ASEAN International Sandbox Conference 2026 AISC Proceedings, Volume 11, 2026
http://aseansandbox.org

Framing Femininity: Representation and Algorithmic Engagement on Xiaohongshu

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Abstract

This study investigates the framing of femininity on Xiaohongshu and its intersection with algorithmic engagement. Grounded in postfeminist and media theories, the research explores how beauty, fashion, and lifestyle narratives construct digital femininity and whether algorithmic visibility reinforces specific gendered ideals. A quantitative content analysis of 30 purposively sampled posts (April–June 2026) evaluated visual and textual features against user interactions (likes, comments, saves) using descriptive and inferential statistics.

Findings indicate that femininity is predominantly framed through self-care, polished aesthetics, emotional softness, and aspirational lifestyles. Although makeup visibility significantly correlated with higher user engagement, overall interaction metrics did not predict how femininity was framed. This suggests that while visually salient beauty content attracts algorithmic attention, digital femininity is co-constructed by creator agency, platform culture, and socio-cultural standards rather than quantitative metrics alone. Ultimately, this study advances the understanding of gender representation in recommendation-driven media and emphasizes the need for critical media literacy.

Keywords: Femininity, Xiaohongshu, Gender Representation, Algorithmic Engagement, Social Media

1. Introduction

Social media has become a central environment in which gender is displayed, interpreted, and evaluated. Images, captions, short videos, and audience reactions do more than document personal life: through repetition, they help define which appearances, behaviors, and lifestyles become recognizable as feminine. Hall (1997) argues that representation produces meaning rather than simply reflecting an already settled reality. From this perspective, platform content participates in the construction of femininity by making particular signs and practices more visible than others.

Xiaohongshu, also known as RED, is especially relevant because it combines user-generated lifestyle content, social networking, product recommendation, and commerce. Beauty tutorials, outfit posts, skincare routines, body-management advice, emotional reflections, and aspirational domestic scenes circulate together in a recommendation-driven feed. These posts are often presented as personal experience, yet their visual polish and repeated themes connect individual self-presentation with broader cultural expectations. Research on Xiaohongshu has linked the platform to appearance anxiety, body-image discourse, entrepreneurial femininity, and the normalization of youthful, slim, and carefully managed feminine ideals (Guo, 2022; Li, 2023; Liu & Li, 2024; Zhang, 2024).

The platform's femininity is not limited to physical beauty. Content frequently presents self-care, emotional balance, discipline, consumption, and continuous improvement as parts of a desirable feminine life. Gill (2007) describes postfeminist media culture as a sensibility in which empowerment and personal choice coexist with self-surveillance, body work, and pressure to improve. McRobbie (2009) similarly observes that contemporary femininity is often framed through individual responsibility and consumer choice. On Xiaohongshu, these ideas appear in highly accessible forms: a skincare routine can be presented as self-love, a fashion purchase as self-expression, and a carefully arranged daily routine as evidence of independence and emotional control.

Self-presentation is also important. Goffman (1959) conceptualized social interaction as impression management, in which people organize what others are allowed to see. Platform users extend this process through editable images, selective captions, hashtags, and recurring visual styles. The result is not necessarily deception; rather, it is a strategic presentation shaped by imagined audiences and platform conventions. Femininity can therefore be examined through observable choices such as makeup visibility, styling, body emphasis, luxury aesthetics, self-care routines, emotional tone, and consumption display.

Visibility adds another layer. Recommendation systems rank and circulate content unevenly, making some posts easier to encounter than others. Algorithms are not neutral technical channels; they participate in

cultural selection by organizing attention (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014; Kitchin, 2017). Cotter (2019) describes visibility as something creators learn to negotiate through platform-specific practices. On Xiaohongshu, likes, comments, and saves are public signals of audience response and may be associated with continued circulation. Nevertheless, visible metrics cannot reveal the internal operation of the recommendation system. In this study, the term algorithmic engagement is therefore used operationally to describe public interaction metrics, not direct access to Xiaohongshu's proprietary algorithm.

Existing research offers important insights into femininity and platform culture, but fewer studies have quantitatively compared how multiple feminine indicators appear across beauty, fashion, and lifestyle posts and how those indicators relate to visible engagement. This study addresses that gap through a structured content analysis. It asks which feminine frames are most common, whether particular frames receive stronger interaction, and whether engagement reliably predicts the way femininity is presented.

2. Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1) to examine how femininity is framed through representation in Xiaohongshu content.
2) to analyze the relationship between representations of femininity and visible algorithmic engagement.
3) to explore whether engagement shapes or predicts the framing of femininity on the platform.

The study combines five related perspectives. Framing Theory explains how selected features become salient and guide interpretation (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). Representation Theory explains how cultural meaning is produced through images, language, and recurring signs (Hall, 1997). Postfeminist Media Culture situates self-care, beauty labor, discipline, consumption, and empowerment within contemporary femininity (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). Algorithmic gatekeeping explains how ranking and recommendation organize visibility (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014). Self-Presentation Theory explains how creators manage appearance and impression for an audience (Goffman, 1959). Together, these perspectives connect content, identity, audience response, and platform visibility.

Based on this framework, three hypotheses were tested.

H1 proposed a significant relationship between the representation of femininity and algorithmic engagement.

H2 proposed that different forms of feminine representation would be associated with different levels of engagement. H3 proposed that algorithmic engagement would significantly influence the framing of femininity.

These hypotheses were treated cautiously. Engagement may amplify content that already fits recognizable visual conventions, but it may also reflect creator popularity, timing, topic, audience size, or other unmeasured factors.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a quantitative content-analysis design. The unit of analysis was one publicly accessible Xiaohongshu post. A coding sheet converted visible features into measurable categories, allowing representation patterns to be counted and compared with likes, comments, and saves. Quantitative content analysis was appropriate because the research questions concerned frequency, category differences, relationships, and prediction rather than users' private motivations.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population consisted of publicly accessible beauty, fashion, and lifestyle posts published from April to June 2026 that contained observable representations of femininity and visible engagement metrics. Because Xiaohongshu does not provide a public total for all eligible posts in this bounded period, the population size could not be precisely calculated. Purposive sampling was used to select 30 relevant posts: 10 beauty, 10 fashion, and 10 lifestyle posts.

Table 1 Sample Distribution

Category	Posts (n)	Percentage
Beauty	10	33.3%
Fashion	10	33.3%
Lifestyle	10	33.3%
Total	30	100.0%

Eligible posts had to be public, fall within the collection period, belong to one of the three categories, contain visual or textual indicators of femininity, and display likes, comments, and saves. Duplicate, private, irrelevant, or insufficiently visible posts were excluded. The balanced category allocation supported comparison, although purposive selection limits statistical generalization beyond the sample.

3.3 Instrument, Validity, and Reliability

The coding sheet contained 21 items across four parts: post information, femininity representation, engagement, and coding summary. Five experts reviewed the instrument. Item-Objective Congruence values ranged from 0.80 to 1.00, and the overall IOC was 0.97. Inter-coder testing produced 94.44% overall agreement and an overall Cohen's kappa of 0.91, indicating very high reliability.

3.4 Variables and Coding

The independent variable was the representation of femininity. Ten binary indicators captured makeup visibility, skincare practice, slim-body emphasis, feminine styling, luxury aesthetic, self-care practice, aspirational lifestyle, emotional softness, self-improvement discourse, and consumption display. The dependent variable was algorithmic engagement, operationalized as the sum of visible likes, saves, and comments. Engagement was also grouped into low, medium, and high levels for category comparison.

Table 2 Main Coding Dimensions

Dimension	Selected indicators	Measurement
Appearance	Makeup, skincare, slim-body emphasis, feminine styling	Present/absent
Lifestyle	Luxury aesthetic, self-care, aspiration, consumption	Present/absent
Discourse	Emotional softness, self-improvement	Present/absent
Engagement	Likes, saves, comments	Visible count/total

3.5 Data Collection and Analysis

Posts were screened, anonymized for presentation, coded, and entered into a structured dataset. Frequencies and percentages described the representation indicators. Means summarized visible engagement across categories and indicators. Point-biserial correlation tested relationships between binary representation indicators and total engagement. A chi-square test examined the association between content category and engagement level. Simple linear regression tested whether engagement significantly predicted femininity-framing scores. The significance level was set at 0.05.

The design has clear boundaries. The sample contains 30 deliberately selected posts and does not represent every Xiaohongshu user or post. Public interaction counts may change over time, and engagement is affected by factors outside the coding model. Most importantly, the study did not inspect source code, ranking weights, exposure logs, or recommendation histories. Conclusions therefore concern observable content and engagement patterns only.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Dominant Femininity Frames

Femininity was represented as a continuing project of self-management rather than a single physical ideal. Self-care practice and self-improvement discourse appeared in all 30 posts. Aspirational lifestyle appeared in 28 posts (93.3%), and emotional softness appeared in 27 (90.0%). Luxury aesthetic was present in 21 posts (70.0%), feminine styling in 17 (56.7%), and consumption display in 16 (53.3%). Makeup visibility appeared in 13 posts (43.3%), while slim-body emphasis appeared in 8 (26.7%) and skincare practice in 2 (6.7%).

Table 3 Representation Indicators in the Sample

Indicator	n	%	Indicator	n	%
Makeup visibility	13	43.3	Self-care practice	30	100.0
Skincare practice	2	6.7	Aspirational lifestyle	28	93.3
Slim-body emphasis	8	26.7	Emotional softness	27	90.0
Feminine styling	17	56.7	Self-improvement	30	100.0
Luxury aesthetic	21	70.0	Consumption display	16	53.3

Beauty posts most clearly connected femininity with visible makeup, transformation, polished appearance, and luxury aesthetics. Fashion posts emphasized styling, clothing coordination, taste, accessories, and consumption. Lifestyle posts relied less on direct appearance work and more on emotional tone, daily routines, self-care, independence, and aspirational living. These category differences show that platform femininity is adaptable: the same broad ideal of an improved and curated self is expressed through different genre conventions.



Figure 1 Representative Beauty Posts Showing Makeup Visibility and Polished Presentation
Source: Selected Xiaohongshu beauty posts analyzed in this study (April–June 2026).

Fashion examples present femininity through coordinated outfits, accessories, visual taste, and consumption. Compared with beauty posts, the emphasis shifts from facial transformation to the styling of the whole appearance; compared with lifestyle posts, femininity is communicated more directly through clothing choices and curated display.

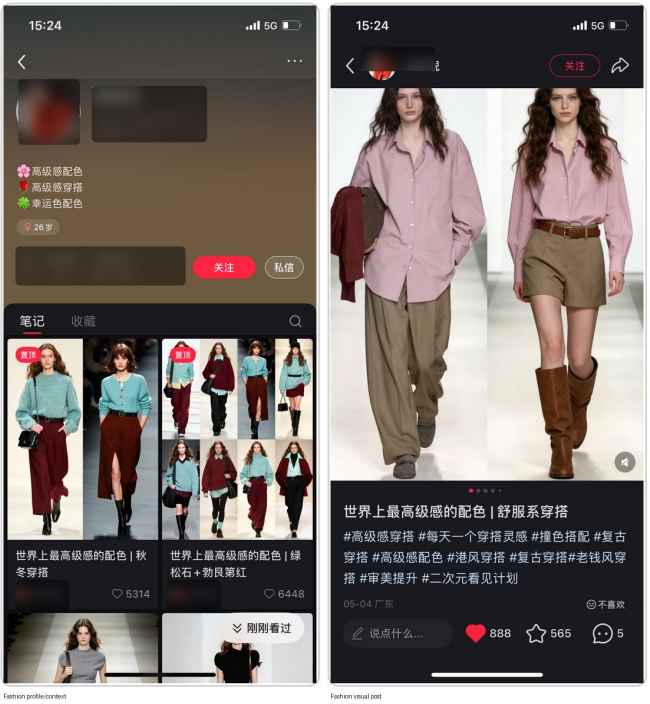


Figure 2 Representative Fashion Posts Showing Feminine Styling, Coordination, and Consumption
Source: Selected Xiaohongshu fashion posts analyzed in this study (April–June 2026).

The visual examples reinforce the descriptive coding. Beauty content presents femininity through technical appearance work and transformation; fashion content links femininity to coordination and taste; lifestyle content constructs it through reflection, calmness, and personal development. Across all three categories, the posts encourage an active, disciplined form of femininity. This pattern is consistent with postfeminist accounts in which self-care and empowerment are intertwined with self-surveillance and continuous improvement (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009).



Figure 3 Representative Lifestyle Posts Showing Self-Development and Emotional Softness
Source: Selected Xiaohongshu lifestyle posts analyzed in this study (April–June 2026).

4.2 Engagement Patterns

Table 4 Mean Total Engagement by Content Category

Category	N	Mean total engagement	Std. deviation
Beauty	10	8,520.10	4,120.35
Lifestyle	10	2,880.90	1,560.40
Fashion	10	1,540.90	980.20
Total	30	4,313.97	3,901.88

Beauty posts recorded the highest mean total engagement, followed by lifestyle and fashion posts. Six of the ten beauty posts were classified as high engagement, compared with two fashion and two lifestyle posts. Posts containing makeup visibility, feminine styling, or luxury aesthetics also showed higher descriptive means than posts without those features. These patterns suggest that visually clear and transformation-oriented content may attract attention, but descriptive differences alone do not establish a general rule or causal mechanism.

4.3 Hypothesis Testing

Table 5 Summary of Hypothesis Tests

Hypothesis	Test	Result	Decision
H1	Point-biserial correlation	Makeup visibility: rpb = .452, p = .012	Partially supported
H2	Chi-square	$\chi^2(4, N = 30) = 6.000$, p = .199	Not supported
H3	Linear regression	$R^2 = .023$; F(1, 28) = .659, p = .424	Not supported

H1 was partially supported. Among the tested indicators, only makeup visibility showed a statistically significant, moderate positive relationship with total engagement (rpb = .452, p = .012). Feminine styling, luxury aesthetic, and self-care display did not reach statistical significance. Femininity representation therefore did not operate as one uniform driver of engagement; a specific and highly visible beauty practice accounted for the supported relationship.

H2 was not supported. The chi-square test found no significant association between the broad category of a post and its low, medium, or high engagement level, $\chi^2(4, N = 30) = 6.000$, p = .199. Although beauty posts appeared more often in the high-engagement group, the sample did not provide sufficient evidence that category systematically determined engagement level.

H3 was also not supported. The regression model showed that visible engagement did not significantly predict femininity-framing scores, $R^2 = .023$, F(1, 28) = .659, p = .424. Engagement explained only 2.3% of the variance. The remaining variation is likely connected to creator choices, topic, visual aesthetics, cultural trends, audience composition, and other factors not measured in the model.

4.4 Discussion

The findings support Framing Theory by showing that content genres make different features of femininity salient. They support Representation Theory by demonstrating that femininity is constructed through repeated visual and textual practices rather than merely displayed. The prevalence of self-care, self-improvement, emotional softness, and aspiration also aligns with postfeminist media culture, where idealized femininity is presented as chosen, manageable, and achievable through personal labor.

At the same time, the statistical results complicate a deterministic account of algorithms. Public metrics may amplify particular posts, but the data do not show that engagement directly controls framing. The significant

result for makeup visibility is better understood as a localized relationship within this sample. Algorithmic engagement functions here as a visibility signal, not proof of platform intent. This distinction is important because claims about recommendation systems can easily exceed what public-facing data can support.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how femininity is represented in Xiaohongshu beauty, fashion, and lifestyle posts and how those representations relate to visible engagement. The analysis shows that femininity on the platform is multifaceted but highly curated. It combines appearance management with self-care, self-improvement, emotional regulation, consumption, and aspirational living. Across the sample, femininity was presented less as a fixed trait than as an ongoing project requiring discipline, taste, and continuous personal development.

The three content categories expressed this project differently. Beauty posts emphasized makeup, transformation, expertise, and polished presentation. Fashion posts emphasized coordination, taste, styling, and consumption. Lifestyle posts emphasized calmness, independence, self-care routines, emotional softness, and idealized everyday life. These differences demonstrate that platform femininity changes with genre while retaining a shared orientation toward an improved and carefully presented self.

Visible engagement was highest for beauty content at the descriptive level, and makeup visibility was significantly related to total engagement. However, broad content category was not significantly associated with engagement level, and engagement did not significantly predict femininity framing. The study therefore rejects the simple claim that platform metrics determine how femininity is constructed. Engagement may increase the visibility of specific, visually striking practices, but creator agency, cultural expectations, aesthetic conventions, and audience preferences remain central.

The study has practical implications for users, educators, and platform practitioners. Users may benefit from recognizing that polished lifestyle content is selectively produced and does not fully represent ordinary life. Media-literacy education can use Xiaohongshu to discuss how representation, commerce, self-presentation, and recommendation systems interact. Platform designers and content practitioners should also consider whether repeated visibility privileges narrow beauty standards and whether more diverse representations can be supported without treating engagement as the only measure of value.

The conclusions are limited by the purposive sample of 30 posts, the short collection period, and reliance on public interaction counts. Future studies should use larger and longitudinal samples, compare creator types, examine comments qualitatively, and investigate how users interpret different femininity frames. Research using platform-provided exposure or recommendation data would be needed before making stronger claims about algorithmic causality. Within these limits, the study provides a focused account of how femininity and visibility are negotiated on Xiaohongshu.

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