

The Impact of the ‘Internet Stepford Wife’ Phenomenon on the Construction of Women’s Gender Temperament

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Abstract:

In modern society, with the rapid development of Internet technology and the rise of various new media platforms, a phenomenon known as ‘Internet Stepford Wives’ has gradually become a hot topic of discussion. This phenomenon usually refers to a group of women who attract a large number of fans and attention by displaying their beauty, family life, and traditional gender roles through the Internet platform. This paper aims to analyse the causes of the phenomenon of ‘Internet Stepford Wives’ and explore the sociological factors behind it. The paper analyses in detail the role of traditional gender roles and cultural norms in the phenomenon of ‘Internet Stepford Wives’, and reveals the influence of the media in spreading gender stereotypes and reinforcing traditional images of women. The paper argues that the phenomenon of ‘Internet Stepford Wives’ is not only a product of the fusion of traditional gender roles and modern media but also a result of the interaction between the Internet economy and cultural consumption. Through this study, a call is made to society to interpret the phenomenon of ‘Internet Stepford Wives’ more comprehensively and rationally and to promote gender equality and the realization of women’s self-worth. This study not only has theoretical significance but also provides a reference for gender equality issues in reality.

Keywords: Gender temperament; feminism; discourse construction.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the rapid progress of the Internet and

social media has brought about far-reaching changes to people’s life patterns and social habits, triggering a great innovation in the mode of information dissem-

ination. According to the statistics published by China Internet Network Information Centre (CNNIC) in 2022, the number of online registrants in China has reached 1.032 billion, with women accounting for nearly 50% of Internet users. The Internet provides a platform for women's self-expression, but in reality, Internet women are still trapped in the awkward situation of being stared at and consumed by the information, value orientation, and gender awareness disseminated by mass media [1]. This study looks at an emerging category of women's image on the Internet, which is very meaningful for studying the role of the Internet in shaping women's gender temperament. For example, in XiaoHongShu, a topic of high discussion is 'Internet Stepford Wife', in which a large category of women usually packaged themselves as full-time baby mothers, who can still maintain their body shape during pregnancy and after giving birth, deliberately displaying body lines and other attractive features to attract men, glorifying the process of women's pregnancy and childbirth, and adopting the 'thin skin and big stuffing' style of women's image. 'thin skin and big filling' and other uncomfortable words to describe the state of pregnancy; the other category caters to the distorted aesthetics of infantile state, with words such as 'baby bowls' (A weaker description.) popping up all over the place, and in the name of love, they are willing to show their weaknesses, be little themselves, and become stared-at individuals in order to please others. They have completed an inexplicable self-objectification. This phenomenon shows that not only are women not free from being stared at in social media, but some of them have become companions of the gaze, which opens up the topic of gender issues for discussion. The rise of Stepford Wives on the Internet has, to a certain extent, alienated women's rights, thus contributing to the unequal status of men and women, which is already unbalanced. This study focuses on the role of women represented by 'Stepford Wives' in social media, and uses the questionnaire survey method and the literature analysis method to search and read relevant information and literature. The advantage of this method is that it can clarify how the current Internet culture reshapes gender roles and show the gradual change of the social expectations of women's roles. change. This will help to promote multimedia literacy and increase the public's sensitivity and judgemental ability in relation to gender issues, thereby mitigating the negative impact that the phenomenon of 'Internet Stepford Wives' may have. The ultimate goal of this study is to help reassess society's perception of the characteristics of Internet culture and provide effective strategies for creating a more open and equal cyberspace. To achieve this goal, this paper analyses the content of the 'Internet Stepford Wives' videos and the audience that viewed them.

2. Literature Review

In *Beyond Gender Politics: Thirty Years of Chinese Women's Media Image Research (1994-2023)*, Cao Peixin and Song Junyan point out that the research on women's media image, which emerged during the period 2008-2023, is in sharp competition with the established academic discourse dominated by the Western feminist paradigm. With the continuous advancement of social and historical situations such as the change of national production and construction policies and the implementation of the national policy of reform and opening up, women's temperament has changed from traditional femininity to androgyny, and then gradually transitioned to a pluralistic temperament, which contributes to this study in terms of contemporary women's media image, but lacks the analyses of the impact of gender stereotypes on women [2]. Zheng Zhuoran, in *On the Self-Presentation of Female Internet celebrity on Tiktok under the Perspective of Feminism*, suggests that female Internet celebrity have not yet completely escaped the heavy constraints of masculinist ideology, and that their self-presentation and identity construction on short-video platforms are still subjugated to male aesthetics. Although female netizens have a large number of online media such as short video platforms as a window for self-presentation at this stage, due to the influence of the legacy of patriarchal society, the current social background and network environment is still dominated by men, female Internet celebrity are restricted by stares from all directions in the 'round prison', and it is difficult to get rid of the stares, disciplines, and consumption. It is still difficult to get rid of the predicament of being stared at, disciplined and consumed [1]. At the same time, Tang Ruoyao points out in *The Evolution of Female Body Symbols in the Field of New Media* that in the era of new media, women are both receivers and participants of consumerist culture. On the one hand, they are labelled with various symbolisms and become victims of the era of mechanical reproduction, and on the other hand, they taste the dividends of body symbols under the wave of consumerism, and are willing to consciously or unconsciously attach themselves to them, or even take the initiative to commodify them, thus contributing to the prevalence of consumerism [3]. The above research mainly analyses several types of typical female social media images, with the phenomenon of 'body consumption' (the performance and display of the female body) as the main focus, and there is a lack of analysis of the phenomenon of 'Internet Stepford Wives' in the relevant research, so this paper will start from this phenomenon and analyse its characteristics. Therefore, this paper will analyse the causes and effects of this phenomenon to supplement the existing research

gaps.

3. Analysis of the Causes of the ‘Internet Stepford Wives’ Phenomenon

The influence of ‘consumerism’. Under the impact of consumerism culture, the beauty of the female image is more and more people pay attention to, the younger the body the more desire to watch, the more in line with the ‘standard’ image of women will cause people to pursue [4]. However, in recent years, with the popularity of feminism, more and more women break out of the barriers, and strive to break the stereotypes, so for the Internet in the so-called ‘standard’ of the female gender temperament will produce attention and discussion, for example, the current topic of women’s most concerned about is the issue of fertility, they have a certain fear of marriage and family, and these Internet celebrities deliberately embellish the body, the more desire to watch, the more ‘standard’ female image will cause people to follow [4]. The deliberate glorification of women’s fertility by these Internet celebrities is bound to generate widespread discussion and attention, as well as huge economic benefits. They have lowered their status, or gazed at men with malice, and used their pregnancy image as a selling point, with traffic coming from men’s aesthetics on one hand, and from women’s questions and discussions on the other. Women have broken the old boundaries, escaped from the old feudal shackles, and jumped into the new fence of ‘violent domination’ [4]. Similarly, in network live broadcasting, due to the consumption and transaction attributes of network live broadcasting, female anchors in the network are constantly adjusting themselves in the process of being watched, demanded, rewarded, praised, and appealed to by viewers, constructing an identity that caters to the other, and being reduced to an object to be disciplined [5].

The discourse reflects the online environment. The network media is still essentially a male-dominated traditional order medium, and women in the network are only as ‘others’ to become ornaments and consumer goods of the male-dominated society, and are unable to deconstruct the current male-dominated social order [1]. Influenced by the legacy of patriarchal society, mass media emphasises gender stereotypes, denies women’s individual value, solidifies the gender division of labour, and shapes them as dependent objects. Male aesthetics has largely influenced the construction of women’s image, so that the self-presentation of female Internet celebrity is also strongly affected. As the ‘object’ of viewing, female Internet celebrity are constantly approaching the stereotypical aesthetic standards of men, fulfilling men’s fantasies and bad

taste for the body image of pregnant women. In addition, women also gaze at themselves, i.e., they observe and reflect on themselves. And one of the important reasons for women’s self-gazing is to attract men’s gaze, so as to obtain men’s attention [6].

Deficiency of female subject consciousness. Women’s active participation in the mass media is one of the manifestations of their awakening of gender consciousness, but according to various examples in recent years, the inherent discriminatory concepts of society towards women have still not been completely eliminated, and women who are eager to seek self-expression are still in a state of constant exploration under the impact of old and new ideas, and some of the negative images of Tiktok female Internet celebrity transmitted to society further confirm their loss of self-expression [1]. Women’s eagerness for self-expression is clearly characterised by being ‘disciplined’, which appears to be a demonstration of female strength, such as maintaining a good figure and exquisite dress during pregnancy, but in fact it is a continuous display of their own physical beauty and consumption of their bodies, which reinforces the ‘ornamental’ nature of women.

4. ‘Internet Stepford Wives’ in the Public Eye

According to the analysis of the results of the questionnaire survey on the phenomenon of ‘Internet Stepford Wives’, a relatively high proportion of the respondents were women (78.82 %), with their age ranging mainly from 24 to 30 years old (47.29 %) and from 31 to 40 years old (19.21%). More than half of the respondents (65.52%) said they were aware of the phenomenon of ‘Internet Stepford Wives’, which indicates that the phenomenon has a certain degree of popularity in society. Jittery Voice and XiaoHongShu are the main platforms on which respondents view short videos of ‘Internet Stepford Wives’, accounting for 67.98% and 67.98% respectively. The vast majority of respondents believe that this phenomenon hurts society, such as shaping unrealistic marriage expectations (74.38%) and exacerbating the concept of gender inequality (68.97%). Respondents generally believe that the social reasons behind the ‘Internet Stepford Wives’ phenomenon include the shaping of women by male discourse (59.61%) and the stereotyping of women in society (65.02%) and that the phenomenon reflects, to a certain extent, the domination by consumerism. It is also believed that the phenomenon of ‘Internet Stepford Wives’ reflects, to a certain extent, contemporary social characteristics such as domination by consumerism, male stereotypes, and the pursuit of a happy life.

5. Typical Examples and Impact

In April 2021, YiLiShaZi (a Tiktok Internet celebrity) became famous for her 'Blue Dress' (the blogger was wearing a tight blue dress), which attracted more than 3 million fans in just two weeks. In this hot short video, YiLiShaZi was wearing a slim blue dress, with the music to make a few simple twisting dance moves, sexy body combined with its innocent smile attracted a lot of attention, since then YiLiShaZi has determined its 'sexy and pure' route. However, in YiLiShaZi and many similar Tiktok Internet female celebrity video, there is no lack of 'soft pornography', 'touch ball' and other elements, since the beginning of 2024, the Tiktok Internet celebrity in the social media released their pregnancy photos, began to pregnant women image as a selling point to continue to attract eyeballs, which attracted widespread discussion because the pregnant image shown by the web celebrity was similar to the image of Stepford Wives in some adult comics, while emphasising the fact that she had no adverse reactions during her pregnancy. To cater to men's visual consumption of women, they have firmly grasped the traffic code of 'flattering men', and have continued to construct their images in a way that is closer to male aesthetics, further emphasising the 'ornamental' nature of women's images. The gender status of these female Internet celebrity celebrities is still in the 'second sex', with strong traces of being 'disciplined'. More comments in the comments section say: 'This is what men imagine their wives to look like when they are pregnant, the pregnant wife is only fat in the stomach but not in the face, the belly is round and lovely, wearing tights or a small shawl full of motherhood and wifely flavour, and the child in the belly signifies that the wife's whole body and heart is marked by her own.' Another kind of comment tends to be 'I don't see anyone saying that giving birth to a child is hard,' 'People say that there are no adverse reactions to pregnancy,' and so on. Under the influence of the Internet celebrity themselves and the impact of such views, teenagers who have not yet formed a correct view of marriage and love will have contradictory psychology. Some women who have seen such short videos will break through the barrier and realise that it is a marketing tool and face up to the phenomenon, while some women, especially the underage group, may imitate one after another. In the KuaiShou short video platform appeared '06 years of unmarried pregnant mother's day vlog', '07 years of young pregnant women's day' and other shocking video, this kind of video, not only conveys the wrong values, but also may have a misleading underage viewers! These videos not only convey wrong values, but may also mislead underage viewers, as they have a serious impact on the healthy growth and social

morality of young people and pose a potential threat to their physical and mental health, inadvertently reinforcing the image of women as 'good wives and good mothers', as well as the traditional sense of the gender division of labour, which states that 'men focus on the community and women focus on the family'.

The rise and spread of social media platforms has transformed into a central issue in contemporary society that should not be taken lightly and has played an irreplaceable role in the emergence and development of the 'Internet Stepford Wife' trend. Through the efficient communication methods of social media platforms and their vast user base, this creates an opportunity for the 'Internet Stepford Wife' to show off her charms and attract followers. By 2022, the total number of social media users will have reached 4.26 billion, representing 54.7 % of the world's population. 'Thanks to their large user base, Internet Stepford Wives have created a broad target audience with a wide range of content that allows them to establish a deep connection with users abroad, using social media, especially social platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Weibo. By presenting a stereotypical image of male dependence, the 'Internet Stepford Wives' quickly gain a large number of followers by means of calculation algorithms and referral strategies on social networks, thus rapidly expanding their personal social influence. On Instagram, for example, many Stepford Wives have attracted a lot of attention because of their meticulous content design, which has given rise to the well-known phenomenon of the 'Internet celebrity Economy'. The interactive nature of social platforms allows users to interact with their wives in real time. Studies have shown that a high level of interactivity on an account usually leads to a higher level of popularity among users. This means that Stepford Wives are not only able to respond to user feedback in real time, actively participate in discussions and curate live streams, but also that this increases their online visibility and popularity and creates a large number of loyal followers. They have gained traffic, money, and status through their large number of followers, but in the process of pursuing their interests, some of their outlandish or transgressive words and behaviours can have extremely serious negative impacts on society [7]. For example, in some of the posts in Xiaohongshu, some women use the term 'sealing the uterus' to describe the end of their own fertility, and such an objectifying description reinforces the image of women as being displayed to others for their comments, which has a supreme power and creates a kind of constraint and oppression on the observer. This affects women's identity and self-esteem, which in turn affects their image and evaluation of themselves [8]. Women's long-term regulation and gaze will unconsciously cater to social and male

aesthetics, and also consciously reject behaviours that do not conform to the male narrative, as a result of long-term social regulation and compromise with the male subject in society [9]. Since ancient times, women have been struggling in a male-dominated society, and female subjectivity has been slowly disintegrated by the patriarchal society [10]. Women have gradually internalised male aesthetics as their own standards, and with such standards they judge women of the same sex, shaping an image of women that does not get out of the cage woven by male discourse.

6. Conclusion

The result of this study is that the term ‘Stepford Wives’ itself is a description of a class of women who conform to the traditional male aesthetics and society’s reverie of women, but the emergence of the Internet symbolisation of the body, the initiative to give up the right to become the individual to be gazed at to become a point of purchase, to attract traffic, and the aesthetic excesses, which further leads to the research conclusion that this may lead to the youth group for the concept of marriage, childbirth to produce confusion, and even vicious guidance. , and today, most women have long since stepped out of the barriers and made continuous efforts for gender equality, while the rapid development of Internet technology, entertainment to death, and consumer supremacy are no longer unfamiliar concepts, along with the invasion of a large amount of fragmented information every day, people are losing the ability to make serious thinking and rational judgment on social affairs, and the mass media’s negative portrayal of some of the female Internet celebrity as well as their inappropriate self-presentations have subconsciously deepened the public’s stereotypical impression of women. This study provides a lot of valuable references for future research in this direction, which mainly affects people’s views and analysis of women’s media image in gender relations and gender division of labour, and future

research should focus more on the analysis of audience groups, and gain a deeper understanding of the specific impact of different women’s images on the public.

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