

Impact of Social Stereotypes on Women's Identity

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Abstract. This study focuses on the profound impact of social stereotypes, especially traditional gender stereotypes and feminist stereotypes, on women's identity, and explores how to construct a new feminist identity based on them. Traditional gender stereotypes limit women's roles to the domestic and emotional spheres, emphasizing their tender, dependent qualities. This solidified perception not only limits women's career development and social participation but also profoundly affects their self-perception and identity. Feminist stereotypes, on the other hand, may overemphasize women's independence and antagonism, ignoring the diversity and differences within women, also posing a complex impact on women's identity. On the one hand, traditional gender stereotypes have led to many obstacles for women in pursuing their values and dreams, such as limited career choices and low social recognition. Feminist stereotypes, on the other hand, may cause women to feel confused and pressured about their identity when pursuing feminist goals. On this basis, this study proposes strategies for constructing a new feminist identity. Feminist identity should transcend the limitations of traditional gender stereotypes and feminist stereotypes, advocate gender equality and individual freedom, and respect women's diversity and differences. The significance of this study is that it provides theoretical support and practical guidance for the construction of a more egalitarian, inclusive, and pluralistic feminist identity through an in-depth exploration of the impact of social stereotypes on women's identity.

Keywords: Stereotypes, feminism, identity.

1. Introduction

In today's pluralistic and globalized society, the issue of women's identity has become increasingly important. Social stereotypes, as an important force in shaping an individual's self-perception and social role orientation, play an inescapable role in the shaping and evolution of women's identity. Among them, traditional gender stereotypes and feminist stereotypes, as two distinct perspectives, are intertwined and independent of each other, jointly influencing women's self-positioning and development trajectory in modern society.

Gender stereotype refers to stereotypes and perceptions of men and women in terms of behavior, personality traits, and social division of labor [1]. According to the theory of social roles, gender stereotypes stem from differences in the division of social roles between men and women in the family and at work. The gender division of labor has a long history and has existed from primitive societies to modern economic societies. In the domestic sphere, women do most of the daily household work and play the primary caregiver role. In the workplace, women tend to work in people-oriented service occupations rather than in competitive, object-oriented occupations, which are traditionally dominated by men. This dichotomy of gender roles not only restricts women's career choices and social participation but also affects women's self-perception and identity at a deeper level, causing them to face many obstacles in the pursuit of their values and dreams.

However, with the rise and development of the feminist movement, women have begun to actively strive for equality and freedom and to challenge the constraints of traditional gender stereotypes. Feminism advocates breaking down the fixed division of gender roles and advocates women's independence and the pursuit of personal values and rights. However, during the development of feminism, a new stereotype has also evolved. It treats women as a group that is completely opposed to men seeks absolute equality and ignores the diversity and differences within women. This feminist stereotype also has a complex impact on women's identity. It has inspired women's courage and

determination to fight for their rights and interests, but it may also lead them to feel lost and confused in their new gender role identity.

Therefore, an in-depth study of the impact of social stereotypes on women's identity not only helps to reveal the historical roots and cultural background of the division of gender roles but also provides an important theoretical basis and practical guidance for the construction of a new feminist identity. The new feminist identity should transcend the limitations of traditional gender stereotypes and feminist stereotypes, advocate gender equality and individual freedom, respect women's diversity and differences, and encourage women to shape their own identities according to their wishes and choices.

This study aims to explore feasible paths for constructing a new feminist identity by comprehensively analyzing the impact of traditional gender stereotypes and feminist stereotypes on women's identity. Through a combination of theoretical exploration and empirical analysis, this study will reveal the complex mechanism of social stereotypes on women's identity and provide useful insights and suggestions for the construction of a new feminist identity. At the same time, this study will also contribute to the social progress that promotes gender equality and the free development of individuals.

2. Impact of Traditional Stereotypes on Women's Identity

2.1. Pressure of Social Role Expectations on Women

Society has dual expectations of women. On the one hand, they are expected to be outstanding women in the workplace. On the other hand, they are expected to play a good role in the family and raise children. This expectation is strongly influenced by the traditional notion that “the man is the master of the house and the woman is the master of the family”, which results in men often being accustomed to enjoying the status of the family that comes with their social roles. However, women face the challenge of balancing the workplace and the family. With the changes in society, although women have gained more social roles and opportunities, accordingly, men's participation in family life care has not significantly increased. The concept of the “E-woman”, proposed by American psychologist Blake, depicts the image of the modern intellectual woman who strives for excellence both at home and in the workplace [2]. However, such women, as symbols of social progress, are burdened with extremely high social expectations and pressures. Studies have shown that they are more likely to fall victim to physical and mental illnesses, with a much higher incidence than the average woman, and even more than double to triple that of men.

2.2. Influence of Traditional Stereotypes on Women's Career Choices and Career Development

Influenced by traditional concepts of gender, occupational gender stereotypes are very common in real life, study, and work. People generally think that men are independent, strong, brave, stable, and aggressive so they are more suitable for some pioneering and enterprising work, such as scientists, engineers, civil servants, police, etc. However, women are considered to have qualities such as delicacy, sensitivity, caring, and gentleness, and are more suited to service occupations such as teachers, counselors, nurses, and secretaries [3]. This rigid concept of employment not only restricts women's pursuit of a broad career but also prevents companies from attracting talent based on the scientific principle of "meritocracy". This is undoubtedly unfavorable for the career choices and development of individual women. Even though the educational level and social status of women have risen considerably, the actual situation of women in the workplace has not fundamentally changed. Akanbi and Salami's (2011) study further reveal that there are still many barriers to women's career advancement in the field of management [4]. These barriers stem mainly from gender-related preconceptions, prejudices, stereotypes, and misconceptions about women's managerial and administrative capabilities. Surprisingly, the study found that the majority of respondents held a bias, preferring to work for a male supervisor and believing that women were difficult to work with. Further analysis shows that female managers are often unfairly perceived to be deficient compared to their

male counterparts when it comes to assessing the key attributes needed to manage work performance and success. This bias may stem from traditional expectations and stereotypes of women's roles in society, such as the belief that women lack leadership, and decision-making power or are not decisive enough. However, these perceptions not only overlook women's actual abilities and contributions in the field of management but also limit women's opportunities for development and advancement in the workplace.

2.3. Restricting Women's Self-awareness and Reducing Self-value

Gender stereotyping, as a deeply rooted concept in society and culture, has a profound impact on women's sense of self-awareness and self-worth. It not only shapes women's perceptions of themselves but also influences their behavioral patterns and life choices. Under the pressure of the image of the “perfect woman”, women are often expected to be beautiful, intelligent, gentle, and virtuous at the same time. That's certainly an unrealistic expectation. When women have difficulty meeting these standards, they may fall into self-doubt, anxiety, or even depression, which can seriously affect their self-esteem and sense of self-worth.

In recent years, appearance anxiety has become a common social anxiety, especially among female groups (especially young women). Multiple survey data confirm this. The questionnaire survey conducted by CYC School Media in 2021 showed that nearly 60% (59.03%) of college students had appearance anxiety, with the percentage of women who were very satisfied with their appearance (6.08%) significantly lower than that of men (12.77%) [5]. The “2023 Survey Report on the Status of Chinese Women in the Workplace” released by Wisdom Recruitment in 2023 also pointed out that compared to men (45.6%), women (56.6%) are more nervous about their appearance [6].

This appearance anxiety is heavily influenced by the female identity gaze. The female identity gaze is a specific form of scrutiny. It emphasizes women's appearance and gender identity in the mediated field and puts additional pressure on young women by closely associating their value with their appearance and gender. This gaze not only reinforces normative demands on women's appearance but also makes young women more vulnerable to appearance anxiety. Faced with the dual pressures of scrutiny from pan-otherization and the female identity gaze, some young women may resort to passive resistance strategies such as self-denial or self-depreciation. This passive resistance not only exacerbates their appearance anxiety but may also further erode their self-esteem and self-confidence [7].

In addition, mass-mediated forms of discourse exacerbate women's anxiety about looks. On the one hand, media content often pushes implicitly patriarchal ideas that reiterate the gender imperative for women to be thin, beautiful, and loved by men. On the other hand, influenced by contemporary feminism, the media discourse presents contradictory content, teaching women to dress up to conform to popular aesthetics (especially male aesthetics), but also encouraging women to be brave and be themselves, and that they should not change for anyone. This contradictory discourse puts women in a “dilemma” in their quest for self-identity, agonizing over appearance anxiety and feeling anxious about generating such anxiety themselves, further exacerbating their psychological burdens [8].

3. Influencing Women's Self-worth Cognition

Feminism was originally aimed at pursuing gender equality and women's rights. In practice, however, the movement for women's liberation has been characterized by some radical moves and ideas due to the misinterpretation of “gender equality” by some feminists based on their own experiences. This was met with protests from men and even some women. This not only leads to confusion and challenges in women's quest for self-identity but also to the escalation of gender antagonisms and conflicts. It is also not conducive to the healthy development of women's emancipation.

3.1. Influencing Women's Self-worth Cognition

Feminist movements and trends seek equality between the sexes, which can be subdivided into equality of rights and equality of substance. Substantive equality is the basis for realizing equality of rights. Whereas current feminism and its movements are mainly focused on equality of rights, neglecting the emancipation of value connotations. Although the gap between women and men in the public sphere is narrowing, it is still plagued by the values of “male superiority” and “female inferiority”. Women's excessive focus on the equality of rights between the genders and neglect of the emancipation of women's personalities has led to many new types of problems for women in the process of modernization. Driven by feminist thinking, the trend of women's empowerment advertising has gradually emerged as a new form of advertising based on women's perspectives. This trend is a product of “post-feminist” influences. It marked a shift in feminism from mere resistance to male power to encouraging women to achieve self-determination through self-seeking. Through advertising narratives, women's empowerment advertisements aim to inspire female audiences to clarify “self-meaning”, pursue “self-worth”, and ultimately realize “self-empowerment” [9].

However, in modern times, the prevalence of consumerism has led to a generalization of the concept of female empowerment. It has gradually become an accessory symbol for advertising selling points and celebrity labels, while the real demands of women's groups are often ignored. In a commodity economy, women are often equated with “material goods” and the market is flooded with products and advertisements centered around women. Women are often driven by more complex motivations when purchasing goods. Luxury goods not only provide women with material enjoyment but also become a symbol that flaunts status and even reflects the status of the woman's partner. In other words, what women are more attracted to in the process of consumption is not the function of the object itself, but the meaning carried by the symbolic symbols that have been created.

3.2. Intensifying Gender Opposition

Feminist stereotypes exacerbate gender antagonism and conflict to some extent. Stereotypical images of feminism often place women in an “adversarial” position. In this context, women are expected to compete with men and, in some cases, to prove their worth by “outperforming” them. This competitive mindset not only exacerbates tensions between the genders but can also lead to women feeling more isolated in the face of challenges. Because when women are expected to “beat” men in some way, the pressures and expectations on them increase accordingly. This, in turn, may hinder their growth and development. After establishing their self-worth under the suppression of anti-feminists, women began to use their feminine values as a weapon in a fierce confrontation with masculine values. Some feminists overemphasize the superiority of women and the ugliness of men. Instead of truly advancing gender equality, such extreme statements and behaviors may lead to more controversy and misunderstanding. True gender equality should be based on mutual respect and understanding, not by belittling and attacking each other.

3.3. Hindering True Feminist Progress

There are many different schools of thought in the development of feminism. Some of these schools of thought have limited the development of feminism to a certain extent. Take the liberal feminist school as an example. The liberal feminist school was a precursor to feminist movements and thinking. It advocates that men and women should enjoy equal political and civil rights. However, this claims only brought women formal equality. By ignoring difference and deliberately avoiding the issue of difference, liberal feminist advocacy and movements have achieved some success while harboring equality pitfalls. An analysis of the history of the modern and contemporary women's liberation movement reveals that women's liberation has gone off track. Radical means of emancipation, narrow-minded emancipation ideas, and the connotation of gender equality based on one's own experience have unleashed many negative effects on the seemingly powerful women's emancipation movement. This not only puts women's emancipation into a passive situation but also fails to lead women to ultimate emancipation [10].

Stereotypical impressions of feminism tend to simplify it to a radical, antagonistic, or even hostile posture. When feminism is labeled as “radical” or “extreme”, it is difficult for it to gain widespread acceptance and support in society. This has resulted in many useful initiatives and reform measures being difficult to implement because of a lack of adequate support. This delays the advancement of the gender equality process.

Different people may have different perspectives and strategies in the pursuit of gender equality. When feminism is stereotyped as a fixed model, those who disagree may be seen as “heretics” or “traitors”, leading to internal strife. This division not only weakens feminism but also hinders its potential to act as a unifying force for social change.

4. Construction of a New Feminist Identity

In the pursuit of gender equality and female empowerment, the construction of a new feminist identity has become an important issue that contemporary women cannot ignore. The construction of this identity is not only related to the self-recognition and growth of individual women but also involves the change of the gender concept and power structure of the whole society.

4.1. Breaking Down Prejudices and Barriers to Enhance Women's Subjectivity

For a long time, women have often been given fixed roles and expectations in society, such as being good wives and mothers and being gentle and considerate. These prejudices not only limit women's development but also deprive them of the right to express themselves and pursue their dreams. The construction of a new feminist identity is about breaking down these stereotypes and freeing women from bondage to reclaim their voices and power.

Breaking down bias starts with self-awareness. Women need to realize that they are not just an appendage in the family, but an important force in the development of society. They have the right to pursue their careers, express their opinions, and even be leaders in certain fields. This improved self-awareness enables women to face life and work with more confidence, no longer affected by external prejudices.

At the same time, elevating women's subjectivity is key to constructing a new feminist identity. Subjectivity means that women can determine the trajectory of their lives autonomously, without control or influence from others. This requires that women not only have the ability to think independently but also dare to express their opinions and needs. When women can confidently stand up and speak for themselves, their power and influence is greatly enhanced.

To achieve this goal, society also needs to give more support and encouragement to women. Gender barriers should be broken down in all areas, including education, the workplace, and the family, to provide equal opportunities and resources for women. When women can give free rein to these fields, they not only realize their values but also contribute to the development of society.

In addition, the media and social media platforms should also take on the responsibility of spreading the concept of new feminism. By showcasing diverse images of women, it breaks down traditional gender stereotypes and allows more people to recognize the diversity and potential of women.

4.2. Emphasizing Equality and Diversity

Gender equality is the cornerstone of neo-feminist identity construction. It is required to abandon traditional gender stereotypes, such as “men should be strong and women should be weak,” and to accept and respect the diversity of each person's gender traits and potential. This means that women should enjoy the same rights and opportunities as men, whether in education, employment, political participation, or other aspects of social life. The realization of gender equality requires the full range of legal, policy, educational, and socio-cultural support to ensure that women are free to pursue their dreams without gender constraints.

Diversity is another important feature of the new feminist identity. It emphasizes the diversity of women's identities, including race, culture, religion, social class, sexual orientation, age, body shape, and many other aspects. Diverse female identities mean that each woman has her own unique experiences, perspectives, and values. These differences make up the richness and vitality of the female community. New Feminism encourages women to embrace their diverse identities while respecting and appreciating the differences of others and to work together to build a more inclusive and harmonious society.

Based on gender equality and diversity, the new feminist identity emphasizes women's self-knowledge and growth. This requires women not only to pay attention to their external rights and opportunities but also to dig deeper into their inner potential and maximize their self-worth. Women should have the courage to pursue their dreams, express their views, and challenge traditional gender roles and expectations. At the same time, women should also learn to self-reflect and grow, and continue to improve their knowledge, skills, and literacy to better adapt to the changes and challenges of society.

4.3. Support and Mutual Assistance from Feminist Communities

As a bridge connecting individuals and society, women's organizations provide a platform for women to display themselves, exchange ideas, and share resources. Through lectures, seminars, workshops, and other activities, these organizations help women gain a deeper understanding of gender issues and enhance their self-awareness and self-expression. In the process, women begin to realize their value and power, and thus face life's challenges and opportunities with greater confidence.

More importantly, women's organizations provide a network of mutual help and support for women. In this network, women can share each other's experiences and confusions, and encourage and support each other. This spirit of mutual assistance not only helps women to solve practical problems but also gives them great emotional support and comfort. When women are faced with injustices such as discrimination in the workplace and domestic violence, these organizations can be a solid backing for them, providing them with legal aid, psychological counseling, and other necessary support.

Women's organizations also play an active role in promoting gender equality. They have endeavored to eliminate gender discrimination and prejudice and to fight for more rights and opportunities for women by advocating policy reforms and participating in social movements. These efforts not only help to improve the living conditions of women but also promote awareness and acceptance of the concept of gender equality in society.

These organizations also encourage women to actively participate in social and public affairs and to enhance their leadership skills and influence by providing leadership training and project funding. This will not only help women achieve greater success in various fields but also inject new vitality into the transformation and development of society.

In addition, women's organizations promote communication and understanding among women from different countries and cultures through cross-cultural exchanges and cooperation. Such cross-cultural exchanges not only help to broaden women's horizons and ways of thinking but also increase their attention to and participation in global gender issues.

5. Conclusion

In exploring the impact of social stereotypes on women's identity and the construction of a feminist identity, it was found that both traditional gender stereotypes and feminist stereotypes have a profound impact on women's self-perception, social roles, and psychological experience.

Traditional gender stereotypes have long shaped society's fixed perceptions of women, often portraying them as gentle, dependent, and family-oriented. Such stereotypes not only limit women's room for development but may also lead to confusion and stress about their self-identity. As women grow up, they may unconsciously internalize these standards and in turn face many challenges in their

pursuit of self-actualization. This stereotype often puts women at a disadvantage in terms of career choices, social status, and personal rights and interests,

However, the rise and development of the feminist movement have provided new perspectives and ways for women to fight for equality and freedom. Feminism advocates breaking the boundaries of traditional gender roles and advocates women's independence and the pursuit of equality and freedom. However, feminism has also developed certain stereotypes during its development, such as placing women in a position of opposition to men, or over-interpreting and expecting excessive roles from women. These stereotypes may likewise hurt women's identity, causing them to feel stressed and confused about their new gender role identity.

In constructing a feminist identity, there is a need to recognize the complexity of stereotypes and their profound impact on women's identity. On the one hand, it is necessary to actively advocate gender equality and individual freedom, break the boundaries of traditional gender stereotypes, and provide women with more development opportunities and equal rights and interests. On the other hand, it is also important to avoid falling into the trap of feminist stereotypes, to respect women's diversity and individual differences, and to encourage them to shape their own identity according to their wishes and choices.

To study in greater depth the impact of social stereotypes on women's identity and the construction of a positive feminist identity, future research needs to make efforts in deepening the understanding of existing stereotypes, exploring the deeper impact of stereotypes on women's identity, the construction of a positive feminist identity, methodological innovations, and the continuous tracking and evaluation of the effects of policies.

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