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Young Female Linguistic Practices on Xiaohongshu: Phenomena, Drivers, and Cultural Significance

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Abstract. The emergence and application of female linguistic culture on online platforms reflect the deeper characteristics of gender dynamics in the new media era. Using Xiaohongshu (RedNote) as a case study, this research focuses on the emerging linguistic and cultural practices of young women on the platform, including lexical reconstruction, the re-creation of address terms, and gender-reversal narratives. Employing a mixed-method approach that integrates participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and textual analysis, the study analyzes selected texts, short videos, and comments from the platform. The findings reveal that through these three discursive practices, female users of Xiaohongshu not only demonstrate the interaction between gender consciousness and youth culture but also convey ideals of gender equality through linguistic creativity. These practices foster greater public awareness and encourage critical reflection on women's rights. The study concludes that female linguistic practices on Xiaohongshu exemplify the enhancement of women's subjectivity and the reconfiguration of gender discourse in digital culture, offering valuable insights into how contemporary young Chinese women express cultural agency and creativity in online spaces. This study further contributes to the understanding of gendered digital discourse and provides a framework for analyzing linguistic agency in online feminist practices.

Keywords: linguistic culture, young women, Xiaohongshu (RedNote), gender culture

1. Introduction

With the popularization of social media, digital platforms have become important arenas for daily communication and cultural practice among young people [1]. In the "platform society" represented by Xiaohongshu, lifestyle narratives, emotional expression, and algorithmic visibility together shape a distinctive form of everyday politics and public opinion structure [2].

Within this environment, young women carry out linguistic practices in a light and creative manner: On the one hand, through operations such as "de-gendering or inverting female-radical characters" [3,4] and "feminizing honorific terms" [5], they rewrite and resemanticize existing vocabulary to challenge gendered coding; on the other hand, they reaffirm and redistribute address terms such as "老板" (lǎo bǎn, "boss", neutral, usually male-dominated identity, no explicit gendered insult) "老板爷" (lǎo bǎn yé, "male boss", emphasizes masculinity and authority, highlighting male dominance) "老板娘" (lǎo bǎn niáng, "female boss or boss's wife", often implies

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dependency on husband, reflects gender inequality) “学长” (xué zhǎng, “male senior student”, emphasizes men as role models or authority figures) “学哥” (xué gē, “male senior student”, more colloquial, conveys protective or brotherly male role) “学姐” (xué jiě, “female senior student”, shows respect but often carries undertone of male gaze) and engage in the de-stigmatization practices of titles such as “小姐”(xiǎo jiě, “miss/young lady”, originally neutral, but in modern usage often implies sex worker, pejorative for women) and “媛”(yuàn, “a young beautiful woman”, strongly shaped by male gaze, highlights appearance and gender rather than ability) [6,7], which had been stigmatized in the past. At the same time, gender-reversal narratives are flourishing in short videos.

This paper explores the motivations behind women’s linguistic cultural practices in the era of new media and examines their social and cultural impacts and significance.

2. Literature review

2.1. Female discourse in social media and post-feminist studies

Wang Tian and Tan Tianhui argue that empowerment advertising often mobilizes post-feminist discourse by invoking imagery of individual choice and self-capacity [8]. Shen Yishan and Chen Sheng, using online ethnography, analyzed divorce-related short videos on Xiaohongshu, revealing the entanglement of self-presentation and post-feminist discourse practices [9]. Feng Jianxia, from the perspectives of MeToo and the COVID-19 pandemic, discussed “voicing,” emotional labor, and discursive activism in women’s self-media [10,11]. Moreover, debates on the feminist public sphere and the construction of discursive power provide theoretical grounding for understanding “micro-resistance” on digital platforms [12,13].

2.2. Public opinion dynamics and everyday politics on Xiaohongshu

Researchers have pointed out that Xiaohongshu combines both lifestyle promotion and the fermentation of public issues. Platform mechanisms, aesthetic economy, and community norms interact to form a type of “everyday politics” in public opinion [2].

2.3. Address terms, gender encoding in chinese characters, and processes of stigmatization and de-stigmatization

There is systematic scholarship on the pejorative distribution and historical roots of Chinese characters with the “female” radical [14,15]. Studies on the semantic evolution and contemporary online variation of “娘” (niáng, “effeminate/soft”, often used to insult men, equating femininity with weakness, pettiness, or cowardice) highlight its shifting pragmatic evaluations [3,4]. Research on gendered stigma in sports contexts such as “飞盘媛” (fēi pán yuàn, “pretty young woman playing frisbee”, emphasizes beauty and gender rather than athletic skill) [6,7] has also revealed mechanisms of stigmatization and coping strategies [16]. Some scholars suggest that women’s re-appropriation of stigmatized labels online constitutes a strategy of “discursive resistance” [17]. Meanwhile, the formation and spread of feminized honorifics such as “英雌” (yīng cí, “heroic woman”, carrying the same positive meaning while affirming female identity) reflects the trajectory of online semantic inversion [5].

In summary, existing studies provide a foundation for understanding women’s linguistic culture on Xiaohongshu, but three gaps remain: (1) a lack of detailed descriptions of linguistic phenomena; (2) insufficient explanation of motivations, influences, and cultural meanings; (3) inadequate

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attention to the interplay between platform mechanisms and user practices. This study addresses these gaps by examining phenomena, motivations, and significance.

3. Research methods

This study employs three complementary methods: participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and textual analysis.

The study was conducted through a ten-week participant observation on the Xiaohongshu platform. During this period, the researcher observed posts, short videos, and comment sections published daily by anonymized female users (e.g., “Miao**”, “Xi**”). Using keywords including “媛”(yuàn, “a young beautiful woman”) “女性话语权”(nǚ xìng huà yǔ quán, “women's right to speak”) “女性主义”(nǚ xìng zhǔ yì, “feminism”) “嫉妒”(jí dù, “jealousy”) “污名化”(wū míng huà, “stigmatization”), the study systematically collected and examined relevant content. Particular attention was paid to materials featuring character variations, address-term usage, and gender-reversal narratives. For each sampled item, the publication time, anonymized author information, core text, thematic domain, interaction data, and indicators of controversy were recorded for subsequent analysis.

In addition, twenty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants recruited both online and through the researcher’s personal network, including classmates and friends. Among the interviewees, fourteen were female and eight were male, aged between 18 and 35, with the majority being active Xiaohongshu users. The female participants represented diverse social backgrounds, including university students and freelancers, providing a range of perspectives on linguistic innovation. Including male respondents enabled comparative insights into how men perceive and evaluate these emergent forms of female linguistic creativity. Key questions included: “Have you used or seen modified words or new meanings? What motivated such usage? What values or attitudes were expressed?” With informed consent, interviews were video-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Textual analysis was applied throughout the study. Texts collected via observation and interviews were analyzed to categorize practices, calculate proportions, and explore motivations and impacts, thereby revealing how women’s linguistic culture influences society.

All participants provided informed consent, and their identities were anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

Findings: Percentages were calculated based on a total of 125 observed posts and manually coded thematic categories. Among 125 observed posts, 36% involved character variation, 57% address terms, and 7% gender-reversal narratives. Themes of “women’s power,” “women’s awakening,” and “rejecting stigma” accounted for 93%. The total interaction count reached approximately 1.1 million, with 85.9% likes, 9% saves, 3.6% comments, and 1.5% shares, generating 31 controversies.

Interview results: 86% identified “struggle for women’s rights” as the main motivation, 9% cited “emotional expression,” and 5% mentioned “attracting traffic.” Regarding influence, 41% reported gaining new knowledge, 51% believed practices encouraged deeper reflection, 41% warned against extremity, 32% noted positive linguistic innovation, 61% saw promotion of women’s rights and discursive power, and 41% emphasized renewed social focus on gender equality and humanistic concerns.

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4. Phenomena of female linguistic practices on Xiaohongshu

4.1. Character and lexical reconstruction

Users rewrite words that contain the female radical and carry derogatory or neutral meanings into forms without gendered radicals or with deliberate modifications. For instance, “白嫖”(bái piáo, “to take advantage for free”, with female radical, implying sexualized negativity) is rewritten as “白剽” (bái piāo, same meaning, but neutral, no gendered radical); “嫌弃” (xián qì, “to dislike”, with female radical, associating negativity with women) is replaced with “慊弃” (qiàn qì, same meaning, but neutral, no gendered radical);“妒忌” (dù jì, “jealous”, with female radical, constructing jealousy as a female trait) is rewritten as “忮忌” (zhì jì, same meaning, neutral, no female radical); “贪婪” (tān lán, “greedy”, with female radical, suggesting greed as feminine) is replaced by “贪惏” (tān lán, same meaning, neutral, no female radical). They even coin the artificial term “男疾男户” (nán jí nán hù, constructed with male radicals, a forced male equivalent of “嫉妒” [jí dù, “jealous”, with female radical) highlighting how jealousy is marked as feminine by default].

Moreover, some originally male-centered positive words are deliberately re-created into female-marked forms. For example, “雄心壮志” (xióng xīn zhuàng zhì, “ambition”, valorized masculine expression) is rewritten as “雌心壮志” (cí xīn zhuàng zhì, “ambition” same positive meaning but deliberately feminized); “英雄” (yīng xióng, “hero”, the male-centered default for honor and greatness) is reformulated as “英雌” (yīng cí, “heroic woman”, carrying the same positive meaning while affirming female identity).

4.2. Reconstruction and re-naming of address terms

In daily usage, titles such as “老板” (lǎo bǎn, “boss”, neutral) “学长” (xué zhǎng, “senior student”) or “少年” (shào nián, “a young person”) are often assumed male. Many users question this default and advocate gender-neutral or parallel forms, e.g., “老板爷老板娘” (lǎo bǎn yé lǎo bǎn niáng, “male boss and female boss”) “学哥学姐” (xué gē xué jiě, “male senior student and female senior student”) “少男少女” (shào nán shào nǚ, “a young male and a young female”). Some positively reclaim formerly derogatory terms: “太娘们了” (tài niáng men le, “too effeminate, insult”, uses femininity as a way to demean men) is used to praise female resilience. Terms historically stigmatized, such as “媛” (yuàn, “a young beautiful woman”) “妇” (fù, “married woman”, identity marker, often restrictive in social role) “大妈” (dà mā, “middle-aged woman”, often pejorative, connotes lack of attractiveness or nagging) “圣母” (shèng mǔ, “Virgin Mary”, in internet slang pejorative, refers to overly sympathetic or naive women), are re-appropriated: “程序媛” (chéng xù yuàn, “pretty young woman programmer”) “学术媛” (xué shù yuàn, “pretty young woman academic”) emphasize professionalism; “妇” (fù, “mature woman”, often reinterpreted as a figure of wisdom and strength, emphasizing experience and authority, increasingly respected in modern context) “大妈” (dà mā, “middle-aged woman”, a term that has been reclaimed to describe confident and assertive women who stand up for their rights, now often used with positive connotations of resilience and power) “圣母” (shèng mǔ, “a maternal figure symbolizing selflessness, nurturing, and care, increasingly celebrated for embodying emotional intelligence, moral integrity, and compassion”) gain positive meanings when describing brave activism or public engagement.

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4.3. Gender narrative reversals and parody practices

Some creators experiment with gender reversal to expose hidden gender biases in common narratives. For example, blogger “阿*”(“A*”) takes behaviors that society tolerates in men because of male privilege and swaps them onto women. For instance, turning 'getting a foot massage and cheating’ into 'getting a manicure and cheating’; reversing the patriarchal naming logic of giving daughters names like “招娣” (zhāo dì, “a girl’s name meaning 'bring in a younger brother’, reflects son preference and daughter’s role as transitional”) or “盼娣” (pàn dì, “a girl’s name meaning 'hope for a younger brother’, reinforces patriarchal desire for sons”) into giving sons names like “招媚” (zhāo mèi, “a boy’s name meaning 'bring in beauty’, a gender-reversed invention to expose the bias of naming daughters for sons”); or redirecting the biased question “How do you balance career and family?”—typically aimed at successful women—onto men instead.

In the comment sections, users also play with gender swaps. For example, the stereotypical advice “If you meet such a good man, just marry him” becomes “If you meet such a good woman, just marry into her family.”

Additionally, the blogger replaces the sexist term “花瓶” (huā píng, “literally 'vase’”, used pejoratively for women: pretty but empty, objectifies women as decoration) with “草壶” (cǎo hú, “literally 'grass pot’”, gender-swapped parody of 'vase’, mocking men as shallow and decorative) to mock men in the same way. Similarly, the pejorative expression “娘们唧唧” (niáng men jī jī, “an insult meaning 'nagging like women’”, used to shame men by feminizing them as petty and cowardly) is parodied as “爷们嘎嘎” (yé men gā gā, “a parody meaning 'nagging like men’”, mocking men with the same ridicule usually directed at women) to target men.

Through these systematic vocabulary swaps, the creators expose the asymmetry in language: what is naturalized when applied to women often sounds absurd or comic when applied to men, thereby highlighting the deep-rooted gender inequality embedded in everyday speech.

5. Analysis of motivations, impact, and cultural significance

5.1. Driving factors of female linguistic practices

First, linguistic transformation conveys gender equality and resists implicit bias. Many Chinese characters with “female” radicals are pejorative (e.g., “嫖” (piáo, “to take advantage for free”, with the female radical) “妒” (dù, “jealous”, with female radical)), while honorifics like “英雄” (yīng xióng, “hero”, typically applied to men) assume maleness. Reconstructed forms like “白剽” (bái piāo, “to take advantage for free”, neutral, not gendered) “英雌” (yīng cí, “heroic woman”) in resist such bias.

Second, de-stigmatization reclaims the right to define female identity. By re-legitimizing terms like “程序媛” (chéng xù yuàn, “pretty young woman programmer”) or “大妈” (dà mā, “A middle-aged woman well-versed in defending her rights”), women convert imposed stigma into proactive identity declarations.

Third, parody practices enlighten broader audiences. Through humor and resonance—for example, “招媚” (zhāo mèi, “a boy’s name meaning 'bring in beauty’”, a gender-reversed invention to expose the bias of naming daughters for sons) “爷们嘎嘎” (yé men gā gā, “a parody meaning 'nagging like men’, mocking men with the same ridicule usually directed at women) —gender-reversal narratives provoke reflection on gender norms and women’s rights.

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5.2. Social and cultural impacts

At the linguistic level, these practices enrich gender expression in Chinese. They fill semantic and cultural gaps [e.g., redefining “妇” (fù, “mature woman”) as a figure of wisdom and strength, emphasizing experience and authority, increasingly respected in modern context, and redefining “大妈” (dà mā, “middle-aged woman”) as a term that has been reclaimed to describe confident and assertive women who stand up for their rights, now often used with positive connotations of resilience and power], transforming language from a disciplining tool into a medium of resistance, demonstrating that language is dynamic and user-driven.

At the gender-cultural level, they facilitate women’s shift from “object of gaze” to “subject.” While female-radical words traditionally carried negative connotations and male terms were default, new forms like “草壶” (cǎo hú, “literally 'grass pot’”, gender-swapped parody of 'vase’, mocking men as shallow and decorative) or “学术媛” (xué shù yuàn, “pretty young woman academic”) emphasize agency and creativity, empowering women as authors of their own narratives.This echoes Judith Butler’s concept of performativity, where language becomes a site for reconstituting gender identity.

At the socio-cultural level, they serve as widespread enlightenment. By reversing gendered narratives—such as redirecting “work–family balance” questions to men—such practices expose double standards and systemic injustice, prompting society (including men) to reflect on normalized gender privilege and strengthening gender-equality awareness.

6. Conclusion

Through an analysis of the phenomena, motivations, and cultural implications of female linguistic practices on Xiaohongshu, this study finds that these practices represent a concentrated expression of contemporary women’s efforts to claim discursive power, deconstruct gender bias, and negotiate identity within digital spaces. Such practices are both entertaining and socially transformative: by employing humor and parody, they lower the cost of resistance and enhance communicative reach; through semantic reconstruction, redefinition of address terms, and narrative reversal, they challenge traditional gender discourses, articulate the ideals of gender equality, and reclaim women’s authority over self-definition and interpretation.

These practices enrich gendered expression in the Chinese language and promote the transformation of women from objects of the gaze into active subjects. At the same time, they function as a broader form of social enlightenment, fostering a heightened awareness of gender equality within the public sphere.

By highlighting young women’s linguistic creativity on Xiaohongshu, this study extends feminist digital discourse research into a non-English, platform-specific context. It contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how localized gendered language practices in China intersect with global feminist communication, offering comparative insights into cross-cultural studies of digital agency and linguistic empowerment.

Nevertheless, this study acknowledges certain limitations. The focus on Xiaohongshu confines the findings to a specific platform where linguistic practices are highly dynamic and context-sensitive, and some emerging terms or narrative memes may have relatively short life cycles. Moreover, the scope of interviewees remains limited. Future research could expand to cross-platform comparative studies, incorporate a more diverse range of participants, establish longitudinal linguistic corpora, and design quantitative or intervention-based studies to further deepen the exploration of this field from multiple perspectives.

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