

#InfantFood: Women's Subtle Resistance under the Algorithmic Gaze of Rednote Users

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Abstract: Although Rednote's user demographic is mostly female (70-80%), numerous individuals claim to encounter harassment from male users. In this environment, female users construct a sophisticated coping technique that has not been adequately studied. This study investigates the phenomenon of female users' intentional appropriation of the hashtag #InfantFood on Rednote to minimize the visibility of their posts to male users. Based on the theory of algorithmic bias, the study endeavors to solve the central questions: why do female users choose the specific hashtag #InfantFood? How does it achieve dual resistance against traditional gender discipline and algorithmic bias? The current study proposes that female users' appropriation of #InfantFood serves as a subtle form of resistance to subvert the algorithmic bias and gender discipline embedded in #InfantFood, rendering a safe space where women are empowered to have a voice, while the practice also raises concern about gender segregation and the formation of echo chambers, which may exacerbate misunderstandings and conflicts between genders. This paper offers a novel perspective on the interplay between algorithmic bias, gender discrimination, and online harassment and offers insights for a reevaluation of algorithmic design to promote gender equality in digital spaces.

Keywords: Social Media, Algorithmic Bias, Gender Discrimination, Online Harassment, Hashtag

1. Introduction

Rednote has witnessed a new trend among female users: many young women, even when posting content unrelated to childcare such as makeup tutorials, selfies, or travel diaries, purposefully attach the hashtag #InfantFood. Actually, the hashtag falls under the category of the so-called “male avoiding tags”, a strategy aimed at leveraging algorithmic filters to minimize the visibility of their posts to male users, thereby targeting only a female audience. By February 2025, this tag has attracted over 38 billion readings. This behavior reflects female users' intentional efforts to manipulate the visibility of their posts and the accessibility to their chosen audience, which serves as a coping strategy to avoid online harassment. Even though Rednote's main user group consists of young women, accounting for an overwhelming 70-80% of the user community, quite a number of them have reported experiencing harassment in actual use.

The current research assumes that the pervasive male intrusion in a female-dominated community is related to algorithmic bias. The existing studies have primarily been concerned with algorithmic discrimination against consumers [1]. Another heated topic focuses on algorithm

attractiveness and user loyalty [2]. Notwithstanding the breadth of current studies, the intersection between algorithmic bias and gender discrimination has not been adequately explored. This research proposes a novel perspective on the interplay between algorithmic bias, gender discrimination, as well as online harassment. This essay endeavors to respond to the following questions: (a) Why do female users choose the specific hashtag #InfantFood? (b) How does it achieve dual resistance against traditional gender discipline and algorithmic bias? This study sheds light on how women resist entrenched inequalities in digital spaces in a novel way; additionally, the inquiry is crucial for social media platforms to reassess their algorithms and truly improve gender equality.

2. Literature review

Algorithmic recommendations, utilizing big data and artificial intelligence, are engineered to facilitate accurate alignment between content and user preferences. It has become essential in numerous digital platforms, such as e-commerce systems, search engines, and short video websites, transforming the dissemination and consumption of information in the digital era. Wen and Xie point out the cornerstone of algorithm recommendation: the similarity-based filtering mechanism, which systematically categorizes users and content based on shared characteristics to generate personalized recommendations [3].

Nevertheless, the application of algorithm recommendation is not without problems. A seminal issue is privacy leakage, and the platform may exploit users' personal data for financial gains. For instance, Li investigates the phenomenon of "big data exploitation of loyal customers", in which algorithms set personalized prices based on users' behavioral data, and purchasing history, and demographic information, thus allowing companies to maximize profits by charging higher prices to loyal customers [4]. Another salient concern regarding algorithm is the amplification of existing discrimination, such as gender bias.

The algorithmic recommendation mechanism, alongside the rise of social media has inserted a new dynamic in women's discourse, transforming them from passive audiences to active participants in self-presentation and construction of subjectivity. Despite all the positives, social media has not effectively challenged the entrenched gender discrimination. For instance, the diverse filter functions available on social media, such as face slimming and body slimming, reflect body aesthetics adhering to male expectations [5]. What's more, Phipps and Catherine have noted that online hate, including sexually violent messages and threats of bodily harm, predominantly targets women, an extension of cultural misogyny [6].

Meanwhile, social media has likewise generated a significant shift in the feminism movement and contributed to new forms of protesting. The current feminist wave primarily manifests in the form of online discursive activism. Feminists recognize the political potential of discourse and, through the reinterpretation and construction of alternative narratives, challenge the patriarchal discourse. The discursive nature has long been the focus of the previous feminist movement, such as consciousness-raising circles, speak outs, and alternative press while the rise of social media has provided feminists with an unprecedentedly large platform and considerable channels for voice [7]. The hashtag has become essential in advancing online discursive activism, as it enables information aggregation and communication, transforming individual statements into collective action. Activists thereby refer to this type of protest as "hashtag feminism", which is exemplified by the sweeping #MeToo movement, demonstrating the mobilization capacity of hashtags in the age of social media [8]. However, #InfantFood displays a different nature from its predecessors in terms of lack of political agenda and deliberate organization. The distinctiveness has not received enough research attention, and the current study of #InfantFood, accordingly, may generate new understandings of feminist hashtag activism.

3. Theoretic framework: algorithmic bias

Based on big data and machine learning, it is deemed neutral and impartial. However, technology is socially shaped, where social relations (including gender relations) are reproduced [9]. A taken-for-granted myth is the automatic association between technology and manliness, while diminishing women as technically incompetent or invisible in the technical sphere. In other words, algorithms are likewise gendered. Rahmatullah and Gupta's research reveals that algorithmic gender bias originates from both the biases of its creators and the societal assumptions embedded in the training data [10]. What's more, it will be an oversimplification to reduce such bias to mere theoretical concerns. Rather than merely reflecting societal prejudices, algorithms actively contribute to the solidification and amplification of systemic gender inequalities. For example, in the job market, even when the applicants do not provide gender information, algorithms can track their past shopping records to judge their gender and marital status, thus placing female candidates at a disadvantage [11]. In a separate incident in 2024, the Beijing police probed a disturbing crime wherein the culprit used an algorithm to fabricate about 7,000 pornographic photographs. The female victims were the suspect's classmates and colleagues. In comparison to men, women exhibit greater susceptibility to sexual offenses. An algorithm intensifies this feeling of insecurity: even a mundane photo on social media might be altered into a pornographic image. In summary, algorithms, far from being neutral, are deeply embedded in gendered power structures, perpetuating systemic inequalities. Under such circumstances, females resort to novel ways to resist gender biases, as exemplified by the appropriation of hashtags like #InfantFood.

4. Results and discussion

Despite its superficial appearance as a female-friendly platform featuring a main user community composed of women, in its essence, Rednote's algorithm reproduces a binary gender framework and a heteronormative patriarchal structure. To begin with, the platform only offers two gender options. In actual use, the platform reinforces the stereotyped gender notions. Moreover, Rednote's algorithm presupposes that male users prefer consuming female sexuality, so when it recognizes female users uploading selfies, it tends to send the message to male users. Consequently, algorithms intensify women's plight of being consumed, gazed upon, and marginalized in cyberspace. Under such circumstances, the current study argues that (a) for one thing, female users subvert the algorithmic bias and gender discipline embedded in #InfantFood through re-encoding the tag and establish a safe space where women are empowered to have a voice; (b) for another, this practice can also lead to gender segregation and conflicts.

4.1. Re-encode the hashtag

The social expectations embedded in #InfantFood deserve notice. The word "infant" emphasizes women's responsibility of nurturing offspring. Besides, the word "food" is closely linked to a specific space, implying that women should be confined to the domestic sphere, the kitchen especially. In most cultures, there exists the image of the "angel in the house." Similarly, in traditional Chinese society, there exists the adage, "Men govern the external realm, while women govern the domestic sphere." In conclusion, #InfantFood embodies the societal expectation of a "virtuous mother."

But the female users do not fully comply with the underlying social discipline but take a negotiated position. According to Stuart Hall's theory of "encoding and decoding", the communication process is far from a linear sender-message-receiver model. Due to differences in identity, emotions, values, and other factors, even if the receivers fully comprehend the original intention, they can decode the message another way [12]. He identifies three positions in decoding: the first is the

dominant-hegemonic posture, in which the audience comprehends the encoded information and fully endorses it.

The second is the oppositional position, where viewers understand the connotation but decide to decode in a completely contrary manner. #InfantFood falls into the negotiated position, acknowledging the legitimacy of dominant definitions while adopting a resistant attitude in specific contexts. On the one hand, female users recognize the legitimacy of the social norms behind #InfantFood, understanding nurturing infants as a responsibility for women, a domain that men have no right to enter. On the other, they rewrite its connotations by associating “baby food” with travel, food, beauty, and more, thereby deconstructing the social expectations of women's roles. In this process, the hashtag is re-encoded with new meanings, becoming a secret language among female users. The hidden language not only fosters camaraderie and sisterhood among female users but also serves as an alternative grammar to male-dominated discourse, possessing subversive and transcendent force. The negotiated position has inherent restrictions. Despite the hashtag's dynamics in connecting, organizing, and mobilizing, the question remains: when do the dynamics draw the power to enact concrete change? How does the online engagement translate into offline mobilization or institutional impact? Consequently, there exists the concern about the carnival of signs, where symbolic gestures may take precedence over tangible actions.

#InfantFood adopts a subtle form of resistance. It lacks a clear political agenda, and is leaderless and unorganized but has been internalized as a lifestyle circulating among female users. Some may criticize that it is passive resistance. But thanks to the relatively moderate position, it is endowed with broader circulation. It partly explains why other male tags enjoy less popularity: hashtags like #185cm impose body shame on men while tags like #Castration and #MaleSterilization adopt a more aggressive stance, showing direct hostility. Such intense aggression is more likely to provoke conflicts and retaliation. Consequently, #InfantFood's subtle resistance avoids harassment and disputes, creating a safe space where women can have their voice.

4.2. Gender segregation and conflicts

Nevertheless, the gender segregation caused by this hashtag, which can lead to intensified misinformation, misunderstanding, and even antagonisms, should also be highlighted.

While the hashtag can shield female users from the prevalent harassment and establish a safer community, it, to some extent, confines them to an insulated space without access to a wide range of viewpoints or open interactions with males. To be more specific, feminist perspectives and progressive ideas remain circulated within an internal network rather than being integrated into public discourse. Not only does such isolation limit the reach of their voice in broader social discussion, but it also undermines cross-gender understanding. Even when males intend to comprehend the lives and aspirations of females, the obstacles consisting of secret languages and signals of hostility deny their access. Hashtags such as #InfantFood hinder males from properly understanding females, hence relegating the latter to a more marginalized and invisible status. Ironically, the original intent behind the “male avoiding tags” is to create a safe space that empowers women to express themselves; however, in practice, such actions inadvertently imply an assumption of women's vulnerability and incapacity, suggesting they cannot navigate the complexities of open discourse or defend themselves as equals against men. Consequently, the establishment of a “safe space” reinforces the patriarchal narrative that women should be confined to a protected and private area.

Aside from the self-segregation, the use of such hashtags raises another problematic issue: the creation of “echo chambers” where the entire user group is inclined to approach extreme positions. Cass Sunstein initiates the concept of an echo chamber that the perspectives of users get reinforced owing to the interactions with peers sharing similar tendencies, amplification of the presupposed narratives, along with the exclusion of alternatives in a closed environment [13]. Furthermore,

Sunstein expresses concerns that new technologies may exacerbate echo chamber effects, thereby contributing to group polarization [14]. In the context of #InfantFood, the algorithm, that traces female users' search trajectory, tends to feed them opinion-reinforcing sources over opinion-challenging ones, thus dramatically facilitating like-minded people to sort themselves into virtual communities and wall themselves off from others. Platform algorithms are not only drivers of echo chambers, but also carriers of gendered techno violence: by commercializing recommendations with the "female friendly" label, resistance symbols are incorporated into traffic tools to dissolve their disruptive potential. Moreover, within such communities, female users are more conscious about their self-presentation; in other words, how they are perceived by other group members. Subsequently, when they discern their position deviating from the mainstream, they purposefully adjust their opinions at least slightly to conform to the majority to avoid being deemed as disloyal, thus eroding ideological diversity.

As a result, the echo chamber established by female Rotenote users that bans the opposite gender not only reinforces existing stereotypes but also stifles internal diversity, leading to more homogeneous views and an increased intolerance towards opposing viewpoints. Although the hashtag partly rewrites the established gender discipline and offers a sense of safety, it overlooks the need for public visibility and ideological diversity, prioritizing safety over inclusive dialogue.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the appropriation of the hashtag #InfantFood by female users on Rednote manifests a subtle form of resistance against both traditional gender norms and algorithmic bias. By re-encoding the hashtag, women create a safe space for self-expression and empowerment, subverting the original social expectations embedded in the tag. However, this strategy also contributes to gender segregation and the formation of echo chambers, potentially exacerbating misunderstandings and conflicts between genders. This study primarily revolves around the female user's perspective. Future research should integrate male users' views, analyzing their understanding and reactions to this nuanced resistance. Further inquiry is required to examine how the social media platform addresses women's issues and potential solutions that reconcile user safety with inclusive interactions.

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