

Psychological Experiences of Gender Stereotypes among High School Students in Social Media and Educational Support Strategies

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Abstract:

Social media has become an integral part of high school students' lives in China. Yet the pervasive gender stereotypes in social media content, encompassing forms like appearance norms, occupational limitations, and rigid behavioral expectations for genders, may disrupt adolescents navigating critical phases of gender identity development, leading to tangible issues such as self-identity confusion and constrained behavioral choices. Building on the Stereotype Threat Theory framework, this study employed semi-structured interviews with five high school students and recent graduates, combined with Nvivo qualitative analysis, to examine their psychological experiences of gender stereotypes and educational support needs in social media. Results indicate: Female-oriented stereotypes outnumber male-oriented ones, with most students clearly identifying labels targeting their own gender group. Psychological responses predominantly manifest as anger and defiance, accompanied by critical and negative cognitive tendencies, though a minority of girls exhibit label internalization. Behavioral coping mechanisms emphasize passive adaptation over proactive resistance. Support needs encompass four key stakeholders: individuals, schools, platforms, and parents. This research provides empirical evidence for developing targeted educational support strategies between families, schools, and social media platforms, fill the existing research gap in gender stereotype studies among high school students in the digital age.

Keywords: Social Media; Gender Stereotypes; High School Students

1. Introduction

A joint survey on social media usage among high school students in China, the United States, Japan, and South Korea, conducted by the China Youth and Children Research Center in collaboration with institutions from these countries, reveals that 90.1% of Chinese high school students have used social media and hold a high level of acceptance for this medium. This remarkably high usage rate demonstrates that social media has become an integral part of high school students' daily lives [1].

As a widely used medium among high school students, social media inherently contains numerous gender stereotypes. Zhang Y. points out that gender biases from films and TV shows persist in social media. Female content is often assumed to focus on daily life and appearance, while male content tends to revolve around careers and sports [2]. Women are portrayed as emotionally reserved figures, while men are depicted as more outgoing. Gong Q. also notes that the media deliberately constructs an "emotional consumption" image of female fans, which is further solidified in social media, such as assuming women should support idols while men focus on tech and sports. Given that high school students frequently use social media and are easily influenced by gender stereotypes, this study focuses on the psychological experiences of gender stereotypes in the social media context, aligning with social realities [3].

The influence of numerous gender stereotypes in social media is more pronounced among high school students. Nowak's research found that high school students are in the late adolescence stage, with their psychological gender identity still being dynamically constructed and experiencing significant gender identity crises. This psychological plasticity and vulnerability make them more susceptible to and receptive to gender perceptions in social media [4]. Compared to other age groups, the psychological gender development of high school students is in a critical period, making them more significantly affected by gender stereotypes. Therefore, this study selected China's high school students as research subjects to investigate their psychological experiences of gender stereotypes in the context of social media. Additionally, this study further explores targeted educational support strategies based on students' psychological experiences and needs.

In recent years, numerous studies on gender stereotypes have been conducted both domestically and internationally. Jiang's research revealed gender differences in how mathematics-related gender stereotypes affect high school students' self-efficacy in academic decision-making, with mathematics self-concept serving as a moderating factor that can be mitigated through group counseling inter-

ventions [5]. Zhou's analysis of Shanghai's new college entrance examination system demonstrated that physics-related gender stereotypes encourage male students to choose physics while discouraging female students, with males exhibiting higher self-efficacy in physics [6]. Chen's examination of illustrations in People's Education Press high school English textbooks identified a tendency to depict more male figures and higher occupational status [7]. Galano's study showed that acceptance of gender stereotypes weakens scientific identity among high school students, particularly girls [8]. Flore's research confirmed that gender stereotype threats reduce Dutch high school girls' mathematics test scores [9]. These studies collectively demonstrate the widespread existence of gender stereotypes in mathematics, physics, and English textbooks, which influence academic self-concept, subject selection, identity formation, and academic performance, with significant gender differences. Some studies also validated the feasibility of intervention measures.

2. Method

2.1 Theory Evidence

The theoretical foundation of this study is the Stereotype Threat Theory, systematically proposed by Steele in their research. Originating from investigations into the socio-psychological processes of "poor academic performance among specific groups," this theory suggests that when individuals perceive their group being labeled with negative stereotypes and find themselves in situations requiring them to demonstrate the group's diminished capabilities, they develop psychological threats due to concerns about "their actions validating these stereotypes." This ultimately leads to underperformance relative to their actual abilities [10,11].

This study reveals that gender stereotypes in social media create "stereotype scenarios" for high school students. During their critical gender identity development phase, exposure to such content may trigger psychological threats through fears of validating stereotypes through their actions. This can lead to self-doubt regarding one's academic abilities and subject selection anxiety. For instance, girls may experience anxiety about choosing STEM subjects due to internalizing social media's gender stereotypes that frame females as having "weak scientific aptitude", which is a pattern consistent with the Stereotype Threat Theory and empirical findings. These findings provide theoretical support for exploring how high school students experience gender stereotypes in social media environments.

This study employs the Stereotype Threat Theory frame-

work, conducting research across four dimensions. It begins by examining how high school students perceive gender stereotypes as threats through specific social media scenarios. This perception triggers psychological stress, leading to emotional and cognitive reactions. The research then investigates their subsequent coping behaviors and identifies their support needs during this process.

2.2 Research Design

2.2.1 Subject investigated

This study adopted a flexible purposive sampling method to select 8-10 high school students and students who have graduated from high school for less than three years as research subjects, with a male-to-female ratio of nearly 1:1. They regularly use social media software such as WeChat and Weibo, and have experienced contact with gender-related issues or events.

2.2.2 Research technique

This study employed semi-structured interviews using an interview framework comprising four dimensions: threat

perception, psychological stress, behavioral coping, and support needs. The interview questions were primarily open-ended, focusing on participants' experiences with gender stereotypes during high school and their expectations for educational improvements. Each interview was conducted within 15-20 minutes, with all information strictly confidential. Researchers informed participants in advance and obtained their signed consent for audio recording, which was then transcribed into text and imported into NVivo for qualitative analysis.

3. Result

3.1 Gender Stereotype Scenes and Perceptual Features

The results in Table 1 show that there are more stereotypes about women than about men, and that most students can clearly perceive that the labels are directed at their own group.

Table 1. Interview Results Coding.

Fundamental Category	Subcategory	Initial Concept	Sample Interview Text	Reference point
Perceived Threat	Specific stereotype scene	For male behavior labels	A relatively androgynous-looking man was seen shedding tears in the video. Some people commented that men shouldn't be so effeminate and cry like women.	6
		For women-behavior labels	Girls should pay more attention to their appearance, dressing, and modesty	6
		Male appearance label	Some guys look feminine, and people in the comments section will call him a „daddy boy“ or something, saying that his style of dressing is not like a normal guy should have.	2
		Female-appearance label	Women should be beautiful and have no body hair	2
		For women-subject tags	They say girls don't do well in science, math, and so on	2
		For women-role labels	That women are born to serve the family	1
	Level of awareness	Clear perception	I feel like I'm talking about me	3
		Partial awareness	If the content is in line with my values, for example, he said he couldn't understand women chasing stars, and I happen not to chase stars, I won't feel offended or labeled	2

mental stress	cognitive reaction	Criticism and rejection	Everyone has their own hobbies and habits, but some people love to wear makeup and dress up, so it can not be said that a certain gender is fond of wearing makeup and dressing up.	9
		Worried about being judged	Those ads brainwash women with this idea of labeling, and it's natural that it affects me, and if that idea is widely accepted, then one day I'll be attacked for not dressing up.	2
		Partial approval	If I have this label or if I have someone of the same gender around me, I would say neutral approval	1
	emotional response	indignation	It's anger. It's like you've been attacked.	2
		Take it amiss	I feel resentful	2
		insentience	I don't feel anything. Maybe I'm used to it because it's common	2
		speechless	Too outrageous and you'll be speechless	1
Behavior Response	Proactive response	Find groups that agree with you.	Check the comments section to see if anyone is attacking him. If there are normal people, I'm relieved.	4
		Share your thoughts with people close to you	Talk to your friends and parents	3
		Behaviors that are the opposite of „tag“	In the past, there was a bit of an escape, like avoiding certain styles to prove that, despite being a girl, you didn't fit the label.	2
		Comment Reactions	Comment on the video that promotes stereotypes	1
	Passive response	Don't maintain self	I don't deal with it, I do what they say, and I do what I do.	4
		Quick Fix	Yes, I was once told not to look like a girl because of my crazy personality, and I tried to change for a few days, but I couldn't hold it back and gave up.	3
		avoid	I saw someone go straight to the diode, so there's no need to talk to it	1
Support requirements	Individual ability needs	Enhance your ability to argue and your courage	I wish I could summon the courage to curse such people. Don't be afraid of private messages or insults.	3
		Strengthen your core	You also have to improve your core.	1
	School and teacher education needs	Integrate relevant concepts into education.	Teacher, I think my homeroom teacher does a good job. She often discusses some gender-related hot issues with us in class meetings, and tells us to break the stereotype of gender.	3
		Popularize science knowledge	Schools are widely popularizing science and reshaping values for a wider range of groups.	1
	Platform management requirements	Reduce content with gender stereotypes.	Social media platforms also hope to reject content with labels and positive content, so that it can become popular and win more people's attention	2
		Advertise against gender stereotypes.	On social media platforms, the question is whether we can first ban those ads that are labeled for no reason.	1
	Parental support needs	Change traditional ideas	Because I think parents are actually taught traditionally because of a lot of historical reasons, with stereotypes about gender, but I want them to change their stereotypes by listening to the new ideas of their next generation.	2
		listen for	Parents can listen to their children more often	1

The analysis of coding results reveals that female stereotypes encompass three dimensions: appearance, academic disciplines, and social roles. Regarding appearance, they emphasize the need for beauty and lack of body hair. Academically, they associate poor performance with science subjects. Socially, they are tied to serving the family, corresponding to five reference points. Male stereotypes involve only two aspects: behavior and appearance. Behaviorally, they demand that men not display feminine traits or shed tears. Visually, they label clothing styles that deviate from male standards as “effeminate.” These correspond to four reference points. Cosmetics advertisements often convey the role label that women must achieve marriage and romantic opportunities through beauty. In comment sections, terms like “effeminate” are frequently used to critique male appearance, highlighting the disparity between genders.

In terms of perception levels, three clearly defined reference points account for a higher proportion than two partially recognized ones. Over 60% of students immediately associate gender labels with their own social group when encountering them. Only a minority experiences partial recognition due to value alignment. This is particularly evident among non-fans who perceive the negative label “women love chasing stars” as inherently contradictory to their values. Overall, perceptions demonstrate strong directional alignment.

3.2 Characteristics of Psychological Stress Response

In the psychological stress response, some girls will hold a neutral attitude towards the stereotype labels, such as “girls can’t learn well in science,” because their own characteristics overlap with the labels, such as poor physical scores, and there is a slight tendency of label internalization.

As shown in Table 1, anger and resentment are the predominant emotions students experience when encountering stereotypes. These two categories collectively account for 80% of responses, with only 20% of students showing indifference or silence. Those who remained indifferent cited two common stereotypes related to gender, which they had become accustomed to. The silent group primarily responded to the most extreme and absurd stereotypes. Students generally reported feeling attacked and disrespected when encountering such labels, demonstrating clear resistance to these experiences.

At the cognitive level, critical skepticism dominates. Students identify nine key reference points: they generally reject the notion that gender determines personal interests and abilities, opposing absolute statements like “a spe-

cific gender must do certain things.” Only one reference point shows partial acceptance, primarily among female students. Some girls neutrally acknowledge labels when they meet specific criteria, such as those with poor physics grades who mildly internalize the label “girls can’t excel in STEM subjects.”

3.3 Stereotype Coping Behavior Characteristics

The main problem of coping behavior is that students’ coping behavior with stereotypes is mainly passive, and their active coping behavior not only accounts for a low proportion, but also has a single form, and lacks active strategies that can effectively weaken the influence of stereotypes.

As shown in Table 1, students mainly respond to stereotypes with passive behaviors, and their active countermeasures are insufficient, resulting in limited coping effects.

Passive coping has become the predominant strategy. Among students, 4 reference points indicate “maintaining self-identity through non-confrontation,” while 3 reference points suggest “temporary compliance followed by abandonment.” These two passive behaviors collectively account for over 70% of responses. Most students avoid confrontation with social labels, either adhering to the principle of “let them say what they will, I’ll do my own thing,” or temporarily adjusting their behavior based on external evaluations—such as modifying their personality or adopting label-aligned attire. However, these adjustments often prove unsustainable as they ultimately contradict their self-perception.

The proactive response strategies remain limited in variety and low in frequency. The most common approach is “seeking group validation through shared perspectives,” supported by four reference points. Students typically alleviate discomfort by reviewing mainstream comments in discussion sections. “Sharing opinions with close contacts” follows closely with three reference points, ranking second only to the first strategy. Direct counter-commenting on label content constitutes merely one reference point. Overall, the lack of effective counter-strategies makes it challenging to fundamentally diminish the influence of labels.

3.4 Characteristics of Educational Support Needs

Respondents highlighted multiple unmet needs regarding educational support across different levels. At the school level, students require gender awareness education, yet systematic gender equality initiatives remain underdeveloped. On the platform level, management systems lack effective response mechanisms. While parents express

strong student demands, most have yet to implement necessary changes.

Table 1 clearly shows that students' needs for educational support cover four subjects, namely individuals, schools, platforms, and parents, and their core demands are clear.

Individual-level needs focus on three key aspects of skill enhancement. The first emphasizes building the courage to challenge gender stereotype labels, with students seeking to alleviate their anxiety in such situations via gender equality workshops and group counseling—initiatives they urge schools and platforms to deliver. The second highlights strengthening one's core gender identity: cognitive development through self-awareness courses and critical thinking training helps diminish the impact of labels, enabling students to bolster their confidence in handling them personally, as they expect these learning activities to be embedded in school curricula or after-school programs. Schools and platforms form the core of external demands. At the school level, three reference points for integrating gender equality concepts into class meetings are most widely recognized, with students generally approving of using class meetings to discuss current hot topics and promote equality. Popularizing gender knowledge is the only reference point, indicating that the system's educational needs have not been fully met.

At the platform level, there are two reference points for "reducing the promotion of gender stereotypes" and one reference point for "prohibiting gender stereotypes advertising", which are the main demands. Students expect to reduce contact with labels from the source.

Parents need to focus on changing attitudes, with two reference points pointing to changing traditional attitudes and one reference point pointing to listening to children's ideas. Students hope parents will avoid transmitting implicit stereotypes and understand the new generation's gender cognition through communication.

4. Suggestion

4.1 Parents and Teachers Work Together to Help Students Strengthen Coping Skills

In terms of cultivating students' media literacy, teachers and parents can guide students to identify the stereotyped content logic of algorithmic push in social media, such as women are often pushed to lookalike content, men are often pushed to competitive content, and improve their discernment ability through label traceability practice, to avoid passive acceptance of labels.

To help parents better shift their mindset and fulfill their role as "guides" for their children, it can optimize parent-child interactions and home-school collaboration.

First, community-based parenting workshops on gender perspectives should be established. Through sessions like "The Impact of Stereotypes on Teenagers" and "Non-Stereotypical Communication Skills", practical methods will be provided. For example, specific guidance will be given to avoid absolute statements in family education, such as "boys should be strong, girls should be quiet".

Schools can also regularly communicate with parents about the characteristics of adolescent gender cognition development, recommend parent-child learning resources, such as gender equality documentaries and books, guide parents and children to have in-depth discussions around social media labels, narrow the intergenerational cognitive differences, and form a family-school collaborative support situation.

To enhance students' psychological resilience, schools and teachers can guide students to record personal experiences that contradict stereotypical labels, such as girls recording high scores in science exams and boys recording positive feedback for emotional expression, so as to weaken the interference of labels on self-cognition with concrete evidence.

4.2 The School Builds a Systematic Education System

To address the lack of gender equality education in schools, a systematic educational framework should be established. In teaching practices, schools can integrate efforts to dismantle gender stereotypes into classroom instruction. Both institutions and educators should leverage class meetings to discuss current hot topics related to gender stereotypes with students. Through these dialogues, students can learn to cope with the negative psychological impacts caused by such stereotypes through intellectual exchanges.

In terms of student cooperative inquiry, the school can set up a gender issue practice club, organize activities such as "Breaking Labels" short video creation and campus gender equality debate, and transform the concept into practical actions.

In terms of teacher training, gender equality training can be carried out to prevent teachers from transmitting implicit stereotypes through case analysis, such as "girls are more careful and boys are better at logic", to create an inclusive classroom environment.

4.3 Platform Optimization of Relevant Content Governance Mechanisms

To address student demands on the platform, it will optimize content governance mechanisms. A gender equality content support program will be launched, prioritizing

traffic for high-quality content that promotes the “breaking stereotypes” concept, such as neutral-styled youth vlogs and diverse gender role lifestyle sharing, to counter algorithmic bias in content recommendation. The platform will enhance its tag reporting system by adding a dedicated “gender stereotypes” reporting category, ensuring feedback on reported cases within 24 hours, and publicly disclosing typical handling examples. These measures aim to strengthen students’ trust in the platform’s governance.

5. Conclusion

This study investigates gender stereotypes and psychological experiences among high school students in social media environments, along with educational support strategies. Through semi-structured interviews with 8-10 high school students and recent graduates, combined with NVivo qualitative coding analysis, the research identifies key experiences and needs of adolescents in this digital context.

In terms of perception, women are more frequently targeted by stereotypical labels than men, with most students clearly perceiving these labels as targeting their own group. Regarding psychological stress, anger and resentment dominate emotional responses, while critical and negative cognitive attitudes prevail. However, a minority of girls exhibit partial acceptance of such labels. Behavioral coping strategies primarily involve passive adaptation, with insufficient proactive resistance. Support needs encompass four key stakeholders: individuals, schools, platforms, and parents. School class meetings play a crucial role in promoting equality concepts, while platform moderation of stereotypical content remains a core demand. However, some girls demonstrate internalization of labels, passive coping behaviors, and unmet external support needs.

Future research could expand the sample size by including high school students from different regions and academic stages and employ quantitative research methods to further validate the universality of this study’s conclusions. Additionally, implementing the educational support strategies proposed in this study via a phased campus rollout and tracking their effects using specific indicators of students’ cognitive shifts toward gender stereotypes and frequency of active stereotype challenges over a defined cycle of one semester of tracking and one academic year of evaluation, could help explore their practical effects in improving high school students’ experiences with gender

stereotypes. Clear evaluation criteria of pre/post-intervention surveys and interview data further enhance the operability of future research in this area. This would provide a foundation for developing a more precise gender-equality education system for adolescents.

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