

Navigating Online Visibility: Construction of Feminine Identity in Chinese Influencers' Affective Networked Publics

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Abstract

The rise of fashion and beauty influencers in China has produced highly visible representations of idealised femininity that increasingly appeal to young women and girls. This study examines how influencers on the Chinese social media platform Weibo discursively construct feminine identity through digital self-branding and how young women interpret and negotiate this mediated feminine visibility. By employing in-depth interviews with 31 Chinese urban young women and a feminist critical discourse analysis of 48 selected posts produced by leading female influencers, this study identifies three interrelated discursive resources through which idealised femininity is assembled: ambiguous feminism, an entrepreneurial beauty discourse, and aspirational consumption. Drawing on Berlant's concept of intimate publics, the study argues that these discourses circulate affectively through relatability, producing both belonging and discipline within the community. Participants actively negotiate these representations through tactically extracting symbolic values and managing pressures to construct a legible feminine subjectivity. Furthermore, this study argues that asymmetric gendered power relations are reproduced through affective circulation within feminised digital spaces.

Keywords

China; feminine identity; influencer; intimate publics; women's digital self-representation

1. Introduction

In China, digital content creators have become increasingly professionalised through the emergence of multichannel networks (MCN) and influencer incubators since the mid-2010s (Han, 2021; Sun et al., 2026). Through systematic training in content production and platform operation, alongside marketing support, a

growing number of creators have begun to pursue influencer work as a full-time career. They are capable of strategically generating online personas, cultivating substantial followings, and converting online symbolic capital into commercial value (Abidin, 2016; Dippner, 2018; G. Zhang & de Seta, 2018). Within this ecosystem, fashion and beauty constitute an appealing and commercially significant sector, accounting for the largest share (33.6%) of the RMB 90 billion total expenditure on Chinese influencer marketing in 2023 (TopKlout, 2024).

Beyond its commercial scale, existing studies have shown that Chinese fashion and beauty influencers have developed at the intersection of digital popular cultures and platform commerce, where aesthetic expertise, neoliberal entrepreneurship, and relational and affective labours are closely intertwined (Guan, 2021; Liao, 2021; Sun et al., 2026). More importantly, their content, audience addressability, and thematic repertoire are also highly feminine-coded, frequently centring on clothing styles, make-up, and/or relationship advice. Through beauty tutorials, product recommendations, and sharing personal stories, fashion and beauty influencers become models of “aspirational femininity” and translate these ideals into concrete routines, consumer choices, and modes of presentation that followers can incorporate into their everyday lives. In this sense, their digital communities function as a platformed pedagogic site through which idealised femininity is made visible, desirable, and actionable (Calder-Dawe et al., 2025; Camacho-Miñano & Gray, 2021).

This remarkable economic success and growing cultural impact are of central importance in the Chinese context, given that Chinese young women are navigating their feminine subjectivity and femininity in a post-socialist society where state-sanctioned collectivism is reconfigured through neoliberal and market-oriented self-governance (Rofel, 2007). This transformation has produced new expectations for modern femininities and gender relations, which are mediated intensively through women’s digital self-representation and “confessional” discourses throughout their online activities, and more so in fashion and beauty influencer-led digital communities (Sun, 2023). Existing studies of fashion and beauty influencers in the Chinese context tend to focus on the production side, including content and discourse analyses of digital materials (Liao, 2021; Sun, 2023; Sun et al., 2026), or interviews with content creators (Guan, 2021). However, less attention has been paid to how meanings circulate between mediated representations and their reception by followers. Drawing on symbolic interactionism, this study approaches meanings as neither merely residing in influencer texts alone nor being simply transmitted to audiences; instead, they are produced, interpreted, and modified by individuals through reflexive interpretive processes (Blumer, 1986). Young women actively associate mediated representations of idealised femininities online with their own bodily experiences, gendered aspirations, and situated social environments. Simultaneously, as influencers’ digital sites essentially rely on the “intimacy sells” grounded in relational attachment (Glatt, 2024), this article adopts an affective scope to understand how these discursively represented femininities are articulated through resonance, anxiety, and attraction. Bringing these two analytical dimensions together, this study poses the following research questions as below:

1. How do fashion and beauty influencers discursively represent femininity/feminine identity through intimate and affective self-branding practices to sustain online visibility?
2. How do young women interpret, negotiate, and affectively engage with these mediated visions of idealised femininity within influencer communities?

To address these questions, this article combines feminist critical discourse analysis of digital posts produced by fashion and beauty influencers on Weibo with in-depth interviews with young female participants. This article is not concerned with linear media effects or direct causal claims. Instead, it focuses on the relations of power and cultural tensions embedded in these discursive representations and young women's engagement with them.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Influencer and Gendered Visibility

This article uses the term “influencer” to refer to professionalised social media actors who have transformed online visibility into commercially oriented careers. This usage distinguishes influencers from the earlier concept of micro-celebrity, which emerged from studies of ordinary users' strategic pursuit of online fame and recognition (Senft, 2008). Chinese influencers (the vernacular Chinese term is *Wanghong*) share key features identified across the broader internet celebrity literature, including curated authenticity, audience-management work, and the commercialisation of one's personal identity (Abidin, 2018). Their online performance is closely tied to self-branding, through which individuals construct a coherent “meta-narrative and meta-image of self” (Hearn, 2008, p. 198). However, influencer visibility is not merely the outcome of an individualised entrepreneurial practice; instead, it is produced within platformed environments in which influencers need to negotiate platform governance, commercial imperatives, and quantifiable metrics such as likes, comments, follower counts, and traffic conversion (Duffy & Hund, 2019; Khamis et al., 2017).

This platformised visibility is deeply gendered. Feminist media studies have shown that women's influencer work is organised through aspirational labour, in which the promises of creative autonomy, flexibility, passion, and fame obscure insecure, unpaid, and feminised forms of digital labour (Duffy, 2017). In fashion and beauty sectors, visibility depends particularly on the continuous glamour and aesthetic labours, in which one's body, personality, lifestyle, and social connections become resources to be curated and commercialised (Elias et al., 2017; Wissinger, 2015). Platform infrastructures further discipline these forms of visibility by privileging normative forms of attractiveness, lifestyle performance, and feminine respectability, while marginalising bodies and identities that fall outside these norms, including LGBTQ+ identities (Bishop, 2018; Obreja, 2025).

The labour of maintaining gendered online visibility is associated with a set of neoliberal and postfeminist discourses driven by an intensified concern for self-improvement, self-discipline, and self-choice (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Dobson, 2015; Duffy & Hund, 2015; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). A growing number of scholars adopting a critical postfeminist perspective argue that discourses around women's empowerment, makeover capability, and free choice in popular culture and media seemingly celebrate women's autonomy; however, they obscure structural oppression and inequitable socio-political systems (Harris, 2004; Nayak & Kehily, 2008). Existing scholarship has demonstrated that postfeminism as a cultural sensibility has been transnationally re-localised within Chinese influencer culture, while acquiring distinctive inflections shaped by state ideology, platform infrastructures, and market imperatives. Liao (2021) shows how fashion influencers embody an aesthetic, entrepreneurial, and patriotic femininity, arguing that their willing complicity with nationalist discourse constitutes a postfeminism with Chinese characteristics.

Extending this inquiry to independent (*yesheng*) lifestyle bloggers on the Xiaohongshu platform, Guo (2022) reveals a paradox whereby postfeminist aspirations towards flexible, passion-driven entrepreneurship are simultaneously enabled and constrained by platform governance and algorithmic control, illustrating how postfeminist subjectivity is co-produced with platformisation. Focusing on the femininity of beauty influencers, Sun (2023, p. 38) identifies a hybrid “beauty assemblage” on Weibo, arguing that the seemingly empowering rhetoric of self-optimisation ultimately reinforces neoliberal capitalism alongside residual patriarchal gender scripts. The literature on postfeminism helps conceptualise women’s empowerment as an ambivalent discourse through which feminine self-making becomes both agentic and disciplinary, as well as commercially valuable.

More recent work on MCN-affiliated beauty influencers further shows that gendered influencer self-presentation, audience engagement, and intimacy are increasingly industrialised, turning authenticity and affect into standardised and monetisable formats (Sun et al., 2026). However, less attention has been paid to the politics of intimacy and how intimacy intersects with the construction of idealised femininity. It remains unclear how affective dynamics contribute to connection, aspiration, or discipline in the networked feminine publics, and how audiences engage with these discourses and values. To address this gap, this article directs analytical attention towards the affective forces within mediated visibility and towards how these discourses become meaningful to young women in China.

2.2. Affective Networked Publics and Relatability

Berlant’s (2008) argument that publics presume intimacy provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the enactment of influencer digital communities and their impact on young women’s gender subjectivity. According to Berlant:

This “women’s culture” is distinguished by the view that the people marked by femininity already have something in common and are in need of conversation that feels intimate, revelatory, and a relief even when it is mediated by commodities. (Berlant, 2008, pp. viii–ix)

Berlant (2008, p. xiii) conceptualises the network of women consuming these cultural artefacts as an “intimate public sphere,” which fosters a sense of belonging based on shared vulnerability, aspirations, and the textures of ordinary life. Such publics provide emotional consolation and mutual recognition, while also reinforcing disciplinary norms concerning “how to live as an x” among women (Berlant, 2008, p. xiii). In this sense, influencer digital self-representation is not simply a narcissistic practice; it is also normative, invitational, encouraging women to feel together and affirm their attachment to an imagined community. Berlant (2008, p. x) further identifies a “juxtapolitical” quality in feminine intimate publics, in which women’s discussions remain closely tied to political concerns, such as heteropatriarchal systems, but operate primarily through sentimental narratives rather than calling for concrete political action.

Kanai (2018) deepens Berlant’s theory and proposes the concept of relatability to explain how such intimate publics are sustained. Kanai (2018, p. 3) argues that relatability is not accidental likeability or familiarity in digital communication, but a branded social relation that requires ongoing “affective labour” and “techniques of self-management” (Kanai, 2018, p. 7). It requires content creators to appear authentic and individualised while remaining sufficiently “average” or “normal” to become representative of the audience’s perceived

common feelings (Kanai, 2018, p. 19). The personal experience revealed by an influencer must therefore appear plausible and pleasingly generalisable, thereby enabling a wider range of followers to “see themselves” in the post (Kanai, 2018, p. 19). Given that relatability takes hold through affective narratives in digital communities, Ahmed’s (2004) theory of “affective economies” is useful as a supplementary framework for understanding how these emotional relations play a role in making connections among participants. According to Ahmed (2004, p. 120), emotions do not reside within a specific object, but are produced as effects of “circulation,” through which they move between “signs” and “figures” across a social field. This repeated circulation can accumulate affective value, so as to create a sense of “sticking together” among collective bodies (p. 130).

Existing research has largely examined the affordance of networked platforms for gender politics, such as mobilising women’s collective memory and experience to enhance women’s solidarities through online activism (Huang & Sun, 2021; Yin & Sun, 2021). However, in Chinese online sites/communities, women’s connection and gatherings do not always unfold through political engagement, particularly when, increasingly, young people’s online activities are associated with aesthetic practices, consumption, and entertainment (Jia & Han, 2020). In the Chinese digital context, strict platform censorship and state governance have proved an obstacle to the circulation of feminist discourses and collective actions, as witnessed in the suppression of the #MeToo movement and the removal of NGO feminist accounts on Weibo (Yin & Sun, 2021; Zeng, 2020). Women’s voices are coordinated within the “state–market nexus” on Weibo, where commercially profitable and politically safe women-centred content is advanced, while more vocal feminist content is excluded through the platform’s certification system, algorithmic ranking, and vertical marketing infrastructure (Liao, 2024, p. 191). This platform ecology reinforces an asymmetrical power dynamic impacting feminist visibility, which influences women’s potential for making feminist claims in online public fora. Therefore, it is necessary to address women’s discursive proposition and engagement in juxtapolitical places, as these are valuable for understanding how women live and imagine “the good life” (Berlant, 2011, p. 2). In a digital community, even though these cultural artifacts should not be overstated as forces capable of transforming systemic structures, they may retain political significance for publics in everyday “digital inscriptions” (Lasén & Hjorth, 2017, p. 123; McGuigan, 2005). Indeed, recent research has shown that feminist discourses emerging among Weibo beauty influencers are characterised as “state-aligned,” i.e., they advance gender concerns while avoiding contentious framings (Sun & Ding, 2024, p. 7). However, we know less about the political and cultural meanings that young women generate through participation in these intimate communities, and what forms of feminine discourses are visible, relatable, and recognisable to young women.

3. Data and Methods

The empirical data were drawn from part of a doctoral project that focused on Chinese online femininity and young women’s gender identity construction. During data collection, the study drew on 23 ranking lists of top influencers compiled by academic and media-industry institutions, which were used to identify highly visible Chinese influencers. After reviewing the credibility and selection logic of each list, a cross-referencing strategy was used to identify potential influencers who appeared repeatedly and met all four criteria: (a) have female identity; (b) create digital content relevant to the fashion and beauty sectors; (c) have an active social media presence; and (d) have a substantial follower base of at least half a million. Ten influencers were ultimately identified (see Table S1). Posts published by the selected influencers over six

months between 2021 and 2022 were scraped. This process yielded 1,157 digital posts from Weibo, one of the largest and most popular social media platforms in China, which all selected influencers used as an official platform for self-branding. Each post was catalogued by assigning an identification number and coded using a protocol comprising basic descriptive information, including post format (text, image, video, or a combination of these), authorship (original or reposted), and the number of comments, likes, and reposts. While this article does not report quantitative results, this coded corpus provided a structured foundation for the subsequent selection of the qualitative sample.

At the interview stage, participants were eligible if they were urban young women aged 18–33 and active social media users, defined as posting original content on any platform at least twice a month on average. Participants were initially recruited through advertisements posted on the researcher's own Weibo and WeChat accounts, and subsequently through leaflets and emails distributed at the University of Liverpool. Snowball sampling was then employed to recruit additional participants by asking interviewees to recommend friends who also met the criteria. In total, I recruited 31 participants who varied in education, occupation, life stage, and age. Following ethical approval by the committee, the interviews were conducted either online via Zoom or in person in a quiet setting, such as a library room. Each interview lasted 1–1.5 hours. Each participant received a consent form and a participant information sheet outlining privacy provisions. All personal data provided by participants were handled in accordance with procedures for confidentiality and anonymisation.

Interview transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Coding proceeded in two rounds. First, transcripts were coded inductively, staying close to participants' own language about what they noticed, valued, or disagreed with in influencers' content. Second, these initial codes were consolidated into two groups of higher-order themes: the dominant feminine identities participants attributed to influencers (e.g., "entrepreneurs," "feminist," "stylised girl") and the recurrent topics they discussed (e.g., "intimate relationships," "affective connection," "consumerism," "bodily makeover"). After immersing in the data, I further iteratively compared and grouped these codes and generated three provisional interpretive domains concerning feminist identification, entrepreneurial beauty self-management, and classed lifestyle aspiration.

This study then returned to the catalogued corpus to purposively select posts through progressive theoretical sampling, in which materials are selected based on an emerging conceptual understanding of the topic rather than a fixed a priori quota (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). The selection criteria considered typical relevance to the themes identified in interviews, textual richness, and response rates. This procedure ensured sufficient information combined with thematic variation. In total, 48 posts were selected for critical discourse analysis through a feminist lens, informed particularly by Lazar's (2007, p. 147) argument that "the tacit androcentrism" is pervasive in many cultures and discourses, "in which not only men but also women are complicit through their habitual, differential participation in their particular communities of practice." Gender ideology and hegemony in contemporary society do not take the form of overt domination (Lazar, 2007) and therefore require critical examination to reveal asymmetrical power relations. The analysis here focuses on the textual dimensions of the posts, including captions, hashtags, and any text embedded within images or videos. In practice, following instructions from linguistic works by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) and O'Halloran and Tan (2023), this study examined lexical choices (naming), grammatical strategies (social action and circumstance), mood (clause types), modality (modal auxiliaries), and metaphor in the posts.

The final analysis moved between participants' accounts and the selected influencer posts to capture the contradictions and complexities in the relationship between the posts and participants' interpretations. In this process, an affective dimension emerged as salient across both datasets, prompting an additional layer of analysis. Informed by Kanai (2018) and Ahmed (2004), this study brought in an additional analytical layer focusing on how affective circulation operated in influencers' discursive construction and young women's attitudes and feelings towards those representations.

4. Findings

4.1. *Feeling Feminist Identities as a Sisterhood Connection*

My study found that influencers on Weibo circulate an ambiguous feminism, addressing women's issues through self-reflection on aspects of their own lives, recommending books and films, and offering commentaries on gender topics and news events. In the sample, these posts avoid explicit commercial intent, which distinguishes them from most of the commercialised content that encourages product consumption and efforts to improve one's physical appearance. The discursive strategy of the sampled influencers neither treats feminism as a completed historical project that women have already achieved, nor calls for feminist activism. Rather, this ambiguous feminism can be tethered to "the performance of individual value" (Kanai, 2018, p. 156), which is incorporated into influencers' self-branding practices to cultivate a sisterhood alliance with followers.

One post by the user @Zhang (@原来是西门大嫂) declares that "what we need has never been help or protection, but genuine respect and equality," which positions women as agentic individuals rather than passive subjects in need of rescue. The slogan "girls help girls" and the metaphor of "a single drop of water, when gathered, can create a tsunami" invoke a sense of collective strength among women. Yet, the horizon of this solidarity appears to extend no further than speaking out about everyday gender discrimination, such as "being judged for clothing, body shape, and age; or being labelled as a female boss or female director." Collective narratives thus create a sense of a feminist "we" without requiring a shared political programme or sustained collective action. These discourses foster recognition of gender inequalities through a commitment to sisterhood, yet a critique of institutional inequality remains absent.

Moreover, the sexism women encounter is simplified as a personal matter. This is evident in a post by user @Becky Li (@黎贝卡的异想世界), who shared her self-reflections following participation in an Audi-sponsored "She Power" forum:

Due to my personality, I often step back during disagreements with others and prefer to compromise rather than argue with another person....Many women around me tend to act in this way....When a girl does not listen to others, people may assume her "difficult to deal with."...Please fight for yourself, stick to your beliefs, [do] not compromise easily.

Here, "compromise" is articulated as a purely personal psychological problem rather than a socialised response to external judgements and stereotypes. The subsequent encouragement for women to fight back confines the solution to the individual level. In this discursive framework, individual women's efforts constitute the affective bond, while narratives of overcoming and fighting difficulties are associated with the

requirement to be an agentic subject. Empowerment then becomes the work of adjusting the self rather than transforming the social and cultural regulations and norms that make “compromise” necessary. This discourse of ambiguous feminism therefore operates through a double movement: It creates affective sisterhood by naming shared gendered oppression and injuries, while simultaneously individualising the response through self-empowerment and self-management. This representation of feminism is underpinned not only by the need to navigate algorithmic or commercial visibility (Cotter, 2019), but also by a discursive strategy within the Chinese censorship programme that permits deliberate discussion and criticism of social problems while suppressing the possibility of collective gathering for social mobilisation (King et al., 2013).

In my participants’ views, this ambiguous feminism functions less as a political identity or stance; instead, it is perceived as a cultural resource and affective attachment in the negotiation of feminine subjectivity. This feminist discourse is primarily perceived as a form of cultural taste and intellectual inspiration. As participant Xinzi remarked:

I noticed the documentaries and movies they recommended...[those] about women’s growth imply a lot of feminist meanings. I am interested in knowing more about this knowledge, because I am a woman. It made me feel that she [the influencer] has good taste in artistic and literary works; importantly, she is taking care and standing with us.

Xinzi describes feminist content as “knowledge” and attributes her interest in such content to the shared identification as a woman. The influencer community therefore becomes a space from which women can derive cultural and intellectual value, even though this digital content is embedded within a vast volume of entertainment and commercial information. Meanwhile, the influencer, as a provider of “feminist knowledge,” is perceived as an insightful modern subject with good taste, which resonates with my participants’ expectations of ideal femininity. Participant Kaixi’s response reinforces this point, as she notes:

They are not, like, a promoter for me. I know some of them have graduated from the top universities....They are beautiful, independent, and caring about what women want.

Such self-revealing feminist narratives produce authenticity precisely by appearing not to resemble branded content, thereby creating shared sentiments that bind women together (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Other participants suggest that cultivating an online identity rooted in feminism enables influencers to symbolically construct a trustworthy, women-friendly community. As Yuanyuan states:

I find we have the same concerns, like the struggle in intimate relationships....I feel the courage in their casual talk....As they said: “I don’t need a man. [I need] to be beautiful and rich.”

This suggests that participants expected to receive more emotional support from those who shared the same values and positions. Intimate connection here is based not on agreement over a clearly feminist identity, but on recognition of common feminine concerns (Hemmings, 2012).

However, when feminism takes the form of a political declaration, it is decoded as dangerous and suspicious. This is clearly illustrated by Xinzi, whose attitude shifted abruptly when she was asked: Does your interest in feminist content mean you support feminism movement? She responded: “If someone loudly says they are

a feminist, I will be wary of them.” These responses suggest that my participants classify feminism into two distinct categories: the cultural consumption of feminism and political identification as a feminist. The former is perceived as safe and acceptable, while the latter is perceived as radical, ignorant, and disrespectful in the digital media space. Xinzi explains that overt feminist activity is “incompatible with Chinese mainstream culture values” and “excessively confrontational.” CiCi expresses the same attitude: “You know some feminist online communities on Douban....People’s attitudes are extremely radical and superficial....I mean, it evokes a gender antagonism.”

Although my participants did not explicitly identify strict censorship as a force shaping their vigilant attitudes towards activist feminism, their attitudes imply an assessment of online risk, including reluctance to depart from mainstream values or engage in disputes on the platform. This suggests a form of self-restraint informed by “control parables” about which kinds of speech may cause trouble (Stern & Hassid, 2012, p. 1240). Indeed, beyond technologically platformed governance, feminism is marginalised as overly aggressive and unreasonable in Chinese digital cultures (Leibold, 2011; B. Wang & Driscoll, 2019). Within these cultures, feminism is frequently misconstrued as fighting against and exploiting men or combatively claiming privileges in social life (Wu & Dong, 2019). Influencers provide a “palatable feminism” that aligns with a broader expectation that women should adopt an empowered subjectivity (Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 21), while shielding women from becoming embroiled in acrimonious quarrels. This affective solidarity does not indicate an absence of feminist consciousness; rather, feminist politics are undermined alongside the articulation of a neoliberal feminist subject (Rottenberg, 2018).

4.2. Making Beauty and Body a Feminine Discipline

The second theme is an entrepreneurial discourse of fashioning physical appearance, which shares features with the “aesthetic entrepreneur,” who is “autonomous, self-inventing and self-regulating in the pursuit of beauty practices” (Elias et al., 2017, p. 30). This study further identified that this entrepreneurship is not merely manifested in bodily narratives but also works affectively as a feminine discipline that produces a self-made subject in psychic life (Scharff, 2016).

The key discursive tropes of aesthetic entrepreneurship in my sample include “beauty equals productivity,” “let’s fight for the oil skin,” and “beauty is our weapon,” which suggest that the enhancement of personal physical appearance is rationalised as an extension of women’s rights and a powerful resource (Lazar, 2006). In the discourse of this idealised femininity, work on beauty and the body is presented as an achievable makeover project, in which women have common struggles and need to strive continuously, thus positioning commercial products as the ultimate way of solving the problem. As user @Zhang (@原来是西门大嫂) posts:

Our city girls are always saying we should stop staying up late, but we just can’t help ourselves! When you wake up in the morning and see that dull and tired look showing on your skin, there’s always a quiet regret creeping in. That’s why it’s so important to give your skin a timely rescue. This set of #YSLHigh-EnergyNightRepairCP# can help your skin recalibrate back to a healthy state.

The use of the first-person plural “our” and the collective identity “city girls” indicates an affective relation in which personal experience is generalisable, allowing a broad range of followers to recognise themselves in the post. The confession “we just can’t help ourselves!” manufactures a collective struggle. The influencer here

portrays herself as a fellow struggler rather than a professional beauty expert. The influencer then uses the second person “you” to speak directly to the audience, which creates a more engaging setting. The statement “see that dull and tired look” attempts to trigger a shared feeling of guilt or self-dissatisfaction among followers. Giving “your skin a timely rescue” indicates that skin care is an urgent mission or project that needs to be managed. The consumption of the beauty product “YSL High-Energy Night Repair CP” is articulated as a necessary approach to mitigating this risk, and the phrase “recalibrate back to a healthy state” implies that beauty is measurable and fixable. Women are invited to embrace a self-monitoring position, which requires constant attention, work and vigilance in the never-finished labour of self-optimisation (Gill, 2007).

My participants’ attitudes towards this aesthetic entrepreneurship were contradictory and extended beyond the dualism of rejection and acceptance. There was an apparent trend in my interviews showing that the labour required for body makeovers was perceived not as conformity but as a personal decision and a form of women’s liberation. Some participants (Sisi; CiCi; April) described influencers’ beauty practices using terms such as “brave,” “an endeavor,” and “a progressive action.” As CiCi stated:

I think nowadays many people are actually not ashamed to admit they had plastic surgery....Bravely revealing your experience can earn more compliments and admiration from others online. This is because everyone knows how hard it is, for example, to lose weight or undergo cosmetic injections.

If we take for granted, after Winch (2015), that women’s bodies are increasingly understood as assets, brands, and entryways to empowerment, adaptability and self-motivation become essential qualities for successfully achieving the construction of body. In my participants’ opinion, undertaking aesthetic labour was not limited to a gendered achievement but was related to a series of neoliberal values, including self-responsibility and becoming a “resilient subject” (Gill & Orgad, 2018). Suffering and pain are thus recognised and converted into evidence of courage and diligence, which echoes the “positive energy” discourse promoted by the Chinese government that celebrates personal triumph in overcoming difficulties rather than grievances against the external norms and regulations in citizens’ social life (Chen & Wang, 2019).

Ongoing self-reflection and scrutiny in daily life led to a disquieting situation among my participants, as April said: “My main concern is whether sleeping on one’s side will cause nasolabial folds, as I always lie on my back to sleep....I am also worried crossing my legs might make them crooked.” As Gill (2007, p. 155) contends, “no area of a woman’s life is immune from the requirement to self-survey.” In fact, homogeneous, heteronormative beauty standards generated disciplinary pressure for my participants. Participant Ning described the exhaustion of inhabiting this neoliberal subjectivity, stating:

I can’t help comparing myself to those chic women online....I feel I am not working hard like them, for example, carefully doing skincare every night or going to the gym....I don’t think my beauty can reach that level.

As women’s beauty practices become intertwined with neoliberal self-governing ideologies, those who fail to conform may be labelled as lacking “the ability to bounce back” (Gill & Orgad, 2018, p. 480).

Notably, this anxiety did not lead to disengagement from entrepreneurial beauty practices among my participants; rather, they strategically participated in manageable ways. My participants were aware of the

distinction between “show-off posts” and “informative posts.” Participant Chenchen stated that she preferred those who “reveal true and unedited photographs of their past appearance” over those who “disguisedly show-off their good body shape.” This purposive selection by my participants was further based on how relatable an influencer’s style and physical traits, including bodily and facial features, were to their own bodies and appearances. As Lili said:

The *Wanghong* [influencer] I follow is relevant to me; for example, I have combination-oily skin, and so does she; I am short, and she is too. The skincare products she recommends and the outfits she matches up are useful and suitable for me.

The influencer here is not a paragon of beauty but a relatable mediator, through whom styling practices are customised and made actionable. Thus, aesthetic discipline in my participants’ views was not fixed or universal; instead, it was continuously negotiated and recalibrated in accordance with their particular physical features. The hyper-feminised images, such as the *Wanghong face* identified in earlier research on Chinese influencer culture (Dippner, 2018), appeared far from ordinary women’s appearances in my participants’ interpretations and were therefore less easily relatable. Similarly, the relevant slogans about being beautiful at all times appeared detached from the realities of women’s social lives, which increased the pressure they experienced. This does not mean that beauty disciplines and regulations imposed on women were weakened; rather, they were reproduced through the shared vulnerability, negotiated compliance and neoliberal encouragement. Young women were affectively encouraged to inhabit a self-optimised subjectivity through the experience of feeling understood.

4.3. Having a “High Quality” Life as Aspirational Belonging

The final predominant theme concerns classed gender identity, in which consumption-based distinctions are repackaged as measures of women’s legibility as modern feminine subjects. Although China has been transitioning towards a market-oriented economic structure since 1978, the notion of class is difficult to define within a post-socialist regime that foregrounds the “common prosperity” agenda as a governing priority (Yu et al., 2025). Class is therefore closely associated with cultural constructions negotiated and rationalised through lifestyle, taste, and consumerism (Rocca, 2017; L. Zhang, 2010). This provides a basis for influencers to circulate a normative femininity organised around the imagined lifestyle of a higher class. As user @Kakakaoo states in a post promoting anti-ageing skincare:

As a “high-quality woman among human beings” [人类高质量女性], my anti-aging efforts must be improved to match the high standard, right? Keep using a basic approach is a waste of time and money. A powerful and effective high-quality anti-aging tool is the right way to go. Estée Lauder #Re-Nutriv Platinum Cream# is really an “old buddy” on my skincare table. It’s expensive, but absolutely stunning.

The repeated use of the terms “high standard,” “high-end,” and “high quality” constructs a semantic field in which product choice becomes a declaration of class or stratum belonging. Consuming expensive skincare is rationalised as an essential and justified investment, while lower-cost alternatives are dismissed as wasteful and ineffective, thereby excluding women who do not hold themselves to elevated standards. Here, the influencer ironically uses the phrase “high-quality woman among human beings” to balance the tension

between superiority and relatability. The term originated in a widespread internet meme in which a man arrogantly displayed his wealth while seeking a partner and described himself as a “high-quality bachelor among human beings.” The influencer’s use of this self-deprecating humorous tone allows her to acknowledge her high-class identity while jokingly avoiding appearing elitist and boastful. This “high quality” identity is thus presented as something followers can simultaneously laugh about and aspire to, rather than a boundary that excludes them.

In the interviews, the “high quality” life was not associated with the ostentatious display of status or vanity; instead, it was perceived as a symbol of self-achievement, aesthetic taste, and social distinction. Among my participants, this notion is naturalised as a constitutive condition of embracing an entrepreneurial feminine identity. As participant Qiqi explained: “Even though a big-name bag places a burden on my salary, I feel like stylish modern women should have at least one or two luxury bags.” Qiqi’s response indicates that high-end consumption may not signify that women possess the corresponding financial capacity. This resonates with a broader media and marketing discourse that extravagantly celebrates Chinese women’s consumption capacity, which cultivates the illusion that women have achieved a higher-class identity, even though their financial circumstances do not reach that level (Yang, 2023). Notably, the phrase “should have” suggests a normative expectation and common sense attached to the generalised feminine category of the “stylish modern woman.” Drawing on Rofel’s (2007) concept of the desiring subject in China, luxury consumption becomes a marker of individual autonomy and modern selfhood, distinguishing this subject from the Maoist-era subject, whose desires were expected to respond to collective need. Within this discourse, young women are encouraged to symbolically experience an aspirational feminine identity through repeated consumption (Johansson, 2001). The financial burden that Qiqi acknowledged thus becomes the price of gaining and maintaining access to this idealised feminine identity.

Those who cannot afford high-end products, including full-time students who rely on family support for their living expenses, appear to negotiate this exclusion. My participants described managing their budgets through the selection of “affordable alternatives.” As Xiaouu stated:

I really like the boxy style of the YSL handbag, but it is too expensive for me. I would like to choose a bag with “same feel” [style] on Taobao [a shopping platform].

The search for a bag with “same feel” suggests that the significance of luxury products lies not in the item itself but in its internalisation as a symbol of aesthetic authority and fashion refinement. The luxury brand provides this participant with a set of aesthetic coordinates for judging, confirming and calibrating their consumption choices. By drawing on this taste in consumption, the respondents symbolically approach a particular higher-class identity. This cohesion thus does not necessarily depend on the price hierarchy but is circulated through a recognisable aesthetic.

My participants’ discussions also extended beyond the consumption of commercial products, encompassing a set of leisure activities, such as attending operas, skiing, wine tasting, and travelling abroad. For my participants, the appeal of this glamorous lifestyle lies not primarily in what the subject permanently possesses but in whether they can be seen and recognised by others. As Yujia explained:

I don't post frequently on my social media...the social media channel for me is like a social business card or a self-introduction. There is nothing fun about broadcasting a normal day....What I post is likely just when I [go] to some fancy restaurant, concert, travelling, or go skiing.

Yujia described social media as a “social business card or self-introduction,” which reveals how digital self-representation moves beyond purely individual expression to operate as a strategic instrument of social positioning. The activities she selectively posts, such as visiting fancy restaurants, attending concerts, travelling, and skiing, constitute a desirable lifestyle that becomes a symbolic resource for social positioning, rendering her visible online. Yujia's statement that “there is nothing fun about broadcasting a normal day” suggests the social currency of attractive femininity, echoing influencers' online practices within affective and attention economies (Ahmed, 2004; Marwick, 2013). In Yujia's account, these leisure activities are perceived as exciting, interesting, and worthy, while the ordinary and mundane aspects of daily life are excluded because they lack aspirational appeal. In this sense, influencers' digital representations provided my participants with a symbolic resource to perform a lifestyle aligned with a shared imagination of middle- and upper-class leisure practices. This offers a common aspirational vision that binds young women together, while marginalising genuinely ordinary women's experiences by rendering them invisible.

5. Conclusion

This study explores the discursive construction of feminine identity within fashion and beauty influencer communities and examines how young women engage with and make meaning from these representations. The article extends existing scholarship on digital femininity by bringing the affective dynamics of influencer communities into the analysis, and particularly by demonstrating how affective stickiness is gendered and how it serves to construct idealised femininity in the online intimate publics. This article also contributes to Chinese influencer studies by foregrounding young women's interpretations. They navigate these discourses and values in the desire and imagination of being a new modern feminine subject. By combining an examination of influencer posts with young women's interview discussions, the findings suggest that influencers construct a feminine “we” by addressing women's shared experiences, anxieties, desires, and concerns across three tropes, including ambiguous feminism, aesthetic self-management, and aspirational consumption. Influencers' gendered visibility is closely linked to the establishment of emotional recognition and attachment among young women.

Influencer communities generate a feeling of empowerment for women, while disciplining what is proper, legible, and respectable. By framing gendered pain and vulnerability within positive, courageous, and sisterly supportive narratives, influencers render feminist concerns emotionally accessible. Moving beyond the purely commodified feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), an ambiguous feminism in Chinese influencer communities provides women with a political sensibility to engage with sexism and gender stereotypes, while overlooking the significance of activism in social transformation. Within the complex dynamics of Chinese state, market, and digital platforms, feminist identity is reconstructed as well-educated, intellectual, and self-possessed. This formation cannot be explained solely by the cultural stigmatisation of feminism; instead, it is also related to systematic platform governance in which commercially compatible and politically non-confrontational women-centred content enjoys greater visibility. The political horizon of feminism may be narrowed to intra-feminine affirmation and individual self-transformation rather than collective claims directed towards structural relations (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009).

This neoliberal logic of pursuing equality is enhanced by entrepreneurial practices of fashioning body and consumption. Influencers provide affective glue by positioning themselves as strugglers who share bodily anxiety with broader ordinary women. Beauty and body work is portrayed less as a need to accommodate the external gaze, but as a common project of self-improvement and self-empowerment among women. While this aesthetic entrepreneurship challenges the traditionally submissive femininity embedded in long-standing Chinese gender norms (Barlow, 2004), it generates new forms of discipline in which increasingly strict beauty standards are rationalised as self-investment (Elias et al., 2017). Moreover, high-consumption discourse offers followers symbolic proximity to a “high-quality woman” identity that they can rehearse. In a post-socialist Chinese context, consumption becomes more than a sign of wealth; instead, it operates as evidence of personal autonomy, modernity, and distance from an earlier collectivist subject whose desires were expected to remain subordinate to collectivist ends (Rofel, 2007; H. Wang, 1998). Such high-consumption lifestyles reproduce a hegemonic ideology of class distinction, in which women who do not possess the corresponding economic capacity or taste are excluded and positioned as subordinate and unfashionable.

The influencer community occupies a juxtapolitical position, in which women create connections and bonds through shared grievances and feelings about what it means to live as a woman (Berlant, 2008). However, as hooks (1989) insisted, naming personal pain without connecting it to a critical consciousness of structural inequality can be readily absorbed by neoliberal culture. My participants are capable of recognising the risks of engaging with these discourses yet remain unwilling to relinquish them, which reflects a cruel optimism towards the figure of a new feminine subject who is well-educated, self-reliant, and economically independent (Berlant, 2011). This construction of normative femininities does not suggest a cultural transition of Western postfeminism; rather, it is jointly shaped by the interplay among platform commerce, censorship, and Chinese sociocultural norms.

However, because the study’s sample comprises urban, educated young women, the findings are not intended to be generalised to women from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds across China. Future research could examine the intersections of class and region and how women from diverse backgrounds engage with these gendered discourses and representations. Furthermore, as this qualitative study focused solely on fashion and beauty influencer content on Weibo, it does not represent the full landscape of Chinese digital feminine communities. Future research could pursue cross-platform comparisons and explore the role of platform affordances, as well as algorithmic systems in shaping the circulation of affective discourses.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The interview data are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise participants’ privacy and confidentiality. The social media posts analysed in this study were publicly

accessible at the time of data collection. However, some posts are no longer publicly accessible because the account holders have subsequently changed their access settings. To respect these current access restrictions, the archived social media data are not publicly shared. The author welcomes any enquiries regarding the data and research materials, subject to applicable ethical and confidentiality requirements.

LLMs Disclosure

The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Claude AI (Anthropic) to assist with language editing, citation, and reference formatting during the final preparation of the manuscript. All AI-assisted suggestions were critically reviewed and verified by the author, who takes full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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