

A Critical Assessment of the Construction of the Image of Middle-aged Women in the Chinese Variety Show Sisters Who Make Waves

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Abstract: With the progress of society and the development of education, the status of women has gradually risen. However, under the patriarchal aesthetic model, middle-aged women are still forced to accept the judgement of patriarchy and gradually lose their "selves". This paper aims to critically assess the image of middle-aged women in the Chinese reality TV variety show *Sisters Who Make Waves* to emphasise that women of different ages have the same subjective consciousness and voice on TV and in the media, and to call on middle-aged women to break away from the shackles of age, to show their self-confidence and maturity, as well as to reflect on the role of the media in the promotion of women's development and gender equality.

Keywords: Women, Age anxiety, Variety Show

1. Introduction

Patriarchy, the basic structure of modern society, permeates all corners of social organisation and is characterised by the institutionalisation of male authority over women and children within the family unit [1]. Women have, therefore, long been seen as subordinate to men, as objects of "domination," "management," and "gaze." With the advent of globalisation and information technology, the unequal relationship between the sexes seems to have taken a turn for the better: globalisation has integrated women, who were once dependent on men, into the marketplace and made them part of the family economy. The breadwinner is no longer the sole responsibility of men, and women have more say and autonomy in the household. With increased access to education and media, women's identities are becoming more diverse and differentiated according to their responsibilities at each age. Of course, the fact that women are paid for their work does not fundamentally change their position in the family and society. Middle-aged women over thirty, who have more responsibilities under patriarchy, are therefore more of a concern than the young women who are still in the early stages of their lives. They face the realities of interpersonal relationships between spouses, the work and lives of family members, economic ties between family members, household chores, child care, sexuality, and emotional support [1]. They are obliged to play many roles simultaneously, varying depending on daily life circumstances. Hall also clarifies that individual identity is "progressively fragmented in contemporary times" and is "a multiplicity of constructions based on many different and often intersecting and opposing discourses, practices, and positions [2]. They are part of a revolutionary

process of historicisation and are constantly in the process of change and transformation". They are forming families, raising offspring, and developing careers. The multiplicity of responsibilities embedded in multiple identities places middle-aged women in a more complex and repressive social context, passively subject to the "panoramic view" of patriarchal society.

Under the limits of the patriarchal aesthetic paradigm, television and online programmes emphasise young women's athletic performance and discourse. In this state of general "aphasia", "middle-aged women are forced to accept patriarchal aesthetic disciplines, such as keeping young, fit, and beautiful. They are forced to look to young women to create their own "myth of agelessness." The pursuit of fantasy selves, such as the "frozen beauty," is the product of the aesthetic framework of the patriarchal gaze and the collusion of consumerism. In the process of self-consciousness, self-doubt, and self-denial, the middle-aged woman's "self" is gradually alienated and distorted, and the spiritual world she once relied on and constructed becomes unsustainable, eventually leading to the state of "scarcity" that Simone Veil warns against. According to Veil, the human soul has various needs, but the soul is often in a state of unfulfilled deprivation. The "scarcity of the soul" emphasises not only the self-repression caused by the difficulty of satisfying spiritual needs but also the fact that it continues to place middle-aged women in a cycle of identity anxiety that is difficult to break away from. The social construction of traditional male and female gender identities seems to have disappeared in this new era, where modern people look for diversity and individuality. So rather than "who we are" and "where we come from," it is "what we might become," "how we have been behaving," and "what pressures we are likely to exert on how we present ourselves" [2]. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey introduced the on-camera "gaze" concept in her article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* and divided it into three types: the camera, the character, and the audience [3]. She contends that mainstream film has always favoured men and that sensual pleasure has always influenced the structure of men watching and women being observed, in which female viewers identify with either the active male character or the sacrificial female protagonist.

Furthermore, later, her theory was called excessive male determinism, to which she reflected that she did ignore the changes in the script and the audience [4]. Postmodern feminist theories of film and television are more concerned with "Who is creating? For whom? Who is watching?" and so on [5]. In recent years, various female-themed films, TV dramas, and variety shows have explored this issue and given their perspectives. However, they are either "old wine in new bottles" and challenging to break away from traditional perspectives or too original and out of touch with real life. In the context of modernity, the reality show *Sisters Who Make Waves*, which focuses on women in their 30s, combines the richness and representativeness of the contestants with the authenticity of their daily practice, bringing a new opportunity to break the ice on the identity of middle-aged women.

2. Content

Sisters Who Make Waves, a phenomenal female variety show in 2020, focuses on selecting 30 high-profile female artists aged 30+ to compete in teams, with the final 5 becoming a female group. The entire season incorporates various current show formats such as interviews, competitions, nurturing categories, and authentic experiences. Hot topics are constantly being discussed, and the competition rules change in various ways in each episode, continuing to catch the audience's attention.

From a gender perspective, the presence and dominance of "sisters" as middle-aged women in variety shows are a result of them finally being "seen." In traditional film and television narratives, male characters have a more comprehensive range of subjects to choose from, being present from adolescence to middle age to old age. Their social roles and values are most recognised. In contrast, the options available for female characters are narrower, and apart from youthful themes, women in adulthood have minimal scope to play in the proper drama. As a result, when middle-aged female entertainers have a voice, their discursive power overflows. The energy squeezed out of them in film

and TV dramas is released in large numbers into variety shows. In the reality shows in which they participate, the narratives that the show's organisers create are based on their characteristics, allowing them to present their full range of personas, images, personalities, relationships, and even values. At the same time, *Sisters Who Make Waves* has a well-received rule: the 500 live judges recruited by the show are all women. It brings the female audience to the forefront and formally removes the "male gaze." From a feminist perspective, the "male gaze" is a heteronormative male "look" at women, who are positioned as "objects" of their desire. They are sexualised, objectified, and viewed. Having women as judges meant that women were declared to be more understanding of femininity, more appreciative of women, and more willing to help women. A large female audience quickly buys into this, spreading the word online and discussing it. It is this residual energy that has contributed to the explosion of the "sister" reality show and its active audience.

The figures are the most three-dimensional presentation of the image and represent a wealth of symbolism. All 30 sisters have unique personas in the programme, such as Yuqi Zhang, who made viewers feel the contrast before and after the programme started, and Jing Ning, the "big sister" of the team. These are the unique character traits of the sisters. Each member's interview is summarised in a short video, equivalent to a personal business card, showing the characteristics of each of the 30 sisters and their irreplaceability. Each character's different yet three-dimensional personalities and the words that represent their relaunch allow the female audience to empathise with their situations. The character traits of the 30 sisters add dimension and substance to the programme's entire character symbol system.

In the *Sisters Who Make Waves*, women are the main characters, while men, including Xiaoming Huang, dance teacher Kenn and music teacher Zhao Zhao, become the "others." Xiaoming Huang is referred to as the "sister guardian," and the audience refers to the show as "Ming's Adventures." These symbols do not help to break female stereotypes but rather give the audience the impression that the sisters are "picky" and create a negative image. As a result of a misunderstanding between the choreographer and the members, the dancing instructor wept immediately in front of Serenity and the others during the performance, breaking the notion that "a man should not weep easily." The sisters hugged him and comforted him, becoming his protector instead. The sisters also give their opinions on the singing on stage. As participants in the show, the women do not just follow all the rules but are also objective in giving their own ideas. At the same time, the teachers respect the sisters' advice and selflessly put themselves in their shoes to find their confident beauty.

Sisters Who Make Waves is a variety show with women as the primary audience group. It adopts the operation format and value orientation that meet the aesthetic needs of women nowadays, with the theme of "women are not afraid of age and show their true personality." It rides on the "high-speed train" of the integrated media era. "In the diverse media discourse space, female images such as "X Infinite Possibilities" and "True Sister" are constructed, breaking the traditional male perspective on the image of women, allowing women's subject consciousness and discourse rights to be fully expressed. The programme also promotes the development of women's values. At the same time, the programme reflects the confusion of contemporary older women from multiple perspectives, finding realistic "role models" for the "30+" group of women who are at a "loss" in terms of discourse space, the transmission of values, and independent personality. The programme is a voice and advocates for the new generation of women in terms of discourse, the transmission of values, and independent personality. In *Rethinking the Public Sphere*, Nancy Frazer writes that the public sphere, once seen as irrelevant and inclusive of social status, is, in fact, exclusive of women and the lower strata of society [6]. The need for more space for women's expression in conventional society, controlled by the masculine discourse system, has constrained women's independent entity and significance, making it harder for them to acquire more public resources to realise their life's worth. *Sisters Who Make Waves* chooses iconic women to be guests on the show so that they can find "role

models" for women in real life. It gives them a more intuitive image of themselves, thus gaining a sense of female identity and finding emotional resonance in the programme. For example, on the night of the *Sisters Who Make Waves* show's inauguration, Yuqi Zhang gave this inaugural speech: "Firstly, independent women have to have the ability to dominate time, and secondly, we have to have the ability to say no to violence and fists, because not everyone's marriage is so happy and perfect. We also have to have the ability to put our talents on display and tell people who judge women by their looks that "intelligence and beauty go hand in hand." I also have to have a particularly independent acumen and judgement". The show has shown the world the power of women and their courage to break through barriers and prejudices and unleash their true selves.

During the youthful culture of society, for the first time, *Sisters Who Make Waves* proposes to break down age boundaries compared to women's variety shows of the past. The group of middle-aged women, previously lost in translation, is prominently presented to the public. Under everyone's expectations of independent and mature middle-aged women, the captivating performances and genuine expressions of the female guests in the show display femininity and beauty that has nothing to do with age. *Sisters Who Make Waves* not only encourages middle-aged female artists to break free from the shackles of age and showcase the confidence, independence, and maturity of middle-aged women but also draws attention to the long-ignored issues of women's age and rights. To a certain extent, *Sisters Who Make Waves* is an attempt to break down society's ageism towards women and give a voice to middle-aged women. Specifically, by giving the "30+" women on the show the role of "sister," the renaming is significant. In the ageist discourse of youthfulness and misogyny in society, the emergence of the term "sister" has given women the confidence and courage to do just that. In the name of "Sisters who ride the waves" the programme is a name for the middle generation of female artists at a bottleneck. The 30 women chosen for the show range in age from 30 to 52 and represent a variety of occupations; some are already married and have children, while others are still single at age 40. In short, all are in an age crisis. In the opening interview of the programme, all 30 sisters give their ages and the time of their debut. Here, age is not a sore point that makes women feel anxious, but it has given them strength and charm through time. The sisters' confessions also express the heartfelt sentiments of women over 30, with 50-year-old Lydia Chung saying: "I do not want to think they think 20 will win. Why would 20 win? I think age is a number, and my state of mind will always be just 22." When explicitly asked about her age, the 38-year-old Qian Wan said bluntly, "Every girl at every age has her charm. Why should I deny myself? I have reached my prime." Here, age is no longer a taboo subject. Instead, "30+" is given the beauty of maturity, confidence, independence, and sensuality. Their words have a strong emotional resonance with the corresponding audience, leading them to identify with themselves, showing them how confident they still are, and conveying their determination to strive and try.

However, there are still problems with the show. The first is the hidden problem behind the ultra-realistic persona. The sisters in the show enter with their persona, showing an accurate self-image different from their previous on-screen counterparts. The women's very different personalities enhance the audience's viewing experience and are an essential factor that makes the show so hot. Many viewers watch the show because they look forward to the conflict and drama in the show rather than the casting session set up by the show mechanism itself. However, it is worth noting that the "real" persona of the sisters is to show the real and create a sense of reality, a mimicry rather than the real itself. Jean Baudrillard mentions that mimesis has neither original nor reference and that in the infinite reproduction and multiplication, the boundary between the original and the copy, between the real and the false, is dissolved, and even this mimesis is more accurate than the real, the "real" beyond the real [7]. The programme is a clever use of reality TV narratives that allows viewers to indulge in the realism that comes with a pseudo-persona while watching the programme, satisfying the desire for voyeurism. The way the show is presented also reflects that our ways of understanding and cultural

perceptions are still outside the box and that self-interpretations and expectations of the female figure are still polarised. The image of women should be diverse and concrete in the true sense of the word rather than just an empty shell of "attitude," "bomb," and "valiant." There are still some traditional ideas of gender in the show. For example, after the first meeting, the first thing everyone does is compliment each other on their appearance. However, each sister has a certain status and strength in her industry. However, the pleasantries of meeting each other are still bound to female topics, less from business competence, and not creating more value in the conversation. As the show continues, the content becomes increasingly schematic, with the characters not showing as much of their value as they did in the early stages. In the later stages, as the show's content progressed, the show became more "combustible." It did not focus too much on each person's unique characteristics, resulting in the sisters' personalities being overlooked.

Second, the program's universality has yet to be evaluated. The title of the programme is derived from the symbolic meaning of "riding the waves," which expresses the qualities of "30+" women overcoming obstacles, bursting through, and shattering preconceived notions. However, the participating sisters are not average ladies, but rather celebrities with a certain degree of social capital. In terms of economic conditions and other resources, they are significantly better off than regular women, allowing the participating sisters to compete with the societal rules indicated by the programme team and the evaluating criteria represented by the judges.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has critically evaluated *Sisters Who Make Waves*'s portrayal of middle-aged women. This study allows us to have a deeper reflection and a new understanding of contemporary women's age anxiety. *Sisters Who Make Waves*'s theme of "female self-identity" and "not being frightened of aging" penetrates the show's topicality and enters viewers' hearts through an entertaining exterior. In addition, there has been much conversation on social media concerning the criteria for evaluating women's image, the influence of women's discourse, and the definition of women's self-worth. In terms of relevance and social influence, *Sister* is unquestionably a reality show success. Nevertheless, social stereotypes of women persist. We still need the mass media to represent more women who are independent and self-seeking, as well as to continue their exploration and efforts to eradicate the concept of male dominance and alter the widespread perception of women as shallow. In the future, we will see more diverse images of women in tv programmes. We need to continue to work and think about the role of the media in promoting women's development and gender equality, as well as creating a perfect online space for women's development.

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