



# The Representation of Female College Students in Chinese Internet Media

Hanwen Ye<sup>1,+</sup>, Mengjie Liu<sup>2,+</sup>, Shuo Li<sup>3+</sup>, Xinran Qu<sup>4+</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Foreign Language, University Of Electronic Science And Technology Of China, Chengdu, 611731, China

<sup>2</sup>School of International Relations and Diplomacy, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, 100089, China

<sup>3</sup>Shenzhen International Foundation College, Shenzhen, 694041, China

<sup>4</sup>Shenzhen International Foundation College, Shenzhen, 694041, China

\*Corresponding author email: 743570677@qq.com

+These authors contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

**Abstract.** To investigate how female college students are represented in media portrayals, the authors explore the rhetoric and reality surrounding female college students in China through a content analysis of Internet media. The study explains the potential ideologies behind the media's portrayal from 359 Chinese language news articles produced by the Chinese Internet media, including 10 Chinese mainstream media outlets, whose reporting is officially sanctioned. The findings show that media' biased identity framing of the Chinese female college students as a negative image, which emphasizes the identity of being emotionally sensitive, vulnerable, superficial and material. The representations of female college students potentially imply the ideologies of traditional patriarchy, which reflect and shape Chinese womanhood within the Chinese socio-cultural context.

**Keywords:** female college students; Internet media; women's roles

## 1 Introduction

Chinese womanhood has had different metaphorical representations at different time periods [1]. The traditional patriarchal ideology of Confucianism in China has led to a deep-rooted belief that "The man goes out to work while the woman looks after the house," that being gentle and submissive and having many children is considered a good virtue for a wife, and that higher education for women was incomprehensible before the founding of China. According to the Chinese Census Bureau, the average age of entry for Chinese undergraduates is around 18 to 23 years old, which has led to Chinese female college students being considered "women of childbearing age"; they are often expected to marry after their undergraduate degree rather than pursue higher education; female college students with PhDs are under widespread discrimination

[2]; and they are considered one of the most suitable groups to marry and have children. This social expectation is also reflected in the media coverage of female college students.

The representations of female college students in Chinese Internet media potentially imply the ideologies of traditional patriarchy, which reflect and shape Chinese womanhood within the Chinese sociocultural context. This study aims to investigate how female college students are represented in the Chinese language Internet media. By analyzing the above issues, we will show the important influence of the media on the image of female college students and highlight the fact that this situation needs to be changed urgently.

## 2 Literature review

According to the theory Pseudo-environment, there is a virtual environment which exists between realistic environment and objective environment (Lippmann); The virtual environment is produced by media, a bridge between publics and external world. Although media is unable to determine how should the publics think, it, rather, can decide what content should the publics focuses on (McCombs and Shaw ). Both of the theories demonstrate that media has certain degree of influence on shaping the image of social group and instructing the focus of audiences. Because the Internet media has the characteristics of wide audience and large dissemination, if a group is negatively reported for a long time, it is bound to give rise to a stereotype of the image of this group.

In recent years, the media image of female university students as a group representing modern intellectual power has become progressively stereotyped and negative (Liu, 2017). Online media efficiently spread images of the ideal figure in modern society and market the social standard and Chinese female college students are a group vulnerable to this criterion. As Chinese people live within a collectivist culture, they have more characteristics of social orientation, are more easily influenced by the network environment, and strive to match the social standards of the ideal figure [3]. A few studies have examined how female college students are represented in the media. Ming (2013) found that female college students are more likely to be the subject of media coverage than other college groups, and their images are labeled and demonized; media coverage of female college students unilaterally pursues curiosity to attract the audience's attention. Pan found by searching keywords that the headlines of the naked loan incidents reported by the media often superimposed key words such as "female college students" and "naked" together, fully attracting the audience's attention [4]. Similarly, Hu found that the topic of "emotion" has been the focus of coverage in recent years through content analysis, and "emotion" has been associated with "sex"; even if they belong to the group of "students", the Internet media have reported very little on the study part of female university students, and have focused more on the emotional life of female university students [5].

Differing from the previous studies, this study selected a broad sample of 10 media outlets, while most of the relevant studies only focus on one media for analysis. In this study, all samples within 10 years were selected for manual identification rather

than random sampling by traditional methods. Therefore, the authors can ensure that the sample was as representative as possible. Based on previous references, this study aims to answer the following questions:

(1) Are there stereotypes in the Internet media coverage of Chinese female college students?

(2) If so, how is the image of female college students represented in Chinese Internet media news?

### 3 Methodology

This study focuses on solving the problem by analyzing the content of articles specifically about Chinese female college students. This study collected 74 news articles published by 10 Internet media from 2012 to 2022, from *People's Daily Online*, *Sina*, *Tencent*, *The Paper*, *Ifeng*, *China Net*, *CCTV Net*, *Today's Headlines*, *Guangming Net* *Xinhua Net*. These Internet media were identified based on the most representative mainstream media as assessed by the "Online Media Development Ranking 2021" released by the China National Information Center.

In the text analysis, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used to facilitate the identification of a valid sample using keyword search. In order to ensure as broad and comprehensive a sample as possible while facilitating retrieval, news articles between 2012 and May 2022 were selected for analysis because a complete database for easy keyword retrieval was established after 2012. After retrieving all samples, the data analysis in this study has four main steps: retrieval, identification, classification, and analysis. The author used a manual method to identify the image of female college students. The criteria for selecting samples in this study are that articles are selected when they mention the behavior of female college students, the attributes of female college students, or the encounters of female college students; the titles and contents of news articles are in the scope of selection, while the accompanying pictures, hotness, and comments of the news are not in the scope of consideration.

### 4 Results and Discussion

Two sources can be traced back to the formation of identity by the social media. One way functions by increasing or changing receivers' knowledge of the exposed or the reported people [6]. Another way is the specially selected expression by the social media, which aims to convey certain subject signals to change the receivers' cognitive perceptions and understandings of the reported people (Pingree, 2007). According to Table 1, the negative image reports overall outnumber the positive ones (266 vs. 71), which indicates that the news is inclined to picture a negative image of female college students. This deliberate negative expression is closely linked to the public perceptions of the female college students as being vulnerable, sensitive, superficial, good-looking and material.

**Table 1.** Different media images of female college students in Internet media

Images	Freq.(%)	Examples
Positive images	71 (19.8)	<i>She has donated bone marrow twice                      And was secretly photographed while sharing a house                      ...painting a beautiful view of the campus on the leaves</i>
Negative images	266 (74.1)	
Neutral images	11 (3.1)	
Total	359 (100)	

Through textual analysis, the authors divided the negative images of female college students in the Internet media into nine categories (Table 2). These nine categories of negative images reflect the Internet media's portrayal of female college students from two aspects: first, the characterization of female college students (victims, beautiful women, offenders, rescued), and second, the personality attributes of female college students (money-worshipping, emotionally sensitive, sexually open, shallow, and emotionally vulnerable).

**Table 2.** Classification of negative images of female college students

Images	Freq (%)	Examples
Victim	154	<i>She was strangled to death by the criminal even after resisting.                      Beautiful college students dancing in the snow.                      She answered that she donated her eggs in exchange for an iPhone.                      ...and lost contact after emotional setbacks.                      She pretended to be pregnant and tried to pass through security.                      ...leave the baby in the toilet after giving birth in the dormitory.                      ...called the police immediately after being scared by a rat.                      ...and she works as a porn host for money after her roommate sleeps                      ...chose to commit suicide because she was not allowed to keep a cat.</i>
Beautiful women	(57.9)	
Shallow	24 (9.0)	
Sensitive	23 (8.6)	
Offenders	21 (7.9)	
Sexually open	13 (4.9)	
Rescued	11 (4.1)	
Money-worshipping	9 (3.4)	
Emotionally Vulnerable	6 (2.3)	
	5 (1.9)	
Total	266 (100)	

The news titles analyzed in this essay are inclined to convey the knowledge that the female college students are socially and economically lower and more vulnerable. The news titles also justify this statement by the originally biased public perceptions that female college students are oppressed under the imbalanced gender hierarchy and only can seek “assistance” from maintaining the status quo and suppressing themselves. According to Table 2, 21 news titles portray the female college students as being emotionally sensitive, stubborn and easily heart-broken while the only cure for this is the accompany from the male partners. 9 news involve titles and content picturing female college students as the “princesses on the bean”, who will call the police (male police) immediately when they face some trifle problems such as being scared by a rat. This submissive and lower status of college female students is exaggerated in the news report of their economic dependence to the male partners. 6 news titles and content frame female college students as material and money-oriented. These news ignore the significance of being economically independence for female college students to satisfy their material needs, but instead portray that a seemingly sole solution to make money

is through reliance on their male partners. The news titles and content justify the biased public understanding of the female college students, without adopting an objective perspective or offering the alternative solutions for female college students to rely on themselves and be independent.

**Table 3.** Classification of articles in which female college students are reported as victims

Articles	Freq (%)	Examples
Sexual harassment	38 (24.7)	<i>She was touched on the thigh by the driver.                      Her nude photos were leaked by a lender.                      ...stabbed by him forty-eight times.                      ...and scammed two days in a row.                      ...beaten by drunken man in restaurant.                      ...was raped by the vice president.                      ...remains of lost girl found in Qinghai.                      ...and hidden cameras were found                      She was one of those killed in the natural disaster.                      ...rumored to be a prostitute by driver.                      She was confirmed to have been duped by a pyramid scheme.</i>
Usury	21 (13.6)	
Murder	18 (11.7)	
Defraud	17 (11.0)	
Bodily harm	15 (9.7)	
Rape	13 (8.4)	
Go missing	10 (6.4)	
Creepshot	9 (5.8)	
Others cases	5 (3.2)	
Rumor case	4 (2.6)	
Pyramid sale	4 (2.6)	
Total	154 (100)	

The news analyzed also use a deliberate expression to convey the meaning of the content towards their target (Table3). According to the research result, 154 news report the events of female college students as being victims. However, rather than adopting the objective narrative expression, the news describes the female college victims as being strangled to death even after resisting. This kind of deliberately negative expression indicates a refute and dissatisfaction with female college students’ resistance. One special case in the analyzed news is the report of the event that female college students cannot be connected to their relatives or friends. Rather than using the objective language of being incapable to connect, the news interprets the female college students as “being lost”, which conveys a negative and self-approached meaning. The news also deconstructs the original and object causality of the whole event which the responsibilities can be attributed to the tourist authorities, but establishes a new causality that the female college students themselves are the only ones to be responsible for their own mistakes of being careless and not cautious. The news justifies this artificial causality by combining some irrelevant and random information such as the biased characters of female college students as being irresponsible and flighty. Therefore, through the language, the news deconstructs the objective report of the accident, but interprets a meaning of female college students’ carelessness.

**Table 4.** Classification of positive images of female college students

Images	Freq (%)	Examples
Quality	37 (52.1)	<i>...ordered takeaway for the police.                      she returned to hometown to start her own business.                      ...gave her life in support of epidemic preparedness.</i>
Employment	20 (28.2)	
Sacrifice	14 (19.7)	
Total	71 (100)	

However, even when the focus shifts to the positive image reported by the news, almost one-fifth positive images are connected to the quality of self-sacrificing and dedication (Table4). This intended selected expression shapes the female college students in the reporters' willingness, and transfers this identity to the public.

Through the use of knowledge and special expression, the news successfully establishes a negative image of female college students as holding the seemingly "feminine" characters as emotionally sensitive, vulnerable, superficial, easily-hurt and material. This enhances the traditional dualism view which differs female vs. males as good vs. bad, and again enhances the ideology of a patriarchal society [7].

The news can also function as a platform to set up a network for the public to discuss certain interpersonal topics. Moreover, the online news also intensifies the selection bias to gather those who have the psychological motivation to discuss certain topics under a series of news of a targeted topic [6]. In this process, the common emotions, thoughts and opinions play an active role in strengthening the combination of these like-minded news receivers.

In the news analyzed, the deliberate portray of female college students of being vulnerable, superficial and material brings about the agreement of certain news consumers. These consumers make similar comments in the comment selection, which attracts more like-minded news consumers to believe in the subjective description of the female college students.

However, the effect of social media to change the public perceptions in reality is controversial. Based on the third person effect [8], when people receive information, they are apt to relate the reports to others rather than themselves. Therefore, the negative social images may cause little attention of the public because the news consumers are regarding it as trifle and not self-related. It will be less likely for the public to notice the language and expression of the social media and these media techniques actually have little influence on the public.

## 5 Conclusions

By analyzing the news of Chinese female college students published by 10 Internet media from 2012 to 2022, this essay addresses three questions mentioned above. The essay first elaborates the news' biased identity framing of the Chinese female college students as a negative image, which emphasizes the identity of being emotionally sensitive, vulnerable, superficial and material. Then, the essay delineates the news uses the knowledge and special expression to convey the framed identity of Chinese female college students to the news receivers. Finally, the essay also points out that the news further enhances this identity framing by selecting the targeted news readers to form a topic network to increase agreement among the biased identity.

Finally, there are still limitations in this study. Even if authors choose the broadest and most representative sample possible, it is impossible to cover all periods of news. Therefore, it cannot be said that the data in this study represent all female college students in China. By observing samples from different periods, it can be found that Chinese Internet media have been standardizing the words used to describe female college students in recent years and trying their best to avoid obvious discrimination

against this group, but this trend has not been mentioned in this study. This study focuses on the analysis of the media images of female college students. However, due to the limitation of sample size, the differences between the media images of this group and male college students are not mentioned. Internet media pay far less attention to male college students than female college students. For example, from 2012 to May 2022, there were 58 news reports targeting female college students, while only eight focused on male college students. However, media reports still have stereotypes about male college students and the discipline of masculinity in traditional patriarchal society, which is still of far-reaching research value.

## 6 Acknowledgement

Ye Hanwen, Liu Mengjie, Li Shuo, Qu Xinran contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

## 7 Appendix

<p>List of Internet Media in Which Articles Appeared (<math>N=359</math>)</p> <p><i>People's Daily Online</i> (205)</p> <p><i>Sina</i> (58)</p> <p><i>Tencent</i> (34)</p> <p><i>The Paper</i> (16)</p> <p><i>Ifeng</i> (15)</p> <p><i>China Net</i> (14)</p> <p><i>CCTV Net</i> (8)</p> <p><i>Today's Headlines</i> (7)</p> <p><i>Guangming Net</i> (1)</p> <p><i>Xinhua Net</i> (1)</p> <p>NOTE: The number of articles is indicated in parentheses.</p>
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