

From Production to Viewing: The Presentation of Female Subjectivity in “Siren: Survive the Island”

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Abstract: As cultural products, female variety shows have the potential to challenge gender norms and promote gender equality. This study adopts feminist theory, social gender theory, especially the relevant content of postmodern feminist theory and audience usage and satisfaction theories. It closely reads the text of the Korean variety show “*Siren: Survive the Island*”. Considering the rise of streaming media and the promotion effect of the feminist movement on the production of such programs, this study focuses on the two levels of program creation and audience reception. It discusses how programs give women the right to speak in creation and how to break away from the male-centered discourse system. In the description of the identity of the contestants, the program selects powerful women who are difficult to become absolute protagonists in the past as narrative subjects so that women can jump out of the traditional society’s expectations of their identity. On the body’s performance, the show presents the contestants’ body from an equal and objective perspective, conveying a positive body concept. At the same time, the show largely meets the needs of modern audiences and inspires audiences’ consensus on female subjectivity and gender equality. This study aims to combine theory and practice, provide strategies for subsequent works, promote producers’ and audiences’ cognition of female subjectivity, call for a more open and inclusive environment, and promote further thinking and development on gender issues in the real society.

Keywords: female subjectivity, female variety show, streaming media, *Siren: Survive the Island*

1. Introduction

Variety shows have become a kind of media content with wide influence. Thanks to the development of social culture and the rise of the feminist movement, women’s rights and economic ability have been improved. In addition, the rapidly developing streaming media platform has the help of data-driven creation and precise content push, providing a broader living space for diverse content. Women’s variety shows have also become more abundant in recent years. In 2022, the Korean drama “*Squid Game*” exploded on Netflix, providing a new development direction for many Korean content producers and further promoting Netflix’s content layout in the Asia-Pacific region. In addition, South Korea has become a thriving feminist movement in recent years, and its people’s discussion of gender issues has broken the heat of drama, so the all-female variety “*Siren: Survive*

the Island” should be formed, becoming the main work of meticulous division and precise promotion in its variety track. This paper will choose this variety show for case analysis to explore how it presents female subjectivity in content.

“*Siren: Survive the Island*” premieres on Netflix in 2023 and features 24 female guests from six professions: firefighters, athletes, police officers, guards, soldiers and stuntmen. Grouped by class, they compete for seven days in a wilderness arena called the “Island of Fire” to defend their base while trying to unflag the other teams to occupy more bases. In the competition, there are privilege-earning battles, where teams can win games that test physical strength and ingenuity to earn the privilege-playing privileges for a limited time. In addition, during the course of the show, some groups can choose to actively ally with each other to eliminate their opponents. The creators of the program, the contestants and the audience who participate in the interaction on the network platform are mainly women. It should be noted that the author does not think this program is only a “female variety show”, but also hopes that its audience is not limited to women, to promote a more solid and extensive social consensus. Because this program has shown obvious innovation in challenging traditional gender roles and promoting gender equality issues, the author hopes to analyze this variety show with both theoretical and practical features through close reading of the text, to provide useful creative strategies for subsequent female variety shows and stimulate the subjective awareness of producers and audiences when constructing and understanding female images. To further contribute to the issue of gender equality with practical significance.

2. Manuscript Preparation

As the amount of work increases, academia has increasingly focused on feminist film and television works. However, there is a lack of research on the representation of female subjectivity in variety shows compared to analyses of female-oriented films and TV dramas. In this literature review, the scope was not limited to “female-oriented variety shows”. Instead, literature related to women’s consciousness, image, and subjectivity in film and television works was organized from three main perspectives.

Firstly, a range of literature investigated the representation of female subjectivity in film and television, emphasizing the need for discourse power in achieving female subjectivity. Ma Yanjiao observed that women in film and television were often portrayed as objects to be viewed or images with unclear female characteristics. To break away from these biased or stereotypical portrayals, stories must be grounded in real female experiences [1]. Luo Hui analyzed from a socio-cultural perspective, explaining the deprivation of women’s cultural subjectivity. This paper highlighted that within male-dominated discourse, women internalize themselves, and emphasized the significant role of mainstream media in reinforcing a male-centric gender order. Therefore, it is imperative to reshape the female image portrayed in the media [2].

Subsequently, a body of literature reviewed the development of female-focused variety shows. These studies have traced the evolution of such programmes, highlighting that their increased popularity is rooted in the rise of female autonomy and the growth of economic power among women. While these variety shows hold value in challenging and reshaping stereotypical and uninspired female images, their potential is limited by the influence of capital and traditional patriarchal views. This often leads to issues such as over-commercialization and profit-pursuit. An Xiaoyan emphasized that “female-oriented variety shows” still predominantly focus on traditional aspects of private life, and women in these shows still largely restricted from entering the public discourse [3]. Zeng Mojia and Hu Qianqian called for “female-oriented variety shows” to abandon superficial entertainment and strike a balance between entertainment value and depth, aiming to present a comprehensive and authentic image of contemporary women to the audience [4]. Yin Le and Shen Zhe found that in the context of the internet, female variety shows have aggregated the

scattered topics about women online to present in a program format. This represents a shift from the marginalized position of being objectified to entering mainstream discourse and achieving a “counter-gaze” status. However, the authors noted a paradox in the commercial culture that shapes female subjectivity, where “female-oriented variety shows” has both positive and negative impacts on female audiences [5].

Finally, some of the literature delved into individual showcases. These authors analyzed emerging women-centric variety shows, considering the gains and losses in terms of shaping female roles and advocating female subjectivity. While acknowledging the positive contributions of these programmes in enriching the portrayal of women on screen, they also pointed out that in their pursuit of ratings and capital, the shows inadvertently push female roles back into the constraints of traditional discourse, hindering the realization of individual female self-identification. Among them, Wang Yun and Xin Xiaoying discussed the dual effects of variety shows in presenting female bodies, they resist the male gaze and social norms towards women’s bodies, diminishing the utilitarian view of women’s bodies mainly for reproduction, but they can also make women the “gazed upon” objects of desire [6]. Hu Xinyan and Ling Lan took the Chinese variety show “Sisters Who Make Waves” as an example to dissect the gaze relations that are formed between “producers and performers” and “men and women” under the cultural industry and gender politics. They pointed out that these two pairs of gaze relationships interact and restrain the awakening of female consciousness, thereby deepening the contradictions within female-centric programmes [7]. Lyu Ting highlighted the breakthroughs of variety shows in challenging traditional female images but also mentioned the re-emergence of constraints, where the depicted female image remains in conflict, unable to break free from the expected roles society imposes on women [8].

The existing literature offers detailed studies of the social backgrounds and communicative gains and losses of female-oriented variety shows, but there are still limitations. For one, the selected cases often don’t venture beyond the gender binary, which means that most research focuses on how women are represented, rather than how the works themselves are created under the guidance of female subjectivity. “*Siren: Survive the Island*” stands out in this regard. Rather than correcting or refuting society’s traditional expectations of female roles, the narrative unfolds by directly disrupting the traditional male-centred discourse. Women in this show are not only the depicted subjects but also the narrators, making it a comprehensive attempt to interpret female subjectivity and an advancement of female consciousness in the real world. Additionally, most existing studies focus mainly on case analysis, with less in-depth research on audience reactions. This study aims to combine content analysis of the show itself with audience feedback, discussing shifts in audience demand within socio-cultural contexts and how these changes affect content production, thus filling the gap in content reception research.

3. Theoretical Framework

This paper uses a variety of theories as research support to analyze how *Siren’s Call* practices and inspires female subjectivity from two perspectives of creation and audience reception. First, this paper applies feminist theory and social gender theory, mainly referring to Beauvoir’s view that gender is not born but is shaped by society, culture and history. The theory reveals how women are regarded as the “other” of men in the process of socialization and gradually become a marginal “second sex”, thus gradually losing the subjectivity that they might have had [9]. This paper will use these theories to analyze how “*Siren: Survive the Island*”reconstructs the traditional female image and further emphasize the importance of various shows with powerful influence to convey the advancing times, undistorted and diverse female images.

Secondly, this study is deeply inspired by the ideas of postmodern feminism, especially the theory of Judith Butler, who puts forward the “gender rehearsal theory”, which holds that biological

gender and social gender are the results of discourse construction. There is no preexisting biological gender [10]. It examines and expands the traditional feminist theory represented by Beauvoir and emphasizes that the female subject that modern feminism strives to construct today, because it is composed of male hegemonic discourse under the patriarchal culture, still cannot reflect the true self of women. The construction of women's subjectivity needs to deconstruct the setting and distortion of women's essential characteristics by patriarchal culture, start from women's own experience, and use women's self-talk to find the real female self. Based on these viewpoints, this paper will analyze how "*Siren: Survive the Island*" practices the theory of postmodern feminism, especially how it applies the female subject consciousness to the creation to break away from the bondage of the male-centered discourse system and directly show the multiple possibilities of women as subjects.

Finally, this study simultaneously applies the theory of audience use and satisfaction and the related theories of feminist media research. Media, as a product for the public, can be regarded as a window to observe and interpret social phenomena, and its presentation of female images and treatment of gender issues reflect the main trend of social culture to a large extent [11]. The audience has the initiative to choose and use media content and obtain satisfaction from it. Through analyzing the audience's feedback on "*Siren: Survive the Island*", the author can further understand the audience's needs and analyze their attitude towards gender issues.

4. Analysis of "*Siren: Survive the Island*"

4.1. Presentation of the Female Image

"*Siren: Survive the Island*" presents a highly subjective female image, offering the audience a new perspective on understanding women.

4.1.1. Escaping the Male-centric Discourse on Female Identity

"*Siren: Survive the Island*" forgoes the conventional choices of "vase-like" or "pale, young, and slender" guests, instead adopting an "Amazonian feminism". The show focuses on real-life female heroes, showcasing professions such as police officers and firefighters, with simple interviews, perspectives, and first-hand job footage to emphasize both professional and strength beauty. Previously sidelined strong female characters are now the main narrative focus, presenting a balance of impactful yet gentle energies through a range of relevant yet varied professions, setting the stage for multiple survival challenges.

The show identifies "muscle" and "strength" as primary survival principles, but not everyone who excels in these can move up the food chain. Power-based competitions lead to resistance battles and fierce competition, leading to in-depth discussions of strategy, individual/team character, skills, and roles that fill the narrative framework. Behind-the-scenes interviews and bloopers are supplementary, showing the participants' perspectives and problem-solving methods, emphasizing the concept of "power beauty" concept and exploring the unique contributions of contemporary women in society.

There is no mention of marital status, age, or similar in the interviews. Traditional female labels are downplayed, replaced by their professional and competitive roles, fighting only for professional honour. Unlike many women-centric shows where participants discuss balancing family and work, "*Siren: Survive the Island*" directly showcases their professional identity and strength. By choosing not to directly challenge or refute certain views, the show transcends a specific discourse, in this case, a male-centric one. Female creators and participants are able to think, exist, and act from a subjective perspective, free from defining shackles because they are not shackled by nature.

4.1.2.Bodies Presented and Controlled Freely

In “*Siren: Survive the Island*”, the female participants completely control their bodies. They use their bodies freely for work, sport and confrontation. For instance, during a wood-chopping competition, a female soldier takes off her shirt (wearing sportswear underneath), not to please a particular audience but to convey female strength through muscle and sweat. The show promotes a healthy body image; participants respect their bodies and don’t strive for perfection. Such a positive view challenges South Korea’s traditional suppression and discipline of the female body, providing a healthier, freer body perception model.

“*Siren: Survive the Island*” is very documentary-like, with a more objective and equitable filming and editing style that moves away from viewing women as sexual objects. The significant female presence in the creative team offers a unique female perspective based on women’s experiences. This ensures that specific aesthetic biases do not influence viewers, and, instead, see a genuine and holistic representation of women.

4.1.3.Direct Expression of Female Emotions

During competitions, the female participants temporarily escape societal norms by being given a free, competitive, collaborative space. Free from societal expectations of female gentleness and fragility, they can articulate their emotions and needs. Their genuine reactions, such as the unabashed desire to win or direct anger towards unfair tactics, are unembellished. If these reactions were mapped onto traditionally expected female roles, they might be seen as aggressive or inappropriate. Conversely, when associated with traditional masculine descriptors, they symbolize decisiveness, bravery, and ambition. “*Siren: Survive the Island*” presents these raw reactions, showing viewers the real emotional states of women as subjects rather than objects under scrutiny.

The female camaraderie depicted in “*Siren: Survive the Island*” contrasts with many stereotypes of female relationships. There is neither the exaggerated female rivalry often portrayed in traditional media nor the passive-aggressive behaviour that results from prolonged oppression. The show reveals positive interactions between women, including transparent competition, intricate cooperation, and support. Both the traditionally masculine attributes of bravery and decisiveness and the traditionally feminine attributes of gentleness and sensitivity coexist in the participants, suggesting that gender attributes are fluid rather than fixed.

4.2. Analysis of Audience Feedback

After collecting feedback from platforms such as IMDB, YouTube, Netflix Korea, and Douban, out of 200 comments, the majority were positive, however, a minority expressed negative views. This research collated and summarized the more representative comments presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Main audience feedback for “*Siren: Survive the Island*”.

Positive feedback	Negative feedback
1. The show is enriched and expanded the representation of women.	1. The competition format is flawed, such as homogeneous team configurations and unfair resource allocation.

Table 1: (continued).

2. The show presents women who are no longer restrained by traditional discourse, exhibiting freedom and genuine charisma.	2. The show failed to fully showcase participants' intelligence and professionalism.
3. The Show is unique in not over-emphasizing the female identity of those involved.	3. The competitive reality show has an inherent tendency towards violence, which may have a negative impact on viewers.
4. The show is practical and encourages women to bravely pursue their self-worth.	4. The structure of the competition still has not broken away from the patriarchal culture, adhering to concepts of authority and survival of the fittest.
5. High production quality with mature techniques.	

During the analysis, the author noticed that a section of the audience is hoping for the emergence of more diverse female-centric shows like *“Siren: Survive the Island”*. They believe that progressive female-centric programmes will have an educational effect, particularly on teenagers, helping to shape a broader understanding of gender roles. In addition, the show has already demonstrated its positive contemporary relevance. Many viewers have expressed that the show helped them to develop a healthier and broader sense of self and has given them more confidence in the power and value of women.

“Siren: Survive the Island”, which presents a progressive and diverse image of women, reflects to some extent today's mainstream social ideologies about female images and roles. This suggests that the contemporary perception of gender roles is continuously evolving.

4.3. Analysis of Audience Feedback

Even as *“Siren: Survive the Island”* tries to refute gender essentialism and show viewers the power and courage of women, it ignores more important issues. Feminist art historian Linda Nocklin, in identifying “why there have been no great female artists,” points out that the assumption of this question implies that “women can't be great.” “When we try to identify great female artists,” she reminds us, “we fall into the questioner's trap, implicitly reinforcing its negative implications.”

Although *“Siren: Survive the Island”* avoids the negative implications of the question “Why are there no strong female power people?” by not emphasizing gender, it still unconsciously swallows the bait of the question. While the show tries to tap into overlooked and valuable female strengtheners and bring them back into the picture, showing that women can do well in male-dominated industries, the more important question of how women are excluded from this male-centric professional system is missing.

Many people hear enough “women can do it” but forget to ask “why not.” Therefore, even if the above critique is harsh, people need to realize that only when people begin to question the existing social system can people completely shatter the argument of gender essentialism.

5. Conclusion

Based on feminist theory, social gender theory and postmodern feminist theory, combined with audience usage and satisfaction theory, this paper analyzes the innovative exploration of female subjectivity in the Korean variety show *“Siren: Survive the Island”* from both production and viewing aspects. It may provide reference strategies for the creation of subsequent programs and opportunities for audiences to re-examine traditional gender roles.

Film and television works reflect and shape society, and at the same time, they are produced under the joint action of history, social concepts, audience aesthetic needs and other factors. The exploration of female identity and subject consciousness in film and television works echoes women's efforts in real society to fight for the subject identity, which requires long-term efforts. This article calls for a more open social environment and, at the same time, appeals to the audience to be more tolerant and patient.

Whether it is the "*Siren: Survive the Island*" or other female variety shows, they walk between the audience's disappointment and expectations and also send out a kind of helpless background color, which is related to the audience's subconscious gaze and harsh criticism - people are tolerant of women, indicating that they accept their ambitions and desires, but on the other hand, they restrict them. Such vague and uncertain criteria often put the women in her show in a gray area.

With the gradual development of film and television works, more and more audiences have their self-awareness awakened in the face of complex and diverse program types, which makes the audience's personal preference for film and television works more and more obvious. When the audience's preference is exploited deeply enough, the relevant film and television works are also faced with more stringent comments and analyses. In the face of disappointing female variety shows, the audience can blame them for constantly putting clichés on the screen and can criticize their current situation of being absorbed by consumerism, but should people also pause for a moment and realize that we are sometimes so harsh that the women on screen are still trembling, unable to show the diversity and bravery that the audience has come to expect.

Finally, it must be noted that this study is based on a single variety analysis with sample limitations. The author's collection of audience feedback is also limited in quantity, which makes the research not comprehensive. Therefore, a comprehensive and in-depth study of more related variety shows and their audience feedback will be an important direction of subsequent work.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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