

# ***An Analysis on the Formation of Feminism in Emerging Adulthood in the Context of Social Media***

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**Abstract:** As an emerging hot topic in China's social media, "Feminism" has been widely disseminated and paid attention to, including the attention of emerging adulthood individuals. Emerging adulthood individuals are in a fluid period, and their values are easily influenced by the extensive content push of social media. Among them, feminism is a topic with strong ideological and cultural significance, which has a certain impact on the conceptual construction of the emerging adulthood group. Therefore, this paper analyzes the formation of feminism in emerging adulthood by combining the definition and development process of feminism, and combining the characteristics of emerging adulthood and social media. This paper argues that the exploratory desire of the adult fledgling group leads them to pay attention to feminism-related content. Then, the participatory and free nature of social media will affect the formation of feminist concepts in this group. Based on this, this paper suggests that relevant departments and schools should pay attention to students' mental health education. Social media platforms should focus on strengthening supervision. Individual users should focus on cultivating critical thinking.

**Keywords:** Feminism, emerging adulthood, social media

## **1. Introduction**

With the development of Chinese society and the popularization of the Internet, feminism has gradually become a heated topic in China. More and more people have become feminists, and this identity formation and transformation is particularly prominent in the emerging adulthood group. However, this identity transformation is affected by multiple factors, so the reasons behind it are worth exploring.

In general, it is of great theoretical and practical significance to analyze the influence of feminism itself and social media on the formation of feminism in the emerging adulthood group.

First of all, from the theoretical point of view, through the analysis of the impact of feminism and social media, people can have a deeper understanding of the formation process and influencing factors of the concept of feminism in the emerging adulthood group. This is helpful for people to refine the understanding of emerging adulthood psychological development, as well as shed light on the role of social media in the spread of feminist ideas.

Second, from the practical point of view, understanding the impact of feminism and social media on emerging adulthood can provide useful information for policymakers, educators, and social

workers. For example, the Ministry of Education may work with schools to carry out educational activities to help young people better understand and accept feminism, while social media platforms could take steps to optimize the online environment in which feminism-related content is disseminated in order to prevent negative messages from having an adverse impact on emerging adulthood individuals.

This paper would integrate the definition and development process of feminism, the main features of the emerging adulthood group and the characteristics of social media, to analyze how emerging adulthood forms feminist concepts after being influenced by feminism and social media.

## **2. Overview of Key Concepts**

### **2.1. The Definition and Development of Feminism**

#### **2.1.1. The Definition of Feminism**

Tian Yu defines feminism as three aspects: political, theoretical and practical. From the political aspect, feminism is a political movement that aims to change the existing power relations between men and women in society [1]. From the theoretical aspect, feminism is a value, doctrine and methodological principle that emphasizes gender equality and affirms women. It is a cultural construction with women as the main body [1]. From the practical aspect, feminism is a social movement for women's liberation [1].

The goal of feminism is to eliminate gender discrimination, end the oppression of women, and bring about change in the realm of thought and culture. A feminist is someone, whether female or male, who is genuinely involved in the movement and actively participates in its intellectual and cultural revolution [1].

#### **2.1.2. The Development of Feminism**

In the study of the worldwide feminist movement, scholars generally divide the development of the feminism into three stages, including two major waves.

The first stage of feminism, also known as the First Wave Feminism, is generally considered to have occurred in the mid-to-late 19th century to the early 20th century. During the French Revolution, the French women's leader Olympe de Gouges published the "Declaration of the Rights of Women" in 1791, which was used to benchmark the "Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizens". Although her ideas were strongly opposed by the patriarchal society, her ideas still influenced many Western countries. In 1848, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Stanton and other vanguard leaders of the American feminist movement organized the first Women's Rights Conference in the United States, which clearly proposed that women should enjoy property rights and the right to vote like men [1]. The convention marks the official beginning of the feminist movement in the United States. In 1859, the first women's organization in Britain, the "Langham Place Group", established the "Society for Promoting the Employment of Women", and then came the wave of feminism in Britain. The main demand of feminists during the First-Wave Feminism was to achieve political equality with men. The goal of feminists during this period was to win for women the same voting rights, education rights and employment rights as men. In this wave, male feminists such as John Mill also emerged, who believed that the order of male superiority over females is not the best model for human relations between sexual relations, and emphasized that women should have the freedom to choose [2]. Despite difficulties such as resistance from the patriarchal society, feminist leaders and female groups made great achievements in the First Wave of Western countries through their struggles. Women in many countries gained the right to vote, while women's education was promoted, and women's employment opportunities increased.

The second stage of feminism, or the Second-Wave Feminism, took place in the 1960s and 1970s, shortly after the end of the First Wave Feminism. It started in the United States and quickly spread to the whole world, covering almost all the western developed countries in the world at that time. Although the critique of men and the patriarchal society remained a constant aim of feminism in this period, the main goals of the Second Wave were different from those of the First Wave. In this wave, radical feminism developed rapidly, and its main goal changed from fighting for rights to criticizing sexism and male supremacy, and eliminating gender differences. Since then, countries around the world have gradually set up specialized agencies to protect women's rights and interests, and some countries have amended their constitutions and laws to protect women's rights and interests [3]. During this period, the works published by Simone de Beauvoir and others caused a large number of studies and discussions on gender equality and differences and the reasons for women's oppression, and then a large number of feminist theorists emerged and different academic schools were formed.

The third stage of feminism occurred in the 1980s and 1990s when feminism and postmodernism merged to form postmodern feminism. This phase of feminism included a wider range of women was more inclusive and diverse, and carried on the critical inheritance of the previous two waves of feminism. The goal of gender equality pursued in the third stage of feminism was to make no gender need to pay any price for any difference in their gender. It paid attention to the unique experience of women, adhered to the special position of women, and actively promoted the feminist value orientation without prejudice and discrimination while comprehensively liquidating the inherent connotation of gender oppression and patriarchal characteristics of modern society [4].

In addition to the above three stages of feminism development, relevant scholars believe that the development of the Internet has increased the possibility of the "Fourth Wave" of feminism. Although some scholars believe that the Internet itself did not prompt feminism to define a new era, the reality of society shows that the widespread use of the Internet has increased feminists' freedom of action. At the same time, it has led to discussion on the topic [5]. This has brought a lot of new information and topics that combine the previous feminist content, including positive content such as the rise of women's power and women's contributions, but also negative information such as feminist stigmatization and gender antagonism.

## **2.2. The Definition and Features of Emerging Adulthood**

### **2.2.1. The Definition of Emerging Adulthood**

Developmental psychologist Jeffrey Arnett and his colleagues in developmental psychology identified what they consider a new phase of development, emerging adulthood. Researchers discovered that individuals aged between eighteen and twenty-nine experienced a sense of feeling in-between [6]. Rather than simply transitioning from late adolescence to young adulthood, these individuals were experiencing a fluid state in which their cognition was still developing, neurobiology was still changing, and mental structures such as ego function, ego ideal, and superego function were not yet fully matured. Their relationships were still in a transition and restructuring phase, and specific career goals for this age group have yet to be determined [7]. Jeffrey Arnett thus coined the term "emerging adulthood" to describe this specific period of development. The starting point of emerging adulthood is relatively clear, that is, 18 years old, but the end is not easy to determine precisely, thus 18 to 25 years old or 18 to 29 years old can be included, but 18 to 25 years old is the core age of adult emerging period [8].

### **2.2.2. The Features of Emerging Adulthood**

There are five main features of emerging adulthood, namely, identity explorations, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between and possibilities/optimism [8]. During this period, young people take

"exploration" as the core feature, and due to less social control and less social responsibility, they pay more attention to themselves, which is a period of self-concern [9]. Webster argues that in the emerging adulthood period, young people's worldviews will be constantly challenged and questioned based on the instability and possibilities of life. The occurrence of changing events such as studying and working abroad will impact individual values and worldviews, leading to a deeper and more complex understanding of oneself and the world [10]. It can be seen that the value orientation of the emerging adulthood group often changes easily because of the influence of different values due to the feature of "Exploration".

### 3. Impact Analysis

During the period of emerging adulthood, many individuals undergo frequent changes as they explore various possibilities in love, work, and worldviews [11]. In combination with the features of the emerging adulthood groups mentioned above, this group is at a critical stage of identity and value formation. They are deeply thinking about and exploring their identities and values, their expectations for the society and themselves are constantly changing, and they are also facing various choices and uncertainties, so they are more inclined to explore and understand hot spots of society and different values. They may even abandon many traditional ideas and become advocates of new ones. In today's era, social media has become one of the most important channels for people to get information. The so-called "social media" mainly refers to the application software that realizes content creation, emotional exchange and information sharing with the Internet as the carrier [12]. social media first appeared in a 2007 e-book called "What is Social Media". The author Antony Mayfield defined social media as a new type of online media that gives users a great space to participate, with the following characteristics: participation, openness, conversation, community, and connectedness [13]. Due to the characteristics of "openness", "participation" and other social attributes of social media, people browse views, express views or agree with views on various social media platforms in order to meet their personal cognitive and emotional needs. In the process of using social media, everyone can not only participate in the dissemination of information, but also participate in the production of information, and such communication, contact and interaction will always affect the change or reshaping of social mentality [14]. Individual attitudes and behaviors can therefore be affected to varying degrees. Content on social media platforms is diverse, including news, blogs, videos, discussions and more. The content covers a variety of social issues and topics, including content related to feminism.

At present, the user groups of social media in China show a trend of rejuvenation. Taking the Chinese social media platform "Zhihu" as an example, Zhao Hang analyzed the user types of Zhihu, and the data showed that young people aged 18-25 accounted for more than 40% of the users of Zhihu [15]. Feminism, as a topic that has just emerged in Chinese social media in recent years, has naturally become a topic that has aroused wide attention and discussion among the emerging adulthood group. With the development of social media, the speed of information dissemination continues to accelerate, which has boosted women's ideological liberation to a certain extent, and has also increased the generation of female-related issues. For example, it can be seen from the content characteristics of "Feminism" in Zhihu, a social media platform mainly used by youngsters, that the presentation of feminism in social media not only contains content that opposes gender discrimination and seeks equal rights and opportunities, which helps people establish the concept of equality, but also contains some negative messages such as gender antagonism and female stigma because of the capital-driven quantification of social media streams. According to Wang Jiayuan's research on "Feminism" related issues on the Zhihu platform, through word frequency statistics of 742 questions and 1,285 answers on four topics related to "Feminism" in Zhihu, high-frequency words and discussion characteristics of all Q&A contents were obtained. That is, the emotion of relevant discussion is intense and radical,

stigmatization words attached to feminism appear frequently, the family division of labor and social roles of men and women are commonly discussed, the practical dimension is generally concerned, and the discussion level is wide [16].

In the emerging adulthood group, the desire for knowledge and exploration is strong, and individuals in such a period have a more sensitive cognition of social problems and personal fate. As a result, they are susceptible to feminist ideas. While positive feminist ideas on the Internet have an impact on the emerging adulthood group, some extreme feminist related content may also affect this group. As digital natives, emerging adulthood individuals have a preponderance in their ability to use online technology and are very familiar with the use of the Internet and social media, which allows them to use social media platforms to access a large amount of information, including feminists related content and discussions. In addition, through big data algorithm analysis, social media platforms can push relevant content based on users' interests and behaviors. The interactivity and transmissibility of social media allow such content to spread quickly and reach more people. Through the participation and interaction of social media, emerging adulthood individuals can communicate and discuss with other people who pay attention to feminist issues as well, thus further deepening their contact with a wide range of feminist concepts, and then forming their feminist thoughts.

To sum up, there are several reasons why emerging adulthood individuals can be influenced by feminist content and social media to form their feminist ideas: First, in the stage of identity exploration and value formation, they are sensitive to social issues and personal fate, and easy to accept feminist ideas and concepts. Secondly, they have a strong thirst for knowledge and desire to explore, and can obtain feminist information through online technology and the usage of social media. Finally, the big data algorithm and content characteristics of social media enable feminist content to spread quickly and affect more people, further strengthening the possibility of feminism forming in the emerging adulthood group.

#### 4. Suggestions

The content of social media is very mixed, and the content related to feminism is not only limited to the opposition to gender discrimination and the pursuit of equal rights and opportunities, but also contains some negative information such as gender opposition issues and female stigma. To avoid negative effects on the emerging adulthood group, here are some suggestions.

##### 4.1. School and Society

A large portion of the emerging adulthood group is still on campus. Therefore, in response to the psychological features and personality characteristics of emerging adulthood individuals, schools should cooperate with education departments to strengthen mental health education and provide targeted psychological counseling for this group, as well as carry out some activities to help them understand feminism, and encourage critical thinking and independent thinking. Individuals in the period of emerging adulthood may face inner confusion and insecurity as they form their identities and values. In the process of using social media, they may often face some information that contradicts their inherent understanding, and they may also face extremely negative content. Therefore, strengthening mental health education can provide targeted psychological counseling, help the emerging adulthood group to understand and deal with their emotions, enhance self-cognition and emotional management ability, and prevent them from being affected by negative information. In essence, feminism advocates the concept of gender equality, but it is often labeled as an extreme and sensitive topic in social media. Therefore, relevant activities can be carried out in schools to let students truly understand the core of feminism and avoid extreme opinions and behaviors. Moreover, cultivating critical thinking and independent thinking ability of the emerging adulthood group can



guide them to rationally think and evaluate the feminist information on social media and form their independent judgment.

Apart from psychological education and counseling in schools, government departments should also play a full role. For example, government departments can carry out voluntary activities at the social level to help emerging adulthood individuals who are not on campus understand their characteristics, help them improve their thinking ability, and help them avoid being influenced by negative information on social media due to their lack of social experience, which can lead to behaviors that are detrimental to the development of feminist ideas that support the concept of gender equality.

#### **4.2. Social Media Platforms**

As an important channel of information dissemination, social media platforms have a certain influence on public opinion and social order, so they have the responsibility to strengthen the supervision of published content, improve big data technology, and avoid the situation of traffic supremacy. Social media platforms should ensure the authenticity, objectivity and diversity of content, avoid the dissemination of biased and misleading information, and push more diverse views and information to avoid information barriers. Feminism, as a hot topic, is often used by people on social media platforms to publish inflammatory content such as the promotion of gender antagonism while wearing the name of feminism. Instead of allowing this to happen, social media platforms should actively intervene to prevent polarizing public opinion. For example, in the platform system, all kinds of extreme words should be included in the scope of sensitive words, and the content involving these sensitive words must enter the review process before being published, to maximize the avoidance of various extreme content being published [17].

#### **4.3. Individuals**

Although the emerging adulthood group is in a changeable stage of life, they already have the basic right and wrong judgment ability. Therefore, as users of social media, individuals of the emerging adulthood group should always pay attention to the screening of information in the process of exploration, and refrain from losing their subjective judgment by imitating others. In the face of various ideas, emerging adulthood individuals should have critical and multidimensional thinking, understand the various viewpoints of feminism, and not believe in some false information or be swayed by emotions. Individuals can participate in some feminist-related discussions or activities to communicate with others and share their views and experiences, to deepen their understanding and knowledge of feminism. Feminism is a diverse movement, so it is necessary to respect the different views and experiences of different people, and not criticize or discriminate against others easily to avoid causing disputes.

### **5. Conclusion**

According to the definition and development process of feminism, feminism is a movement that supports gender equality by bringing about ideological and cultural changes that both men and women can participate in. Emerging adulthood is a period when individuals' identity and cognition are in the exploratory stage, so their thoughts can be easily influenced. It can be concluded that feminism breaks traditional patriarchal thoughts and is often associated with social issues, thus, combined with the social attributes and communication characteristics of social media, it has a certain influence on the formation of feminism in emerging adulthood who have the need and core feature of exploration. As emerging adulthood individuals are less subject to social control and bear less social responsibility, the formation of their ideas is relatively lacking in guidance and norms, and it is easy to deviate from

the correct line. Therefore, this paper aims to avoid the adverse impact of social media and some negative feminist information on emerging adulthood. From the perspectives of schools and society, social media platforms and individuals, some suggestions are put forward, such as providing psychological counseling for the emerging adulthood group, strengthening supervision of social media platforms and paying attention to information screening.

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