

Expression of Female Subjectivity under the Perspective of Contentious Discourse Practices—Analysis Based on the Trend of Baby Complementary Food Tags on the Xiaohongshu Platform

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Abstract: This study uses contentious discourse research as the theoretical framework to analyze the "avoiding men tags" phenomenon represented by #BabyComplementaryFood on the Xiaohongshu platform and the feminist practices behind it. Based on in-depth interviews and participatory observation, it is found that: At the textual level, these tags exhibit significant text construction strategies and emotional expression tendencies. At the discourse practice level, "avoiding men tags" have undergone phased development, behind which is a complex multi-stakeholder negotiation among female users, male groups, and platform/algorithm rules. Female contentious discourse practices are generated and evolved in this dynamic process. At the social practice level, this trend not only profoundly influences interactions and perceptions within female groups but also, as an important contentious discourse practice, substantially reconfigures women's participation patterns in the platform field and even in broader conventional gender frameworks. The study reveals how online tags become effective mediators of micro-level negotiations and gender discourse reconfiguration.

1. Introduction

On the social media platform "Xiaohongshu," female users are engaging in confrontational feminist practices through the use of "avoiding men tags" represented by #BabyComplementaryFood. These tags contain contentious discourses, which are symbolic collections constructed and disseminated by female groups using media channels to fight for gender equality, enhance discourse power, and maintain subjectivity. Influenced by the global "MeToo" movement, female actions in the Chinese internet have become increasingly diverse, such as promoting ideas of non-marriage and non-childbearing, freedom in dressing, etc., which are essentially contentious discourse expressions against the conventional social status quo.

Xiaohongshu, as a female community platform focusing on beauty makeup and fashion, has 300 million monthly active users (as of June 2025), with a male-to-female ratio of 3:7. Some female users feel uneasy about the influx of men, facing pressures from "male gaze" and harassment, coupled with the platform's atmosphere of excluding men. Based on their imagination of algorithm rules, they explore "avoiding men tags." A typical example is #BabyComplementaryFood,

originally meaning infant food, but long associated with female fashion, beauty, and lifestyle content, with a view count of 44.45 billion times. This article aims to analyze the "avoiding men tags" phenomenon on the Xiaohongshu platform through the theoretical framework of contentious discourse research, exploring how women use tag strategies to avoid male users and compete for exclusive spaces in online practices.

2. Literature Review: Gender Politics and Discourse Practices in Contentious Public Spheres

Regarding the "avoiding men tags" phenomenon, Wang Qin and Cong Ying (2024)'s research approaches from the perspective of algorithm resistance, using media affordance theory, pointing out that this phenomenon is female users' adaptive tactics to algorithmic discrimination and the dilemma of male gaze; however, their research focuses on technical ethics, arguing that under the "algorithmic black box," the effect is limited and fails to create ideal segregated spaces. This leaves room for this article's discussion on tag text analysis and specific social effects and impacts.[1]

Feminist media studies in China have undergone development. Bu Wei (2021) points out that they present three main frameworks: "communication mode + women," cultural studies, and communication activism, with social gender theory as the core. In the new media era, research mostly focuses on platforms like Weibo and WeChat, where women often appear as "audiences" or "described objects" (such as studies on female images, audience paradigms), and some studies begin to focus on women's expressions and self-presentations as subjects.[2]

In the field of contentious discourse research, there are already several cases, but most concentrate on mainstream social issues: Zhou Yuqiong and Qi Fapeng (2014) conceptualized contentious discourse through the Wukan incident;[3]Zhou Yuqiong (2016) analyzed contentious discourse systems and logic from environmental land requisition slogans;[4]Li Yanhong (2016) combined public sphere theory to analyze contentious discourse practices in labor issues from structural, representational, and interactive dimensions.[5]Relatively speaking, female contentious discourse research is more recent, such as Shi Jiaying (2023) on Weibo's "6B4T" advocacy, [6]and Peng Hui (2023) on menstrual taboo topics,[7] revealing how women engage in subjective contention in public discourse spaces to challenge conventional cultural mechanisms.

In summary, contentious discourse research focuses on interactions between non-mainstream groups and the mainstream. Wang Qin et al.'s research provides a foundation for understanding the technical resistance dimension of "avoiding men tags," but in feminist media studies, in-depth text and social implication analyses of female subjective contentious practices (especially on new platforms), as well as the application of contentious discourse theory to non-mainstream social issues (such as gender space competition), still have room for expansion. Focusing on Xiaohongshu's "avoiding men tags" as an emerging female collective contentious discourse practice has important practical significance.

3. Research Questions and Methodology

This article focuses on the "avoiding men tags" phenomenon on the Xiaohongshu platform, with female contentious discourse practices as the core research object. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional discourse model (text, discourse practice, social practice) as the analytical framework, it aims to explore the following questions:

What are the construction logic and forms of the textual content of "avoiding men tags"?

What changes have tag texts undergone in the processes of production, dissemination, and reception? What public implications do they have?

What deep power relations and structures in social reality does this phenomenon reflect?

This study mainly adopts semi-structured interview methods and participatory observation

methods. The researcher, as a Xiaohongshu user, continuously observes content and interactions under relevant tags (such as #BabyComplementaryFood). At the same time, through purposive sampling combined with snowball sampling, 6 female users who meet the conditions (Xiaohongshu usage time ≥ 1.5 years, daily usage ≥ 0.5 hours) and are familiar with the phenomenon were invited for online interviews (duration 40-90 minutes). The specific background information of the interviewees is shown in the table below: (Table 1)

Table 1: Respondent Information

Number	Gender	Age	Whether Posted Avoiding Men Tag Content	Occupation (Identity Notes)
A	Female	24	No	Financial industry practitioner (employed)
B	Female	30	No	Local public security publicity department practitioner (currently unemployed)
C	Female	26	Yes	Electrical and electronic information major international student (currently working at a German car company)
D	Female	23	Yes	Media marketing planner (undergraduate major in traditional Chinese medicine)
E	Female	24	Yes	Drama and film major graduate student (Xiaohongshu 10,000-follower blogger)
F	Female	24	Yes	Psychology master's graduate (corporate psychological counseling intern)

Interviews were conducted via online meetings and recorded, with content focusing on research questions, covering interviewees' cognition, participation, understanding, motivations, involved power subjects, and evaluations of social implications regarding "avoiding men tags." Based on interview materials and observed texts, the following analysis unfolds.

4. Discourse Text Analysis: Gender Tag Reconstruction in Social Media Platforms

According to interviews, besides #BabyComplementaryFood, there are multiple "avoiding men tags," such as #MaleLigation, #Le (lesbian), #Yabi (subculture enthusiast), etc. These choices are not random but strategic text reconstructions.

4.1 Frame Bridging and Frame Transformation—Text Construction Strategies

Interviews reveal that although female users' use of "avoiding men tags" is not an organized strategy, they share directional cognitions, mainly reflected in two strategic frame applications. Frame bridging forms new meanings by associating specific identity frames. The use of #Le tag is based on the cognition that "heterosexual men usually do not pay attention to lesbian content," and users (regardless of sexual orientation) use it to avoid male gaze and interactions (Interviewee F). Similarly, #Yabi tag is used by subculture enthusiasts (mostly women) to identify non-mainstream content, relying on algorithms to achieve segregation from men.

Frame transformation is a fundamental remodeling of old frame meanings. #BabyComplementaryFood originally refers to infant food, but users observe that its content is mainly constituted by "mom" interactions, forming a consensus of "female exclusive space." They infer that men lack interest in this, so algorithms will not push related content to men (Interviewee A). Thus, the tag's original meaning is subverted and transformed into an "avoiding men" symbol carrying broad female life-sharing content.

4.2 Reverse Detour and Direct Attack—Text Emotional Expressions

The text choices of "avoiding men tags" also reflect users' distinct emotional orientations: one is a detour, avoidant emotion, represented by tags like #BabyComplementaryFood, #Le, #Yabi. These strategies are based on predictions of male users' browsing preferences (preset blind spots or exclusion points), with the core logic being "staggered peak" display, actively avoiding possible male attention and interactions, with a relatively restrained emotional tone.

The other is more radical, aggressive emotion, represented by tags like #MaleLigation, #MaleInfertility, #MaleHealth. These tags directly point to male reproductive functions and socially promoted "fertility worship," carrying strong irony and provocation. Users believe that denying men's sexual ability easily triggers their "breakdown" (psychological collapse), thereby effectively preventing harassment: men either avoid self-humiliation by not clicking in, or even if they do, they lose moral high ground due to default "defects" and cannot launch effective attacks (Interviewee E). Their emotions are overt, with direct confrontational nature.

5. Discourse Practice Analysis: Feminist Contentious Expressions under Conventional Gender Frameworks

5.1 Origin: Helpless Adaptive Tactics in Gender Interactions

The rise of "avoiding men tags" directly stems from female users' gender pressures and negative interaction experiences in platform public spaces, a passively triggered resistance strategy. Interviews show that this pressure manifests specifically as privacy anxiety. Interviewee C sees Xiaohongshu as a life wisdom repository, but when encountering sensitive topics like gynecological knowledge, female public toilet facilities, etc., strongly rejects male users viewing them, considering them female exclusive domains. Another pressure comes from harassment risks. Interviewee D, after sharing fitness shaping content, encountered male users' casual and unfriendly evaluations of her figure (such as "thick arms"), feeling uncomfortable but unable to respond effectively.

Users generally attribute intrusions to the joint action of platform algorithm push mechanisms and some male users' preferences for actively browsing opposite-sex content. Peters' described "broadcasting" style information dissemination brings negative experiences to women in this context. Therefore, they encode "avoiding men" needs into tag choices, attempting to open relatively safe expression spaces under algorithm logic, which is a helpless yet strategic contentious starting point.

5.2 Dissemination: Collective Expressions Promoting Power Competition

The "avoiding men tags" phenomenon also involves female groups' competition for visibility power. Dayan points out that new media environments not only grant publics visibility but also enable them to actively define how they are seen. Female users, through collective adoption of specific tags, attempt to use platform algorithm mechanisms to control the visibility range of their content, i.e., selectively making it "invisible" to male users. This essentially transforms Xiaohongshu, this public domain, as a "negotiated communicative arena", a space for generating and disseminating discourses challenging mainstream (conventional) ones.

Although Xiaohongshu users are mainly female, society as a whole is still dominated by male discourses, and this power structure inevitably extends online. Male users' "cross-group interaction" of female spaces is seen as normal. Therefore, the prevalence of "avoiding men tags" functions not merely as individual avoidance tactics, but also as collective signaling through which female users

negotiate visibility with platform ecosystems, ultimately constituting an emergent large-scale marking practice in digital spaces.

5.3 Diffusion: Symbol Alienation after Tag Popularity

With the widespread popularity of "avoiding men tags," their meanings and functions have undergone significant changes and ultimately alienation. This process can be traced back to their original meaning stage, such as #BabyComplementaryFood originally pushing infant food, #MaleInfertility serving male health needs. Subsequently, meanings were reconstructed; female users successfully seized interpretive rights by mass-producing content unrelated to original meanings, endowing them with new "avoiding men" connotations, and practicing competition for "visibility" power in this process.

However, the alienation brought by popularity erodes the tags' original contentious functions. Some users (including women) abuse popular tags like #BabyComplementaryFood, #Yabi to post unrelated content like dances, selfies for traffic pursuit, aiming to attract broad audiences including men (Interviewees E, B). Meanwhile, male users begin using these tags as special entrances to peep into female lives (Interviewee C), instead exacerbating "being gazed" risks. Thus, the confusion and abuse of tag meanings disrupt platform content ecology and algorithm logic, prompting platform manual interventions (such as limiting flow for #BabyComplementaryFood, increasing infant content weight) to restore order. By the end of alienation, erosion by traffic logic and counteractive uses partially degenerates "avoiding men tags" from strategic tools for women's discourse rights into symbols chasing traffic or triggering reverse gazes, significantly weakening their original intent to build exclusive female spaces.

6. Social Practice Analysis: Gender Political Practices in Online Public Domains

The essence of the "avoiding men tags" phenomenon is a dynamic game of power relations, with its text evolutions and discourse interactions revealing complex linkages between discourse, society, and ideology. Foucault pointed out that discourse functions far exceed symbolic references. From the social practice dimension, this phenomenon profoundly maps real tensions and power negotiations among diverse subjects.

6.1 Unity and Division within Female Groups

On the surface, the popularity of "avoiding men tags" seems to mark female groups' united contention, echoing feminist calls for collective action logic. However, in practice, significant divisions arise within women due to differing demands. First affected are #BabyComplementaryFood's original target users—childbearing-age moms. They accuse "avoiding men" behaviors of occupying childcare content space, creating "information noise," making it hard to access needed resources (Interviewee B).

Another criticism targets the tags' operational logic: some women believe #BabyComplementaryFood's "avoiding men" effectiveness actually relies on the stereotypical preset of "childrearing as motherhood," this unconscious continuation of traditional gender divisions may exacerbate social exploitation of women's fertility (Interviewee A). Divisions further spawn "witch hunts" within groups—women with different stances accuse each other of being "unprogressive" or "ignorant," even advocating to "expel from womanhood." Such conflicts stem from value differences, feminist cognition divergences, and deep conventional cultural infiltration, essentially intense negotiations within female groups around power boundaries and contentious strategies.

6.2 Tentative Negotiations between Female Users and Platforms

The generation and alienation of "avoiding men tags" need to be understood in the intermediary context of algorithm technology. Algorithms are not neutral; their design is shaped by social ideologies (especially conventional gender structures), and male users' behavioral data further reinforce push biases, fueling "male gaze" penetration.

Scholars Xiang Anling and Shenyang point out that algorithms often implement "associated discrimination" based on real biases, i.e., differential pushes based on group generalized features (such as gender). In this background, "avoiding men tags" can be seen as a tentative dialogue between female users and algorithmic platforms: women send signals to platform rules through collective data behaviors (such as concentrated use of specific tags), attempting to reversely leverage algorithm logic with utilitarian strategies, colonizing relatively friendly female territories in cyberspace. This contention, though not directly targeting men, points straight to the invisible power structures behind technology.

6.3 Women's Negotiation for Discourse Power under Patriarchal Society

Macroscopically, "avoiding men tags" are women's micro-practices in deeply rooted patriarchal societies to seize discourse power. Conventional ideology has been systematically integrated into social fabrics; although explicit expressions of "male superiority" are subtle, gender power imbalances persist covertly in daily life—such as praise for "virtuous wives and good mothers" or disciplining women to be "quiet and obedient," all continuing suppression of female subjectivity. In this structure, women are often objectified as "sexual resources," and the core motivation of "avoiding men" actions is precisely resisting such objectification: male "evaluative communication" (Interviewee B) reflected in scrutinizing gazes essentially places women in consumed object positions.

Gender interactions in cyberspace are projections of real power relations. Women seizing autonomy in virtual spaces through tags is actually an extension of their subjective awakening to online battlefields after real-life resources and living spaces are squeezed by patriarchy. Its contentiousness lies not only in "avoiding men" itself but also in openly challenging patriarchy's natural possession rights over women's spaces and discourses.

7. Conclusion

The "avoiding men tags" phenomenon demonstrates women's wise strategies in social media to fight for discourse spaces, but its actual effects are limited. Platform interventions (such as manually elevating infant content weight under #BabyComplementaryFood), the uncontrollability of algorithmic black boxes, symbol alienation after tag popularity, and divisions within female groups collectively weaken its ability to build exclusive spaces, making it difficult to achieve the expected "avoiding men" effects. Positive assessments of its contentious impacts thus face challenges.

Nevertheless, this practice reveals women's ongoing contentious needs and strategic explorations in online public domains. Under current media environments and feminist tides, future female groups are expected to develop more diverse and effective contentious discourse forms. The deepening interaction between related research and practices will provide momentum and possibilities for women to fight for more ideal positions in interwoven virtual-real social spaces.

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