

Using the Media to Identify Invisible Problems of the Gender Sphere

Chang Ma^{1,a,*}

¹Arts and Social Science, University of Sydney, New South Wales 2050, Australia
a. chma6615@uni.sydney.edu.au

**corresponding author*

Abstract: The fast-developing network era has brought unprecedented cultural impact to the masses, and people have also gained more knowledge through digital production, even breaking many information gaps to a certain extent. The reporting and reprinting of hot and negative news, which are more likely to attract attention, have also brought to light many invisible problems of gender in society, including the protection of women's rights and the inequality of marital relations. In this article, we conducted interviews with some specific groups of people from different backgrounds through online questionnaires to understand how people from different backgrounds use social media to find out about marital or gender issues and the mutual influence between them and the media. The results showed positive media coverage can promote social support for victims and condemnation of domestic violence. Discussions of sexual harassment in social media productions also help to increase public awareness of sexual harassment and encourage victims to come forward.

Keywords: Gender studies, Social media, Sexual harassment, Domestic violence, Marriage

1. Introduction

With the popularity of the Internet, digital media and online platforms have become the essential and main ways for people to get news, information, and entertainment, so the way of content production and dissemination has also changed dramatically due to the changes in digital media and online platforms. The media industry has undergone a profound change in digitisation, with traditional media such as newspapers, TV and radio gradually transitioning to online platforms and digital media providing more interactive, real-time and customised services. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Xiaohongshu, and Weibo provide channels for users to share information, make connections, and engage in social interactions.

Global internet users spend 151 minutes per day on social networks in 2023, which is a rise of 2.72% compared to 2022, and it is a continuous rise [1]. According to the Global Web Index, the average number of social media platforms regularly accessed by 16 to 64-year-olds globally is 6.7 per month, and the number of platforms for 16 to 24-year-old viewers rises to 7.5 [1]. Social media usage among young Chinese continues to break new heights, with 1.03 billion social media users in China in 2024. As of June, the user scale of instant messaging, online video, and short video still ranked in the top three, reaching 1.047 billion, 1.044 billion, and 1.026 billion respectively, with a user usage rate of 97.1%, 96.8%, and 95.2% respectively[2].

In addition to bringing entertainment and convenience to life, social media continues to help young people gain insights into the outside world and become a meeting place to discuss and learn from others' views. Many of the livestreams on TikTok use issues that may be encountered in marriage as topics for debate, with highly discussed topics including, "Is it necessary to celebrate Chinese New Year with my husband's family?", "Is it considered domestic violence for couples to abuse each other?", "Should the bride price be given to the woman?" etc. Viewers can join the debate table, or listen to others' speeches in the live room. In the process of discussion, many people realized the invisible problems in marriage. Meanwhile, with these social media discussions, more and more researchers are analysing the invisible problems of both genders, including but not limited to the protection of women's rights and the inequality of marital relationships. However, in post-normal times, the emerging concepts have failed to solve the old social problems completely, so some of the new gender issues are still in a state of blankness in terms of exploration and solutions. Therefore, this article conducts interviews with people of different backgrounds through online questionnaires to understand how people of different backgrounds use social media to find out about marital or gender issues and how they and the media influence each other.

At the same time, by analysing the media's reflection on the ideological trends of society, we can understand the views and attitudes of different groups in society. This analysis contributes to in-depth academic research on the relationship between the media and the general public. It serves as a practical guide and inspiration for society, government and media practitioners, promoting a deeper understanding of the relationship between the media and ideology in society.

2. Invisible problems

2.1. Protection of women's rights

2.1.1. Women's Education

Generally, women are regarded as not have an advantage in maths and physics compared to men. In addition, the discrimination against women in education does not only lie in the arbitrary belief that they are not good at any subject; it is that women's basic right to education is difficult to ensure in many developing countries. In remote and impoverished areas, parents may choose to squeeze time and energy out of their studies by involving their daughters in household chores at an early age, judging their daughters to be unfit for study and deserving of laborious work or marriage in exchange for resources as soon as possible. As a result, people with low levels of education tend to enter marriage easily, especially women. In addition, in families that provide schooling for both sons and daughters, for reasons such as overburdening and lack of resources, parents prioritise securing education for boys, even though girls may have better grades.

Many educators are working on improving continuing education in poor mountainous areas. Among them, the Huaping Girls' High School, founded by Headmistress Guimei Zhang and received attention from social media and online news outlets, has been a breakthrough in addressing the invisible problem of women's difficulty securing their right to education. Headmistress Zhang believes that women's education can have a lasting impact on three generations, including educated women, thus reducing current and future dropout rates in poor mountainous regions and alleviating the problem of educational difficulties in the long run [3].

2.1.2. Sexual harassment

Because the information cocoon caused by the network big data push will make the media publicity coverage, lack users who have not paid attention to the relevant topics [4], so most of the time, the information and content of women's rights and interests of the topic of the push will not attract

widespread attention. However, social media has a cohesive ability, and users enjoy the impact of participatory culture and thus become engaged in the topic. Until Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's sexual assault scandal broke, issues such as workplace sexism and sexual harassment that women encounter because of their gender were not talked out. However, Berkeley used the influence of social media to unveil the fourth wave of feminism by encouraging many women to face unfair treatment for the first time and to disclose information about it through Instagram, one of the world's mainstream social media platforms [5]. Thousands of people shared their experiences of sexual assault on social media, using the hashtag #MeToo to express their protest and solidarity against sexual assault. The Me Too movement is an international social movement that reveals the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment and promotes awareness, discussion and change. The core idea of the movement is to make victims feel supported and heard while reversing cultural attitudes towards sexual assault and harassment and promoting a fairer and safer social environment. In the wake of this, the issue of gender inequality in the workplace has gone from being an unspoken and invisible issue to one that is openly discussed.

Through social media, people are engaging in discussions on the topic, using their own experiences as case studies to disclose the discrimination they have encountered in the workplace, including unfair promotions, sexual harassment, gender differentiation, and cancellation of labour contracts due to pregnancy and maternity. Social media provides narrators the security and courage to share their encounters online by hiding their real identities. This has made more people aware of the common invisible problems women encounter in the workplace and even in other life scenarios. As a result, women have come to realise their passive role in a patriarchal society.

In recent years, under the influence of media reports, the concept of sexual harassment has been refined. It is no longer only defined as direct physical contact but also as various behaviours that make women feel offended, verbal harassment, and cyber harassment. At the same time, sexual harassment has been extended to men and some transgender and queer people [5].

However, #MeToo has been met with some controversy while generating a significant impact, including concerns that the movement may have led to false accusations or social hypervigilance and concerns that the movement may have weakened interactions and socialisation in gender relations. In the wake of this movement, surveys have shown that women are 2.5 per cent more likely to be dissatisfied with security in stations and carriages [6]. Even though #MeToo increases insecurity in society, this is a consequence of the media's amplification of social issues. It is still the first step for women to be brave enough to defend their rights in gender relations, and it is the campaign that most visually demonstrates the impact of the media on gender issues.

2.2. Unequal marital relations

2.2.1. Leftover women

In recent years, there has been much criticism of "leftover women" in the Chinese media. For example, many women say that if they remain unmarried or are not in a relationship after the age of 30, they will be urged and criticised by their friends and relatives on marriage and relationships [7]. The media image of "leftover women" has two basic patterns: "marriage rationalist" and "eager to get married", and the media reports are generally more objective, to a certain extent restoring the image of "leftover women" [8].

In traditional marriage, women are often regarded as subordinate to their husbands and families and are mainly responsible for supporting their parents and reproducing their offspring. This unequal marriage relationship makes many highly educated women choose not to get married. In the news, popular discourse portrays these unmarried women as selfish, choosy, and only interested in men

with excellent financial resources [9]. Such criticisms have also intensified the emergence of feminism consciousness on the Internet.

In current post-normal times, young working women have gained more rights to choose their lives. At the same time, the majority of people still believe in the old concept of traditional marriage, which leads to verbal attacks on "non-marriage", "leftover women", and other issues. The traditional criticism of unmarried women is a validation of society's traditional expectations of women. In the process of resisting the criticism, single women are gradually revealing themselves as independent and autonomous. Most women have a stable job and a decent life, so they are more cautious about marriage, and a single life is not difficult for them to accept. However, traditional parents believe that marriage is the ultimate choice for women and exerts maximum pressure on their daughters. Social media has provided more platforms and opportunities for women to discuss the issue of marriage. On TikTok, the hottest short video platform worldwide, many influencers choose to film their married life, showing the integrity of marriage for others, so that more unmarried women can see what marriage looks like under different circumstances through social media and thus consider the meaning of marriage for themselves in a more in-depth, comprehensive.

2.2.2. Pressure for marriage

In addition, studies have shown that the main source of anxiety and stress for most leftover women originates from their parents, who subconsciously ignore women's disadvantages in marriage, believing that their daughters' singleness is due to their too-high standards and selfishness rather than a man's problem [9]. Usually, parents raise their daughters to be women who meet the standard of social values, and they want them to achieve excellent results in their studies and careers. However, when they reached, their parents considered her value in terms of marriage. Put another way, parents raise not their children but another man's wife. Thus, many working women strive to pursue the creative life of pioneers, but they will suddenly realise that they are still expected to play supporting roles such as submissive wives and responsible mothers [7].

2.2.3. Domestic violence

In many developing countries, society does not provide enough protection for women's marital rights and interests, and it is challenging to solve the problem of domestic violence between couples. For example, on 9 June 2019, in Thailand, pregnant Chinese tourist Nuannuan Wang fell from a 34-metre-high cliff. After the incident, Wang said she was "personally pushed off the cliff" by her husband. Thai police arrested Yu on suspicion of killing his wife. The news has attracted much attention from both Chinese and Thai people and a lot of discussion on social media about marriage issues. Many influencers have analysed the case and expressed their views on marriage and domestic violence. Domestic violence is no longer an easy conflict and common quarrel between husband and wife but a thoroughly premeditated murder. The resulting fear of marriage continued to ferment on the Internet, and the issue of domestic violence became the bottom line of male-female interactions. At the same time, instigated articles on social media were more likely to have high transmit rates at this stage [10]. Thus, the inequality of women in marriage and the deprivation of personal safety rights and interests are uncovered in social media.

In addition, to cater for online hashtag, traditional media are also more inclined to discuss issues in marriage. The film *Lost In The Stars* was released worldwide in 2023; the story of a gambler who lured his wife to Southeast Asia to kill her in the sea in order to pay off a huge gambling debt. The choice of material for this film originated from the case mentioned above, and the initial reason for the creation of the film was because people realised through the media coverage that domestic abuse is also an invisible and vicious violence in a marriage. Not only physical abuse is domestic violence,

but also verbal and emotional abuse [11]. Until domestic violence is confronted and openly explored, the level of awareness of emotional abuse in marriage is minimal for both men and women and young people can learn more about concepts beyond their original perceptions through social media discussions.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data collection

The questionnaires were selected from subjects of different ages, genders, educational levels, occupations, and cultural backgrounds to ensure the diversity and representativeness of the findings. In addition, subjects completed the questionnaire under anonymity conditions to ensure that they were able to authentically express their personal views without being influenced by external pressures. The authors recruited subjects willing to participate in the study through online platforms, social media and the student community. After obtaining consent, subjects were provided with a link to the study questionnaire. Eventually, a total sample size of 90 was collected, with a valid sample size of 82, of which females accounted for 53.66% of the sample size and males were 46.34%. The main age concentration was 36-45 years old, and the educational background was undergraduate, occupying 47.56%. Subjects completed the questionnaire under anonymity conditions to ensure that they were able to express their personal views truthfully without being influenced by external pressures.

The questionnaire was designed to cover two main topics: gender issues and the media. Questions included but were not limited to:

- If you encounter verbal violence in a romantic/marital relationship, what is your attitude towards it?
- Did you experience verbal or physical sexual harassment growing up and in your life?
- How would you rate the current internet campaigns against violence and sexual harassment?
- Have you ever experienced verbal or physical sexual harassment in your life or upbringing?
- Please list the events or cases that you have learn about on social media where gender/marriage issues are highly discussed (e.g. #ME TOO; the case of the pregnant woman who fell off a cliff in Thailand; etc.):

For semi-structured questions, thematic analysis was used to identify common themes and patterns. Cross-analysis was used for scored questions in order to summarise and compare perceptions between different groups.

3.2. Result

3.2.1. Choice of Marriage

Those with low levels of education will be more likely to enter into marriage, as shown in Figure 1 (a), which indicates that those with high school education and below have the highest rate of being married, and that the rate of being married decreases as the education level increases, regardless of age. In addition, by comparing comparing unmarried people's willingness to get married, it can be seen that unmarried men are generally higher than unmarried women (Figure 1 (b)). After adding the consideration factor of the Internet, unmarried women who think that the Internet contributes a great deal to the understanding of gender relations have the lowest intention to get married. The intention of the unmarried women to get married tends to increase as the influence of the Internet decreases, which is supported by the fact that the women who considered the Internet to be unhelpful in understanding relationships were shown to be married (Figure 2).

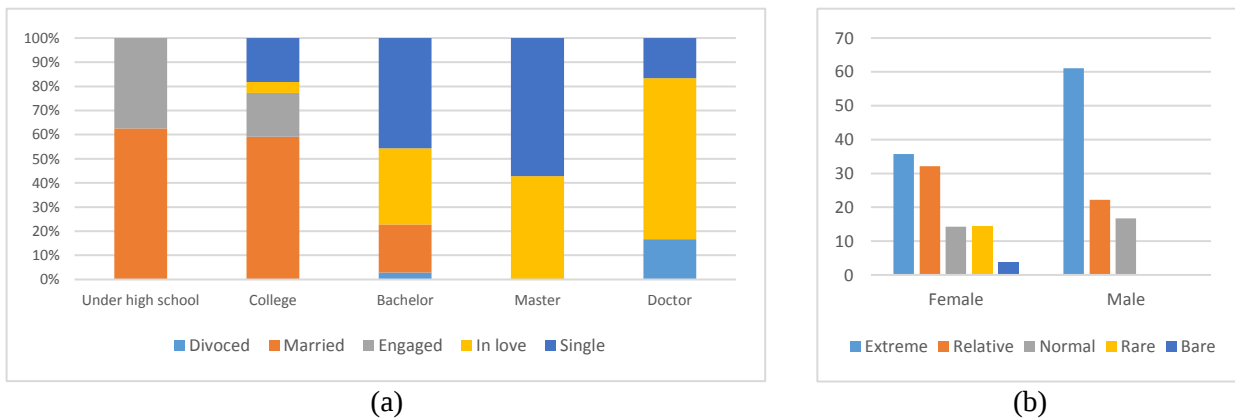


Figure 1: (a) Marriage state and education; (b) The marriage willingness of unmarried

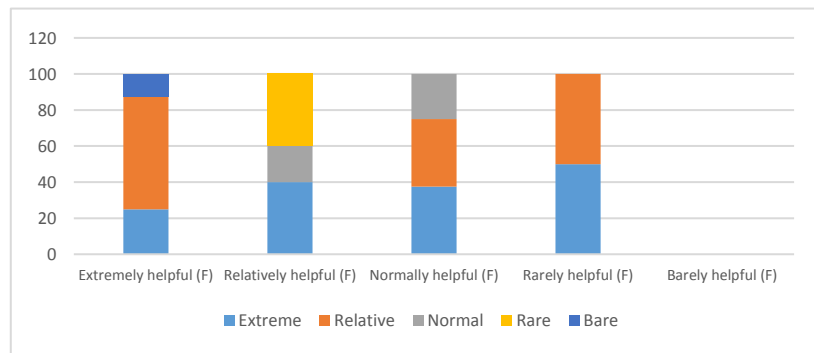


Figure 2: The impact of media helpful for female's willingness to marriage

3.2.2. Sexual harassment

About encountering verbal or physical sexual harassment, according to Figure 3, the attitude of some people is to avoid it. Even though most of them chose to fight back directly, more than 50% of those who fought back directly did not experience sexual harassment. As for the probability of being sexually harassed, men are also relatively more likely to experience sexual harassment in the workplace (Figure 4), but this is rarely noticed. In addition, the extent to which the Internet publicises the issue of violence and sexual harassment can also affect the population's sensitivity to such matters.

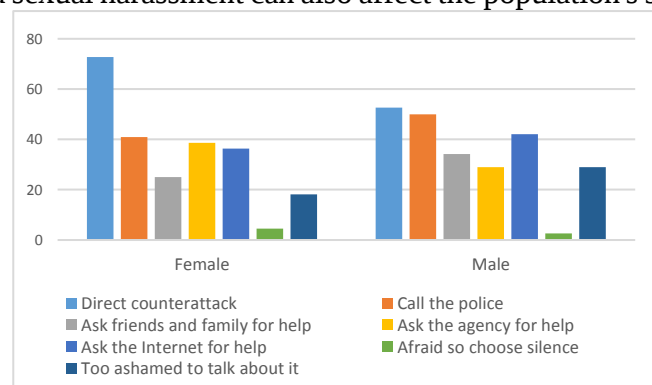


Figure 3: The different reactions to verbal sexual harassment

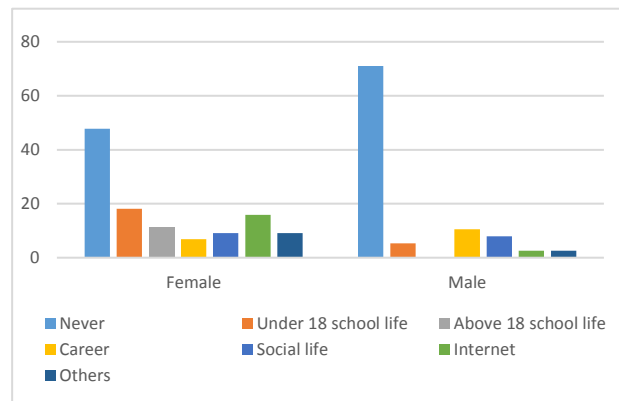


Figure 4: The contrast between females and males

3.2.3. Violent behaviour

Most people have a low tolerance for violence in relationships. According to Figure 5, 47.56 per cent of people do not tolerate violence at all, and 41.46 per cent of people's tolerance for violence is limited to giving fewer opportunities for correction. Before the media intervened to report on domestic violence, domestic violence was considered by some people as a normal behaviour for couples to get along with each other. After the media analysed and disseminated more and more incidents of domestic violence, the public's sensitivity to domestic violence increased. Verbal violence is also recognised as a form of domestic violence (Figure 6).

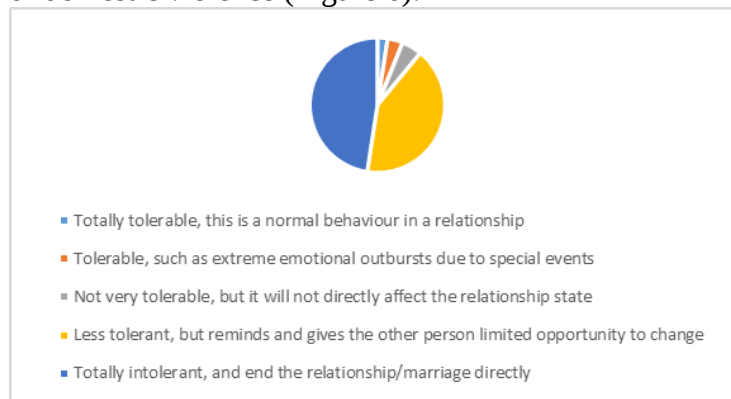


Figure 5: attitude towards verbal violence in romantic/marital relationships

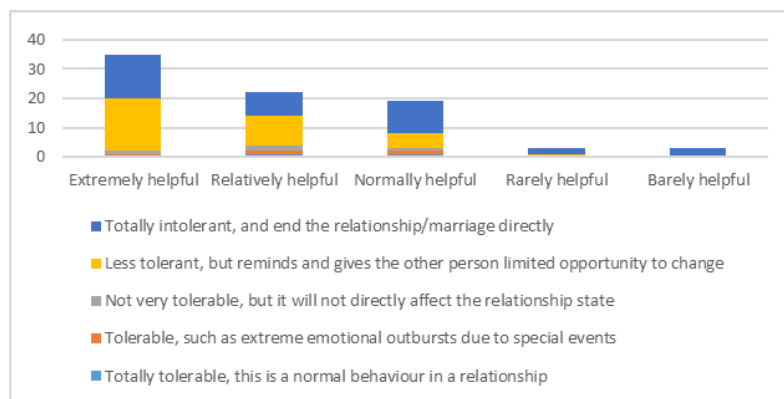


Figure 6: influence between Social Media communication and the attitude of domestic violent

4. Discussion

Research has found that young people generally have a significantly lower desire to marry, and this is particularly true of highly educated women. There is a negative correlation between women's education and the need for marriage; the higher the education, the lower the need for marriage. With the changes in society and the dissemination of information, women have become more aware of the status of gender inequality and have increased their independence in life, a tendency that has led them to pursue personal and career development rather than taking marriage as their only life choice. In addition, having a certain degree of financial independence gives women more choice and control over their lives.

Moreover, domestic violence in marriage has been gradually exposed to the public through the media, and the attitude and stance of the mass media in reporting domestic violence will have a certain impact on the public. Suppose the media actively exposes domestic violence and gives the victims legal or humanitarian attention and support. In that case, it can arouse the public's sympathy for the victims and attention to domestic violence, thus prompting society to condemn domestic violence and build a perfect social supervision mechanism. At the same time, the serious discussion of domestic violence in media works (e.g. films and variety shows, etc.) resonates with the audience. It motivates the public to participate in efforts to solve the problem of domestic violence.

In addition, as mass media communication has a certain degree of influence on public perceptions, and the media also reflect ideological trends in society, public media exposure of sexual harassment will enhance public awareness of sexual harassment. By reinforcing the definition and scope of sexual harassment, the public will have a clearer understanding of sexual harassment. The sharing and helping environment established through social media platforms can help victims better protect their rights and interests. This open discussion environment also helps to reduce the silence and concealment of sexual harassment, encourages the exposure of many behaviours to society, and helps to establish a sound mechanism for monitoring and punishing sexual harassment behaviours in society.

The analyses in this article provide relevant perspectives and insights into society's understanding of gender relations issues and provide strong support for developing more effective social intervention and support policies. The analyses also make it clear that the Internet positively impacts and contributes to the failure and solution of invisible problems in society.

5. Conclusion

This article has explored the public's exploration and discussion of invisible issues in contemporary gender relations through the media, including women's unequal access to education, leftover women, pressure for marriage, domestic violence and sexual harassment. A web-based questionnaire was used to explore the influence of the media to make the argument.

However, the questionnaire survey should consider that the self-representation method gives the respondents a great deal of autonomy, especially when confronted with sensitive topics, and they will give the most desirable and desirable answers to meet social expectations. It is also essential to consider that some of the respondents have not experienced sexual harassment, and their judgement on this issue may be idealistic. In addition, some of the respondents were older, so recall bias is also possible. The sample is also relatively small and lacks a certain degree of universality.

Contemporary media can reflect the ideological trends of society, and it can also be used to influence the public's ideology. Proper use of the power of the media can help more people understand the invisible problems of marriage and thus have the opportunity to avoid or solve them. I will continue to research the link between media and social ideology in the future and focus on how the media can ameliorate societal negative issues.

References

- [1] Dean, B. (2023, December 19). Social Media Usage & Growth Statistics, Backlinko. Backlinko. <https://backlinko.com/social-media-users#average-time-spent-on-social-media>.
- [2] Chen, G. (2024, January 22). Analysis of the Development Status of Social Media Industry in 2024, ChinaIRN.com. <https://www.chinairn.com/hyzz/20240122/174837600.shtml>.
- [3] Li, P. (2023, July 7). Zhang Guimei: Willing to be a light in the mountains. China Education News. http://www.jyb.cn/rmtzgjjyb/202307/t20230707_2111066478.html.
- [4] Zhang, X., Cai, Y., Zhao, M., & Zhou, Y. (2023). Generation mechanism of “information cocoons” of network users: An evolutionary game approach. *Systems*, 11(8), 414. <https://doi.org/10.3390/systems11080414>.
- [5] Boyle, K. (2019a). #MeToo, weinstein and feminism. In #MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism. Springer Link.
- [6] AitBihiOuali, L., & Graham, D. J. (2021). The impact of the MeToo scandal on women's perceptions of security. *Transportation Research Part A: Policy and Practice*, 147, 269–283. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tra.2021.02.018>
- [7] Gui, T. (2020). “Leftover women” or single by choice: Gender role negotiation of single professional women in contemporary China. *Journal of Family Issues*, 41(11), 1956–1978. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513x20943919>
- [8] Dong, T., & Wang, H. (2017). ‘Whether the media image of “leftover women” reflects reality or artificial construction? --A study of Sina.com's coverage of ‘leftover women’ from 2011 to 2015. *Press Circles*, 2017(11), 27-34. DOI:10.15897/j.cnki.cn51-1046/g2.2017.11.005.
- [9] Ji, Y. (2015). Between tradition and modernity: “Leftover” women in shanghai. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 77(5), 1057–1073. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12220>.
- [10] Stieglitz, S. (2013). Emotions and information diffusion in social media—sentiment of microblogs and sharing behavior. *Journal of Management Information Systems*, 29(4).
- [11] Adebayo, O., Omojola, O., & Evbuoma, K. (2021). Social media and emotional abuse in marriage: Evidence from Lagos State, Nigeria. *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, 25(5S), 67+.