Exploring Gender Perception and Agenda-Setting in the Chinese Variety Show *Your Face Sounds Familiar*

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Abstract: *Your Face Sounds Familiar* is a popular variety show in China. The show gets high ratings by inviting guests to imitation other celebrities. However, two gender-related-issues were continuesly discussed during the show. The first is that government banned show from cross-dressing for male artists, which was once the most attractive part of the show. The second issue is that the proportion of the number of guests varies significantly between the two genders. Most of the guests were male. By discussing the two gender-related-issues, the research aimed at investigating about how variety shows can effect on people's gender cognition issues, such as the cognition of the human gender, the attitude of cross-dressing, the tendency of teenagers' feminization, and the progress of gender equality. First hand data were collected during the internship experience in the program panel. Discussion was also based on interview of internal high-level-staffs and top comments of external audiences. The study finds that variety shows can indeed change people's gender cognition. The variety show sets agenda by attracting the audience to satisfy their curiosity. It makes the audience easier to accept the values spread by the program in an entertaining and implicit way. Such influence effects of audience cannot be achieved by traditional and serious program.

Keywords: Agenda Setting Theory, Chinese Variety Show, Gender Study

1. Introduction

Your face sounds familiar is a celebrity imitation show launched by Hunan Satellite TV in 2012. This experimental program became the best in the same batch of new programs. Once it was broadcast, it became the first in the country at the same time. It has been broadcast for five seasons. During the internship of Hunan Satellite TV to participate in this variety show, I discovered that the issue of gender cognition was involved. For example, the auditing producer stipulates that the program does not allow guests to pretend to be women, but allows women to pretend to be men. There is also an imbalance in the ratio of male and female guests. Faced with such restrictions, the program group has made many plans, such as allowing most female artists to act as male artists, retaining the unique features of the show. And in the aspect of male artist's stage show, it combines current hot spots and real-time continuous improvement and innovation to enhance the laughter. Following the influence of external controversy, the program team also tried to meet the audiences' satisfaction by letting only a well-known male artist play the role of a female artist. All kinds of phenomena reflect the current social phenomena [1].

From the perspective of social development, the controversy and influence brought about by issues such as gender cognition and differences are very large. For example, it has caused hot topic of recent years-to prevent the "feminization" of male adolescents. The phenomenon of "feminization" generally refers to men wear women's clothing or dress up. Most of them are young men with beautiful facial features, and women's clothing are suitable for them. This "feminization" phenomenon has not only appeared in recent years. In Chinese history, there have been celebrities who were sought after by men disguising themselves as women. In the Tang Dynasty, there was an opera singer Li Ling. Although he was over fifty, when he was dressed like a girl, he was shy and charming on the stage, he was called the "Masked Lady". But many people believe that the prevalence of "feminine wind" makes people lack "masculine", even there is a saying "save the boy" has appeared on the Internet, hoping to cultivate boys' masculinity, many training institutions have even launched courses for this purpose. Ancient Chinese society emphasized ethical principles, and men had a relatively high status in society. Many women often need to pretend to be men in order to make achievements. The most famous story is that Hua Mulan joined the army for her father. In the barracks, she can only appear in a male role. But even in ancient societies dominated by men, it was very tolerant for men who looked beautiful and loved women's clothing. Especially in the Sui and Tang Dynasties, the trend of pretending to be men disguised as women spread in society from top to bottom, which also shows the openness and tolerance of the society at that time.

On the contrary, this phenomenon in modern society has caused huge social controversy – Has "feminization" become a derogatory term? Why can't we respect everyone's character and temperament, and it has nothing to do with gender? In the past, the role identification of men was mainly focused on the strength and masculinity [2]. But as many people say, dressing is not the privilege of women. Since women can disguise themselves as men, why can't men disguise themselves as women and learn from the lifestyle of some women?

This kind of problem also appeared on the "Your face sounds familiar"-apart from the restriction of not being feminine, why does this show have the problem of imbalance between men and women? Faced with the huge influence of this variety show, why did the program team arrange this way? Will such issues bring social controversy? Various questions about gender differences and cognition aroused my strong desire for research. I plan to divide my research topics into internal and external directions as research materials for investigation and comparison, the internal staff act as a guide. What is the direction and purpose of their guidance? Do the results they lead achieved their goals? Will the external audience be affected by the content guided by the internal staff? What kind of views and attitudes will internal workers and external viewers adopt in the face of program restrictions? Will their views be consistent? In recent years, many people believe that the phenomenon of "feminization in society" has become more and more serious, and it spreads very quickly among teenagers, which has caused many people's concerns. Faced with the strong influence of "Your face sounds familiar": Will the imitation show of women's clothing really affects the gender perception of young audiences? How does the program groups conduct gender research in the face of such social controversy? Can variety shows really be gender-guided through TV and the Internet? These are my specific research questions.

In the past, the media images were serious, similar to the use of professional and standardized writing through news and newspapers and other media to describe social phenomena and guide the thinking of the masses [3]. In the era of media art, the content and form into TV program gradually conform to the aesthetic orientation of the audience. The program-based form has gradually transformed into an audience-centered model. TV integrates audition methods, and disseminates information about multiple elements such as images and sounds, which greatly reduces the requirements for audiences' education level, understanding ability, and age range. The TV variety shows such as 'Your face sounds familiar combines traditional techniques with post-modernism, so

that niche art forms such as opera and musicals can also be widely accepted by the audience through careful "packaging" [4]. At the same time, this type of innovative variety show also has an important gender cognitive impact on audiences of different ages because of target audiences. As the guidance of the audience, the program group has achieved the effect they want in the production process of designing content, post-editing and inviting guests. In this society where online social media is overwhelming, as a variety show, does it have the same effect as traditional media? For audiences and topic guidance that traditional media cannot control now, will variety shows have more control over them?

2.   Framing and Agenda Setting in variety shows

The theoretical perspective that used in the research are Agenda setting and Framing. Agenda setting refers to the idea that there is a strong correlation between the emphasis that mass media place on certain issues (eg, based on relative placement or amount of coverage) and the importance attributed to these issues by mass audiences. Framing differs significantly from these accessibility-based models. It is based on the assumption that how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences. For example, the other finding in previous research —the emerging body of research on framing, agenda setting, and priming has signaled the latest paradigm shift in political-communication research. Scholars of mass communication often suggest that the field passed through a series of paradigms in the 20th century [4]. The early hypodermic needle and magic-bullet models of the 1920s and 1930s were quickly replaced by a paradigm based on the much more theoretically and methodologically sophisticated ideas that Lazarsfeld and his colleagues in Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research put forth in The People's Choice and subsequent studies. Media effects were much more complex in nature than previously assumed, they argued, and depended heavily on people's homogenous networks and their selective [5][6].

In recent years, influenced by various factors such as the Internet, new media, and changes in the media environment, agenda setting theory has also undergone corresponding changes. In the era of new media, the subject of agenda setting is no longer confined to traditional mass media such as newspapers, radio, and television, but has become broader-audiences can also participate in agenda setting and guide public opinion; the intervention of multiple subjects makes The content of the topics is more diversified; the multiple interactions of topics between various media, etc., have further revealed the role of the agenda setting theory on the communication effect. For example, the application of agenda setting in the variety show "Sister Riding the Wind and Waves": 1. Innovate program topics to satisfy the curiosity psychology 2. Combine current affairs hotspots and language packaging topics 3. The topic setting subject is broad. 4. The coexistence of entertainment and positive energy [7]. First of all, the starting point of the program itself has strong positive energy: a group of over 30-year-old ladies who are not as good as young girls in group strength and endurance is going to have a "girl group dream", which is incredible but full of expectations. Secondly, when the audience sees the process of 30 30-year-old sisters bravely chasing dreams, breaking through difficulties and making positive choices, they will also reflect on their dreams and find the best way and option to realize themselves. This is the impact and purpose of the agenda setting for this variety show.

2.1.   Variety shows in China

Accompanied by the concept of imitation came into being, 'Your face sounds familiar' is the first celebrity imitation variety show in the Mainland, allowing celebrities to imitate celebrities, allowing classics to recast classics. In the process of variety imitating, The familiar image is re-interpreted in a brand-new face, which shows the other side of the star and gives the audience a refreshing visual

and auditory impact. The emergence of 'Your face sounds familiar' broke the fixed style dominated by mainland variety shows in recent years, dominated by talent shows and emotional stories. With novel program formats and innovative variety play methods, it successfully sat down in the same viewing period. In the research of two scholars, I have seen discussions about gender around the carnival performance of 'male disguise as female' on 'Your face sounds familiar'. A research conclusion is that this feature brings a new perspective, greatly enriches people's sensory experience, and makes our media art field show the characteristics of multiple open. The program's design usually combines Chinese and foreign cultures, travels through ancient times, and uses various elements to integrate the time dimension. The program uses exquisite costume props, gorgeous stage special effects, first-class makeup technology, powerful post-production team, and special effects technology to eliminate space boundaries. The host or guest will mix with multiple languages to form a linguistic carnival to narrow the psychological distance with the audience [1]. Other scholars believe that this form of performance is a ritual subversion of traditional masculinity, entertaining the public and gaining eyeball [6][7].

From the perspective of internal producers, I think the production goal of *Your face sounds familiar* is more biased towards the first scholar's research point of view-presenting the development tendency of postmodernism in TV programs and giving the audience an unprecedented sensory impact. It has become one of the critical signs of the diversification of television culture today. Regardless of the recording content or the form of the show, the show has prominent characteristics of postmodernism. The essence of "Variety" lies in imitation. The guests invited by the program will choose another celebrity to imitate. The imitation is not limited to clothing and modeling, from acting to performances, expressions when singing, and decorations. They are all replicated vividly. However, the show is not limited to imitation. Most of the works presented on the stage are adaptations of original works or second creations. In addition to imitation, they have new characteristics to give the audience a sense of freshness. Nowadays, the audience's aesthetic standards for media art are constantly improving. Blind imitation and jokes can only attract the eyeballs of some audience a while. This kind of post-modernist program has broken the audience's previous recognition to a certain extent. "Variety" utilizes a variety of multi-element cultural types, audiences' aesthetic preferences, and value orientations, playing fierce collisions all the time. This kind of influence is very prominent in the field of Chinese TV entertainment.

2.2. Media's discussion of gender and what impact will it have on society

The media plays an essential role in promoting gender equality in social development. Because of its publicity and influence, it has the function of constructing a gender model. Gender sensitivity in media reports can be reflected in challenging traditional gender stereotypes, acknowledging that men and women are equally active, and paying attention to issues such as gender equality. Our current living environment is deeply influenced by media culture, and "gender culture" is also an essential branch of media culture. From traditional media to new media, from mass media to self-media, all media types show the gender relations in the current society in a unique way. New media has shown its special role in disseminating gender equality concepts and online organization of gender equality rights, but it also offers different opinions on whether the current social culture has proper gender awareness. The media's discussion of gender will also have a considerable impact on society. For example, the self-media environment has a polarizing phenomenon that strongly promotes and strongly hinders the spread of "gender issues." According to a scholar's research, the self-media environment has more obvious commercial attributes than other media environments.

On the one hand, self-media provides a platform for individuals to speak up, and it also provides a cheap promotion channel for commercial activities. According to survey statistics, nearly half of the netizens in my country are women. The prerequisite to please female consumers is to cater to the

values or concerns of female consumers. By seizing the "vulnerable psychology" of female groups, using the equal values of "female culture", or promoting positive themes, or consuming adverse events, it has become a common method for women's self-media platforms [8]. Another influence in our research that has generated considerable controversy in the society-about the "feminization" of male artists. A scholar believes that social constructivism believes that the formation of the "essential characteristics" of things results from the social acquisition. Therefore, the appearance of the feminine temperament and common cognition of male artists is a combination of history, society, culture, and media in time and space. The result of the co-construction of factors. From the historical development and evolution, he looked at the change of context from the ancient male sex to the feminization of male artists and believed that this change also brought about the similarities and differences of various phenomena. At the same time, this "feminization" phenomenon has affected the discourse debate, image review, self-discipline, and social identity reshaping of relevant stakeholders and extended the aesthetic boundaries of the public. Simultaneously, it dilutes the audience's cultural belonging and weakens the ability of my country's audiovisual cultural products to be recognized domestically and internationally. For example, the endorsement of feminine idols is affected by the geographical preference of capital and reshapes the urban cultural landscape. These phenomena have deepened the class consolidation of urban cognition among young people [8].

Both of these influences reflect the media's discussion of gender and the tremendous impact on society. And the topic I studied and the second scholar's study have similarities in the same way. This is because of the influence of the phenomenon of idol feminization in this scholar's research. This variety show is also due to various sensitive topics in society-to prevent the "feminization" of young people, men should be "masculine." The program reviewers still have concerns about the "feminization" that will bring about gender cognition barriers to young people and the state's mandate to prevent young people's "feminization", and they have to cancel the feature link of "male disguise as women". This is undoubtedly in line with the characteristics of diversification and openness have caused massive conflicts. But at the same time, because of the huge influence of the media's intense discussion of gender, this variety show is also constantly revising the program's content because of the trend of the media and the attitude of the public.

3. Conclusion

Through a series of analysis, research and summary, it can be seen that cross-dressing impersonation shows will not have an impact on the gender cognition of teenage audiences. On the contrary, from the perspective of external audiences, cross-dressing impersonation shows, the social trend and comments are positive and inclusive. It can be seen that variety shows can be guided by gender through TV and Internet. In this society flooded with online social media, as a variety show with an audience, *Your face sounds familiar* will be more influential and effective than traditional media. In the process of watching variety shows, the masses will be imperceptibly guided by the content expressed by the programs in a relaxed and pleasant state. It is precisely because of the "audience" advantage of variety shows that they are more capable of controlling audience groups and topic guidance that traditional media cannot control at present.

In the production process of the "cross-dressing" imitation show, the program group by inviting the male guests who have strong imitation experience and have won praise for dressing up as women before, and in the design of the program content, it focuses on avoiding to make fun of women, but restoring some classic images of women, imitating a manner and rhyme, and making clear that the direction and state of the program are correct, so as to guide the masses. Avoid controversial and sensitive topics that involve "sexism" and "insulting women."

Inside staff are negative about the cross-dressing ban, saying it deprives the show of its most distinctive features and forces the show to focus on content design. In response to the social

controversy caused by the ban on men dressing up as women after two episodes, the program chose to try its best to recover the features of men dressing up as women. Instead of abandoning such impersonations, the program tried its best to declare such content under the premise of meeting the censorship standards.

Compared to the inside, the outside public will not focus on the ban, but more on the nature of the show. From the audience's point of view, they will notice the disappearance of 'cross-dressing' content and question the show crew. Judging from the data and comments on Weibo, after the program resumed "cross-dressing", the public's attitude has obviously changed from negative to positive. It can be seen that the outside world shows a positive direction towards the phenomenon of "cross-dressing". The phenom enon of "men dressing up as women" is more likely to cause controversy in the outside world. The majority of the audience's attention and discussion focus on such sensitive issues as "gender discrimination" and "gender equality", while the majority of the audience still hold strong doubts and criticisms.

This study can let the public know the real production content behind the scenes of the TV program and feel whether the internal and external are consistent. How to guide variety shows? Making use of agenda setting -- innovating program topics to satisfy the audience's curiosity. Combine current affairs hot spots and language packaging issues. The subject of the topic setting is broad.

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