

# From "ideal life" to "self-discipline": a study on digital stress among young users of Xiaohongshu

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**Abstract.** Against the backdrop of deep mediatization, digital stress induced by the "ideal life" spectacle on Xiaohongshu has become increasingly prominent. Grounded in the theories of the achievement society and algorithmic discipline, this study explores the mechanism through which young users evolve from real-world feedback to self-discipline via qualitative interviews. The results reveal that digital stress stems from the spillover of negative social feedback, which is reconstructed into quantitative indicators through algorithmic terminologization. Individuals internalize such stress as a lack of personal competence via internal attribution, falling into a dual cycle of "conformity and anxiety" that solidifies into a structural existential state. This study uncovers the reverse domestication path of algorithms over subjects, offering insights into analyzing the psychological crises of young people in the digital age and platform governance.

**Keywords:** digital stress, Xiaohongshu, algorithmic discipline, achievement society, subject alienation

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## 1. Introduction

In the era of deep mediatization, social media has evolved beyond a mere communication tool into a new type of "digital infrastructure" deeply embedded in young people's daily lives. As "digital natives", contemporary youth's self-perception, lifestyles and even emotional dynamics are being comprehensively reshaped by the technical architecture and content ecology of platforms. However, while social media promises "templates for a better life" and "paths to self-improvement", a pervasive and structural psychological burden—digital stress—has quietly become a common existential state among young people.

Existing studies often regard digital stress as an aggregation of psychological reactions such as information overload, Social Media Fatigue (SMF) and Fear of Missing Out (FOMO). Yet on platforms like Xiaohongshu that emphasize "lifestyle sharing" and "exquisite aesthetic presentation", the form of digital stress has undergone profound alienation. It is no longer merely a stress response to digital signals, but a process driven by algorithmic logic that originates from real-world social feedback, undergoes technological restructuring by platforms, and ultimately evolves into individual self-discipline.

Through a highly visualized, tagged and performative content mechanism, Xiaohongshu constructs a "panoramic" reference space. In this space, individuals' real-world anxieties (e.g., inferiority about appearance, career setbacks, and a sense of lag in consumption) are framed by algorithms as "technical problems to be solved". Driven by the logic of the achievement society, young users are not only induced to engage in upward

social comparison but also internalize structural social pressure as a lack of personal competence amid the "standard answers" provided by the platform, thus falling into a dual cycle of "conformity and anxiety".

Focusing on the Xiaohongshu platform, this study conducts in-depth interviews with 20 young users to explore the following questions:

First, how does digital stress spill over from real-world scenarios and complete the logical leap from "external evaluation" to "self-examination" mediated by algorithms?

Second, how do users become trapped in entrenched dilemmas when faced with the ever-rising standards of the "ideal self"?

Third, by deconstructing this formation mechanism, this paper aims to reveal the deep mechanism of young people's subject alienation in the digital age and provide reflective paths for enhancing individual media literacy in the algorithmic era.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Multidimensional construction of digital stress

Digital stress is a psychological phenomenon faced by young people in the digital age, referring to individuals' subjective physiological, emotional or behavioral responses to specific stimuli (e.g., information notifications) or categories of stimuli (e.g., digital media) [1]. In an ecosystem shaped by the iterative evolution of digital media technology, the post-90s and post-00s generations, as representatives of youth, are also known as digital natives [2], whose cognitive structures and emotional experiences are deeply embedded in environments shaped by platform technical architectures. Digital stress is not a unidimensional psychological reaction but a complex composed of multiple stressors.

Existing studies mostly adopt a typological perspective and identify several core dimensions of digital stress: when individuals are exposed to more information than their information-processing capacity, information overload occurs [3], resulting in cognitive burden; social fatigue arises from maintaining extensive online relationships; response pressure stems from meeting others' expectation of "Permanently Online, Permanently Connected (POPC)" [4]; and anxiety manifests as the fear that others may be enjoying beneficial experiences one is absent from [5], driving a desire to stay continuously connected to others' activities. These stress dimensions are intertwined, collectively forming the basic psychological backdrop of young people's digital lives.

### 2.2. Upward comparison and alienation in the achievement society

The formation of digital stress is closely linked to psychological mechanisms such as social comparison. In chronological order of emergence, social comparison theories include classical social comparison theory, fear-based social comparison theory, downward social comparison theory, social cognition-based social comparison theory, and individual difference-based social comparison theory [6]. Social comparison theory and self-discrepancy theory provide an analytical framework for explaining digital stress. The performative nature of social media, especially highly visualized content forms such as graphics, texts and short videos, offers a convenient arena for users to engage in sustained upward social comparison. When young individuals compare their ordinary daily lives with highly idealized life templates filtered by algorithms, the gap between the real self and the ideal self is amplified, systematically inducing anxiety and self-depletion.

At a deep logical level, this process embodies the characteristics of the achievement society criticized by Byung-Chul Han: by templating and commercializing the ideal life, platforms transform digital stress into a social mechanism with cultural reproduction functions. Under the discourse of self-optimization, young people

are driven to engage in self-exploitation, yet they often attribute the root cause of stress to personal efforts rather than structural factors such as platform capital and algorithmic manipulation.

### 2.3. Social media: a key arena triggering youth anxiety

As the core arena for young people's social lives in the digital age, social media has become a critical space for inducing anxiety. Through its technical architecture and content ecology, platforms systematically shape young people's psychological environments. Current research increasingly emphasizes that the deep embedding of digital technology is restructuring the architecture of social relations. The rise of platform media not only represents a paradigm shift in the communication ecosystem but also implies the emergence of a new social infrastructure intertwined with technology, capital and power. As the technical embodiment of a "mediatized society" [7], platform media, through the "neural system-like" connection of algorithms, data streams and smart terminals, has gradually evolved into a "digital infrastructure" weaving social life [7]. This infrastructure attribute means that different platforms may lead to distinct forms of stress due to differences in their technical logic and content ecology. Thus, ignoring platform specificity makes it difficult to accurately and meticulously explain the formation mechanism of young people's digital stress.

### 2.4. Platform specificity of Xiaohongshu: a panoramic reference space

As a social media platform primarily targeting young people, Xiaohongshu focuses on sharing lifestyles and life experiences, with community topics revolving around various life elements such as beauty, fashion, health, hobbies and travel [8]. Integrating diverse scenarios such as study and life into a single information stream, it constructs a unique "panoramic reference space" [9]. Research finds that Xiaohongshu's content ecology is governed by three logics: visualization, framing and performativity. High-saturation images construct a displayable ideal life; social identity tags reinforce group behavioral patterns; and mediatization logic transforms leisure experiences into calculable and executable task performance. Under this mechanism, users evolve from life experiencers to strategy executors. Platforms achieve reverse domestication of users' practices and perceptions through ideal templates and performance thinking, thereby triggering widespread anxiety in non-competitive domains.

## 3. Research methods

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, aiming to observe the micro-processes of changes in young people's emotions, behaviors and cognition during social media use through in-depth interviews. Compared with quantitative research, qualitative methods can effectively capture complex details and deep dynamics in social phenomena, making them particularly suitable for exploring dynamically changing and personally meaningful experiences. In the research implementation, in-depth interviews serve as the primary method for data collection. The interviews focus on the sources of stress, emotional fluctuations and behavioral feedback experienced by young users when using social platforms represented by Xiaohongshu.

A series of open-ended questions were designed, such as "What content on Xiaohongshu most easily makes you feel anxious?", encouraging respondents to narrate based on their personal experiences and thus present their authentic and specific psychological landscapes. In terms of specific implementation, interviews were conducted in offline meetings, online voice calls or telephone conversations based on respondents' preferences and convenience. Each respondent was interviewed 2–3 times to gain a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding through ongoing dialogue.

Regarding research participants, the study focuses on young people aged 14 to 34 and adopts a snowball sampling strategy for recruitment. The research first identifies representative heavy users of Xiaohongshu from familiar social circles as starting points, then leverages their social networks to refer more eligible participants. Ultimately, 20 young people of diverse genders, occupational backgrounds and platform usage experiences (see Table 1) were interviewed, ensuring the research encompasses diverse voices and experiences. Additionally, all interviews were conducted with respondents' full knowledge of the research content and voluntary consent, and all personally identifiable information was desensitized and anonymized to protect individual privacy.

**Table 1.** Respondent information

No.	Gender	Education	Region	Occupation	No.	Gender	Education	Region	Occupation
S1	Female	Bachelor's	Sichuan	Student	S11	Female	Bachelor's	Heilongjiang	Freelancer
S2	Female	Bachelor's	Inner Mongolia	Student	S12	Female	Bachelor's	Jiangxi	Corporate Employee
S3	Female	Bachelor's	Xinjiang	Student	S13	Female	Associate Degree	Sichuan	Corporate Employee
S4	Female	Associate Degree	Chongqing	Corporate Employee	S14	Female	Master's	Sichuan	Freelancer
S5	Female	Master's	Chongqing	Teacher	S15	Male	Bachelor's	Jilin	Student
S6	Female	Bachelor's	Beijing	Student	S16	Male	Bachelor's	Sichuan	Student
S7	Female	Bachelor's	Yunnan	Student	S17	Male	Master's	Henan	Student
S8	Female	Bachelor's	Gansu	Student	S18	Male	Associate Degree	Chongqing	Student
S9	Female	Master's	Chongqing	Teacher	S19	Male	Associate Degree	Sichuan	Freelancer
S10	Female	Bachelor's	Chongqing	Civil Servant	S20	Male	Bachelor's	Gansu	Civil Servant

## 4. Research findings

### 4.1. External feedback: spillover of digital logic into real-world social interactions

The onset of digital stress does not fully erupt the moment algorithms push content but lurks in negative evaluations, implicit comparisons and structural gaps individuals encounter in real-world social scenarios. The study finds that most respondents experienced explicit or implicit external feedback in real-life situations before developing digital stress such as appearance anxiety or an all-encompassing sense of lag while using Xiaohongshu. These feedbacks are not isolated objective facts but "gaps" perceived and interpreted by individuals through social comparison, collectively centering on the core anxiety of "Am I not good enough?". Essentially, these real-world feedbacks constitute the pre-intervention of digital logic into real life, prompting individuals to pay closer attention to their social status and self-worth, and in turn seek so-called "solutions" on platforms like Xiaohongshu.

Appearance-related stress is the primary trigger of young people's digital stress, often originating from verbal interventions targeting physical features in daily social interactions, such as comments like "Have you put on weight lately?" or "Your dark circles are very heavy". "At a dinner party once, a friend said in front of

everyone, 'Your face has gotten rounder'. Even though she said it jokingly, I felt extremely embarrassed and stared at myself in the mirror for a long time when I got home." (S3) Such evaluations are distinctly public in terms of social harm. Public scrutiny places individuals' bodies in a field of group examination and quantitative assessment, triggering long-term self-monitoring. This indicates that under the infiltration of digital logic, the body has broken away from pure natural attributes and transformed into social capital requiring meticulous management. Additionally, such judgment is achieved through physical ranking via non-verbal signals in social interactions. Being marginalized in group photos constitutes informal social exclusion [10], negating individuals' value ranking within the group through competition for visual centrality. Meanwhile, the absence of feedback such as "dressing up elaborately but failing to receive expected attention or praise" points to a lack of presence in social situations. Amid intertwined internal and external negative evaluations, young users develop the initial motivation to seek "solutions" on social media.

A perceived sense of lag in competition and comparison generalizes this unease into an all-encompassing relative deprivation. Explicit indicator comparisons in real-world social interactions, such as "My colleagues have all gotten promoted, but I'm still in the same position. I feel a huge gap and a lot of pressure." (S19), represent typical upward comparison—individuals comparing themselves with more outstanding others, easily generating a subjective sense of lag. This stress further permeates micro-level social interactions, such as not being invited to gatherings or being ignored in group chats, which damage individuals' sense of belonging. Social psychological research notes that social exclusion not only reduces individuals' sense of belonging but also impairs their sense of meaning and control [11]. Anxiety such as "Everyone else is moving forward, only I'm stuck" (S1) drives young people to seek catch-up paths on platforms, only to fall into more complex reference traps. Amid a multi-dimensional sense of lag, young people develop a strong motivation to seek information, attempting to find strategies and paths for "catching up" through social media.

In an environment of deep mediatization, social interaction becomes high-intensity performative labor, generating significant response pressure. "I always reply to friends' messages carefully, but they only send a brief 'Hmm' after a long time. I start wondering if I said something wrong, and later I'm reluctant to take the initiative to contact them." (S8) Such inequity translates into face threats, triggering anxiety and withdrawal. Erving Goffman's "face work" theory posits that individuals strive to maintain their social image in interactions, and threats to face arise when efforts fail to receive reciprocal responses, inducing anxiety and withdrawal. Furthermore, the implicit pressure to take a stance and demonstrate conformity in group chats exacerbates emotional depletion, leading to Social Media Fatigue (SMF). Dhir et al., summarizing the views of multiple scholars, define it as: "The exhaustion experienced by social media users due to overload from various technical, informational and communicative sources across different platforms [12]." Under such pressure, young people often turn to platforms for social skills, attempting to repair social rifts caused by frayed subjectivity through technical means.

Gaps in consumption and lifestyle touch on the underlying logic of social dignity. Consumption disparities exposed in real life, such as "People on Moments are either showing off new bags or checking into high-end restaurants, but I can barely afford rent. I feel utterly ashamed." (S2), erode individuals' sense of decency and touch on their social dignity. This shame stemming from an inability to match the consumption capacity of reference groups is an extension of the Veblen effect: consumers purchase high-priced goods not only for material satisfaction but also to signal social status and wealth through price, with conspicuous consumption intensifying observers' relative deprivation and self-deprecation. Amid such psychological tension, young people turn to Xiaohongshu for money-saving tips or affordable alternatives, attempting to narrow the gap between ideal and reality with limited resources.

It should be noted that these external feedbacks are not scattered facts but systematically transform young people's real lives into fields awaiting review against digital standards. This unease prompts them to convert occasional real-world feedback into a list of problems solvable by platforms, thereby initiating the full migration of digital stress into algorithmic spaces.

#### 4.2. Algorithmic intervention in media search: technological restructuring of distresses

When young users enter Xiaohongshu for search with unease triggered by real-world feedback, algorithmic intervention marks a fundamental shift of digital stress from context-specific individual distresses to standardized problems. Algorithms no longer act as neutral information intermediaries but reorder and encode users' problem awareness according to specific logic. They strip vague, emotional life anxieties of their concrete contexts, filtering and restructuring them in line with platforms' commercial and technical standards into a series of to-do items defined by high-frequency terms and quantitative criteria. Under this reordering, users' distresses are no longer indescribable emotional fluctuations but precise goals endowed with technical paths, completing the fundamental transformation from context-specific psychological stress to technical problems.

**Terminologization Mechanism.** Through search suggestions and content tags, algorithms systematically convert users' daily expressions into professional terminology systems, endowing problems with a sense of scientificity, operability and urgency. This mechanism has three typical characteristics: Creating cognitive urgency: Daily language is vague and open, while professional terms carry authoritative connotations, easily suggesting to users that "the problem is more serious than imagined". "I originally just thought my face was a little round, but after browsing Xiaohongshu, I learned this is called 'insufficient facial folding angle', which suddenly turned it into a defect needing correction." (S3) Creating an illusion of operability: Terms simplify complex dilemmas into technical parameters, implying standardized solutions exist, guiding users to believe they can solve problems by mastering these "techniques". Driving attributional shift: Vague context-specific distresses are redefined as "solvable technical problems". Users are no longer anxious individuals but those lacking certain skills, transforming structural pressure into a lack of personal competence. Stress is no longer regarded as structural social exclusion but redefined as a lack of competence caused by information asymmetry or failure to master specific solutions, objectifying the self as a project to be revised. "I started seriously researching 'facial folding angle' and watching many improvement videos. The more I watched, the more flaws I found in myself." (S3)

**Standardization Mechanism.** Through concentrated recommendation of a large volume of homogeneous content, algorithms construct ideal standards for users, compressing the space for diverse life paths. These standards have three characteristics. Quantifiability: Algorithms transform abstract values into specific quantitative indicators, such as "accumulating 500,000 yuan before age 25", making private experiences comparable. Comparability: Algorithms strengthen horizontal comparison through tags like "peers" and "same city", pushing content such as "savings guides for post-00s", placing individuals within group coordinates. Executability: Complex social competition is simplified into "checklist-style" tasks, such as "10 things to accomplish before age 30", packaging success paths requiring long-term accumulation into short-term achievable task lists. Under the standardization mechanism, users face not diverse lifestyle choices but a highly unified standard for success, decency or normality, with non-compliance easily leading to profound self-denial. Notably, the standardization mechanism often works in tandem with an "exaggeration" discourse strategy. A large number of posts adopt clickbait titles such as "It's the end of the world", "I'm devastated" or "I won't let anyone miss xxx", inducing cognitive urgency and catastrophic imagination to attract clicks. "When I see titles like 'It's the end of the world', my first thought is something major has happened. I click in only to

find it's ordinary complaints. I feel tricked but still can't help feeling anxious." (S1) Behind this exaggeration strategy lies content production logic oriented toward traffic and marketing rather than sincere experience sharing. Platforms objectively encourage continuous escalation of standards through algorithmic weighting of high-click and high-interaction content, subjecting users to excessive emotional stimulation alongside standardized comparison. Standardization and exaggeration reinforce each other, locking users into a single evaluation dimension of "Am I meeting the standards", laying the groundwork for subsequent conforming behaviors or anxiety.

**Algorithmic Personalized Recommendation.** Personalized algorithm matching [13] continuously pushes highly homogeneous content based on users' clicking, staying, searching and interacting behaviors, forming "information cocoons" and "comparative closed loops". This mechanism generates three effects. Information narrowing: Users constantly see "success stories" of similar problems but have limited access to alternative narratives of different paths or self-acceptance, restricting problem-solving perspectives within the framework set by the platform. "After browsing for a while, I feel everyone is taking postgraduate or civil service exams, as if not doing so means failure. But I didn't think this way originally." (S20) Continuous standard escalation: The standards of the "protagonists" in pushed content keep rising, from "savings of 100,000 yuan" to "savings of 500,000 yuan", from "good communication skills" to "the pinnacle of high EQ socializing", creating a perpetually unattainable "moving finish line" as users engage. Individualized attribution: Algorithms continuously imply that "the problem lies in your lack of effort, incorrect methods or failure to keep up" rather than guiding users to reflect on structural social differences or platform norms themselves, thus attributing social pressure to individual responsibility. "Seeing how outstanding others are, I think it must be because I'm lazy and undisciplined." (S13) The personalized recommendation mechanism accelerates the cycle of digital stress, trapping users in persistent self-doubt amid information narrowing and standard escalation, and misattributing the root cause of stress to insufficient personal effort.

After the "mediated search intervention" stage, the nature of users' problems undergoes a transformation. Before entering the platform, users experience vague unease of "Am I lagging behind?", with external feedback being occasional and context-specific. After search intervention, through the triple mechanisms of terminologization, standardization and personalized recommendation, the problem evolves into systematic self-examination of "In what aspects do I have gaps? How to catch up?". The terminologization mechanism encodes daily distresses into professional terms, endowing problems with scientificity and urgency; the standardization mechanism constructs a highly unified "ideal standard" through quantifiable, comparable and executable task lists; the personalized recommendation mechanism locks users into "information cocoons" and "comparative closed loops" via information narrowing, standard escalation and individualized attribution. Together, these mechanisms reshape users' confusion into a "revision checklist", with appearance, career, social interaction and consumption all transformed into technical problems that "can be purchased, learned and caught up with". Users no longer ask "Why am I anxious?" but begin to inquire "What should I buy?", "What should I learn?" and "What should I do?". This shift in problem nature paves the way for subsequent norm internalization and path narrowing.

#### 4.3. Feedback in media: from "others' evaluation" to "self-examination"

When platform algorithms transform users' daily distresses into systematic "revision checklists", users begin to actively adopt this terminology system as a tool for understanding themselves and identifying gaps. This process is not passive information reception but active cognitive reconstruction. Social norms and evaluation standards presented by platforms are gradually deeply internalized by individuals, becoming the core reference framework for self-perception, self-evaluation and self-monitoring. Internalization occurs simultaneously at

cognitive, behavioral and emotional levels, essentially representing the transformation of external social evaluation into internal self-requirements. Social cognitive theory posits that individuals form self-regulation mechanisms by observing, imitating and internalizing external standards. Xiaohongshu precisely accelerates this internalization process by providing a highly systematic and standardized "ideal model" through algorithmically recommended content.

At the cognitive level, users begin to actively use professional terms provided by the platform to describe themselves and identify gaps. Vague self-doubt of "Am I not good enough?" is replaced by a seemingly scientific and quantifiable terminology system. "I used to just think I wasn't good at communicating, but now I know it's called 'low social value' and I need to find ways to improve it." (S10) This shift from daily language to professional terms is not neutral knowledge acquisition but a reconstruction of cognitive frameworks. When users position themselves through these terms, they clearly perceive the gap between their current state and platform thresholds, generating a sense of failure from "not meeting standards". This sense of failure not only fails to prompt individuals to question the rationality of platform standards but also induces greater recognition of the authority of this evaluation system, triggering more rigorous self-examination. The introduction of terms endows vague emotional distresses with characteristics of technical parameters, transforming private emotional experiences into quantifiable and comparable technical indicators, thus objectifying the self as a "project" requiring continuous transformation in line with platform paths. "I used to think saving money was just being frugal. After learning about 'exquisite frugality', I realized it means being decent and economical at the same time. I feel my previous thinking was too simplistic." (S8)

Cognitive changes drive internalization at the behavioral level. Users begin to transform platform-displayed solutions into daily practical tasks, gradually forming a self-management check in checklist. "The first thing I do every morning is open Xiaohongshu to check the recommended study plan, and I check in before going to bed at night. It's like having an extra assignment." (S7) These behaviors are not impulsive but internalized as fixed daily routines. "I practiced 'effective makeup' according to tutorials for a month and did look better, but every time I see a new 'natural makeup' standard, I feel I'm still far from it." (S14) What is internalized is not only indicators but also a constantly shifting reference framework. Users' behaviors seem like independent choices but are actually running on pre-set platform tracks.

Why are these behaviors internalized as "personal responsibility"? Superficially, users actively learn terminology and copy solutions as rational self-improvement behaviors. Deep down, however, the platform anchors the "ideal self" as a quantifiable, comparable and attainable standard through prior terminologization, standardization and personalized recommendation. Users accept these standards because they provide certainty and control amid uncertain real life. Concrete goals such as "increasing facial folding angle by 5%" or "saving 500,000 yuan in three years" feel far more tangible than vague wishes like "looking better" or "succeeding". This is precisely the psychological capture effect of the standardization mechanism. "Everyone is improving using these methods. If I can't do it, I can only blame myself for not working hard enough." (S15) Behind this attribution lies the logic of the achievement society: platforms package competitive pressure as self-optimization, and users, under the vision of "becoming a better self", voluntarily assume risks and anxieties that should be borne by society. Individuals redefine differences determined by social structures, cultural norms or economic conditions as "insufficient personal effort". Users come to believe that with enough effort, intelligence and "know-how", any gap can be bridged. Under the logic of the "achievement society", platforms successfully package structural social competitive pressure as individual actions of "self-optimization". Driven by the vision of "becoming a better self", users voluntarily assume risks and anxieties that should be borne by social structures, and attribute all failures of goals to insufficient personal effort, thus falling into deep self-blame and attribution traps.

At the emotional level, the internalization process is accompanied by a shift from "external anxiety" to "internal unease". Initially, users' anxiety stems from specific feedback in real social interactions (e.g., criticism or comparison); after internalization, users automatically initiate self-examination even when alone and without external evaluation. "Now I don't need others to criticize me. When I look in the mirror, I think, 'Are my cheekbones too prominent? Should I get botox?'" (S4) This automatic self-monitoring is a typical manifestation of emotional internalization. Users no longer require external stimuli to trigger anxiety because the source of anxiety has been internalized as the "ideal self" in their minds. This ideal self is always ahead, continuously criticizing the real self. Meanwhile, through functions like check-ins, recording and sharing progress, platforms institutionalize the internalization process into a public performance that can be displayed, compared and receive feedback. Individual self-management is no longer a private matter but a continuous public ritual subject to platform and social evaluation. "I stick to daily study check-ins. I feel motivated when I get likes, but if not, I wonder if my photos are bad or my captions are poorly written." (S6) The mechanism of externalizing internal efforts as social performances embeds the internalization process not only at the individual psychological level but also into the interactive structure of the platform, forming a double bond of self-monitoring and social monitoring.

At this point, users complete the transformation from "triggered by external evaluation" to "automatic self-examination". Stress that once required external stimuli to emerge is now continuously generated by users themselves. Digital stress thus evolves from occasional emotional reactions into an integral part of daily cognitive frameworks. "No matter what I do now, a voice in my head keeps asking: 'Is this good enough? What will others think?'" (S17) The formation of this inner voice marks the successful transformation of external norms into individual self-discipline. This shift lays the psychological foundation for subsequent path narrowing and self-difference solidification: users no longer "passively" chase standards but "actively" aim to meet them, even though these standards are always set and continuously raised by the platform.

#### 4.4. Path differentiation and dilemma entrenchment: from dual cycle to locked self-difference

After young users internalize platform norms as self-evaluation standards and attribute problems to a lack of personal competence, Xiaohongshu does not offer diverse coping paths. Instead, through its content ecology and algorithmic logic, it systematically guides users into two limited action paths: conformity-oriented behaviors and anxious emotions. These two paths are not independent but mutually reinforcing, ultimately locking users into an inescapable dual cycle and forming an irreconcilable self-difference.

First, conformity-oriented behaviors: Users act in accordance with platform-displayed "solutions" to narrow the gap between real and ideal selves, manifesting as purchasing products, practicing social skills and formulating financial plans. Its typical feature is short-term positive feedback (e.g., receiving likes), yet this satisfaction is highly dependent on continuous confirmation from external standards. As algorithms continuously raise "ideal standards", users must invest increasing resources to maintain the same psychological reward. "I feel happy for a while when I post photos after following makeup tutorials and get likes, thinking my makeup is good. But after a few days, I feel it's not enough and want to learn more advanced techniques." (S11) The essence of this path is exchanging temporary security for continuous self-transformation, at the cost of surrendering self-identity.

Second, anxious emotions: When users fail to achieve ideal results due to real-world constraints, they easily fall into a psychological dilemma of repeated comparison and self-denial. Such users tend to browse similar content more frequently, seeking breakthroughs in massive information but constantly encountering stricter standards, forming a vicious cycle of "more anxiety leads to more browsing, more browsing leads to more anxiety". "The more I browse, the more inadequate I feel, but I can't stop. I keep thinking the next post

might tell me how to become better." (S21) This process can be termed "anxious rumination": individuals repeatedly examine their "flaws" but fail to translate this into effective action, instead depleting psychological energy. In the context of Xiaohongshu, uninterrupted algorithmic 推送 provides continuous material for such rumination. These two paths are not separate branches but mutually reinforcing closed loops. Failed conformity exacerbates anxiety, and anxiety drives a new round of conformity. "I bought a facial slimming device, but it didn't work after a month. I became more anxious, then searched for other methods and bought more things." (S12) Platforms act as "perpetual suppliers of solutions", benefiting whether users conform or feel anxious. Together, these two states lock users into a dual cycle, making exit extremely difficult because exiting means not only ceasing platform use but also giving up the possibility of "becoming better".

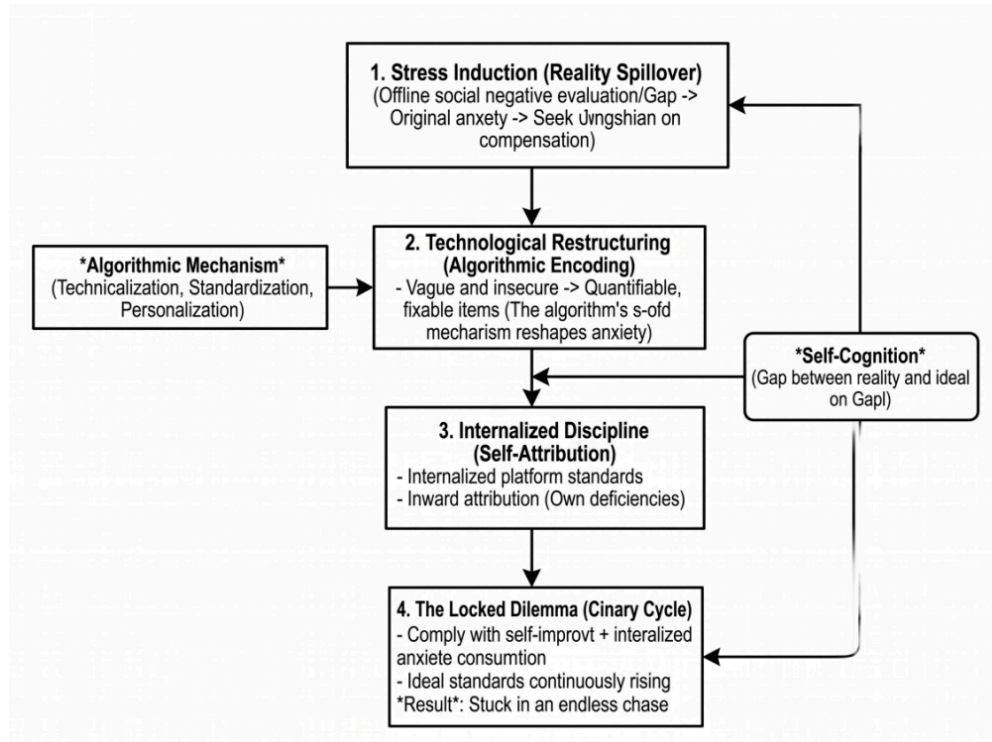
Following the aforementioned stages, individuals are trapped in a closed cycle of "effort—inadequacy—more effort". The permanent existence of this gap not only brings significant frustration but also leads to a loss of subjectivity at the behavioral level. The ideal self is a standardized and quantifiable personality image continuously shaped by platforms, setting ever-rising reference standards in appearance, career, social interaction and consumption; the real self is an individual situation perpetually in a "to-be-revised" state. Algorithms continuously raise standards as users progress. "I finally saved 100,000 yuan, but the content I browse is all about 'saving millions by age 25'. When will this end?" (S5) The ideal self is always ahead, making "meeting standards" structurally impossible—this is the internal logic by which platforms maintain user engagement and consumption willingness. The gap brings significant emotional burdens, with shame and frustration solidifying into daily emotional structures. Users habitually attribute setbacks to "not being good enough" but fall into the reproduction of frustration due to perpetually shifting standards. At the behavioral level, self-difference leads to behavioral entrenchment, as ceasing platform use is subjectively equated with "giving up self-improvement".

Users fall into a closed cycle of "effort—inadequacy—more effort": each effort brings fleeting hope, each comparison confirms the gap, and each frustration triggers a new round of action. "I feel like a hamster running nonstop on a wheel. The faster I run, the faster the wheel spins. I can't stop." (S18) At this point, digital stress is no longer an emotional fluctuation during platform use but a structural state internalized into daily life. Even when closing the app, the voice of the ideal self echoes in one's mind. "No matter what I do now, I overthink and search for posts on how to do it perfectly without being criticized before I start." (S18) The formation of this inner voice marks the successful transformation of external norms into individual self-discipline. In this endless chase, users gradually lose the right to independently define "being good enough". The ultimate convergence of these paths essentially completes the "formatting" of individual life by algorithmic logic.

#### 4.5. Research summary

Based on a qualitative analysis of the behavioral trajectories of 20 young respondents, this study elaborates on the dynamic evolutionary mechanism through which digital stress migrates from real-world social interactions to algorithmic logic. The findings reveal that individuals' psychological dilemmas rarely arise instantaneously from algorithmic pushes; instead, they are rooted in occasional and concrete negative feedback from offline social interactions. This primary sense of disparity drives respondents to turn to Xiaohongshu for compensatory solutions, thereby channeling personal distress into the platform's logical framework. In this process, algorithms convert diffuse emotional unease into tangible and quantifiable technical indicators via the triple mechanisms of terminologization, standardization, and personalization. This coding process not only reshapes users' perceptions of their problems but also induces individuals to internalize structural social disparities as a lack of personal competence. Ultimately, under the discipline of the platform's ideal templates,

users complete the transformation from external anxiety to self-scrutiny, becoming trapped in a closed loop intertwined with conformity and anxiety. As illustrated in Figure 1, this formation mechanism demonstrates that digital stress has evolved from an occasional emotional stress response into a structural existential state mediated by algorithms and internalized by the subject.



**Figure 1.** Four-stage formation mechanism of digital stress

## 5. Conclusion and discussion

This study systematically sorts out the formation mechanism of digital stress among young users of Xiaohongshu, constructing an evolutionary model covering four stages: stress induction, technological restructuring, normative internalization and dilemma entrenchment. This closed-loop logic reveals that digital stress is not an isolated emotional reaction but a structural product of the deep coupling between real-world social anxiety and platform algorithmic logic. Its evolutionary trajectory is as follows: first, primary stress is induced by negative feedback in real-world social interactions; subsequently, stress is re-encoded through algorithmic terminologization and standardization, achieving technological restructuring of distresses; thereafter, external standards are deeply internalized by individuals as self-cognition norms, guiding them into an internal attribution-based discipline stage; finally, subjects are anchored in a dual cycle of conforming practices and anxious self-depletion, achieving ultimate dilemma entrenchment. This interlocking process essentially completes the formatting of individual life by algorithmic logic, making young people's daily life practices gradually subject to platforms' performance evaluation systems.

Theoretically, the generation of digital stress reflects the alienation of young subjects under the logic of the achievement society mediated by platform algorithms. As Byung-Chul Han points out, subjects in the achievement society are laborers who exploit themselves, and the invisibility and cruelty of this exploitation lie precisely in its obvious voluntariness. Within the panoramic reference space constructed by Xiaohongshu,

platforms achieve digital possession of young people's emotional resources through continuously rising ideal self standards. Young people's self-improvement behaviors, whether acquiring social skills or refining appearance management, have unconsciously deviated from the original intention of subject growth and transformed into self-depletion oriented toward algorithmic performance. When authentic life perceptions are completely replaced by performance logic, individuals not only lose the ability to embrace ordinary life but also surrender the initiative to define self-worth in the digital illusion of pursuing excellence.

The loss of subjectivity calls for the urgent reshaping of digital composure in the algorithmic era, whose core lies not in physical disconnection from technology but in the in-depth deconstruction of platform mindsets. Young people should develop reflexive aesthetic awareness based on media literacy, identifying the capital logic and disciplinary nature behind terminological appearances. All sectors of society should collaborate to break the monolithic success narrative supported by data indicators and grant legitimate meaning space to non-performative lives. By regaining authentic life perceptions and embodied experiences, young people can carve out a resilient subjective space amid the tension between algorithmic logic and real-world circumstances, achieving a shift from digital alienation to subject return.

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