

Empowerment and Discipline in Rednote: A Feminist Economic Perspective

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Abstract. This article explores how the behavior of women on the Rednote online platform reflects the tension between empowerment and discipline under the logic of platform capitalism. Based on feminist economics, this study highlights unpaid labor, emotional work and institutional restrictions that affect women's visibility and participation in the digital space. This article employs discourse analysis and combines media political economy to explore three dimensions: women's content production and media self-image, symbolic consumption and emotional labor embedded in community interaction, and the algorithmic logic and commercial logic of platforms. Research has found that women's participation in Rednote has expanded their expressive agency and economic engagement. But at the same time, it also recreates the gender division of labor and the commercialized femininity. The so-called empowerment is conditional - it is facilitated by market visibility rather than structural equality. Finally, the study holds that women's activities on Rednote reflect the paradox of digital femininity, where feminist discourse and capitalist incentives are intertwined, creating opportunities and constraints for women in the digital economy.

Keywords: Rednote, feminist economics, digital femininity, gendered division of labor, influencer culture

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid development of digital platforms and the growing size of the female consumer demographic, the intersection of gender and economy has received extensive attention in both academic circles and public discourse. Since 2010, Rednote has evolved from a cross-border shopping guide into a platform that integrates lifestyle sharing and social commerce. The monthly active users of this platform have exceeded 200 million, more than 90% of whom are women, creating a distinctive space for sharing consumption culture and lifestyle [1]. On this platform, women are positioned as consumers and producers and disseminators. They continuously participate in generating economic value and cultural significance through practices such as "grass-planting notes" and "shopping sharing".

However, the "empowerment" afforded by the platform is far from one-dimensional. Previous studies show that although Rednote presents diverse representations of women, these images remain regulated by algorithms and commercial logic [1,2]. For instance, the image of women are quite diversified, which covers a wide range of age, professions, and life styles, yet high-traffic content on

the platform still emphasizes appearance, ideal body shape, and consumerism, which potentially reproducing traditional gender stereotypes [3]. At the same time, women's consumption behaviors increasingly display symbolic functions, with commodities serving as markers of identity and social recognition. "Colorful lipstick that can charm men" is a typical case among them [2].

This phenomenon reflects the duality of Rednote as a site of "feminist economy". On the one hand, the platform offers women new opportunities for self-expression and entrepreneurship. On the other hand, this empowerment is constrained by the logic of platform capitalism and consumerism [4].

Based on this phenomenon, this article adopts feminist economics as the theoretical framework and draws on approaches from consumer culture and media criticism to explore how Rednote embodies the contradiction of feminist economy between empowerment and discipline. Specifically, it tries to respond to the following questions: first, how does Rednote construct a feminist economy through content production and community interaction; second, how do the platform algorithms and commercialization mechanisms undermine or alienate women's empowerment; thirdly, how does this contradiction reveal the tension between women's economic practices in digital platforms and gender inequality in social structures?

2. Literature review

2.1. Basic concepts of feminist economics

Feminist economics emerged in the 1960s. As a feminist intervention in classic economy, feminist economic serves as a critique of neoclassical economics, particularly its reliance on the assumption of the "rational economic man". This theory emphasizes that the gender differences, unpaid labor, and emotional labor recognized as a component of value production and global exploitation [5]. By challenging market-centrism, feminist economics argues that women's economic activities not only include employment and consumption, but also cover household labor, child-rearing and social supply. These long-neglected non-market labors are the foundation of social operation [5]. Furthermore, feminist economics also emphasizes the impact of gender power relations on resource allocation and labor division. As Goldin's historical research reveals, even though the proportion of women in education and employment has significantly increased, income disparities persist. The root cause lies in institutional arrangements such as time structure and job incentive system within organizations [6]. This indicates that structural inequality will not naturally dissolve due to the enhancement of individual initiative, but must be reformed at the institutional level.

2.2. Research on new media and consumerism

In the context of new media, consumption has increasingly embeded within the process of self-expression, identity building and interpersonal social interactions Baudrillard's theory of "symbolic consumption" argues that the symbolic meaning of commodities often surpasses their use value, turning consumption into an exchange of social codes [2]. This trend of symbolization is evident on contemporary digital infrastructures which combine social interactions and online shopping. In Rednote platform cosmetics, fashion items and lifestyle labels not only represent the products themselves, but also serve as important channels for users to express themselves and gain recognition.

Meanwhile, users perform emotional labor through the process of "planting grass"(which means recommendations) and "pulling grass" (disavowals), that maintains community relations through

performative attitude towards their audience [5]. This model that combines consumption with community not only provides women with space to generate both economic and emotional value, but also makes them more exposed to appearance anxiety and peer pressure [1].

Previous research has argued that the construction of female media images on Rednote has dual significance. Luan Qian found that although Rednote has projects images of independent, self-responsibility, diversity, yet at the same time it reinforces ideals centered on women's appearance and consumption [7]. Similarly, Wang Xueyuan points out that women's self-presentations on platforms often reflect traditional femininity, which is encouraged in the platform logic [3]. Furthermore, Zhou Di added that, as a "community + e-commerce" platform, the women's culture in Rednote is often distorted by commercial logic, where "empowerment" and "discipline" are interwoven [4]. Such tension reflects the complex situation where consumerism and feminism are intertwined in the post-feminist era.

Overall, the existing literature offer three insights for this article: First, feminist economics offers a critical framework for analyzing non-market labor and institutional inequality in Rednote. Second, the theory of consumer culture helps explain that how female consumption encourages symbolic performance which further generate emotional power in the platform. Thirdly, while previous research on Rednote has revealed the contradiction between empowerment and discipline, it lacks an in-depth analysis of the institutional logic behind it. This article seeks to bridge that gap by integrating theoretical perspectives with case-based analysis.

3. Theoretical framework and methods

Given this research inquiries, this article takes feminist economics as the core theoretical analysis framework to better understand how gender relations are orchestrated in the platform economy. As noted earlier, feminist interventions in economic theory provide a critical perspective on how women has long been exploited as unpaid labor and emotional labor, which has been ignored and devalued in traditional economics. It also calls for a close scrutiny of the institutional power that constraints gender relations, demonstrating that inequality is not merely a result of individual choices but is deeply embedded in systemic arrangements [5]. This framework helps to go beyond the orthodox Marxist analysis of value production in Rednote by foregrounding how women are embedded in and shaped by the entire process. Specifically, the value of women on Rednote is reflected not only in shopping and consumption, but also in non-market labor such as note-taking, experience sharing and community interaction. The circulated content is further absorbed as value under the platform logic [5]. Furthermore, Goldin's insights offer an important lens for analyzing how labor time is organized in everyday life and how institutional structures shape the distribution of work [8]. This perspective reminds that when examining women's behavior in the context of digital platforms, the focus should not be limited to individual initiative on the surface. Instead, attention must be given to the deeper institutional constraints that condition and regulate these behaviors.

Therefore, the analysis will focus on three aspects. First, the production of female content and the construction of gendered media images by scrutinizing how female users of Rednote shape their diverse identities through notes, pictures and videos, as well as boost their visibility in community interactions? Second, I will discuss how consumption was displayed as an identity symbol and, in turn, generate emotional labor. Third, the analysis will address the restrictions imposed by the platform's institutional logic on women's empowerment. Particularly, I will show how algorithmic distribution privileges high-traffic and commercially valuable content. I would like to further

elaborate the idea that female expressions could gain visibility in the platform, but only insofar as they are subsumed within the logic of capital accumulation [4].

In conclusion, this article will systematically examine the tension between empowerment and discipline in women's practices on Rednote through the critical framework of feminist economics, drawing on text analysis, discourse analysis, and the political economy of media. In doing so, it aims to uncover the complex entanglements of gender and capital that shape women's experiences on this digital platform.

4. Case study

4.1. Female content production and media image construction

Rednote, positioned as a women-centered life sharing video platforms, provided users a whole set of affordances for content production including posting notes, pictures and videos, and other ways. On the one hand, it offers female users an opportunity to present their diverse identities through self-made content. For instance, one could find millions of workplace sharing by professional women, parenting records of mothers, makeup tutorials by beauty experts, and so on. These contents together constitute a rich spectrum of female images [7]. In addition, Rednote also offers women an opportunity to break through the stereotypes of traditional gender roles on digital platforms. By sharing workplace experiences, motherhood narratives, and daily life stories of self-exploration, female users can present their identities in diverse and authentic ways. This narrative not only challenges the cultural framework that has long confined women to family and consumption roles, but also, to a certain extent, promotes the transformation of society's perception of the diverse image of women [3,7]. Especially against the backdrop of the female economy and the digital consumption wave, these true stories of women highlight the expanding voice and subjectivity of women in the digital public domain.

However, on the other hand, the algorithmic model and traffic-driven design has reinforced certain stereotypes. High-traffic content is mostly concentrated in the fields of appearance, fashion and beauty, which may lead to the homogenization of female images [3]. Meanwhile, content in professional or academic domains receives limited exposure. This means that even if women have the initiative to create diverse content, their visibility is still constrained by the platform mechanism. This tension reflects the "limited empowerment" of women on digital platforms: they have gained a space for expression, yet this space is restricted by commercial logic and aesthetic discipline.

4.2. Symbolization of women's consumption behavior and emotional labor

Consumption lies at the core of Rednote's practices. At present, the consumption of Rednote users has transcended the material use value of the goods themselves and is more prominently manifested as a symbolic practice. Specifically, labels of cosmetics, clothing or lifestyle are not only used to meet daily needs, but also become important codes for users to showcase their identity, taste and social belonging [2,9]. For instance, "Male-cutting lipstick" signifies not only cosmetics but also attractiveness and social identity. Under this logic, consumption functions as a means for women to perform and affirm their self-identity within the community.

Meanwhile, women's interactive behaviors around consumption on Rednote contributes to digital data accumulation, which the platform then monetizes and leverages for power. I argue that the interpersonal actions in Rednote constitutes emotional labor, including "Grass-planting Notes", answer questions in the comment section, like or share others' content. Although these behaviors do

not generate direct monetary rewards, they play an important role in maintaining community relations [1]. However, this kind of emotional labor is often overlooked or even devalued. On the one hand, it enhances platform engagement and commercial value; on the other hand, in the long term, the reinforcement of “idealized” beauty and standardized middle class lifestyle could barely help to balance gender relations. In performing this labor, they must maintain their symbolic identities while simultaneously bearing psychological and economic burdens.

Therefore, the consumption behavior of women on Rednote exhibits a tension with feminist ethos. On one hand, they serve as practices of self-expression and community connection; on the other, they constitute unpaid labor that is absorbed into the logic of capital. This aligns closely with the concept of “neglected labor” emphasized in feminist economics [5].

4.3. Labor platform institutional logic and restrictions on women's empowerment

The institutional design of Rednote profoundly influences the way women's behaviors are represented. The algorithmic distribution and commercial sponsorship prioritize content with high commercial value and broad aesthetic appeal, thereby reinforcing the commercialization of slogans such as “female independence” and “Be your own Queen” [4]. On the surface, these slogans convey a feminist message. They encourage women to be self-responsible and independent, however it tightly combines women’s independence with their consumption which further traps women within the designated market strategies.

This “commercialized feminism” embodies the logic of platform capitalism, in which feminism is no longer a critical tool but a consumable symbol. As a result, women's empowerment often becomes “conditional”. It will only be recommended and seen when its expression aligns with business logic, while posts addressing workplace inequality or institutional critique are marginalized. This contrasts sharply with the visibility of beauty and fashion content. This logic indicates that the empowerment of women on Rednote is closely linked to its capital accumulation mechanism. The initiative of female users on the platform is not completely autonomous but is embedded in algorithmic preferences, advertising cooperation and traffic logic.

As Goldin’s research on the gender gap demonstrates, structural inequality is often deeply embedded in institutional arrangements and incentive mechanisms [6]. Likewise, the empowerment of women on Rednote is essentially limited, always regulated by the underlying logic of capital accumulation.

5. Discussion and criticism

From the case analysis above, it is evident that the behavior of women on Rednote as a whole reflects the dual logic of “empowerment and discipline”. From the perspective of feminist economics, this contradiction carries deeper significance.

First, the numerous practices undertaken by women on Rednote constitute unpaid and emotional labor, as female users continuously produce content and maintain emotional bonds for the community through ‘grass-planting notes,’ sharing experiences, and interactive comments. These practices not only enhance community stickiness but also directly bring potential for traffic and business conversion to the platform [2]. However, it needs to be pointed out more specifically that such behaviors involve women at different levels: on the one hand, there are ordinary users who contribute their experiences and word-of-mouth information in daily communication but receive almost no direct economic returns; On the other hand, there are Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) and micro-influencers. Their content may attract brand cooperation or traffic sharing, but this kind of

return is still based on highly unequal algorithmic recommendations and platform commercial mechanisms [1]. This indicates that women's community labor is often within the structure of an influencer culture: ordinary women passively undertake "unpaid emotional labor", creating value for a few top women and platforms, which in turn further capitalize through advertising and traffic. This is consistent with the long-term criticism of feminist economics. That is, women's reproductive labor and caring labor are underestimated or even completely ignored in the social and economic system.

Secondly, the platform has strengthened the gender division in the digital space. The fields dominated by women mainly focus on beauty, fashion, lifestyle and parenting. In the digital age, these fields are increasingly regarded as symbolic signs of "femininity", giving rise to what scholars call a kind of digital femininity—an ideal of social construction. It links women's empowerment with consumption, appearance and family expertise [3]. In contrast, content related to digital products, sports and finance does have some popularity on the platform, but it is not the core stage where women's identities are widely reflected or rewarded. This asymmetry is very similar to the gender division of labor in the offline society. In the offline society, some forms of knowledge and professional skills are feminine, while others are still associated with male-dominated authority. This indicates that the digital platform Rednote has not broken down gender boundaries. On the contrary, to a certain extent, it reproduces gender differences. This phenomenon indicates that platform empowerment is conditional. Its boundaries are set by capital logic and algorithmic mechanisms.

The commercialization of "femininity" has challenged what "feminism" is promised in the platform. The slogans on Rednote such as "Women's Independence" and "Be your own Queen" are essentially transformed by brands into consumer symbols for marketing and capital accumulation [4]. Feminism has detracted from critical discourse to advertising language. This weakens its liberating potential and confirms the warning of feminist economics about institutional constraints. Once the slogan of gender equality is tied to capital, it may lose its social critical edge [6].

Finally, Rednote revealed a new form of institutional constraints on digital platforms. Goldin's research indicates that the gender gap is often not a matter of individual ability but rather the result of institutional arrangements [6]. For Rednote, the platform algorithm, traffic distribution and business cooperation mechanism constitute new "institutional constraints". This determines which female behaviors can gain visibility and which are marginalized. The empowerment of women is thus highly unstable and dependent.

6. Conclusion

This article adopts feminist economics as the core framework, discourse analysis and media political economy methods to explore the behavior of women on Rednote. This study finds that Rednote functions not only as an important space for women to express themselves and construct online identities, but also a field where the logic of platform capital and gender discipline interweave. Women have demonstrated initiative and creativity in content production, consumption practices and emotional labor. However, these behaviors often translate into unpaid labor, creating value for the platform while reinforcing gender-based division of labor and commercial discourse.

The feminist discourse on Rednote presents a paradox of "empowerment and discipline". On the one hand, women have gained unprecedented visibility and discourse space on this platform. On the other hand, this kind of empowerment is dependent on the platform system and is constrained by algorithms and capital logic, making it difficult to break through structural inequality. This is in line with the core concepts of feminist economics. Gender labor and institutional constraints have long existed in the modern economic system and are constantly being reshaped.

The academic significance of this research lies in, through the perspective of feminist economics, revealing on the one hand the underestimated emotional labor and reproductive labor in digital platforms. On the other hand, it has deepened the critical understanding of the relationship between consumer culture and gender. The practical significance lies in reminding that while encouraging women's digital empowerment, attention should also be paid to the institutional structures behind the platform. Otherwise, "empowerment" is very likely to become an illusion under the logic of capital.

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