

Impact of exposure to gender issue content on attitudes towards gender equality: the mediating role of emotional resonance

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Abstract:

In recent years, new media platforms have seen a rapid growth in the content of gender equality issues, such as anti-sexual harassment and the defense of women's rights, often with storytelling, testimonials and emotional expressions that trigger public engagement. As young people aged 18-30 years old become the main users of social media, the frequency of exposure to gender-related content may have a subtle impact on their gender attitudes in the daily information flow. However, the relationship between media use/exposure and gender attitudes has been inconsistent, and the explanation of the influence mechanism is still insufficient. This study proposes a mediation model in which emotional resonance mediates the relationship between exposure to gender-related content and gender equality attitudes. The study will use questionnaires to collect data from college students aged 18-30, and utilize descriptive statistics, correlation analysis and mediation effect test to test the hypotheses. The study will help to supplement the explanation of the psychological mechanism of gender communication in new media in theory and provide a reference for the content production and public communication strategy of gender issues in practice.

Keywords: Gender-related content exposure; emotional resonance; gender equality attitudes; social media.

1. Introduction and Research Background

1.1 The Growth of Gender Issue Content in New Media Contexts

Compared with traditional paper media, social media

and new media platforms have lowered the threshold of public issue expression, resulting in a trend of high-frequency emergence of gender-related content in recent years. Relevant studies have pointed out that online topics such as #MeToo have obvious characteristics of collective narratives, in which users converge their private experiences into public

dialogues through sharing and re-telling, forming a continuous issue visibility and interactive structure. As Papacharissi (2016) argues, “affective publics are networked publics that are mobilized and connected through expressions of sentiment” (p. 125)[1], suggesting that emotional expression is central to digital issue formation. The online action represented by #MeToo often transforms the experience of sexual harassment, sexual violence and gender inequality into communicable public issues through personal narratives and testimonies, thus promoting more users to form discussions and attitudes around the path of “encounter → emotion → position”. and expression of attitudes around the path. #METoo is also more capable of triggering emotional resonance in the group and better disseminating these experiences.

1.2 The possibilities of shaping attitudes for young groups under high-frequency contact

Young people aged 18-30 are important users of new media platforms. This group is at a stage before their values are further solidified, and their views on gender roles, gender equality and positions on social issues continue to be adjusted under the combined effect of educational experiences, peer interactions and the media environment. Therefore, when the media users at young age are exposed to anti-sexual harassment, women's rights and initiatives in their daily information flow, such exposure may not only change their perception of the relevant social facts, but also affect their gender attitudes through their emotional reactions and value recognition.

1.3 Disagreements and Research Gaps in Existing Research

There are inconsistent findings on the relationship between media exposure or use and gender attitudes. “Media exposure is associated with both traditional and egalitarian gender role attitudes depending on content characteristics” (Ward & Grower, 2020) [2]. On the one hand, some research suggests that high frequency exposure to certain media content may be associated with more traditional gender roles or norms of masculinity. For example, studies of adolescents have found that heavy use of modern media such as television, video games, and YouTube is associated with higher identification with notions of masculinity, such as being “emotionally aloof, dominant, and assertive”. There are also some research has found that exposure to media emphasizing dominance, emotional restriction, and aggression predicts greater endorsement of traditional masculine norms among adolescents and young adults (Vandenbosch & Eggermont, 2012) [3]. On the other hand, some studies and commentaries sug-

gest that new media platforms may also serve as a channel for the diffusion of gender equality concepts, especially when the content ecology of the platforms includes more affirmative and anti-discriminatory expressions, and that exposure may be accompanied by more positive gender attitudes. (Jackson, Bailey, & Foucault Welles, 2020) [4]. Taken together, the differences in the “directionality” of the existing studies suggest that media influence is not a unidirectional outcome, but may be moderated by the type of content, the form of communication, and the psychological mechanisms of individuals. (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013) [5].

More importantly, many studies remain at the level of “whether it is relevant”, with relatively limited explanation of the psychological path of “how the impact occurs”. As Slater (2007) notes, media effects research must move beyond simple exposure-outcome associations to consider “the dynamic, reciprocal processes that shape attitude formation” (p. 284) [6]. One of the prominent features of new media content on gender issues is emotional expression and testimonial narratives: anger, sympathy, empathy and value recognition are often the main drivers of communication mobilization and attitude formation. Therefore, our study focuses on a more specific mechanistic question: does the frequency of exposure to gender-issued content further promote users' attitudes towards gender equality by triggering their emotional resonance? This mechanistic perspective can help explain why “high-frequency exposure” may lead to different attitudinal outcomes under different content ecologies and narrative strategies.

2. Literature Review: Media and gender attitudes: from stereotypes to ideas of equality

A substantial amount of research has focused on the link between media representations and gender perceptions. The systematic review points out that media representations are closely related to gender stereotypes, objectification and gendered presentation, and that media environments can consistently produce and reinforce certain gender role expectations at the socio-cultural level. Ward and Grower (2020) conclude that media representations are consistently associated with the development of gender stereotypes and role expectations among youth (p.113) [2]. Among adolescents, there is some evidence to support the association between modern media use and normative identities of masculinity, especially when the content includes values such as dominance, assertiveness, and exclusion of femininity, which may have a reinforcing effect on unequal gender perceptions. Narrative persuasion

research suggests that when individuals are “transported into a narrative world,” they are more likely to adopt beliefs consistent with the story (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 701) [7].

At the same time, new media offer another possibility: the diffusion of equality ideas through issue exposure, public discourse, and anti-discrimination expression. #MeToo demonstrates how digital platforms can amplify personal experiences into collective political narratives (Mendes et al., 2018). Taking #MeToo as an example, cross-national comparative studies have highlighted that the movement has triggered social discussions and cultural changes globally, suggesting that social media mobilization may be accompanied by certain positive social impacts. Social media publics are structured through “sentiment, events and mediality,” enabling emotional engagement to shape public discourse (Papacharissi, 2016, p. 311) [1].

Valkenburg and Peter (2013) also points out that media effects are conditional upon content characteristics and audience susceptibility rather than exposure time alone [5]. Therefore, it may be too crude to discuss only the “time of use” or “frequency of platform use”, and it is more important to focus on the content of specific issues and their dissemination mechanisms.

3. The role of emotions in communication and attitude change: narrative and persuasion

Communication research has long pointed out that emotions are not the antithesis of cognition but are an important factor in the depth of information processing, memory and attitude formation. Emotional responses can guide attention allocation and influence the depth of message processing, thereby shaping evaluative judgments and belief structures (Damasio, 1994) [8]. Narrative persuasion research has developed the concept of “narrative immersion”: when individuals are highly immersed in the world of a story, the story is more effective in influencing their beliefs and attitudes (Green & Brock, 2000, p. 701) [7]. New media content on gender issues is often driven by personal stories, testimonies, detailed contexts and emotional expressions, which are highly compatible with the mechanism of narrative persuasion. Immersive storytelling is often accompanied by heightened emotional engagement, which serves as a mechanism through which narrative exposure influences attitudes (Slater & Rouner, 2002) [9].

Further research also focuses on the role of emotional change/transference in narrative persuasion: immersive storytelling is often accompanied by changes in the audience's emotional experience, which can be an important component of attitude change. Therefore, if gender issue content can resonate with audiences through narrative and emotional expression, it may provide a psychological driver for attitude change.

3.2 Emotional resonance and online publics: from “being moved” to “positional identification”.

In the context of digital communication, “emotions” not only exist at the individual level but also may shape the interactive structure of online publics. The perspective of “affective publics” suggests that social media enable “connected emotions” through technology and interactive mechanisms, allowing public issues to coalesce around emotional expressions, story structures, and interactive retweets. Papacharissi (2016) suggests that the social media platforms organize participation around shared sentiments and storytelling structures [1]. Through technological affordances such as sharing, commenting, and retweeting, emotional expressions become connective mechanisms that shape issue visibility and collective engagement.

For gender issues, emotional expressions (e.g., anger, sympathy, hurt, and empowerment) are often the key medium for user participation, stance taking, and value recognition. The #MeToo discourse analysis study also shows that the related discussion is not only centered on “anger and revenge”, but also emphasizes personal empowerment and meaning construction, which suggests that emotional expression may be intertwined with the construction of value positions. Research on digital feminist activism shows that #MeToo transformed individual testimonies into collective political discourse, fostering transnational conversations centered on both outrage and empowerment (Mendes, Ringrose, & Keller, 2018) [10]. These findings indicate that emotional expression is intertwined with the construction of value positions and identity alignment in online environments.

In summary, the existing studies provide important theoretical resources for the path of “media exposure→emotion mechanism→attitude change”, but in the content scenario of gender issues, there is still a need to more explicitly link “exposure frequency” and “emotion resonance” as measurable variables into a unified model, and to empirically test their relationship.

4. Theoretical foundation and research model

4.1 Concept of emotional resonance and research value

Emotional resonance could be understood as the tendency for individuals to achieve an shared emotional experience, creating connection and empathy in between when encountering others' storytelling or the meaning of an issue. It involves processes of emotional mirroring and synchronization, often described in research on emotional contagion as the automatic tendency to "mimic and synchronize expressions, vocalizations, postures, and movements with those of another person" (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994, p. 5) [11]. Within social movements and public communication contexts, emotional resonance typically manifests as audience empathy, affective engagement, and value identification towards an issue, thereby increasing willingness for deeper information processing and stance expression. (Papacharissi, 2016) [1]. Its significance lies in transforming 'information exposure' into 'psychological involvement'—ensuring audiences not only "see" but also 'care,' subsequently fostering more stable attitudes (Green & Brock, 2000) [7].

4.2 How Emotional Resonance Bridges "Exposure" and "Attitude"

In gender-related content, common emotional triggers include anger towards injustices, sympathy for victims, endorsement of equality principles, and reflection on structural inequalities. Narrative communication often heightens audience immersion through detailed experiences, vivid depictions of victimisation, and contextualised expressions, thereby strengthening the integration of emotional experience and value judgements. Narrative communication research shows that immersive storytelling increases emotional engagement and reduces counterarguing, thereby enhancing persuasion (Green & Brock, 2000) [7].

As individuals are repeatedly exposed to emotionally evocative narratives, the likelihood and intensity of emotional activation may increase, strengthening cognitive elaboration and value internalization (Slater, 2007) [6]. Emotional resonance further prompts deeper information processing (e.g., contemplating causes of gender inequality, embracing equality values), ultimately manifesting as more positive attitudes towards gender equality.

Emotional resonance thus functions as a mediating psychological mechanism: frequent exposure to gender-related content may not directly change attitudes, but through

repeated affective engagement and identification processes, it can promote deeper reflection and endorsement of gender equality principles.

5. Research Model

Based on the theoretical discussion above, this study proposes the following conceptual model.

Independent Variable (IV): Frequency of exposure to gender-related content

Mediating Variable (M): Level of emotional resonance

Dependent Variable (DV): Attitudes towards gender equality

That is: Exposure frequency → Emotional resonance → Attitudes towards gender equality, while allowing for a direct effect of exposure frequency on attitudes towards gender equality.

5.1 Research Hypotheses: Main Effect Hypotheses

Frequent exposure to gender-related content may heighten individuals' perception of the visibility of gender inequality issues and their perceived importance, while fostering familiarity and endorsement at the value level through repeated exposure. Therefore, we propose:

H1: The higher the frequency with which platform users encounter gender-related content, the more positive their attitudes towards gender equality.

5.2 Mediating Effect Hypothesis

From an emotional resonance perspective, frequent exposure provides greater opportunities to trigger emotional responses. Emotional resonance can deepen information processing and strengthen value identification, thereby facilitating attitude change. Research on narrative transport and affective transfer also supports the pivotal role of emotional experiences in attitude transformation. Hence, we propose:

H2: Emotional resonance mediates the relationship between the frequency of exposure to gender-related content and attitudes towards gender equality.

That is: Frequent exposure to gender-related content enhances gender equality attitudes by eliciting emotional resonance among users.

5.3 Research Methodology: Research Design

This study employs the questionnaire survey method within quantitative research. The research design constitutes a cross-sectional correlational study, which does not impose experimental treatments upon participants. Instead, it measures the frequency of exposure, emotional resonance,

and levels of gender equality attitudes among different individuals in real-world contexts, while examining the relationships between these variables.

5.4 Sample and Data Collection

The target sample comprises university students aged 18–30. This cohort exhibits high media usage intensity and is in a stage of value formation and adjustment, aligning with the research questions. A combination of convenience and snowball sampling was employed: questionnaire links were distributed via university communities, course groups, and social media channels. The questionnaire homepage provided an explanation of research objectives, a commitment to anonymity, and an informed consent option; participants could withdraw at any time without adverse consequences.

5.5 Variable Operationalisation and Measurement

To enhance measurement feasibility, this study defined all variables as quantifiable indicators and employed Likert scales (e.g., 1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree; or 1 = Never, 5 = Always) for assessment.

5.6 Independent Variable: Frequency of Exposure to Gender-Related Content

Operational Definition: The frequency with which respondents encountered content pertaining to ‘gender inequality/anti-sexual harassment/women's rights/gender equality initiatives’ on social media platforms within a specified timeframe (e.g., the past month).

This may be measured using 3–5 frequency items, such as:

‘Over the past month, I frequently encountered content related to gender equality in my news feed.’ ‘I frequently proactively click/view videos, posts, or topics related to gender issues.’

Platform types (e.g., Weibo/Xiaohong Shu/TikTok/Instagram) may be supplemented as control variables or descriptive variables.

5.7 Mediating Variable: Emotional Resonance Level

Operational Definition: The degree of emotional synchronisation and affective engagement experienced by respondents when encountering gender-related content, encompassing but not limited to anger (towards injustice), sympathy (towards victims), and identification (with equality principles).

Emotional response items may be employed, such as:

‘Upon seeing such content, I feel anger towards instances

of unfairness.’

‘I feel strong sympathy/empathy for the individuals' experiences.’

Furthermore, narrative and affective research indicates that emotional experiences intensify with story immersion.

5.8 Dependent Variable: Attitudes Towards Gender Equality

Operational Definition: The degree to which respondents endorse gender equality values and reject traditional gender role divisions. Measurement may draw upon the framework of gender role equality scales, adapted for simplification within the context. For example:

‘I believe men and women should have equal opportunities in terms of work capabilities and social roles.’

‘Domestic responsibilities should not be determined by gender.’

For more standardised measurement of ‘gender discrimination/attitudes towards gender’, the classical framework of hostile/benevolent sexism scales (e.g., ASI) may be referenced as a control or supplement (e.g., validating an inverse relationship between ‘attitudes towards gender equality’ and ‘tendencies towards gender discrimination’). Suggested control variables: gender, age, academic year, political/value self-identification, platform usage duration, educational attainment, and whether the respondent has experienced relevant incidents.

6. Data Analysis Methods

Following data collection, analysis was conducted using SPSS / Jamovi / R. The procedure comprised:

Data cleaning and descriptive statistics (demographic characteristics, means, standard deviations)

Pearson correlation analysis (IV, M, DV correlations)

Mediation effect testing: Examine total effect (IV→DV), path a (IV→M), path b (M→DV controlling for IV), and direct effect c' (IV→DV controlling for M). Use Bootstrap confidence intervals for indirect effects to determine mediation significance. Significance level set at $p < 0.05$.

7. Discussion and Conclusions: Expected Findings and Interpretative Framework

If H1 be supported, it would indicate that within platform environments featuring a more ‘equality-oriented’ content ecosystem on gender issues, high-frequency exposure may correlate with more positive attitudes towards gender equality. This outcome aligns with the explanatory frame-

work of ‘increased issue visibility – value familiarisation – clearer stance formation’.

If H2 be supported, it would signify that ‘emotional resonance’ serves as a crucial psychological mechanism for translating information exposure into attitudinal change: high-frequency exposure does not automatically induce attitude shifts, but rather, after repeatedly triggering resonant emotions such as anger, sympathy, or value identification, it becomes more likely to prompt individuals to engage in deep processing and value internalisation. This aligns with the narrative immersion/transportation theory’s emphasis on the mechanism through which stories influence attitudes.

Furthermore, existing research cautions that media exposure may correlate with more traditional or unequal gender perceptions, particularly when content reinforces gender stereotypes and dominant values (Ward & Grower, 2020) [2]. This underscores the necessity for this study to emphasise the critical importance of ‘content type’ and ‘emotional orientation’ when interpreting findings: even with ‘high-frequency exposure,’ encountering gender-discriminatory or objectifying content may reinforce unequal attitudes, whereas exposure to anti-sexual harassment and equality advocacy content may foster egalitarian attitudes. Consequently, this study’s focus on ‘frequency of exposure to gender-related (equality-oriented) content’ with emotional resonance as the mechanism constitutes a response to the ‘conditional nature’ of media influence.

7.1 Practical Implications

If emotional resonance proves to be a key mechanism, it implies that public communication and platform content governance should prioritise the social impact of ‘emotional narratives’: how equality content balances authenticity, emotional triggering, and constructive guidance when presenting inequality issues may influence audience attitude shifts. Research on affective publics indicates that emotional narrative’s structure participation and collective identification in digital environments (Papacharissi, 2016) [1]. Concurrently, platforms can mitigate discriminatory content diffusion through information recommendation and topic governance, preventing negative emotional mobilisation from reinforcing gender biases.

7.2 Limitations and Future Research

First, this cross-sectional design precludes rigorous causal inference; longitudinal tracking or experimental designs warrant future exploration. Second, questionnaire-based self-reported data may suffer from social desirability bias;

future studies should integrate behavioural data or experimental exposure materials. Third, the predominantly university student sample limits generalisability; future research should expand to broader societal groups and compare differences across platform content ecosystems.

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