

# Image Construction of Neutral Idols in the Era of Social Media

## -- Regarding Neutral Idols from Youth with You 2

Yiming Yuan<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Communication, Communication University of China, Beijing, Beijing 100024, China

\*Corresponding author. Email: yym\_nicole@163.com

### ABSTRACT

Based on the current craze for neutral idols on social media, text analyses were conducted on relevant microblogs with respect to Liu Yuxin and Lu Keran, two neutral idols from Youth with you 2. It was found that their media images are characteristic of “rebellious” traditional women, seeming like men in appearance, and achieve a gender balance in temperaments, demonstrating to some extent the pursuit of gender equality by contemporary women. Nonetheless, there was also a phenomenon of over beautification, leading to stereotyped neutral female images. Some neutral idols deliberately imitated the men so that they maintained still the binary opposition between sexes. Meanwhile, a reflection on the craze for neutral idols was described and the underlying problems were explored with respect to audience psychology, market economy and macro social conditions.

**Keywords:** Neutral women, social media, media image, feminism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Research background

The number of Internet users in China has reached 940 million as of June 2020 according to the 46th China Statistical Report on Internet Development by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC). The social application has become one of the basic functions of the Internet, for example, with a utilization rate up to 40.4% [1], the social microblog has been an important platform for internet users in China to obtain and disseminate information. In the recent years, with the development of the idol cultivation show as well as an improvement of the audience's right to speak and choose during the cultivation of an idol, microblog has turned into a significant media for the publicity of programs and audience discussions. Especially during the broadcast of Youth with you 2 in 2020, there were up to 468 related hot topics on microblog and the total number of interactions between the official account of iQIYI Youth with you and general users reached 142 million times. In the meantime, many neutral female idols in the show have entered the public view as they stood out among many beautiful girls with their unique dressings attracting more attentions of the audience. Since Li

Yuchun took the crown of Super Girls' Voice in 2005, Liu Yuxin and Lu Keran made their debut from Youth with you 2, with Liu Yuxin taking a central position of the girls group, the neutral idols have been increasingly popular, and however they also bring about a lasting controversy.

### 1.2. Literature review

At present, there is no unified definition of neutral woman made by academics. Overall, the neutral women mainly presented neutral characteristics concerning both image and temperament, i. e. they not only deviated from the traditional female image in appearance, such as makeup, hairstyle, clothing and so on, namely short hair, brows and so on, but also demonstrated more traditional masculinity in temperament characteristics as self-confident, decisive, enterprising and strong in personality. Since Super Girl Li Yuchun made her debut, researches on neutral women have gradually increased in China, in multiple perspectives of feminist, sociology, psychology and media etc. For example, Jin Lujie (2012) deemed that the rise of a neutral beauty craze among modern girls groups was not only resulted from the pursuit of fashion, but also of gender equality, which indicated signs of the release of nature and awakening of subject consciousness [2]. While Chen Yanjiao (2017) held that the image of neutral women originated from the star's desire to

construct a cyber-character design appealing to both genders, thus maximized the attraction to fans, which is essentially a product of catering to market demand, fan expectations and cultural trends [3].

### 1.3. Research questions and aims

Nowadays, the neutral beauty has gradually become a fashion symbol, and neutral idols have also been popular with a large number of female fans. A large number of idol-related information has been widely disseminated in social media, such as idol performance scene, vlog of everyday life, and magazine photos. The interaction between idols and their fans was also more frequent. In this process, the relevant information of the neutral idol was selected and processed, and the images of the neutral idol were then constructed. However, what are the characteristics of neutral idols constructed on social platforms? What is the cause behind their popularity? And what practical problems exist therein?

Taking into consideration of the above problems, some micro-blog texts related to neutral idols on the microblog platform from March 12 to June 6, 2020 were analyzed using a text analysis method, taking Liu Yuxin and Lu Keran, two prominent neutral wind idols in the idol cultivation variety show *Youth with you 2*, as examples. The media image characteristics of neutral wind idols were summarized and the reasons behind the craze for neutral women were speculated in combination with results drawn from in-depth interviews.

## 2. MEDIA IMAGE OF NEUTRAL IDOL

### 2.1. Rebellious traditional female image

The traditional gender system has established a series of regulations on masculinity and femininity, which had the gender categorized as male masculine and female feminine temperaments. Neutral idols are undoubtedly “betrayal” as compared with a traditional female image. An overview of relevant microblogs had it that neutral idols appeared mostly as gender-ambiguous images, mainly with thick eyebrows and short hair. Female characteristics are not deliberately highlighted in clothing by the neutral idols as they wore a pair of trousers or flat shoes. Even in some dressings, neutral idols appeared closer to traditional male images, which are manifested as de-feminization. In microblog texts, they were described mostly as cool, handsome, personalized, or in other cross-gender words, while adjective words for traditional images, such as beautiful, cute were less used to describe neutral idols. The appearance of neutral idols caters to women’s aesthetic needs more than men. The image construction of neutral idols reflected to some extent the improvement of contemporary women’s economic status, and harsh requirements imposed on

women in the traditional female consumption era were consciously eliminated.



Figure 1 Neutral Idol Liu Yuxin

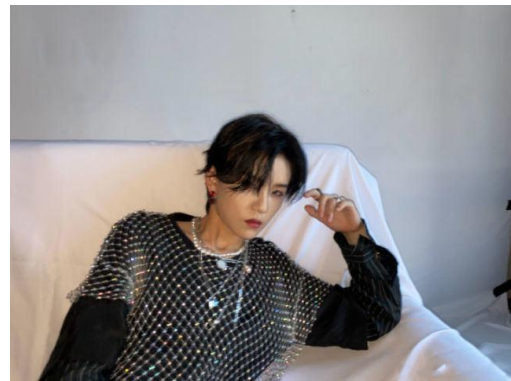


Figure 2 Neutral idol Lu Keran

The neutral idols not only deviated from a traditional aesthetic standard in appearance, but also embodied an inner personality charm. Different from the traditional femininity of being shy, weak, meek, virtuous, timid and lovable, the neutral idols realized a balance of gender temperament. As a neutral idol from social media, Liu Yuxin offered at the first time her care and comfort when his teammates were frustrated, or would be the first candidate to register when running for the center position (standing in the center of the performance stage during a performance). She might cover her face shyly when praised, or respond bravely in the face of criticism. Therefore, there are both inherent gentle and strong sides in her personality. The neutral idols exhibited more self-worth, strong confidence and courage as compared with traditional women, no long dependent on or obedient to others, showing themselves as more roles as leaders, protectors and skilled women.

It can be concluded that the neutral idols constructed in the field of social media have to a certain extent broken through stereotypical impressions made by traditional women. They achieved self-improvements by means of ‘masculine characteristics’ originally deprived of them, which not only signified their resistance to a gender relation of women’s obedience to male, but also provided

opportunities for women to make their choices as they want. In some way, it represented the expectation of a new female gender, which implies the progress of gender concepts.

## **2.2. Deified neutral women**

The image construction of neutral idols was somehow significant positively, but it does not really mean that neutral women were generally accepted by the society, on the contrary, its social value is rather limited. The neutral idol was actually rooted in a culture of the entertainment industry so that excessive beautifications would not be avoided. It is the two-way interaction occurred in social media between program authorities and fans that constructs the myth of neutral idols. The images of neutral wind idols have become a symbol of personality, courage and freedom based on traditional stars of appearance attractiveness, strong ability and good personality. The narrative logic of the media images of neutral wind idols present in social media may be described as follows: hardship suffering, being attacked, hardworking, strong and successful, with the capital power behind deliberately concealed and rather, they were portrayed as a defender for the minorities and a pioneer bravely expressing herself

However, there was a strong support from the professional public relationship team behind the perfect image of a neutral idol. In the initial stage of development, a neutral idol was doomed to be a product of meeting the market demand, and it was still the maintenance of male aesthetic under a patriarchal system dominated by today's society. The two neutral idols that made their debut in *Youth with you 2* still had the characteristics of traditional female images with a pretty oval face, beautiful slanted eyes and a slim figure. In a fashion trend driven the neutral idols, the neutral beauty has become a new means for women with an exquisite appearance to highlight their advantages of personal image and temperament. Only women catering to the traditional male aesthetic with a neutral style might be recognized by the public, while women with ordinary or poor appearances were not recognized as neutral and more likely to be regarded as aliens or even subjected to attack.

In the case of less mainstream media participation, the social media played a key role in the image construction of neutral women. The neutral idols enjoyed a huge flow, with a high efficiency of related information production and reproduction in addition to a large scale of communication which predominated over the media public opinion. The media images of neutral idols also represented the neutral wind female image to a large extent. However, the neutral idols were actually not true neutral women and they did not represent a minority either. The construction of idol images for the neutral wind resulted in a stereotyped impression of neutral

women. It was also a reconstruction of the non-mainstream culture, marginalizing the rest of the neutral women who did not possess an image of neutral idols and in the meantime, they did not have adequate communication resources to speak effectively for themselves.

## **2.3. Male imitators**

The images of neutral idols developed by social media demonstrated a tendency to deliberately imitate men so that they not only tried to have a male appearance, but also made a coarse sound. Moreover, they also assumed photographic postures, made dance movements and had daily manners like a man as they took photographs with hands put in pockets and legs crossed. In addition, social media intentionally made a CP match of each neutral idol and traditional female idol individuals. For example, the combination of Liu Yuxin and Kong Xueer was interpreted by netizens as 'the hegemonic president and his little pretty wife'. However, it is difficult for neutral idols to won public recognition when they tried to return to the traditional female style. As Liu Yuxin took over the CK underwear advertising, her appearance in the social media wearing only female underwear was not acceptable to most audiences.

Therefore, the female logic of neutral beauty represented by neutral idols is similar to that of Hua Mulan's experience. Although a neutral idol had her appearance and temperament changed, but left the logic of power unchanged, namely 'if you want to appear in social media, you can only make up like a man'. However, the classical mode of discourse 'men see, women are seen' in traditional media has been to some extent overturned with a change of the gender power situation. Relying on their political and economic resources, women began to gaze at men and the capital with film and television culture industries acting as agents [4]. Neutral idols were portrayed as perfect idols possessing positive characteristics of both men and women. To a large extent, they fit well in with ideal male spouses of contemporary women and became the gazed objects. These neutral idols were mostly imagined as a man by women. There are a large number of remarks like 'wanting to marry' and 'going to be a lesbian' in microblog texts expressed by female users, indicating there was a abnormal 'male consumption' behind. Therefore, neutral idols have not created diversified woman images; rather they still maintained the gender framework of binary opposition.

## **3. REFLECTION ON THE CRAZE FOR NEUTRAL IDOLS**

An in-depth interview method of semi-structured interview was used in the present study to analyze the causes of the neutral idol hit more comprehensively.

Three women and one man, a total of four interviewees were selected, with their viewing integrities of Youth with you 2 more than 90 % and actively participations in social platform program related discussions. The three female interviewees were designated as J, P, H respectively in this paper, with the male interviewee as X.

### ***3.1. The audience psychology behind the neutral idol***

There has been a complex audience psychology behind the craze for neutral idol. Nowadays, the traditional male-dominating power system remains unchanged, women are still yet bound by traditional gender expectations, and in most cases they choose to compromise, or even internalize the gender system as a member to preserve the gender system. Therefore, lots of female audiences project their dream into the neutral idols. They were actually pursuing their freely chosen ideal-selves when claimed to support the idols.

H: Liu Yuxin 's rebellious temperament will attract a lot of girls, since many girls cannot behave like her, who is dare to be herself, and very confident. I couldn't do that way, so I would very like to see these things happened to her and admire her courage.

It was put forward by Chizuko Ueno in the book MISOGYNY that female disgust is self-aversion, but women may not experience female disgust as self-aversion, the suitable way is regarding themselves as an exception to women [5]. On the one hand, today women have more rights to choose independently with their awakened self-consciousness and enhanced consumption capacity. On the other hand, as influenced by misogyny, women who could not improve their subjectivity choose to be 'middle', and women's competition consciousness is weaker as compared to the 'middle' women with de-feminized appearance, personality and sexual orientation. In addition, the neutral idols mentioned above have masculine temperaments. Therefore, neutral women are more popular with many female fans as compared to female idols conforming to the traditional female aesthetic, but in essence it is still affected by the gender division of patriarchal society, characterized by a tint of misogyny and the pursuit of masculinity.

J: According to their (her friends') posts in the WeChat circle of friends, the words they liked to use to describe the neutral idols was 'so handsome', 'I want to marry her' etc. In fact, I think most girls consider neutral idols from a male perspective.

P: If I had such a handsome female friend around me, my sexual orientation would have changed... I think she is too handsome, and I really want to marry her.

J: Yu Shuxin and Kong Xueer (two idols with traditional female images) are quite typical different

styles of women... I don't like Kong Xueer, since she appears particularly ambitious, and burdened with idols. As for Yu Shuxin, I didn't like her at first because she left deliberate and unnatural impressions on me, pretended to be cute.

### ***3.2. Market economy behind neutral idols***

With the development and expansion of the fan economy, the social media has become an idol marketing platform with a low threshold for requirements of information release, on the bases of numerous users and convenient interacting conditions. A large number of stars and their fans have used the microblog, bring about microblog platforms for the fans to chase their stars. The media's choice of specific issues was a result of catering to market preferences regarding the theory that the audience is commodity [6]. Neutral idols are more likely to attract audience attention for their appearance and alleviate aesthetic fatigue.

Q: When did you notice Lu Keran?

J: Right from the start. She was very impressive, might because she was quite different from other members of the traditional girls group. I didn't judge her with colored glasses, just paid more attention to her. And then it was because she's skilled, I've been following her all the time.

The audience of idol shows was mainly women, it was the Network Variety Show Audience Report 2018 to put forward that the female audience of two idol cultivation variety shows, Idol Producer and Produce 101, accounted for more than 50 % (72.3% and 55.7%, respectively), with the largest audience groups aged 19-24 and 25-34 years old respectively. In response to the needs of young female audience groups, the social media hyped neutral idols as a topic, using the difference among neutral women and the feminism color therein, symbolized the neutral idols, concealed the commodity value with a social value of neutral women, intensified the audience's preferences for neutral idols and stimulated the emotional consumption of fans. The relevant statistics demonstrated that Liu Yuxin had promoted sales of natural grain milk beverage more than 14 million boxes for a sponsor of the Youth with you 2 shows.

It can be seen from above there are enormous economic interests behind the neutral idols, so the craze for idols has turned into a new means of profit for the Chinese idol industry, a new situation of media consumption by women. Nevertheless, the domination by a patriarchal ideology was still retained concerning the social economy and politics. The deep-seated female problems were entertainment oriented under a cover of consumerism. How should the neutral women speak for themselves as a minority group after a brief boom of craze for the neutral idols?

### 3.3. Macro-society behind the neutral idol

In recent years, the number of neutral women on social media has increased with a more open social atmosphere. They not only exhibited freedom in appearance and temperament, but also inevitably associated with sexual minorities. However, they were also affected in reality by the traditional marriage concept such as 'wife' and 'mother', and it was difficult for them to obtain the recognition of their parents and the male groups. They were neither classified as the traditional male category, nor as the traditional female category. Nowadays, with a significant gender division of labor, they encountered difficulties to find employments. The gender dilemmas faced by the neutral idols were masked by their packaged images.

P: I dare not make myself a neutral girl. My parents will never agree with me taking a neutral image.

X: I absolutely don't like them. They seem to be neither male, nor female. I can't believe that they put such a wired guy in the center of a girls group!

On the contrary, although male idols have also shown a trend of feminization in appearance, the current public opinions rarely used a word of neutralization for them. The cultural labeling of gender was analyzed by Fei Tianxiang (2020), and it was claimed that the power relationship between men and women was always asymmetric. In a patriarchal society, women are labeled as heteronomy, men are positive, and a middle term between men and women would be more biased towards men [7]. Even if a man possesses female characteristics, it is difficult for him to be accepted being called 'neutral', so it can be deemed that under a gender order in a traditional society, men have stronger awareness of preserving their own authority.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Neutral women are still bound by stereotypical images and subjected to gender pressures from many aspects of society even with the presence of today's craze for neutral idols. The popularity of neutral idols demonstrate an enhancement of women's overall economic status and self-awareness, however, entertainment orientation of gender issues has impeded the in-depth thinking of women's equality, and to some extent hindered the self-expression of minority groups. The real neutral beauty requires the society as a whole to treat results of women's self-selection with a more pluralistic and open attitude, face up to the gender discourse in media issues, allow the marginalized groups more equal voice opportunities and make more room for today's feministic reflection and discussion with a highly developed consumerism. \_

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