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Digitized identities: A feminist examination of female authorship in China's online literary sphere

Yunyi Hu

Division of Digital Humanities, School of Information Resource Management, Renmin University of China, Beijing 100872, China;
huyunyhk@163.com

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Abstract: This study critically examines the identity construction of female writers within China's burgeoning digital literary sphere through a Feminist Media Studies lens, with an emphasis on Postmodern Feminist Theory. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with 26 female online literature writers and thematic analysis of their narratives, the findings reveal that identity construction in this context is a diverse, dynamic, and interactive process. Key factors influencing this process include personal experiences, societal expectations, gender norms, audience feedback, and the affordances of digital platforms. The study highlights how female writers actively shape their identities, often challenging traditional gender norms and leveraging the interactive nature of digital platforms to negotiate their self-representation. Furthermore, it uncovers the pivotal role of reader-writer interactions and platform algorithms in shaping both their creative practices and their professional identities. These findings contribute to the understanding of gender dynamics within digital literature, offering insights into strategies for promoting gender equality and diversity in the online literary space.

Keywords: digital publishing; online literature; identity construction; feminist media studies; postmodern feminist theory; female authorship; digital media in China

1. Introduction

Since the publication of Michael Joyce's hypertext fiction *Afternoon, a Story* in 1987, the Internet has provided literary enthusiasts with platforms to create and consume literary works in virtual space, which has given rise to a new genre of literature known as online literature. The digital revolution has profoundly transformed the global literary landscape by providing a platform for a broader range of voices, including those traditionally marginalized in the literary canon. This transformation is particularly evident in China, where the burgeoning digital literary sphere has become a vibrant space for diverse expressions of creativity. Online literature platforms, offering a unique blend of creativity and interactivity, have surged in popularity, providing an avenue for writers and readers to engage in dynamic dialogues.

In China, online literature has emerged as a major form of cultural production that has been transforming the landscape of Chinese literature, the rise of which is closely linked to the country's rapid development of the economy and Internet technologies in the past decades [1]. The popularity of Chinese online literature has challenged traditional notions of literary authorship, publishing, and distribution, creating new patterns of literary production and consumption [2], which has also increased the influence of Chinese culture and literature on the world as a tool for cross-cultural understanding and communication [3]. By 2022, the scale of the online

literature market had reached 38.93 billion yuan, an increase of 8.8% year-on-year. The number of online literature writers had exceeded 22.78 million, covering 57 major categories of the national economy. The number of online literature users had reached 492 million and the number of overseas online visitors reached 901 million [4].

The tremendous success of Chinese online literature in domestic and overseas markets is closely linked to the rise of Chinese women as both writers and readers. Female readers now account for nearly half of all online literature consumers, and the market share of works authored by women continues to grow significantly [4,5]. Online literature production allows Chinese women to acknowledge the relevance between the social conditions they are situated in and the products of their wild imagination, which contributes to the material and immaterial empowerment of Chinese women at both individual and collective levels [6,7].

Despite the rise of female participation in online literature, scholarly attention to this group remains relatively sparse. Most of the existing research focuses on the content of online literature or the dynamics of online literature platforms [7–9]. Few studies have specifically explored the experience of female writers, particularly in terms of how they construct and present their identities in the digital literary space.

Therefore, this study aims to bridge this research gap by delving into the identity construction of female online literature writers in China. It seeks to understand how these writers navigate the virtual realm to shape, present, and negotiate their identities through their work, and how these identities are perceived and interpreted by their readers. It endeavors to shed light on the intricate processes of identity construction among female online literature writers in China. By doing so, it aims to provide a richer, more nuanced understanding of the experiences of and the challenges faced by these writers in the digital literary sphere.

2. Literature review

The literature review covers three main areas: The first section, “Feminist Media Studies and Postmodern Feminist Theory” includes an in-depth review of key texts in the field, providing an understanding of how these theories have been used to analyze media content and production. The second section, “Identity Construction in Online Spaces” reviews studies on identity construction in digital environments, with a focus on the strategies individuals use to craft and negotiate their identities, and the role of online communities and audiences in shaping these identities. The third section, “Women and Chinese Online Literature” discusses studies on the role and representation of women in Chinese online literature, providing context and background for the study’s focus on female online literature writers in China.

2.1. Feminist media studies and postmodern feminist theory

Feminist Media Studies originated in the late 20th century, around the 1970s and 1980s, coinciding with the second wave of feminism. It arose as a vital field of study that scrutinized the intersection of gender, media, and power. This discipline provided a gendered perspective to examine media production, representation, and consumption [10].

One of the early influential works in this field was Tuchman’s “The Symbolic

Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media”. Tuchman [11] introduced the concept of “symbolic annihilation” to articulate how media narratives often distorted or completely omitted women’s experiences. This study underscored the systemic marginalization of women in media, laying a foundation for future research in Feminist Media Studies. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Feminist Media Studies were significantly shaped by the prevailing theoretical paradigms, such as Marxist feminism and liberal feminism. Researchers primarily focused on the representation of women in media, critiquing the pervasive depiction of women in stereotypical and belittling roles. By the 1990s, Feminist Media Studies evolved to incorporate intersectional perspectives, acknowledging that women’s experiences in media are not monolithic. Instead, they are influenced by multiple overlapping aspects of identity, including race, class, and sexuality [12]. This shift broadened the scope of Feminist Media Studies, enriching its critiques and insights into the complex dynamics of gender and media.

As we entered the new millennium, the representation of women in the media began to transform, prompting a shift in the research focus within the field of Feminist Media Studies. A significant contribution to this evolving discourse was Rosalind Gill’s work (2007) on “postfeminist” media culture. Gill [13] highlighted an intriguing paradox in contemporary media, where feminist ideas are simultaneously utilized and undermined. She argued that this intricate interplay has given rise to a subtle form of sexism. In this context, empowerment is portrayed as a product of individual choice, thereby camouflaging systemic gender inequalities.

The advent of the digital age in the 21st century further broadened the scope of Feminist Media Studies. The field began to explore the role of new media in shaping and negotiating gender identities [14]. This new direction includes the examination of digital spaces as potential sites for feminist resistance, as well as the influence of algorithms and digital infrastructures on gender representation. Today, Feminist Media Studies continues to evolve, integrating a vast array of theoretical perspectives and methodologies. It remains committed to scrutinizing the complex interplay of gender, media, and power, adapting to the changing media landscape and its implications for gender representation and dynamics.

Postmodern Feminist Theory, emerging alongside the third wave of feminism in the late 20th century, is deeply rooted in the postmodernist philosophy that questions grand narratives and fixed truths. This theoretical approach has significantly influenced our understanding of gender, power, and identity, particularly in the context of media studies. Haraway [15] expanded this theoretical framework with her concept of the “cyborg”—a fusion of machine and organism—in her work “A Cyborg Manifesto”. This metaphor served as a potent symbol for a post-gender world, profoundly influencing the discourse on gender within the realms of technology and digital culture. A cornerstone of Postmodern Feminist Theory is Judith Butler’s groundbreaking work, “Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity”. Butler [16] deconstructed the idea of a stable, inherent gender identity, proposing instead that gender is performative and socially constructed. This notion of “gender performativity” has had far-reaching implications on gender studies, underscoring the fluidity and complexity of gender identities.

The interaction between Feminist Media Studies and Postmodern Feminist

Theory provides a robust conceptual framework for deciphering the intricate dynamics of gender, power, and identity in media. For instance, McRobbie [17] utilized this intersectional approach to demonstrate how contemporary media simultaneously employs and undermines feminist discourses. She argued that media often recasts feminist achievements as individual success stories, thereby negating the necessity for collective feminist struggle. Recent research, such as the study by Keller et al. [18], has employed this intersectional framework to analyze the complexities of online feminist activism. Echoing Butler's concept of gender performativity, they showed how digital spaces enable the performance of fluid and multiple gender identities. Their research highlights both the possibilities and challenges of digital feminist activism, illustrating how these platforms can be used to confront rape culture while also exposing activists to online harassment and backlash [19].

Altogether, the combination of Feminist Media Studies and Postmodern Feminist Theory offers a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics in contemporary media. As media landscapes continue to evolve, these theoretical frameworks will be instrumental in examining the complex interplay between media, gender, and power.

2.2. Identity construction in online spaces

The onset of the internet and the proliferation of social media platforms have revolutionized how identities are constructed, performed, and perceived. The digital realm provides a unique platform for users to actively participate in self-presentation, negotiate their identities, and influence their perceptions by others. This literature review examines seminal and contemporary works that explore the domain of online identity construction.

In the early days of internet development, online spaces were often viewed as distinct from the "real" world. Pioneering researchers like Wagner [20] posited that the Internet fostered an environment conducive to "identity play," enabling users to experiment with multiple personas, often distinct from their offline selves.

However, this perspective was contested as the demarcation between online and offline realities became increasingly porous. Slater [21] urged a shift in perspective, arguing that online and offline worlds are intertwined and mutually influential, thereby necessitating a more holistic view of identity construction.

As social media platforms gained traction, the discourse of online identity construction experienced a significant shift. Researchers began to study how these platforms facilitate self-presentation and identity performance. For instance, Boyd [22] proposed that platforms like MySpace and Facebook function as "networked publics" where adolescents negotiate identity. Boyd's work underscored how self-presentation on these platforms is shaped not only by self-perception but also by the anticipated expectations of an imagined audience.

Furthering this discourse, Papacharissi [23] introduced the concept of "affective publics". She argued that social media platforms allow users to form connections predicated on shared emotions and experiences, thereby influencing online identity construction and perception.

As the field matured, scholars began examining the influence of cultural factors on online identity construction. Nakamura [24] explored how racial stereotypes and

prejudices persist in online spaces, affecting the construction and perception of racial identities. This underscored the importance of considering cultural and societal contexts when studying online identity construction.

The narrative around authenticity and anonymity has also significantly influenced online identity construction. Senft [25], in her study on blogging, explored how bloggers navigate the tension between authenticity and self-exposure, leading to the emergence of the “micro-celebrity” phenomenon.

In contrast, Hogan [26] investigated the role of anonymity in online identity construction, discussing how platforms like Reddit provide a space for users to express aspects of their identities that may be uncomfortable to share in more identifiable online spaces.

More recently, the rise of visual social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok has added a new layer to online identity construction. Abidin [27] demonstrated how these platforms enable users to construct their identities through visual narratives, emphasizing aesthetic presentation.

In all, identity construction in online spaces is a multifaceted process impacted by numerous factors, including the nature of the platform, cultural contexts, societal norms, and individual motivations. As online spaces continue to evolve, it becomes increasingly critical to explore these dynamics to understand their impact on our perception of self and others.

2.3. Women and Chinese online literature

The evolution of the internet and digital media has dramatically transformed Chinese literature, introducing new platforms for both literary expression and consumption. Women have become a significant demographic within Chinese online literature, contributing creatively and engaging as readers. This literature review focuses on pivotal studies investigating the roles, portrayals, and influences of women in the realm of Chinese online literature.

The explosion of Chinese online literature into a significant cultural phenomenon over the past two decades is masterfully documented in Michel Hockx’s “Internet Literature in China”. Hockx [1] argues that the internet has democratized the processes of literary creation and consumption within China, creating avenues for voices typically marginalized, including women, to interact with literature in novel ways.

The contributions of female writers to the depth and variety of Chinese online literature are prominent. Heather Inwood [28], in “Verse Going Viral: China’s New Media Scenes”, states that female authors have utilized online platforms to express personal experiences and perspectives often overlooked in traditional Chinese literature. She emphasizes the example of online poetry, where female writers voice their emotions and perspectives, thereby contesting patriarchal norms.

A salient example of a female-authored work achieving global recognition is Jingfang Hao’s “Folding Beijing”, which earned the 2016 Hugo Award for Best Novelette. Hao’s accomplishment highlights the Internet’s capacity to magnify women’s voices within the global literary sphere.

The depiction of women in Chinese online literature has been a subject of substantial academic inquiry. Feng [29] critically examines how women are

represented in online romance novels. It is observed that although these narratives often reproduce traditional gender stereotypes, they also provide avenues for questioning and challenging these norms.

Gender and sexuality are further explored in Yang and Xu [30], who further explored gender and sexuality by scrutinizing the “Boys’ Love” (BL) genre, which predominantly attracts female readers. They contend that BL narratives enable women to explore alternative sexualities and gender identities, underscoring the emancipatory potential of online literature.

The effect of Chinese online literature on its extensive female readership is another crucial research area. Wang and Zhao [31] examined the evolution of women’s perceptions as reflected in online romantic novels published from 2012 to 2021. They argue that the growing number of women expressing their viewpoints and ideas through internet literature provides a valuable lens into the ideologies and shifts in women’s perceptions during this period.

In conclusion, the emergence of online literature has significantly redefined women’s roles in the Chinese literary landscape. From providing a platform for female writers to express their unique perspectives to offering narratives that challenge traditional gender norms, and fostering a sense of community among female readers, Chinese online literature plays a pivotal role in empowering women. As this field continues to evolve, it remains essential to further explore these dynamics and understand their broader cultural and societal implications.

3. Research methods

3.1. Data collection

A semi-structured interview is a research method where the interviewer has a set of themes to follow but allows interviewees to respond freely, and new questions can emerge based on their responses [32]. The data collection process for this study was carried out through semi-structured interviews with female writers who contributed their original novel creations to various Chinese online literature platforms. These platforms included renowned sites such as 17K, Hongxiutianxiang, Tadu, Qidian, Lehu, Jinjiang Literature City, Xiaoxiangshuyuan, and Xiaoshuoyueduwang.

The data collection period was extended from October 2021 to October 2023. Each interview’s time frame fluctuated, lasting from a minimum of 25 min to a maximum of 2 h 10 min. Throughout the data collection period, a total of 26 comprehensive interviews were amassed. The recruitment of interviewees occurred through a variety of channels: Personal acquaintances who were female online literature writers were engaged for assistance, and recruitment information was disseminated on social media platforms. The interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 44 years old. The interviews were conducted in Chinese and were subsequently translated into English. The interview process began with demographic inquiries to initiate the conversation and foster a comfortable atmosphere. Following this, the interviewees’ narratives of their self-identification journey as online literature writers were documented.

3.2. Data analysis

The data amassed from the interviews underwent a rigorous analytical procedure utilizing thematic analysis. Thematic analysis served as an effective method for pinpointing, scrutinizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning or “themes” within the qualitative data [33]. This method aptly aligned with the study’s exploratory nature and its emphasis on subjective experiences and interpretations.

The thematic analysis process identified recurring patterns across the interview data, categorizing identity construction into five core influencing factors: personal experiences, gender norms and expectations, audience feedback, and the affordances of digital platforms. These themes emerged organically from the data, with each factor being supported by multiple narratives and examples provided by the participants.

3.3. Ethical considerations

In conducting this study, strict adherence to established research ethical guidelines was ensured. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, thereby safeguarding their anonymity and reinforcing their right to withdraw from the study at any given time. For the textual analysis, the analysis was strictly limited to publicly accessible texts, and every possible effort was made to anonymize the data.

4. Results

The study identifies several interrelated factors that influence the identity construction of female online literature writers. These include personal experiences; gender norms and cultural expectations, which reflect the pervasive influence of societal standards; audience feedback, which directly shapes writers’ narratives and self-perceptions; and the affordances of digital platforms, such as algorithms, policies, and community structures, which simultaneously provide opportunities and impose constraints on identity negotiation.

The identification of these factors is grounded in both theoretical and empirical foundations. Theoretically, they align with key concepts in Feminist Media Studies and Postmodern Feminist Theory, which emphasize the dynamic interplay between individual agency, societal structures, and the affordances of media environments in shaping identity. Empirically, these themes emerged as significant influences through the thematic analysis of interview data, with participants consistently describing how these elements shaped their creative practices and perceptions of self. Together, these findings underscore the multifaceted and interactive nature of identity construction in the digital literary sphere.

4.1. Personal experiences: Female writers as active agents

At the age of 25, Linlin recounted her journey, which led to her experiencing immense satisfaction and positivity from publishing her romance novels on the literary website 17K:

“...I have been a passionate fan of romance novels since I was 12 years old. I was crazy about reading online romance novels such as *Pharaoh’s Favored Concubine*, *Princess of Khitan*, etc. After I entered college, I began to write my romance novel themed on time travels on 17K... I felt excited about and satisfied

with the love stories that I created... My fantasies were more fulfilled when I created my own romance stories..."

Linlin's journey as a romance writer exemplifies the principles of Feminist Media Studies, particularly Postmodern Feminist Theory, which emphasizes active agency, lived experiences, and the fluidity of identity. Her transformation from a passionate reader to a creator on the digital platform 17K reflects how women can move beyond passive consumption to actively shape their identities through creative expression. Linlin's love for romance novels since her teenage years, combined with her eventual decision to write her own time-travel-themed romance stories, demonstrates how personal experiences drive identity construction. Postmodern Feminist Theory, which rejects essentialist and fixed notions of identity, helps us understand Linlin's evolving self-perception. Her writing process, rooted in personal passion, allows her to reclaim her fantasies, derive immense satisfaction, and assert her autonomy within the digital literary space. This active engagement not only empowers Linlin as a writer but also challenges traditional norms, showcasing how women can use media spaces to construct multifaceted identities.

The interviewees deliberately selected their writing genres based on personal interests, mainly in literature, films, TV dramas, or anime, and subsequently developed stories within these genres, actively contributing to their identity construction as writers. Notably, 23 out of 26 interviewees chose to write romance novels in various subcategories, reflecting their preferences. Even those who ventured into traditionally male-dominated genres, such as wuxia, science fiction, and military, made intentional choices to challenge conventional norms. This conscious engagement in genre selection and storytelling highlights the active role these writers play in shaping their identities. Their experiences further reinforce this process. Typically, the writing journey begins with creating a story outline, followed by drafting and publishing chapters while closely considering feedback from editors and readers. This feedback, an essential aspect of their experience, influences the refinement of their narratives, shaping both their writing practices and their identities as writers. Additionally, the popularity of their work and the positive responses they receive significantly impact their writing frequency and their self-perception as successful authors. These elements—feedback, success, and creative practice—are integral to the ongoing construction of their identities.

Feminist Media Studies emphasizes the centrality of personal experiences in understanding media practices. Consistent with this framework, our research highlights the active, experience-driven process of identity formation among female online literature writers. These writers are not passive recipients of societal norms but active agents who draw upon their lived experiences, cultural backgrounds, and lifestyles to shape their identities through their creative work [34]. This perspective aligns with Postmodern Feminist Theory, which underscores the fluid and multifaceted nature of identity, rejecting essentialist notions of a fixed, stable self.

4.2. Gender norms and expectations: Female writers challenge and subvert traditions

Mengqi, a 24-year-old, was born and raised in a small county town in southern

China. She started publishing online novels with a “dominant female lead” theme after entering university. For Mengqi, releasing online novels is a way for her to show the world the independent thoughts and abilities of women:

“I grew up in a pretty traditional place where women were expected to be dependent on men. But through my own experiences, I found that what I value more is independence and self-reliance. I realized that I can’t just rely on others; I need to be in control of my own destiny. So, when I started writing online novels, I decided to put these ideas into my stories. The main characters I create aren’t people who passively accept their fate; they are people who actively shape their own lives. They don’t depend on others but rely on themselves to achieve their dreams... I hope my stories can tell everyone that women can be independent, self-reliant, and in control of their own destiny. I hope that when readers read my stories, they will feel inspired and understand the value of independence and self-reliance... This is my journey to becoming a writer of “dominant female lead” novels. Through writing, I’ve shaped an identity that is different from societal expectations, as a creator of independent, self-reliant female characters...”

Mengqi’s experience as a writer of “dominant female lead” novels exemplifies how female writers challenge and subvert traditional gender norms through creative expression, a process that can be analyzed through Feminist Media Studies and Postmodern Feminist Theory. Growing up in a traditional environment where women were expected to depend on men, Mengqi’s rejection of these norms reflects her active agency in reshaping her identity and resisting societal expectations. By creating female characters who are independent, self-reliant, and in control of their own destinies, Mengqi not only challenges patriarchal values but also uses her work to inspire readers to embrace similar ideals. Postmodern Feminist Theory, which emphasizes the fluidity and multiplicity of identities, helps frame Mengqi’s journey as a writer. Her decision to write about “dominant female leads” reflects her dynamic process of identity construction, shaped by her personal experiences, cultural background, and resistance to traditional norms. Rather than passively conforming to societal expectations, Mengqi actively constructs an identity that aligns with her values of independence and self-reliance, both in her personal life and through her creative works. Her writing becomes a medium for expressing an alternative narrative about femininity, one that departs from essentialist portrayals of women as passive or dependent. Through this lens, Mengqi embodies the postmodern feminist rejection of fixed, unified notions of identity and instead demonstrates how creative practices can be used to challenge and reimagine gender norms. Her work not only empowers her as a writer but also sends a broader message about the possibilities of female autonomy, thereby subverting traditional representations of women and contributing to the ongoing renegotiation of gender roles in contemporary media.

Lulu, a 28-year-old, works as a human resources specialist for a Fortune 500 company in China. Since the age of 21, she has been publishing literary works on Qidian, a literature website, in her spare time. Lulu grew up in a family with extreme patriarchal values. For her, becoming an online literature author provided an opportunity to challenge the male-dominant views of her original family, both mentally and materially.

“...My passion for writing online literature is the source of my courage to resist reality. I grew up in a family with extreme male preference and female devaluation... Our parents have told us since childhood that the assets of our family will be left to our younger brother in the future... My first novel was about how an ordinary girl from the countryside pursued a career and true love in a big city. I projected myself in the construction of the heroine in the novel to some extent...I turned to the virtual literary world that I created whenever I felt lonely and worthless in real life. I completed the novel when I was 22 upon graduation from the university. At the end of the story, the heroine has a successful career and a new family that unconditionally loves and supports her... I was paid about 4000 RMB by the platform for the novel, which I spent on a new computer later. It was the first time that I stood on my own feet to purchase a quite expensive item without asking my parents for money. Every time I asked them for monthly living expenses at college, they looked unhappy and told me to save as much money as possible... I feel proud to financially support myself by writing online novels...”

Lulu’s interview highlights how female writers use online literature to challenge patriarchal norms and construct empowered identities, a process that can be analyzed through Feminist Media Studies, particularly Postmodern Feminist Theory. Growing up in a family with extreme male preference, Lulu faced systemic devaluation as a woman, but her decision to write online literature became a form of resistance, both emotionally and materially. By creating a heroine who overcomes obstacles and achieves career success and unconditional love, Lulu projected her own aspirations and values onto her work, using writing as a space to reimagine possibilities beyond the constraints of her patriarchal upbringing. From a postmodern feminist perspective, Lulu’s journey reflects the rejection of fixed, essentialist identities imposed by traditional gender expectations. Instead, she actively constructs a new identity—both as a writer and as a financially independent individual—through her creative practices and professional accomplishments. Her ability to earn money from her novels, such as purchasing a new computer without relying on her parents, symbolizes her transition from dependence to self-reliance, directly subverting the male-dominated values of her family.

Feminist media studies emphasize the transformative potential of personal experiences in media production. Lulu’s use of the “virtual literary world” as an outlet to process feelings of loneliness and worthlessness demonstrates how creative expression can serve as a form of empowerment. Her writing not only provides emotional resistance to the devaluation she experienced but also materially challenges patriarchal structures by enabling her financial independence. In line with Postmodern Feminist Theory, Lulu’s process of identity construction is fluid and multifaceted, shaped by her lived experiences, cultural context, and creative agency. Through her stories, she redefines notions of femininity and success, challenging traditional gender norms while inspiring others to imagine alternative possibilities for women’s roles in society.

Our research demonstrates the subversive potential of the literary works created by these women writers, revealing that these narratives serve as more than mere expressions of personal identity. Instead, they actively challenge and undermine

traditional gender norms. This insight aligns with a core principle of Postmodern Feminist Theory, which emphasizes the discursive nature of gender and its capacity for both deconstruction and reconstruction. In this context, online literature emerges as a powerful medium for feminist expression and social critique, reinforcing the central concern of Feminist Media Studies: understanding media as a dynamic space for resistance, negotiation, and the reimagining of societal norms.

4.3. Audience feedbacks and interpretations: Female writers as part of communities

30-year-old Ahua started to publish original literary works on the literary website Hongxiutianxiang when she was a teenager after reading the online romance novel *Summer's Desire* in 2005:

“...At first, the novel (that I wrote) was not well received, perhaps because it was full of bad logic and terrible rhetoric (pause), after all, I was only 14 years old then. But gradually I made progress because I felt really good... One year later, upon the completion of the novel on my 15th birthday, I received a private letter from one of my readers on the website, saying that she enjoyed my story and appreciated the company that the characters in it provided her in the past year. At that moment, I was most thrilled and satisfied...”

Ahua's narrative demonstrates how audience feedback can shape a writer's identity. Despite initial poor reception, a piece of positive feedback from a reader on her birthday affirmed her identity as a storyteller, providing her with both validation and motivation to continue writing. This shows that audience feedback can significantly influence a writer's self-perception and professional identity, and direct engagement with readers can foster a deep sense of satisfaction and belonging.

24-year-old Mao works in a shop in the daytime and writes online novels in the evening. When I asked her to tell a story that reminded her of identity as an online literature writer, she recalled how she interacted with other writers on the first day she signed a contract with the online literature platform 17K:

“...Previously I published some online novels on other literary websites such as 17k, Jinjiang Literature City, etc. ...After I signed a contract with 17k, the literary website, I was then invited by an editor of the platform into a QQ group consisting of writers, editors and readers of the website. On the first day that I joined the QQ group, I was warmly welcomed by Linlin, Shiliu, and Mianbao (names)... It is fun. We then became friends on QQ first and then WeChat... Until today we still have a WeChat group. It's a family full of love...”

Mao's experience underscores the vital role of a community, consisting of both writers and readers, in presenting and negotiating a writer's identity. Being part of the QQ group facilitated by the 17K platform not only validated her status as a professional writer but also provided an avenue for peer recognition and camaraderie. This community acted as a “family”, offering a supportive environment where writers could share their experiences, learn from each other, and receive feedback. This interaction, both peer-to-peer and writer-to-reader, effectively nurtured her identity as an online writer, reinforcing her sense of belonging and shaping her self-perception within the literary world. Thus, the existence of such communities proves to be a

crucial element in the identity formation of online writers like Mao. 20 out of 26 interviewees mentioned interactions with other online writers, readers, or editors from the literary websites in their life stories, and they widely used terms such as “friend”, “family”, “circle”, “community”, “group”, “sense of belonging” to depict this collective part of their identity as online literature writers.

32-year-old Siyu, whose time-travel romance novels are very popular on the literary website Jinjiang Literature City, shared her story in which she emphasized the strong emotional connections between the writers and the readers of online literature:

“...I read the comments that they (the readers) left in the comment zone of my (first) novel. I remember that one of the comments was “Her writing is skillful and elegant, not like that of a novice”. I was flattered, to be honest. I expressed my gratitude in the reply to this comment and a couple of days later, the reader sent me a private letter in which she wrote down her suggestions on how to improve my writing in rich detail. I was very touched when I saw the letter, which was indeed inspiring and encouraging...Readers can show their attitudes toward a novel by using functions that the literary website provides, such as “(dis)like”, “comment”, “mark”, “vote”, “gift”, and so on... I care a lot about my readers... When I found that my novel received good feedback from the readers, I became more motivated to update my work... I have a WeChat group majorly consisting of my readers and they call me “Dada”, a nickname that they gave me for being the core figure of this community... They (the readers) will discuss my novels, ask me to update my ongoing novels, and provide materials for my future novels. I always feel that my readers are cute... Every time I feel like dropping it (online literature production), my readers become the source of power that drags me back to this career. Because deep down inside I know that they are there, waiting to hear more stories from me...”

Siyu’s narrative strongly highlights the reciprocal relationship between writers and readers in shaping a writer’s identity. The process begins with her readers providing detailed suggestions and feedback on her work, which not only serves as a validation of her writing skills but also aids her in improving and fine-tuning her craft. This elevates the readers from being passive consumers of her work to active participants in her journey as a writer, creating a unique two-way relationship. This dynamic is further amplified through the use of social media platforms like WeChat, where Siyu has been able to foster a close-knit community with her readers. Within this community, she is affectionately given the nickname “Dada”, establishing her as the central figure and thereby reinforcing her identity as a writer. Beyond just being a setting for interaction, this community serves as a source of motivation for Siyu. The positive feedback, active engagement, and sense of responsibility towards her readers not only keep her motivated to update her work but also provide the necessary encouragement to persist in her writing career even when faced with challenges. In essence, her readers have become an integral part of her professional identity, serving as both a source of inspiration and a reminder of her responsibilities as a writer. Hence, Siyu’s account underscores the reciprocal relationship between writers and readers in shaping a writer’s identity. Quite a few interviewees said that they were pleased and even proud to be part of this network: “I have this sense of belonging in the QQ group of 17K writers”; “I think that is a compliment to my novels, because only contracted

writers of the platform can receive the invitation to the QQ/WeChat groups”; “It is nice to have people who share similar interests with me talk about trivial things in daily life...it’s a glorious dream in a plain life”, etc. A majority of the interviewees agreed that a benign and inter-dynamic relationship between writers and readers makes contributions to the productivity of writers.

The experiences of Ahua, Mao, and Siyu collectively highlight the crucial role of audience engagement in shaping writers’ identity construction within the digital realm. Audience feedback and interpretation not only influence the reception of their literary works but also play a significant role in how these writers perceive themselves and their creations. For Ahua, audience responses provide motivation and validation; for Mao, they foster a sense of community and belonging; and for Siyu, they establish a reciprocal relationship with her readers. Together, these experiences emphasize the interactive nature of identity formation. This process aligns with a core principle of Postmodern Feminist Theory, which posits that identities are not fixed or innate but are instead fluid and constructed through interaction and perception. For these writers, identity construction is a dynamic and ongoing negotiation, shaped by their engagement with their audience rather than being solely self-determined. This finding also resonates with the focus of Feminist Media Studies on audience studies, particularly the power dynamics between creators and their audiences. Here, the audience is not a passive consumer but an active participant, contributing to the creation, interpretation, and ultimate meaning of the work. Audience feedback, engagement, and interpretation feed directly into the writer’s evolving self-perception and sense of identity.

4.4. Digital platforms’ affordances: Spaces, algorithms and policies

The role of digital platforms in shaping the identities of Chinese female online literature writers is both profound and multifaceted. These platforms provide flexible spaces for writers to construct, negotiate, and express their identities while simultaneously influencing this process through their algorithms and policies. From the perspective of Feminist Media Studies, particularly Postmodern Feminist Theory, these platforms serve as sites of both empowerment and negotiation, where identity is fluid, dynamic, and shaped by interactions with external structures.

Digital platforms offer unique opportunities for female writers to explore creative freedom, engage with audiences, and expand their reach beyond traditional boundaries. The case of Yin, a 44-year-old writer, illustrates how digital spaces enable writers to overcome the limitations imposed by traditional publishing. Yin’s fusion of romance and science fiction was dismissed as “too risky” by conventional publishers, but on the 17K platform, she found a space that embraced her innovative storytelling. Here, Yin experienced creative freedom, unbound by rigid genre classifications, which allowed her to express her unique vision. Her experience underscores how digital spaces can act as empowering arenas where female writers challenge traditional norms and explore multifaceted identities.

Similarly, Li’s journey highlights the interactive potential of these spaces. At 23, Li began her writing career on an online platform, where reader feedback played a crucial role in shaping her identity as a writer. When readers criticized her protagonist

as being too passive, Li reimagined her narrative, giving her character greater agency. This process of adaptation and negotiation reflects the interactive nature of online platforms, where writers construct their identities through direct engagement with their audiences.

Luowei's experience showcases the global reach of digital platforms and their ability to transform writer identities. Initially catering to a Chinese audience, Luowei's work gained international traction, particularly among Indian readers. This exposure introduced her to diverse cultural perspectives, prompting her to incorporate elements of Indian culture and history into her narratives. Through this evolution, Luowei's identity shifted from being a local writer to a globally conscious storyteller. Her case exemplifies how digital platforms facilitate identity construction not only within localized contexts but also across transnational boundaries, aligning with Postmodern Feminist Theory's emphasis on the multiplicity and fluidity of identities.

While digital platforms provide creative freedom, their algorithms also play a significant role in shaping the visibility and reception of content, thereby influencing identity construction. Ming's story illustrates how algorithms can act as a driving force for creative adaptation. As a writer of historical fiction, Ming noticed that contemporary romance novels received greater promotion and visibility on her platform. In response, she began integrating elements of contemporary romance into her historical narratives, creating a unique blend of genres. The algorithm's preference for certain content nudged Ming toward a new creative direction, reshaping her identity from a purely historical fiction writer to one recognized for her innovative fusion of genres. This case demonstrates how algorithms can subtly steer writers toward new creative territories, pushing them to renegotiate and expand their identities in response to platform-driven trends.

From a Postmodern Feminist perspective, algorithms highlight the interplay between external structures and individual agency in identity construction. They underscore the dynamic and fluid nature of identity, which is continually shaped and reshaped through interactions with technological systems. Ming's case reveals how these systems, while potentially constraining, can also serve as catalysts for creativity and identity evolution.

In addition to algorithms, platform policies significantly influence writers' identity construction by imposing constraints on content. Li, a 27-year-old writer known for her gritty and realistic narratives, faced challenges when her platform introduced policies discouraging explicit content. These guidelines threatened censorship or removal of her work, forcing Li to adapt her writing style. She transitioned from explicit portrayals to more implicit, suggestive storytelling, maintaining the intensity of her narratives while aligning with platform rules. This adaptation reshaped Li's identity, transforming her from a writer known for stark realism to one celebrated for subtle, evocative storytelling.

Li's experience illustrates how platform policies can compel writers to negotiate their identities within the boundaries of external constraints. From a Feminist Media Studies perspective, this highlights the power dynamics inherent in digital platforms, where writers must navigate the tension between creative expression and compliance with platform guidelines. Postmodern Feminist Theory further emphasizes that such negotiations reflect the fluid and contextual nature of identity, constructed through

interactions with external forces and systems of power.

The narratives of Yin, Li, Luowei, and Ming collectively underscore the transformative potential of digital platforms in shaping the identities of female online literature writers. These platforms provide spaces for creative freedom (as seen in Yin's case), active audience engagement (as exemplified by Li), global exposure (as demonstrated by Luowei), and algorithm-driven adaptation (as illustrated by Ming). At the same time, they impose constraints through algorithms and policies, which influence the content created and the identities constructed.

From a Postmodern Feminist perspective, these cases highlight the multiplicity and complexity of identities, challenging singular and fixed notions of self. Digital platforms act as both enablers and regulators, fostering a dynamic interplay between individual agency and structural influence. Feminist Media Studies' focus on media as a site of resistance and negotiation is particularly relevant here, as these platforms provide a space where writers can challenge traditional norms while simultaneously navigating external constraints.

Digital platforms serve as powerful agents in the identity formation and presentation of Chinese female online literature writers. They offer spaces for freedom and creativity while also shaping identities through algorithms and policies. These platforms exemplify the fluid and dynamic nature of identity construction, as writers constantly negotiate and adapt their identities in response to audience feedback, global exposure, algorithmic trends, and policy constraints. Through this interplay of freedom and regulation, digital platforms emerge as transformative arenas where female writers can explore and redefine their identities, aligning with Postmodern Feminist Theory's emphasis on the discursive and multifaceted nature of identity.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the identity construction of female online literature writers in China through the lens of Feminist Media Studies, with a specific focus on Postmodern Feminist Theory. It explored how these writers shape, present, and negotiate their identities in online literary spaces, as well as how these identities are influenced by societal expectations, gender norms, audience interactions, and platform affordances. The findings reveal that identity construction in this context is a fluid and dynamic process, shaped by the interplay of individual agency, audience feedback, and structural influences such as algorithms and policies.

Female writers in this study demonstrated their agency by actively challenging traditional gender norms through their works. Many created empowered female protagonists and subverted patriarchal tropes, reshaping gendered narratives in ways that promote inclusivity and alternative representations. This aligns with Postmodern Feminist Theory's rejection of fixed identities, emphasizing instead the multiplicity and fluidity of selfhood. The interactive nature of digital platforms amplifies this process, as writers are not only constructing their identities but also renegotiating them in response to audience feedback and platform dynamics.

Audience feedback emerged as a key factor in identity construction, illustrating the collaborative and interactive nature of digital storytelling. For instance, participants frequently revised their narratives based on real-time reader comments,

adapting their characters and plots to reflect audience expectations while maintaining their creative vision. This process highlights how writers' identities are co-constructed with their readers, demonstrating the dialogic relationship between creators and audiences. Digital platforms thus facilitate a space where identities are continually shaped through negotiation and interaction, reflecting the participatory culture of online literature.

In terms of gender equality and diversity, this study underscores the transformative potential of online literature platforms. By amplifying female voices and encouraging diverse narratives, these platforms challenge dominant gender norms and provide underrepresented writers with opportunities for creative and economic empowerment. However, achieving true equity requires platforms to actively support inclusivity by prioritizing diverse voices, facilitating meaningful audience engagement, and ensuring safe, supportive spaces for writers to express their identities.

The study also sheds light on the dual role of digital platforms in identity construction. On the one hand, these platforms empower female writers by providing spaces for creative freedom, audience engagement, and global exposure. On the other hand, algorithms and content policies can constrain this process by shaping the visibility and acceptability of certain narratives. For example, algorithmic biases favoring popular genres or stringent content guidelines can push writers to adapt their styles, subtly influencing their creative identities. Addressing these systemic barriers—such as promoting inclusive algorithms, equitable policies, and safe online environments—can foster a more diverse and representative literary ecosystem.

Despite these insights, this study has limitations. Its qualitative approach, focusing on a select group of Chinese female writers, provides in-depth but context-specific findings that may not capture the full diversity of experiences in other cultural or literary contexts. Future research could explore comparative studies across regions or delve deeper into the role of audience feedback in shaping writer identities. Additionally, examining how writers navigate challenges such as censorship, harassment, or algorithmic biases could offer further insights into the dynamics of identity construction in digital spaces.

In conclusion, this study highlights the complex and interactive process of identity construction among female online literature writers in China. Through their engagement with audiences, negotiation of platform constraints, and active subversion of gender norms, these writers are reshaping narratives and contributing to a more inclusive literary landscape. By addressing structural barriers and fostering diversity, digital platforms have the potential to further empower female writers and promote equity in the digital literary space. Continued research into these dynamics will be critical for understanding and advancing gender equality and representation in online literature.

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