

Qualitative Analysis of Female Texts in Chinese Stand-up Comedy

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Abstract: In the digital era, the rapid development of digital media promotes the widespread transmission of feminist viewpoints within the Chinese social context, despite the stringent regulations imposed on feminist activities by the authorities. Like Rock & Roast, stand-up comedy has become an effective medium for articulating females appeals and critiquing gender inequalities in China. Through methods of textual analysis and critical discourse analysis, this essay explores different kinds of females texts in Chinese stand-up comedy, different genres of feminism that these texts reflected, as well as male audiences' attitudes towards those various types of females texts. This paper finds that the females texts offer different perspectives, with YangLi's texts particularly challenging hegemonic masculinity. As a result, her texts elicit strong resistance from male audiences, as they confront and question traditional gender power dynamics and norms. However, as a whole, the females texts created by female comedians in Chinese stand-up comedy show the features of popular feminism, which distinguishes from true feminism due to their failing to unveil the structural inequalities and oppression in social and cultural contexts.

Keywords: stand-up comedy, masculinity, traditional gender norms and dynamics

1. Introduction

During the promotion of socialist production, the state-controlled media constructed females' images by emphasizing their responsibilities and contributions to socialist production. This led to the obliteration of natural gender differences between men and women, resulting in the removal of femininity and the adoption of masculine traits based on male standards and norms. While this elevated women's social status and economic capabilities, which also led to the oppression of women, particularly in the domestic sphere [1]. Since the era of reform and opening up, traditional femininity has revived in portraying females. However, this has also led to an undue emphasis on feminization, which has resulted in the resurgence of patriarchal culture. At the same time, modern Chinese feminism emerged during the era of radical socialist reform and strove for finding its path between the Chinese political regime and cultural environment and the hegemony of Western feminist discourse [2].

Regardless of whether women were expected to improve their skills to contribute to socialist development or were confined to the roles of virtuous wives and mothers at home, the dominant ideology of China has consistently strengthened gender norms and reinforced females social roles and images by the government's economic development goals and the maintenance of social order

[3]. The feminist activist movements, which challenge patriarchal conventions and advocate for female empowerment and rights, have faced severe restrictions from the state. Therefore, digital feminism became popular in the digital age. Female texts from the Chinese stand-up comedy shows, Rock&Roast, a widely consumed form of expression on digital platforms, considerably increase the visibility of discussion about feminism and enlarge the living space for digital feminism in China [4]. Both the increased exposure to feminism and the prevalence of deep-rooted prejudice from men against feminism and women are prominent features of digital media in China [5]. By adopting methods of textual analysis and critical discourse analysis, this essay will argue the different perspectives that female texts offer. This paper can show the different feminism genres reflected in females texts in Chinese stand-up comedy and analyze the effects as well as limitations of texts contents on feminism development in China through observing texts' delivery and male attitudes.

2. Research Questions

This essay shed light on the females texts in Chinese stand-up comedy, different feminism genres of them, their influences on Chinese feminism development and males audiences' attitudes towards them. This passage brings about three research questions, which are elaborated below.

RQ.1 What are the different perspectives of the females discourses behind different kinds of females texts in Chinese stand-up comedy?

RQ.2 What are the males attitudes towards different females texts and reasons?

RQ.3 What are different feminism genres reflected in females texts and their influences on Chinese feminism development?

The females texts are all from Rock&Roast Stand-up Comedy Shows Season 3-5 and males comments that can show attitudes are all from social media Douban and Weibo.

3. Textual Analysis for Different Kinds of Females Texts in Chinese Stand-up Comedy

3.1. Siwen - Highlighting Females' Independence from the Self-empowerment Perspective

The typical comedy tactic Siwen employed when discussing female empowerment is reversing the traditional subject-object positions in the gender hierarchy [6]. In traditional gender norms, females have been portrayed as objects that passively receive assessments of appearance and are financially reliant on males. However, in Siwen's texts, she delivered the unorthodox gender opinion that females should prioritize enhancing their economic capacities over focusing on attractiveness of appearance [7]. She depicted a scenario in real life where she possesses enough security when she and her husband have conflicts. Her ownership of the house made the power dynamic between her and her husband entirely deviating from the common heterosexual gender dynamics in most marriages when they have conflicts [7].

However, this narrative angle falls short of promoting true gender equity and female empowerment because of its meritocratic and narrow neoliberal perspective. In fact, gender inequalities actually set large obstacles for females' financial independence, but the realization of individual financial independence cannot directly reduce gender inequalities such as gender prejudices and the objectification of women [8]. On the one hand, such expression has solely stressed the significance of female financial independence in advancing female status, but overlooked other aspects of inequalities women suffered from. This leads to the failure to carry out structural interrogations, examinations, and attributions of male privilege in the present gender hierarchy, as well as subverting existing hegemonic male power structures [9]. On the other hand, this expression places the burden of realizing financial independence completely on females' own excellence without exposing the essence of societal and cultural restraints on female financial ability.

3.2. XiaoLu - Intensifying Females Stereotypes with Self-exclusion Perspective

XiaoLu's performance is another kind of typical female text that appears to make appropriate feminism claims but delivers it from a self-exclusion perspective, resulting in the intensification of existing stereotypes and oppression of women. On the one hand, although her texts expressed opposition to females' anxieties about aging and appearance, she penetrates the ideas by parodying and mocking anxious women themselves. Such expression defined downtrodden females' role as the target mocked by men and so-called level-headed women like herself. This failed to expose and blame the origin of female anxieties, which is the male gaze, and abode by the conventional joking relationship under patriarchal culture, in which females have always been gazed at and joked at by males. On the one hand, while many female comedians also deliver feminism values through mocking women, they usually add a self-deprecation perspective and output clear criticisms for social gender norms as the delivery strategy, which may achieve great effects on evoking female audiences' resonances and promoting feminism consciousness awakening [10]. However, XiaoLu did not express herself with a gesture of self-deprecation. She performed in a nonsexual voice rather than a strong female identity that has been stuck in stereotypes. She dressed in business casual and with short hair [11]. She presents herself as a confident and superior figure by listing her titles for audiences such as "confident candidate for the final champion," which models her screen image as the representative of successful and robust women [12]. The appreciable distinction between her image and traditional femininity also means her unification with traditional hegemonic masculinity [13].

3.3. Yang Li - Gazing at Hegemonic Masculinity with "Mansplaining" Perspective

YangLi's female texts provided revelations about male unconscious privileges and sharp gazes at hegemonic masculinity from the "mansplaining" perspective [14]. In her performance, Yang mocks masculinity by raising the question sarcastically, 'Why does he seem so average but so confident?' [15], and promoted the term "puxinnan" (a summary of "average but confident men") to be the Internet buzzword in China in 2020 [14]. Yang strategically chose the topic of the phenomenon that females have suffered from for a long time and performed in an everyday-life style to employ the feminist critique. Initially, she chose male chauvinism as the topic, offering a kind of female gaze at male. Then Yang performed by sharing her own real-life experiences to show the feelings many women have when faced with toxic masculinities or oppression males take for granted in China. This can resonate with a wide female audience. Additionally, she employed the rhetorical strategy of combining mocking males with self-deprecation as well as acknowledgement with marriage and love, which can ensure the safety of her expression under the official ideologies in China but is quite explicit and combative for masculinity at the same time [16]. Through depicting males defects in character, Yang's texts actually aligned with Molière's argument of providing powerful critiques of vices to inspire change [6].

4. Analysis for Males and Females Audiences' Attitudes

4.1. Different Males Attitudes towards Females Texts

By analyzing the textual characteristics of male audiences' feedback for female texts in stand-up comedy collected from Chinese social media, we can conclude that they show an attitude of calm, even acknowledgement for the first two kinds of texts, but strong anger for Yang's texts [17]. They resist against Yang's performances and extinguish her texts' rationality by employing discourse strategies of denying the existence of gender inequalities and female dilemmas in true life [14], interpreting Yang's intention as provoking gender antagonism to make money maliciously, and connecting Yang's image with negative labels to stigmatize her and her texts [18].

4.2. Male's Different Attitudes towards Yang's Texts compared with others

Firstly, Yang's female texts adopted "mansplaining" discourse strategies, but the other two kinds of female texts did not. In the Western feminism field, there has long been a conception called "mansplaining," which indicates mocking of men who are knee-deep in giving their condescending opinions on everything [19]. Only Yang's female texts also did it. Siwen's and XiaoLu's texts both failed to do it. Advocating for females better economic ability to elevate female status and restructure traditional gender dynamics in heterosexual marriage, or joking about female anxieties, both failed to skewer over males' hegemonic superiority and masculinity to make males feel challenged and embarrassed to change the unequal gender power relationship [20].

5. Different Feminism Genres behind Females Texts and Their Influences

Due to the supervision of official ideologies and the obsession with online popularity in the contemporary digital age in China, the visibility of most popular feminism precisely stems from their failure to unveil and challenge the structural gender inequalities. Commodity feminism and entrepreneurial feminism are the main genres of popular feminism, rather than radical feminism in the digital media age. Therefore, the increased visibility of popular feminism is a kind of erosion of true feminism. The female texts in Chinese stand-up comedy fail to criticize post-feminism values in the context of neoliberalism, which emphasizes females' economic success, self-empowerment through consumption behavior, and self-entrepreneurship. Instead, the values of entrepreneurial feminism can be reflected in some female texts, such as Xiaolu's and Siwen's, and commodity feminism is also embodied in Yang's texts.

To increase its visibility in the public sphere, digital feminism requires the platform of digital media, including its audience, market, and circulation capabilities supported by the neoliberal capitalist background [21]. Considering the requirements of ensuring the safety of contents and the heavy reliance on platform capitalism, the digital feminism that can be popular, which is called popular feminism, usually avoids challenging institutional and structural inequalities in gender.

On the one hand, the entertainment industry has always been strictly regulated by censorship in China to ensure their works steer clear of conflicts with official ideologies. Therefore, the heavy dependence on "platform capitalism" of popular feminism inevitably leads to the compromise or flattening of contents. In these female texts, the contents of offending or complaining about gender inequalities have been operating within the confines set by the ruling elite, which indicates a gesture of gentle and non-confrontational representation [22]. To adhere to ideological authorities, female stand-up comedy texts in China commonly agree with traditional values in terms of marriage and procreation. They may be sarcastic about the difficulty of seeking out ideal men as partners or question societal common beauty standards under the male gaze, rather than denying the value of marriage and bearing. They tend to advocate for females' independence in economics and thoughts rather than pointing out the structural oppression of women.

On the other hand, commodity feminism is also a kind of typical popular feminism shown in female texts in Chinese stand-up comedy, which indicates advertisers' attempts to appropriate feminism discourse as labels that can be attached to products or services to make feminism values the tool to gain commercial profits [23]. Commodity feminism provides women with a kind of delusion of being empowered to rebel against inequalities. However, their rebellion is actually depoliticized consumerism behavior, losing the origins of feminism, which acts as a critique of structural oppression and inequalities, and failing to threaten the hegemony of patriarchy or capitalism [24]. The female texts in Chinese stand-up comedy always tend to adhere to the mainstream commercial logic of online shows in digital media by actively integrating sponsorship into their performances. Female stand-up comedians even regard gaining advertisements as strong proof of their female

strength, status, and success. For example, in Yang's texts, she talked about the great satisfaction of being sponsored by well-known companies, which also became popular female self-empowerment discourse.

6. Conclusion

Stand-up performances have emerged as important channels for female comedians to voice for female empowerment and female audiences attract public attention on feminism in China. Among all kinds of females texts, Yang's texts suffered from the fiercest resistances from male audiences due to their "mansplaining" perspective, which openly exposed and challenged dominant masculinity. This threatened the privileges that males currently enjoy in the gender power structure. Nevertheless, the stringent censorship imposed by official ideology and the dominant commercial capital logic exert a substantial effect on the formation and spread of gender discourses. With these constraints, the texts produced by stand-up comedians can be categorized as popular feminism, which does not effectively address the underlying gender inequities in society. This essay has some limitations on analysis perspectives. The analysis focused solely on the opinions of males, neglecting to examine the female audiences' attitudes towards different females texts in stand-up comedy. The criterion of the true feminism has not reached agreement even within females. On the one hand, the public discussions among females audiences caused by female texts exhibited a tone that was more aggressive, radical, and snarkier compared with that of females texts themselves. On the other hand, because of males stigmatization of feminism as a movement seeking privileges, the phenomenon that some female being afraid of feminist identity is quite wide. Some female audiences of stand-up comedy adopt a stance aligned with male audience members to critique Yang's material, arguing that they advocate for gender equality without subscribing to irrational or radical feminism. The phenomenon and reasons are also worth analyzing, which can be researched in further studies.

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