inherent truths buth socially constructed representations that reinforce gender stereotypes and prejudices. By deconstructing negative labels and challenging societal norms, these women engage in a process of social construction, reshaping perceptions of female academic achievement and challenging the patriarchal structures that underpin gender inequalities.

4.3. Consumption and Commodification of Female Body and Appearance: The Role of Filters on TikTok

Symbolic interaction posits that individuals derive meaning from social interactions and construct their identities through these interactions. The diverse filter functions available on TikTok, such as beautification, face slimming, and body slimming, offer women a convenient means to enhance their appearance and present themselves online. In the context of TikTok's filter functions, women utilize these tools to project an idealized version of themselves that aligns with societal beauty standards. By enhancing their appearance through filters, women seek validation and recognition from others, shaping their self-concept based on societal feedback and perceptions. Women can shape and construct their self-image at zero cost, aligning with prevailing aesthetic standards, particularly focusing on enhancing physiological characteristics like skin whitening and achieving a slender figure.

Lacan's mirro theory posits that the self-reflected in the mirror is not a true reflection of the subject but a result of the dual unity of others' expectations and self-expectations. The subject's recognition of itself is contingent upon reference to 'the other', encompassing not only men but also entrenched social and cultural norms. Consequently, the aesthetics of women's body appearance to a certain extent reflect the disciplining influence of male expectations. Women invest both time and money to enhance their beauty and to display their idealized selves for consumption by the broader audience, reinforcing societal norms and gender expectations.Foucault (2019), in discussing the operation of power and the gaze, highlighted how mere observation exerts significant disciplinary influence, stating, no weapons, no physical violence or material restraints are needed. Just a gaze, a supervisory gaze, and everyone will be under this gaze. Become humble under the pressure. The observer subconsciously acknowledges the authority of the gaze and consciously adjusts their behavior accordingly, a phenomenon that also underpins the popularity of beauty videos on TikTok. Beauty bloggers endeavor to disseminate skincare and beauty knowledge to female users, while simultaneously promoting products aimed at enhancing their appearance. However, beneath this seemingly harmonious facade lie elements of sexism, language prejudice, and violence.

A prime example of this is seen in the live-streaming comments of beauty bloggers on TikTok. Over 70% of beauty bloggers on TikTok have tried live streaming, with a monthly replay rate exceeding 80% (Ryu, 2022). The primary audience for these streams is female, and it's common to see criticism and insults directed at the bloggers' appearances in the live stream comments and video comments. Criticisms range from accusations of plastic surgery for good looks, to mocking the excessive use of slimming filters. Beauty bloggers who do not conform to mainstream beauty standards often face derogatory remarks about their appearance, intensifying the sentiment of contempt through questioning tones. This dual attitude of female users – resenting attractive bloggers popular with the opposite sex, while mocking those who do not meet their own or societal beauty standards –reinforces the typical manifestations of gender discrimination in a patriarchal society.

4.4. The Facilitation of Anonymity in Gender Discrimination Discourse

Gender discrimination，deeply ingrained in societal consciousness, often remains concealed due to social pressures and norms governing interpersonal communication. However, the inherent anonymity and openness of

online media enable the release of these concealed attitudes. Both male and female users can engage in online interactions while hiding their identity, gender, and name, alleviating concerns about identity anxiety and expressing their genuine thoughts, thus facilitating self-awareness and the reconstruction of subjectivity.

This aligns with the symbolic interactionist perspective, as users construct and negotiate their identities within the digital realm, influencing their attitudes and actions towards others. This anonymity enables users to express their true thoughts, facilitating self-awareness and the reconstruction of subjectivity. However, the anonymous nature of the internet creates a setting were sexist discourse flourishes without consequence. Perpetrators of sexism and those subjected to discrimination often remain anonymous, lacking any meaningful interpersonal connections. Moreover, the low technical barrier to entry for using new media platforms, coupled with simplified and often inadequate moderation processes, reduces the cost associated with making sexist remarks. Consequently, individuals feel emboldened to express deeply rooted biases and prejudices with impunity online.

The anonymity of the internet creates a consequence-free environment for the discourse of gender discrimination. Discriminators and the discriminated are almost strangers to each other, lacking any personal or financial connection. Coupled with the low technical threshold for using new media and the simplified and delayed process of moderation, the cost and risk of expressing gender discriminatory remarks are significantly low. Under such conditions, deeply ingrained subconscious thoughts can be freely expressed on the internet. Users, under the guise of anonymity, openly, sharply, and bluntly insult women, abusing the right to free speech granted by the internet. This leads to irrational, emotional discourse pervading the online interactive space, exacerbating the issue of gender discrimination in the digital era.

4.5. Media Enculturation: The Symbolic Encoding of Stereotypes

In the context of media influence, symbolic interactionism suggests that media representations contribute to the construction of gender roles and stereotypes through repeated exposure and interaction. Walter Lippmann's concepts of the "mimetic environment" and "stereotype" align with this framework, emphasizing how media portrayals influence individuals' understanding of the world. When the media's portrayal aligns with pre-existing viewpoints, these notions are further reinforced under its influence. Persistent societal stereotypes about women, such as 'men work outside, women manage the home', 'unmarried women over 30 are considered 'leftover women', and 'childcare being a woman's duty', are deeply rooted and perpetuated through media platforms.

For instance, the topic 'leftover women' on TikTok has garnered 860 million views, with discussions in first-tier cities being more heated than in other areas. Here, these 'leftover women' are often highly educated, hold senior positions, and earn substantial incomes, but are older. Comments often label them as picky or unfilial. A female teacher from a university in Xi'an, known as @vivi teacher (translated name), posted a video titled '33 and unmarried, do my family pressure me to marry?' where she calmly analyzed her reasons for being unmarried. The comments, however, were rife with sarcasm and mockery, including age attacks like '33? You look 43', and 'Born in 1987? You seem 7-8 years older than me'; provocative remarks on marriage and childbirth like 'Stop looking for a teacher, find an old man', and 'Listen to me, there's a 48-year-old spinster in my office, so tragic'; and moral 'kidnapping' regarding family sentiments like 'A waste of your parents' upbringing' and 'Being from a single-parent family, marriage seems a distant dream for you'. Media reports on 'leftover women' often neglect individual differences, reinforcing the negative enculturation effect of this concept on society, particularly on women.

TikTok acts as a double-edged sword. On one hand, with its interactivity and low threshold, it dissolves the boundaries between communicators and audiences, offering women new perspectives, spaces, and platforms for expression. On the other hand, due to the commercial interests manipulated by male culture and continuous compromises between internet media, it further strengthens stereotypical notions about female characteristics. The online interactive environment provides a detachment tool from the real world, where expressing inner thoughts or making unwarranted comments on facts has become a nearly cost-free norm of interaction, essentially restraining and hindering women's self-identification and expression.

4.6. Market Consumption: The Trap of Capital Power

It has been highlighted that globally, women dominate 70%-80% of purchasing power and consumer influence (Madgavkar et al., 2019), and in China, 41% of the GDP is driven by female consumption, the highest globally (Su et al., 2019). Some scholars even refer to the 21st century as the 'She Century' (Su et al., 2019). The female economy has become a lucrative sector in the online economy, making understanding women's preferences and psychological identification key to business profitability. Consumer culture deftly harnesses elements of traditional concepts to cultivate discussions around gender issues, creating aspirational model images that drive female consumption and spark gender-related consumption trends.

According to the observation from the gender-related TikTok videos, the creation of gender-related consumption trends frequently involves interactions revolving around female body image and appearance, effectively constituting a process wherein men mold women's identities. The female body itself has the characteristic of symbolic capital, making women both subjects and objects of consumption, often caught in the

dual lure of consuming and being consumed. Whether through celebrity-endorsed cosmetics live streams or consumer goods authentication, these interactions accentuate the notion that a product's significance for women can be infinitely magnified, blurring the lines between authenticity and artifice.

For instance, the market capitalizes on the allure of female celebrities to captivate consumer attention, leading ordinary women to measure themselves consciously or unconsciously against celebrity standards in various aspects of life, from work to relationships. This not only deepens the traditional notion of female dependency on men but also increases the likelihood of men harboring gender biases.

In consumer societies, individuals derive satisfaction from the symbolic meanings attached to commodities, with the female body itself serving as symbolic capital. As material symbols proliferate, catering to women's expanding desires for symbolic consumption, women find themselves ensnared in a cycle of self-consumption and being consumed. The material abundance associated with celebrities often subliminally shapes ordinary women's attitudes toward money and values, perpetuating traditional notions of female dependence on men and exacerbating the risk of gender discrimination.

Despite these dynamics, women struggle to break free from male-centric stereotypes, perpetuating constraints on female aesthetics and subjecting themselves to the control and discipline of societal norms. In conclusion, the intertwining of consumer culture and gender dynamics underscores the complex interplay between economic forces and social constructions, shaping and perpetuating gender bias and inequalities in women's discourses.

5. Limitations and Future Research

As we navigate the complex landscape of achieving gender equality in new media, the scope for further research is vast and varied. A critical area for future studies is the exploration of intersectionality, where gender intersects with other social categories like race, class, and age, to understand the multi-layered experiences of discrimination in new media. This approach can unravel the nuanced realities faced by different groups, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of media representation.

Firstly, the qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis employed in this study are inherently subjective and interpretive, potentially leading to researcher bias. Future studies could incorporate a more diverse range of analytical methods or triangulate findings with quantitative approaches to enhance the robustness of the analysis.

Secondly, the study predominantly focuses on TikTok in the Chinese context, limiting the generalizability of the findings to other cultural and geographic contexts. Factors like age, geographical location, and socio-economic background can influence user experiences and perceptions of gender bias. Future research could benefit from employing a more stratified sampling approach to explore how these factors intersect with gender dynamics on the platform.

Furthermore, while the study acknowledges the influence of influencers and gatekeeping mechanisms on TikTok, it does not delve deeply into their specific mechanisms and impacts on gender dynamics. Future research could conduct more in-depth investigations into the role of influencers and gatekeeping in shaping gender discourse and representation on social media platforms.

6. Conclusion

In the evolving landscape of new media, the journey towards establishing a forum for gender equality and parity is extensive and complex. For both male and female users engaged in online interactions, there is a crucial need to collectively enhance media literacy and strengthen education on gender consciousness. Particularly for women, it is vital to participate in the construction of public discourse with a more proactive and independent approach in self-presentation and expression. Self-recognition is a prerequisite for gaining recognition from others.

This journey also demands a concerted effort from media entities. It is imperative for media gatekeepers to develop a stronger awareness of gender issues and actively supervise the inertia of male-centric discourse. Leveraging algorithmic capabilities of media technology can enhance media monitoring efficiency, contributing to the formation of a healthier online public opinion environment. Establishing a harmonious and robust female discourse system requires the collective participation and dedication of the entire society.

Reflecting on the discussed themes, such as the double-edged nature of new media in women's discourse, the reinforcement of stereotypes, the anonymity in online interactions, and the consumerist traps set by capital power, it becomes evident that these challenges are deeply entrenched and multifaceted. The path towards a balanced representation of genders in media and the dismantling of long-standing biases is not straightforward. It involves a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play and a strategic approach to address them.

The evolution towards a more gender-balanced media environment also involves addressing the commodification of women's bodies and appearances, challenging the patriarchal norms perpetuated through media, and redefining the female narrative beyond traditional stereotypes. As society progresses, so must the portrayal and treatment of women in all forms of media. This shift is not only essential for the empowerment of women but also for the development of a more equitable and inclusive society.

In conclusion, the quest for gender equality in the realm of new media is an ongoing process that requires the active engagement of all stakeholders – users, media practitioners, policymakers, and society at large. It is only through a collaborative, informed, and persistent effort that true parity can be achieved, ensuring that the voices and experiences of all genders are represented and respected in the digital age.

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