

Chinese Online Audience's Aesthetics Change on Female Characters in Media Products from 2018 to 2023

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Abstract: As time developed, online media also developed rapidly. Nowadays, online media had become the majority of media for the audience. As the outbreak in 2019, the closure policy was released. The closure policy severely restricted people's access to public areas, including a large number of cinemas and offline multimedia venues. As a result, people had to increase their online media use to fill the gap in offline media entertainment, which gave online media a huge boost. The article shows the research on how Chinese online audience aesthetics on female characters in media products changed from 2018 to 2023, adopting participant observation methods for observation samples and content analysis methods for discussing observation results. The observation reflects that independent and powerful female images are more required by the audiences and more attention by the producers. In addition, this kind of change exist limitations. According to the analysis, the progress in women's social position, the outbreak, the closure policy, and the progress in thought and the historical legacy make up the macro factor of the change. In addition, online feminist activity, the audience's internal influence and the commercial effects also be related that have an impact on the change.

Keywords: media representation, female images, online media, audience, audience culture

1. Introduction

As internet technology developed, online media become one of the main media forms in people's daily life. The outbreak and the lockdown policy in China in 2019 also pushed the progress of online media audiences to increase. In addition to the basic information and connect function, online media also play an important role in providing entertainment visual products such as online novels, dramas and films. As audiences become more comfortable with online media technology, the demand for online entertainment products that suit their tastes is also increasing. What's more, as the progress of society, online feminist activities also start to grow since the "Me too" movement expanded to the Chinese internet around 2018. Feminist thoughts had gained some popularity in the Chinese network and have been developing for some time. The aim of the research is to explore the change in Chinese audiences' perceptions of the female figure in online media from 2018-2023. During the research, observation of the media products and audiences' behavior was carried out. The observation observed media producers' advertisement keywords and how audiences react to and judge the female characters in media products. After that, the observation result was analyzed under the theoretical framework of the Use and Gratification Theory and the social learning theory.

The analysis also combined factors from the social dimension, social activities dimension, and audience dimension.

2. Theory

The Use and Gratification theory and the Social Learning theory are set as the theoretical framework for the article. Use and Gratification theory is a theory that admits audiences are equipped with autonomy and enabled to come to contact with media content, selecting channels to satisfy their requirement [1]. It suits the recent years' situation that as the internet age develops, audiences have gotten used to satisfying themselves through a variety of media products, especially online media products. Furthermore, the Use and Gratification theory matched the topic that emphasizes audience aesthetics and choice of media products. According to M. Yilmaz, U. Yilmaz and Demir-Yilmaz's definition, the social learning theory is a learning theory that is located between behavioral learning and cognitive learning and highlights the foundations of social learning [2]. During the process of audiences building up their own viewing standard, their thoughts are influenced by society and other practical experiences. Modern social media has allowed audiences also can play the role of information exporters to influence other audiences. As a result, the social learning theory can use for the discussion of the reason that modeling audiences' new standard toward female characters in visual products.

3. Method

The research uses qualitative methods including the participant observation method and content analysis.

3.1. Participant Observation Method

Observations of the internet text and digital products' content that do not reveal the investigation purpose are carried out and will be implemented from the perspective of the producer and the perspective of the audience. Firstly, the selection of texts is limited to the dramas, films, and novels that have been released in recent years (2018-2023) or that have been discussed enthusiastically by audiences, and are environmentally limited to the internet on the mainland. Second, texture for analysis is collected from several several popular platforms or websites on the Chinese internet, containing platforms for viewing digital visual products IQiYi, and Jinjiang Literature Place, and one social media platform that has strong use for people seeking suggestions: Weibo. In order to collect typical text that reflects the Chinese online audiences' common cognition, a series of standards is also set. Among the platforms for viewing media products, the synopsis of the latest successful TV series, films, or novels is mainly focused on. Meanwhile, comments and blogs from audiences on social media platforms are another key focus. The second standard for text selection is text should have highlighted references to how the women characters' characteristics are built and how her storyline is developed. Otherwise, the selection of the text also attention to finding discussions between audiences around the argument "How should a satisfying female character be like" and those audience blogs that recommend or do not recommend a digital visual product because of its female characterization.

3.2. Content Analysis Method

In analyzing the collected texts, the content analysis method is adopted. Initially, as the key feature, the descriptive words of the female character and how the audiences react to the different female characters will be extracted with emphasis. Characteristics considered should be on a perfect female

image and potential reasons drive the content presented in this text will be extracted. Moreover, keywords reflect the changing of the social environment or other elements of the wider environment that affect the aesthetics of the audience also will be retrieved for analysis. Finally, the other audiences' reactions to those texts and the trends in the macroscopic domestic creative environment will be set as the consequence to explain how and why the audiences' aesthetics developed into the situation observed in the survey.

4. Results

4.1. Advertising Female Characters' Power and Independency Becoming One of the Main Instruments Used to Attract Audiences

As the observation reflected, from the perspective of the producer, advertising female characters' power and independency is one of the main instruments used to attract audiences. It shows a side note to the audience's aesthetic demands for female characters.

Jinjiang Literature Place is an online commercialized novel platform. Its audiences are mainly female readers who consume its VIP novels and it has been in business for about two decades. According to its business mechanism, each novel's advertisement copywriting is important content for those authors to attract audiences. From observing the top 10 charged novels copywriting, a trend of keywords about women's success in a business dominating the advertising area was observed. As of the time of writing, the top 1 recommend VIP novel (went live in 2019) on the website page used the most obvious place to show that this novel's female main character is a strong player in the field of professional work. The novel's female main character not only is advertised as a strength in work but also plays the role of mentor. Apart from the major part of the advertisement, only a small rate of the copywriting claimed the heroine won't fall in love until the official plot is basically over. This kind of advertising is no accident in novels that are loved by readers, among the recommendation list of the Jinjiang website, the emphasis on the heroine's "ability to work on her own" or even to outperform the man in terms of skills has become a common part of the advertising copy. For example, *The Heart Of Genius*, a critically acclaimed novel that has been commercially adapted into a TV series in 2022, builds a female main character have genius mathematical skills and gains success in her schoolwork at the beginning of the story. What is worth discussing is that although the author sorted the novel into the heterosexual romantic type, the advertisement text of the novel focus on the claim that this novel is about the heroine's own journey of growth and the heroine's genius-like strength. Switching to the realm of online drama, the online video platform, also a visual product producer IQiYi also exemplifies similar strategies for engaging audiences. *Love Between Fairy and Devil* is a TV drama series produced by IQiYi and reaped extremely successful popularity when first released. From its quick introduction on the website, "female main character and the male main character helping each other" also be set as the keywords for the advertisement. A phenomenon particularly deserving of attention is that IQiYi made a revision of the story in that the female main character was added to a more powerful and independent setting in order to attract its audiences. As a result, this kind of revision of female characters did be highly praised by the audiences.

4.2. Online Audiences Showing a New Preference for Female Characters

From another degree of angle, nowadays audiences, especially online audiences show a new preference for female characters than in the past decade. Around 2000, novels and dramas admired by audiences in China are "president novels", which is a type of romantic article that describes weak and poor females being saved by powerful males. However, online audiences now becoming intolerant towards those "weak female characters". Still use the online drama *Love Between Fairy*

and Devil as an example, before it was adapted into a TV drama, it was a novel published in 2014. In the original storyline of the novel, the female main character is just a normal person who highly relies on the male main character. At the time when the novel was first serialized, it won an excellent rate from the readers. But as the novel be known by the audiences once again because of the TV drama version in 2022, the latest comment on the novel became negative. Readers are unhappy with the weakness of the female main character and her ingratiating with the male character. Even though, the audience praised the IQiYi drama producer's office for making a significant change to the female character, which is the behavior that would be frowned upon.

4.3. Audiences Developed a Set of Behavior Patterns to Obtain Aesthetic Suggestions Through Media with Other Viewers

More than that, the audiences developed a set of behavior patterns to obtain aesthetic suggestions through communication with other viewers. On social media, dedicated blogs have been set up for audience submissions to judge whether a product is worth watching. Whether a product creates female characters that can satisfy them is one of the most mentioned standards (criteria for similar grades are whether the work is plagiarized or not). Among the audiences, even products that claim themselves as a “grand female work” would be judged seriously, and be critiqued because of their female character not being treated with sufficient care. For instance, a novel telling about a powerful female who gained the admiration of many male heroes was targeted by the audience on Weibo because of the author's improper adjective about the female main character. Audiences are not only using their new standard on female characters in recent years' products to express themselves. *Empresses in the Palace* is a classic Chinese TV drama that was published in 2015. Its original plots were about a harem of women gradually moving toward success and its author was more oriented toward the theme of a woman should find a good man to rely on. Nevertheless, a part of the audience started to have doubts about the original theme of the story. They created a blog on Weibo (one of the biggest Chinese social media platforms) called “*Empresses in the Palace Community Blog*” in 2018. Through the blog, audiences use an advanced standard to judge if female characters are bad or not. Under their new standard, female characters who were ambitious, crafty, hard-working, and helpful to the same nature were praised, even if some of them used to be seen as evil characters. In brief, from 2018 to 2023, audiences' discussion on how to define a satisfying female character still continues in the media, and new interaction between the different viewpoints of the audience led to another new round of information output has been created.

5. Factors of the Aesthetic Change

It is clear from the results of this observation that Chinese internet audiences have developed new and advanced standards for the portrayal of female characters over the past five years (2018-2023). Worked, capable, and helpful to other characters gradually become new role models required by the audiences. However, this kind of change also exist limitations. While audiences are demanding more independence and strength from the female characters, they are also demanding that the products retain some emphasis on the weakness and dependency of the female characters. Shen pointed out in her analysis that in a popular female perspective film, the audiences actually prefer those tender female characters to those female images closer to the definition of independence [3]. According to Shen's conclusion, audiences expecting seeing women characters struggle in their life through their own efforts, meanwhile taking it for granted that she is actually continually helped by male characters [3].

5.1. A Macro Age Development Perspective

5.1.1. Time Development: Women's Social Position Raised

From a macro age development perspective, more women are entering the workplace and are able to work in a growing number of fields than before. As noted by Shen, social economy development pushes women into the majority of consumers, and more women entering the workplace led to the elevation of women's social status [3]. According to the discourse of the Use and Gratification theory, audiences would bring their personal needs when choosing media [1]. In the five kinds of needs concluded by Katz et al, cognitive needs, affective needs, and integrative needs respond to the audience's need for enhanced self-awareness, emotional support, and self-confidence from the media [1]. As a result of the increase of workplace women, female audiences who are required to gain empathy from female characters also increasing. Compared to an image of a woman dependent on others, an image of a striving through her own strength in the workplace can better meet the workplace women audiences' requirement.

5.1.2. Covid-19 Outbreak Promoting Online Media Development

Another social factor that pushes the progress of the audiences' requirement to change is the COVID-19 epidemic outbreak in 2019. The embargo made offline media viewing virtually impossible, leading to a proliferation of online internet users and a wider audience for online media products. As reported by Feng, during the outbreak, the offline cinema industry suffered a severe blow, but the online media industry, for example, Zhejiang Huace Film & Tv Co., Ltd., reaped the rewards of success [4]. The responses from an online media company president collected by Feng reflected that during the outbreak, Huace's online drama could give the audience moral support, which led the company to gain such success [4]. The increase in online audiences and the promoted desire of viewers to derive psychological satisfaction from media productions set the stage for subsequent aesthetic changes.

5.2. Media Impact

Online media also have an impact on shaping the audience's aesthetic. On one hand, audiences learn from advanced visual products to improve their thoughts, on the other hand, online media provide an efficient foundation for audiences to be taught by opinion leaders (especially feminist activists online) and learn from other audiences.

5.2.1. Valued Female Audiences and Feminist Online Activity

As an observation result, the media producers started to produce powerful and independent female characters for the mass. Those media visual products and the rise of feminist activism on the Chinese internet in recent years have allowed viewers to learn new ways of judging women's roles. According to Appel and Gnambs's calculation, in the past decade, movies passing the Bechdel-Wallace test is increasing [5]. BWT is a judging criterion for women characters in movies, testing female characters if are independent characters or merely setting up the male character [5]. Increasing pass of the BWT means the increasing of the vibrant and independent portrayal of women. As Social Learning theory claimed, observing the environment has an important role in behavior acquisition [2]. The Use and Gratification theory also mentioned that the audiences' cognitive needs include the need for information [1]. Exposing to a viewing environment that appears more independent female characters than before, audiences gain new information about

how recent products model female characters and their aesthetic habits will also be invariably more receptive to this kind of change.

Rising online feminist activities on the Chinese internet also influenced the audience's acceptance of more powerful female characters. Audiences had developed a kind of culture where before they decide to view something, they sometimes seeking for suggestions from social media first. On one of the major social media platforms Weibo, various blogs had set for providing suggestions to audiences. Meanwhile, social media also is useful in supporting feminist activists [6]. The progress of the feminist building community on social media also brings out an instructional space against the oppression of women [6]. On Weibo, there exist several blogs that provide viewing advice from the perspective of feminists, one of which achieved more than 4 million followers in 2023. When giving out their suggestions on choosing media products, feminists always encourage audiences to realize how female images are smeared in traditional aesthetics. They also would positively act as models that dare to criticize those media products that didn't portray a woman who is independent enough. Dewey believes that communication has an educational force on individuals in social life [2]. Moreover, according to Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie's study, online communications are textual, they are "frozen", thus rendering them more open to girls' thinking critically across time [7]. That means, the online environment especially helped female audiences to think deeply about the standards of judging a female character from a feminist perspective.

5.2.2. Interaction Within the Audience

In addition to professional feminist activists, other viewers also have an impact on influencing the aesthetics of the audience. In addition to the fact that the individual can be affected by environmental factors, this means that he/she can affect environmental factors [2]. On Weibo, some viewers would post collation posts about if a novel/drama/film is excellent enough, they had also become a kind of suggestion source for other audiences. Besides, specific submission blogs also play a platform that includes thousands of viewing experiences from different audiences, they would make alerts that which set of the product is "not good enough". Those experience sharers also become another kind of opinion leader to others. As former observation shows, Meißner concluded, they keep guiding audiences' tastes and therefore organize those visual products available online [8].

5.2.3. Summary: Multifactorial Cycle

In summary, the influences of a new aesthetic strengthened through the online environment. The increase in female consumers, feminist critics, and audiences' choices led to producers starting to create more independent female images in online media products. Then, those new female images in media products provide information for audiences to learn and refresh their cognition. Finally, through the convenience provided by the internet, the audiences who be educated by the media also express what they learned to others. As a result, a new aesthetic was spread and consolidated.

6. Factors of the Limitation of the Aesthetic Change

6.1. Historical Legacy

To explain the phenomenon that audiences still retain the requirement that female characters need to be married and need to show tenderness even keep acting as a person being helped, historical legacy, and commercial disruptions are mentioned by several research. Chen explained that China has been under patriarchal feudal domination for a very long time, thousands of years ago, women were treated as inferior figures [9]. Until modern time, Chinese women still have a degree of

disadvantage in society, and still, be taught to be tender and devoted because of traditional thoughts [9]. In Li Li, Yea-Wen Chen, and Nakazawa's research on a drama series' success on the Chinese internet, they found that Chinese audiences are likely to identify with their own value systems through the main characters [10]. Likewise, because traditional thoughts still affect women's social position and thoughts, female characters who kept similar disadvantages and weaknesses in media products are easier accepted by Chinese audiences, especially female audiences. This is also supported by Chen's research. Chen listed four explosive women's perspective films from 2021 to 2022 and concluded that those films' "successful women characters" still appeared as disadvantaged groups obviously, and didn't arrive at a completely independent end but still choose to sacrifice themselves [9].

6.2. Commercial Disruption

Another factor is commercial disruptions. Shen mentioned the special situations in which a large number of self-proclaimed "granted female work" films and TV shows have been attracted by the increased status of female consumption and have appeared in modern China, but most of them actually still follow the traditional masculine ideology [3]. Lin's conclusion also supports that those "female movies" existing limitations on discussing the true problems that females are facing [11]. Those "granted female movie" media products seem to treat women as the center, but in fact, they put women into consumerist daydreaming in order to stimulate their consumption [3]. To draw a conclusion, as commercial producers' fundamental aim is making money, not really enlightening aesthetics, the female characters they shape would always keep some disadvantages or masculine ideology to match the mass's situation and marketing needs. Thus, audiences would also be influenced by or identify with those female characters who actually do not totally independent or powerful.

7. Conclusion

Suggestions will be presented according to the above phenomenon and analysis. First, in order to serve audiences' new requirements for more advanced female imagines, media producers should be aware of the opportunity of the progress of thought, break the solidified mode of creation, and create more advanced female characters in visual products. From the observation, audiences are becoming more aware of the female images in the media products. To catch the progress of audiences' change, media producers also need to make changes in production. Second, cultural workers need to pay attention to online media and media products' increasing importance in ideological indoctrination. As a result of technological development and the epidemic, online visual products and audience culture had developed, and thoughts had been more easily learned through them. Third, when viewing those media information about what is a good women's image, audiences should keep their own judging ability, and avoid treating the commercial settlements in media as the single source of thoughtful advice. For example, to make a commercial benefit, media products would contain other ideas to persuade audiences to consume but not really have a constructive role. Against this background, the audience should avoid sources of information monopolized by commercialized information. Fourth, compared with the progress in the audience's thought, the progress in screen images sometimes requires more time, especially in China's historical background, audiences and media critics need to be aware of this fact when and keep patience. Among the audience comments from observation, there is still always exist the voice from the audience saying the portrayal of women at this stage is inadequate. Under this kind of voice, almost no media products can satisfy this standard. However, it takes time for creative ideas to progress, critics need to be aware of this point and avoid going in the direction of extreme

negativity. Fifth, as online media rises, Chinese feminist activists could utilize the instructive role of the media and online opinion leader, using entry on the portrayal of female characters in media products entry point for the dissemination of ideas. Audiences' learning behavior on media, especially on entertainment media products and social media had developed to a certain stage. Combing ideological education and viewing suggestions is useful for giving audiences basic inspiration on how to judge a female image in a more professional way.

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