



Research on Gender Decoding of Stand-Up Comedy in Chinese Network Communication Taking *Rock & Roast* as Example

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Abstract. Through decoding gender issues in stand-up comedy, this paper shows how gender issues are carried out in Chinese comedy programs, and how they cause social concerns. In the context of media convergence, new modes of communication and new forms of programs based on Internet platforms have attracted the attention of Chinese audiences. With the rise of feminism, different stand-up comedians start to discuss about gender equality, showing that comedy is a platform where ideas about gender can be reaffirmed, contested, or rethought. Stand-up comedians of different genders have different gender identities and perspectives. Female performers mostly use innuendo and criticism to their opinion of gender discrimination. Male performers use identity interchange and empathy to gain the respect of female audience and the recognition of male audience. These stand-up comedians have gained a lot of attention on *Rock & Roast*—one of the hottest online comedies show in China, sparking discussions on gender issues and reshaping society's gender values.

Keywords: Stand-up Comedy · Gender · Network Communication

1 Introduction

With the rapid development of new media technology, the Internet provides a place for the expression of gender opinions in society and a space for the coexistence of diverse ideas and cultures [1]. Due to the openness of Internet communication and freedom of speech, online programs represented by stand-up comedies are attracting more and more Chinese people's attention. These online programs not only induce social discussion, but also guide the values of many young people. Like the Comedy Central Roast in America, Chinese stand-up comedy *Rock & Roast*, a comedy roast battle between a group of comedians, has aroused wide discussion in society. These shows have gradually become an important platform to discuss hot social issues, including gender issues [2]. Since the *Rock & Roast* debut in 2017, its ratings have been skyrocketed. The show has been on the air for four years now, with just under 2.6 billion views for its latest season, an average of 136 million views per episode. In addition, this program was viewed more than 238 million times in seven days. On the night of the season 3 finale, this program had

garnered 44 hashtags, which became one of China's most popular stand-up comedies. Because it is so popular in China, it can well represent Chinese stand-up comedy, with typical and research value.

As a network competition program, *Rock & Roast* has selected a champion from among dozens of Chinese brilliant stand-up comedians, becoming a window for Chinese audiences to familiarize themselves with stand-up comedy. This program has the attention to the reality of the timeliness, the humour of hot spots, insight and reminder of the society, and a lot of powerful topics are associated with gender. A group of outstanding female stand-up comedians in the *Rock & Roast*, such as Yang Li and Li Xueqin, have discussed gender issues by using irony and ridicule, attracting social attention [3]. They clearly show about critical attitude to the stereotype of gender displayed in the mass media, followed by the participation of male comedians in the discussion of gender issues, giving the feminist movement a constructive direction and promoting gender equality.

When communication studies were introduced to China in the early 1980s, gender issues received little attention. At that time, Chinese people paid little attention to women's rights, and the idea that "men are superior to women" was still deeply rooted in Chinese elder people. With the development of society and the continuous introduction of Western culture, gender topic began to attract the attention of scholars. Especially in recent years, with the international community's attention to feminism, the research of female discourse and the discussion about gender issues are very popular in China. This paper will analyze the gender issues in talk shows from the perspective of *Rock & Roast*, so as to explore the development of equal rights for women in the whole Chinese society and the change of social gender concept.

2 Literature Review

Talk Show was originated from coffee shops in England in the 18th century. Later, it was introduced to small bars, night clubs and other night leisure places in the United States. In the 20th century, with the emergence of radio, television and other media, talk show had entered the public horizon, which included many types of programs, such as face-to-face interview and stand-up comedy. As a branch of talk show, stand-up comedy has early developed in Western countries. But in China, with the development of the Internet, some stand-up comedies have been introduced online and gradually attracted the attention of the society in 2010s. If the development of stand-up comedy is a forward-propagation in western countries (from offline to online), and in China it is a back-propagation (from online to offline). Different development modes have formed different social influences, so the way of measuring the communication effect in western countries are not suitable to the research of Chinese stand-up comedy.

National and international scholars have studied the media effect of stand-up comedy and a series of gender topics it caused. Foreign studies on the gender topic of stand-up comedy are relatively mature. Due to the early emergence of stand-up comedy in Western culture, Western stand-up comedians have been discussing gender issues since the 1980s, which attracted the attention of many scholars. In Marlee O'Keefe's research, she examined the use of gender roles and norms in stand-up comedy. By analyzing the

performances of three well-known stand-up comedians as examples, she argued that comedy is a platform where gender topics can be reaffirmed, debated or rethought. This analysis of the gender perspective provides a good example of Chinese stand-up comedy study. Some researchers also mentioned that male comedians are in a great number, so the discussions of gender always tend to focus on the anomalousness of female comedians [4].

With stand-up comedy becoming more and more popular in China, the number of Chinese research, related to stand-up comedy, has gradually increased in the past two years [5]. In Wan Qianqian's research, she studied the influence of stand-up comedy in China and considered that stand-up comedy has two seemingly contradictory characteristics: entertaining and reflective [6]. Every speech given by stand-up comedians is an "entertaining reflection" which is meaningful to the society. The scholar Bu Wei sorted out the propagation process of feminism in China and put forward three analytical frameworks with the help of the concept of "theoretical travel" – transmission mode + women, cultural research and communication activism research. He found that gender theory is always at the centre of each framework [7]. This paper is significant to the media communication of gender issues in China.

However, most of researches are based on the communication effects of stand-up comedy or feminism, but few of them discuss gender issues through the influence of stand-up comedy and its media effect. In addition, the current discussions on the gender topic of stand-up comedy in China are often related to female stand-up comedians, and less attention is paid to male speakers. In Xue Jing's research, she found that female stand-up comedians use women's unique perspective to discuss the construction of female image in their creation, which promotes the construction of feminism in China [8]. Her paper tends to be based on the feminist perspective, with little consideration given to the male perspective [4]. At the same time, her research only summarizes and analyzes the characteristics of the verbal expression, without much research on the non-verbal expression of the stand-up comedians. Some suggestive statements and behaviours about gender are also noteworthy [9]. At present, the research on the gender topic of Chinese stand-up comedy is still not deep enough. Therefore, this paper takes *Rock & Roast* as the research object, using case analysis to discuss the communication effects in gender of stand-up comedy. Through the verbal and non-verbal analysis of Chinese stand-up comedians, the purpose of this paper is to decode the gender topic in stand-up comedy, which can fill in the missing research part of gender topic in China. At the same time, it explores how to break gender opposition through media communication in the context of the Internet.

3 Results and Discussion

Since stand-up comedy was first spread on the Internet, this kind of stand-up comedies subverts the discourse expression of traditional TV programs in terms of discourse construction, emphasizing the concise expression of viewpoints. This sharp and bold speech expression, firstly expressed on the gender topic. In the latest season of *Rock & Roast*, there is an interesting phenomenon that "gender topics" has taken up half of all performances, and the most popular jokes are always about gender. Many stand-up

comedians have gained a lot of attention by using the “art of offense” to make fun of gender issues. As soon as some gender issues were aired, they quickly won the approval of many female audiences. Because of this, some gender topics have aroused debates on gender antagonism in society, quickly becoming sensitive topics in China. Some topics have even sparked online violence. In addition, male and female stand-up comedians show gender differences in theme choice, identity setting, verbal and non-verbal expression [10]. Male stand-up comedians often construct “bystander identity” to express their understanding of women, or they stand on “Woman noble and man humble” situation to discuss gender power structure. Female stand-up comedians often create typical female images from a female perspective, and they criticize the “conventional” phenomenon in society based on their identity as “feminist fighters”, which arouses the audience’s thinking and resonating (especially for female audiences).

3.1 Gender Decoding of Female Comedians

In recent years, female stand-up comedians have begun to “emerge” in China. While women’s discourse has received wide attention from the society, they are also participating in multiple social issues and delivering positive female values. Yang Li, Yan Yi and Yan Yue, are the three female comedians explored in this study. They were the most popular female performers on the latest edition of *Rock & Roast*. By analyzing their topic setting, performance style and language characteristics, it is easily to find out the common feature of female comedians and the social influence that is different from male performers. For female comedians, their own feelings about gender issues can easily be changed into sharp perspective about social gender structures. They attack conventional gender opinions in a playful way, showing the special value of women as female comedians.

Many female stand-up comedians focus and examine men from a female perspective. They take the initiative in coding, pay attention to gender issues and establish discourse authority through their own speech. Yang Li is called “Man-hating Comedian”, who rose to fame after competing in the Rock and Roast. Her most famous joke, proclaiming “men can be so confident yet so average,” became one of the most used memes among Chinese feminist netizens in 2020. The female characters in Yang’s performances can be roughly divided into two categories: one is her portrayal of herself in the performance text, and the other is her observation and contact with women in daily life. Yang Li’s performance symbol strategy and “frame breaking” narration solidified the image of “weak woman” and “strong man”, and then she changed the image into “strong woman” and “problem man” through unreliable narration and plot techniques, forming an offensive text against traditional male gender roles. She is also good at using “black humour”, presenting her funny experiences to the audience with exaggerated expressions, making the audience think about gender discrimination while laughing. While “criticizing men”, she constructed an independent, confident and intelligent female image and conveyed positive female values. But some male audiences think Yang’s performance as exaggerating gender differences in order to resonate emotionally with contemporary women. She turned gender harmony into gender antagonism by dwarfing the male, which also has a negative effect on the construction of female image in China.

In this online program, the female comedians also pay attention to the expression of female discourse and tell stories based on the principle of “women need to care for themselves”. It is easy to find that female stand-up comedians are looking for common points in daily life that cause anger and dissatisfaction. They make a personalized interpretation of events and phenomena and take the initiative to shape the image of “spokesmen” of female groups beyond the limitations of age, region and education level. Quite different from Yang Li’s sharp style, Yan Yi & Yan Yue—the “twin sisters”, have won the audience’s favour by using “innuendo” and the unique form of “duet”. They always appear on the stage with their youthful and beautiful appearance, refuting the trendiest opinions with gentle expressions. Their presentations range from gender discrimination in the workplace to marital issues and even wearing to present gender issues. They always hit the nail on the head: “Men always relegate housework to women. Are men bad at cleaning? But the guys on legal news can easily clean up crime scenes!” They start from small details and communicate with the audience face to face. Which is a process of emotional transmission, allowing the audience to immerse themselves in the event and establish a sense of group identity.

3.2 Gender Decoding of Male Comedians

In the fourth season of *Rock & Roast*, it has been noticeable that more and more male stand-up comedians are willing to address gender issues and express their views. Firstly, some male stand-up comedians think about how to express the view of gender discrimination through a male perspective. Wang Mian is one of them, who puts gender issues into a part of his performance. On the stage, he always uses his guitar to attract the audience’s attention and shows his opinions by singing. “I’m a man, no cry, no birthday.” He portrayed himself as a “male chauvinist”, installing cabinets without reading instructions, opening wine without a corkscrew, and pretending to know how to teach others. He interprets the male stereotype from a male perspective, giving us a pitiful and funny image of a man who is afraid to be weak, afraid to admit defeat, afraid to be emotional. “Men are also oppressed by male chauvinism.” Wang Mian’s performance exaggerates this point. What kind of behaviour are men supposed to exhibit? Is it masculine? It seems that Wang Mian is telling a story about men, but his core content is the same as the female performers mentioned above, which is still about gender discrimination. The male stand-up comedians acknowledge the privileges men have gained. They point out that as the gender gap deepens, gender discrimination will also increasingly restrict men’s rights. They finally settled on the expectation of gender equality and gender liberation.

In addition, some male stand-up comedians construct a micro-ecology of “female superior and male inferior” and reveal the absurdity of social division of labour according to gender roles through the comedic effect brought by the inversion of gender roles. For example, a male comedian talked about his experience of being a Stay-at-home dad, finding that the “traditional motherhood” job was so tiring and difficult to obtain financial income and respect from his wife. This reveals an alarming problem with the gender power structure: put a man in a woman’s place and he becomes a woman. This “perspective-taking” approach has also become a highlight for male stand-up comedians. Empathy not only resonates with the female audience, but also demonstrates for the male audience how to properly deal with gender issues and avoids the gender confrontation.

What's more, some male stand-up comedians even use non-verbal methods to address gender issues. In the *Rock & Roast*, Xu Zhisheng, the male performer, established an "ugly man" to criticize the abnormal aesthetics of "Nancy boy" – who are having qualities, or an appearance traditionally associated with women, especially delicacy and prettiness. He poked fun at his own appearance – slender eyes, dark skin and a curl of hair stuck to his head, establishing the values ("I'm ugly but I'm confident") and advocating a diverse aesthetic. From a male perspective, he called on people not only to pay attention to the appearance but also to the inner beauty. By the rise of feminism, Xu Zhisheng's criticism of "sissy culture" also defends a certain male status. Male stand-up comedians' discussion of gender issues based on their male identities can also resonate with female audiences, but sometimes they will be opposed by other male groups in the society.

4 Conclusion

Stand-up comedy is a language art, more than entertainment, which is a realistic creation, becoming a way for people to discuss gender issues. Both male and female stand-up comedians have exerted a certain influence on society, making audiences pay attention to gender discrimination. In China, stand-up comedy, as an import of Western culture, was not valued by the public at the beginning, but with the development of Internet technology, numerous online varieties shows began to spread, and stand-up comedy, as one of the performance forms, has attracted public attention in recent years. In this humorous way, stand-up comedians change complex social problems into "jokes", making these sharp social problems easier to accept, triggering a change in gender discourse.

Male and female stand-up comedians play different roles in the discussion of gender issues. Female stand-up comedians often take the female perspective as a breakthrough to explore the unfair treatment of women in a disadvantaged position, finding it easy to connect emotionally with female audiences through storytelling. Some female comedians have even created gender-defying phrases to entitle "Women speak." However, the gender discussion by male stand-up comedians, whether it is the construction of the world of "women being superior to men" or the gender role exchange, has formed the reflection and resistance to the male gaze and the against to traditional gender order. Whether male or female, everyone is at risk of being "gender weak", being treated unfairly due to stereotyped notions of gender. In the era of rising female consciousness, as an online stand-up comedy show—*Rock & Roast* shows its sense of responsibility as a mass media through media texts with resistance consciousness. To some extent, this program promoted the establishment of a non-antagonistic and harmonious space between male and female. But at the same time, there are also excessive interpretation of gender topics, resulting in gender opposition and social conflicts, female images in the construction process of the lost value and other problems. In addition, network communication which helps the rapid dissemination of information has accelerated the generation of social conflicts. Therefore, based on different media communication effects and cultural development modes, there is still a long way to go for the discussion of gender issues in Chinese stand-up comedy.

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