

Becoming the "Cool Aunt": Commodifying Female Independence in Xiaohongshu's Xiaoyi Trend

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Abstract. The “cool aunt” archetype has gained cultural traction across global digital platforms, symbolizing a form of female autonomy outside traditional roles of marriage and motherhood. In China, this aspiration has materialized into the “Xiaoyi Style”—a viral fashion and lifestyle trend on Xiaohongshu (RedNote) that combines aestheticized independence with marketable empowerment. This study investigates how the Xiaoyi Style is constructed, circulated, and socially negotiated on Chinese social media, and what it reveals about postfeminist sensibilities and digital femininity in contemporary China. Drawing on a qualitative multi-method approach, the research analyzes 60 high-engagement Xiaohongshu posts through thematic and discourse analysis. The findings reveal four key themes: entrepreneurial empowerment, relational femininity, aesthetic labor, and ambivalence toward singleness. Distinct audience receptions (dominant, negotiated, and oppositional readings) also emerge. While Xiaoyi Style appears to celebrate female autonomy, it is simultaneously shaped by platform logics and socio-political filtering. Empowerment is repackaged into consumable, non-threatening images. Ultimately, the study argues that Xiaoyi Style reflects a culturally specific expression of postfeminism that blends emotional aspiration, commercial logic, and soft-market feminism in China’s digital landscape.

Keywords: Postfeminism; Femvertising; Digital Femininity; Chinese Fashion.

1. Introduction

Across global digital cultures, the “aunt” figure often represents a second mother, a confidante, or sometimes a savvy peer to their younger kins [1]. On TikTok, the “#coolaunt” trend is celebrated as having the benefit of being a “mother”, but free from the burdens of marriage or true parental responsibilities, offering women an unconventional and vibrant “Plan B” for their adulthood [2]. Increasingly, “cool aunt” as a new form of identity is emerging, and young women hope to have one or aspire to become one themselves. In contemporary China, such aspiration similarly projects an unmarried freedom, but it has also manifested in a uniquely feminist and aestheticized form: the emergence of the “Xiaoyi Style”.

Unlike the broadly defined “aunt” in the Western context, Xiaoyi in Chinese kinship terminology refers strictly to the younger sister of one’s mother. As a result, Xiaoyi figure is usually expected to have fewer family responsibilities, and a more modern, liberal, and cosmopolitan outlook. In cultural environments where traditional gender norms remain deeply entrenched, Xiaoyi is often imagined as rebellious figure, boldly fashionable, and striving for independence. Compared to the western cool aunt archetype, the Xiaoyi figure embraces a femininity that carries a deeper empowering connotation. By early 2025, *Xiaoyi Style* had become a viral fashion and lifestyle trend on Chinese social media, particularly Xiaohongshu (Little Red Book), a platform known for its focus on femininity and everyday aesthetics. While this style celebrates female autonomy with the cultural message that Xiaoyi figure delivers, it also raises critical concerns. The rapid commodification of the *xiaoyi* persona, through influencer marketing, brand collaborations, and algorithmic promotion, suggests that its feminist messaging is increasingly repackaged into market-friendly and consumable images. This tension between genuine cultural resonance and commercial exploitation makes Xiaoyi Style a compelling site for analyzing the construction of contemporary digital femininity. This research aims to unpack the ideological contradictions embedded in Xiaoyi Style, offering insights into the

intersections of gender, digital media, and platform-driven consumerism in China's context. To achieve this, the study addresses the following questions: How is Xiaoyi style constructed and negotiated on Chinese social media platforms? What social attitudes toward gender, marriage, and financial independence does it reflect? And what are the impacts of its commodification?

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative, multi-method approach, combining thematic and discourse analysis of 60 high-engagement Xiaohongshu posts. Following Braun and Clarke's six-phase coding model and employing Gill's postfeminist sensibility framework, this approach enables a nuanced analysis of the symbolic construction and contested reception of *Xiaoyi Style* [3, 4].

2. Literature Review

The emergence of the "Xiaoyi Style" on Chinese social media, particularly Xiaohongshu, underscores how women's femininity, aspirations for economic independence, and lifestyle choices can be expressed and commercialized in the digital age. As this phenomenon involves new developments in women's ideologies and closely intersects with marketing and cultural contexts, it is important to explore literatures across three key thematic areas: (1) core frameworks on post-feminist theory and popular feminism; (2) discussion on "femvertising" in marketing; and (3) the local context of Chinese women's negotiation with female empowerment and their self-presentation on social platforms. By reviewing existing works in these areas, the study aims to establish a foundational framework for a comprehensive analysis of the "Xiaoyi Style", as well as the deeper logic behind its rising popularity.

The concept of post-feminism describes a cultural climate where feminism is seen as "achieved," and empowerment is thus framed as a matter of individual choice of self-discipline, bodily control, and consumption [4, 5]. Women's agency seems empowered, but this often manifests through consumer behavior and internalized beauty norms. Meanwhile, Banet-Weiser's book on popular feminism highlights how feminist messages can be repackaged in media for market appeal, yet displaces structural critique in the process [6]. These concepts are particularly relevant to the Xiaoyi Style, which presents an image of single, financially independent women who assert autonomy through curated beauty and consumption. Combining the two theories enables a layered reading of the Xiaoyi figure as both a gendered subject and branded symbol—one who embodies post-feminist ideals while circulating in digital spaces shaped by platform logic and consumer culture.

Building on the above theoretical perspective, a growing body of research has examined femvertising - the strategic use of pro-female messaging in advertising. Advertisements that counter gender stereotypes can reduce resistance among female audiences, thus encourage consumption, and empowerment-themed campaigns can positively influence brand perception and purchase intentions [7, 8]. The adoption of feminist language in ads is clearly effective – not in terms of challenging structural inequality, but as a commercial strategy in creating a persuasive, modern image of womanhood that sells [5, 9]. These insights are crucial for understanding how the viral Xiaoyi aesthetics on Xiaohongshu—by projecting autonomy, style, and economic independence—can become a part of market strategies that champion empowerment on the surface, but ultimately serve commercial interests.

In the Chinese context, femvertising is similarly popular, but the feminist discourse behind such popularity displays a unique dynamic. As the Chinese government has long promoted gender equality, feminism has been a more acceptable discourse in a socio-political environment where most other discussions on rights and liberty are censored [10, 11]. However, state-endorsed feminism often serves broader national goals such as economic development or social stability; and grassroots feminism and discourses online must reframe to align with state agendas to avoid moderation, often by adopting and internalizing discourse that align with nationalist or consumerist values [11]. As noted by Wang and Chang et al., digital spaces like Xiaohongshu have become alternative platforms where women articulate gender concerns, but discussion must carefully step away from systemic critique or calls for collective action [12, 13]. In China's digital content moderation system, the platforms actively shape the collective epistemological environments, guided by the dual imperative

of maintaining political stability while ensuring commercial profitability [14]. Consequently, a feminist discourse that emphasizes individual empowerment, lifestyle, and consumer participation are more likely survive and thrive. These dynamics help explain the rise of the popular feminist ideals such as the Xiaoyi Style: a depoliticized form of female autonomy that only subtly challenges traditional gender roles, expressed largely through consumption and lifestyle choice.

Together, the literatures provide a strong contextual foundation for analyzing the Xiaoyi Style. However, there remains a gap in in-depth case studies that examine how post-feminist and popular feminist narratives are commercially manifested and socially negotiated by women in everyday contexts. Few research looks at the concept of cool aunt or social trends such as the Xiaoyi Style, especially regarding how they navigate feminist ideals of empowerment while also reinforcing new forms of aesthetic and emotional labor. This study addresses these gaps by positioning Xiaoyi Style as a culturally specific expression of post-feminist sensibility and soft-market feminism in contemporary China. By analyzing how this style is constructed, circulated, and commodified on platforms like Xiaohongshu, the research hopes to offer new insights into the shifting landscape of gender representation and consumer subjectivity in China's digital culture.

3. Methodology

A qualitative, multi-method approach is used to investigate how the Xiaoyi Style is constructed, circulated, and negotiated on Chinese social media, particularly Xiaohongshu. Drawing from feminist media studies and digital cultural analysis, the research combines thematic analysis and discourse analysis to capture both the symbolic construction and social reception of this aesthetic as it gains popularity in the Chinese digital space.

The analysis begins by identifying three of the most widely viewed hashtags associated with the Xiaoyi Style. A sample of 60 high-engagement posts is selected (20 per hashtag), including content from influencers, everyday users, and brand collaborations. Posts are initially categorized into the following three broad types for analysis: (1) Fashion-focused content (e.g., outfit-of-the-day and styling advice); (2) POV or vlog-style videos that narrate Xiaoyi lifestyle experiences; (3) Meta-discursive posts that discuss or critique the style's meanings.

The analysis then proceeds in two stages. In the first stage, the categories undergo a thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase model [3]. While themes are initially developed from the dataset, they are interpreted by Gill's framework of postfeminist sensibility to uncover how empowerment, autonomy, and femininity are symbolically framed [4].

In the second stage, the study conducts a textual analysis of titles, captions, and user comments across three categories (1), (2), and (3). Here, the content is treated as a cultural text in which meanings are encoded by content creators through post-feminist codes. Drawing on Hall's encoding/decoding model, user interactions are examined to reveal dominant, negotiated, or oppositional readings of Xiaoyi-style empowerment [15]. This framework supports a more dynamic understanding of how gendered subjectivity is both constructed and contested within participatory digital spaces.

Overall, this approach allows the study to capture not only the aesthetic logic of Xiaoyi Style, but also its embedded ideological contradictions and cultural significance within contemporary Chinese digital femininity.

4. Result

The dataset of 60 Xiaohongshu posts collected from the popular hashtags was categorized into three content types: (1) fashion-focused advice (n=29), (2) POV or vlog-style lifestyle performances (n=16), and (3) meta-discursive commentary (n=12). Other than that, three posts had gained significant visibility through the "Xiaoyi" tag but were deemed irrelevant as their content did not reflect any relating visual, discursive, or thematic markers. They were excluded from the final dataset.

According to the thematic analysis of content types (1) and (2) (n=45), the study finds four interconnected themes that visually and discursively defines the Xiaoyi style and its persona (Table 1).

Table 1. Thematic Analysis.

Theme	Frequency (out of 45)	Description
1. Self-Entrepreneurship and Empowerment Narrative	15	Empowerment and entrepreneurial stories where the Xiaoyi figure are portrayed as financially autonomous and professionally competent. Empowerment is linked to commercial self-making.
2. Relational Femininity and Soft Authority	10	Xiaoyi is portrayed as wealthy and stylish woman offering care, guidance, and support to younger relatives, especially girls, through unconventional means like makeup tips and gift-giving, reflecting a non-maternal but gendered form of soft authority.
3. Ambiguity of Aesthetic Labor	33	Xiaoyi as a fashion style emphasizes aesthetic labor, self-care, and bodily discipline, but lacks a fixed defining features or garment. It draws from diverse trends and relies on tagging; posts that convey a polished, fashionable, and self-possessed image can easily affiliate with the trend.
4. Acceptance of Marriage vs. Singleness	10	10 posts mention relationship attitudes, with 7 depicting marriage/heterosexual relationships positively, while 3 highlight singleness.

In the second part of the study, audience reception is examined through 285 comments (five per post) across content types (1), (2), and (3), with the exclusion of the irrelevant posts. Three main interpretive positions emerged from these responses. First, dominant readings (n = 184) showed strong admiration for the Xiaoyi style. Many users expressed a desire to emulate the look from the content creators, asking for product links and brand names, while others praised the Xiaoyi persona as an aspirational lifestyle ideal.

A set of negotiated readings (n = 79) revealed more ambivalent responses. These users appreciated the aesthetic presentation but questioned the practicality or authenticity of the content. Some, for instance, complimented the creator’s style but noted that the endorsed products seasonally inappropriate (e.g., too cold for winter), or only suitable for extremely slim women. Others expressed that extravagant fashion items and behaviors such as gift-giving, which are central in some content, were only realistic for wealthy women.

Finally, oppositional readings (n = 22) actively challenged the glamorization of the Xiaoyi trend. Users critiqued it as “another beauty trap” or a form of “consumption in disguise,” and some pushed back against the message that wealth and stylishness equate to empowerment. A few comments voiced discomfort with the way young women is continuously subjected to new identity frameworks, arguing instead for a vision of femininity based on freedom from such normative scripts.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Construction and Negotiation of Xiaoyi Online

Theme 1 of the study’s analysis demonstrates how Xiaoyi is consistently framed through a narrative of self-entrepreneurship and empowerment. Content under Xiaoyi-related hashtags on Xiaohongshu frequently portrays the Xiaoyi figure engaging in confident acts of resistance against traditional

family expectations—for instance, confronting toxic male relatives at family gatherings, succeeding in professional careers, and generously giving gifts to younger relatives through their strong economic capability. Other narratives depict the glamorous life of a self-disciplined and financially independent woman who can stay physically attractive and unmarried even in her forties. Through showcasing fashion taste, confidence, and aspirational lifestyles, Xiaoyi becomes constructed as a woman who capitalizes on her autonomy to brand herself as powerful, elegant, and self-sufficient. Linking closely to Banet-Weiser's discussion of "self-branding feminism", empowerment within Xiaoyi Style is tied to the ability to aestheticize, commercialize, and market oneself as a successful autonomous figure [6]. In the meantime, such representations of the Xiaoyi narrative also tightly aligns with Guo's research on the "living-alone" influencers on Xiaohongshu, where singleness is particularly aestheticized and marketed as a form of empowered middle-class life and modern womanhood [16]. Although the two figures differ in persona, they both heavily emphasize high income, self-management, and lifestyle performances that visually discipline the female body. Gill's concept of postfeminist sensibility, particularly on the characteristic of self-surveillance and discipline, provides a critical lens here, and the rise of Xiaoyi Style can be viewed as a Chinese manifestation of postfeminist culture — where empowerment is symbolized through aesthetic and consumer practices rather than collective social change [4]. Ultimately, while Xiaoyi Style appears to offer a liberating model of womanhood, it also reinforces neoliberal ideals of self-governance, aesthetic control, and entrepreneurial femininity, making it both emotionally resonant and market compatible.

Another critical theme that emerges from the analysis that defines the "Xiaoyi aesthetic" is a unique relational femininity and a soft authority. Although Xiaoyi appears to offer liberation from traditional maternal roles, it paradoxically reintroduces emotional labor through new cultural expectations, as the Xiaoyi figure performs success not only through beauty and financial autonomy but also through relational care. Dominant reading of the Xiaoyi figure recognizes her as somebody who gives lavish gifts, encourages romantic explorations, and offer emotional support for younger kin from a unique position between parent and peer. While this image highlights female empowerment, success, and an assumed rebellion against traditional roles, they are also easily subsumed into new forms of obligation. In the construction of this seemingly "perfect" lifestyle, women are socially rewarded not just for their personal achievement, but for delivering emotional and material values, which also requires the maintenance of their beauty as a testimony to the success of their lifestyle. Such expectations are fundamentally service-oriented, and they reflect the motherhood under postfeminism where caregiving, beauty, and success are framed as personal choices, but in reality, are still deeply embedded in traditional gender norms [12, 17]. Similarly, the concept of aesthetic labor by Elias, Gill and Scharff helps explain how the Xiaoyi figure, while seemingly rejecting traditional housewife ideals, imposes new standards of wealth, beauty, and generosity [18]. On Chinese social platforms, such performances do not truly disrupt patriarchal structures but rather repackage gendered expectations through beauty, consumption, and capital [19]. Evidently, what emerges is not a pure rejection of traditional femininity, but a reconfiguration where women are still required to be desirable, nurturing, and self-regulating under the guise of freedom; and gendered anxiety is brought along a shallow empowerment.

5.2. The Commodification of the Xiaoyi Aesthetic

Another critical dimension of the Xiaoyi phenomenon lies in its ambiguous and fluid aesthetic definition, which is a key factor that contributed to its strong connection with postfeminist consumer culture, ultimately reproducing the neoliberal logic that equates freedom with choice, and choice with consumption. Unlike more codified aesthetics such as "Old Money" or "Office-Siren" which had similarly amassed significant popularity on Xiaohongshu, Xiaoyi Style does not rely on a fixed visual system. Instead, it draws flexibly from various trends, and merges them under a shared tone of refined independence. As long as the post conveys polish, elegance, and self-possession, tagging it with #Xiaoyi suffices to affiliate it with the trend. This aesthetic ambiguity enables Xiaoyi to adapt to diverse market demands and amplifies its commercial potential within platform-driven environments.

Moreover, the previously mentioned self-entrepreneurship and empowerment narrative, which speaks to the deep-rooted emotional aspiration of many Chinese audiences, fosters active engagement from them. Even when Xiaoyi-themed content clearly includes consumption cues, the dominant reading from the viewers remains positive, with many enthusiastically requesting extra product information, increasingly tying feminist empowerment to visibility, marketability, and entrepreneurial success [6]. Meanwhile, Lazar's analysis of femvertising also highlights how such empowerment narratives can be emptied of structural critique, and only presenting beauty and consumption as modes of liberation [9]. Gill's concept of "knowing subjectivity" helps frame Xiaoyi participants as agents who recognize their choices yet operate firmly within culturally prescribed tracks [4]. Thus, the Xiaoyi trend exemplifies a sophisticated form of cultural advertising—one that naturalizes consumption and gendered self-discipline under the guise of freedom and success.

5.3. The Role of Platform and Politics in The Construction of “Xiaoyi”

The rise of Xiaoyi Style is not merely organic, but strategically amplified by platform algorithms and shaped by socio-political filtering, producing a marketable yet non-threatening image of female independence. While the trend initially resonated with young users' emotional longing in past years, it was institutionalized by Xiaohongshu through launching a hashtag campaign, promising algorithmic visibility to posts tagged with #Trendy Aunt Has Returned Home, and #Trendy Aunt Style. Although many viral posts were also created outside the campaign period, the platform's endorsement would certainly have encouraged the commercial amplification of the trend.

During this process of platform promotion, the radical undertones of “unmarried autonomy” which had been central to the original Xiaoyi narrative, were notably diluted; and there were instead more positive portrayals of marriage in comparison. Women's singleness, within contemporary China's feminist discourse, often functions as a flexible yet complex strategy to negotiate gender inequalities in China [20]. However, overt endorsements of singleness and anti-marriage ideologies remain politically sensitive and discouraged [21]. As such, content celebrating financial independence, aesthetic success, and consumerist empowerment was favored, while posts explicitly endorsing anti-marriage ideologies were especially marginalized in the two platform-endorsed hashtags and remained visible in the third popular hashtag (#Xiaoyi). This selective amplification aligns with Zhang and Zhang's observation that feminist articulations gaining visibility in China must be non-confrontational and consumer-friendly to survive the dual filters of state and capital [11]. Women are invited to claim agency through aesthetic and relational performances, yet these performances are tightly bound to platform-sanctioned, market-compatible narratives. Thus, the concept of Xiaoyi, despite its initial feminist potential, undergoes a “safe repackaging” process, and is transformed into a harmless, desirable, and highly commodifiable vision of womanhood that sells empowerment without challenging deeper gender structures.

6. Conclusion

The popularity of the Xiaoyi Style lies in its ability to tap into Chinese women's collective memory of the xiaoyi figure, as well as a deep-seated emotional longing for an alternative path to womanhood — one that defies marriage and traditional roles in motherhood, and instead chooses freedom and self-actualization. Such cultural resonance positions Xiaoyi Style as both an aspirational identity and a performance of empowered femininity in China's digital sphere. The study explores the construction, circulation, and reception of this style on Xiaohongshu as a culturally specific articulation of postfeminist digital femininity. Findings reveal that Xiaoyi Style is framed through four key themes: entrepreneurial empowerment, relational femininity, aesthetic labor, and ambivalence toward singleness. Audiences' responses further demonstrate distinct interpretive positions, ranging from admiration, to irony, and to outright critique, reflecting the complex ways in which users engage with the Xiaoyi narrative. The findings suggests that while Xiaoyi Style appears to promote female autonomy and liberation, it ultimately reinforces a market-friendly and politically safe model of empowerment.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of scholarship on postfeminism and femvertising in non-Western contexts, offering a new lens for understanding how femininity is negotiated within digital cultures, and how feminist expression can be shaped by socio-political filtering. However, the research is limited by its exclusive focus on Xiaohongshu, a platform with a mostly urban and middle-class user base. In the future, there could be more exploration on how the concept of cool aunt evolves across platforms like TikTok or Weibo, where gender narratives are shaped by different logics. Moreover, studies can also examine how such trends are perceived and performed across varying economic, educational, and geographic backgrounds. Ultimately, the study explores the ideological contradictions within Xiaoyi Style, highlighting the intersection of gender, digital media, and consumerism in contemporary China, but also inviting further inquiry into these evolving dynamics.

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