

Becoming Independent: Female Autonomy and the Individualization of Empowerment on Chinese Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The “independent woman” (独立女性, *dúlì nǚxìng*) has become a prominent ideal of womanhood in contemporary Chinese popular culture. This study asks how the figure is constructed on Xiaohongshu and what that construction suggests about the values attached to female empowerment. Using directed content analysis with descriptive frequency counts, it codes 100 publicly accessible posts, retrieved through four Chinese search terms, for 12 themes covering forms of autonomy and the location of responsibility for achieving it. Independence appears as a multidimensional ideal. Emotional autonomy and individual responsibility were the most frequent themes (each in 52% of posts), followed by self-improvement (45%); structural gender critique (27%) and female solidarity (8%) were far less common. The sampled posts widen what women are encouraged to claim, including financial security, emotional self-sufficiency, and choice in marriage and motherhood, while more often locating the means of achieving these goals in the individual woman than in social change. The study argues that the *dúlì nǚxìng* is best understood as a contested feminist ideal in which expanded agency coexists with individualized expectations of self-sufficiency and self-development. The findings describe visible discourse on one platform, not the views of Chinese women.

Keywords: *independent woman, Chinese feminism, Xiaohongshu, social media, female empowerment, neoliberal feminism, female autonomy, self-improvement, content analysis, individualization*

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean for a woman to be “independent”? In contemporary Chinese popular discourse, the answer reaches well beyond supporting oneself financially. The “independent woman” (独立女性, *dúlì nǚxìng*) is imagined as someone who earns her own income, builds a career, maintains emotional autonomy, invests in herself, and decides whether and how to enter marriage and motherhood. Circulating through popular culture and social media, she has become an increasingly visible model of desirable womanhood.

Social media is where this ideal is most visible and most ordinary. Ideas about womanhood are produced not only in explicitly feminist debate but also in everyday advice about careers, relationships, appearance, money, and personal growth. A post need not call itself feminist to communicate assumptions about what women deserve, what holds them back, and what they should do in response. The *dúlì nǚxìng* therefore offers a way to study feminism as an everyday cultural discourse rather than only as an organized political movement.

This study examines how the independent woman is constructed on Xiaohongshu (小红书, also known as RedNote) through a content analysis of 100 posts. It asks two questions. First, which characteristics are most often associated with an independent woman? Second, what do these representations suggest about the values attached to female empowerment, particularly the relationship between individual autonomy and critiques of structural gender inequality?

The findings show that independence is constructed as a broad ideal that includes economic, professional, emotional, and relational autonomy. They also show that responsibility for achieving it is placed on individual women far more often than it is placed on social structures or collective action. The paper argues that the independent woman is best understood as a contested feminist ideal: she represents a real expansion of women’s choices, and she also carries rising expectations of self-sufficiency and self-development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Changing Ideals of Chinese Womanhood

The meaning of female independence in China has never been fixed. It has been reconstructed alongside changes in the country’s political economy and dominant gender ideology. Debates about women’s independence predate the People’s Republic. In the late Qing reform period, women reformers advocated education and public participation, challenging the division between a domestic “inner” sphere for women and a public “outer” sphere for men. The 1897–1898 Shanghai campaign for women’s education, for example, produced a women’s association, a journal, and a school run by women. Qian

(2015) argues that female reformers differed from male reformers, who often saw women's education mainly as a means of strengthening the nation; women reformers also stressed women's own self-improvement and agency. The tension between women's self-development and national purposes was thus present from the start.

After 1949, the socialist state promoted an emancipated womanhood built on participation in productive labor. Women entered occupations once associated with men, and cultural representations celebrated tractor drivers, pilots, and other labor heroines. The "Iron Girl" (铁姑娘) became the emblem of an ideal in which women demonstrated equality through traditionally masculine work (Wang, 2016). Wang's research on socialist feminism complicates the view of this period as a project imposed from above: feminists working inside state institutions actively challenged gender hierarchies and promoted women's public participation. Even so, socialist emancipation did not end inequality. Leung (2003) argues that state socialist discourse promoted women's liberation while operating within gender structures shaped by male dominance, and women's entry into paid labor was not matched by a redistribution of domestic and reproductive work. Independence in this period was tied to collective labor, class politics, and national development rather than to individual self-realization.

The economic reforms that began in the late 1970s changed this model. Zhang (2003) describes post-Mao gender discourse as a move away from the politicized, revolutionary understanding of gender equality associated with Maoism and toward renewed emphasis on femininity and sexual difference. White et al. (1996) describe the effects of reform on Chinese women as ambiguous: markets widened opportunities in economic, cultural, and social life while reinforcing older forms of subordination and creating new inequalities. Wu and Dong (2019) argue that postsocialist transformation produced a new gendered structure of power and, in response, diverse and sometimes conflicting forms of feminist consciousness among young urban women. There is no single Chinese feminism, and no single meaning of independence.

The Independent Woman in Postsocialist China

Jia (2026) traces the "new independent woman" to the convergence of economic reform, the One-Child Policy, consumer culture, and the All-China Women's Federation's "Four-Selves" discourse, which emphasizes self-esteem, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-improvement. In this setting independence becomes an individual project: the ideal woman educates herself, builds a career, earns her own income, keeps improving, and makes autonomous choices. Jia identifies this figure with educated urban women who negotiate independence alongside expectations of femininity, consumption, family, and heterosexual relationships. In Jia's analysis of reality dating television, the supposedly independent woman can be recast as a more traditionally feminine figure once she enters the marriage market, which shows the limits placed on acceptable female autonomy.

Economic independence is central to this ideal. The "She Economy" (她经济) presents women not only as workers but as powerful consumers. Song et al. (2024) observe that the purchasing power of

educated, middle-class women has produced narratives in which consumption itself signals autonomy and female empowerment, while cautioning that women's digital participation remains shaped by state power, market forces, and persistent gender inequality. Miao (2026) analyzed 1,285 Weibo comments on four domestic-violence cases and found that users constructed the "independent woman" as an aspirational subject defined by wealth, professional success, beauty, and emotional independence. Economic independence was often imagined as protection from undesirable relationships and male violence. Miao argues that this discourse can turn structural inequality into a question of individual responsibility: if independence is the solution to women's vulnerability, women who remain dependent or who experience abuse risk being seen as having failed to become self-reliant.

The contemporary independent woman therefore differs from the socialist Iron Girl. Liberation once came through collective labor; it is now expressed through individual achievement, self-management, lifestyle, and personal choice. The shift carries a paradox. The independent woman challenges the expectation that women depend economically and emotionally on husbands, yet she may be held to increasingly demanding standards of career success, attractiveness, consumption, and self-improvement.

Social Media's Role in Feminist Discourse

Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo, Xiaohongshu, Douyin, Bilibili, and Zhihu allow users to discuss experiences long treated as private, including relationships, marriage, harassment, domestic violence, beauty standards, and workplace discrimination. Hou (2020) describes this as a rewriting of the principle that "the personal is political." Drawing on online ethnography of young women's activism between 2012 and 2018 and on interviews with activists, Hou shows how campaigns such as Naked Chest against Domestic Violence and China's #MeToo movement turned individual experiences into collective gender issues and built networks for activism. Digital feminism does not require users to come to feminist ideas through organizations or academic theory; an ordinary post about pressure to marry or unequal housework can become evidence of a wider gendered pattern.

Social media is not inherently emancipatory, however. Hou (2020) stresses the precarity of digital platforms and the difficulty of politicizing personal issues online. Feminist discourse shares space with antifeminist content, commercial content, and traditional gender expectations, and what becomes visible depends on the political, technological, and commercial structures of each platform. Social media is better understood as a site where the meaning of feminism is constructed and contested than as a neutral channel that spreads feminist ideas. Because "independent woman" can cover anything from economic autonomy and rejection of marriage expectations to beauty, self-care, and consumption, it is a useful term for observing which forms of empowerment are most visible and valued.

Neoliberal Feminism and the Individualization of Empowerment

Scholarship on postfeminism and neoliberal feminism describes a shift in which feminist ideals such as agency, choice, and empowerment become organized around individual self-development rather than collective political change (Gill, 2007; Rottenberg, 2018). In this framework the empowered woman is expected to take responsibility for building a successful life through education, employment, financial management, appearance, relationships, and continuous self-improvement. These theories require adaptation to China rather than direct application. Jia (2026) argues that Chinese postfeminist subjectivity grew from specifically Chinese conditions, namely the One-Child Policy, urban consumer culture, and the Four-Selves discourse. Yang (2023) identifies a form of consumerist pseudo-feminism aimed at urban middle-class women, in which self-reliance, freedom, and choice are tied to access to education, professional jobs, and consumer goods, and in which emancipation is located in women's capacity to improve and consume themselves rather than in challenges to patriarchal structures.

The resulting figure can appear both empowering and restrictive. Financial independence can reduce women's dependence on husbands and families, and the normalization of single or ambitious women challenges the expectation that fulfillment comes through marriage and motherhood. Dismissing individual independence as false feminism would therefore be too simple. At the same time, individualized empowerment can obscure structural inequality. If the empowered woman is defined as successful, confident, emotionally self-sufficient, attractive, and able to overcome adversity through self-improvement, then workplace discrimination becomes a problem she must overcome alone, beauty standards become demands for self-confidence, and economic vulnerability becomes a failure to achieve independence. The burden of achieving equality risks shifting from institutions to individual women.

RESEARCH GAP AND QUESTIONS

Existing scholarship documents the historical transformation of Chinese womanhood, the importance of digital spaces for feminist discourse, and the rise of individualized models of empowerment. Studies of reality television (Jia, 2026), popular film (Yang, 2023), and Weibo comments on domestic violence (Miao, 2026) show the independent woman in specific genres and debates. Less is known about how the figure is constructed in the everyday lifestyle content of Xiaohongshu, where advice about money, relationships, and self-development circulates daily. What does a woman have to possess, do, reject, or become recognized as "independent" there? This study addresses two questions:

RQ1. Which characteristics are most often associated with the "independent woman" in Xiaohongshu posts?

RQ2. Where do these posts locate responsibility for women's empowerment: in individual women, in social structures, or in collective action among women?

METHOD

Research Design

The study uses directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005): coding categories were derived from existing theory and applied to a corpus of posts, and the resulting frequencies were supplemented by qualitative reading of representative posts. The aim was to describe how female independence is represented in a sample of publicly available posts, not to measure the attitudes of Chinese women toward feminism.

Xiaohongshu was chosen because it is a widely used domestic platform whose users are mostly young. Reported figures put its monthly active users above 300 million, about 70% of them women, with a primary age range of 18–35 (Ngu, 2026). Its mixture of lifestyle content with discussion of careers, relationships, consumption, and self-development makes it a relevant site for studying ideals of womanhood.

DATA COLLECTION

The corpus consists of 100 publicly accessible posts retrieved with four Chinese search terms: “独立女性” (independent woman), “女性独立” (female independence), “女性成长” (women’s growth), and “女性力量” (female strength or empowerment). Twenty-five eligible posts were collected per term. Each term was entered separately using the same search settings, and, beginning with the first displayed result, every third eligible post was selected until 25 unique posts had been collected. This systematic procedure limited researcher discretion in choosing posts. Searches were run between July 4 and September 12, 2026, using the “comprehensive” (综合) sort setting on a new account with no history, and each post was archived at collection.

Posts were eligible if they substantively addressed women’s independence, empowerment, self-development, economic life, career, intimate relationships, marriage, motherhood, or related aspects of female autonomy. Duplicates, irrelevant results, and posts with too little content to interpret were excluded. The sample is a corpus of visible Xiaohongshu discourse on these search terms and is not representative of Chinese women or of Xiaohongshu users.

CODING

A codebook of 12 codes was developed deductively from the literature on Chinese feminism, postfeminism, and neoliberal feminism (Table 1). The codes distinguish forms of personal autonomy, such as financial and emotional independence, from three ways of locating responsibility for empowerment: individual responsibility, structural gender critique, and female solidarity.

Table 1
Coding Framework

Code	Theme	Definition
FIN	Financial independence	Women's ability to earn and control their own financial resources
CAR	Career ambition	Professional achievement and career development
EDU	Education	Educational attainment and intellectual development
EMO	Emotional autonomy	Emotional self-sufficiency that does not depend on romantic validation
MAR	Marriage autonomy	Capacity to choose whether to enter or leave marriage
REP	Reproductive autonomy	Capacity to choose whether to have children, treating motherhood as a choice rather than an obligation
SEL	Self-improvement	Independence linked to personal development, discipline, or productivity
BEA	Beauty / self-care	Appearance, fitness, and beauty
CON	Consumption / lifestyle	Lifestyle choices such as travel, material goods, and property
SOL	Female solidarity	Empowerment linked to mutual support and cooperation among women
STR	Structural gender critique	Gender inequality attributed to social institutions and systemic gender norms
IND	Individual responsibility	Responsibility for achieving autonomy placed on individual women's attitudes, behaviors, and self-transformation

Note. Codes were derived deductively from the literature and refined after pilot coding. Created by author, 2026.

Each post was coded 1 (present) or 0 (absent) for every theme, and a post could receive several codes. For example, a post urging women to build careers so that they need not depend on a husband's income could be coded for career ambition, financial independence, marriage autonomy, and individual responsibility. Theme frequencies were then calculated across the 100 posts. They are used descriptively, to show which characteristics are most prominent, and are not treated as estimates for any wider population. Coding was carried out by one researcher.

The frequency counts were combined with a qualitative reading of representative posts, attending to how independence was framed in language and imagery, what problems it was presented as solving, what women were encouraged to acquire or reject, and whether gender inequality was treated as an

individual or a structural problem. Posts were analyzed in Chinese. English translations are the researcher's own, and the Chinese original is given with each excerpt.

ETHICS

All analyzed posts were publicly accessible. To reduce the chance of identifying authors, usernames and other identifying details were omitted, posts were assigned identifiers (XHS001, XHS002, and so on), and quoted material was lightly paraphrased so that it cannot easily be traced by searching the platform.

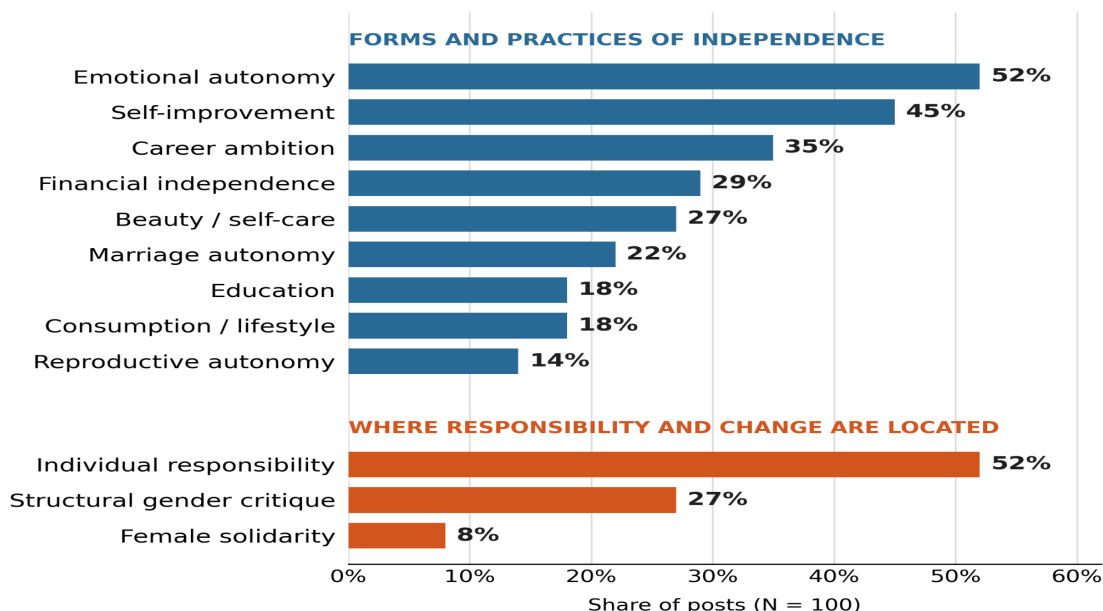
FINDINGS

Overview

Across the 100 posts, the independent woman was constructed through several forms of autonomy at once. Emotional autonomy (52%) and individual responsibility (52%) were the most frequent themes, followed by self-improvement (45%), career ambition (35%), and financial independence (29%). Beauty and self-care and structural gender critique each appeared in 27% of posts, marriage autonomy in 22%, education and consumption in 18% each, reproductive autonomy in 14%, and female solidarity in 8% (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Frequency of Themes in Xiaohongshu Representations of the “Independent Woman”



Note. Percentages represent the proportion of sampled posts coded for each theme. Because posts could receive multiple codes, percentages do not sum to 100%. Created by author, 2026.

Two patterns organize the analysis. First, independence is broader than economic self-sufficiency. Second, themes concerning how women should pursue independence, namely individual responsibility and self-improvement, appeared much more often than themes concerning social structures or collective action.

Emotional And Economic Autonomy

Emotional autonomy appeared more often than any single economic theme: in 52% of posts, compared with 35% for career ambition and 29% for financial independence. In these posts independence meant keeping a sense of self that does not rest on a romantic partner's validation or on other people's approval. One post (XHS015) asserted that "no matter how financially stable you are as a woman, you cannot be truly independent unless you are no longer subject to romantic attachment" (作为女人, 无论经济上多么稳定, 只要还没有摆脱对爱情的依附, 就无法真正独立). This shows that emotional autonomy can be treated as a stricter test of independence than financial security. Money alone does not qualify a woman as independent. She must also free herself from needing a romantic partner, which turns independence into a standard of emotional self-management.

Economic themes nevertheless formed a distinct dimension. Financial independence and career ambition frequently appeared together, and these posts often presented income and professional capacity as resources that give women control over their lives, not as achievements for their own sake. Taken together, the posts construct two linked forms of autonomy: a material one, built through work and income, and an emotional one, built through self-confidence and reduced dependence on external validation. The second shifts attention from what a woman has to how she manages herself.

Independence as an Ongoing Project

Self-improvement appeared in 45% of posts. Many posts treated independence not as a status that a woman either has or lacks but as something built continuously through discipline, learning, emotional growth, and productivity. Education (18%) was one part of this process. Beauty and self-care (27%) and consumption (18%) were often folded into it: self-improvement and beauty or self-care appeared together in 15 posts, slightly more than the roughly 12 expected if the two themes were unrelated. Appearance and body care were thus presented as part of a wider set of practices through which women develop themselves. One post (XHS092) shows how this framing can work. It stated that "a truly confident, independent woman will not allow herself to get fat or ugly" (一个真正自信, 独立的女人是不会允许自己变胖变丑的), and then went on to advertise a skincare product. Here independence is defined partly through appearance: confidence and independence are treated as qualities a woman proves by managing her body. The advertisement that follows suggests that this standard can also serve a commercial purpose.

The independent woman that emerges is less someone who has achieved independence than someone engaged in a continuous process of becoming independent. The posts describe a set of capacities to be accumulated: professional skills, knowledge, emotional resilience, bodily care, financial resources, and particular lifestyles.

Marriage, Reproduction, and Choice

Challenges to conventional expectations about marriage and motherhood formed a smaller part of the discourse. Marriage autonomy appeared in 22% of posts and reproductive autonomy in 14%. In these posts independence meant being able to decide whether and under what conditions to enter a relationship, marriage, or motherhood. This did not usually require rejecting marriage. Economic or emotional independence was presented as the condition that turns relationships into matters of choice. One post (XHS037) asserted that “before a woman becomes a mother, she must first become herself” (一个女人要在成为一个母亲前先成为她自己). The post does not reject motherhood. It places a woman’s own identity before it, so that selfhood becomes a prior condition for being a mother.

Where Responsibility Is Located

The sharpest contrast in the coding concerns where responsibility for empowerment is placed. Individual responsibility appeared in 52% of posts, structural gender critique in 27%, and female solidarity in 8%. Posts were thus nearly twice as often coded for individual responsibility as for structural critique.

This does not mean that structural awareness was absent. More than a quarter of posts attributed women’s constraints to social expectations, gender norms, institutions, or economic arrangements. Collective responses were much rarer: only 8 of 100 posts linked empowerment to mutual support, shared identification, or collective action among women. One of these posts (XHS024) contended that “female independence cannot be achieved without cooperation among women” (女性独立的成立不能没有女性之间的合作). Here independence is not something a woman builds alone; it depends on other women. This is the opposite of the individual framing found in most of the sample, which makes the post a useful contrast case.

Individual responsibility was not confined to particular topics. It appeared together with emotional autonomy in 15 posts and with self-improvement in 12, which is fewer than the roughly 27 and 23 that would be expected if these themes were unrelated. Most posts coded for individual responsibility were therefore not coded for emotional autonomy (37 of 52) or self-improvement (40 of 52). Responsibility for independence appeared as a framing across posts on various subjects rather than as a feature of any one theme. Individual and structural framings were also not mutually exclusive, appearing together in 13 posts. Some posts acknowledged gendered constraints while advising women on how to navigate them. The difference is therefore one of emphasis: structural inequality is visible in the discourse, but the means of achieving independence are more often located in the individual woman.

DISCUSSION

An Expansion of Female Autonomy

The findings support reading the independent woman as a feminist ideal in a meaningful sense. The sampled posts encourage women to build careers, control their money, develop emotional self-sufficiency, and treat marriage and motherhood as choices. These ideas depart from an image of femininity in which a woman's fulfillment lies in dependence on husbands and families. They also bear out Jia's (2026) and Song et al.'s (2024) accounts of an urban, educated, economically capable female subject, and they show that this subject is defined by more than income: emotional autonomy appeared more often than any single economic theme. Financial security, education, and professional achievement can materially widen women's options under unequal conditions and dismissing them as merely neoliberal would overlook that practical value.

Individualization

The same findings complicate a purely emancipatory reading. Individual responsibility appeared in 52% of posts and self-improvement in 45%, while structural critique appeared in 27% and solidarity in 8%. Much of the sampled discourse presents women as the agents who must acquire the capacities needed to cope with inequality, and it presents those capacities as a project of continuous work on the self. Financial vulnerability invites earning more, dependence in marriage invites keeping one's own career, romantic disappointment invites emotional self-sufficiency, and insecurity invites constant self-development. This pattern matches the concerns raised by scholars of neoliberal feminism (Gill, 2007; Rottenberg, 2018) and, in the Chinese context, by Yang (2023) and Miao (2026), and the prominence of self-improvement fits Jia's (2026) account of the Four-Selves discourse.

An important qualification applies. The individual-responsibility code captures posts that place responsibility for autonomy on women's own attitudes and behavior. It does not separate advice addressed to readers, which is a common feature of lifestyle content, from explicit blame of women who remain dependent. The findings therefore show that individual-level framings were prominent. They do not show that posts held women responsible for structural inequality, which is the specific mechanism Miao (2026) describes. Testing that mechanism would require coding separately for posts that attribute women's difficulties to a lack of effort or independence.

The Right to Be Independent and the Expectation to Be Independent

The distinction that best captures the tension is between having the right to be independent and having the responsibility to make oneself invulnerable to inequality. The first widens the range of lives women can choose. The second turns the ability to overcome inequality into another standard against which women are measured. An ideal that once asked women to be good wives and mothers may be replaced by one that asks them to be financially secure, professionally successful, emotionally resilient,

attractive, and always improving. Independence can then be a liberation and an expectation at once. If it becomes the latter, economic dependence, workplace discrimination, or unequal relationships may come to look like personal shortfalls instead of products of gendered conditions. The sampled posts do not demonstrate that readers experience independence this way, but the discourse supplies the terms in which they could.

Alternative Explanations

Several factors besides the meaning of “independent woman” may shape the pattern. Xiaohongshu is a lifestyle platform in which self-improvement and personal-development content is common for all genders, so the prominence of self-development may reflect platform genre as much as gendered ideology. The search terms, especially “女性成长” and “女性力量,” point toward growth and empowerment and may retrieve content already framed around the individual. Moderation and self-censorship may also reduce the visibility of posts that criticize gender institutions or call for collective action. The state’s Four-Selves discourse, which promotes individual self-reliance, offers a further source for individualized framings that is not specific to neoliberal feminism. These possibilities do not undermine the description of the sample, but they mean the low frequency of structural critique and solidarity should not be read as a measure of what Xiaohongshu users believe.

LIMITATIONS

Sampling and Platform Mediation

Posts come from ranked, personalized search results, so the sample reflects what the platform made visible under particular settings, not all posts on the topic, and the sample cannot be reproduced exactly. Every-third-post selection limits researcher choice but does not remove algorithmic ranking. Xiaohongshu users are also predominantly young, urban, and female.

Search Terms

The four terms emphasize independence, growth, and empowerment and do not target explicitly feminist or critical vocabulary such as “feminism” (女权) or “gender inequality” (性别不平等). The pattern reported here applies to posts retrieved through these terms. A comparison sample using critical terms would test whether the pattern is specific to independent-woman discourse.

Moderation and Commercial Content

Content critical of gender institutions or calling for collective action may be moderated or avoided, so the scarcity of structural critique and solidarity cannot be attributed to user preference alone. Many Xiaohongshu posts are produced by influencers and brands, which may amplify beauty, consumption, and self-improvement themes. Author type and sponsorship were not coded.

CODING

The codes were derived from neoliberal-feminism theory, which may predispose the analysis toward patterns that theory predicts. Distinguishing self-improvement, empowerment, and individual responsibility requires interpretation. Coding was done by one researcher, and percentage differences of a few points, such as among emotional autonomy, self-improvement, and career ambition, should not be treated as a ranking.

REPRESENTATION AND TIME

Content analysis shows how independence is represented, not how audiences interpret it or whether it affects them. The data are also a single snapshot, so they cannot show change over time.

TRANSLATION

Translations are the researcher's own. Some Chinese terms carry connotations that do not map exactly onto their English equivalents.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how the independent woman is constructed in 100 Xiaohongshu posts. Independence appeared as a multidimensional ideal that combines economic, professional, emotional, relational, and personal forms of autonomy. Emotional autonomy and individual responsibility were the most frequent themes, each appearing in 52% of posts, and self-improvement followed at 45%. Structural gender critique appeared in 27% of posts and female solidarity in 8%. Within the discourse retrieved through these search terms, independence was more often presented as a matter of individual capacity than as a response to structural inequality.

These findings suggest that the independent woman is neither simply feminist nor simply a product of consumer individualism. She expands what women are encouraged to want and to control, and she places the work of achieving that control largely on women themselves. The central distinction is between the right to become independent, which widens women's possible lives, and the expectation to be independent, which risks judging women by their ability to overcome conditions they did not create.

The study has clear limits: it draws on one platform, four search terms, a single coder, and a snapshot of posts rather than of audiences. Future research could compare these results with samples drawn through explicitly feminist or critical search terms, other platforms such as Weibo or Zhihu, and men's independence discourse, and could code separately for advice, individual responsibility, and blame. Such work, including studies of how readers respond, would show whether the individualization described here is specific to the independent woman or a wider feature of online self-improvement culture. What the

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findings establish is that, in this corner of Chinese social media, independence both opens possibilities for women and places the burden of realizing them on women themselves.

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