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Lunch of Suffering: White People Food, Diet Culture, and the Performance of Self-Control among Young Chinese Women

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ABSTRACT

Low-calorie food posts on RedNote (Xiaohongshu) often frame dietary restriction as self-care. This study explores how dietary discourse constructs thinness as feminine self-discipline among young Chinese women. It combines a quantitative content analysis of 500 posts with four influencer case studies. Three patterns emerged: (1) restriction was framed as wellness, (2) personal experience was cited far more often than scientific evidence, and (3) anxiety language was frequently paired with product recommendations or corrective routines. Among the 312 restrictive posts, 76.3 percent used wellness language. Across the full 500-post sample, only 41 posts (8.2 percent) cited a scientific or professional source. The findings show that Xiaohongshu associates thinness with femininity, discipline, and health even though thinness is not a measure of health. This discourse may normalize compensatory behaviors associated with disordered eating.

INTRODUCTION

On Xiaohongshu, many food posts appear to be about health and self-care. They feature salads, black coffee, meal replacements, carefully arranged lunch boxes, and other foods described as light or low in calories. The tone is often positive: a meal can be called clean, burden-free, comforting, or helpful for allowing the body to reset. However, these posts also connect eating less with being disciplined, attractive, and able to manage oneself. Food therefore becomes more than something to eat: it becomes a way for young women to display control over their bodies and their daily lives.

The phrase “white people food” makes this contradiction especially visible. On Xiaohongshu, it often refers to meals that appear plain, cold, and joyless. Users may joke that eating them feels like suffering. At the same time, these meals are associated with low calories, efficiency, modern lifestyles, and body control. The joke does not necessarily reject restriction. It can make restriction easier to accept by presenting it as a shared lifestyle experience. The title “Lunch of Suffering” refers to this tension. The meal appears undesirable as food, but desirable as evidence of discipline. The term is not restricted to a single hashtag. Of the 500 posts analysed here, 43 (8.6%) were returned under 白人饭; the phrase circulates across the wider low-calorie and body-management corpus and names a contradiction that

recurs throughout it. It is used in this article as the figure through which that contradiction becomes visible, not as a label for a separate sub-corpus.

Other trends follow a similar logic. While "zero-burden eating" makes food appear emotionally safe, "big-meal compensation" presents eating as a mistake that should be corrected. Liquid fasting promises to reset the body through several days of liquids or meal replacements, whereas celebrity diets and influencer challenges turn visible bodies into evidence that a method works. These trends may look separate, but they share a deeper structure: they encourage users to monitor food, compare bodies, and treat weight change as proof of personal success or failure.

The discourse operates through four recurring mechanisms: low-calorie meals, compensatory eating language, influencer and celebrity authority, and rapid weight-loss promises. This paper asks how these mechanisms construct thinness as a form of feminine self-discipline among young Chinese women. The study combines a quantitative content analysis of 500 highly visible Xiaohongshu posts with four influencer case studies. The posts were related to weight loss, low-calorie eating, compensatory dieting, and body management, and each post had at least 10,000 likes. The study also examines Yizhibai, Dou Yue, Wang Bangni, and Xiu Xian because their accounts represent different forms of dietary restriction, authority, anxiety, and commercialization.

The results show that Xiaohongshu rarely promotes thinness through direct instructions or recommendations. Instead, creators associate thinness with being healthy, confident, self-loving, feminine, and disciplined. Restriction is frequently described as self-care. Visual transformations replace detailed evidence. Guilt creates demand for compensatory routines. Commercial posts often present a bodily problem before offering a product as the solution. Together, these patterns turn thinness into a model of feminine self-management that appears healthy and achievable for anyone, even as it addresses, and may reinforce, anxieties about body image.

Historical Transformation

Chinese ideals of respectable femininity have changed across political eras. Jung documents how traditional and contemporary ideals are described by students today rather than what historical Chinese beauty norms were. Although the ideal body type has changed, each period discussed below attaches feminine respectability to some visible form of discipline. The continuity claimed here is a recurring rhetorical demand whose content differs by period, not an unchanging expectation.

Under earlier Confucian norms, "三从四德" (the Three Obediences and Four Virtues) tied feminine virtue to family obedience and restraint (Barlow). In the late Qing and May Fourth periods, the "New Woman" was instead expected to commit herself to education, physical health, and national modernization (Wang; Rodriguez).

During the Mao era, the admired commitment became collective labor and revolutionary purpose. Plain clothing, limited cosmetics, and physically capable female workers signaled political seriousness rather than consumer glamour (Ip).

After Reform and Opening Up, commitment increasingly took the form of individualized self-improvement. The beauty economy encouraged women to pursue youthfulness and femininity through consumption (Yang), while Chinese and other Asian media—not Western media alone—circulated slim-body ideals (Jackson, Cai, and Chen). On Xiaohongshu, the controlled meal now signals a contemporary commitment to self-management: knowledge, discipline, attractiveness, and purchasing power are condensed into what a woman eats. Virginia Woolf's argument that women's expression depends on the material and institutional conditions available to them provides a broader lens for considering whether this contemporary self-management is freely chosen. Woolf provides an interpretive lens here rather than evidence about Xiaohongshu. The connection to food discourse is specific: the material and institutional conditions she describes appear on the platform as sponsored products, creator authority, and metrics that reward visible transformation.

Diet Culture and Food Morality

Low-calorie claims can shape a consumer's judgment before the food is eaten. Huang and her colleagues found that these claims influenced how Chinese consumers perceived and purchased packaged food. The health-halo effect partly explained this effect. On Xiaohongshu, terms such as "零负担" (zero burden), "无罪感" (guilt-free), and "重启" (reset) create a similar impression. These words promise relief and renewed control rather than describing the nutritional value of the food.

Cairns and Johnston's "do-diet" explains how restriction can appear as positive action: choosing health, practicing self-care, and becoming a better self. Jovanovski and Jaeger likewise show that diet culture moralizes foods and bodies as clean, responsible, guilty, or failed. Compensatory health beliefs add a corrective logic in which an indulgent meal is imagined to be canceled by later restriction or exercise (Knäuper et al.; Amrein et al.).

Influencer Authority and Commercialization

Influencer authority blends personal testimony, visual confidence, and commerce. Xiaohongshu promotions can resemble spontaneous lifestyle sharing (Yi and Xian), while idealized influencer images have been associated with lower body satisfaction among young female users (Zhang et al.). Appearance-focused social-media activity is also associated with body dissatisfaction through thin-ideal internalization (Duan et al.; Roorda and Cassin). These studies support analyses of how platform posts make advice feel relatable and credible, but they do not establish that every viewer responds identically.

Research Gap

Existing research has separately examined changes in Chinese beauty ideals, low-calorie marketing, diet culture, compensatory beliefs, influencer credibility, commercialization, and body dissatisfaction. Fewer studies have examined how these elements work together in everyday Xiaohongshu food discourse. This study addresses that gap by investigating how low-calorie eating is presented through the language of health, self-care, discipline, compensation, and rapid transformation. It also examines how creators establish authority and how product promotion enters apparently personal food stories. Rather than assuming that these meanings are already proven, the study tests whether they appear repeatedly across a large sample of Xiaohongshu posts and across four contrasting creator accounts.

METHODS

Platform and Sampling

This study uses quantitative content analysis together with qualitative discourse and visual analysis. The sample contains 500 Xiaohongshu posts published between 1 January 2021 and 28 February 2026. The sampling frame begins in 2021 because preliminary observation showed that the current wave of viral weight-loss meal discourse began then, including the widespread circulation of Yin Zheng's braised-dish meals. The time frame continues through 28 February 2026, the final cutoff, so that the study can examine how the discourse developed rather than treating one short trend as the entire phenomenon. Posts were collected between 1 and 15 March 2026.

The post-selection process began with highly visible hashtags related to dieting, low-calorie eating, body management, compensatory eating, rapid weight loss, and emotional responses to food. The exact Chinese search strings were:

- **Low-calorie / light-meal discourse:** 轻食, 低卡, 低脂, 清淡, 清爽, 零负担, 无负担, 代餐
- **Moralized / restriction discourse:** 自律, 管住嘴, 精致女孩, 都市丽人, 优雅, 放纵餐
- **Compensatory discourse:** 大餐补救, 大餐恢复, 补救, 液断, 轻断食, 断碳
- **Rapid-loss / anxiety discourse:** 暴食, 反弹, 复胖, 明星减肥, 快速减肥, 短期瘦身, 水肿
- **"White people food" discourse:** 白人饭

These groups were selected because they correspond to different parts of the research question. Light-meal keywords identify low-calorie food discourse. Moralized terms identify posts that connect eating to discipline or guilt. Compensatory terms identify correction after eating. Rapid-loss terms identify the use of urgency and anxiety. The 白人饭 term identifies the specific "white people food" discourse named in the title.

The initial search returned 4,230 hits. After removing 605 duplicate posts by note URL/note ID, 1,102 posts unrelated to food, diet, or body management were excluded. A further 1,505 posts with fewer than 10,000 likes were removed, leaving an eligible pool of 1,018 posts. The final 500 were selected by taking the top 500 by like count, stratified by year to preserve variation across the 2021–2026 period. Each selected post had at least 10,000 likes. This threshold focused the study on posts that had already gained substantial visibility and engagement. It also established a consistent standard across different search terms. The method does not claim that highly liked posts represent all content on Xiaohongshu. Instead, it examines the messages that became especially visible within diet and body-management discourses. Duplicate posts were removed by note URL and note ID. No cap was placed on the number of posts per creator. Likes were recorded on 15 March 2026. Because older posts had more time to accumulate engagement, the sample supports conclusions about selected highly liked posts, but it does not establish which messages users encountered most frequently. Table 1 shows the distribution of the 500 posts by year and search category

Table 1. Distribution of the 500 posts by publication year and search category.

Year	Low-calorie / light meal	Moralized / restriction	Compensatory	Rapid-loss / anxiety	White people food(白人饭)	Total
2021	15	10	8	12	5	50
2022	25	15	12	20	8	80
2023	35	25	20	30	10	120
2024	40	30	25	35	10	140
2025	25	20	15	22	8	90
2026 (to 28 Feb)	6	5	3	4	2	20
Total	146	105	83	123	43	500

“Young women” in this study refers to the audience addressed by the posts, identified through gendered address and feminine appearance standards (402 posts, 80.4%). Neither the age nor the gender of creators or viewers was verified, and no demographic data were collected.

Coding Categories

The coding categories recorded whether a post was directed toward women or feminine appearance, used self-care or wellness language, recommended explicit food or calorie restriction, presented appearance or thinness as the main outcome, used personal experience as evidence, praised discipline or self-control, expressed anxiety or guilt, promoted a product, promised rapid weight loss, used before-and-after comparisons, recommended compensation after eating, or cited a scientific or professional source. These twelve categories are defined operationally in Table 2, with inclusion rules, exclusion rules, and examples.

Table 2. Operational codebook for the twelve coded categories.

Category	Definition	Inclusion rules	Exclusion rules	Example
Content directed toward women or feminine appearance	Post addresses women or uses feminine appearance as the central standard.	Uses 精致女孩, 都市丽人, 优雅, 漂亮, 小蛮腰; discusses looking better in dresses, dating, summer, or social events.	Generic health or diet post with no gendered address or feminine appearance standard.	“小蛮腰养成” with dress-fitting photos.
Self-care or wellness language	Post frames restriction through health, cleansing, balance, comfort, or self-care.	Explicit use of 干净饮食, 清爽, 清淡, 零负担/无负担, 刮油, 清肠, 大餐恢复, 重启 when framing restriction as care.	Low-calorie terms alone (低卡) without wellness framing; neutral nutritional description.	“零负担轻食，给身体放个假.”
Explicit food or calorie restriction	Post recommends reducing calories, replacing meals,	Explicit recommendation of 低卡, 代餐, 断碳, 液断, 轻断食, skipping	General healthy-eating advice without restriction;	“三天液断食谱.”

	avoiding carbohydrates, liquid fasting, skipping meals, or highly controlled meal plans.	meals, or controlled meal plans.	maintenance advice.	
Thinness presented as the main outcome	Post presents appearance change as the main result of the recommended behavior.	Smaller waist, flatter stomach, thinner face, lower scale number, or better-fitting clothes as the main outcome.	Health outcomes such as energy, strength, blood pressure, or nutritional balance.	“一周瘦脸，下颌线出来了.”
Personal experience used as evidence	Post uses the creator’s own experience as the main source of authority.	“This worked for me,” “how I lost weight,” daily routine presented as proof.	Citing others’ experience without a personal claim; general information.	“我从120斤到95斤的每日饮食.”
Discipline or self-control language	Post praises persistence, willpower, obedience, or appetite control as moral qualities.	自律, 管住嘴, 坚持, 意志力, 控制; treats weight control as self-control.	Neutral meal description; no evaluative language.	“自律的女孩最漂亮.”
Anxiety, guilt, or fear of weight gain	Post explicitly expresses anxiety, guilt, or fear about weight gain.	Explicit 后悔, 害怕, 焦虑, 罪恶感, 担心变胖, 怕胖.	水肿 (bloating), 反弹/复胖 (weight regain), and 补救 (compensation) do not by	“吃多了好有罪恶感.”

			themselves count as anxiety; the category is assigned only when explicit emotion words appear.	
Product promotion or commercial content	Post explicitly promotes a product, service, course, or brand.	Purchase link, brand tag, discount code, 购买, 课程, 链接, or paid-partnership disclosure.	Product visibility without promotional markers is not coded as promotion.	“同款代餐链接在评论区.”
Rapid weight-loss promises	Post promises short-term, dramatic weight loss.	三天, 五天, 七天, 狠心食谱, 快速; urgency and dramatic results.	Gradual, sustainable weight management.	“三天狠心食谱.”
Before-and-after images or body comparisons	Post includes before-and-after photos, scale images, waist measurements, or clothing comparisons.	Visual comparison of the body before and after.	Single body image without comparison.	拼图对比图.
Compensatory advice after eating	Post recommends restriction or exercise to correct a large meal.	Skipping the next meal, liquids only, reducing carbohydrates, longer exercise, or a restrictive	General exercise advice not framed as compensation; does not by	“大餐后三天补救食谱.”

		plan after a large meal; 补救, 大餐补救.	itself establish anxiety.	
Scientific or professional sources cited	Post cites a doctor, nutritionist, academic study, or recognized health organization.	Named source, study, organization, or traceable reference.	A creator identifying as a nutritionist counts as a credential claim, not as citing a professional source, unless a traceable source is named. Scientific terminology alone is not sufficient.	“根据《中国居民膳食指南》.”

Each post was examined for caption text, hashtags, cover image, carousel images, and, for videos, on-screen text and the auto-generated transcript. Audio was not examined. The post was the unit of analysis. Overlapping codes were allowed because a single post could contain several traits at the same time. A post could use self-care language, dietary restrictions, a before-and-after image, and a product advertisement. Overlapping coding was necessary because the study examines how these features work together rather than treating them as separate types of content.

Two figures reported in the Results use criteria narrower than the twelve codes. *Measurable health outcome* refers to an explicit mention of strength, energy, blood pressure, nutritional balance, sleep, digestion, or a medical biomarker in the same post; visible thinness alone does not qualify, and the indicator was recorded only for appearance-focused posts. The 75.1 percent figure for commercial posts records a textual order: the post names a bodily problem or concern — bloating, slow metabolism, overeating, weight regain, or difficulty controlling eating — at any point before a product is presented. It describes the structure of the post, not its effect on readers.

The study has a single author, who developed the codebook and coded all 500 posts. No second coder was available, so no inter-coder reliability statistic could be computed. To check consistency, the author wrote decision rules for each of the twelve categories before coding began, piloted the rules on 50 posts outside

the final sample, and revised ambiguous rules. After completing the full coding, the author waited two weeks and recoded a random 10% subset (50 posts) without consulting the first-pass codes. Simple agreement between the two passes was 88% across the twelve categories (range 82%–94%). Disagreements were resolved by re-reading the post against the written rules and, where the rules were still ambiguous, by adding a clarifying example to the codebook.

The study also recorded connections between categories. These comparisons made it possible to examine whether restrictive posts were framed as wellness, whether rapid-loss posts relied on visual evidence, and whether commercial posts first created anxiety before offering a solution.

Qualitative Case Selection

The study also uses case studies to examine four forms of weight-loss content. Yizhibai and Dou Yue were selected because their diet plans became widely copied online methods. Wang Bangni was selected because she uses professional credentials and medical language. Xiu Xian was selected as a contrasting case because she promotes a more flexible approach. All four were identified during the keyword searches described above, and each was selected because her account represents a distinct configuration of authority, restriction, and commercialization rather than because of her follower count.

For each creator, between 38 and 52 posts were collected from her public account over the period 2021–2026, using the same 10,000-like threshold where applicable. Of these, 8 to 15 posts per creator also appear in the 500-post sample; the remaining posts were collected separately to capture each account's characteristic format, which the sample alone did not represent evenly.

Yizhibai (45 posts, 2021–2026; 12 overlapping with the 500-post sample). Representative excerpts include 三天狠心食谱 ("Three-Day Ruthless Diet Plan") and 年后好好做人三日食谱 ("Three-Day Post-Holiday Get-Back-on-Track Diet Plan"). Diet instructions are confirmed by explicit plan text. Commercial evidence is limited to product visibility: tea appears beside recovery meals, but the coded posts contain no purchase link, brand tag, or discount code. Third-party sellers reuse her name and method; this is a possible association, not a confirmed relationship with the creator.

Dou Yue (38 posts, 2021–2026; 9 overlapping). Representative evidence includes five- and seven-day meal templates and the instruction 午餐灵活，早晚餐减量 ("lunch is flexible; reduce morning and evening portions"). Diet instructions are confirmed by explicit meal templates. Commercial evidence is again limited to product visibility: tea is placed beside meals without promotional markers. Third-party marketing of the "Dou Yue method" is a possible association, not a confirmed relationship.

Wang Bangni (52 posts, 2021–2026; 15 overlapping). A representative title is 为什么不吃不饿，一吃就停不下来，一条视频说明白！ ("Why am I not hungry when I do not eat, but unable to stop once I start? Explained in one video!"). The credential is self-reported: she identifies as a nutritionist and an ACE-certified fitness coach, and this has not been independently verified. The coded posts cite no traceable professional or scientific source, so the credential is recorded as a claim rather than as evidence

citation. Commercial promotion is confirmed where supplement links or purchase channels appear; elsewhere the material shows product visibility only.

Xiu Xian (41 posts, 2021–2026; 8 overlapping). Her own label is 放纵饮食法 ("indulgent eating method"). Diet instructions are confirmed by explicit guidance on flexible combinations and on adjusting rather than replacing an existing diet. Sales of courses, books, supplements, and lower-calorie foods are confirmed where purchase links appear.

Throughout the case analysis I distinguish three levels. A confirmed commercial relationship requires a purchase link, brand tag, discount code, course or product sale, or partnership disclosure. Product visibility means the product appears repeatedly without promotional markers. Possible commercial association means third-party sellers reuse a creator's name or method, which does not establish that the creator is involved. Claims in the case sections are limited to the level the evidence supports; where only visibility is documented, the text says so.

The four cases form a continuum. Yizhibai promotes rapid, restrictive plans. Dou Yue promotes structured eating. Wang Bangni focuses on internal bodily processes. Xiu Xian supports balanced and sustainable meals. The analysis examines food presentation, the source of authority, the form of anxiety, and the relationship between content and commercialization.

Ethical and Analytical Boundaries

The study analyzes publicly available posts and publicly visible creator content. It does not diagnose creators or viewers. It also does not assume that every commercial association proves deliberate deception. Claims about indirect product demand describe patterns in content rather than private intent. Comments were not coded systematically in the available dataset, so the study does not claim to measure how all viewers interpreted the posts. The analysis focuses on the discourse that the posts rendered visible.

Additionally, the analysis documents discourse, not audience response. The coded material consists of what posts say and show; it contains no measure of what viewers felt, believed, or did. Statements in this article about how viewers may interpret a post, compare themselves with a body, or come to regard a method as effective are interpretive possibilities consistent with the textual evidence, not findings. Comments were not systematically coded, and no data on consumption, purchasing, or disordered eating were collected. Claims about commercial effect are correspondingly limited: a post that presents a problem and then a product is evidence of a problem–solution structure, not evidence that the post produced anxiety or increased purchasing.

Quantitative Results

As described in the Methods section, the quantitative content analysis used overlapping codes for 500 Xiaohongshu posts related to weight loss, low-calorie eating, compensatory dieting, and body

management. Microsoft Excel was used to organize the posts and calculate the frequency and percentage of each coded indicator. For Table 3, the "Scientific or professional sources cited" category required a named source with a traceable reference; a creator's self-identification as a credentialed professional, or the use of scientific terminology, did not satisfy it and was recorded separately. For Table 3, the framing column describes conventional usage and does not function as a coding rule.

Table 3. Frequency of coded traits in the 500-post sample.

Observed trait	**Number of posts**	**Percentage**
Content directed toward women or feminine appearance	402	80.4%
Self-care or wellness language	338	67.6%
Explicit food or calorie restriction	312	62.4%
Thinness presented as the main outcome	291	58.2%
Personal experience used as evidence	264	52.8%
Discipline or self-control language	249	49.8%
Anxiety, guilt, or fear of weight gain	226	45.2%
Product promotion or commercial content	197	39.4%
Rapid weight-loss promises	186	37.2%
Before-and-after images or body comparisons	174	34.8%
Compensatory advice after eating	143	28.6%
Scientific or professional sources cited	41	8.2%

Table 4. Chinese diet-discourse lexicon: translations and semantic framing.

Chinese term	**English translation**	**How the term frames eating**
白人饭	"White people food"	Describes a plain, cold, and efficient meal. The joke makes restriction easier to share.
轻食	light meal	Presents a small meal as fresh, modern, and healthy.
低卡	low calorie	Makes calorie reduction the meal's main benefit.
低脂	low fat	Uses reduced fat as a sign of health or discipline.
清淡	lightly seasoned / mild	Connects restraint with comfort and purity.
清爽	light and refreshing	Connects food with a clean physical and emotional state.
零负担	zero burden	Removes the imagined physical or moral cost of eating.
无罪感	guilt-free	Treats food as moral by promising freedom from guilt.
重启	reset / restart	Presents the body as a system that can be corrected.
液断	liquid fasting	Gives severe restriction a short and organized name.
轻断食	intermittent / "light" fasting	Makes fasting sound less extreme through the word "light."
断碳	cutting carbohydrates	Turns carbohydrates into a food group that should be eliminated.

Chinese term	English translation	How the term frames eating
代餐	meal replacement	Presents a product as an efficient substitute for a meal.
掉秤	scale-weight loss	Defines success through a lower number on the scale.
显瘦	look slimmer	Treats the appearance of thinness as the desired result.
瘦脸	slimmer face	Uses a slimmer face as visible proof of success.
小蛮腰	slender waist	Presents a narrow waist as a feminine beauty ideal.
精致女孩	refined / delicate girl	Connects food and body management with polished femininity.
都市丽人	urban beauty / city lady	Connects controlled eating with modern urban status.
优雅	elegant	Turns restraint into a feminine virtue.
自律	self-discipline	Treats persistence and appetite control as moral qualities.
管住嘴	control your mouth / appetite	Places responsibility for success on personal willpower.
放纵餐	indulgence / cheat meal	Treats pleasurable eating as a temporary violation of the rules.
大餐补救	compensation after a large meal	Presents later restriction or exercise as a way to repair eating.
反弹	rebound weight gain	Presents regained weight as the return of a feared problem.

Restriction Was Commonly Presented as Self-Care

The pattern most central to this study's argument was the overlap between restrictive eating and wellness language. A total of 312 posts, or 62.4 percent of the sample, recommended some form of food restriction. These practices included reducing calories, replacing meals, avoiding carbohydrates, consuming only liquids, skipping meals, or following highly controlled meal plans.

Creators rarely described these practices as deprivation. Among the 312 restrictive posts, 238 posts, or 76.3 percent, also used language related to health, cleansing, balance, comfort, or self-care. Wellness language also appeared in 100 of the 188 nonrestrictive posts (53.2%), a difference of 23.1 percentage points. They described restrictive meals using expressions such as "低卡" (low calorie), "干净饮食" (clean eating), "清爽" (light and refreshing), "清淡" (light or mildly seasoned), "零负担/无负担" (zero burden/burden-free), "刮油" (literally "scrape away oil," implying fat removal), "清肠" (intestinal cleansing), and "大餐恢复" (recovery after a large meal).

Thinness Was Promoted Indirectly

A total of 291 posts, or 58.2 percent of the sample, presented appearance change as the main result of the recommended behavior. These posts focused on a smaller waist, a flatter stomach, a thinner face, lower scale numbers, or better-fitting clothing.

Among the 291 appearance-focused posts, 217 posts, or 74.6 percent, did not mention a measurable health outcome. They did not discuss improved strength, energy, blood pressure, or nutritional balance. Instead, they treated visible thinness as sufficient evidence of success. The thin ideal therefore operated through association. Thinness became the visible result of discipline and successful self-management. This pattern suggests an appearance-centered notion of health: visible thinness was often treated as evidence of being "healthy" even when no broader health outcome was mentioned.

Visual Comparison Strengthened the Authority of Weight-Loss Advice

Before-and-after photographs, scale images, waist measurements, and clothing comparisons appeared in 174 posts, or 34.8 percent of the sample. Among these posts, 149 posts, or 85.6 percent, presented the thinner image as the successful or improved body.

Rapid weight-loss posts relied especially heavily on visual proof. Among the 186 posts that promised rapid results, 132 posts, or 71.0 percent, included a body comparison, weight measurement, or transformation image.

Weight Loss Was Connected to Discipline and Moral Value

Nearly half of the posts used the language of discipline. A total of 249 posts, or 49.8 percent, described successful weight control as the result of persistence, willpower, obedience, or self-control.

Anxiety and Compensation Formed a Repeated Cycle

Anxiety, guilt, or fear appeared in 226 posts, or 45.2 percent of the sample. These posts mentioned fears of gaining weight, becoming less attractive, losing progress, overeating, appearing bloated, or failing to fit into certain clothes. The category was assigned only when these feelings were explicit in the wording; recurring expressions included “放纵” (indulgence), “后悔” (regret), “管不住嘴” (inability to control one’s eating), “暴食” (binge eating), “复胖” (weight regain), “水肿” (water retention or bloating), and “补救” (compensation).

Compensatory advice appeared in 143 posts, or 28.6 percent of the full sample. Among the 226 anxiety-focused posts, 137 posts, or 60.6 percent, included a compensatory method. Viewed from the other direction, those same 137 posts made up 95.8 percent of all 143 compensatory posts, showing that nearly every compensatory post also used explicit anxiety, guilt, or fear language. These methods included skipping the next meal, consuming only liquids, reducing carbohydrates, exercising for longer periods, or following a restrictive plan after eating a large meal.

Commercial Posts Frequently Paired Bodily Concerns with Product Solutions

Commercial promotion appeared in 197 posts, or 39.4 percent of the sample. These posts advertised low-calorie foods, meal replacements, supplements, enzymes, exercise programs, paid courses, or other weight-management products.

Among the 197 commercial posts, 148 posts, or 75.1 percent, introduced anxiety or a body-related problem before presenting the product. The posts described bloating, slow metabolism, overeating, weight regain, or difficulty controlling eating. The product then appeared as the solution.

Personal testimony appeared in 161 commercial posts, or 81.7 percent. Creators used their own weight-loss stories, photographs, or daily routines to support the product. Their appearance served as evidence that the recommendation was trustworthy.

Personal Experience Was More Common Than Professional Evidence

A total of 264 posts, or 52.8 percent of the sample, used personal experience as the main source of authority. Creators made claims through statements such as “this worked for me,” “this is how I lost weight,” or “this is what I eat every day.”

By contrast, only 41 posts, or 8.2 percent, cited a doctor, nutritionist, academic study, or recognized health organization. Even fewer posts explained the quality or limitations of the evidence.

The Content Was Strongly Gendered

A total of 402 posts, or 80.4 percent of the sample, directly addressed women or used feminine appearance as the central standard. These posts used expressions such as “精致女孩” (delicate girl), “都市丽人” (urban woman), “优雅” (elegant), “漂亮” (beautiful), and “小蛮腰” (slender waist), or discussed looking better in dresses and preparing the body for dating, travel, summer, or social events.

The three features also coincide in individual posts rather than appearing separately. A plan title such as "都市丽人春夏五日食谱" ("Five-Day Spring/Summer Diet Plan for Urban Women") in one phrase addresses an urban feminine identity, promises a visible five-day result, and frames the plan as strict self-control. The case studies show the same convergence at the level of an account: each creator combines a feminine address, a thin outcome, and a disciplinary method, but combines them differently. The analysis therefore treats these as intersecting features of the same posts rather than as separate variables with independent effects.

Case Studies of Xiaohongshu Weight-Loss Bloggers

The quantitative results identify repeated patterns across 500 posts. The case studies show how these patterns are organized within individual creator accounts. Each blogger creates a different relationship between food, authority, anxiety, and commercial value.

Yizhibai

Yizhibai uses strong contrasts between large meals and restrictive recovery meals: a post showing hot pot, fried chicken, desserts, or milk tea may be followed by a meal containing only eggs, vegetables, or fruit. By making that contrast more visible, calorie labels cast large meals as indulgence and restrictive meals as correction, creating a cycle of eating and compensation.

By promoting short challenges that promise rapid weight change, Yizhibai offers followers meals they can easily copy and results they can record. These posts attract users who feel frustrated by slow progress, even though personal weight changes provide most of the evidence and nutritional explanations remain limited. The scale therefore becomes the main measure of success.

Yizhibai appears to allow popular foods and social meals, but she often presents them as temporary indulgences that should later be corrected through restriction. Her content also creates a strong sense of urgency around weight loss. For instance, some of her diet plans use titles such as “三天狠心食谱” (“Three-Day Ruthless Diet Plan”), “都市丽人春夏五日食谱” (“Five-Day Spring/Summer Diet Plan for Urban Women”), and “年后好好做人三日食谱” (“Three-Day Post-Holiday Get-Back-on-Track Diet Plan”). These titles emphasize short time frames and strict self-control, which can make rapid weight loss appear both desirable and achievable. The contrast with dramatic three- or five-day results may invite viewers to compare their own progress and to read slower, balanced eating as less effective. Similarly,

terms such as "reset" can make severe restriction appear less extreme by presenting it as a temporary correction rather than deprivation.

Although Yizhibai does not appear to sell mate tea directly, her posts often connect recovery meals with tea or similar drinks, and this repeated association may make the product appear necessary. Third-party sellers can then use her name or method to market similar products, allowing the content to support indirect commercialization even when direct sales are not established.

As the most restrictive case, Yizhibai presents compensation as flexibility, allowing pleasure only when later restriction corrects it. This structure closely matches the quantitative result now reported above: 137 of the 143 compensatory posts, or 95.8 percent, also used explicit anxiety, guilt, or fear language.

Dou Yue

Dou Yue uses standardized meal images that divide food into protein, carbohydrates, and vegetables. Although rice, noodles, steamed buns, and sweet potatoes remain visible, making the approach appear more realistic than strict low-carbohydrate dieting, portions remain small and controlled, and high-calorie foods often require later correction.

Because Dou Yue's five-day and seven-day plans use familiar Chinese foods, followers can copy them without advanced nutritional knowledge. The meal templates also encourage check-in posts that spread the method across Xiaohongshu and allow followers to display their compliance.

Dou Yue divides food into highly structured categories and assigns different foods to different times of the day. Her meal plan generally recommends eating pure protein in the morning, often boiled eggs, allowing greater flexibility at lunch, and eating carbohydrates at night. Lunch is presented as the most flexible meal. However, this flexibility is still regulated. If followers eat a meal that is considered too high in calories at lunch, Dou Yue often recommends reducing the portion size of the morning and evening meals to compensate. This structure turns eating into a system of adjustment and correction, in which one meal affects what is considered acceptable later in the day. Her content therefore constructs a rule-based structure that may invite anxiety, since viewers are prompted to evaluate whether they have eaten "too much" and how they should compensate for it. Viewers may compare their ordinary meals with these controlled structures and read slower progress as poor compliance rather than normal bodily variation.

Although Dou Yue does not appear to sell mate tea directly, she often places it beside her meals. Repeated placement can give the product symbolic value, which may invite an inference that the tea improves water loss or weight reduction and allowing third-party sellers to market it through the Dou Yue method.

Dou Yue represents moderate but highly regulated dieting: although she includes Chinese staple foods, she still teaches followers to measure and classify every meal. Her account shows that diet culture does

not require complete food elimination because it can also operate through detailed organization and constant comparison.

Wang Bangni

Presenting herself as both a successful weight-loss participant and a professional advisor, Wang Bangni identifies herself as a nutritionist and an ACE-certified fitness coach. Rather than describing weight loss as simply as eating less, her content focuses on cortisol, blood sugar, muscle loss, visceral fat, and hormones. For example, one post title asks, "为什么不吃不饿，一吃就停不下来，一条视频说明白！" ("Why am I not hungry when I do not eat, but unable to stop once I start? Explained in one video!"). This wording turns an everyday experience of appetite into a bodily problem that the creator then explains through professionalized health language.

Because Wang Bangni explains hunger and weight gain through bodily processes rather than simply telling followers that they lack discipline, her approach can reduce blame, and she also criticizes extreme starvation. However, her content often explains problems without providing complete meal plans, so followers receive a new interpretation of the body but not always a complete way to evaluate the claim.

Although Wang Bangni rarely uses direct body shaming, her content may create metabolic anxiety by encouraging followers to interpret stress, hunger, or poor sleep as evidence of hormonal imbalance. Even thin women may worry about hidden fat or poor metabolic health. Her content therefore shifts anxiety from visible weight to invisible bodily processes, leaving followers feeling that they cannot fully understand or control their bodies without expert guidance.

When Wang Bangni discusses supplements, vinegar drinks, metabolic support, and internal regulation, her content follows a problem-solution structure: she identifies an internal problem, explains why diet and exercise may not solve it, and later presents products as possible support. Her credentials strengthen trust in these recommendations, although the available evidence does not prove deliberate deception.

Wang Bangni shows how diet culture can use professional and scientific language. Her content rejects starvation but still encourages constant bodily monitoring. She also complicates the quantitative finding that professional evidence was rare. Professional language can create authority, but it does not always provide transparent evidence or complete explanations.

Xiu Xian

Xiu Xian presents more flexible Chinese home-style meals that may include rice, noodles, meat, vegetables, and stewed dishes. Because she does not rely on fixed grids or constant calorie labels, high-calorie foods can appear without a punitive meal. Her content offers several alternative meal combinations and recommends adjusting an existing diet rather than replacing it entirely. For example, her posts explain how viewers can include hot pot, desserts, mala hot pot, and other foods commonly

associated with weight gain while pursuing or maintaining weight goals. This variety makes her approach more flexible than the other cases.

By connecting fasting, single-food diets, and severe restrictions with binge eating and weight regain, Xiu Xian helps followers to manage weight without abandoning family meals or carbohydrates. She presents flexibility as a long-term strategy, although she still supports weight management and therefore reforms diet culture rather than rejecting it completely. Her own label "放纵饮食法" ("indulgent eating method") provides a concrete example: flexibility becomes a planned method rather than a failure that requiring punishment.

Although Xiu Xian creates less food anxiety than the other bloggers, she sells courses, books, supplements, and lower-calorie foods. Her sales strategy relies mainly on professional trust rather than connecting products to rapid weight loss or compensation.

Xiu Xian provides the strongest contrasting case. Her account shows that professional authority and commercialization do not always depend on body shaming or metabolic fear. Her content still treats the body as something that should be managed, but moderation replaces punishment as the main form of control.

Comparative Analysis of the Four Cases

Each blogger constructs a different form of weight-loss anxiety. Yizhibai attaches anxiety to speed and Dou Yue to rules, whereas Wang Bangni centers on hidden metabolic problems. Xiu Xian reduces these pressures through flexible eating.

Self-control also takes a different form in each account. Yizhibai links it with compensation, Dou Yue with meal organization, Wang Bangni with bodily monitoring, and Xiu Xian with moderation. Feminine self-discipline therefore has no single fixed form: it can involve eating less, arranging food correctly, interpreting internal signals, or maintaining balance.

Commercialization also takes a different form in each account. Yizhibai and Dou Yue create indirect demand through product association, Wang Bangni connects professional advice with supplements, and Xiu Xian sells long-term guidance through professional trust. Commercial influence can therefore appear as direct promotion, repeated product placement, expert recommendation, or the sale of a complete lifestyle system.

DISCUSSION

The strongest quantitative result is the overlap between restriction and self-care. More than three-fifths of the posts recommended restriction, and among those restrictive posts, 76.3 percent used wellness language. This overlap shows how restriction can be recast as care, making discipline appear voluntary, healthy, and feminine.

This central overlap helps answer the research question by showing that Xiaohongshu constructs thinness through a network of positive meanings. The platform rarely needs to tell women directly that they must be thin. Thinness appears as the natural result of health, confidence, elegance, self-love, and discipline. This indirect form is powerful because it makes the goal appear voluntary: a woman seems to choose the thin ideal for herself even when repeated social expectations have shaped the available choices.

Returning to Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own clarifies this apparent choice. Woolf argues that women's expression is shaped by the material and institutional conditions available to them. On Xiaohongshu, a woman may appear to choose thinness for herself, yet the language of confidence, elegance, and self-love has already been organized around a body that is desirable to others. A socially produced appearance standard is then presented as an individual project of empowerment.

The results also show how food becomes moralized. Nearly half of the posts used the language of discipline. Larger meals were often connected to failure, loss of control, or the need for correction. Small meals represented responsibility. This pattern supports Jovanovski and Jaeger's argument that diet culture creates moral hierarchies around food and bodies. On Xiaohongshu, the hierarchy is also visual. A neatly arranged low-calorie meal appears calm and correct. An unplanned meal appears excessive even before the caption explains why.

Compensation reveals the emotional structure beneath this food morality. Almost all posts contained explicit anxiety, guilt, or fear language — a co-occurrence that indicates how frequently the two appear together in this corpus. The sequence was repeated across the sample. Control comes first. Eating becomes a possible failure. Compensation repairs the failure and restores control. The process can then begin again. This finding applies the concept of compensatory health beliefs to platform discourse. It does not prove that every viewer follows the advice. The content therefore normalizes the idea that eating more than planned should be followed by a corrective behavior intended to restore dietary control.

The cycle also helps explain why the pursuit of thinness can continue after a temporary goal is reached. The standard is not only a target weight. It is the ability to display control every day. A woman can therefore reach one number and still feel that she has failed after a single meal. The platform can produce new correction methods, new body comparisons, and new reasons to restart. Self-discipline becomes continuous rather than complete.

Visual evidence strengthens this process. Among rapid-loss posts, 71.0 percent included a transformation image, body comparison, or measurement. The image makes the result easy to understand and emotionally powerful. It also conceals unanswered questions. A thinner body does not show whether the method was nutritionally adequate, sustainable, or appropriate for other users. However, the visual transformation can replace those explanations. The creator's body becomes evidence, advertisement, and authority at the same time.

The contrast between personal testimony and professional evidence is therefore important. More than half of the posts relied on personal experience, while only 8.2 percent cited a professional or scientific source.

This finding does not mean that personal experience has no value. It means that relatability can become more persuasive than evidence. The ordinary creator appears trustworthy because she seems close to the viewer. The viewer can imagine copying the meal and receiving the same result. Individual experience is then generalized without enough attention to biological differences or health conditions.

The Wang Bangni case shows that professional language does not automatically solve this problem. Credentials and medical terms can provide useful explanations, but they can also create a new form of anxiety. The follower may begin to worry about invisible hormonal or metabolic problems. Professional language therefore changes the location of concern rather than necessarily removing it. Diet culture can move from direct starvation advice to continuous internal monitoring.

Commercialization is integrated into each stage of this discourse. Nearly two-fifths of the posts contained product promotion. Among commercial posts, 75.1 percent introduced anxiety or a bodily problem before presenting a product. This pattern supports the idea of a beauty economy. The body becomes a project, and every problem creates a possible market. Low-calorie foods, meal replacements, supplements, courses, and exercise programs promise to make control easier. The product does not sell nutrition alone. It also presents products as offering temporary relief from guilt and uncertainty.

The four case studies also show that commercialization can exist without direct product sales. Repeatedly placing a tea beside a diet method may give the product symbolic value, while a creator's name can later be used by third-party sellers and a professional creator can sell a course or supplement through trust rather than rapid claims. These differences matter because commercial influence is not always marked clearly; it can be embedded in lifestyle sharing, product association, or the presentation of expert guidance. Because such influence may be difficult for viewers to recognize, the pattern gives reason to consider independent third-party review of health and product claims, clearer disclosure of commercial relationships, and limits on unsupported recommendations. The effectiveness of such measures was not evaluated in this study.

Gender is central to the entire system. More than four-fifths of the posts directly addressed women or used feminine appearance as the standard. The successful woman is repeatedly represented as thin, disciplined, visually attractive, and able to manage appetite without visible struggle. The burden was not only to change the body. It was to make the change appear graceful and personally chosen. This connects the current platform discourse to a longer history in which women's bodies have represented modernity, morality, and social progress. The meanings have changed, but the demand for disciplined female self-improvement remains.

At the same time, the case studies prevent the analysis from treating all weight-management content as identical. Xiu Xian rejects severe diet restrictions and creates less anxiety than the other cases. Her approach still supports body management and commercial products, but it allows family meals, carbohydrates, and flexible portions. This contrast shows that the study should not classify every health-oriented creator as equally harmful. The more important question is how a creator defines control,

what emotions support the advice, and whether food is presented as nourishment, threat, or moral evidence.

Limitations

This research has several limitations. First, the sample includes posts with at least 10,000 likes. The threshold helps identify highly visible content, but it may overrepresent dramatic transformations, strong emotions, and commercially successful posts. Less popular posts may use different language or present more moderate advice.

Second, Xiaohongshu posts cannot represent all Chinese women. The study focuses on public content from one platform. Women who do not use Xiaohongshu, do not engage with diet content, or do not post publicly are not represented. The findings describe a visible discourse rather than the private beliefs or eating habits of all young Chinese women.

Third, the categories overlap. This overlap is analytically useful because self-care, restriction, anxiety, and commercialization often appear together. However, coding social-media language also requires interpretation. Some words can have different meanings depending on context. Future research could use multiple coders and report intercoder reliability. The comparisons reported in the Results are illustrative rather than exhaustive, describe differences within the coded sample, and are not tested for statistical significance

Fourth, content analysis cannot establish causation or reception. The study can show that thinness, guilt language, compensation advice, and product promotion appear repeatedly and in patterned combinations. It cannot show that viewing a post causes body dissatisfaction, anxiety, purchasing, or disordered eating, and it cannot diagnose creators or viewers. The design also cannot distinguish posts that reflected an existing audience concern from posts that contributed to one.

Fifth, comments were not coded systematically in the available dataset. The study therefore cannot measure how viewers accepted, resisted, joked about, or changed the meanings of the posts. A future project could compare post messages with comment responses.

Finally, the case-study analysis cannot prove private commercial intent. Product placement and repeated association can create indirect demand, but the available evidence does not show every financial relationship. The analysis therefore describes visible patterns and avoids claims of deliberate deception when the evidence does not support them.

CONCLUSION

Xiaohongshu diet food discourse does more than provide information about food and exercise: it creates a system of body management. Across Chinese history, women have been asked to display different commitments—family virtue, national modernization, revolutionary labor, and now individualized

self-improvement. The contemporary platform recasts that recurring demand through food, appearance, and daily self-monitoring.

"White people food," light meals, compensatory advice, influencer diet plans, and rapid weight-loss promises may seem like separate trends. They are connected by the same deeper logic. Young women are encouraged to prove control through what they eat, how little they eat, and how carefully they present dietary restrictions online.

Creators rarely promote thinness through a direct command. They connect thinness with health, confidence, self-love, femininity, and discipline. Thinness, however, is not a reliable measure of health. This association may normalize restrictive or compensatory behaviors linked to disordered eating. The present study cannot prove that viewing these posts directly causes an eating disorder.

These findings reveal a contradiction within Xiaohongshu's diet discourse. Dieting is presented as self-care, while many of the suggested behaviors involve restriction and anxiety. They also require constant self-surveillance. Food is presented as nourishment in one post and a threat in another. Guilt reinforces this threat. Compensation then encourages users to correct themselves after eating more than planned.

The scientific support behind these suggestions also remains unclear. Although 67.6 percent of the posts used self-care or wellness language, only 8.2 percent cited a doctor, nutritionist, academic study, or recognized health organization. Personal testimony can make the advice persuasive. A visual transformation can create the same effect. Neither proves that the method is safe, effective, or suitable for another user.

This cycle creates commercial value. Influencers and brands turn concerns about weight into opportunities to promote products or routines, while personal authority often blurs the boundary between lifestyle sharing and health marketing. As the Discussion argues, independent third-party oversight might evaluate product claims, require disclosure of commercial relationships, and restrict unsupported recommendations.

Overall, Xiaohongshu uses wellness language to connect thinness with feminine self-discipline. Moral judgments around food strengthen this connection. Emotional pressure and visual transformations make it more persuasive. Commercial products provide an apparent solution. The platform describes body control as healthy and personally chosen, yet repeated expectations shape this "choice." Recognizing the difference between thinness and health is necessary. The evidence behind diet advice also requires closer examination. Stronger oversight of promoted products may reduce the harm created by this discourses.

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