

# ***Media Narratives and Their Impact on Choices among Grassroots Women: A Perspective on Narrative Empowerment and Identity Reconstruction***

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**Abstract.** This study examines the influence of media narratives on the lives of grassroots women, with a focus on aspects such as career development, marriage and fertility, consumption, and self-identity. Employing a qualitative approach centered on media text analysis and case studies, this research analyzes narrative strategies across both traditional and digital platforms. The findings reveal that media narratives significantly shape women's decision-making processes through mechanisms of normalization, symbolic exclusion, and emotional mobilization. At the same time, they also demonstrate how dominant representations can reinforce gender hierarchies and constrain individual agency. Furthermore, the study highlights the paradoxical role of new media as both a site of empowerment and a perpetuator of consumerist stereotypes, providing spaces for self-expression while simultaneously embedding women within market-oriented logic. The paper concludes with critical reflections on the structural constraints of current media practices and proposes pathways for more inclusive and authentic narrative constructions that could foster more diverse models of female agency and social participation.

**Keywords:** Media narratives, gender studies, communication, empirical research, textual analysis

## **1. Introduction**

Media narratives play a pivotal role in shaping social perceptions and individual behaviors. Particularly for women, media representations—ranging from stereotypical domestic roles to hyper-ambitious professionals—create unrealistic expectations and reinforce systemic biases [1]. These representations not only construct gendered ideals but also influence women's perceptions of what constitutes a “normal” or “desirable” life trajectory. While existing literature has extensively documented the general impact of media on gender norms, few studies have focused specifically on grassroots women—those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds—whose voices are often marginalized in mainstream discourse [2].

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the following research questions: (1) Which specific life choices of grassroots women are most influenced by media narratives? (2) What types

of media narratives exert the most significant impact? (3) Through what mechanisms do these narratives influence decision-making?

The research employs a qualitative methodology, combining media text analysis with case studies of both popular social media influencers and traditional media representations. By focusing explicitly on grassroots women, this study offers a nuanced understanding of how class, gender, and media intersect to shape life trajectories. The significance of this research lies in its potential to inform media practitioners, policymakers, and educators about the need for more equitable, inclusive, and representative narratives that support, rather than constrain, women's agency.

## **2. Conceptual framework and theoretical background**

This study is grounded in two core theoretical frameworks: narrative theory and intersectionality.

Narrative theory, as developed by scholars such as Walter Fisher, posits that humans understand and interpret the world through stories [3]. Narrative theory holds that narrative is the core way for humans to construct identities, understand the world, and endow life with meaning. We shape ourselves by organizing fragmented events into stories with plots, causes and effects, and teleology. Media narratives thus function as powerful tools for constructing social reality and shaping individual identities [4].

Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a lens through which to analyze how overlapping social identities—such as gender, class, and ethnicity—compound experiences of discrimination or privilege [5]. This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the diverse ways media narratives impact women from different backgrounds.

The mainstream society is often filled with some kind of "privileged narrative" (such as the success stories of middle-class men), which is tacitly regarded as universal, thereby otherizing or silencing the experiences of marginalized groups. Narrative theory offers tools for analyzing the presentation form of individual experiences, while interdisciplinarity provides methods for critically interpreting their content. Together, these theories help decode how media stories are constructed, disseminated, and internalized, and how they differentially affect women's choices.

## **3. Impact of media narratives on grassroots women's choices**

### **3.1. Personal development and identity formation**

Media narratives often promote idealized images of success—whether as devoted mothers or career-driven professionals—that may conflict with the realities faced by grassroots women. Social media has provided an unprecedented channel for marginalized groups to express themselves and start businesses, which is a form of empowerment. While platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu frequently showcase luxury lifestyles and rapid career advancement, creating pressure to conform to consumerist ideals [6]. Case studies of female influencers from rural backgrounds reveal how they navigate between authenticity and commercial appeal, often reinforcing the same narratives they seek to challenge [7]. For instance, the Women's Common Prosperity Workshop was displayed on multiple platforms. However, the economic model, traffic rules, and mainstream aesthetics of the platform are constantly regulating the content and form of creation, making it more consumer-friendly and in line with mainstream values.

### **3.2. Social and civic participation**

Traditional media have historically underrepresented grassroots women in public roles, reinforcing their exclusion from civic discourse [8]. However, new media platforms have enabled some to voice their concerns and mobilize communities. Examples include live-streamers advocating for rural education or labor rights, demonstrating how digital storytelling can facilitate social engagement [9]. For instance, Cheng Jie's public welfare live-streaming room for adult literacy classes enables women to gain the confidence and ability to handle affairs independently (such as keeping accounts, running stores, and using mobile phones) and helps adult women (especially the middle-aged and elderly) who have dropped out of school due to historical reasons to be literate, enabling them to better adapt to the digital age. Meanwhile, this live stream reshapes the self-worth of the participants through learning and community interaction, challenging the traditional narrative of the old Chinese society that "a woman's virtue lies in her lack of talent." Yet, these gains are often tempered by algorithmic biases and commercial pressures that prioritize viral content over substantive dialogue [10].

## **4. Evolution and contradictory influences of media narratives**

### **4.1. Traditional media vs. new media: shifts in narrative power**

While traditional media often perpetuated top-down, homogenized narratives, new media allow for more participatory storytelling. This shift has enabled grassroots women to share their experiences directly [11]. However, the democratization of narrative production is incomplete. Commercial platforms often co-opt personal stories for profit, blurring the line between empowerment and exploitation [12].

### **4.2. Differential impact through an intersectional lens**

Media narratives affect women differently based on class, education, and geographic location. For example, urban middle-class women may encounter narratives promoting "lean-in" feminism, while rural women are more likely to be depicted as victims or objects of pity [13]. These divergent representations reinforce existing social hierarchies and limit the range of acceptable choices [14].

## **5. Critical reflections and pathways for change**

### **5.1. Structural limitations of current media narratives**

The prevailing media ecosystem is characterized by commercial imperatives that prioritize engagement over empathy, leading to stereotypical and sensationalized portrayals of women [15]. Additionally, algorithmic curation often silences marginalized voices in favor of mainstream content [16].

### **5.2. Recommendations for narrative transformation**

To foster more inclusive narratives, media producers should adopt ethical storytelling practices that prioritize authenticity and diversity [17]. Policy interventions could include funding for community-led media initiatives and stricter regulations against discriminatory content [18]. Educational programs aimed at enhancing media literacy among grassroots women would also help them

critically engage with and reshape narratives [19]. To effectively enhance the media literacy of grassroots women, enabling them to critically respond to information and proactively shape narratives, community-led educational programs are core tools. These projects should be led by local non-governmental organizations, community centers, or public libraries, designing highly contextualized course contents that closely revolve around needs such as information verification, financial fraud prevention, and the safe use of digital tools. The teaching method adopts the form of participatory workshops, such as organizing "rumor verification" practical exercises and role-playing scenarios and encouraging women to use mobile phones to create short videos to share their own and community stories. This move aims to transform them from passive information consumers into active content creators, fundamentally reshaping the narrative subject. When accessing information, women should pause the urge to forward, question the source and evidence of the information, and use free tools such as reverse image search and official rumor-refuting platforms for quick verification.

## 6. Conclusion

This study provides a clear demonstration of how media narratives significantly shape the choices and opportunities available to grassroots women, particularly in the realms of personal identity formation and social participation. It argues that while new media platforms appear to offer unprecedented spaces for self-expression and representation, they simultaneously introduce sophisticated new forms of commercial and algorithmic control. These mechanisms often co-opt authentic expression, steering it towards consumerist or politically neutral ends. Consequently, the research concludes that there is an urgent need for more nuanced, intersectional approaches to media analysis and advocacy. Such approaches must move beyond simplistic binaries of empowerment versus oppression to critically engage with the complex interplay between agency and structure in the digital age.

A primary limitation of this study lies in its methodological scope, which relies heavily on the analysis of publicly available media texts and a limited number of case studies. This approach, while valuable, may not fully capture the lived experiences and nuanced interpretations of media content by the women themselves. To address this, future research could benefit greatly from incorporating participatory action research methods. For instance, organizing collaborative digital storytelling workshops would not only generate richer, more authentic data but also actively involve grassroots women in the co-creation of knowledge, ensuring their voices are central to the analysis. Furthermore, longitudinal studies designed to track changes in media consumption habits and their correlation with life choices over an extended period would yield invaluable insights into the long-term effects of media influence.

Looking ahead, the central challenge in the evolving landscape of media and gender remains clear: will these narratives ultimately reinforce existing power structures and commercial interests, or can they evolve into genuine catalysts for social progress? Future investigations should therefore focus on several promising avenues. These include exploring resistance tactics and "counter-publics" created by women online, examining the specific impact of algorithmic bias on marginalized groups, and developing media literacy frameworks tailored to empower grassroots women to critically navigate digital spaces. The trajectory of these narratives will be a critical indicator of broader social change.

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