

# *Power, Body and Media Image: Reflections on the Phenomenon of "Netflix Grandmothers" from Feminist Perspective*

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**Abstract:** In the past two years, a group of "netflix grandmothers" have become popular with their distinctive personal images and unique communication contents and styles, becoming a rising force in the netizen team. This paper adopts the case study method and participant observation method to analyze "Grandma Wang who only wears high heels" in TikTok from three dimensions: female discourse, female body and female media image. The study finds that the online celebrity grandmothers reflect that women's discourse power has been enhanced in the new media era, but there are still problems of lack of discourse power and alienation; netflix grandmothers are no different from ordinary online celebrities except for their age, and their bodies are objectified and regulated; netflix grandmothers show a more diversified image of older women, which helps to break stereotypes, but it should be realized that under the influence of technology, capital and patriarchal culture, the appearance of elderly women has been changed from "obscured" to "partially presented" under the empowerment of short video technology.

## **1. Introduction**

In the era of traditional media such as newspapers and television, the majority of older women are in the "object" position, lacking the right to speak for a long time, and the overall image of women is characterized by absence, passivity and stereotypes [1]. Gaye Tuchman's "symbolic extinction theory" emphasizes the relative lack of portrayal and attention to women in the mass media, and points out that the root cause of the "extinction" and neglect of women's existence is that the mass media is a vehicle for reflecting the mainstream values of society, while women in a patriarchal society are usually presented as subordinate, marginal and passive. Coupled with the "digital divide" and other reasons, it is difficult for people to understand the real situation of the female group, which leads to the further deepening of the stereotype of older women, and the phenomenon of older women being "stigmatized" and "labeled" persists in the society.

The rapid development of new media technology has provided a possibility to solve the problem of "loss of language" and "stigmatization" and "labeling" of older women in the communication system. Short video technology has further lowered the threshold of content production, and its own features such as simple equipment and easy operation has enabled more and more elderly women to share their lives and express themselves skillfully and freely. According to the "China Silver Hair

Economy Insight Report 2021" released by Quest Mobile, the size of China's silver hair users exceeds 60 million, and the Internet usage rate is over 20%, and short video APPs are favored by silver hair people.

In the past two years, "Netflix grandmothers", represented by "Grandma Wang who only wears high heels", have emerged like a mushroom, trying to grasp the right to speak and dominate, breaking the stereotypical image of elderly women portrayed in the media through their exquisite makeup, elaborate clothing and elegant physique. They try to break the stereotypical image of older women portrayed in the media, and provide young women with advice on love and marriage as "past generations", expound on life philosophies, encourage women to live their own lives without fear of age, and promote the awakening of women's consciousness, which has a significant impact on women's survival and development. However, what cannot be ignored is that the hidden but strong intervention of male power culture, visual culture and consumerist culture also unconsciously restrict the presentation of older women's image and rational expression of feminism, resulting in the alienation of women's discourse and the objectification and regulation of women's bodies.

Among the relevant literature searched, firstly, there are few studies that use feminist perspective as an entry point to explore short videos, and most of them focus on the image of women in short video platforms; secondly, the current research mainly focuses on the phenomenon of young netizens, At present, research is mainly focused on the phenomenon of young netizens, and there is a lack of research on the phenomenon of "silver-haired netizens". Therefore, this paper adopts the participant observation method and case study method to study "Grandma Wang who only wears high heels" in TikTok as the object of research, and adds the dimension of media image to the existing literature on the study of discourse and body. In this paper, we choose "Grandma Wang, who only wears high heels" as the research object mainly for the following reasons: (1) Grandma Wang has more than 15 million followers in TikTok, and in three months, she set a record of 5.37 million yuan in single sales, which is more representative and typical; (2) The theme of the short video content posted by Grandma Wang is more closely related to feminism, which is in line with the research question of this paper.

## **2. Female Discourse: Elevation and Alienation**

French sociologist Michel Foucault believes that discourse and power are one and the same. Women's discourse is the comprehensive embodiment of women's interests, claims, qualifications and their free power, which not only contains the hidden identity of women's speech and the status and power of their claims, but also depends on the effective social environment, expression mechanism and subjective qualification of a discourse, and directly expresses women's grasp of the state of self-reality and the flow of the corresponding subjective state of mind. The construction of women's discourse is an important symbol to measure the equality between men and women.

### **2.1. The Promotion of Women's Right to Speak**

In the era of traditional media such as newspapers and television, there is a serious lack of women's right to speak. This is reflected in the fact that the number of male and female practitioners in the media industry varies a lot, decision-making power is mainly in the hands of men, female practitioners are hard to control the selection of news topics and other content, etc. On the other hand, normal women lack channels for expression and are "shaped by others".

The rise of new media has provided the possibility to improve women's voice power. The "body expression" characteristics and simple and easy-to-operate technical features of the short video have enabled marginalized elderly women to speak up, greatly increased the opportunities for self-expression, and weakened men's absolute control over the right to speak. Moreover, more and more elderly women have entered the public's field of vision, moving from behind the scenes to the front

of the stage. With the open recommendation strategy by TikTok, “Netflix Grandmothers”, with “Grandma Wang who only wears high heels” as an example, have received widespread attention and set off waves of traffic myths on the Internet. They not only greatly expanded the influence of discourse power, but also gained a certain social status and social influence by that. The fact that “Netflix Grandmothers” quickly became popular and attracted countless fans in a short period of time, to a certain extent, is the result of the social environment and new media technology giving women more voice, which reflects contemporary women's pursuit and practice of equality between men and women.

## **2.2. The Lack and Alienation of Women's Right to Speak**

The rapid changes in network communication technology and the technological dividends brought about by the empowerment of new media seem to herald the arrival of a carnival era, in which the relationship between men and women is reconstructed and women have the right to speak. However, some scholars pointed out that the development of modern communication technology only provides conditions for the improvement of women's self-awareness and the bridging of the gender gap in theory and technology. The expression of women in the media is actually a 'utopia' for women's right to speak [2]. There are still problems of absence and alienation here.

First of all, "everyone has a microphone" is just an illusion. Similar to the traditional media era, the right to speak is still concentrated in the hands of a few people, that is, "Internet celebrities". However, these “Internet celebrities” mainly have MCN (Multi-Channel Network) agencies providing services such as publicity and promotion, monetization and sales behind [3]. Most female top users also establish their image and express themselves under the guidance of MCN. Due to the constant compromise manipulated by male culture in the commercial interests and the Internet media, it in fact has strengthened the stereotypes of femininity, which will also affect the rational expression of female key users. Secondly, the development of the Internet has not promoted the formation of an equal space for dialogue between men and women. Instead, women's voices have been submerged in the carnival of body consumption time again and again. Thirdly, "Grandma Wang who only wears high heels" often placed advertisements in the later stage. The placement of advertisements challenged the loyalty of the audience to a certain extent, weakened the power of her female voice, and also posed a threat to her right to speak. Finally, as a commercial platform, TikTok has a strong entertainment attribute, where the fragmented and entertaining narrative makes it difficult to form in-depth discussions, and the short video content of “Netflix Grandma” such as Grandma Wang also stays on discussion about emotions questions. This causes the problem of superficiality and lack of attention to public affairs. If women spend a lot of time browsing entertainment content, it will inevitably squeeze women's attention to public affairs. Coupled with personalized recommendations, women's discourse domain will be narrowed. In the long run, the narrower discourse domain will affect the overall development of the individual.

## **3. Female Body: Be Objectified and Disciplined**

For feminist scholars, the body has always been an important topic. From foreign corsets to China's “three-inch golden lotus” then to modern high-heeled shoes, women's bodies have never been controlled by themselves. Under the influence of consumer culture and visual culture, the problem of women's bodies being objectified and disciplined has become increasingly prominent.

### **3.1. Materializing the Body and Manipulating Consumption**

Patriarchy has spawned a consumerist culture in which women are treated like commodities. In

the short video by Grandma Wang, it mentioned "Girls, you raise yourself so expensively, don't be cheap to those bastards!". Here, the prices of vegetables are compared to the value of girls, thinking that "you get what you pay for", which promotes the idea that "women with expensive packaging are more expensive". This is clearly objectifying women's bodies. In addition, one of the important characteristics of visual culture is the commercialization of the body. Grandma Wang's "carefully packaged body" has become a key element in forming a visual impact. In the visual feast, the female body has become the most beautiful consumer goods, and the landscape of the body has also been pushed to the extreme.

As Baudrillard said in "Consumer Society", "(Show windows, advertisements, production company names and trademarks) are no longer a series of simple goods, but a series of meanings, because they imply more complex high-end goods and are connected with each other which makes consumers generate a series of more complex motives." To simplify, consumption is no longer based on the actual use value of the commodity, but on the symbolic meaning of the commodity. Grandma Wang symbolizes her body as exquisite, elegant and beautiful. When the audience watches related videos, they will have a yearning for her "frozen age beauty". For example, we can often see comments like "hope to also be as exquisite and beautiful as Grandma Wang when getting old". Grandma Wang materialized the "frozen age beauty" into various skin care products and cosmetics, so as to achieve the purpose of guiding or manipulating women to pay for their "body" crazily. As Delia said, "Beauty has become a religious absolute imperative for women." When women buy cosmetics and clothing almost crazily, they have been completely manipulated by the consumer society which sells the "frozen age beauty" symbol.

### **3.2. Disciplined Female Body**

"Discipline" is a core concept proposed by French scholar Michel Foucault in his book "Discipline and Punish". Discipline is the technology and means of modern power operation, and its core feature is standardization. From the perspective of feminism, the social construction of women's bodies belongs to the invisible discipline and gaze that women receive in the entire patriarchal society. It is a phenomenon that people are accustomed to hidden in women's daily life [4].

The development of new media technology and the enhancement of women's independence and autonomy have not brought substantial benefits to "women's body liberation". For example, Grandma Wang used "only wear high heels" as one of her labels, but high heels, which have been popular for a long time, are essentially a reflection of the restraint and discipline of women's bodies by patriarchal culture. Unknowingly, women's bodies have become objects for power manipulation. In addition, Grandma Wang, as an Internet celebrity with tens of millions of fans, seems to have taken the initiative, but she has unknowingly become a follower of the "aesthetic standards" shaped by consumer society and male culture. In addition to her 81-year-old age factor, Grandma Wang is actually no different from other Internet celebrities in appearance. They all have big eyes, tall nose bridge, fair and smooth skin, and delicate oval face, etc. Behind Grandma Wang's "beauty", it is the forced expropriation of a certain standard, which has a complex historical nature and is inseparable from the content described in discipline, norms, and punishment [5]. When acquiring "beauty", women's subjectivity as human beings is also deprived. As Nietzsche said, "Male creates the image of woman for himself, while female imitates this image to create herself."

### **4. Women's Media Image: Multiple Images and Being Partially Realistic Presentation**

At present, there is no unified definition of media image, and in reality, there are mainly two dimensions in the study of media image: one is the image of media organization itself; the other is the image of people or things in the media. The media image of older women referred to in this paper

is the image of older women in the media. However, since the mass media is not mapping the social reality, but constructing the "reality". Therefore, for a long time, the media reproduction of elderly women has been branded with strong gender bias, and their media images have the problems of "stereotyping" and "stigmatization".

#### 4.1. Showing Multiple Images and Breaking Stereotypes

Robert N. Butler introduced the concept of Ageism in 1969, which refers to the view that older people are socially or physically weaker, stemming from the stereotypes that holders have about older people. In contemporary culture, women's sexual attraction to men is also always associated with age, as embodied by the terms 'lady of a certain age' and 'yellow-faced woman'. To many women, the implication of being 'old' is inevitably perceived as damage to their self-worth and evidence of the need for change, which is both a macro-level ageism and a devaluation of women's value.

The 81-year-old Grandma Wang, who wears red lips and high heels, can dance and carry goods, and the 78-year-old Chenchen's Grandma, who loves to wear Chinese costumes, jerk off and go shopping, both subvert and break a series of stereotypes and social prejudices shaped by the traditional media era, such as those who surround their children and grandchildren, are unwilling to accept new things and lack social value as the disadvantaged, expressing an attitude of fearless age and showing a confident and optimistic, exquisite and elegant. The image of elderly women who are confident and optimistic, exquisite and elegant, energetic and wise, inspires women to live their own lives without fear of age and promotes the awakening of women's consciousness, which has a significant impact on the survival and development of women.

#### 4.2. From "Obscured" to "Partially Realistic"

In the era of traditional media such as newspapers and TV, the real image of older women was "obscured" due to the "digital divide" and stereotypes. Some studies have found that urban newspapers mainly portray negative images of the elderly and often portray them as "beneficiaries" and vulnerable [6]. Other scholars point out that in TV dramas, the image of elderly women is also often portrayed as the stereotypical image of grumpy, brutal and stubborn, and emotionally out of control [7].

The new media platforms such as TikTok provide a free platform for elderly women to show themselves, and its short, flat and fast video characteristics provide the possibility of embedding elderly women's life scenes with a microscopic perspective, which greatly enriches the image of new elderly women. However, it should be noted that the image established and the thematic content expressed by the creators of elderly women's self-media are also selected, and their choices are influenced by various factors such as capital, technology and patriarchal culture. The process of establishing the persona of the Netflix grandmother is also the process of symbolizing oneself, and the Netflix grandmother is carefully packaged by MCN companies as a "senior female image commodity". Therefore, the image of elderly women in TikTok may be alienated and one-sided, and the face of elderly women is empowered by short video technology to change from being "obscured" to being "partially presented", rather than being fully and absolutely true.

### 5. Conclusions

Old age and gender are the double shackles of older women, who are unable to have an equal and excellent cultural environment and find their own positive discourse position in the mainstream culture, which not only deepens the lack of older women's discourse, but also deepens the marginalized position of older women in the society and culture [8-11]. The booming development



of the Internet and the rapid progress of new media technology have provided the possibility to change the phenomenon of "aphasia" and "stigmatization" and "stereotyping" of elderly women. Grandma Wang, who only wears high heels, has made a useful attempt to break the stereotypes and build a new image of elderly women, which has brought the society's attention to diversified voices and different elderly women, and played a role in the pursuit of gender equality and the awakening of women's consciousness [9-15]. They have contributed to the pursuit of gender equality and the awakening of women's consciousness. However, it cannot be ignored that the hidden but strong intervention of male power culture, visual culture and consumerism culture also unconsciously restrict the presentation of older women's image and the rational expression of feminism, resulting in the alienation of women's discourse and the objectification and regulation of women's bodies [16-20].

In addition, regarding this phenomenon, I think there are five other issues that deserve attention. First, the fan base of "Grandma Wang who only wears high heels" is mainly young women, catering mainly to the needs of young people, so what are the real needs of older women? And who will satisfy them? Secondly, with the covert and powerful intervention of capital and male culture, the relationship inside and outside the field becomes more complicated, and falls into the trap of commercial hype, the original purpose of raising women's awareness will inevitably be dissipated, and the role of raising women's voice and challenging traditional social gender positioning will be weakened. Third, we need to be wary of a phenomenon: driven by commercial interests, short video platforms such as ShakeYin may emerge more and more "Netflix grandmothers" with a "sophisticated and elegant" style, we need to be wary of excessive anti-stereotypes, we should also be wary of defining new stereotypes under anti-stereotypes at the same time. Fourth, in the short video work of "Grandma Wang who only wears high heels", "exquisite elegance" is equated with various skin care products and cosmetics, but I think that true exquisite elegance is not made of materials, but from the inside out, long-term accumulation of a temperament. The so-called "exquisite elegance" is just a fashion charm myth created by the mass media and commercial capital. Fifth, at present, there are still hidden gender inequalities in the real society, and there is still a long way to go before the gender is fully equal. In this process, how to give full play to the role of new media in building a gender-equal society and guide users to think rationally is an issue worth further study.

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