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"Traffic Feminism": The Platform-Mediated Reshaping of Feminist Discourse on Xiaohongshu and the Reconstruction of the Digital Gender Ecology

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Digital platforms have furnished feminist discourse with unprecedented dissemination efficiency in the Chinese-language internet, yet this process has simultaneously been profoundly restructured by the logic of traffic. Taking Xiaohongshu (RED) as its fieldwork site, this article proposes the concept of "traffic feminism", referring to a discursive formation of feminism shaped by three intertwined mechanisms: algorithmic distribution, emotional resonance, and brand commercialization. The article reveals the dual effects of commercial drivers: They have played a positive role in lowering cognitive thresholds and de-naturalizing traditional gender morality, while at the same time producing structural deficits in the visibility of non-commodifiable issues. Drawing on the theoretical resources of environmental law, the article establishes the legitimacy of treating women's opinion space as a "shared environment" and designs a three-tier guidance framework in which traffic-based rewards serve as the primary mechanism, the regulation of unlawful conduct as the auxiliary mechanism, and the channeling of "water- extractive" content as the guiding mechanism, thereby offering theoretical and practical reference points for building an inclusive and equitable digital gender ecology.

Keywords: traffic feminism, Xiaohongshu, platform-mediated influence, gendered self-presentation, opinion-environment governance, women's digital- ecology awareness

The Research Problem

Since 2020, Xiaohongshu has become the core arena for the diffusion of feminist discourse on the Chinese-language internet. From "female independence" and "appearance anxiety" to "gaslighting" and "survival guides for women living alone", a host of feminist concepts previously confined to academic discussion have entered the daily information streams of hundreds of millions of users through notes and short videos—on a scale unprecedented in the history of the dissemination of feminist thought in China.

Yet the scale of dissemination does not equal the quality of discourse. One phenomenon warrants concern: Issues capable of triggering intense emotional resonance—romantic betrayal, appearance anxiety, mother-in-law/daughter-in-law conflict—receive massive recommendation traffic, whereas issues requiring systematic analysis and institutional confrontation—workplace sex discrimination, poverty among single mothers, rural women's land rights—remain persistently low in visibility. At the same time, the core concepts of feminism are

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being recoded by brands: "Independent woman" becomes a consumer label, "bodily autonomy" becomes a purchasing rationale, and "self-investment" becomes the marketing pitch of paid-knowledge products.

This phenomenon is not an incidental "distortion" of feminist communication—it is the routine operation of the platform economy's logic upon all social-movement discourse: preserve the discursive form, replace the discursive content, and place the whole in the service of commercial monetization. This article names this specific discursive formation "traffic feminism" and addresses three questions.

First, how did traffic feminism take shape in the Chinese internet context? What structural differences distinguish its dissemination mechanisms and content- production logic from traditional feminist discourse?

Second, the social effects of traffic feminism are two-sided—it empowers even as it influences; how do its empowerment mechanisms and its influence mechanisms respectively operate?

Third, confronted with the paradoxes of traffic feminism, can we construct a governance framework that transcends the binary choice between "laissez-faire" and "speech censorship"—one that safeguards the communicative vitality of women's discourse while preventing the platform's commercial logic from silently dominating the feminist agenda?

Theoretical Foundations and Conceptual Definition

The Sinicized Circulation of Feminism: Triple De-contextualization

No theory can avoid being reshaped by its receiving environment in cross-cultural circulation. This is not the "distortion" or "alienation" of theory—it is a structural feature of dissemination itself. When Euro-American feminist theory entered the Chinese context, it underwent a process of triple de-contextualization that can be precisely described.

First de-contextualization: the stripping away of historical context. Second-wave feminism in Europe and America was born in a particular soil—the postwar expansion of welfare states and the resonance of civil-rights movements. When concepts such as "glass ceiling" and "sexual harassment" arrived in China, they were uprooted from their native institutional soil. The theory did not thereby lose its efficacy—but it became a "conceptual toolbox" available for selective appropriation.

Second de-contextualization: the recoding by state narratives. China's official gender-equality discourse has its own independent genealogy. "Women hold up half the sky" originated in the Yan'an-period production mobilization (Dai, 1999); the core framework of post-1949 gender policy has been "class emancipation × participation in productive labor" rather than "individual rights × identity politics". When Euro-American feminism entered this discursive field, a peculiar docking occurred: Issues compatible with productive participation—educational equality, workplace promotion—received the endorsement of state discourse, while issues tied to radical claims of individual rights—sexual autonomy, non-marital childbearing—occupy a grey zone, neither suppressed nor embraced, but "benignly ignored".

Third de-contextualization: the accelerated restructuring by the internet. Traditional discourse dissemination operates on a yearly timescale. The internet compresses it into "hot-topic cycles"—"gaslighting" went from a term discussed by a minority of academics to a nationwide buzzword within months. But acceleration carries a cost: Platform algorithms, through the feedback loop of "content → engagement rate → recommendation", reshape content even as they disseminate it—long arguments are compressed into short bursts of emotion, and pluralistic viewpoints are simplified into taking sides (Chen, 2021).

These three de-contextualizations constitute the historical conditions that made traffic feminism possible: By the time feminism reaches Chinese internet users, it is already a highly malleable discursive resource—no longer bound to specific institutional conditions, no longer carrying a complete theoretical genealogy, but a kind of “semantic raw material” that can be individually interpreted, fragmentarily disseminated, and commercially exploited.

Platform-Mediated Influence: A Literature Review of a Global Mechanism

Traffic feminism is not a China-specific phenomenon. Globally, the “influence” (co-optation) of digital platforms over social-movement discourse is a widely discussed scholarly topic, and understanding this mechanism is the theoretical precondition for analyzing the Chinese case.

Nancy Fraser, in *Fortunes of Feminism*, issued a warning that remains enormously explanatory: the “dangerous liaison” between neoliberalism and second- wave feminism after the 1980s. Fraser’s core argument is that feminism’s appeals to “individual liberation”, “autonomous choice”, and “breaking free of traditional bonds” structurally resonated, at the discursive level, with neoliberalism’s pursuit of “flexible labor”, “tax and welfare cuts”, and “individual responsibility”. The result was the emergence of a “neoliberal feminism”: Women are encouraged to “lean in”, but the subject of “leaning in” is always the middle-class individual, never working-class women oppressed by structural inequality. Before a working-class woman can “lean in”, what she confronts is not a glass ceiling but the survival pressure of long working hours—Fraser puts it: This is not a glass ceiling; it is a “glass floor” (Fraser, 2013).

Sarah Banet-Weiser, in *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*, further exposed the commodification mechanisms of “popular feminism”. Her contribution lies in distinguishing two feminisms: a “feel-good feminism” centered on self-empowerment, confidence, and body positivity, easily commodified (“love yourself—buy this”); and a “structural feminism” that aims at the reconfiguration of power relations and cannot be smoothly converted into consumer goods (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This distinction maps almost perfectly onto the feminist discourse of the Xiaohongshu ecology—narratives of the former kind, “independent woman”, proliferate, while narratives of the latter kind, “equal pay for equal work”, are absent.

Catherine Rottenberg, in *The Rise of Neoliberal Feminism*, analyzed the ideological function of the discourse of “balance”. Tracing the discursive trajectory from Anne-Marie Slaughter’s 2012 *Atlantic* article “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All” to Sheryl Sandberg’s *Lean in*, she showed how “balancing work and family” was transformed from a critique of social institutions (Slaughter’s original direction) into a demand on individual competence (Sandberg’s “you can do it”). “Happiness—balance—resilience”, she argued, constitutes the subject-forming formula of neoliberal feminism: not changing unequal institutions, but requiring women to remain “resilient” while squeezed by them (Rottenberg, 2018).

José van Dijck and colleagues’ *The Platform Society* supplies an infrastructural perspective on this mechanism. Their core claim is that digital platforms are not neutral “connectors”; through the three mechanisms of datafication, commodification, and selective filtering, they actively shape the ground rules of social interaction. The “impartiality” of platforms is a particular kind of impartiality—not politically partisan, but structurally biased toward content that is large-scale, high-engagement, and commodifiable. Any social-movement discourse that wishes to circulate through platforms must first adapt to this bias (van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018).

Taken together, these theoretical resources yield a core judgment: The dual challenge facing feminism globally is not direct suppression by traditional conservative forces but the combined effect of the “gentle

influence of neoliberalism" and the "infrastructural filtering of the platform economy". Chinese traffic feminism is the localized expression of this global trend, endowed with three China-specific variables: the "productivity-first" framework of state gender narratives, the extreme commercialization of internet platforms, and the intense emotionalization of gender issues in public opinion.

"Traffic Feminism": Defining an Analytical Concept

On the basis of the above analysis, this article proposes the concept of "traffic feminism", distinguishing it from traditional feminism and from "popular feminism" in the global context.

The first core distinction lies in "traffic" becoming the dominant logic of content production. The driving force of "popular feminism" is the market and the culture industry—it concerns how feminism is absorbed and symbolized by popular culture (film, advertising, music). The driving force of "traffic feminism" is more specific: not the "market" in the broad sense, but, narrowly, "user engagement rates under algorithmic recommendation mechanisms". A blogger's income depends on the views and engagement her notes receive, and views and engagement depend on whether the algorithm recommends them. This means that a blogger's production of feminist content is not "communicating ideas"—she is producing content that the algorithm can recommend. The algorithm does not censor ideas—it only rewards high engagement. But because high engagement naturally favors emotionalized, polarized, and commodifiable content, the algorithm achieves through non-censorship the effect of censorship: It does not delete serious feminist content that resists commodification; it lets it sink into an abyss of invisibility.

The second core distinction lies in traffic feminism's deep coupling with users' self-presentation. In the era of traditional media, women received gender narratives produced by experts, authorities, and media institutions. In the era of social media, women are not only consumers of content but also its producers. On Xiaohongshu, "I am an independent woman" is not only a political declaration—it is simultaneously a performative act of self-presentation (Goffman, 1959). Users "present" their independent-woman identity through carefully curated lifestyle displays (makeup, fashion, fitness, reading). This self-presentation and the platform's business model form a perfect closed loop: lifestyle displays of the independent woman → "seeding" consumer desire → consumption → more displays. The political potential of feminism is channeled within this loop toward non-political ends: "Awakening" becomes a performed identity that must be sustained through continuous consumption.

The third core distinction lies in the degree of fragmentation of dissemination. Traditional feminist communication relies on complete systems of thought—from theoretical argument to practical guidance. The unit of traffic feminism's dissemination is the fragment: an image, a sixty-second video, a quotable line in a screenshot. Fragments facilitate rapid circulation—they lower cognitive thresholds; anyone can "get it in a second"—but they also sever the internal logical connections among fragments. The result: The same user may "like" a post declaring "women should not be defined by marriage" in the morning and bookmark "how to find a quality partner" in the afternoon. This is not the user's cognitive inconsistency—it is a structural feature of fragmented dissemination: Each fragment exists independently and need not remain logically consistent with the others. The "loose consensus" of traffic feminism makes it easy to spread and equally easy to displace—today's viral hit may attract no attention tomorrow.

This article defines traffic feminism as follows: a discursive formation of feminism whose core channel of dissemination is the algorithmic recommendation mechanism of internet platforms, whose principal motor is user experience and emotional resonance, and whose hidden agenda-filter is brand commercial monetization. Its key

difference from traditional feminism lies not in which school of theory it supports, but in its production logic (producing for the algorithm), its dissemination form (fragmentation), and its social function (consumer identity construction).

Fieldwork on Xiaohongshu: Dissemination Mechanisms and Self- Presentation Practices of Traffic Feminism

Research Method and Data

This article adopts participant observation as its primary research method, with Xiaohongshu as the fieldwork site. The methodological rationale for choosing participant observation over large-scale data scraping is this: Internet activity has penetrated nearly everyone’s daily life—men and women, young and old, produce, consume, and circulate content every day—and the researcher, as an everyday user of the platform, is herself situated inside the very social phenomenon under study. This “universal participation” grants participant observation a distinctive epistemological advantage: The researcher is not “peering” from outside at a closed community—she is a real user, and her information feed, her algorithmic recommendations, and the commercial placements and emotion-driven feminist discourse she encounters are shared with hundreds of millions of other users in one common dissemination environment.

The researcher’s observation proceeded along three lines: (1) entering through core feminist hashtags (#independent-women, #female-awakening, #GirlsTalk, #female-power, and the like), conducting continuous participant observation of platform-recommended content and attending to the interaction patterns and dissemination characteristics of different content types; (2) observing and analyzing the commercial cooperation models of leading female-topic bloggers to identify how brand discourse docks onto feminist narratives; (3) comparatively observing the visibility differentials among different feminist issues—from emotional betrayal in intimate relationships to workplace sex discrimination.

The analysis in this article does not rely on statistical inference. The researcher does not claim that the observed content “represents”, in a statistical sense, the entirety of feminist discourse on Xiaohongshu. The purpose is to identify and describe the operating mechanisms of traffic feminism—its dissemination logic, self-presentation strategies, and structural biases—and, through theoretical analysis, to propose a guidance-oriented governance framework.

Dissemination Mechanisms of Traffic Feminism: Algorithmic Recommendation and Agenda Filtering

Xiaohongshu’s recommendation algorithm is the key to understanding the dissemination mechanisms of traffic feminism. Based on users’ browsing, liking, saving, and commenting behavior, and operating through collaborative filtering and content-similarity computation, the algorithm continuously pushes content users may be interested in. Within Xiaohongshu’s algorithmic ecology, the dissemination of feminist content exhibits three salient features.

Feature One: the traffic advantage of emotional content. Feminist notes whose titles contain strong emotional vocabulary (“shocked”, “furious”, “tears welling up”) generate far higher engagement rates than analytically oriented notes. A note recounting, through personal experience, the power asymmetry in a marriage receives dozens of times more views than a note analyzing the gender wage gap from the perspective of labor economics—because the former’s content form (personal narrative plus emotional turn) better fits social media’s logic of low cognitive load and high affective resonance (Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

Feature Two: the fragmentary compression of complex issues. Platform content formats (note-length limits, short-video duration limits) are unsuited to argumentative texts. When concepts such as “structural discrimination” and “systemic inequality” are compressed into hundred-character copy, they are inevitably simplified—“structural” becomes “everywhere”. This lexical degradation is not the author’s intention; it is the shaping effect of content form upon content itself.

Feature Three: the algorithm’s implicit bias toward commercial convertibility. Xiaohongshu’s business model is the “seeding → consumption” loop. A note on “women’s financial independence” appended with a finance-course link is more likely to be recommended than a purely critical note discussing “legislation against workplace sex discrimination”—the algorithm does not need to know what “feminism” means; it only needs to know which content brings advertising revenue.

Self-Presentation of Traffic Feminism: Identity Performance and the Consumption Loop

On Xiaohongshu, “traffic feminism” is not only a mode of discursive production but also a strategy of self-identity presentation. Users construct and display their “independent woman” identity by publishing notes—a process that follows the general patterns of social-media self-presentation yet is deeply shaped by the platform’s traffic logic and business model.

Content types of identity performance. The content of traffic feminism falls mainly into four categories. The first is the “awakening narrative”—presenting one’s “feminist awakening” through personal-growth stories (leaving an unhealthy intimate relationship, refusing marriage pressure). The second is “lifestyle performance”—presenting the “independent woman” identity through consumer behavior (buying skincare products, gym memberships, courses), the category with the highest commercial conversion efficiency. The third is “women’s mutual-aid communities”—building online communities and sharing job-seeking experience and legal-rights information. The fourth is “knowledge popularization”—explaining feminist theoretical concepts in accessible language (gaslighting, emotional labor, the motherhood penalty, and the like).

The formation of lifestyle performance and the consumption loop. The second category—lifestyle performance—is the most distinctive dissemination phenomenon of traffic feminism. The user is not engaged in an act of “political expression”—she is fashioning an “ideal self of the independent woman” (ideal self), a self that must be sustained and presented through continuous consumption. In Xiaohongshu’s narrative logic, the standard equipment of the independent woman is a complete consumption list: an apartment suited to living alone (home-furnishing placements), a gym membership (fitness-industry placements), regularly purchased skincare and cosmetics (beauty-industry placements), continuous investment in paid-knowledge courses (online-education placements), and at least one solo trip per year (travel-platform placements).

Brands consciously exploit traffic-feminist discourse to sell products. In 2024, a skincare brand abandoned its traditional “whitening” appeal and instead ran brand placements on Xiaohongshu under the themes “independent women love themselves” and “bodily autonomy begins with refusing appearance anxiety”, recoding “bodily autonomy” into “buying more expensive skincare”. The strategy was enormously successful in traffic terms—because it precisely fitted the core narrative of traffic feminism: Self-empowerment equals self-consumption.

The Filtering Effects of Algorithms: Visible and Marginalized Feminisms

What traffic feminism presents is not “the whole spectrum of feminism”—it is only one segment of the spectrum, a segment amplified and pushed before users’ eyes, treated as “this is feminism”. The other segments—they are not nonexistent; they are sunk into invisibility.

Highly visible feminist issues. A thematic classification of the 100 hottest notes under major hashtags such as #female-power, #GirlsTalk, and #independent-women on Xiaohongshu reveals that “highly visible” feminist issues share the following traits: (1) They can trigger intense emotional resonance (anger, empathy, hope); (2) they connect directly with personal life experience (“I feel like I’ve been through this too”); (3) they can be compressed into quickly consumable fragments (a quotable line, a story twist); (4) they can be naturally steered toward consumer behavior (“heal yourself”, “reward yourself”, “invest in yourself”). Typical visible issues include: emotional betrayal in intimate relationships and coping strategies, appearance anxiety and body positivity, ways of coping with marriage pressure, displays of solo-living lifestyles, and the “green tea” (innocent-appearing but manipulative) struggle narratives in the workplace.

Hard-to-see feminist issues. In sharp contrast, the following feminist issues have content volumes and engagement levels on Xiaohongshu far below their severity in social reality: (1) workplace sex discrimination—not individuals’ “unfair treatment”, but systemic barriers to women’s promotion in the labor market; (2) poverty among single mothers—involving compounded disadvantages in housing, employment, children’s education, and healthcare; (3) the labor burdens and missing rights of rural left-behind women; (4) the unfair property division and unenforced visitation rights faced by divorced women; (5) the absence of labor protections for domestic workers. The common traits of these issues are also obvious: They cannot trigger easy consumption behavior—indeed, addressing them would require challenging the existing distributional structure—which suits neither the platform’s commercial interests nor the algorithm’s traffic logic.

This division between the “visible” and the “invisible” constitutes the most insidious form of violence in traffic feminism. It operates not by prohibiting certain statements but by ensuring that certain statements, even when uttered, are heard by no one. When a rural left-behind woman posts about her life’s predicaments on Xiaohongshu, her post—lacking topicality, lacking an emotional detonation point, impossible to fit into any brand placement—is drowned by tens of thousands of posts saying “love yourself and spend money on yourself” and “stay away from people and things that drain you”.

Feminist Dissemination Driven by Commercial Profit: Positive Effects and Structural Biases Requiring Guidance

The model of commercial profit driving feminist dissemination is itself positive. A feminist content creator earns traffic revenue from her content and uses that revenue to improve her conditions of production and produce higher-quality content—a healthy reproduction cycle that should not be criticized. But commercial logic, running alone, generates certain structural biases: the commercial tilting of the agenda, the traffic advantage of emotional opposition, and the visibility deficit of non-commodifiable issues. Acknowledging these biases is not meant to negate commercial drivers—it is meant to provide, outside commercial logic, supplementary guidance mechanisms for the areas it cannot naturally cover. This chapter first establishes the positive effects of commercial drivers, and then analyzes the structural biases requiring guidance.

Positive Effect I: Lowering Cognitive Thresholds and De-naturalizing Traditional Morality

The first positive effect of traffic feminism lies in lowering cognitive thresholds. Traditional feminist theory—de Beauvoir, Butler—follows the rhetorical norms of academic discourse, which themselves constitute a class threshold. Traffic feminism breaks down this door with highly condensed fragments—a screenshot, a line of copy, a fifteen-second video. “Gaslighting” no longer requires reading psychology—a single note titled “my

ex made me feel I was crazy” suffices. A woman with only a middle-school education sees her own life named, theorized, and placed within an explanatory framework in a single note.

This is what Goffman (1974) called “framing”: not giving you new information—giving you a structure that reorganizes your existing fragments of experience into something meaningful. When your previous suffering had no name, you could only say “I feel bad”; when a name is supplied—“gaslighting”, “workplace sex discrimination”, “the motherhood penalty”—your suffering acquires legitimacy.

The second positive effect lies in the de-naturalization of traditional gender morality. “Men outside, women inside”, “girls should be sensible”—the power of these presuppositions lies not in their being demonstrable but in their needing no demonstration. Because “everyone is like this”, “this is normal”. Traffic feminism turns these operations that “need no argument” into ones that “need argument”. “Why is housework women’s responsibility?” “Why is a 30-year-old unmarried woman gossiped about?” These questions were previously discussed only inside academic journals. Xiaohongshu has turned them into public topics argued over by millions every hour. When a man says “my mother got through it this way”, he thinks the sentence ends the conversation—but the sentence itself has now become an object requiring response.

Positive Effect II: The Reproduction Cycle Driven by Commercial Profit

Commercial profit provides the sustainable material foundation for feminist content production. This is like afforestation in a desert: A person planting trees accomplishes two things at once—(1) a civil legal act: She invests labor and capital and reaps property rights in the trees and future economic returns; (2) a public-interest act: The trees improve the soil and fix the sand, and the ecological benefits, far exceeding her personal economic gains, flow to society as a whole.

The two identities do not conflict. Forcibly separating “public interest” from “private interest” is among the most harmful forms of legal dogmatism. A person can perfectly well earn money while changing the world. Environmental law does not forbid tree-planters from receiving economic compensation, nor does it demand that she “returns the timber income to society”—likewise, the governance of the women’s opinion environment should not restrict the traffic revenues of quality content creators. The “environmental value” it produces far exceeds the “economic value” it distributes.

This is the “concurrence” principle this article proposes: When an act of feminist content creation simultaneously satisfies the two elements of “private-interest character” (the creator gains traffic revenue) and “public-interest character” (the content improves the women’s opinion environment), it should be recognized as an act in which private interest and public interest concur—public interest must not be used to restrict private interest, nor private interest to negate public interest. Three concrete rules follow.

First, the indivisibility of revenue. Every yuan of a creator’s traffic revenue is at once the consideration for her labor and society’s reward for her “contribution to the opinion environment”—the two facets are indivisible. Second, the priority of reproduction. The creator reinvests her revenue in better equipment and deeper research—the feedback loop between her private-interest conduct (improving conditions of production) and its public-interest consequences (raising the quality of discourse) is accelerating. This is the moment when the trees in the desert begin to self-propagate. Third, guarding against over-restriction. A one-size-fits-all policy—for instance, uniformly levying an “environmental remediation fund” on all high- traffic feminist content—cannot distinguish “pure consumer persuasion dressed up as feminism” from “content whose core is highly constructive value”. The most likely consequence: It fails to punish the former (whose commercial arrangements are concealed and

polymorphous) while striking hard at the latter—producing the ironic effect of “quality content taxed, garbage content ignored”.

Structural Bias I: The Transfer of Agenda-Setting Power

The empowering side is obvious—women’s consciousness is rising, women are being named, and traditional morality is being dismantled. But this is precisely where traffic feminism is most dangerous: It shows you the empowering side—a sincere side—and, while you are dazzled by the light of empowerment, it transfers the power to decide “which issues deserve discussion”, “which issues deserve visibility”, and “which issues deserve mobilized resources” from the women’s movement itself to a recommendation system optimizing for a single variable: engagement rate.

We have reason to ask seriously: If an issue concerns the survival of millions of women—workplace sex discrimination, single-mother poverty, rural left-behind women, unprotected domestic workers—yet, because it cannot be branded, cannot detonate emotions, and cannot be articulated within fifteen seconds, it cannot “float up” on the platform—can we say that women have gained discursive power?

This is not the platform actively suppressing certain voices—no one sits in an office saying “don’t let those serious feminist issues through”. There is no need: The algorithm is a filter that requires no thought. It has completed this filtering efficiently enough, and unintentionally—no one can point to it and call it “censorship”. But the effect is this: What most needs to be seen receives no rescue, and the discussions most capable of pushing structural social change sink into the least threatening content stream.

Structural Bias II: Emotional Capture and Opinion Polarization

The fuel of the traffic mechanism is engagement—likes, saves, comments, shares. And the emotions that most readily drive engagement are not considered assent but anger, anxiety, and fear. This makes traffic feminism naturally tilt toward extremism.

The cycle runs: Emotionally accusatory content gains higher traffic → bloggers continue producing in that direction → users see nothing but emotional opposition → the platform validates and reinforces the pattern with traffic → the loop closes. A 10-thousand-character essay on “whether the institution of marriage is fair” is utterly out- viewed by a single screenshot—“Men are all like this. Don’t get married”. The former is read by no one; the latter delivers an emotional release with every read.

The damage is not confined to the men attacked. Those women live in real relationships who try to improve their situations step by step through communication—every time they assert a right, the other side invokes the oppositional narratives of Xiaohongshu. Their consciousness has been activated, but the institutional environment has not changed. Activated without an outlet—this is not empowerment; it is the deepening of powerlessness.

Structural Bias III: The Visibility Deficit of Non-commodifiable Content

The term “independent woman”, after multiple rounds of recoding on Xiaohongshu, has shifted from its original emphasis on political and economic autonomy to a commercial label meaning “a woman who has the ability and willingness to spend money on herself”. Does a genuinely independent woman’s economic capacity permit her to refuse consumption? Or, to maintain this market-defined label, must she consume continuously?

Bodily autonomy—a concept feminism has fought over for decades—becomes, in the traffic ecology, “I have the right to choose what to wear and which products to use”. Brands use “break free of constraints” and “be yourself” to sell everything from cosmetics to real estate. But they will not tell you: The true testing ground of bodily autonomy is not the shopping mall—it lies in the choice to refuse: the capacity to decide not to bear

children, not to be controlled by family relations, not to be held hostage by appearance norms. And these choices are often choices to consume less, to refuse consumption.

Fraser's 2013 diagnosis of the "dangerous liaison between neoliberalism and feminism"—women's progress redefined as individual success in a competitive market—finds abundant empirical confirmation in the Xiaohongshu ecology. Traffic feminism extends the deep logic of this liaison and spreads it from elite women's circles to ordinary female users—one no longer needs to climb to the executive suite to be deemed "independent"; one only needs to buy enough goods on Singles' Day. The most insidious mode of influence is making the influenced feel they are staging a revolution. On Xiaohongshu, every click on a "love yourself" purchase link—she is not consuming; she is "empowering" herself. The most successful influence is not the suppression of a movement—it is making the movement's participants believe they are winning, while they are actually being transferred to the action least threatening to the existing power structure—buying themselves more consumer goods.

Platform Guidance and the Reconstruction of the Digital Ecology: A Three-Tier Guidance Framework

The governance question raised by traffic feminism is not "how to make the structural biases of commercial logic disappear"—an impossible task, because any dissemination entering the platform ecology will be influenced by the platform's commercial logic. The real question is: Does the platform bear responsibility for the "systematic marginalization of non-commodifiable content" produced by its algorithms? And if so, in what legal and governance form should that responsibility be realized?

From "Speech Censorship" to "Environmental Governance": A Paradigm Shift

Existing frameworks of internet content governance by default adopt the two-step analysis of "freedom of speech → reasonable restriction": first acknowledging free speech as a fundamental value, then setting restrictions on it under specified conditions. This framework places the regulator in the position of "censor", so that any intervention must bear the burden of justifying "restrictions on free speech". Yet, when the platform itself is the most effective "agenda-filter"—and its filtering standard is not the public interest but commercial interest—is non-intervention in platform algorithms itself a suppression of free speech? This is no metaphor: Acquiescing in the platform algorithm's implicit filtering of feminist discourse amounts to acquiescing in the domination of a commercial interest over the public agenda.

Drawing on the theoretical resources of environmental law, the legitimacy basis of women's opinion governance can be reconstructed. "Environment" in environmental law has three core properties: sharedness (the externalities of individual conduct), accumulation (a single act of pollution is negligible but accumulation is enormous), and the principle that "unregulated free emission is tantamount to acquiescing in the strongest party's appropriation of everyone's interests". The women's opinion space and the physical environment are structurally isomorphic: The algorithm's systematic suppression of non-commodifiable content is like factory emissions—each individual act negligible, the cumulative effect enormous. The focus of governance should shift from "regulating speech content" to "governing the dissemination environment"—just as environmental law does not forbid driving but regulates tailpipe emissions.

On the theoretical basis above, this article proposes a three-tier guidance framework: traffic-based rewards as the primary mechanism, the regulation of unlawful conduct as the auxiliary mechanism, and the channeling of

water-extractive content as the guiding mechanism. The framework’s figurative foundation: Someone films a tree-planting video and earns traffic revenue from it—the act simultaneously realizes private interest (the blogger’s income) and public interest (the dissemination of environmental ideas). The institution’s primary response should be reward—giving this positive conduct more visibility and material return. Only when the filming itself crosses a legal line—staging scenes on protected forest land, defrauding viewers with fabricated content, and so on—does the institution enter an intervention mode.

Tier One: Traffic-based rewards (the primary mechanism). No distinction between “commercial motives” and “public-interest motives”—so long as feminist content produces positive social effects, it falls within the scope of rewards. The concurrence principle serves as the jurisprudential foundation here: The law does not ask “why are you doing this”—it only confirms “does this conduct deserve reward”. Concrete measures: (1) establish a “Fund for the Promotion of Quality Women’s Content”, jointly funded by platforms, public finance, and public-interest organizations, providing production subsidies for content with high educational value and low commercial potential; (2) provide independent recommendation weights for constructive content, not occupying commercial advertising slots; (3) grant credit accumulation and stable traffic expectations on the platform to creators who continuously produce high-quality content. The essence of traffic-based rewards is this: using public resources to price the positive externalities the market cannot naturally cover.

Tier Two: Regulation of unlawful conduct (the auxiliary mechanism). Triggering conditions are strict: Intervention begins only when conduct in the production or dissemination of feminist-related content satisfies elements of unlawfulness already present in existing law—defamation, insult, incitement to violence, fraud, and other categories already clearly defined—excluding “poor content quality”, “excessive commercial flavor”, or “radical stance”. Three core principles: first, no new speech restrictions—existing law suffices; second, procedural priority—platforms have no power to adjudicate on their own, and administrative organs must not bypass the judiciary; third, punishment and remediation in parallel—not only punishment, but also ordering the publication of corrections and providing remedial channels. The auxiliary mechanism is the boundary protection for the primary mechanism—there must be clear rules for handling conduct that has already caused substantive harm, but its scope must not be expanded to the regulation of “quality” or “stance”; otherwise creators will be unable to predict whether today’s compliant content will be negated tomorrow.

Tier Three: The guiding mechanism for water-extractive content. Returning to the desert metaphor: Besides those who plant trees (civil plus public interest) and those who plant marijuana (unlawful), there is a third kind of person—one who plants water-intensive cash crops. Not unlawful, but it consumes the desert’s scarce water resources, converts public ecological resources into private profit, and simultaneously accelerates degradation—worse than planting nothing at all.

On Xiaohongshu, water-extractive content is clearly identifiable: content that uses the shell of feminist discourse, takes opposition-baiting and emotional extraction as its core strategy, and provides no cognitive increment—“men are all worthless”, “women who marry are fools”, “if you don’t buy this, you don’t love yourself”. Such content is not unlawful, but it genuinely consumes the opinion ecology: occupying attention, crowding out constructive space, raising the temperature of opposition.

For this kind of conduct, the law cannot punish (it is not unlawful) and cannot reward (it depletes the ecology). The only path is guidance—not damming, but channeling: (1) The algorithm maintains restrained traffic allocation for such content, refraining from proactive promotion; (2) when users chronically consume such content, the platform proactively pushes constructive supplements; (3) no additional taxation or extraction—it is

a lawful civil act and cannot be punished for “not being good enough”; one can only let better things receive more sunlight.

Operationalizing Water-Extractive Content: Pound and Feinberg as Theoretical Reference Points

Roscoe Pound divided the interests protected by law into individual interests, public interests, and social interests, among which “social interests” include “conservation of social resources”. The women’s opinion environment is precisely a social resource—a cognitive infrastructure shared by millions of women. The person who plants water-intensive crops does not violate the law—her individual interests (freedom of expression, commercial gain) are genuine—but she is depleting a social interest (the health of the opinion environment). Pound’s “social engineering” indicates: The task of law is not to select a single interest, but to achieve maximal balance with minimal friction—this is precisely the jurisprudential foundation of the guiding mechanism.

Joel Feinberg distinguished the “harm principle” from the “offense principle”: The former applies to conduct causing actual harm (corresponding to the unlawful- regulation tier), the latter to conduct that, though causing no actual harm, produces serious negative externalities. He set strict standards for applying the offense principle—intensity, duration, the degree of reasonable avoidability, whether the affected persons voluntarily assumed the risk, and whether the conduct carries redeeming social value—whose core function is to prevent the offense principle from sliding into the moralistic censorship of “I don’t like it, therefore you should be forbidden”.

On the basis of these two theoretical resources, this article proposes a three-condition test for water-extractive content (all three must be satisfied):

Condition One: driven by opposition, panic, or anxiety as the core emotion. The primary dissemination strategy is manufacturing group opposition (“men are all like this”), individual panic (“you’re finished if you don’t marry soon”), or moral anxiety (“if you don’t buy this, you don’t love yourself”), rather than providing information or argument.

Condition Two: lacking an operationalizable cognitive increment. No chain of argument, no verifiable sources, no cognitive tools the audience can use after leaving the platform. This differs from “concise and accessible”—the former is “nothing there”; the latter is “something compressed”.

Condition Three: commercial monetization as one-way extraction, forming no replenishment loop. If the creator uses advertising income to purchase better research resources, thereby replenishing content quality—it is not water-extractive. The hallmark of the water-extractive is a one-way “emotion → traffic → advertising fee” extraction with no “advertising fee → better content → more cognitive value” replenishment.

The three conditions are conjunctive (AND) and not disjunctive (OR). Content that is emotionally intense but simultaneously provides cognitive tools is “planting trees”, not “extracting water”. Every creator satisfies the “commercial monetization” element in Condition Three; the key is whether the monetization path replenishes cognitive quality.

Three Rules Governing the Primary-Auxiliary Relationship and Guidance

First, irreversibility. The auxiliary mechanism must not become the de facto primary mechanism. In resource allocation, the funds and personnel invested in traffic rewards must far exceed those invested in monitoring unlawful conduct; in institutional design, any intervention by the auxiliary mechanism must bear strict burdens of proof and procedural constraints, while reward decisions under the primary mechanism may be comparatively

flexible. Second, impermeability. The boundary of "unlawful conduct" must not be permeated and softened by "policy needs", "opinion currents", or "moral judgment". Conduct that was not unlawful yesterday cannot be redefined as unlawful because of today's public-opinion pressure. Third, non-confusion. A creator may simultaneously receive traffic rewards and be investigated for unlawful conduct—the former does not exempt her from the latter, and the latter does not constitute grounds for revoking the former. The concurrence principle operates here again: Rewards target the public-interest facet of conduct; investigation targets its unlawful facet; the two rest on different legal foundations and cannot cancel each other out.

Conclusion

Through participant observation of the Xiaohongshu platform, this article has proposed and defined the concept of "traffic feminism". It is not a simplified version of feminism—it is a structural variant produced when feminism encounters the logic of the platform economy.

The social effects of traffic feminism cannot be reduced to "good" or "bad". Commercial profit drivers have played an irreplaceable role in lowering cognitive thresholds, de-naturalizing traditional gender morality, and providing sustainable material conditions for content production. The structural biases produced when commercial logic runs alone—the commercial tilting of the agenda, the traffic advantage of emotional opposition, the visibility deficit of non-commodifiable issues—need to be addressed through supplementary guidance mechanisms, not through prohibition or condemnation of commercial conduct. Commercial drivers are the foundational force; guidance mechanisms are the supplementary guarantee.

On the basis of the above analysis, this article has proposed a guidance-oriented framework built on the theoretical resources of environmental law. Its core innovation is shifting the focus from "regulating commercial conduct" to "rewarding positive conduct"—the primary mechanism is traffic rewards, letting every tree in the desert receive sunlight and water; the auxiliary mechanism is the regulation of unlawful conduct, intervening only when someone plants marijuana; the guiding mechanism is the channeling of water-extractive content—no punishment, no reward, but letting better things receive more sunlight. Between the three, there exists no grey zone of "content-quality control"—the hand of the law does not reach toward the water- extractive crops, but the allocation of sunlight and water can be smarter. This is not a perfect scheme—it faces tensions between information disclosure and trade secrets, the balance between government governance and freedom of speech, and class inequalities in the empowerment of opinion-environment awareness. But it offers a possible path out of the binary opposition between "laissez-faire" and "speech censorship".

Women's empowerment in the digital age should not be satisfied merely with "more people seeing feminist content"—it should ask what more people are seeing: feminism restored as a critical tool, or consumer persuasion repackaged? If we cannot distinguish the two, then every gain in dissemination efficiency may merely be building momentum for the kind of "feminism" least harmful to the status quo.

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