

*Connotation Evolution and Communication Characteristics of Network Language
Using the 5W Communication Model: An Analysis of "X Socialites"*

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Abstract

"Online socialite" has become a popular internet buzzword in China in recent years. Originally referring to female internet celebrities who purchased luxury goods through group buying and then pretended to be "socialites" in high-end places to attract attention, a series of "X socialites" emerged on the internet, such as "Buddha socialites" (beautiful and sexy ladies in a Buddha temple), which caused controversy and discussion. This study examines the connotation evolution and communication characteristics of the internet buzzword "X socialites" from the perspectives of linguistics and communication, based on the 5W model of communication. Content analysis and focus group discussions were employed as research methods for this study. The study finds that the evolution of the term "socialite" reflects the changing evaluation standards and cognitive changes towards women in different periods of Chinese society. The emphasis has shifted from the focus on inner spiritual qualities in the past to the pursuit of external material possessions today. The internet term "X socialites" not only retains the core concept of "socialites" as a "beautiful woman" but also introduces negative connotations, such as creating fake personas and engaging in behaviors that violate public values in order to attract followers for financial gains. It is noteworthy that, whether in traditional society or the internet age, the commercial pursuit and consumption of female beauty behind different images are the focus of public criticism that cannot be ignored.

Keywords: Network Language, 5W Communication Model, X Socialites

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1. Introduction

As network communication penetrates into people's lives, all kinds of network languages have been created, which have been widely concerned and consumed by people. Internet language has been rooted in a dense and multidimensional network practice. From the semantic point of view, internet slang was a new application of daily language in the network environment, in which caused derivation of partial or overall variation. In terms of form, it involved with creative, vivid, and easily-spread characteristics with the function of reflecting the public opinion and mentality in the society (Liu, 2008; Hu et al., 2014) . So, the study of Internet language has always been a more popular topic. Many studies analyzed the word formation and language characteristics of popular network languages and traced the causes of popularity from sociolinguistic perspective in recent years. For example, He and He (2003) mentioned the characteristic words of Chinese internet language resulted of the "word-phrase deformation", i.e., the linguistic modal effects through imitating. Other scholars explored the mechanism and social functions of Internet buzzwords, focusing on their impact on language, culture, and people, such as the pattern of communication (Wang, 2019).

"X Socialites (X 媛; X-Yuan)" was one of the fresh Internet terms that have emerged in the past two years. The term originated from October 2020 when some female online influencers did joint orders to purchase luxury goods in a very good deal, and then pretended to be "celebrities" in high-class places to attract attention (Zhang, 2021). Subsequently, a series of "X Socialites (Yuan; 媛)", such as "Buddhist-Socialites", "Tea-Socialites", "Frisbee-Socialites", "Sick-Socialites", have emerged on the Internet. The term "X Socialites Universe", which means that everything could be called as "X Socialites", has aroused heated discussions and controversies. It was interesting to note that in the Chinese context, the character "Yuan (Socialites; 媛)", which corresponds to female socialites, has long been recognized by the public as a word that refers to beauty and goodness, containing praises and wishes. However, the shades of meaning of the word "X Socialites" in news commentaries and netizens' discussions has been mostly critical and derogatory, showing that the changed use of "Socialites (媛; Yuan)" in the Chinese Internet environment has created strangeness in the content of the meaning. Therefore, one of the main purposes of this paper was to explore the history of meaning deviation from the traditional semantics and shifted current connotation in the online world. On this basis, starting from the five aspects of the 5W communication model, this study took "X Socialites" as an example to explore the semantic flow process and mechanism of network terms through textual analysis, and further clarified the usage pattern and communication effect through focus groups.

2. Method

Lasswell's 5W communication model was proposed by American scholar Harold Lasswell in 1948, which divided the communication process into five parts: the communicator (who), the message (say what), the channel (in which channel), the audience (to whom), and the effects (with what effects) (Lasswel, 1984).

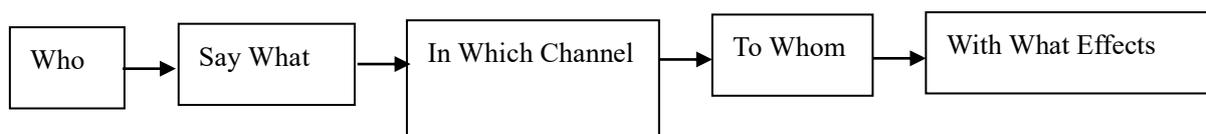


Figure 1: Illustration of Lasswell's 5W communication model (Peng, 2015).

This model clearly sorts out the composition of the elements in the communication process and help to analyze each part in detail. Placing complex linguistic phenomena or communication issues in the overall communication process, a relatively objective and accurate depiction of certain issues could be reproduced through five components. Although the model was proposed earlier and is considered to be imperfect, as a model that clearly delineates the five elements of communication, it points out a clear research area for communication research (Peng, 2015).

The fact that "X Socialites", as one of the hotspot events that caused a great controversy on the Internet in 2020, but still spreading and has been heated discussed to this day shows that the five elements of the event, namely the communicator, the message, the channel, the audience, and the influence (the 5Ws), are all worthy of study, and that the elements are interlocked with each other, which gives the whole process of communication a continuous vitality. However, most of the existing studies on "X Socialites" have analyzed a single element or a few of them independently, focusing on information and influence, while paying less efforts to the communicator, the channel, and the audience. On the other hand, other models of communication behavior change also focus on the effect of communication and neglect information and the front-end of the communication process to a certain extent, which also cannot cover all the research objects of the "X Socialites" phenomenon. Therefore, the 5W communication model is an ideal theoretical framework to study the phenomenon of "X Socialites" online terminology in a comprehensive way. Based on this model, this article hopes to make an effective academic portrayal of the phenomenon of "X Socialites" pronouns in the Internet comprehensively and prompted following research questions by text analysis and focus group (4 groups of total 15 members, included students and professors from different majors):

- (1) Who uses or promotes the transmission of "X Socialites " on the Internet;
- (2) What is the meaning of "X Socialites" on the Internet;
- (3) Who are the audiences of "X Socialites";
- (4) What is the audience's attitude towards "X Socialites"?

3. Who Used or Promotes the Transmission of “X Socialites” on the Internet

The use of "X-socialites" on the Internet is presented in the form of "picture + text", that is, the presentation of a certain image accompanied by a combination of words and the discussions in the comment section with different emotions. This paper will categorize the users according to whether they present relevant images or not, and then analyze the different roles played by people with different attitudes towards both the word and phenomenon.

3.1. The “Party” Presents Relevant Image

Female internet celebrities are the earliest and most important users and promoters of this buzzword. Since 2016, the development of short videos and webcasting has given rise to the netizen economy, and promoted the development of marketing modes such as live broadcasting and e-commerce + KOL. So if they want to be out of the ordinary and gain a firm foothold in the huge group of netizens, putting on their own "persona" might be a consideration, just as respondent C (male) said,

The pressure of competition on this track is too great if you only have beautiful appearance. Nowadays, for most streamer, being pretty is a plus rather than a

determinant, and viewers are often attracted to streamers who have a certain personal talent or ability and look pretty at the same time.

Many of them combine beauty with economic conditions, niche cultural connotations and even positive personality traits. For example, "Sick Socialites" expresses their positive and optimistic attitude towards life even when sick, "Frisbee Socialites" conveys self-discipline, a healthy lifestyle and an outgoing personality, and "Divorce Socialites" show their independence and self-reliance.

On the other hand, the influence of Internet celebrities makes them become lifestyle leaders, and the image presented is therefore supported, imitated and reproduced by many other female internet users. These Internet celebrities and their supporters, in addition to being called "X Socialites", many of them also use this word to call themselves. When researchers asked women why they claimed to be, most respondents believed that they were just following suit, as respondent B (male) thought that even if they know the controversy of the word, they still do not mind using it to package themselves, so as to show their own beauty.

Therefore, since the objects involved in the "X Socialites" controversy in the early days were more or less related to business behavior, the subject of "X Socialites" can be defined as "A group of beautiful women who create false personas online and make a profit by violating public values or thinking paradigms."

3.2. Commenters Without Image Presentation

However, there are people who do not present an image, but participate in and promote the use of "X Socialites" by posting comments, and they can be identifiers and critics based on specific behaviors.

Identifiers refer to the group of people who identify the images of women on the Internet according to the common characteristics of "X Socialites" then recognize whether they are "X Socialites" or not. While the action of Critics is more aggressive than identifiers as they not only identify the image of X Socialites, they also criticize the "right-wrong" values of that image in order to rectify the undesirable trend of the Internet.

For individuals, there were gender differences in their critical intentions. Our respondent thought that women, especially independent women, blame "X Socialites" because they do not want such a "derogatory" to break the long-established social recognition of women's independence, while men tend to think that in the eyes of men, "X Socialites" are erotic as it reflects a recognition of women's advantages in appearance and body shape.

Media's criticism emphasizes the traditional ethical concepts "Gentleness, kindness, respect, frugality, humility" (Wen Liang Gong Jian Rang), and "Benevolence, justice, propriety, wisdom, and faith" (Ren Yi Li Zhi Xin) in order to play the role of manner guide. "X Socialites" use false personas to attract attention is contrary to the virtue of honesty and trustworthiness, and the extravagance of consumerism it induces is opposite to the requirements of simplicity and frugality, let alone her inappropriate attire and behavior on serious public occasions is not in line with the norms of propriety. Taking "Buddhist Socialites" as an example, "Their photographs in monasteries in revealing clothes and indecent behavior, which is not in line with the purpose of Buddhism to lead people to goodness, contrary to the clean and solemn atmosphere of monasteries, the nature of

Buddhist monks who have few desires, and contrary to the pursuit of believers who come to the monasteries to purify their soul." said as the principal of the Buddhist Association of China.

4. The Meaning and Creation of X Socialites in Ancient and Modern Context

The traditional use of the word "Yuan" before the internet context served as a term to show affection and courtesy to a lady. In ancient book *Shuo Wen Jie Zi*, the classic explaining characters in Chinese, "Yuan" is described as "a beauty", with a quote from *Classic of Poetry (Shi Jing)*: "She is so fair and bright/In rich attire snow-white/O'er her fine undershirt/She wears close-fitting skirt/Her eyes are bright and clear/Her face will fascinate/Alas! Fair as she might appear/She is a raped beauty of state (*Bang zhi yuan ye*)." In this ode, "Yuan" is used to describe the exceedingly gorgeous of Duchess Xuan Jiang of Wei. Likewise, *Er Ya* states that "the beautiful woman called Yuan, and beautiful man called Yan". "Yuan" was first used in Ming "*Secret History of the the Wei, Jin and Northern and Southern dynasties (Liang Jin Mi Shi)*" in conjunction with *ming* (famous) as *Mingyuan* (socialite) to call women with both distinguished family and beautiful appearance.

However, language is fluid as it reflects social and cultural changes. The shades of meaning of Mingyuan (Socialite) is still mainly positive in the public's perception, while in fact, it has been changing in different cultural contexts since before the Internet era, due to the changes of women's social roles and status in the development of the times. During Ming and Qing, any woman with talent and virtue could be called a socialite. As the requirement of hierarchy was broken, the word Mingyuan was gradually linked to the erotic industry, beginning to refer to the women who was extravagant, lustful and roaming around social occasions.

In *Hai zou ye you lu*, Wang Tao (1828– 1897) counted several kinds of brothels when travelling Shanghai, "Mingyuan", which could be seen as courtesan here, was one of them. Unexpectedly, they were different from the prostitutes in *Qinglou* (brothel) as they did not need to sing or strum to make a living, inversely, they enjoyed luxury life with maid serving them to dress and make up. The article shows that in Qing there was a history to build up personal image, or we can say it persona of women born into the upper ten as a gimmick, in order to attract customers, though these Mingyuan were still a part of the prostitution industry in essence.

A very critical image of Mingyuan was recorded in the first half of the 20th century, when 1920s a female socialite election was called, which was in fact to satisfy the erotic needs of male urban commoners. Contestants are quite a mixed bag, making those who were really born from polite society, sensible and well-educated retreated from the title of "Mingyuan". There was a similar case reported by Ta Kung Pao (Hong Kong) in 1948 that some female socialites were unaware of the suffering of the poor people's life that even their pets lived a life of luxury, which had again, made the image of the Mingyuan in the eyes of the public strongly questioned.

Similarly, the image of Mingyuan (or socialites) in nowadays internet context is a continuation of its traditional one, while it refers to women who are vain and money-grubbing, and who market themselves by creating false personas, which, thanks to the wide dissemination of buzzword, further strengthened the pejorative meaning of the word "Mingyuan". That is to say, "Mingyuan" in the Internet context is actually a "reproduction" of its original image and "appropriation" of some features of the word's meaning in traditional

context, which ultimately provides an apt description with opposite emotional feeling, and that is the cleverness of internet language production and development.

4.1. The Meaning and Type of “X Socialites” in the Internet Environment

Through the analysis of a series of "X-Socialites" image and related texts, "X-Socialites" was defined as the generalization of the image of a group of women based on hot issues, referring to a group of women who present their crafted and beautiful appearance in specific scenes, while in fact whose dress and behavior have deviated from the traditional assumptions or logic of the public about the image of the characters who belong to the scenes. This was also evidenced in the focus group interviews, where interviewees added further examples of their behavior and purpose, pointing out they actually have an axe to grind and the disavowal of the portrait and the scene.

Respondent A (male): Some women do things they are not well versed in or even don't know about, just attempt to package themselves as professional.

Respondent B (male), Respondent J (female): Their behaviors are not in line with the traditional concepts, which makes audiences dislike or feel inappropriate. For example, the image of being in a hospital should be weak/plain/sick.

Respondent C (Male), Respondent K (Female): As for Frisbee-Socialites, they only use the sport as a tool to take good pictures of themselves, rather than actually enjoying the sport or promoting it.

From commercial behavior's point of view, the initial stage of "X-Socialites" represented by "Socialites" or Mingyuan could be understood as commercial entities such as internet celebrities, micro-businesses achieve their operational purposes by packaging themselves as traditional socialites, which emphasizing high-class life and beauty. With the emergence of Buddhist-Socialites, Tea-Socialites and Frisbee-Socialites, "X-Socialites" at this stage could be further subdivided into two categories: "displaying type" and "proximity type" according to the degree of their association with the "Socialites", with each of them embodying different commercial marketing strategies.

The image of "displaying type" is highly related to that of "Socialites", which reminds people of leisure and luxurious lifestyle by emphasizing the symbols of luxury goods, clothes that create contrast and distance from the life of commoners. Examples of these types are Buddhist-Socialites and Tea-Socialites showing an image that they do not need to run around to make ends meet like general public but enjoy Zen and tea culture everyday, and Vegetable-Socialites dressing out of place to purchase vegetables with brand-name package. However, the fact that their behaviors and purposes are contrary to the values and behavioral patterns rooted in traditional culture and public thinking is the reason why they are criticized. For example, the Buddha Hall is supposed to represent the attitude of forgetting worldly trifles and living in an unadorned lifestyle, where Buddhist-Socialites appear to have no material desires while in fact expanding their business territory. Similarly, Vegetable-Socialites' food-wasting behavior obviously deviates greatly from the basic civic consciousness of saving food and respecting other's labor.

There is a clear downward trend of class in the marketing scenes of "proximity type", as the personas of these internet celebrities are more closely related to ordinary life compared to their superior counterpart, while the only but notable common is that there is weird contrast between their appearance, behavior and the occasions they belong to, as it is different from the public's mindset. Frisbee-Socialites, Sick-Socialites and Divorced-Socialites are examples. They usually present in sports fields, hospitals, kindergartens, and anime exhibitions and attempt to cause psychological interactions with other people. Take Sick-Socialites as a case, the typical patient in the hospital scene is supposed to be weak and emaciated, while Sick-Socialites, especially those who pretend to be sick present a lively, energetic and optimistic image by makeup, arousing sympathy and praise of others, so as to attract fans and achieve their marketing aim. As we can see, from traditional socialites to two phrases of "X Socialites", the core element of the word is always beautiful look and figure--the original meaning of the word, while the social status attributes are further diminished until they are integrated into the daily lives of the public, finally form the "X Socialites Universe" in which every aspect of a woman could be considered a "X Socialite".

5. Who is the Followers of " X Socialites ": Targeted Consumers and Fans

The question defined the followers as the fans of "X Socialites ". Although they exercise the function of spreading the message to a certain extent, they are different from the critics discussed in RQ1. Followers or fans were the direct target of communication and have a more neutral or even positive attitude towards "X Socialites ". Most of them were young people, mainly young women. "X Socialites " played different roles in attracting fans of different gender.

5.1. The Reference Group for Women

For female followers, "X Socialites " played the role of a reference group, with compounded influence. The following reasons for becoming a fan may exist simultaneously.

First of all, some of the female audience aspired to the rich life and luxury symbols presented by "X Socialites ". They have the same values as "X Socialites " and do not feel that their practices are unethical, which are women influenced by consumerism and want to produce similar attractive photos, eye-catching content, or use it as a means of self-promoting. In this case, the influence of the reference group of "X Socialites" is the expression of value, in which this group of audience feels that the information provided by "X Socialites" will help them to show their ideal selves to others.

Secondly, another group of female fans, such as Respondent F (female), *"use the Internet as a window to look up and hope that they can live a carefree life like 'X Socialites' where they can make tea and arrange flowers (rather than work hard)"*. They do not think that the content is false, and their recognition was based on the influence of information provided by "X Socialites", which is simply obtained messages from people who feel like upper class women.

In addition to this, there were some female followers who try to realize their own attractiveness by learning and imitating the contents presented by "X Socialites", which belonged to a kind of impression management for ordinary people. In this case, the main impact of "X Socialites" is to fulfill Utility Needs, i.e., the information provided by "X Socialites" can help this group of audience to achieve the goal of becoming more attractive.

Respondent O (male) said,

I think there is an internal image management that ordinary people have to manage on social media There are some girls who are vain and they want to imitate these so-called 'Yuan' because they are not experienced enough to know that it is fake and they feel that this is the kind of life they want to live. She thinks that this is the kind of life she wants to live.

Respondent G (female) felt that this kind of image management was a result of external aesthetic trends:

In recent years, the Internet environment has become more and more demanding on women, who need to be well-built, tall and have fair skin. In fact, women have been affected by the internalization of this concept and feel that they have to imitate and follow the practices of the 'X Yuan' in order to prove that they are an attractive woman.

5.2. Consumer Goods for Men

Although some young men were also the fans of "X Socialites" and were attracted by the uniqueness of the image, unlike regarding "X Socialites" as a reference group, men tend to treat "X Socialites" as consumer products. They consumed the image of "X Socialites" presented on the Internet. The contrast between the occasions and behaviors of "X Socialites" may make men feel erotic towards this group. Therefore, some male thought that "X Socialites" were suspected of self-objectification.

Respondent M (Male): (Men) Just consume Yuan herself.

6. The Audience's Attitude toward "X Yuan": The Communication Effect

The attitude consists of three dimensions: cognition, affect, and behavior (Khalil et al., 2022). In the behavioral dimension, this study focused on the changes in the respondents' real-life language habits as a result of the influence of "X Socialites". As an Internet buzzword, "X Socialites" has affected the development of traditional language mainly in terms of semantics and real-life language usage. Respondents' acceptance of the changed meanings varied.

The popularity of "X Socialites (X 媛: X-Yuan)" has changed the semantics of "Yuan" and "Mingyuan (名媛)" from positive to negative. Netizens have added the negative connotation of "show-off", which has changed the original meaning of the term. The current controversy over "X Yuan" shows that as a highly generalized title understood and used by different people in various language contexts, the specific meaning and critical implication of "X Yuan" may be different. In this case, users need to judge whether the application of the term is appropriate or not based on the specific situation. Most of the respondents thought that the term "X Yuan" is appropriate when the improper intention of the subjects is obvious, the occasion is immoral, the behavior affects others, or even infringes on the reasonable rights of others. Labeling or using mental shortcuts to jump to conclusions is not appropriate because it may cause harm to the innocent.

Respondent A (Male): Labeling others for being in a particular situation without understanding what she is putting out, which may be a disservice to those who truly love or are committed to the culture.

In everyday contexts, respondents separated Internet buzzword "X Yuan " from "Mingyuan (名媛)" on the basis of keeping the traditional meaning. Several respondents used the term "X Yuan" to describe people who, by online definition, sharing the negative behaviors.

Respondent F (Female): I think I have used it once. I once went to play frisbee, a girl wearing a very short skirt ran off in the middle of the game to take pictures, posing in a variety of ways without participating in the team's activities. Just felt like she was taking pictures and left afterward. That was the word I used when I told my friends about this.

However, most young people would be more cautious in using "Yuan" and "Mingyuan (名媛)", or even avoid using it to prevent misunderstanding.

Respondent D (Female): I won't use "Yuan" to my friends anymore because everyone knows that it is a pejorative term. It is a way of giggle and flirt without any limits or boundaries.

6.1. Moral Controversy Induced from X Yuan

The phenomenon of "X Yuan" has aroused ethical debates as it involved topics such as marketing promotion, consumption of sexualized women symbols, and occasion choosing for attention. Some argued that this is a normal phenomenon and that the behavior of the "X Yuan" group is a manifestation of their free choice and exercise of personal rights. Another point of view was that the behavior of the group should be criticized, pondering the extent of such behavior.

6.2. Situational Controversy, Sexualized Female Image and Effectiveness

Some respondents considered it unethical to use inappropriate forms of marketing on serious occasions, especially in Buddhist temples and hospitals.

In addition, establishing persona through sexualized female symbols may undermine women's strengths in other areas besides sex and appearance, reinforcing the male gaze and hindering the progress of gender equality. This kind of marketing model may cause some women to develop the value of relying on improving their appearance to raise their social status, cling the men instead of improving qualities such as knowledge level to enhance competitiveness. This process will put women in a disadvantaged position and deepen the prejudice against women in society.

Respondent A (Male): The main impact is that it hinders the progress of gender equality. It will deepen the prejudice against women and lead to a situation where one part of the women appeals for the independence and equality, while another part of the still relies on the promoting themselves by emphasizing of their appearance to accumulate money.

Finally, as a marketing tactic, "X Yuan "'s the sustainability of profitability was questionable as it may have a negative impact on the industries involved. Meanwhile, since this kind of female-bait marketing and the corresponding curiosity psychology follow a peripheral route, it may be difficult to attract consumers with high consumption capacity and high information processing involvement. Besides, it may even have a negative impact on the environment of cyber celebrity, mainly reflected in the pressure by labeling and stigmatize on innocent groups, which is suspected of disrupting the market.

Respondent O (M):... attracts consumers with not very high consumption power and thresholds, and does not attract professionals with a higher level of participation.

7. Conclusion

Through textual analysis and focus group interviews, this study found that the propagation agents of "X Socialites" included female Internet celebrities who make profit by designed public persona, followers with imitate behaviors, as well as the identifier and judge performed by media and netizens. There were two types of groups that promote the practice dissemination of "X Socialites": 1) the agents who portrayed related images and 2) the commentators without presentation of images. Among them, female Internet celebrities were the earliest and most significant users and promoters of this online terminology, who described themselves just as they are called, relating to certain personas creation to distinguish themselves in a competitive influencer market and attract attention. For commentators, there were two stages: identification and judgement. The first stage was to identify women's images online based on the common characteristics of "X Socialites", while the second stage was to make further value judgement on the basis of the former.

Secondly , the semantic changes of "Yuan (媛; Socialites)" and its derivatives occurred in the Internet context, but there was a history of positive and negative transformation before they were adopted as popular Internet terms. Besides, during the development of "X Socialites" as an Internet buzzword which related to marketing due to persona benefits, the two sub-categories of "X Socialites", "displaying type" and "proximity type", corresponded to different marketing and communication strategies based on the difference in the degree of association with the traditional meaning of "Yuan". Compared with the traditional meaning, this online term maintained the core concept of "beauty", but introduced a derogatory meaning of gaining profits through traffic by establishing false personas and behaving against the public's values or schema to make profit.

Finally, most of the respondents thought that the term "X Socialites" will be appropriate when the image or behavior of the subject meets the definition of "X Socialites". But it may cause harm when the identification is made by mental shortcuts and labelling. At the same time, "X Socialites" has changed the respondents' daily language habits and led to debates on the efficiency of the involved marketing strategy and balance issues between morality and profitability.

On the one hand, the appearance of "X Socialites" was closely related to the Internet celebrity economy which involved to marketing promotion and consumption of sexualized female symbols. On the other hand, this study discovered a phenomenon that deserves attention, that is, the influence of commercial activities on linguistic connotations and their use. This issue has been complicated in the face of the platforms with different patterns of presentation, capitalization intervention, changes in users' information access habits, and rising attention on

gender inequality under the new media era. These agenda often lead to ethical controversies and affect netizens' real-life language usage habits, so it is necessary for each part in the practice to behave with propriety and strike a balance between social ethics and commercial profitability.

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