

A Gender Studies Perspective on the Developmental Trajectory and Innovative Pathways of She Variety Shows in China

Ruoan Liu

School of Culture and Communication, Capital University of Economics and Business, Beijing, China

An13691002631@163.com

Abstract. In contemporary society, the trend of media convergence has reshaped the ecological landscape of China's online variety shows, propelling the domestic variety show market into a phase of scaled expansion. Against this backdrop, women's issues have progressively emerged as a significant socio-gender topic, garnering widespread public and media attention, leading to the rise of "She Variety Shows". Their core value lies in the multi-dimensional representation of female media images and the profound exploration of women's discursive empowerment. This study employs literature review, case analysis, and inductive analysis, focuses on the developmental trajectory, core challenges, and innovative directions of "She Variety Shows" in China. Research findings indicate that while current programs exhibit a coexistence of diverse themes and varied formats, they still face numerous structural constraints. The key to breakthrough lies in being rooted in social realities, driving content innovation and thematic depth. This approach aims to achieve authentic and pluralistic portrayals of female images, thereby effectively enhancing women's subjective consciousness and advancing the process of gender equality.

Keywords: She Variety Shows, Feminism, Online variety shows, Gender equality

1. Introduction

In traditional Chinese feudal society, gender roles were long characterized by a binary opposition: women were confined to the realm of reproductive labor, while men held the power to choose their professions [1]. By 2010, accelerated social stratification and the rising status of women contributed to the development of feminism in China. According to the 52nd Statistical Report on China's Internet Development released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) [2], as of June 2023, the number of internet users in China reached 1.097 billion, with an internet penetration rate of 75.6%. This has facilitated the rapid growth of online variety shows, providing them with a vast audience base.

In recent years, with the flourishing of "feminism", many filmmakers and producers have turned their attention to "female-themed" content, giving rise to "She Variety Shows". These programs promote feminism in diverse formats, subtly influencing audience values, encouraging women to

bravely pursue self-realization, and to some extent, advancing gender equality. This paper examines the development of Chinese "She Variety Shows" in recent years, analyzes their thematic choices, character portrayals, current shortcomings, and proposes innovative strategies for their future improvement. To thoroughly investigate this phenomenon, this study employs case analysis and inductive summarization.

By analyzing the themes, character portrayals, and social impact of Chinese "She Variety Shows," this research enriches the theoretical framework of feminist media studies. Traditional gender roles were deeply entrenched in feudal society, whereas contemporary "She Variety Shows" as emerging media products, provide a new platform for feminist discourse. By mapping their developmental trajectory and expressive forms, this study supplements existing academic discussions on media and gender equality, offering theoretical references for future research.

2. Research status

2.1. The image of women in the medium

Compared to the west, research on the media representation of women in China started relatively late. Professor Bu Wei's 2001 publication *Media and Gender*, pioneered the study of gender perspectives in media communication and provided an in-depth analysis of gender stereotypes [3]. Hao Xiaowen, in her examination of the portrayal of women aged "30+" in television dramas, found that recent TV series have begun to feature independent female characters.

In recent years, as feminist issues have gained widespread attention, academia has also started to focus more on the construction of female images in the media. However, there remains a lack of research on the representation of women in variety shows [4], particularly those featuring predominantly female guests. Against the backdrop of the "she economy," "She Variety Shows" have emerged as a new force, playing an increasingly significant role in shaping female media images [5].

2.2. She Variety Shows

Research on "She Variety Shows" has primarily been concentrated in academic journals. With the rise of the "She Variety Shows" phenomenon in 2020, academia has begun to explore this topic from diverse perspectives. Xu Songxia, from a gender studies standpoint, conducted an in-depth discussion on how the widespread popularity of "She Variety Shows" influences the construction of female images in society [6].

Meanwhile, Lei Xiaodan, based on McQuail's four "gratifications" theory, conducted a thorough analysis of the hit show *Sisters Who Make Waves*, examining its program concept, format, narrative structure, and other dimensions to explore the reasons behind its massive success [7].

Academics have highly praised the narrative expression and marketing strategies of "She Variety Shows" arguing that these programs facilitate in-depth discussions on feminist issues such as female representation and women's discourse power. Moreover, they believe such shows contribute to positive value guidance for society, using entertainment as a medium to convey female perspectives, women's spirit, and empowerment.

2.3. Definition of key concepts

"She Variety Shows" are female-centric programs that highlight women's experiences in life, work, and relationships, examining their values and societal roles [8]. Designed for female audiences,

these shows adopt a woman's perspective to showcase their realities, aspirations, and struggles, ultimately empowering female narratives in media [9].

3. The current development status of "She Variety Shows" in China

3.1. The development stages of Chinese "She Variety Shows"

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As van Zoonen noted in Feminist Media Studies, mass media can be seen as a technology that constructs gender, capable of adjusting and reconstructing various disciplinary and contradictory cultural representations to reflect social reality. Since the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, female-oriented programs have continuously emerged. With the arrival of the new millennium, an influx of new ideas and perspectives entered China, gradually broadening the perspectives of female audiences. Variety shows centered on women began to lead the trends of the era.

3.1.2. Early embryonic stage

In 2004, Super Girl pioneered China's "She Variety Shows", offering ordinary women a stage to display their talent and individuality. While earlier talk shows like Half the Sky addressed women's issues, they lacked typical variety elements. Early beauty programs also contributed to this phase. These initial formats—mainly talent shows and fashion content—were still emerging, yet significantly boosted public focus on women and paved the way for future genre diversification and structural innovation, marking important progressive value.

3.1.3. Development stage

During its development, "She Variety Shows" achieved breakthroughs in themes and formats. Programs like Mommy Mia showcased the talents of homemakers, while Goddess' New Clothes merged fashion with e-commerce, building a female-focused industry chain. Super Female Soldier highlighted values like perseverance and honor through documentary-style narratives, and travel shows like Divas Hit the Road reflected women's diverse lifestyles. These shows expanded vertically into niches like fashion and travel, while also providing platforms for women of different ages and backgrounds. By presenting non-traditional female images, they played a significant role in reshaping societal perceptions of women.

3.1.4. Prosperity stage

With the development of online platforms, "She Variety Shows" entered a mature stage. Produce 101, centered on the theme of "youth and growth," established an idol-training model for women, while The Romantic Trip integrated travel and emotional interactions, showcasing female relationships and marital perspectives. Meanwhile, programs like My Little One and Daughters' Love focused on multifaceted issues faced by guests in areas such as romance, family relationships, and career, presenting them in meticulous detail [10].

3.2. Innovation and breakthrough in current problematic online variety shows

Despite the flourishing development of "She Variety Shows" today, their ability to truthfully and objectively reflect the realities of women's lives remains constrained by numerous complex factors, posing significant obstacles to overcome. Behind this bustling industry landscape, certain shortcomings in content and format have evidently impeded the sustained growth of "She Variety Shows."

3.2.1. Serious homogenization

A major issue is severe homogenization. Many women-themed shows focus narrowly on female roles such as daughters, wives, and mothers. Though formats vary—interview-based dialogues, competitive games, or documentary observations—the core themes remain fixed on these limited identities. This repetition, despite surface-level diversity in presentation, leads to a lack of novelty and audience fatigue, as similar content is merely repackaged in different forms [11].

3.2.2. Severe commercialization

On the other hand, entangled with commercial logic, "She Variety Shows" face a paradox in shaping female subjectivity. In *Sisters Who Make Waves*, on-stage performances emphasize individuality through appearance, while off-stage efforts reinforce stereotypes like "consumption of the female body." Idol shows like *Produce 101* favor young, fair, and slim contestants, perpetuating narrow beauty standards. Although some contestants challenge these norms, they fail to change deeper image expectations. Such programs often commercialize female youth and beauty to cater to male aesthetics.

3.2.3. Severe female stereotypes

Joan Riviere pointed out that femininity is a performance developed by some women out of fear that displaying masculinity would bring retaliation and punishment—a survival strategy within a patriarchal environment that conceals women's desire for masculinity. Femininity is a practice, not an essence [12]. Current "She Variety Shows" remain constrained by stereotypical gender narratives, including idealized aesthetics, rigid roles, and male-centric values. More diverse portrayals of women are needed to truly reflect the beauty of women in the new era.

3.2.4. Women's lack of the right to speak

In traditional media ecosystems, women's discourse has long been disciplined and spoken for. As Simone de Beauvoir noted in *The Second Sex*, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine [13]." As products of the "male gaze," variety shows often frame women as consumer symbols or fixed roles. The essence of branding them as "she" is to reconstruct female subjectivity: transforming women from objects being viewed into active narrators of their own stories.

4. The innovation path of China's "She Variety Shows"

4.1. Novel narrative methods and angles

When selecting themes and casting for Chinese “She Variety Shows”, it is essential to avoid reducing women to mere “symbols” and break away from the conventional production model that prioritizes celebrities and influencers with "high visibility" and "high topicality" as program guests [13].

The paradigm shift in casting mechanisms is crucial, as the traditional reliance on celebrity influencers presents a dual dilemma: on one hand, it leads to severe homogenization of content (such as multiple shows repeatedly inviting the same female artists), and on the other, it obscures the real lived experiences of ordinary women. Programs should strive to showcase women’s inner qualities and external presence through carefully designed dual narrative structures and multiple perspectives [14].

To enhance “She Variety Shows,” consider featuring non-celebrity professionals like female engineers or astronauts to build multidimensional images through real workplace scenarios. Intergenerational dialogues, such as between mothers and daughters, can break age barriers and showcase evolving values. Decentralized role distribution—avoiding a “main character halo” and using equal competition formats—allows each participant’s uniqueness to emerge naturally.

4.2. Create a diverse image of women

“She Variety Shows” should break away from traditional stereotypes by showcasing women in diverse professions and aesthetics. Beyond typical roles like teachers or flight attendants, emphasis should be placed on women in STEM, emerging fields (e-sports, drone pilots, AI engineers), and grassroots occupations (truck drivers, construction workers).

Additionally, promoting a “healthy beauty” standard through confident representation of different body types and skin tones is essential. Involving groups like women with disabilities and the elderly can challenge the notion that “youth equals beauty.” Introducing segments addressing appearance anxiety—similar to Hear Her’s “Magic Mirror” episode—would further enrich content and support inclusive value-building.

4.3. Compete for women's right to speak

The term “She” in “She Variety Shows” highlights a focus on female perspectives and discourse. To strengthen female subjectivity, production should prioritize women-led creative teams—such as directors, screenwriters, and cinematographers—as seen in Hear Her, where 80% of core roles were female. Employing first-person shots and subjective narration can enhance female-centered storytelling, exemplified by Her Lens.

Additionally, evaluation criteria should move beyond gendered standards. For instance, Sisters Who Make Waves eliminated appearance-based judgments and introduced new dimensions like “leadership” and “creativity,” promoting a more equitable assessment system.

The use of "she" in the term "She Variety Shows" signifies an intent to create media products that are centered on women and emphasize female discourse. In the production of Chinese “She Variety Shows”, continuous efforts should be made to explore and push the boundaries of female subjectivity.

4.4. Promote the development of "her economy" and "her culture"

"She Variety Shows" emerge from the synergy of "she-economy" and "she-culture." Their core value lies in shaping female media images and guiding consumption and gender culture. To resonate with female audiences, these shows must break stereotypes, enhance women's narrative agency, and align with their psychological needs.

In the converged media era, creators must stay sensitive to evolving female self-awareness and values. By accurately capturing audience preferences at different stages, they can balance cultural expression with commercial value, ensuring contemporary relevance.

Ultimately, these programs can bridge female consumption and cultural identity, driving both economic growth and a more equal, diverse "she-culture."

5. Conclusion

From the perspective of gender studies, this paper explores the current development and innovative pathways of Chinese "She Variety Shows." The study finds that while significant progress has been made in terms of thematic diversity and formal differentiation, "She Variety Shows" still face structural challenges such as severe homogenization, the influence of commercial logic, and constraints imposed by traditional gender narratives. To break through these limitations, this paper proposes innovative approaches, including novel narrative methods, diversified portrayals of women, the reclamation of female discourse, and the promotion of synergistic development between the "she-economy" and "she-culture." These strategies aim to achieve more authentic and multidimensional representations of women in media, thereby enhancing female subjectivity and advancing gender equality.

It is worth reflecting that this study has several limitations. First, the selected cases primarily focus on high-profile or trending "She Variety Shows", which may overlook niche yet pioneering or distinctive practices, thus limiting the representativeness of the conclusions. Second, the analysis of audience reception remains insufficient, as there was no systematic collection or examination of how different female demographics interpret and respond to these programs. Future research could employ empirical methods such as surveys and in-depth interviews to further investigate the actual impact of "She Variety Shows" on female viewers' gender awareness and identity formation.

Amid ongoing shifts in societal gender perceptions and rapid advancements in technology, "She Variety Shows" will continue to encounter new opportunities and challenges. Subsequent studies could focus on how emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and the metaverse reshape the construction of female images and narrative models. Additionally, cross-cultural comparisons within a global context could be conducted to examine differences and similarities in issue selection, expressive strategies, and ideological dimensions between Chinese and international "She Variety Shows". Such efforts would provide more insightful theoretical foundations and practical references for the further innovation of Chinese "She Variety Shows" and the positive evolution of gender culture.

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