The sweet trap behind "female-oriented" micro-dramas: strategies for constructing simulacral subjectivity in female protagonists

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Abstract. Driven by media technologies and consumerism, micro-dramas construct "simulacra subjectivity" through the symbolic portrayal of female characters, thereby obscuring the realities of women's lived experiences. This study adopts Baudrillard's theory of simulacra as its analytical lens and uses Lacan's theory of the three orders as a theoretical framework to conduct textual analysis of leading female-oriented micro-dramas. The analysis reveals that female protagonists face a triple dilemma: in the Imaginary Order, they construct a "to-be-gazed" mirror self-dependent on the male gaze, intensifying anxiety over appearance and body image; in the Symbolic Order, female roles are reduced to symbols such as the "virtuous wife and good mother," internalizing patriarchal social norms; in the Real Order, singular, pleasure-driven narratives dissolve the diversity of female subjectivities. This study argues that such simulacra subjectivity is perpetuated through a closed loop of "symbolic production—data feedback," which not only distorts the audience's perception of real women but also risks reinforcing existing gender power structures. To promote gender equality within media and society, micro-dramas must strike a balance between the logic of traffic and the authentic portrayal of female characters, while recognizing their role as a new media form in shaping social values.

Keywords: micro-drama, feminism, lacan's three orders, simulacrum theory

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of media technologies, the intersection of feminism and media has become a critical area of contemporary scholarly inquiry. As a primary vehicle for information dissemination and cultural construction, media serves not only as a vital platform for the articulation of feminist discourse but also as a reflective arena of gendered power relations. In 1977, Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly was the first academic journal in the United States to incorporate "gender and media" into its research scope. Over the past four decades, scholars have analyzed mass media—such as newspapers, radio, television, film, and the internet—through the lens of gender, generating a wealth of scholarly output. Notable works include Ellen Brown's Feminist Cultural Television Criticism: Cultural Theory and Practice, and E. Ann Kaplan's Feminism and Film, among other influential texts that explore the nexus of media andgender [1].

In the era of social media, feminism and media theory have become even more deeply intertwined. On one hand, the ubiquity of social platforms has provided feminist movements with new avenues for organization and mobilization. For instance, the "MeToo" movement utilized platforms such as Twitter and Instagram to break the spiral of silence and foster global reflection on sexual harassment and gender-based violence. On the other hand, issues such as gender stereotyping and the objectification of female representations in media content continue to attract scrutiny and critique from both academic and public spheres. These developments have not only given rise to the emerging field of media feminism but also compelled researchers to examine the entire media production, dissemination, and consumption process through a gendered perspective. This includes exploring how media practices can contribute to gender equality and help reshape a more inclusive and diverse socio-cultural landscape. The convergence of feminism and media thus enriches the practical dimensions of feminist theory and injects a new critical and value-oriented dimension into media studies.

Against the backdrop of mobile internet proliferation and media convergence, the micro-drama—a new form of media content—has experienced rapid growth. According to the National Radio and Television Administration, micro-dramas are defined as online audiovisual works with a clear theme and complete plot, typically ranging from a few dozen seconds to fifteen minutes per episode [2]. Data from CSM's Micro-Drama Industry Development Report indicates that micro-dramas have reached an audience of 576 million users, with women accounting for as much as 54% of the total user base. The popularity of micro-

dramas is closely tied to their "pleasure-driven" narrative mechanism, with " 爽 " (a term denoting sensory and emotional pleasure) as their core appeal. Female-oriented micro-dramas, in particular, offer this sense of gratification through visual pleasure derived from characters' appearances and through narrative satisfaction, such as revenge plotlines culminating in triumph. The term "爽剧" (pleasure dramas) has thus become synonymous with micro-dramas. Branded with slogans like "One thrill resolves everything" and "Only thrill, no delay," the pursuit of immediate gratification has become a shared goal among both producers and audiences [3]. Under the dual forces of technological innovation and consumerist culture, micro-dramas—with their fragmented storytelling and high-paced plots—entice users into rapid and repeated consumption. At the same time, they subtly shape users' perceptions, values, and worldviews.

Baudrillard's theory of simulacra posits that a defining feature of modern consumer society is that what we consume is not primarily tangible products or goods, but rather "sign-objects" mediated through symbols. These "sign-objects" constitute an active structure of meaning production [4]. He outlines four stages in the evolution from representation to simulation: first, the image reflects a profound reality; second, the image masks and distorts that reality; third, the image masks the absence of a profound reality; and finally, the image bears no relation to any reality whatsoever, becoming pure simulacrum [5]. This theoretical framework offers a powerful critical lens for analyzing the portrayal of female characters in micro-dramas. From the "silly, sweet girl turns into a CEO's wife" trope characteristic of Mary Sue narratives, to the "powerful female protagonist tearing down the scumbag and enacting workplace revenge" storyline typical of gratification-driven fiction, these character templates do not stem from the complex and diverse realities of actual women's lives. Instead, they emerge from the repetitive reproduction of successful formulas derived from popular online literature and audiovisual hits, resulting in a form of symbolic excess detached from lived experience—a veritable "carnival of signs."

2. Literature review

2.1. The concept of female subjectivity

In women's studies, female subjectivity has long been a central research focus. It refers to women's conscious agency in recognizing their own status, roles, and value within the objective world. This awareness functions as an internal driving force, motivating women to pursue independence, autonomy, initiative, and creativity [6]. In the contemporary era, female subject consciousness embodies women's subjective understanding of their position and function in society, encompassing four key dimensions: awareness of equality, rights consciousness, autonomy, and the pursuit of achievement [7].

2.2. The concept and historical development of feminism

Feminism is a sociopolitical movement and theoretical framework centered on the pursuit of gender equality. It seeks to dismantle patriarchal structures and reconfigure women's social status and values. Feminist theory spans multiple disciplines, including philosophy, sociology, and literary criticism. Through critical analysis of gendered power relations, feminism exposes the systemic oppression faced by women across political, economic, and cultural domains.

From a historical perspective, feminism has developed through several distinct waves, each associated with different schools of thought. The "first wave" of feminism emerged in Europe and North America from the mid-19th to early 20th century, focusing primarily on women's suffrage. Women mobilized through rallies, protests, and publications to fight for legal and political rights. The "second wave" of feminism, which spanned from the 1960s to the 1980s, broadened its focus to include social, cultural, and familial domains. This wave addressed issues such as gender discrimination, workplace inequality, and sexual violence, significantly advancing both feminist theory and activism. In the 21st century, the "third" and "fourth waves" of feminism have continued to evolve, emphasizing the intersectionality of gender issues by incorporating factors such as race, class, and sexual orientation into their analytical frameworks. These developments reflect the ongoing transformation and deepening of feminist discourse and practice.

2.3. Current research on the construction of female characters

Current research on the construction of female characters primarily focuses on analyzing the identity and function of such roles. For example, Lijuan Zhu examined the predicaments and social identities faced by four generations of women in Bright Nights [8]. Li Liu analyzed the varying life circumstances of housewives and working women in Kurt Vonnegut's short stories [9]. Wanyun Zhang, taking a narrative approach, explored the protagonist's identity constraints and transformative growth in the film Decision to Leave [10].

2.4. Current research on micro-dramas

Existing research on micro-dramas primarily focuses on audience analysis and platform dynamics, while relatively little attention has been paid to the construction of female protagonists in this genre. In China, studies tend to concentrate on audience-oriented analyses. For example, Qian Cheng and Zheng Li examined the consumption of online micro-dramas among the elderly population [11]. Shiyuan Li and Pengfei Li explored the application of AIGC (Artificial Intelligence Generated Content) technologies in micro-drama production [12]. International research on micro-dramas is more inclined toward exploring streaming platforms. For instance, Kinney T. analyzed issues related to content production and update frequency on micro-drama platforms [13]. Stein-ar Ellingsen and colleagues studied problems associated with content interaction and user feedback mechanisms on such platforms [14]. Studies on the construction of female images, however, have largely focused on traditional television dramas and advertising, investigating the historical evolution of female character representation in these domains [15].

Most of these works concentrate on media forms as such, with limited exploration of the interaction between media and the construction of female character identities. This paper addresses a current research gap by focusing specifically on the construction of female protagonists in micro-dramas—a novel media form. Grounded in Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and framed by Jacques Lacan's tripartite theory of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, this study explores how micro-dramas shape and interact with representations of female subjectivity.

As an emerging media form, micro-dramas are profoundly reshaping contemporary values and lifestyles. According to George Gerbner's cultivation theory, the "symbolic reality" suggested by mass media significantly influences people's understanding and perception of the real world [16]. Accordingly, the representation of female protagonists in female-oriented micro-dramas also has the potential to impact real-world gender values. In this context, the subjectivity of female protagonists in female-oriented micro-dramas is expressed through their active stance—not as passive objects subordinate to male protagonists, but as narrative centers expressed through cinematic language, rather than as marginal appendages. They are depicted as central figures in romantic and interpersonal relationships, exercising discursive agency. When female protagonists are portrayed as active subjects, this empowers real-world women to assert their own subjectivity. However, if micro-dramas are oriented toward constructing simulacra subjectivity merely for affective gratification, women may become unaware of their own subjectivity while immersed in this pleasurable experience.

Given this, the present study innovatively incorporates the psychoanalytic framework of French theorist Jacques Lacan, analyzing the construction of simulacral subjectivity in female protagonists of female-oriented micro-dramas across the three registers of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. It aims to examine the multidimensional dilemmas faced by female characters in asserting subjectivity and to explore how micro-dramas contribute to constructing their simulacra subjectivity.

Accordingly, this paper raises the following two research questions:

RQ1: How is simulacra subjectivity constructed in the female protagonists of female-oriented micro-dramas?

RQ2: What is the impact of simulacra subjectivity in female character construction on the development of female-oriented micro-dramas?

3. Research methodology

This study adopts textual analysis as its primary research method. Textual analysis allows for the investigation of deep structures within texts, uncovering underlying meanings, motivations, and effects that often elude ordinary reading. This approach is particularly effective in clarifying the strategies employed in constructing simulacral subjectivity for female protagonists in female-oriented micro-dramas. Dataeye, a leading domestic data monitoring platform specializing in the entertainment industry, offers a highly authoritative ranking of popular short dramas. The platform's rankings are typically calculated using a comprehensive set of metrics, including view counts, user interaction data (such as likes, comments, shares), and search indices. These multi-dimensional indicators provide an objective reflection of audience engagement and the diffusion range of top-performing micro-dramas during a given time period. Accordingly, this study selects the top ten female-oriented micro-dramas from Dataeye's Micro-Drama Popularity Index as the research sample. The data collection period spans from December 2024 to February 2025, encompassing ten dramas, with a total of 676 episodes and approximately 1,673 minutes of content.

Drawing upon Laura Mulvey's essay Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, which incorporates Lacan's concept of the "subject as lack," this study applies her theory of the male gaze as an analytical framework [17]. Specifically, it examines the construction of female protagonists in female-oriented micro-dramas through three dimensions of gaze: the gaze of the camera, the gaze of the audience, and the gaze between characters. As shown in Table 1, this analysis facilitates a deeper investigation into how simulacra subjectivity is constructed in these characters.

Table 1: Strategies for Constructing Female Protagonist Images in Micro-Dramas

Title	Plot Summary	Cinematographic Language	Character Image	Aesthetic Features
Sound of Promises	The female protagonist meets the male protagonist for the first time; she crouches down to tend to his wound.	In a wide shot, the male protagonist occupies two-thirds of the frame, while the female protagonist occupies one-third; the camera films her from his downward gaze, with a close-up of her worried expression.	Gentle and kind ticket seller	Delicate makeup, gentle and graceful appearance
Mafia's Tender Torture	The female protagonist is forced into a contractual romantic relationship with the male protagonist.	Medium shots and close-ups focus on her fearful expressions and gestures of resistance.	Low-status female college student	Rosy cheeks, blonde hair, blue eyes
Good Girl, Indeed	The male protagonist discovers that the female protagonist used him to escape her birth family.	The male protagonist appears in the upper half of the frame, and the female protagonist in the lower half.	Delicate yet defiant daughter from an aristocratic family	Innocent makeup, reddish eyes, slim figure
Pregnancy Protocol	The female protagonist is punished by a consort because she is pregnant with the emperor's heir.	Close-ups emphasize her pained expression and the blood beneath her.	Fragile and lowly palace maid	Pale makeup, frail body with a prominently pregnant belly
My Bestie Watched Me Get Spoiled by the Prince of Beijing	The female and male protagonists meet for the first time.	Filmed from the male protagonist's perspective, using medium shots to focus on the female protagonist's body.	Thrifty and virtuous blind date partner	Pure and elegant makeup, pronounced feminine features
Sound of Promises	The male protagonist forcefully abducts the female protagonist and carries her over his shoulder.	A combination of close-up, medium, and wide shots highlights the male protagonist's dominance; the female protagonist is not shown frontally.	Weak and submissive bride	Refined makeup, curvaceous figure
Sweet Pregnant Wife Pampered by Her Diamond Husband	The villain uses the female protagonist's son to threaten her into kneeling.	Close-ups of the female protagonist's eyes, the child's gaze, and the kneeling gesture.	Self-sacrificing mother	Elegant makeup, slender figure
My Bestie Watched Me Get Spoiled by the Prince of Beijing	The female protagonist is forced to drink; the male protagonist arrives to save her.	The full shot shows her half-kneeling on the ground, while the male protagonist approaches backlit.	Bullied delivery worker	Attractive figure, soft and delicate makeup

4. Research findings

4.1. The simulacral subjectivity of female protagonists in female-oriented micro-dramas

The "Three Orders Theory" (Les Trois Ordres) is a foundational component of Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic framework. It categorizes human subjectivity into three dimensions of experience: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real [18]. Lacan uses these registers to analyze the formation and mode of existence of the subject, ultimately proposing a subversive theory of the subject as "lack" (le manque), which aims to awaken self-awareness in subjects captivated by illusion [19]. Drawing on this triadic structure, this study analyzes the strategies used to construct simulacra subjectivity in female protagonists of female-oriented micro-dramas, along with the resultant implications, from the perspectives of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real.

4.2. The dilemma of imaginary identification in female roles: The self in the mirror

The Imaginary Order marks the origin of the subject's self-identification. In this stage, the individual forms an awareness of self through the mirror stage—a misrecognized and mimetic identification with an external image. The subject attempts to construct a sense of self through the gaze of the other, but this construction is inherently incomplete, as it is dependent on an external gaze.

4.2.1. Standardized aesthetic symbols under the male gaze

In female-oriented micro-dramas, the female protagonist is frequently viewed through the visual framing of the male protagonist —her beauty or fragility is emphasized through the male perspective. For instance, when describing a female protagonist, her value is often framed not by her inherent traits, but by how desirable or popular she is with others, often labeled a "universal heartthrob" (万人迷), thereby positioning her charm as externally validated. Under the longstanding dominance of patriarchal cultural norms, mainstream aesthetic standards and visual culture are typically constructed through the male gaze. Women, in turn, shape their self-image according to how men perceive them. As Laura Mulvey articulates in her male gaze theory, in cinema, a woman is the image, man is the bearer of the look. Together, they co-produce the encoding of desire, reducing women to passive objects being "gazed" [20]. This objectified portrayal to be "gazed at" is apparent in the refined makeup, idealized body shape, and delicate demeanor typically exhibited by female protagonists. Such visual coding exemplifies simulacral subjectivity within the Imaginary Order—where the woman becomes a symbolic image constructed for visual pleasure.

This simulacrum encourages women to divert attention away from public life and social engagement, instead focusing excessively on bodily maintenance and appearance, thereby relinquishing autonomy over their own bodies [21]. As one scholar notes, "micro-dramas create a fantasy realm that allows viewers to escape real-life struggles. Through identification and imagination, audiences enter this illusory space. During viewing, they resemble infants facing the 'mirror self,' overwhelmed by imaginary projections of the 'I.'" [22] The standardized traits—exquisite makeup, ideal body, and delicate femininity—are omnipresent in these micro-dramas (e.g., the image of a rosy-cheeked, blonde-haired, blue-eyed college student in Mafia's Tender Torture). Through frequent repetition, these images are internalized as personal ideals by viewers. From a social psychological perspective, this construction of the "mirror self" is essentially a process of self-objectification. In seeking recognition from a patriarchal society, women are compelled to adopt an illusory, symbolized image of femininity, and to internalize the external gaze as a self-evaluative standard. This process, in turn, fosters widespread body anxiety and appearance anxiety.

4.2.2. The gaze logic in cinematic language

As a mode of narrative expression, cinematic language reinforces the logic of the "gazed" through techniques such as high-angle shots, close-ups, and marginal framing. For example, in the 抢婚 (Bride kidnapping) scene in Sound of Promises (声声相许), the camera uses a wide shot to highlight the male protagonist's dominant posture, while the female protagonist is reduced to a "thing" being hoisted onto his shoulder, her facial expression entirely omitted from the frame. This compositional strategy directly echoes Laura Mulvey's "male gaze" theory, wherein the woman is transformed into a "visual object of consumption," her body becoming a symbolic vessel for male desire. In female-oriented micro-dramas, female protagonists are frequently positioned at the margins of the frame; when victimized, their faces are often tightly framed in close-ups to emphasize vulnerability. The camera commonly shoots women from a high angle and men from a low angle, visually implying that male characters "rescue" the female protagonists. This not only reinforces gender inequality on a visual level but also subtly conveys power asymmetries on a subconscious level.

By repeatedly encoding these visual signifiers, such filming techniques implant gendered power structures into the audience's cognitive schema. The oppressive visual effect produced by high-angle shots renders female characters as physically small, withdrawn, or dominated—as if cast into the "shadow zone" of power. Conversely, low-angle shots of male characters, with their elevated silhouettes and intensified features, construct them as towering "saviors." This visual disparity builds a cognitive habitus in the viewer's mind: an association of female weakness with male strength. Moreover, close-ups that focus repeatedly on women's suffering expressions effectively transform female pain into a spectacle of consumption. As audiences gaze upon these images, they unconsciously participate in the commodification of pain, while the absence or invisibility of male characters —often the perpetrators—diffuses the critical scrutiny of male violence. The female predicament is thus silently reframed as an established narrative fact that necessitates male intervention.

Marginal framing operates as a form of spatial discipline, quietly displacing female protagonists from the narrative center. When female characters are consistently positioned in the periphery of the frame or obscured by foreground objects, the central focal effect in visual psychology comes into play—viewers instinctively focus on the center of the screen, rendering the marginalized female characters mere decorative figures. This compositional strategy not only diminishes the narrative agency of female characters but also perpetuates the ideological notion that "a woman's value must be realized through the male gaze and male salvation." Over time, audiences unconsciously internalize a cognitive schema that assumes "women naturally depend on

men." In this way, the visual grammar of micro-dramas gradually solidifies and intensifies gendered power asymmetries, embedding them into the collective unconscious as a normalized form of gender bias.

4.3. The symbolic order dilemma of female characters — symbolized female images

Under prolonged aesthetic value conditioning, women fall into the dilemma of the symbolic order, where their authentic subjectivity is suppressed to conform to societal expectations. In Lacan's theory, the symbolic order is the realm where the subject connects with social order through language and systems of symbols. However, this linguistic system simultaneously controls the subject, leading to the repression and alienation of the subject's desires. Influenced by the traditional "male public sphere, female private sphere" ideology, patriarchal society expects women to embody the socially sanctioned roles of the virtuous wife and good mother.

4.3.1. The fixation of identity symbols

In female-oriented micro-dramas, symbolized female roles frequently recur. The identity of the "virtuous wife and good mother" effectively reinforces social discipline and limits the pursuit of authentic female subjectivity. The female protagonists in these micro-dramas lack exploration or pursuit of their genuine self-worth; instead, they bear content defined and controlled by male discourse, shaped into symbolized images by patriarchal narratives [23]. These female characters are heavily concentrated in symbolic roles such as "wife," "mother," and "rescued victim," with their personalities reduced to simplified traits like "gentle obedience," "selfless devotion," and "emotional dependence." For instance, the female protagonists in Pregnancy Protocol (好孕攻略) and Sweet Pregnant Wife (好孕甜妻) center their identities on "motherhood," with narratives revolving around "maintaining pregnancy—saving the child—gaining the husband's favor." Their individual value is entirely dependent on their familial roles. This setup essentially demotes women from "independent subjects" to "reproductive tools" and "emotional objects," a condition further reinforced through cinematic language. For example, in Pregnancy Protocol, when the female protagonist faces danger, the camera focuses on her pregnant belly, echoing Lacan's assertion that the symbolic order deprives the subject of authenticity.

4.3.2. Gender imbalance in discursive power

The construction of symbolic subjectivity internalizes patriarchal values as the audience's normative standards. Female characters' dialogue predominantly centers on emotional expression and passive responses, whereas male characters hold dominant discursive authority. This imbalance in discourse reflects an underlying power structure—women are stripped of the power to name and narrate within the symbolic order, their subjectivity entirely dissolved by patriarchal symbolic systems. When audiences internalize such role models as "normal," real-world gender inequalities become naturalized and legitimized. This media form not only disseminates patriarchal values but also serves as a tool sustaining the persistence of such structures. Female viewers unconsciously internalize the behaviors and values of these on-screen roles as norms they ought to follow. This internalization restricts women's awareness of their authentic needs and desires, making them more likely to adopt traditional gender roles and behaviors in real life. The influence extends beyond self-perception into daily life decisions, such as career choices and familial role divisions, thereby further consolidating the stability of patriarchal social structures.

4.4. The real order dilemma of female characters — singular female images

The Real Order, as an original and undifferentiated state of existence, precedes language and symbolization; it represents "an absolute resistance to symbolization" and cannot be fully assimilated into the symbolic order [24]. The passionate pursuit of romantic novels and love stories, in a certain sense, projects the frustrated self-identity experienced in social life onto an individual's dreamlike illusions [25].

Although the pleasurable sensation is accompanied by a profound desire for the satisfaction of desire, it often leads to a hedonistic state of addiction, a "painful pleasure or delight" that transcends the pleasure principle[26]. Female users of female-oriented micro-dramas experience the pleasurable sensation of fantasizing about romantic love with an ideal partner, which accompanies a deep desire to escape real-life difficulties. This fantasy represents an expression of "simulacral subjectivity" because it conceals their true desires, entrapping them in a false sense of fulfillment.

Firstly, micro-dramas rapidly engage female users by setting up stereotyped, simplified, and singular characters. Subsequently, these romantic narratives provide users with a false sense of satisfaction. Ultimately, the pleasurable sensation in these dramas is projected by women onto reality; however, this reality is not authentic but a simulacrum. This simulacrum obscures women's pursuit of subjectivity, constructing a simulacrum of subjectivity.

4.4.1. Stereotyped character construction

This singular image stands in stark contrast to the diversity and multidimensionality of women in the Real Order. Real women are diverse, with desires, emotions, and needs that cannot be simply categorized or defined. However, the repeated reinforcement of stereotypes leads women to unconsciously conform to such images, choosing stable jobs, avoiding competition, and emphasizing gentleness and kindness while neglecting the pursuit of their subjectivity in real life.

Within the framework of simulacra theory, female images in micro-dramas are no longer mere imitations or adaptations of real women but are symbol complexes generated by traffic algorithms and commercial logic. For example, the "revenge heroine" roles mass-produced on short video platforms, constructed through refined makeup, sharp dialogue, and exaggerated body language, visually symbolize "independent women" but reduce female independence to extreme emotional outbursts and material success. The "romantic-obsessed girl" image repeatedly emphasizes innocence and male dependence, reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes. These roles form a "simulacra matrix" driven by platform algorithms, with emotional motives and behavioral logic serving rapid narrative gratification, providing audiences with intense sensory stimulation and emotional compensation in a short time, yet eroding authentic female life struggles and value claims.

Moreover, the "hyperreal" quality of micro-dramas intensifies the implosion of female character images. Platform data directly feedback on the popularity of character symbols, prompting creators to further cater to users' stereotypical imaginations of women, forming a closed loop of "simulacrum production — data feedback — simulacrum reproduction." In this process, the complex life experiences of real women are simplified into quantifiable, replicable symbolic tags. The simulacra world of women constructed by micro-dramas, due to its high concentration of dramatic conflict and emotional tension, misleads viewers into mistaking it for the entirety of real women's lives. This simulacrum's consumption of reality not only hinders society's authentic understanding of female groups but may also exacerbate deep structural contradictions of gender inequality, concretely exemplifying Baudrillard's warning about the "simulacrum's dissolution of the real" within the realm of micro-dramas.

4.4.2. Emotional fantasies in female-oriented micro-dramas

The construction of simulacra subjectivity for female protagonists not only diminishes women's pursuit of self-subjectivity in reality but also reduces their awareness of gender issues through the pleasurable fantasies presented in micro-dramas. These dramas construct a simulacral utopia detached from reality through a romanticized filter. The narratives often revolve around emotionally driven needs such as "revenge gratification" and "sweet pet fantasy": workplace bullying is instantly resolved through the male protagonist's support; reproductive anxieties are dispelled by the "overbearing CEO protecting his wife" trope; the complexities of individual growth give way to "cheat code" style shortcut storytelling. Fundamentally, this narrative functions as an emotional compensation mechanism — the anxieties accumulated by female viewers under real-life pressures are transformed into dopamine-driven "instant gratification" within the plot. For example, in Sweet Pregnant Wife Pampered by Diamond Husband, the female protagonist's kneeling compromise in the face of a villain's threat, which should be a realistic reflection of her predicament, is processed as a tearjerking moment of "maternal radiance moving the male protagonist," thereby alienating survival anxieties into ingredients for a romantic narrative.

However, this simulacrum-based "pleasurable experience" perpetuates a vicious cycle of cognitive distortion. When high-frequency plotlines featuring "sweet spoil redemption" and "revenge slapdowns" become the primary modes through which audiences engage with gender narratives, the fictional simulacra world gradually supplants their understanding of real society. Female viewers may internalize the male savior role model as a realistic expectation, regarding the symbolic logic of "appearance equals value" as a survival principle, and even misconstrue "emotional dependence" as a pathway to female subjectivity. This cognitive misalignment not only obscures the genuine difficulties women face in areas such as employment discrimination, parenting pressures, and the glass ceiling but also weakens women's consciousness of exploring their diverse values through the repeated indoctrination of "simulacral subjectivity." When "being spoiled" becomes the ultimate narrative goal, pursuits of "independent personality" and "professional aspirations" quietly give way to the mimicry of symbolized roles.

5. Research conclusions

This study, through an interdisciplinary lens combining Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and Lacan's triadic framework of the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real, reveals the mechanisms by which female-oriented micro-dramas construct the simulacra subjectivity of female protagonists across these three dimensions. This construction is not merely a matter of artistic bias but the result of the collusion among media technology, consumerism, and patriarchal ideology, whose influence extends beyond textual boundaries to permeate the deep structures of social gender power.

5.1. Imaginary: Self-objectification under mirror gaze and the reconstruction of visual equality

At the level of the Imaginary, micro-dramas shape women as mirror objects to be "gazed" through the lens of the male gaze and standardized aesthetic symbols. This construction causes women to internalize external gazes as standards of self-worth, trapping them in a vicious cycle of "appearance anxiety — symbolic conformity." To break free from this predicament, creators must deconstruct visual hegemony and establish an egalitarian system of gaze. Creators need to abandon the inertia of "male perspective as the default perspective" and employ eye-level shots that present the female subject's full personality, avoiding the alienation of body parts as mere symbolic carriers. For example, in Mafia's Tender Torture, the overemphasis on close-ups of the female protagonist's "blond hair, blue eyes, and rosy complexion" could be reduced, instead using medium shots to portray her intellectual cultivation and independent thinking as a university student. Meanwhile, a "de-beautification" narrative mechanism should be established: when depicting working women or grassroots laborers, focus on their operational logic rather than their physical appearance. For instance, in My Bestie Watched Me Get Spoiled by the Prince of Beijing, the "delivery worker" protagonist can be presented with panoramic shots that emphasize the professionalism of her workflow rather than simply labeling her by her "attractive figure."

5.2. Symbolic: Regulation through symbolic identities and the return of subjective narrative authority

At the level of the Symbolic, patriarchy simplifies female roles into symbolic systems such as "virtuous wife and good mother" and "love-struck girl," reducing women to the roles of "wife," "mother," and "rescued," with dialogue predominantly characterized by emotional confession and passive responses, while discourse power remains monopolized by male characters. This symbolic narrative naturalizes gender inequality for the audience, reinforcing traditional norms that "women should center on family." To break this symbolic cage, micro-drama creation must empower women with multidimensional narrative roles. Creators should deconstruct the inherent framework of "women = family appendages" by incorporating themes such as workplace competition, social participation, and self-realization into scripts. For example, in Good Girl, Indeed, the "aristocratic family daughter" can demonstrate economic independence by actively contesting inheritance rights rather than relying on male characters to achieve the goal of "escaping the family of origin." At the same time, it is essential to strive for female discourse power, allowing female characters to voice themselves through active participation rather than passive response.

5.3. The real: Singular pleasure narratives and the awakening of the authentic subject

At the level of the Real, the "pleasure" narrative constructs a false sense of subject agency through the repetitive formula of "revenge — rescue — sweet romance," which essentially functions as an escapist resolution to real contradictions. The female protagonist's "revenge" often depends on the benevolence of male power, thus alienating "resisting patriarchy" into "consuming patriarchy," leading audiences to misconstrue "domineering control" as an expression of love. Frequent exposure to such narratives diminishes women's critical awareness of actual oppression, causing neglect of genuine issues such as workplace gender discrimination and inadequate reproductive policies. Micro-dramas need to shift the foundation of "pleasure" from "fantastical satisfaction" to "subjective accomplishment." For example, in revenge-themed plots, the trope of the "male protagonist's deus ex machina rescue" should be weakened, while emphasizing the female protagonist's achievement through long-term planning and resource integration. In sweet romance genres, plotlines should incorporate elements of "equal partnership," such as joint entrepreneurship and mutual confrontation of social challenges by both leads. Moreover, a "simulacrum–reality" contrast mechanism should be established by inserting real female interviews or social issue advocacy at the end of episodes, guiding audiences from "emotional immersion" toward "rational cognition," thus transforming fictional narratives into starting points for social reflection.

The popularity of micro-dramas is the product of technological empowerment and cultural consumption, and their social impact cannot be overlooked. When female characters become mere victims of traffic-driven logic, the media obstructs gender equality. Conversely, by constructing authentic and diverse images that help audiences understand themselves and the world, micro-dramas can become vital platforms for female subjectivity expression and catalysts for social change. As Simone de Beauvoir asserted in The Second Sex, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman," the media ought to become a more revolutionary force in the process of this "becoming."

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