

Social Capital and Emotional Labor: The Dual Dynamics Mechanism of “Goods” Sharing in Online Communities Among Young Women

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Abstract

This study, grounded in Bourdieu’s theory of social capital and Hochschild’s theory of emotional labor, explores the dual dynamics mechanism driving young women to continuously share “good finds” in online communities, using the Xiaohongshu platform as a case study. Through in-depth interviews and textual analysis, the research reveals two key findings: First, the accumulation of social capital (including bridging and bonding social capital) and emotional labor (such as emotional investment and labor monetization) are the core factors motivating young women to persistently share. Second, by sharing “good finds”, they not only expand their social networks and enhance their sense of social recognition but also maintain a sense of community belonging through emotional investment and achieve the reproduction of personal value. This paper provides an in-depth exploration of the behavioral motivations and underlying psychological mechanisms of young women in online communities. The study offers a dual “structure-agency” perspective for understanding the digital practices of young women in the digital era and provides insights for optimizing platform governance mechanisms.

Keywords: social capital, emotional labor, young women, online communities, symbolic social investment

1. Introduction

With the widespread development of mobile internet technology and online virtual communities, the scale of Chinese internet users has been steadily increasing in recent years, reaching new heights. According to the *55th Statistical Report on China’s Internet Development*, as of December 2024, the number of internet users in China has grown from 620,000 in 1997

to 1.108 billion, with the internet penetration rate rising to 78.6%. Among them, the scale of online shopping users reached 974 million, an increase of 59.47 million compared to December 2023, accounting for 87.9% of the total internet users. The age structure of internet users is trending younger, with the 20–29 age group accounting for 26.8% of the total (The 55th Statistical Report on China’s Internet

Development Released, 2025). Driven by the diversity of users' personal interests and needs, the vast number of internet users has constructed a wide variety of online virtual communities through various social media platforms. Under the widespread influence of sharing culture and collaborative consumption concepts, an increasing number of internet users are willing to share various resources in online communities, such as photos, videos, experiences, and information. At this stage, users of online communities have shifted from merely "extracting" information from apps to actively "outputting" content, a phenomenon that is now ubiquitous. Platforms such as Sina Weibo, Zhihu Columns, Douban Groups, and Xiaohongshu are typical examples of user-generated content. Meanwhile, there are significant gender differences in this behavior. Overall, young women (especially female college students) are more active and exhibit higher engagement in virtual communities focused on instant interaction, product recommendations, and shopping. They not only frequently utilize "community explicit resources" (such as browsing posts, obtaining product reviews, performance introductions, usage methods, or learning from other members' experiences) but also actively contribute new content to the platform (such as posting, sharing photos, uploading files, and posting videos).

Taking Xiaohongshu, a platform with high popularity and download rates, as an example, it has adopted a differentiated content production strategy. Research shows that nearly 90% of Xiaohongshu users are female, primarily aged 25–35, with women under 35 accounting for approximately 85% of the user base (Zheng Danlin, 2022). Various types of communities on the platform generate billions of daily note exposures. Over more than a decade of development, users visit Xiaohongshu with the intention of being "influenced" to seek purchasing advice. After completing their purchases, they often return to share their product experiences, thereby "influencing" other users. Content sharing on the platform spans over 200 vertical categories, including emotions, fashion, travel, and music (Yu Ru & Wu Jingying, 2025). This raises the question: Why are young women so enthusiastic about continuously sharing and contributing various types of "content" in online communities? What are the underlying mechanisms driving this

behavior?

2. Literature Review

Existing research has revealed the core motivations for user participation in virtual communities from multiple dimensions. Early studies, based on social capital theory, emphasize users' core desire to accumulate social capital (such as reputation and relational networks) within communities. In the context of social media, which comprises various elements, the concept of "social capital" primarily refers to "online social capital". Williams pointed out that in the development space of the internet, there exists a form of social capital distinct from that of real society. This capital relies on the powerful technology of the internet and is constructed through computer-mediated communication, strengthening bridging ties and enhancing bonding ties, which is referred to as online social capital. Chae Jiyoung (2018) through a comparison of four social media platforms — Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Twitter — found that users' online social capital influences their fundamental attitudes toward life. The use of social media benefits individuals with higher online social capital, and the greater the online social capital, the greater the sense of happiness it brings (Chae, Jiyoung, 2018). Lin (2001) proposed that users gain social recognition and establish interpersonal connections through content sharing, which is essentially a process of social capital reproduction (Lin, N., 2001). Such research has been validated in e-commerce communities (e.g., Taobao's "product recommendations") and knowledge-sharing communities (e.g., Zhihu), where users enhance their influence levels within the community through information sharing (Hui Bingran, 2023). Young people use social media to establish a foundation for reciprocal communication with others and expand the practical means of engaging in dialogue with society. By sharing scientific knowledge, common visions, and values with others, young users accumulate a certain amount of social capital. This social reciprocity is of significant importance in driving the aggregation of capital among young social media users.

At the same time, the theory of emotional labor provides a new perspective for understanding user participation in online virtual communities. The concept of emotional labor, introduced by Hochschild (1983), has been incorporated into digital labor studies (Hochschild, A., 2002),

highlighting that users need to invest emotional energy in content creation to sustain community interactions (Duffy & Hund, 2019). For instance, Instagram influencers convey an “idealized self” through meticulously designed makeup tutorials, which essentially combines emotional labor with personal branding (Abidin, 2016). Such research reveals the coexistence of instrumental rationality and emotional investment in user participation but primarily focuses on professional creators, paying insufficient attention to the non-profit emotional labor of ordinary users. Compared to professional creators, the emotional labor of ordinary users in virtual communities is more non-transactional and autonomous. For example, in online gaming communities, teenage players invest emotional energy through activities like accompanying others in games and social interactions to maintain a sense of belonging within the online community (Yan Daocheng et al., 2024). Fan communities engage in “emotional labor” through secondary creations and topic discussions, producing cultural capital and facilitating value exchange within the community (Zhang Yongjun, 2024). Although such practices do not directly generate economic benefits, they sustain the activity and cohesion of the community through emotional investment (Wang Gang, 2017). However, existing research still lacks in-depth exploration of the motivations, manifestations, and impacts of such non-profit emotional labor on users’ mental health.

In summary, the dual dynamics of social capital and emotional labor provide an important theoretical lens for understanding the behavior of young women sharing “good finds” in online communities. By segmenting the membership of virtual online communities and focusing on young women — the main drivers of the “she economy” — this study takes Xiaohongshu as a representative case to deeply analyze the motivations behind young women’s “sharing good finds” or “product recommendations” in these communities. The research finds that the accumulation of social capital (e.g., gaining attention, likes, and comments) and the investment of emotional labor (e.g., meticulously designing content and maintaining interactive relationships) jointly constitute the primary driving forces behind their sharing behavior. However, this process may also lead to issues such as content homogenization,

information overload, and emotional fatigue. By revealing the lifestyles and consumption psychology of young women in virtual communities, this study offers new insights into the behavioral patterns of female users in the new era and provides practical implications for optimizing user governance and enhancing the quality of user-generated content (UGC) in virtual online communities.

3. Data Sources and Research Methods

The primary objective of this study is to analyze the motivations behind young women sharing “good finds” in online communities in the new era. Xiaohongshu, currently one of the most popular platforms among young people, was selected as a representative of new online communities. As a homegrown social e-commerce platform in China, Xiaohongshu has pioneered a dual-core driven model of “content community-consumption loop” since its inception in 2013. By integrating user-generated content (UGC) and cross-border e-commerce services, it has built a unique consumer culture ecosystem. By early 2019, its registered user base had exceeded 200 million, with a distinctive demographic profile: young women (born between 1990 and 2009) constitute the absolute majority, accounting for over 70% of users, forming a highly homogeneous “female-centric” network. This user profile aligns closely with the trends of increasing female consumer decision-making power and expanding social shopping demands in the era of the “she economy”. Additionally, the seamless integration of “product recommendations” (种草) and “instant purchases” (拔草) on the platform makes Xiaohongshu an ideal sample field for exploring the digital practices and consumer identity of young women.

This study employs qualitative research methods to focus on the “good finds” sharing behavior of young female users in the Xiaohongshu community. Based on the principle of purposive sampling, the researcher recruited 15 active female users (aged 18–30) through online recruitment and snowball sampling for semi-structured in-depth interviews. The interview formats included face-to-face (8 participants) and video calls (7 participants), with each session lasting 60–90 minutes. Core questions included, “What is your primary motivation for consistently posting notes on Xiaohongshu?” and “How do you evaluate the quality and limitations of the current UGC

content in the community?" Preliminary data analysis revealed that while the respondents exhibited significant heterogeneity in demographic dimensions (such as occupation, education level, and geographic distribution), their sharing motivations displayed structural homogeneity — centered around the accumulation of social capital and the investment of emotional labor. To further uncover the internal differences in motivation types, the researcher selected seven typical cases from the original sample based on the case study screening criteria proposed by Robert K. Yin (2018). These cases serve as the foundation for analyzing the motivations behind young women's "good finds" sharing in online communities.

4. Motivation Analysis of Young Women's "Good Finds" Sharing in Online Communities

Motivation Theory provides a core framework for analyzing the driving forces and sustainability of individual behaviors. Its central proposition lies in categorizing behavioral motivations into two main domains: intrinsic motivation (stemming from internal interests or a sense of pleasure) and extrinsic motivation (driven by external rewards or pressures) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Building on this, scholars have further incorporated the formation process of self-concept into the analysis, proposing a hierarchical model of motivation that refines motivations into five types:

- 1) Intrinsic-Interest Motivation: Behavior aimed at satisfying self-exploration or interest fulfillment, such as immersing oneself in the joy of creation (Deci et al., 1999).
- 2) Instrumental Motivation: Behavior oriented toward obtaining external benefits like material rewards or social status, such as pursuing platform traffic revenue (Bhattacharjee, 2012).
- 3) Social-Identity Motivation: Behavior intended to meet group expectations and strengthen a sense of social belonging, such as mimicking "influencer" personas to gain community recognition (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).
- 4) Self-Actualization Motivation: Behavior focused on enhancing self-value perception and competence recognition, such as shaping an "expert" identity through knowledge sharing (Bandura, 1986).
- 5) Internalized-Value Motivation: Behavior deeply tied to social norms or ethical principles,

such as promoting environmental protection to advocate for public welfare (Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Based on this framework, the motivations behind Xiaohongshu users' "good finds" sharing behavior can be deconstructed into two main domains: social capital and emotional labor.

4.1 Social Capital Driving Mechanism: Resource Accumulation and Power Dynamics

Based on Bourdieu's (1986) *social capital theory* (Bourdieu, P., 1986), the "good finds" sharing behavior of Xiaohongshu users can be viewed as a form of symbolic social investment, with motivations centered on the construction of relational networks and the convertibility of resources.

Drawing on Goffman's dramaturgical theory and the behavioral characteristics of online community users, this study reconstructs the theoretical framework for understanding the motivations behind young women's "good finds" sharing on Xiaohongshu. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman posits that social interactions are akin to theatrical performances, where individuals manage impressions through the dynamic interplay of the "front stage" (the deliberate presentation of an idealized image) and the "backstage" (the private space where the true self is concealed) (Goffman, E., 2022). The study finds that Xiaohongshu's unique anonymous social mechanism transforms it into a "digital enclave" for backstage performances. Unlike the strong relational constraints of WeChat Moments, the platform's stranger-based social mechanism alleviates the disciplinary pressures of acquaintance society, allowing users to break free from societal role restrictions and engage in unconscious authentic self-expression.

Specifically, the "good finds" sharing behavior of young female users exhibits a dual performance logic: In the backstage creation field, they transform personal life experiences into collective emotional resonance through embodied narratives such as home renovation and makeup tutorials, achieving "self-healing without judgment" ("My skincare notes are written for another version of myself in a parallel world" — Respondent F). However, when the content enters the frontstage performance phase driven by algorithmic recommendations, users actively adjust their narrative strategies, adopting standardized

templates like “clickbait titles and comparison images” to craft a “curated lifestyle expert” persona that meets audience expectations. This tension between frontstage and backstage behaviors confirms Goffman’s assertion about “performance segregation”: users need the authenticity of the backstage to sustain their creative drive, while simultaneously relying on frontstage impression management to acquire social capital.

Notably, the platform’s technical architecture amplifies the complexity of these performances. Xiaohongshu’s content “re-editing” feature (e.g., multiple revisions of notes, hiding historical versions) makes the backstage creation process reversible, allowing users to transition from authentic expression to strategic performance through a cycle of “trial and error-correction”. The study further reveals that sustained frontstage performances can lead to identity alienation, with some users experiencing “account personality splitting” — maintaining a polished persona on their main account while documenting moments of emotional breakdown on a secondary account, creating a new form of frontstage-backstage segregation in digital existence. This highlights a deeper paradox of self-presentation in the social media era: the expressive freedom enabled by technological empowerment ironically exacerbates the estrangement between the true self and the virtual persona.

“Actually, at the beginning, I just posted casually for fun. When I posted a selfie on WeChat Moments, people would ask, ‘Is this too photoshopped?’ But here on Xiaohongshu, when I share makeup tutorials, I get a lot of comments like ‘What’s the lipstick shade?’ or ‘Link to the eyeshadow palette?’ This feeling of being recognized by strangers is like finding another version of myself in a parallel world. Later, I realized that the better the traffic, the more ‘tactics’ the notes require — like adding comparison photos or using titles like ‘Personally Tested and Effective’ — otherwise, the algorithm won’t recommend them at all. (Fiddling with her phone to show her draft notes) Look at this note about concealer techniques. I revised the cover six times just to make the words ‘for clumsy hands’ stand out more. Nowadays, even genuine sharing has to be ‘designed’ to fit what the audience wants to see.” (Respondent Ms. Z)

“WeChat Moments is like dancing in shackles. Every post has to consider how classmates and relatives will perceive it. Here on Xiaohongshu, it’s more like an anonymous diary. I can showcase a polished makeup

look (scrolling through her phone to show a vlog of a store visit) or use a secondary account to post bare-faced photos and vent about workplace stress. But recently, I’ve noticed a strange phenomenon: the beauty bloggers recommended on the homepage are starting to look more and more alike, even their eyeshadow color schemes are almost identical. Is the algorithm creating an aesthetic bubble?” (Respondent Ms. L)

4.2 Emotional Labor Driving Mechanism: Emotional Investment and Labor Monetization

In the “good finds” sharing behavior of young women in online communities, the emotional labor driving mechanism manifests as a two-way interaction between emotional investment and labor monetization. This mechanism encompasses both the subjective agency of users in maintaining community relationships through emotional expression and the capitalization of emotional value within the platform economy.

4.2.1 Emotional Investment: Emotional Bonding and Self-Performance

According to Hochschild’s theory of emotional labor, individuals actively regulate and manage their emotions to meet social expectations (Hochschild, A., 2002). In online communities, young women sharing “good finds” not only transmit information but also establish emotional connections with their audience through “deep acting” (e.g., meticulously crafting usage experiences and pairing them with visual content). For instance, on platforms like Xiaohongshu, users often employ affinity-driven language such as “sisterly recommendations” or “pitfall avoidance guides” to create an empathetic space. This emotional investment fulfills social needs while simultaneously shaping their identity as “thoughtful sharers”. In this process, emotional labor extends from the private sphere to the public domain, enabling users to accumulate social capital through continuous emotional performances, thereby forming a cycle of “emotion-trust-influence.”

“When I first started sharing ‘good finds’, it was purely out of interest. But gradually, I realized that to consistently gain attention, I had to invest a lot of ‘invisible emotions.’ For example, every time I write a product review, I have to carefully consider the tone, using phrases like ‘Sisters, you have to try this!’ or ‘Helping you dodge a bullet here’. Even the lighting and filters in the photos need to be adjusted to make

them feel warm and relatable. Sometimes, even when I'm in a bad mood, I have to maintain an enthusiastic tone in the comments, like wearing a mask of the 'perfect blogger'— I guess this is what they call 'deep acting'." (Respondent Ms. T)

4.2.2 Labor Monetization: The Capitalization of Emotional Value

Bourdieu's field theory of capital posits that social capital, cultural capital, and economic capital can be converted through specific mechanisms (Li Yanpei, 2008). In the digital platform ecosystem, the emotional labor of young women is integrated into the "emotional economy" system:

1) Accumulation of cultural capital: High-quality emotional content, such as immersive unboxing videos and emotional product evaluations, can enhance users' content competitiveness and gain preferential treatment in terms of platform traffic.

2) Transformation of economic capital: Top-tier users monetize their emotional influence through means such as brand collaborations and live-streaming e-commerce. For example, "fans' trust level" is directly related to the conversion rate of products, and the platform algorithm quantifies emotional labor into tradable digital capital through data indicators (such as the number of likes and favorites).

3) Strengthening of social capital: The strong community bonds created by emotional labor (such as interactions within fan groups) further consolidate users' status, forming a positive feedback loop of "emotional investment — traffic growth — business cooperation".

"But this kind of investment really pays off. Fans started calling me their 'thoughtful little bestie', and brands began approaching me for collaborations. However, the pressure keeps growing. Last week, because of a drop in engagement, I stayed up all night reshooting a video three times, crying while editing... I feel like I've become an 'emotional perpetual motion machine', constantly pushed by the platform's algorithm to produce 'likable' content. But when I see fans commenting, 'I've never been disappointed following your recommendations', I feel like all this emotional labor is worth it..." (Respondent Ms. S)

5. Psychological Pathways of Young Women Sharing "Good Finds" in Online Communities

Generally, motivation serves as the starting point of behavior, but such initiation can be occasional or one-time. For studies on sustained

behavior, in addition to focusing on the driving role of motivation, it is essential to delve into the mediating pathways through which motivation translates into behavior — that is, the underlying psychological mechanisms of individual actions. Through in-depth interviews with young women in the Xiaohongshu community, it was found that the behavior of sharing "good finds" is not only directly influenced by individual motivations but is also profoundly moderated by internal psychological mechanisms. Among these, self-identity and social capital are the two core psychological mechanisms driving young women to continuously share "good finds".

5.1 Self-Identity

In Taylor's theory of self-identity, self-identity refers to an individual's reflective understanding of themselves based on their experiences. In the context of late modernity, Taylor imbues this concept with a new interpretation, arguing that each individual possesses unique traits. Through practices in life, work, and social interactions, individuals accumulate life experiences and develop a deeper reflective understanding of themselves. Therefore, self-identity is neither a fixed social construct nor an inevitable stage-specific outcome in the process of individual development.

Self-identity is the primary psychological mechanism influencing young women's continuous sharing of "good finds" in the Xiaohongshu community. This is first reflected in the proactive nature of self-identity behavior, which undergoes a transition from an unconscious stage to a conscious stage. Young women active on the Xiaohongshu platform collectively form an "invisible group", where the norms within the group and interactions among members make individuals deeply feel the attraction and value of the group. They are passionate about "showing off" their lives in virtual communities, and this "showing off" is essentially a conscious display of self-information. The premise of this behavior is that individuals have a clear awareness of themselves, and its goal is to achieve self-identity. Compared to previous generations, the self-identity of contemporary youth exhibits significant differences: it is no longer confined to an implicit and passive state but instead places greater emphasis on recognition from mainstream culture, even carrying a tendency toward excessive artificial modification. For

example, the popular online self-media program *Chen Xiang's Six-Thirty* vividly reflects how youth shape their self-identity through excessive modification on social media. In this process, external explicit discourse and internal implicit expression intertwine, jointly driving the social convergence and deconstructive reconstruction of youth self-identity.

Furthermore, during interactions with group members, when an individual's sharing of "good finds" receives positive responses from others (such as likes, shares, etc.), it indicates that the individual's self-concept aligns with the group evaluation. This consistency not only reinforces their role positioning in the virtual online space but also further solidifies their self-identity. Based on this identity, individuals continue to produce content for the community, thereby forming a virtuous cycle.

5.2 Social Capital

The behavior of young people using social media is closely related to their personal social traits, with social capital being a core concept. Bourdieu pointed out that traditional economic research has overlooked the diversity of capital, which primarily manifests in three basic categories: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital (Bourdieu, P., 1986). He defined social capital as the sum of real and virtual resources possessed by individuals or groups, which are accumulated and maintained through a network of interpersonal relationships with varying degrees of institutionalization (e.g., acquaintances or recognized connections). American scholar Putnam further divided social capital into two forms: bridging social capital, which emphasizes information communication and exchange between different individuals but lacks emotional support; and bonding social capital, typically formed by family or close friends, characterized by strong interest connections and emotional bonds (Putnam, R. D., 2000).

Research indicates that social media plays a significant role in the accumulation of social capital among youth. Ellison et al. found that online interactions through social media networks can strengthen offline real-world social interactions. Additionally, as the frequency of social media use increases, users' acquisition of both bridging and bonding social capital also significantly improves. For example, the intensity of Facebook use positively

correlates with the increase in bridging social capital, while having more "real friends" offline or interacting with offline friends through social media significantly impacts the accumulation of both bridging and bonding social capital.

In the context of young women sharing "good finds" in online communities, the role of social capital is particularly prominent. By sharing "good finds", young women construct an invisible social network. This network not only provides them with a platform for information exchange (bridging social capital) but also strengthens close connections within the group through emotional interactions and trust-building (e.g., likes, comments, and shares) (bonding social capital). The accumulation of this dual social capital not only expands the real-world carriers for their social dialogue but also enables them to gain more social resources and a sense of identity in both virtual and real-world spaces.

"Sharing 'good finds' has given me a greater sense of presence on Xiaohongshu. I feel recognized. Additionally, through interactions with other users, I've learned many new things, like skincare tips and fashion advice, which have made me more confident in my daily life. Moreover, I sometimes receive collaboration invitations from brands. Although I don't share for the sake of making money, these opportunities make me feel that my sharing is meaningful. The Xiaohongshu community is incredible — it brings together so many people. If you're willing to explore, you can find the information you need. Overall, sharing on Xiaohongshu has not only given me a sense of belonging in life but also provided me with more resources and opportunities." (Respondent Ms. W)

6. Conclusion

This study, through the dual lenses of social capital theory and emotional labor theory, provides an in-depth analysis of the dual dynamics driving young women to share "good finds" in online communities. The research finds that the accumulation of social capital and emotional labor are not only the primary drivers of their sharing behavior but also crucial pathways for achieving self-identity and acquiring social resources in virtual communities. By sharing "good finds", young women not only construct extensive social networks but also sustain the activity and cohesion of the community through emotional investment. This behavior fulfills their need for

social capital while also enabling the reproduction of personal value through emotional labor.

However, this study has certain limitations. First, it primarily focuses on the Xiaohongshu platform. Future research could expand to other social media platforms to validate the generalizability of the findings. Second, this paper does not deeply explore the impact of factors such as age, professional background, and cultural differences on sharing behavior. Future studies could segment user groups to reveal more complex behavioral motivations. Lastly, as social media platforms become increasingly commercialized, whether young women's sharing behavior will shift from non-profit to professionalization is also a noteworthy research direction.

In conclusion, this paper provides a new theoretical framework for understanding the behavioral motivations of young women in online communities, while also offering practical insights for social media platforms to optimize user experience and enhance community engagement. Future research could build on this foundation to further explore the diversity and complexity of social media user behavior, enriching both theoretical research and practical applications in related fields.

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