



# Self-representation and Collective Identity: Women's Views on Marriage from a Gender Perspective

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**Abstract.** This paper uses textual analysis to focus on women's specific expressions on marriage issues on social media platforms and to explore the gender consciousness behind women's discourse from a gender perspective. It is found that women's views on marriage present a strong sense of self-gender equality in the private sphere of discourse where women's discourse is empowered by the online community represented by the Douban group; and that a collective identity on the concept of marriage has been further formed within the women's group.

**Keywords:** Self-representation · Collective identity · Gender · Douban group

## 1 Introduction

Marriage and love are stages of life that most individuals must go through, and they are also an issue of particular concern to young people who are ready to marry. Nowadays, there is a wide variety of relationship variety shows and love dramas, spreading a rich diversity of ideas about marriage and constructing young people's views on marriage. Against this backdrop, the author attempts to examine whether women's voices and values are truly conveyed in the representation of marriage issues on new media platforms from a gender perspective. This paper uses the Douban group "Human Lovers Watch" as a case study to explore the main content and discourse characteristics of contemporary women's views on marriage.

As of May 9, 2021, the group had 110,000 members and over 14,000 posts. In this paper, the posts made by members of the group and the interactions between members under each post were used as the research object, and posts with more than 200 discussions and comments with the top 10 likes were selected as the research sample, with a total of 111 posts, excluding posts that were not related to relationship issues, and the total sample size was 100 posts. The author used text analysis of the sample to explore the specific content of women's views on marriage. Depending on the topic of the content of the discussion, the author summarised the sample posts into seven categories, emotional outlook, moral outlook, sexual outlook, money outlook, family outlook, appearance and general.

## **2 Technology Empowerment: The Formation of Women's Perceptions of Marriage**

### **2.1 "Female Empowerment" Among Vulnerable Groups**

The term "empowerment" was coined by Solomon in the 1960s and has been widely discussed as an interdisciplinary concept in the fields of political science, psychology, management and communication. Empowerment theory is aimed primarily at the disadvantaged groups in society. In male-centred societies, women have always existed as the Other in presence, the primary object to be empowered and empowered. The concept of female empowerment was formally introduced at the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and refers to the creation of an environment in which women can make decisions related to their interests and those of society. These include political rights, economic rights, cultural rights, social status and the right to information.

### **2.2 New Media Empowering Women's Discourse Expression**

For a long time, the discourse on mass media platforms has been in the hands of a few elites, and the construction of women's image is a product of the gaze of the other, with women's roles in marriage and relationships always presenting stereotypical images of gentleness, kindness, submissiveness, understanding and male superiority, and women's view of marriage has typical male-oriented characteristics.

The advancement and development of communication technology have led to the advent of the new media era, where the power of communication discourse has been dispersed from elite groups to grassroots groups in a society driven by technology, changing the communication ecology of traditional media domination. In the new media environment, many women's voices are still being heard on the new media platforms, even though women are still bound by aberrant aesthetics and views on marriage from the male perspective, such as "white, young and thin" and "women without talent are virtuous". The number of posts per day on the Douban group "Human Lovers Watch" averages 150, with topics revolving around men's and women's views on relationships in terms of feelings, consumption, morality, family and appearance.

### **2.3 Online Communities Help Construct Women's Views on Marriage**

Online communities are a product of the web 2.0 era, characterised by communities of interest, and are constantly being given new connotations as technology evolves and updates. Douban, as a representative of the new type of online community, has the technological support that allows more users to participate in it, thus forming many Douban communities. Douban consists of three basic structures: the interest system, the expression system and the interaction system, with Douban groups being an important product of the interaction system. This interactive system is non-hierarchical and non-ranked, with users creating their groups and members moving freely in and out of them, creating a relatively free and decentralised network environment. In such a network

environment, group members are free to express their views, and members can fully interact with each other.

In the Lovers' Watch group, 111 posts had over 200 interactions, with the highest number of interactions being over 700 comments. Under a post by a woman who caught her ex-boyfriend cheating on her and found out she had a gynaecological infection, the comments were fierce in their criticism of the man's actions and a discussion of the moral boundaries of men in marriage, resulting in a view of "male morality" that was shared by most of the group members.

### **3 Multiple Discursive Expressions: Specific Representations of Women's Views on Marriage**

Foucault has said that discourse is power and that "power works in culture through discourse". Foucault argues that 'discourse constructs gender identity and that dominant discourse can act as a limit to desire'. The empowerment of technology has enabled the release of women's subjectivity and right to speak in cyberspace, which has led to the formation of a female group discourse on the issue of marriage, and the formation of a group concept of marriage within the group that covers all aspects of the issue of marriage. These concepts represent the concretization of a part of women's self-awareness and contain a wealth of gender needs, which are manifested in the following four areas.

#### **3.1 Emotional Outlook**

Emotional outlook refers to the expectations women hold for their significant other in terms of their own emotional needs. The topics related to women's emotional outlook in the study sample had the highest number of discussions and interactions, which shows that whether men can provide effective emotional value during the marriage process is the most important concern for women. A summary of the 26 relevant discussions found that women's emotional needs for their other half include emotional stability, initiation of conversation, romance, not losing contact for no reason, and verbal behaviour to care about women.

On the topic of "What gifts are more appealing to women in a relationship", one woman said "Flowers are the most ritualistic, formal and romantic! It makes me happy when I see it in a vase" received the highest praise, expressing women's emotional need for ritual and romance in relationships. In the comments section of the post titled "No contact for three days is a default breakup", some women said, "If a boyfriend doesn't contact a girl for a few days in a row for no reason, the relationship is over." The male initiative is an important criterion for women to judge a man's performance in a relationship. Women also believe that "men are not affectionate and are too straight." This can affect the mood of a relationship. For example, the posts "When I gently pamper my boyfriend but he rejects me" and "Why doesn't my boyfriend cater to my little feelings?" all tell of relationships where men failed to recognise their emotions, leading to conflict between them.

### 3.2 Ethical Perspectives

Moral values refer to the basic moral boundaries that women require of men during the marriage. Through observation of related posts, it was found that women consider men's behaviour such as cheating, domestic violence, prostitution, coupling with ex-girlfriends and personal attacks to be matters of principle that cannot be tolerated during the course of their relationship.

There were 12 discussions within the study sample about male infidelity and prostitution. A poll on the topic of "Should I mind if my boyfriend has had sex with a prostitute" was conducted and 3,990 people participated, with 83% of them saying they did. One woman commented, "Men who have had sex with prostitutes have a lot of desire, they can't control themselves and don't think about the consequences, they don't take things into account, and there are big questions about their character." Some comments said, "There are only 0 and countless cheats, and men who have no moral boundaries should not be wanted". In addition to the issue of cheating, women also see the physical assault as an uncultured act. A post titled "Boyfriend says my butt type is the ugliest one" tells of a verbal attack by a significant other on his own body, with a highly praised comment saying that men are "particularly disrespectful to girls, to the extent that they wouldn't think he was in his right mind if they were joking". A woman also strongly expressed the view that "men must accept a woman's body in its entirety, and if they mind, find someone else".

### 3.3 Sexuality

Sexuality refers to women's thoughts on whether or not a relationship partner engages in intimacy and sex, and how men behave during sex. From the research sample, it is clear that women are very positive about whether or not to have sex with their romantic partners, believe that it is a woman's right to enjoy sex, and will directly express their sexual needs and discuss the harmony of their sexual lives in the group. For example, two posts with over 300 discussions were titled: "I want to make out with my boyfriend every time I see him" and "I find that I enjoy driving with my boyfriend". In the post titled "Do people think sexual attraction is important in love?" the post with the title "Do people think sexual attraction is important in love?", highly rated responses said "Sexual attraction is the most important thing that separates a good friend from a boyfriend." Women also believe that if men do not initiate intimate contact with women in relationships, it is largely because they do not like them enough.

Despite open sexuality, women firmly believe that sex must be entirely consensual and that it is disrespectful and illegal for men to induce or force sex after a woman has explicitly refused. In sharing her experience of having sex with her boyfriend for the first time, one woman mentioned that "she had explicitly refused her boyfriend but still half-heartedly had sex, which might not have happened if she had been more assertive." Some women responded to this post by commenting, "Men like that are not of good character." Some women were also caught up in the fact that they had no control over whether or not a sexual relationship took place, and asked "Can I say no again after having sex with someone?" The question was asked. Some women experience problems with men in relationships who resent them for not being virgins. The comments underneath

these posts point the finger at the man's character and upbringing, advising women to wake up: "As long as a man is suppressing your confidence, picking on your appearance, body, family, education, past relationships, making you feel unhappy and at the same time reflecting on whether there is something wrong with you, that man is controlling you mentally, dump him immediately."

### 3.4 Consumerism

Consumerism refers to women's views around the need for a balanced amount of money to be spent by both partners during the marriage, and whether men should spend money for women. In response to the former, women's views were mixed. One group member argued that "women need to take on more unequal treatment than men because of their gender, so guys need to pay more money to keep the relationship going". On the topic of whether men and women need to share equally in living together, The most liked comment said that "living together brings emotional value to both partners, but women need to take on more risks of childbirth gynaecological diseases and worldly pressures, and these unseen risks are part of what women pay for, so sharing equally financially does not mean that men and women are equal." But there are also women who believe that in the relationship process both men and women should be relatively balanced in terms of monetary payments, "Men and women in a relationship should not attribute all spending to individuals, it is better to have a back and forth, this time I buy you dinner, next time you take me to the movies."

There was a consensus among women on whether their significant other should spend money on them. Some women felt that no matter how much money they give in a relationship if a man has a stable income but is stingy and unwilling to give money to a woman, this type of man is not a suitable relationship partner. Another comment suggested that there are two ways to look at it: "When you find out that your partner is simply not willing to spend money on you and is not using the money saved to build a future together, women should stop. However, if he is frugal and attentive to you, both parties can communicate fully before making a decision."

## 4 Emotional Community: The Collective Identity of Women's Views on Marriage

Benedict Anderson has proposed the theory of "imagined communities", which he believes are constructed and sustained through shared imagination and the sharing of meaning. In online communities, there are three stages in the formation of a "community".

### 4.1 The Emergence of an Emotional Community: Based on Hobbies and Interests

The core of the formation of online communities lies in interests and emotions, with interests being the basis for the construction of communities and emotions being the key to their cohesion. For young people of marriageable age, the issue of marriage inevitably becomes a topic of concern and reflection. In the era of mass media, the explosion of

TV matchmaking and marriage mediation programmes has reflected the concern and importance that marriageable men and women attach to the issue of marriage. In the new media era, micro-blogs and online communities based on the issue of marriage have also been formed.

“The group’s rules strictly define the issues that can be discussed in the group: posts on entertainment gossip, politics, society and other topics that are not related to the group’s content are forbidden, and the group must focus on emotional topics. The group’s rules stipulate that “we only talk about love and nothing else”. Based on the clear positioning of the group and the pure communication environment, since its establishment in February 2021, the group has had more than 110,000 users join and more than 14,000 posts on emotional issues have been posted. The online community platform for communicating around emotional issues has become quite large, laying the foundation for the formation of an emotional community.

#### **4.2 Maintenance of Emotional Community: Based on Emotional Empathy**

Evolutionary psychology suggests that men and women differ in their level of emotional empathy, that women’s strengths in emotional empathy are biologically inherited, and that women have stronger emotional empathy with their peers than men. The highly interactive and decentralised nature of new media platforms not only creates a relatively egalitarian media environment for communication but also provides technical support for the transmission of emotions. While writing and posting their own opinions, people receive emotional support by checking likes, and favourites and reading others’ comments to get feedback on their expressions.

In discussions about marriage issues within the Douban group, the female community forms a strong emotional resonance based on common gender characteristics. Whether sharing the sweetness or problems of their love lives, the comments give ample feedback and support to those who express them. In discussions on the topic of men’s moral ground, many women recount their experiences of being betrayed by their ex-boyfriends, and the women in the comments section form a united front with the sharers to make a common cause. This process not only creates a construction of a discourse on masculinity but the female community sprouts a sense of community in its emotional resonance.

#### **4.3 Consolidation of Emotional Community: Based on Collective Identity**

Collective identity is when a cultural subject chooses between two different groups or subgroups. Because of the influence of the different cultures, the cultural subject has to see the other culture as the collective cultural self and the other culture as the other. Inspired by feminist culture and resistance to the fatalistic construction of the self, many women have joined forces to build a feminine discourse, to construct a feminine discourse and become gender-conscious.

Most of the posts in the online community are in the form of accounts of experiences and discussions of problems, where one’s thoughts and feelings are passed on to other women so that problems can be solved and emotions can be resonated. At the same time, there are also women in the group who summarise issues into perceptions and codes of conduct, such as posts with titles such as “How to have a quality relationship for

women” and “Some tips for girls in relationships”. These ideas and guidelines become the collective identity of the women in the community through interaction and discussion and are internalised as a guide for the women’s community when dealing with the issue of marriage. In Mrs Dalloway, Woolf says that ‘flowers unite with flowers, that is, to seek a ‘sisterhood’ among women and to bring together their common experiences, common feelings and common aspirations into a common female voice. Through mutual understanding and support among women peers, we promote the historical awakening of the women’s community and initiate dialogue and struggle with the patriarchal society, to achieve the historical goal of gender equality and harmonious development.

## 5 Conclusions

A study of women’s views on marriage in the Douban group found that in a more closed online community, men’s behaviour in the process of marriage is used as the object of narrative, and women discuss marriage issues of interest through the interactive boards set up within the community for gossip, discussion and help-seeking, and in the process, female discourse on marriage issues is formed. There is a strong sense of subjectivity in women’s expressions on the issue of marriage. Women give priority to their emotional needs in the process of marriage, seeking psychological and emotional satisfaction for themselves. At the same time, most women have moved away from the shackles of traditional chastity on the female body and have developed an open and liberal view of sexuality and control over their bodies. Women’s views on consumption have enriched the notion of gender equality. Most women are aware that the worldly pressures and reproductive risks they have to bear in the marriage process are taken for granted, so they make the legitimate claim that men should pay more money in marriage. Women’s values on the issue of marriage are well expressed and communicated.

The self-construction of a discourse system on women’s love affairs cannot be separated from the dissemination of external feminist culture and the empowerment of online technology, on the one hand, and the promotion of the emotional resonance mechanism and strong interaction within the Douban group on the other. The concept of female marriage based on the Douban group is a synthesis of women’s awareness of equality, gender and independence, breaking the barriers of the traditional concept of marriage, which promotes male superiority over women and gender inequality between men and women, and establishing a gender perspective of mutual respect and equality between men and women.

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