From the She Economy to Consumable Empowerment: Women's Consumer Alienation on Digital Platforms

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Abstract

The term "she economy" usually refers to the market formed by women's rising income, decision-making power, and consumer influence; however, a larger market does not by itself bring women's liberation. This paper adopts an integrative literature review and puts consumer alienation, commodity feminism, postfeminist media culture, objectification theory, and platform studies in one analytical framework. It explores how feminist language is turned into commodity signs and how digital platforms extend this process through visibility ranking, social comparison, and self-branding. According to the review, women's consumer alienation is not a moral problem of "women consuming too much," and is better seen as a chain of mechanisms that structural inequality, empowerment narratives, algorithmic amplification, self-surveillance, and market feedback build together. Consumption can also bring pleasure, community connection, and some limited agency. This paper thus puts forward a conditional framework; in it, empowerment is more likely to turn into consumable self-discipline if commercial infrastructures limit choice to a large extent, the authority to evaluate lies mostly outside the individual, individuals carry the costs and risks, and consumer solutions replace structural reform. Drawing on studies of Chinese female livestreamers, RedNote users, and exposure to idealized social media images, it also outlines an empirical research agenda for the Chinese platform context.

Keywords

Sociology, Sociology of Consumption, She Economy, Commodity Feminism, Digital Platforms

Introduction

The "she economy" depicts women as market actors with independent purchasing power and decision-making capacity. The concept does capture the consumer influence generated by changes in women's education, employment, and income. Yet it can also reduce improvement in social status to an increase in purchasing capacity, so that whether women are empowered appears measurable by what they can buy, what they choose to buy, and whether consumption enables them to construct the self. The central question, therefore, is not whether women should consume, but how markets define the forms of female subjectivity that receive social recognition.

Discussions in Chinese often follow the chain of bodily objectification, symbolic consumption, and behavioral conformity, and they treat capitalist logic, patriarchal culture, and media influence as the main causes.[1–3] This line of work has shown the disciplinary power of consumerism; however, it has three limitations. First, it sometimes assumes that women consumers are passive victims and ignores the pleasure, negotiation, and resistance in consumption. Second, it has not fully explained the way digital platforms change the environment of choice by means of recommendation systems, rankings, engagement metrics, and commercial collaborations. Third, "consumer alienation" is often used as a value judgment, and it offers no operational criteria to tell ordinary consumption, strategic consumption, and alienated consumption apart.

English-language scholarship has developed in largely separate streams. Feminist media and cultural studies have followed the way the language of choice, empowerment, and confidence spreads in advertising and popular culture.[4–6] Psychological research looks at the link between social media use and body-image disturbance, and this work has been summarized in a systematic review and a meta-analysis.[7,8] Studies of influencers and platform labor show how people pursue visibility, measure it, and turn it into income.[9,10] Each stream can explain one part of the problem; however, reviews in these fields seldom link the commodification of feminist language, the psychology of appearance comparison, and the economics of platform work, and only a few deal with Chinese platforms. A review that brings these streams into one framework is needed because, on platforms such as RedNote (Xiaohongshu), Douyin, and livestream e-commerce channels, the same woman may simultaneously read empowerment slogans, compare her body with idealized images, purchase recommended products, and produce content that sells those products to others.

This article consequently asks three questions. (1) How are feminist and empowerment discourses commodified? (2) How do digital platforms connect bodily discipline, symbolic consumption, and self-branding? (3) Under what conditions does agency in consumption turn into alienation? Rather than treating the “she economy” as inherently progressive or inherently oppressive, the article analyzes how empowerment and discipline coexist within the same market practices. The discussion first sets out the theoretical foundations, then examines platform mechanisms and recent Chinese evidence, proposes a four-dimensional mechanism and a set of conditional criteria, compares the strengths and contradictions of the evidence, and closes with limitations and a future research agenda.

Review Method and Conceptual Boundaries

This article uses an integrative literature review, whose purpose is to compare the connections among different theoretical traditions, empirical studies, and research on Chinese platforms, rather than to claim the exhaustive coverage of a systematic review. The search covered Chinese- and English-language scholarship from 1991 to 2026, and a small number of earlier foundational theoretical works were also cited; in combination, it used terms such as “she economy,” “women’s consumption,” “consumer alienation,” “body consumption,” “commodity feminism,” “postfeminism,” “self-objectification,” “social media and body image,” “platform algorithms,” “influencers,” and “self-branding,” as well as their Chinese or English equivalents. Peer-reviewed articles and scholarly monographs had priority, and three criteria decided whether a work entered the core analysis. First, the study should relate directly to women’s consumption, bodily discipline, the commodification of empowerment, or platform mechanisms. Second, it needed to provide clear theoretical propositions, empirical results, or review evidence. Third, it should be possible to check its source and bibliographic information. Commercial reports, promotional content, and online articles without verifiable sources did not count as core evidence. No preregistration, exhaustive database search, dual independent screening, or quality scoring was carried out; thus, this paper does not report search counts or exclusion flows in the style of a systematic review, and it does not present its conclusions as complete coverage of all relevant research.

This article defines “consumer alienation” as a relational condition rather than a moral judgment about the volume of consumption. Consumption displays an alienating tendency when individuals increasingly rely on external market standards to define their own needs, bodies, or identities; when apparent choice expands while actual choice is constrained by the supply of commodities, mechanisms of visibility, and social evaluation; and when structural problems are translated into tasks of personal purchasing and self-transformation. This definition permits the simultaneous recognition of agency in consumption and the constraints placed upon it.

The evidence is organized into three categories. Theoretical literature defines symbolic consumption, commodity feminism, and discipline. Systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and longitudinal studies assess empirical relationships among social media, appearance comparison, and body-image anxiety. Research on Chinese platforms tests the applicability of these concepts to local livestreaming, short-video platforms,

and lifestyle communities. Because these studies differ substantially in samples, platforms, measures, and research designs, this article neither calculates pooled effects nor presents correlations as causal relationships. It instead conducts a comparative synthesis at the level of mechanisms.

Discussion

Theoretical Foundations: From Commodity Signs to Consumable Empowerment

According to Baudrillard's analysis of sign consumption, modern consumption is about use value and also about the identity, taste, and distinction that commodities represent.[11] Bourdieu further shows that taste is more than personal preference, and it is closely related to class position and cultural capital.[12] With these theories, it is easier to see why beauty products, clothing, fitness, and lifestyle goods may go beyond their practical functions and become social signs of being "independent," "self-disciplined," "sophisticated," or "worthy of love."

Another mechanism has been revealed by the concept of "commodity feminism" put forward by Goldman, Heath, and Smith.[4] Markets do not have to oppose feminism in a direct way; instead, they can take signs of autonomy, strength, and liberation out of feminist discourse and attach them to brands and commodities. The postfeminist sensibility discussed by Gill similarly presents women as subjects who choose actively, manage themselves, and continually transform their bodies and identities.[5,6] Gill identifies among its features the notion that femininity is a bodily property, a shift from objectification to subjectification, an emphasis on self-surveillance and self-discipline, a focus on individualism, choice, and empowerment, and the dominance of a makeover paradigm.[5] Traditional external scrutiny does not disappear but is partly converted into women's self-surveillance, a shift that also recalls Foucault's account of disciplinary power.[13] A decade later, Gill argued that this sensibility had become hegemonic and increasingly depended on a psychological register of confidence, resilience, and positive mental attitude.[6]

"Empowerment" may therefore undergo a semantic shift. Collective demands originally directed toward rights, resources, and institutional change are transformed into personal projects of confidence, appearance management, and consumer choice.[14–16] Gill and Orgad argue that "confidence culture" turns feminist questions about work and the body away from structural inequalities and toward self-work and self-regulation, so that inequality appears as a psychological deficiency that women must repair.[17] Once structural problems are rewritten as problems of confidence, image, and execution, markets can continually sell solutions. This is not to deny the value of confidence, consumption, or individual choice. The question is whether, when institutional responsibility is systematically transferred to individuals, so-called empowerment also becomes an ongoing obligation of self-management.

These theories differ in where they locate power. Baudrillard and Bourdieu place it in the social meaning of goods; commodity feminism places it in advertising's appropriation of political language; postfeminist and confidence-culture accounts place it in the self-relation that women are invited to adopt. None of them, however, was written with algorithmic platforms in view. They explain why certain images and products carry value, but not how platforms decide which images are shown, to whom, and how often. That question requires platform research.

How Digital Platforms Reorganize Women's Consumer Alienation

Platforms are not neutral display shelves. Cotter's study of Instagram influencers shows that content producers must infer and adapt to algorithmic rules in order to obtain visibility.[9] Cotter describes influencers' pursuit of influence as a "visibility game" whose rules are encoded in algorithms, yet concludes that algorithms structure, but do not unilaterally determine, user behavior. Likes, saves, reposts, follower counts, and sales convert social recognition into quantifiable feedback, making it easier for users to treat the body and identity as projects requiring continuous optimization. Platforms do more than display aesthetic standards; through ranking and feedback, they determine which forms of self-presentation are more likely to be seen.

Research on body image provides empirical support for this mechanism. Objectification theory, developed by Fredrickson and Roberts, proposes that women in cultures of continuous evaluation may internalize an observer's perspective and develop habitual body surveillance.[18] The theory links such monitoring to shame, anxiety, and diminished awareness of internal bodily states, and to mental health risks that disproportionately affect women. Perloff reviewed, at the theoretical level, the possible pathways linking social media, appearance comparison, and young women's body concerns.[19] Fardouly and colleagues' experimental study pointed to social comparison as an important factor in how social media relates to body image. Among 112 female participants, browsing Facebook produced a more negative mood than an appearance-neutral website, and women high in appearance comparison tendency reported more face, hair, and skin-related discrepancies after Facebook exposure.[20] Tiggemann and Slater examined the association between Internet use and body concern in an adolescent sample. In the sample of 1,087 girls, the time spent on the Internet was linked to thin-ideal internalization, body surveillance, and drive for thinness; also, Facebook users had higher scores than non-users on all measures of body-image concern.[21] An overall association between social media use and body-image disturbance has been found both in the systematic review by Holland and Tiggemann and in the meta-analysis by Saiphoo and Vahedi.[7,8] In the studies reviewed by Holland and Tiggemann that looked at the underlying processes, appearance-based social comparison was the mediator of this relationship.[7] The meta-analysis pooled 63 independent samples and estimated a small but significant overall correlation ($r = 0.169$); it also found that the type of social media use, the body-image dimension measured, country grouping, and age all had a moderating effect on the relationship.[8] These studies are different in samples, platforms, measures, and designs; thus, their results cannot prove that every case of platform use causes harm, and cross-sectional correlations should not be taken directly as causal relationships. Together, they suggest that body-image risk may increase in environments that center on images, involve a lot of comparison, and run on quantified feedback.

Platforms also make the line between consumption and labor unclear. According to Duffy and Hund, fashion bloggers build an entrepreneurial femininity with narratives of passionate work and "having it all," but this self-presentation only looks natural and needs continuous aesthetic labor, content labor, and capital investment.[10] In their analysis, this socially mediated form of self-enterprise hides the labor, discipline, and capital needed to copy its standards and also reproduces the idea that women should work through and for consumption. Duffy places this pattern in the structure of aspirational work and shows that the hope of future opportunities keeps a large amount of underpaid present labor going.[22] A similar process has been described in Chinese research, with stronger features of platform labor. Zhang finds that the work of female livestreamers does not stop at the livestreaming room and reaches into emotional maintenance, appearance management, and everyday life.[23] These workers gain space for expression; however, they also face forms of control that are more hidden. Women are simultaneously consumers of commodities and workers who produce attention, data, and tradable images for platforms and brands. Alienation therefore does not occur only at the moment of purchase; it extends throughout the processes of filming, editing, posting, interacting, and maintaining a personal brand.

Evidence from Chinese Platforms: RedNote, Selfie Editing, and Livestream E-Commerce

Chinese platforms make the connection between content, community, and commerce especially direct. Livestreamers ride marketing imperatives that direct consumers to cross-integrated e-commerce platforms fueling China's emerging consumption culture, while long-standing cultural policies have fostered conditions that advantage female streamers who engage in gendered performance to appeal to wealthy male viewers.[24] Han argues that although the wanghong (internet celebrity) economy is often presented as an economy "by the women and for the women," its business ecosystem contains a structurally embedded gender hierarchy, and major platforms such as Douyin act as active participants that construct and profit from its gendered value chains.[25] Han also finds that streamers and users are aware of the asymmetric power of platforms, which they half-jokingly call "daddy," yet this very narrative further legitimizes platform dominance. Awareness of control does not by itself loosen it.

RedNote illustrates how a lifestyle platform shapes femininity through shared trends. Liu and Li's analysis of two popular female representations on the platform, the "BM girls" and the "Uniqlo-Sanrio girls," argues that young women positioned among competing discourses are framed as a "docile body" through the collective pursuit of being "pale, young, and slim" in post-socialist China.[26] The same platform, however, also hosts content that resists these norms. In a content analysis of 888 body-positivity posts on RedNote, Lang and colleagues found that the posts depicted diverse body sizes and appearances and that most contained positive body-image themes, although over 40% still conveyed appearance-focused messages.[27] Even resistance to appearance pressure, then, is often expressed through attention to appearance, a pattern consistent with the observation that resistance may be absorbed into new styles.

Recent empirical research on Chinese platforms further clarifies causal direction and contextual differences. In a longitudinal study of Chinese female university students, Yao, Niu, and Sun found a temporal association between exposure to idealized social media images and later consideration of cosmetic surgery.[28] The relationships among social appearance anxiety, internalization of ideals, and media exposure, however, were not simply one-directional. Baseline thin-ideal internalization predicted later exposure, and baseline social appearance anxiety predicted less later exposure. Huang, Sun, and Mao, using a sample of 1,234 adult female RedNote users from three Chinese cities representing different city tiers, found that the relationship between passive browsing of appearance-related content and social appearance anxiety could operate through internalization of ideals, and that some of these relationships varied with the social context in which participants lived.[29] Active social media use did not exhibit the same relationship. These findings require analyses to consider modes of platform use, content types, and social position rather than treating "time spent" as a sufficient summary of risk.

Selfie editing extends the link between platform metrics and the body. In a survey of 600 young women in China, Lu and Chia found that posting edited selfies was related to perceptions of audience characteristics and social media metrics, and that the behavior was associated with the intention to undergo cosmetic surgery.[30] Sun's survey of 589 Chinese undergraduate women found that selfie editing was positively correlated with consideration of cosmetic surgery and that the association ran through self-objectification, both alone and in sequence with facial dissatisfaction.[31] Health-oriented content follows a similar pattern. Among 527 Chinese women, exposure to fitspiration content on RedNote was associated with compulsive exercise and eating-disorder symptoms, though not directly with body dissatisfaction, and state self-esteem was a stronger mediator than appearance comparison.[32] Content that is coded as self-care or self-improvement can therefore be connected to the same self-evaluative processes as openly appearance-focused content.

Livestream e-commerce adds an emotional dimension to purchasing. In an experiment (N = 408) and a survey (N = 664), Gao, Yuan, and Lei found that female viewers' perceived attractiveness of male livestreamers selling beauty products triggered parasocial romantic relationships, which in turn strengthened purchase intentions.[33] Here the platform converts an imagined relationship into a sale, and the woman is addressed simultaneously as a consumer of beauty products and as an audience for emotional performance. On the production side, Zhang's study of female livestreamers shows that, under platform pay systems, competition rules, and flexible employment, workers open a "second layer of labor space" for hidden emotional labor and build commodified personas to meet viewers' demands.[23] Yet livestreaming does not have a single meaning. In interviews with rural female e-commerce livestreamers, Tang and colleagues found that these women gained a sense of self-empowerment in economic, social, intellectual, psychological, and spiritual dimensions, and at the same time they faced stigma that came from rural communities.[34] A comparison of these studies shows that the same platform activity may be empowering or alienating, and the result depends on who carries it out, who gets the profit, and what other options exist.

A Four-Dimensional Mechanism of Women's Consumer Alienation

First, the body is turned into a project. It is no longer just the medium of lived experience; it is now an object that needs constant investment, monitoring, and upgrading. Xu and Zhou studied women's body consumption and online livestreaming and found that aesthetic norms can be shaped jointly by media, capital, and the gendered gaze; thus, "voluntary transformation" may contain both choice and discipline.[2,3]

Second, identity turns symbolic. People use commodities to show independence, professionalism, refinement, or resistance, and consumption turns into a language of group belonging and social distinction. However, if a stable identity relies too much on brands, appearance, or platform metrics, commodities stop being tools of self-expression and become standards of self-evaluation.

Third, structural problems are made into personal ones. Gender pay gaps, care burdens, workplace exclusion, and appearance discrimination are problems of institutions and culture, but markets can change them into demands to "build confidence," "manage time," "improve appearance," or "invest in yourself." Women are expected to improve themselves to adapt to inequality, instead of asking institutions to take responsibility for change. This individualization matches the confidence culture Gill and Orgad have described; in it, attention moves away from structural inequalities to self-work and self-regulation.[17]

Fourth, subjectivity is turned into data. Digital platforms change attention, interaction, and purchasing behavior into data, and in return shape visibility with opaque ranking mechanisms. Users adjust their self-presentation to gain recognition, and platforms take commercial value from these adjustments; this dynamic is in line with Zuboff's account of surveillance capitalism.[35] Platforms record behavior, and they also use data feedback to predict and influence what users do next. Agency still exists, but it works inside an infrastructure that is highly unequal. Therefore, analysis should not assume that users are completely passive or treat the choice environment shaped by platforms as naturally neutral.

The four dimensions support each other. A body that is treated as a project produces a steady demand for products; symbolic identity gives these products social meaning; individualization makes the purchases look like responsible choices instead of responses to pressure; and datafication helps platforms learn from each choice and present the next one more effectively. Alienation cannot be described by any one dimension alone, and each of them may also appear in ordinary consumption without causing harm.

Counterevidence That Cannot Be Ignored: Consumption Can Also Express Agency

If all of women's consumption is explained as false need, women's ability to judge their own needs will be denied once again. Consumption may bring aesthetic pleasure, bodily comfort, community identity, cultural expression, and challenges to traditional norms. Clothing, cosmetics, or digital media may also be used by marginalized groups to gain visibility. Therefore, the main task is to analyze the conditions, costs, benefits, and alternatives that structure choice, and not to classify particular commodities as liberating or oppressive by nature.

This caution is also supported by the empirical literature. In the meta-analysis, the association between social media use and body-image disturbance is small and changes with how platforms are used and who uses them.[8] For Chinese RedNote users, appearance anxiety was associated with passive browsing and with viewing appearance-related content, but not with active use.[29] Platform research also shows that users do not simply obey algorithmic rules; they interpret them and play with them.[9] On Chinese platforms, body-positivity posts on RedNote show that the same infrastructures can also carry resistance to appearance norms,[27] and rural women's livestreaming businesses show that they can bring new sources of income as well.[34] These results do not prove that platforms are harmless; however, they suggest that the outcomes rely on the ways of use and on users' interpretations.

Four conditional criteria are put forward in this paper. (1) Is the choice made with enough information and with real alternatives? (2) Do the evaluative standards come mainly from personal needs, or from external visibility and group pressure? (3) How are benefits, costs, and risks shared out, especially in terms of time,

debt, health, and unpaid labor? (4) Does the consumer solution hide structural responsibilities that organizations, platforms, or public policy should bear? These conditions need to be considered together; in this way, the analysis will not portray women as victims without agency, and it will not romanticize every choice as empowerment either.

An Interpretive Framework for China's She Economy

In China, the "she economy" carries both a descriptive and a normative meaning. It describes the purchasing power of women, and at the same time it implies a promise of modernity, independence, and self-care through consumption. Yet growth in purchasing power is not equivalent to growth in bargaining power, labor protection, care resources, or the right to freedom from discrimination. Treating market size as proof of gender progress may conceal differences among women across class, age, region, marital and reproductive status, and physical condition.

Research on China shows how this promise has been built and marketed. Xu and Feiner describe the spread of meinü jingji, the "beauty economy," after China's accession to the World Trade Organization, and argue that state-endorsed beauty pageants promoted consumerism, reinforced commodification, and diverted attention to the personal.[36] Wu and Dong show that China's post-socialist transition produced a new gendered structure of power, to which urban young women responded with varied discursive and material practices that are often perceived as a single, undifferentiated "feminism" proliferating in contemporary China.[37] Advertising has since adopted the language of empowerment directly. Two experiments with Chinese college students found that women-empowering advertisements increased positive attitudes and purchase intentions because viewers perceived them as socially responsible.[38] A social semiotic analysis of SK-II's "Marriage Market Takeover" campaign found that its verbal messages of independence were outweighed by visual signs that conformed to stereotypes of beauty, age, and gender roles,[39] and a study of viewers' responses to a femvertising vlog on Weibo argued that perceived empowerment may obscure the consumerism embedded in such content while promoting "the myth of self-empowerment through consumption" in contemporary China.[40] These studies give empirical form to the empowerment-coding link of the framework.

Based on the existing literature, this article proposes a conceptual framework of "structural pressure, empowerment coding, platform amplification, self-surveillance, and market feedback" (Table 1). Structural inequality generates anxiety and demand; advertising and content industries code solutions as independence, self-love, and consumption for one's own pleasure; platform algorithms amplify images that are easy to circulate, compare, and monetize; users monitor themselves under engagement metrics; and purchases and content production generate new data and commercial feedback. This framework synthesizes existing theories and empirical findings. It was not tested statistically as a causal model, and it does not claim that the five links appear one after another in every consumption setting. Users can negotiate, rewrite, or reject scripts; however, resistance itself may soon be absorbed into new styles and commodity categories.

Table 1. The mechanism chain of women's consumer alienation in the context of digital platforms, listing for each of the five stages its primary mechanism and its possible outcome.

Stage	Primary mechanism	Possible outcome
Structural pressure	Inequality in pay, care responsibilities, appearance standards, and opportunity	Anxiety, time scarcity, and identity insecurity
Empowerment coding	Brands attach independence, self-love, and confidence to commodities	Collective demands become individual purchasing tasks
Platform amplification	Recommendations, rankings, and engagement metrics intensify comparable content	Aesthetic convergence and competition for visibility
Self-surveillance	Body management, content production, and self-branding	Choice and discipline occur simultaneously
Market feedback	Purchases, clicks, and content are converted into data and profit	Scripts are iterated and further personalized

Differences among existing studies clarify the framework's boundaries. Objectification and body-image research principally explains the psychological consequences of appearance-centered content. Platform-labor research focuses on continuous production, emotional maintenance, and commercial control. Research on commodity feminism and postfeminism explains how advertising discourse individualizes collective political claims. The three bodies of scholarship complement but cannot substitute for one another. Appearance anxiety is not a universal outcome of all women's consumption, platform labor is not equivalent to ordinary shopping, and the commodification of empowerment language does not automatically prove that consumers lack agency. Specific analysis must therefore identify the field of consumption, platform mechanisms, users' social positions, and outcome variables.

Comparing the Evidence: Convergence, Divergence, and Contradiction

Western and Chinese studies converge on one broad finding. Exposure to appearance-ideal content is associated with greater body concern in both settings. Holland and Tiggemann's systematic review of 20 studies found that social networking site use was associated with body image and disordered eating.[7] Chinese studies of university students and RedNote users report associations that involve internalization of appearance ideals,[28,29] and studies of young women who edit selfies link the practice to social media metrics and self-objectification.[30,31] The same research, however, diverges sharply once the strength and direction of the relationship are examined, and these divergences are as informative as the agreement.

The first divergence concerns research design. Holland and Tiggemann noted that most of the available evidence was correlational and called for more longitudinal and experimental work.[7] When de Valle and colleagues later meta-analyzed such work, appearance-ideal social media images had a moderate negative effect on body image in experiments (Hedges' $g = -0.61$), although these effects were smaller, but still significant, with outliers removed, whereas social media use showed only a very small negative correlation with body image over time in longitudinal samples (Fisher's $Z = -0.08$).[41] Short-term exposure effects observed in a laboratory therefore cannot be read directly as long-term effects of everyday platform use. The cross-sectional meta-analysis by Saiphoo and Vahedi, which found a small overall correlation, sits between these two results.[8]

The second divergence concerns who is affected. In an experiment with Chinese women, viewing images of thin peers passing the "A4 challenge," a thin-ideal trend from Chinese social media, did not increase state body dissatisfaction for women in general; it did so only among women who already reported higher trait body dissatisfaction.[42] This result is consistent with the moderators identified in the meta-analytic

literature and with the difference between passive and active use among RedNote users.[8,29] It suggests that platform content is more likely to intensify existing vulnerability than to create it uniformly.

The clearest contradiction concerns the role of self-objectification. Sun's cross-sectional study found that self-objectification connected selfie editing to cosmetic surgery consideration.[31] A longitudinal study of 767 Chinese adolescents also found that selfie editing predicted later cosmetic surgery consideration, with facial dissatisfaction as the mediator; that study did not measure self-objectification.[43] A pre-registered study of 200 young Chinese women, by contrast, found that neither self-objectification nor face surveillance was associated with selfie editing, and that selfie editing did not predict self-objectification in a reversed model.[44] Sun and Hao differ in sample and measurement, and Hao distinguished subject editing, which changes facial features, from composition editing, which changes non-appearance elements of a photograph.[44] Their disagreement indicates that the self-surveillance link in the proposed framework should be treated as a hypothesis to be tested rather than an established pathway, and that selfie editing may have motives other than self-objectification.

A final contrast is disciplinary. Cultural studies of RedNote representations and Chinese femvertising infer meaning from texts but rarely measure effects on audiences.[26,39] Body-image studies measure individual outcomes but rarely measure exposure to empowerment discourse itself. Labor studies give voice to producers but rarely to the consumers they address.[23,34] The meaning of "empowerment" also differs across these literatures. For rural livestreamers who earn income, empowerment refers to new economic and social resources.[34] For viewers of branded vlogs, it may become a perception that obscures the consumerism of the content.[40] This difference supports the four conditional criteria, since whether the same word describes liberation or alienation depends on who bears the costs and who receives the benefits. Table 2 summarizes the core evidence and its limitations.

Table 2. Core literature evidence matrix, distinguishing the evidence type, research focus, and role and limitation of each source. The matrix is not a complete screening record for a systematic review but a verifiable summary of the core evidence used in the text.

Source	Evidence type	Research focus	Role and limitation
Goldman, Heath, and Smith[4]	Advertising texts and theoretical analysis	Commodity feminism	Explains how brands absorb feminist signs; does not directly measure consumer effects
Gill[5,6]	Media and cultural theory	Postfeminist sensibility	Shows the coexistence of choice, confidence, and self-surveillance; primarily theoretical interpretation
Fredrickson and Roberts[18]	Theoretical review	Objectification theory	Establishes the path from internalized external scrutiny to body surveillance
Holland and Tiggemann[7]	Systematic review	Social media and body image	Generally supports an association, although most included studies were cross-sectional
Saiphoo and Vahedi[8]	Meta-analysis	Social media and body-image disturbance	Provides overall evidence of association; heterogeneity limits a single causal interpretation

de Valle *et al.*[41]	Meta-analyses of experimental and longitudinal studies	Causal evidence on social media and body image	Moderate experimental effects but very small longitudinal associations
Cotter[9]	Thematic analysis of influencers' online discussions	Algorithmic visibility	Reveals how influencers infer and adapt to algorithmic rules
Duffy and Hund[10]	Textual and discourse analysis	Self-branding and entrepreneurial femininity	Explains the aesthetic labor and capital investment behind empowerment narratives
Zhang[23]	Qualitative platform-labor study	Female livestreamers	Describes the extension of labor space, emotional labor, and identity alienation
Han[25]	Industry and discourse analysis	Gendered wanghong economy	Shows platform profit from gendered value chains; does not measure individual outcomes
Yao, Niu, and Sun[28]	Six-month longitudinal study	Chinese female university students and idealized-image exposure	Suggests a temporal relationship from exposure to later cosmetic-surgery consideration and complex directions among exposure, internalization, and anxiety
Huang, Sun, and Mao[29]	Survey in three Chinese city tiers	Adult female RedNote users	Distinguishes active and passive use and identifies the roles of internalization and social context
Sun[31]; Wang *et al.*[43]; Hao[44]	Cross-sectional, longitudinal, and pre-registered surveys	Selfie editing among Chinese women and adolescents	Sun and Wang *et al.* link selfie editing to cosmetic-surgery consideration through different mediators; Sun and Hao disagree on the role of self-objectification
Tang *et al.*[34]	Interview study	Rural female e-commerce livestreamers	Documents self-empowerment alongside stigma; limited to producers

Research Limitations and Future Agenda

As an integrative review, this paper aims to build a conceptual and mechanistic framework, not to calculate an overall effect. The included studies come from communication, sociology, psychology, and consumer-culture studies and differ a lot in concepts and methods. English-language scholarship is still focused on Western platforms; thus, it cannot directly replace Chinese evidence. There is much theoretical discussion in Chinese scholarship, but there are still few longitudinal, experimental, and platform-data studies able to support causal inference.

Future research can be carried out in four directions. First, advertising and platform content about the "independent woman," "consumption for one's own pleasure," "confidence," and "self-discipline" can be analyzed with reproducible coding. Second, the two-way paths between appearance comparison, algorithmic awareness, self-objectification, and consumer behavior can be tested with surveys, experiments, and longitudinal designs. Third, interviews may be used to compare the ways women of different classes,

ages, regions, and occupations understand the same empowerment discourse. Fourth, platform audits can check if recommender systems keep amplifying one single body type and lifestyle. For a follow-up project at the secondary-school level, a feasible start would be to code a sample of publicly available content with a coding scheme, sampling rules, and exclusion criteria prepared in advance; at the same time, sensitive personal data should not be collected without ethical review and privacy safeguards.

This paper also has some limitations in verifiability. No review protocol was registered, and no exhaustive database search or dual independent screening was reported; therefore, it should not be called a systematic review. Some Chinese studies are based on theoretical analysis or small-scale qualitative materials, and the strength of their evidence is different from that of large longitudinal studies. When the literature search was done, there was still little Chinese research that measured empowerment discourse, algorithmic recommendation, self-surveillance, and consumption outcomes directly in one single design. Thus, the mechanism chain in this paper is mainly a conceptual integration and a basis for developing hypotheses, and it needs to be tested empirically later.

Conclusion

The growth of the “she economy” shows that women have more influence in the market, but it may also turn feminist demands into consumable signs. Women’s consumer alienation does not come from individual vanity or irrationality but is a process produced together by structural inequality, commercial narratives, platform infrastructures, and social evaluation. The real danger is that commodities are presented as the main way to solve gender inequality, identity anxiety, and questions of bodily worth; the fact that commodities enter women’s lives is not the problem.

Based on the evidence reviewed, some conclusions can be drawn with reasonable confidence. In different cultural contexts, appearance-ideal content is associated with body concern; empowerment language is widely used to sell products in China as in other places; and platform labor goes past the moment of production into everyday life. Other questions are still open, such as the long-term causal effect of everyday platform use, the role of self-objectification in practices like selfie editing, and how far what women see is shaped by recommendation algorithms themselves and not by users’ choices.

The main contribution of this paper is that it tries to change consumer alienation from a moral judgment of women’s individual choices into an analysis of the conditions and mechanisms of choice. Whether consumption shows an alienating tendency or not cannot be decided only from whether women buy, how much they buy, or what they buy. The space of choice, the source of evaluative authority, the distribution of costs and risks, and whether consumer solutions take over responsibilities that institutions should bear must also be taken into account. Real empowerment should mean more than women having more goods to buy; it should also be seen in their ability to refuse consumption, choose different ways of living, take part in public discussion, and ask organizations and institutions for change. The mechanism chain put forward here is still a conceptual synthesis, and it needs further testing by content analysis, surveys, interviews, experiments, or platform audits.

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