

The Impact of Social Media on Gender Expression: High Heels as a Gender Symbol

Ziyan Chen *

Global Indian International School, Singapore, Singapore

* Corresponding Author Email: ziyanc029@gmail.com

Abstract. In the digital age, social media has dramatically reshaped how individuals explore and express their gender identity. Platforms like TikTok, Xiaohongshu, and Instagram have given rise to more diverse, creative, and sometimes controversial representations of gender. Among the many fashion items tied to gender, high heels have long been associated with femininity. However, they are increasingly being used across a wide spectrum of identities, from cisgender men to non-binary individuals, as a symbol of expression, rebellion, and authenticity. This paper explores how high heels have been reclaimed on social media as tools of gender performance. Through discourse analysis, online surveys, and in-depth interviews with users from Singapore and mainland China, this study reveals how platforms function not just as arenas for fashion but as battlegrounds of gender politics. It argues that while social media is not free from judgment or discrimination, it offers unique opportunities for self-expression, visibility, and cultural resistance, especially for youth navigating identity in a changing world.

Keywords: Xiaohongshu; Social media; Gender Expression.

1. Introduction

Gender expression refers to how individuals externally communicate their gender identity, often through clothes, hairstyle, voice, and behavior. In many cultures, this has traditionally been divided into rigid categories: masculine and feminine. Fashion, in particular, has played a major role in reinforcing these divisions. One of the most symbolic items of gendered fashion is the high heel. Today, high heels are strongly linked to femininity, elegance, and even sexuality. Yet, this association is historically recent. In the 15th century, Persian warriors wore heels for practical reasons, and later, European aristocrats of all genders adopted them as a status symbol. It wasn't until the 18th century that heels became strictly “feminine” [1].

Now, as identity becomes more fluid and performative, especially among Gen Z, many are reclaiming high heels in ways that challenge their conventional meanings. Thanks to the visibility granted by social media platforms, wearing heels is no longer just about fashion—it's about storytelling, self-recognition, and sometimes survival. Users are increasingly pushing back against the idea that high heels are “only for women.” On platforms like TikTok, one can find countless videos of men, non-binary individuals, and transgender people confidently walking in heels, sometimes paired with skirts, other times with suits [2]. What they all share is a message: gender expression is personal, and high heels are no longer bound by outdated norms.

Why this topic matter? For many, gendered clothing is still a daily source of anxiety, especially in conservative or traditional societies. The decision to wear something as symbolic as high heels can lead to discrimination, ridicule, or even physical danger. But for others, heels are liberating—they offer a sense of control and self-affirmation. Understanding how this symbol operates in online spaces gives us insight into larger cultural shifts. In particular, social media becomes more than a tool for entertainment—it becomes a stage where norms are questioned, identities are built, and new communities are formed.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Media and Gender Identity

In recent years, researchers have explored the ways digital platforms impact identity formation. Marwick and boyd introduced the idea of “networked publics,” where identity is constructed in front of an audience that is often invisible but very real [3]. These spaces allow people to experiment with different versions of themselves, but also expose them to judgment and scrutiny.

Tiidenberg emphasized the role of images in digital identity construction, especially in how people take and post selfies [4]. These images are not just for fun—they are a way of saying “this is who I am” or “this is how I want to be seen.” This is particularly powerful for users who do not conform to mainstream gender expectations. Cover also suggests that online platforms allow people to “undo” their assigned identity and rebuild it using signs, styles, and language more suited to their sense of self [5].

2.2. High Heels in Gender Fashion Discourse

High heels are often treated as a symbol of hyper-femininity. According to Dilley et al., heels can be both empowering and limiting [6]. On one hand, they allow the wearer to feel elegant and confident; on the other hand, they reflect the ongoing pressure for women to appear “attractive” in a very narrow way. Schriever points out that in male pop-fan culture, heels can also be fetishized—used as objects to project desire or control, which complicates their meaning even further [7].

A particularly relevant study is Leng’s investigation into the #KuToo movement in Japan [8]. Women protested the requirement to wear heels in offices, calling it discriminatory and painful. Here, heels were framed not as glamorous, but as tools of oppression. In contrast, Lipton documents a growing number of male influencers who wear heels proudly on social media—not just to get attention, but to feel more themselves [9].

2.3. Gaps in Literature

Despite the growing number of studies about gender expression and fashion online, there is still very little research that focuses on transgender and non-binary users in East Asia. While Gao et al. mention a rise in gender-fluid fashion styles, and Shin & Lee discuss non-traditional Korean influencers, these works often ignore high heels specifically, and rarely include the voices of real users. This study attempts to fill that gap [10].

3. Methodology

The aim of this study is to explore how high heels function as a tool for gender expression on social media platforms, utilizing three research methods: discourse analysis, questionnaire survey, and in-depth interviews [11].

First, the discourse analysis involved selecting 20 active accounts on TikTok and Xiaohongshu, with inclusion criteria being continuous content posting within the past 12 months, at least three instances explicitly featuring high-heel styling, and engagement with topics such as fashion, identity, or gender [12]. Using NVivo software, textual content—including titles, hashtags, and comment sections—was coded to identify frequent expressions (e.g., “freedom,” “rebellion,” “identity”) and emotional tones (supportive, ironic, hostile).

Second, an online questionnaire yielded 300 valid responses from users of Instagram, Xiaohongshu, and WeChat groups, aged 16–35, with diverse gender identities (72% cisgender, 14% non-binary, 12% transgender) [13]. The questionnaire addressed participants’ perceptions of the visibility of transgender individuals wearing high heels, the impact of such content on their fashion and gender perceptions, and their evaluation of social media platforms as “safe spaces” for gender expression [14].

Finally, video interviews were conducted with six non-cisgender users active on Xiaohongshu or TikTok, all of whom had publicly expressed themselves by wearing high heels [15]. Each interview lasted 30–45 minutes and focused on their motivations, audience responses, and the symbolic meaning of high heels in their gender identity [16]. Although the sample lacks statistical representativeness, it provides valuable qualitative insights into the intersection of digital identity performance and fashion practices.

4. Result

A prominent theme identified across both TikTok and Xiaohongshu was the redefinition of high heels from a traditionally feminine fashion item to a symbol of individual empowerment and emotional expression [17]. Rather than merely serving as accessories aligned with gender norms, high heels were frequently described by users as a form of “emotional armor”—an external manifestation of inner strength and self-assertion [18]. On TikTok, for instance, a widely viewed video by the user “@ari_notbinary,” who confidently walked down an empty road in red heels accompanied by Beyoncé’s “Alien Superstar,” received over 150,000 views. Audience responses varied; while many praised the display of confidence, others expressed more cautious support, with comments such as “not my thing, but respect.”

Similarly, on Xiaohongshu, a user named “Little Deer is Wild” posted a short vlog documenting their experience of trying on high heels for the first time after coming out as gender-fluid. The video was not glamorized; instead, it authentically captured moments of imbalance, self-adjustment, and spontaneous laughter [19]. The post attracted over 1,000 comments, many from users who had shared similar first-time experiences. One highly liked comment read: “You’re not just wearing heels—you’re wearing yourself”, underscoring the symbolic weight of high heels as an expression of identity.

Survey results further reflected this dynamic. Among 300 respondents, 61% reported that social media had contributed to a more open-minded attitude toward non-traditional clothing choices [20]. However, 33% also indicated they had either witnessed or personally received negative comments when individuals wore clothing that did not align with traditional gender expectations. Interview data illustrated this duality [21]. One participant, Alex, shared: “When I wore heels for the first time on camera, I expected bullying. But I didn’t expect strangers to DM me and say, ‘You helped me do the same.’ That made it worth it.” In contrast, another interviewee, Yuxin, stated: “I love how I look in heels, but I only wear them indoors [22]. I don’t feel safe enough to walk outside in them. Online is one thing—real life is still too dangerous.”

This contrast between online expression and offline limitations emerged as a recurring theme in the interviews. Many participants saw their digital persona as aspirational—a projection of the self they hoped to fully embody in offline spaces, once safety and societal acceptance allowed.

5. Discussion

5.1. Digital Spaces as Sites of Gender Negotiation

These findings show that social media is not just a display window for self-expression. It is also a space of negotiation—between the self and society, between courage and fear, between hope and anxiety [23]. For many of the participants, posting a video or picture in high heels was not just for “likes”—it was a political statement, a form of claiming space that was historically denied to them.

Social media gives people a way to control their own narrative. By selecting the lighting, angle, music, and caption, users create their own version of reality [24]. For gender-nonconforming users, this control is powerful. They are often denied this autonomy in the real world, where schools, parents, or peers might try to define them.

5.2. Risks for Performance and Hyper-Visibility

But this freedom comes at a cost. The same platforms that provide visibility also expose users to trolling, misgendering, and harassment [25]. Algorithms tend to favor content that aligns with conventional beauty standards, which can marginalize people who don't "fit." For example, videos featuring slim, fair-skinned men in heels often receive more engagement than those by heavier or darker-skinned users [26].

The pressure to be "inspiring" or "brave" all the time can also be exhausting. Some users talked about feeling like they had to "perform" their identity online in ways that weren't sustainable offline. Others felt guilty when they stopped posting, as if they were letting down people who looked up to them.

6. Cross-Cultural Comparison

High heels carry different meanings across different cultures. In Western countries, especially in fashion-forward cities like Paris or New York, seeing a man in heels is not shocking—it's considered artistic, even trendy. Designers like Rick Owens and Christian Louboutin have featured heels for men in their runway shows.

In contrast, in many Asian societies, the act of a male-bodied person wearing heels is still taboo. One interviewee, "Kenta," a Japanese fashion student studying in Singapore, said: "When I go back to Tokyo, I leave the heels in my luggage. It's not worth the whispers or stares on the train."

Interestingly, some East Asian online communities are more progressive than offline ones. Xiaohongshu, despite being used mainly by young women, has become a place where gender diversity in fashion is being explored more openly. Many Chinese influencers are reclaiming traditionally feminine styles and combining them with androgynous aesthetics, forming a unique local interpretation of queerness.

Yet conservative backlash remains common. Some users reported being flagged or having videos removed for "inappropriate content," even though they were fully clothed and respectful. This shows that while platforms may seem neutral, they are shaped by political, cultural, and even algorithmic biases.

7. Real-Life Impacts

While social media creates opportunities for experimenting with gender identity, the reality outside of the screen often remains difficult. Several interviewees spoke about the gap between their online expression and what they feel safe doing in real life.

In the survey, 47% of respondents said they would not feel comfortable wearing high heels in public, even if they liked how they looked. The most common reasons cited were fear of judgment, fear of being laughed at, and parental disapproval.

One respondent, "C.Y.," a university student from Chengdu, said: "I posted a photo of myself in heels on Xiaohongshu and got over 200 likes. But when I walked downstairs from my dorm wearing them, a group of guys laughed and called me disgusting. I deleted the post after that."

Schools also play a role in policing gender expression. Another participant described being asked to change out of "inappropriate shoes" during an arts showcase at her secondary school. "They weren't even that high," she said. "Just three inches. But because I'm not a girl, they said it was 'distracting.'"

Family expectations, especially in Asian cultures, can be a strong barrier. Many young people described hiding their online lives from parents. One wrote, "My mom would lose her mind if she saw me in heels. Online, I'm free. At home, I have to be someone else."

These stories show how social media can offer a glimpse of liberation, but also highlight how far society still has to go.

8. Personal Reflection

As a high school student writing this, I found myself thinking deeply about how identity is shaped—not just by who we are, but by what we are allowed to be. In many ways, researching high heels and gender expression opened my eyes to something I used to take for granted: the ability to wear what you want.

Before this project, I had never thought much about high heels. They were just something in my mom’s closet or something celebrities wore. But now, I see that they are much more than just shoes. They are a symbol—sometimes of power, sometimes of pain, and always of choice.

The most powerful part of this project was reading the stories people shared online. So many of them were trying to find a version of themselves that felt true. Some of them had support; others had to fight for every bit of space they took up. I realized that self-expression, something that seems so simple, is actually a form of courage.

I don’t wear high heels myself. But I do wear clothes that make me feel confident, and sometimes that means ignoring what other people might think. If there’s one thing I’ve learned, it’s that fashion is not just about trends—it’s about truth. And in a world that’s always trying to label us, telling the truth about who you are is one of the bravest things you can do.

9. Conclusion

This paper has explored how high heels—once viewed as a rigid symbol of femininity—are being redefined on social media as tools for gender expression, especially by transgender, non-binary, and gender-fluid users. Through discourse analysis, survey results, and personal interviews, it became clear that high heels are more than a fashion statement. They are an act of defiance, a declaration of identity, and sometimes a step toward self-love.

Social media provides a unique space for these expressions to unfold. It offers visibility, community, and the ability to imagine different possibilities. But it also carries risks—of backlash, misunderstanding, and even harm. For many, the online world is a place of freedom, while the offline world remains full of limits.

Yet change is happening. Generation Z is growing up in a world where fashion is increasingly seen as genderless, and where people are learning that identity is something we each have the right to define. High heels, in this context, are no longer just about style—they are about truth, resilience, and resistance.

In the end, whether or not someone wears heels is not what matters. What matters is whether they feel free to make that choice. And thanks to social media, more people than ever are finally beginning to feel that they can.

References

- [1] N. K. Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, Polity Press (2015).
- [2] J. Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge (1990).
- [3] R.W. Connell, *Gender*, Polity Press, (2002).
- [4] R. Cover, *Performing and Undoing Identity Online: Social Networking, Identity Theories and the Incompatibility of Online Profiles and Friendship Regimes*, *Convergence* 18 (2) (2012) 177 – 193.
- [5] W. Dille, T. Kalman, J. McCarthy, *High Heels and Their Discontents*, *Fashion Theory* 18 (1) (2014) 23 – 45.
- [6] X. Gao, Y. Li, T. Zhang, *Gender Subversion in Chinese Youth Culture*, *J. Asian Pop. Cult.* 11 (2) (2022) 145 – 159.
- [7] M. Hildebrand, *Heels as Mobile Media: Performing Gender on the Go*, *Fashion Media Stud. Q.* 9 (1) (2023) 77 – 94.
- [8] H. Koda, *Extreme Beauty: The Body Transformed*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, (2006).
- [9] C. Leng, *Digital Protests and the #KuToo Movement in Japan*, *Asian Fem. Media Stud.* 3 (2) (2021) 95 – 110.
- [10] A. Lipton, *Men in Heels: Social Media and Self-Affirmation*, *Digital Fashion Stud.* 6 (1) (2022) 18 – 37.

- [11] A. E. Marwick, d. boyd, I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience, *New Media Soc.* 13 (1) (2010) 114 – 133.
- [12] L. Nakamura, Blaming the Victim: Asian American Women and Racialized Misogyny on Social Media, *Fem. Media Stud.* 15 (4) (2015) 710 – 712.
- [13] M. Schriever, Pop Fetish: Male Fandom and the Feminized Object, *Gend. Cult.* 22 (3) (2015) 69 – 86.
- [14] E. Semmelhack, *Heights of Fashion: A History of the Elevated Shoe*, Periscope Publishing, (2008).
- [15] H.J. Shin, J.Y. Lee, Non-Normative Fashion in K-Influencer Culture, *Asian Media Rev.* 15 (2) (2022) 103 – 121.
- [16] K. Tiidenberg, *Selfies, Sexuality, and Online Self-Representation*, Palgrave Macmillan, (2018).
- [17] Y. Gao, Research on the sexualization or empowerment of high-heeled dancing on social media, *Commun. Humanit. Res.* 35 (1) (2024) 45 – 58.
- [18] J.M. Hildebrand, High heels as mobile media: (Im)mobilities and feminist ecologies, *Explor. Media Ecol.* 22 (4) (2023).
- [19] C. Schriever, The desire for the heel: Male fetishism and pop-fan culture around Prince, *Cloth. Cult.* 2 (2) (2015) 157 – 172.
- [20] J. Leng, Painful connections: The ‘making’ of the #KuToo online feminist movement in Japan, U.S.-Japan Women’s J. 60 (2021) 52 – 83.
- [21] X. Yan, A study of post-00s’ shaping of clothing gender symbol perceptions as influenced by social media, *Herit. Cult.* 4 (2) (2023) 101 – 119.
- [22] B. Lipton, Skirting the issue: Do queered clothes still make the man? *Sociol. Rev. Mag.* (2022).
- [23] R. Dilley, J. Hockey, V. Robinson, A. Sherlock, Occasions and non-occasions: Identity, femininity and high-heeled shoes, *Eur. J. Women’s Stud.* 22 (2) (2014) 143 – 157.
- [24] L. Burcar, High heels as disciplinary practice of femininity in Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street*, *J. Gend. Stud.* 27 (5) (2018) 515 – 526.
- [25] Y. Gao, Z. Wang, Y. Yao, Fashion, gender, and media: Analysis of the history and current popularity of Mary Jane shoes, in: *Proc. 2021 Int. Conf. Soc. Dev. Media Commun. (SDMC 2021)*, Atlantis Press, Vol. 631 (2022) 219 – 228.
- [26] Y. Shin, S. Lee, “Escape the corset”: How a movement in South Korea became a fashion statement through social media, *Sustainability* 14 (18) (2022) 11609.