# Challenges of Providing Social Support on a Women-Centric Platform: Insights from REDnote

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### **Abstract**

Online peer support plays a critical role in helping women navigate personal and social challenges. While prior research has examined women's support behaviors on mainstream, male-dominated platforms, less is known about how such support unfolds in womencentric environments. This study investigates social support practices on REDnote. Through in-depth interviews with 18 female users, we explore how emotional support is shared and how users navigate a space shaped by both personal expression and commercial activity. Our findings reveal a dual role of commercialization: while product-centered content can foster community bonding, it also erodes trust when emotional narratives are used for marketing purposes. We identify key socio-technical barriers to support, including visibility concerns, privacy risks, and conflict avoidance. We offer recommendations to improve transparency, support safe interaction, and strengthen privacy controls, contributing to the development of more inclusive and supportive online communities.

#### **CCS** Concepts

• Human-centered design; • Empirical studies in HCI;

## **Keywords**

REDnote; Women-dominant Platform; Social Support; Xiaohongshu; 小红书; Online Community

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### 1 Introduction

Online communities play a critical role in supporting women by providing information and social support across diverse domains [8, 11, 27, 32], including pregnancy [19], online dating safety [12], and romantic relationships in gaming contexts [25]. However, women often face marginalization in male-dominated online spaces such as gaming and live streaming communities [16, 37, 44], technical forums [39], and professional STEM networks [15, 36]. Existing research in CSCW and HCI has primarily focused on platforms that host women's groups within broader networks like Reddit [35, 36] and Facebook [17, 18, 33, 48]. These sub-communities support various needs, from professional empowerment [36] to infertility [17] and antenatal care [9]. However, less attention has been given to women-centric platforms where the majority user base is female, and social support behaviors emerge organically. REDnote, also known as Xiaohongshu (小红书), is one such platform. Initially launched in 2013 as a travel and shopping experience-sharing app, it has evolved into a lifestyle-focused space encompassing beauty, fashion, fitness, childcare, and more [24]. With over 70% of users identifying as women, REDnote functions as both a marketplace and a peer-support network, where users interact through comments, livestreams, and community posts.

Unlike female-oriented subgroups on mainstream platforms [36, 48], REDnote is distinguished by its scale, its core demographic: young, educated, middle-income women [30], and its unique cultural setting. Operating in a Chinese cultural context that is shaped by patriarchal values[26], REDnote promotes a vision that blends social interaction with commerce [47]. This integration allows for a form of "non-profitable sociality" that coexists with commercial incentives, making it a rich site for exploring women's support practices. Prior work has explored online social support extensively (e.g., [2, 4, 10, 13, 34, 43, 45, 46]). Users are often motivated by recreation, self-advancement, altruism, and reciprocity [23]. Yet, little is known about how support manifests in female-dominant environments like REDnote, where users blend emotional exchange, practical advice, and commerce-driven interactions. This study investigates how REDnote facilitates social support among Chinese women around everyday topics, and how such exchanges may foster solidarity among women. We ask: What are the concerns about providing social support among female users?

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#### 2 Method

#### 2.1 Recruitment Procedure

Two researchers shared recruitment information on their REDnote homepages and contacted users who expressed interest in participating in interviews. To screen participants, they asked three eligibility questions: (1) Are you 18 or older? (2) Do you have experience using REDnote? (3) Do you identify as female? Participants who met all criteria were invited via email for online interviews. In total, we conducted 18 interviews with REDnote users who had been active on the platform for five months to six years. All participants were domestic Chinese, born and raised in China, although some had later moved abroad for study or work. Demographic details are presented in Table 1.

# 2.2 Observation and Interview Design and Analysis

This study received Institutional Review Board approval. Researchers had personal experience using REDnote for 2–4 years, including engaging with the platform by browsing posts, seeking information, interacting with other users, joining group chats, and watching live streams. During the study period, the researchers conducted non-participant observation by analyzing public comments and live-stream interactions, focusing on how users provide and receive support within the community.

The interview questions were iteratively developed by researchers based on relevant literature and pilot interview results. Questions were developed in English and translated into Chinese for the formal interview. We used a semi-structured interview format, where additional questions were generated based on responses to the main questions, and participants were allowed to discuss other tangential topics. Specifically, the semi-structured interviews were guided by questions covering three main topics. The first part focuses on the general experience of using RED, including user motivation, usage patterns, and pros & cons of the platform (e.g., "Why do you want to use RED, for what purposes?"). The second part surrounds platform environment and community formation, specifically on interaction with other users and hostile or supportive behaviors on the platform (e.g., "Have you ever observed/encountered malicious behaviors on RED when people give or receive support?"). The third part focuses on supporting the behaviors of users (e.g., "Could you share your previous experience of supporting or being supported on RED?").

An in-depth qualitative analysis was performed to analyze the interview data. Following the guidelines for qualitative analysis in HCI [31], our analysis focused on identifying recurring topics and consistent interpretations of phenomena. Specifically, three researchers began the analysis by familiarizing themselves with the data. A small portion of the data set was first coded simultaneously and independently by the researchers to set the baseline for interpretation through comparison and discussion of this portion. Then, the dataset was divided into three parts, where each researcher coded one part with depth by assigning meanings to the codes and identifying potential themes. In the second stage, we collaborated in an iterative process to discuss, combine, and refine generated

Table 1: Participants demographic information

Participant ID	Gender	App Usage	Participant ID	Gender	App Usage
P1	Female	5 months	P10	Female	4 years
P2	Female	4 years	P11	Female	3 years
P3	Female	3 years	P12	Female	5 years
P4	Female	3 years	P13	Female	4 years
P5	Female	3 years	P14	Female	4 years
P6	Female	2 years	P15	Female	1 year
P7	Female	3.5 years	P16	Female	1 year
P8	Female	4 years	P17	Female	6 years
P9	Female	6 years	P18	Female	2 years

themes by closely examining their relevance to our research questions and the existence of a clear and agreed meaning in each theme and sub-theme. The analytical process was supervised by a senior researcher to ensure that the data were thoroughly understood, relevant topics were clearly identified, relationships between codes were detected, and the codes were well organized and clustered.

# 3 Findings

# 3.1 Emotionally Misleading Advertisements Discourage People from Offering Support

REDnote encourages a subtle integration of advertisements within user-generated content, often making it difficult to differentiate between personal recommendations and promotional posts. This blending of content creates confusion and frustration among users, especially when emotionally charged narratives are revealed to have commercial motives. P12 expressed her dissatisfaction with the platform's prevalence of misleading advertising, particularly posts that appear to share genuine personal struggles but are later revealed as tactics to drive engagement or promote products.

I think REDnote is full of commercial promotions, and many of them are subtle advertisements that are hard to distinguish. [...] Some people use tactics to drive traffic by saying things like they were kicked out by their mom or have a bad relationship with their dad. You sincerely want to help them with advice, only to find out they are just trying to attract traffic. That feeling is very frustrating.

As P12's experience suggests, emotionally manipulative content can erode trust, especially when users attempt to offer sincere support only to realize they have been misled. These tactics often rely on dramatic personal stories that portray the content creator as vulnerable or marginalized. Once other users begin to suspect such narratives are disingenuous, they may hesitate to engage, offer support, or even develop resentment toward the poster. The perception of hidden commercial motives can further influence users' attitudes toward the platform as a whole. When users feel betrayed by content they initially interpreted as genuine, it not only damages interpersonal trust but also prompts skepticism toward the platform's content moderation and recommendation system.

I came across a post from a girl studying at X university who shared things about her boyfriend. Her boyfriend was being abusive, and I remember messaging her to offer support. I even added her on WeChat but found out that she was (using that story and) actually trying to advertise her consultant services. (P2)

P2's experience exemplifies how the line between emotional expression and self-promotion can become blurred. Her initial intention to provide emotional support shifted to a sense of betrayal after discovering the commercial context behind the post. As a result, she became more cautious and redirected her engagement to other platforms, such as Weibo, where she perceived less manipulation. These examples highlight the critical role of transparency and authenticity in maintaining a supportive and trustworthy community. When users lose confidence in the sincerity of shared experiences, their willingness to participate and offer support declines significantly.

# 3.2 Cultural Barriers to Social Support

Content creation and user interaction on REDnote provide nuanced ways for users to express their identities within broader social and cultural contexts. Participants often carefully choose where and how to engage, reflecting a negotiation between traditional values and modern social media practices. In particular, support is frequently offered on culturally sanctioned topics such as relationships, family, and education-areas consistent with traditional gender roles that continue to influence contemporary Chinese women [21]. REDnote also cultivates its own cultural norms through community guidelines that emphasize sincere sharing and friendly interaction. These guidelines aim to foster a non-judgmental environment, yet broader societal values, especially those emphasizing modesty and emotional restraint, continue to shape user behavior. Chinese cultural expectations, heavily shaped by Confucian values, collectivism, and social harmony, can contribute to hesitation in emotional expression [5].

For some posts where I occasionally shared some emotional problems with others, I would leave comments but later felt that it was unnecessary, and then I would delete it. Looking back, I could feel a little embarrassed. I am indeed a strange person. I really support and encourage people on REDnote, which may make me look a bit foolish. But when I see some unhappy people, I will actually leave a comment and say some encouraging words. After they receive the reply, I will delete the comment after 8 or 10 days. (P4)

P4's reflections highlight the internal tension between the desire to offer support and cultural discomfort with public vulnerability. Even on a platform designed for openness, Chinese people tend to be reserved in expressing their emotions freely. Such traditional values around emotional restraint can lead users to retract their interactions after the fact [3, 38]. In addition, REDnote's emphasis on harmonious interaction may discourage users from engaging in ways that risk conflict. This results in more passive participation, as seen in P2's preference for liking posts rather than joining discussions:

I do not want to talk to people, I just do not want to communicate with some random people, just to avoid some conflicts... I don't speak up, but I will show my support. Why do I only use REDnote to like posts and not participate in some controversial discussions? It is because I think it is quite dangerous. I think it is easier to

find me through my REDnote account, and I am afraid of being recommended to people I know. (P2)

P2's experience illustrates how cultural values intersect with platform mechanics to shape social behavior. Her concern about being identified by acquaintances reveals how offline reputation management constrains online participation. However, these cultural barriers are not insurmountable. Positive reinforcement from the community can motivate more active engagement. For example, users may strategically choose posts where they feel their input will be seen and valued. As P11 noted: "I usually engage with posts with few comments or likes because I can receive responses by interacting. However, if many 'sisters' have already given their opinions, I may just leave it there," This strategy reveals that users are more likely to contribute when there is a higher perceived chance of reciprocal interaction or acknowledgment. This suggests that while cultural norms may shape general behaviors, platform dynamics and social feedback also play a significant role in encouraging participation.

# 3.3 Privacy Concerns Caused by the Platform Algorithm

Although REDnote operates as a pseudonymous platform, where users are not required to use real names or profiles, many participants still expressed a strong desire to maintain a boundary between their online and offline identities. For one thing, it is not uncommon for REDnote users to follow friends' accounts. For another, participants reported that the platform algorithm favors pushing content relevant to their social network, e.g., content posted or highly interacted with by their social network. Therefore, there is a possibility of deanonymization when posting personal content or comments being seen by unintended audiences, discouraging some users from fully participating.

My concern is that it feels like there is some degree of real-name registration, which means I cannot just stay anonymous. Due to the limitations of this account (which is not fully anonymous), I am sometimes afraid of revealing too much about myself. It is more suitable for me to just post and browse content. (P14)

P14's comment reflects the perception that anonymity on REDnote is only partial. Her preference for passive browsing over active participation stems from fears that her identity could be inferred. She also expressed discomfort in using features such as group chat, favoring one-on-one communication. This withdrawal could limit opportunities for meaningful exchange and mutual support. Another source of concern stems from the platform's highly personalized recommendation algorithm, which some users perceive as invasive.

The algorithm on REDnote is too accurate; I feel a bit uncomfortable when my friends see my comments under some posts. I think people still need to maintain a certain social boundary, so I have reduced my comments on some REDnote posts. It is not that I feel embarrassed to say this, but I'm afraid my friends will see them. (P4)

P4's discomfort highlights how personalized recommendations can backfire when they compromise social boundaries. On a platform where users often seek support for sensitive topics such as body image, romantic relationships, or family tensions, the risk of visibility to real-life friends can deter users from interacting openly. In some cases, the algorithmic connection between online activity and offline networks causes users to self-censor or withdraw entirely. P2 described this anxiety in relation to being recommended to or by people she knows:

You may feel that you might be seen by others, and that person may even know you. This is also why I will not participate in it. People around me have been recommended to me, and they have nottold me if I have been recommended to them yet. But I do not really want this kind of thing to happen. (P2)

P2's decision to avoid commenting and joining conversations stems from the fear of being recognized by acquaintances. This highlights how platform design, particularly the recommendation algorithm, can inhibit vulnerable sharing when users feel they are not truly anonymous. Her concern reinforces the idea that visibility on RED-note is not just algorithmic but socially consequential. For many, the desire to avoid recognition overrides the benefits of active engagement, resulting in a preference for silent support or passive consumption.

### 4 Discussion

While platforms like Instagram include ads and product recommendations, REDnote stands out for leveraging peer users to organically promote products. This model fosters authentic engagement and trust, as users share commercial content alongside personal stories. As prior work shows, positive social interactions are vital in social commerce settings [28, 47], and REDnote's user-seller dynamics often resemble friendships [41], reinforcing social support behaviors. However, this integration of commerce and community has a dual impact. While it enhances perceived authenticity, it also introduces risks when commercial intentions are disguised as personal narratives. Our findings echo concerns raised in prior studies [20, 49]: when users realize they have been emotionally manipulated for marketing purposes, trust in the platform and its community erodes. Andalibi and Forte [1] also show that users often share sensitive or emotionally charged content in social spaces, expecting empathy and authenticity. When such environments are co-opted for covert marketing, it can violate users' expectations of emotional safety and authenticity, triggering feelings of betrayal and reducing willingness to engage. P2 found it disturbing when found out her support was sent to a person who made up stories. To mitigate these effects, platforms like REDnote must enhance their detection and labeling of subtle commercial content. While sponsored tags exist, many promotional posts evade classification. Improving detection mechanisms, especially those sensitive to contextual and emotional cues, is essential. Additionally, users engaging in business activities should be required to register as business accounts to increase transparency.

Our findings reveal that many REDnote users prefer passive engagement, such as liking posts rather than commenting to balance self-expression with personal safety. This behavior reflects both individual caution and a collective norm that values harmonious interaction [29]. In doing so, users express support without exposing themselves to conflict or unwanted attention. Previous

research indicates that women often use digital platforms to raise their voices against issues like harassment [40], and similar patterns were observed on REDnote in response to body shaming and sexual objectification. These moments of solidarity, however, are relatively rare and topic-specific. The broader environment still lacks sufficient safeguards, and many users choose passive participation to avoid backlash or exposure, especially when discussions touch on controversial topics. This aligns with literature suggesting women generally employ conflict-avoidant, collaborative strategies [7, 14]. To encourage broader participation, platforms should consider integrating conflict mitigation mechanisms, such as moderation filters and opt-in anonymity for sensitive topics [6].

Although anonymity online offers well-documented benefits, such as psychological safety and reduced barriers to social connection [22], the architecture of the Rednote platform compromises this through high visibility and hyper-personalized recommendations. Our findings show that users refrain from publicly expressing support because their interactions easily surface with offline acquaintances. This visibility amplifies users' concerns about personal exposure, particularly when engaging in emotional or vulnerable content. Many participants expressed embarrassment or fear of judgment if seen commenting on sensitive issues by people they know in real life, and both P14 and P4 mentioned such a kind of concern. As a result, they limit themselves to browsing or private forms of support, reducing the overall level of active social engagement. Users who want to maintain a boundary between their online and offline lives are particularly affected. When supportive behavior leaves conspicuous traces, they may opt out entirely. To address this, platforms should offer more flexible identity options. For example, when users engage in supportive actions, such as leaving comments or sending messages, they can choose whether to appear anonymous or identifiable. However, this anonymity must be carefully constrained to prevent misuse, such as harassment or trolling.

#### 5 Limitations and Future Work

This study has several limitations. First, while the observed preference for non-verbal support may reflect collectivist cultural norms emphasizing harmony and conflict avoidance [42], future work should examine how such norms shape support behaviors across cultures. Second, our focus on female users limits insights into how male users engage on REDnote. Exploring their experiences could reveal important gendered differences. Finally, recruiting participants through the researchers' networks may have introduced self-selection bias toward more active users. Broader recruitment strategies could help capture more diverse user perspectives.

#### 6 Conclusion

This exploratory study examined how female users on REDnote provide social support and how platform dynamics such as commercialization, visibility, and cultural norms shape their engagement. While users actively seek connection, concerns over privacy and trust often limit participation, especially when authentic sharing intersects with commercial content. To foster safer and more inclusive environments, platforms must enhance privacy controls, improve transparency, and design features that empower women's voices.

These insights extend beyond REDnote, informing the design of supportive spaces across social media.

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