

Role Reconstruction and Rhetorical Tactics: A Study on "Her Narrative" Strategies in Stand-Up Comedy

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Abstract: In recent years, stand-up comedy has emerged as a critical public discourse space for women to address gender issues. This study examines female narrative performances in Chinese domestic stand-up comedy shows, focusing on the specific practices of role reconstruction and rhetorical tactics employed by female stand-up comedians. The findings reveal that female stand-up comedy narratives deconstruct traditional gender roles and construct new identities, transitioning from the "Other" to the "Subject." By embedding irony, metaphor, and parody into their narratives, stand-up comedians articulate critical discourse through humor. Under the guise of entertainment, these narratives engage in social critique, blending resistance and negotiation in their logic. This offers novel insights into understanding gendered discourse practices within media contexts.

1. Introduction

Stand-up comedy originated in the United States and became popular in the United States in the 1960s. Domestic stand-up comedy started later and were introduced into China in the 1990s[1]. Driven by both media technology innovation and the reconstruction of public discourse, the entertainment form of stand-up comedy has presented unique cultural tensions in the process of localization in China, in which female comedians have challenged the traditional gender order through humorous narratives, and their remarks have attracted widespread attention. On the one hand, with the proliferation of the MeToo movement and the publicization of feminist discourse, gender experiences that have long been in the private sphere are in urgent need of public discussion. On the other hand, the "she-economy" generated by Internet platforms has pushed the entertainment industry to reposition female audiences, providing female creators with media opportunities to break away from the traditional paradigm of expression. With its "offensive art" quality, stand-up comedy has built a threshold space between entertainment consumption and social criticism. This "safe offense" mechanism avoids the cultural resistance that may be triggered by direct confrontation, and at the same time accomplishes the "soft landing" of gender political discourse with emotional resonance as a bond.

With the rise of women's social status, education level and economic capacity, women's images are more and more presented in variety shows, and women's issues are increasingly emphasized by society and public opinion[2]. In the social context of gender role transition, this study aims to

explore how female stand-up comedians realize identity transformation through narratives and how they make use of rhetorical tactics to balance the narrative strategies of entertainment appeal and social criticism, in order to illustrate women's discourse practice of seeking a balance between cultural taboos and expressive efficacy. On a practical level, this study provides strategic references for the creative expression of public issues in the new media era.

2. Role Reconstruction: Narrative Transition from the "Other" to the "Subject"

In the traditional order of gender discourse, women are often constructed as the silent "other" - the object to be watched, defined and spoken. In the public discourse of stand-up comedy, female stand-up comedians deconstruct traditional gender roles and construct a new type of identity, gradually realizing the identity shift from the "other to be spoken" to the "subject to be spoken". This narrative shift is a cultural practice of gender equality and an attempt to reconstruct the power structure of public discourse space.

2.1 Deconstructing Traditional Gender Roles: Humor as a Weapon of Critique

Humor, through its capacity to entertain and mediate social interactions, reflects lived realities and serves as a historical footnote to specific eras. Satirical, sharp humor often carries profound social and cultural significance [3]. Psychologist Martin and others divide humor into several types, which are affinity type, self-improvement type, ridicule type, and self-deprecation type[4]. Female stand-up comedians situate traditional gender norms in absurd contexts. For instance, Yang Li's term "average yet confident men" critiques male overconfidence and gender power dynamics by subverting the male gaze. Si Wen deconstructs topics like marriage and female independence with classic lines such as "husbands and wives are bunkmates" and "shedding tears of independence," transforming personal experiences into public discourse. In her show "My Middle-Aged Woman Era", Xiao Lu tackles age anxiety by satirizing societal expectations: "Now, the standard for complimenting youth is pretending someone doesn't look 30, as if 30 were an expiration date." Such narratives expose gendered double standards and convert individual struggles into symbols of collective resistance.

In the narrative framework of traditional comedy, women's intimate experiences are often lost. Humor systems dominated by the male perspective often reduce physiological experiences such as menstruation and childbirth to superficial gags, for example, female characters in sketches commonly use exaggerated body movements to portray "menstrual cramps", which in fact reinforces the stereotype of female weakness. Female stand-up comedians, on the other hand, use rhetorical interpretation to make public what is considered a private experience. With the sharp analogy of "tampons are not bread, but some people's brains may really be made of flour", Xiao Lu transforms the issue of menstruation from a private taboo into a social critique, using humor to deconstruct the cognitive ignorance behind the stigmatization of menstruation. It is worth noting that self-deprecation in talk show women's narratives is not a simple emotional catharsis, but a reconstruction of the cognitive framework through carefully designed rhetorical tactics, transforming private experiences into narrative resources of public value, so that the audience can empathize and reflect on them in laughter.

2.2 Constructing New Identities: Triple Breakthroughs in Body, Career, and Discourse

The word "identity" is originally derived from the Latin word "idem", which means "same" or "identical". It then evolved into the English word "identity". Subsequently, it gradually evolved into the English word "identity", which is used to express an individual's or group's perception of their

own identity or sense of belonging in a specific cultural or social context. In the 1960s, with the rise of homosexuality, minorities, and feminism, various cultural groups began to actively strive for social recognition of their respective identities, which pushed the development of identity in the field of sociology. In this process, the concept of identity was gradually defined as the recognition by individuals of the identity of the group to which they belong[5].

Female stand-up comedians reconstruct identity through body narratives, professional roles, and discourse ownership. For example, Si Wen's early jokes about marital fatigue ("bunkmate" metaphors) masked suppressed emotional pain, but post-divorce, she openly addressed her struggles, embodying a dynamic interplay of resistance and negotiation. Niao Niao discusses social anxiety: "I avoid eye contact with men—afraid they'll think I'm flirting or being rude"—highlighting the "gaze discipline" women face and fostering collective recognition. Bu Jingyun shifts from a "marriage-dependent" to a "career-oriented" identity, stating, "I'd rather attend entrepreneur summits than dating shows," redefining labels like "housewife" and "single" as critiques of economic independence. Xiao Lu reframes age anxiety as a "badge of life experience," transcending mere comedy to forge new identity paradigms. The statement goes beyond mere comedic entertainment to construct a new type of identity.

3. Rhetorical Tactics: Critical Discourse under the Guise of Humor

Narrative rhetoric plays a pivotal role in storytelling. The character construction, emotional conveyance, and value transmission of a story all depend on the author's invocation of narrative rhetorical devices and techniques [6]. As an arena of public discourse, the language of stand-up comedy is not only a tool of entertainment, but also a weapon of power struggle. Through irony, metaphor, parody and other rhetorical tactics, female stand-up comedians navigate the boundary between "offense and safety", challenging the traditional gender order while skillfully avoiding the risks of censorship and public opinion.

3.1 Irony: Semantic Subversion of Patriarchal Discourse

As a rhetorical strategy, irony creates a critical tension between "signifier" and "signified" through the dramatic expression of surface semantics and deeper intentions. This kind of linguistic art intellectually challenges the traditional order of discourse and is a kind of contextualised power play - when the stand-up comedians states seemingly objective facts in a calm tone of voice, the subtext is like a sharp blade cutting through the invisible veil of social structure. Ironical humour is not only a linguistic skill, but also a contextual setting that brings unexpected artistic pleasure to the reader[7]. For instance, Yang Li's phrase "average yet confident men" ostensibly describes individual traits but covertly satirizes the blind superiority ingrained in male groups under structural privilege. This segment sparked widespread debate on Weibo under the hashtag #Who Exactly Did Yang Li Offend#, with supporters hailing it as a feminist awakening and critics condemning it as "inciting division," thereby demonstrating irony's disruptive power over entrenched hierarchies. Similarly, Niao Niao's joke about her father's disappointment at her birth—"he cried louder than me"—superficially narrates a personal anecdote while exposing the systemic oppression of son preference. By cloaking critique in humor, irony enables gender issues to bypass didactic barriers and enter mainstream discourse. Ironical rhetoric needs to construct multiple semantic protection nets in its narratives, maintaining entertainment at the surface level to break through the censorship barrier, and embedding solid value anchors at the deeper level to keep the critical kernel stable in different communication arenas.

3.2 Metaphor: Cognitive Shifts in Reconstructing Female Experience

Metaphor, as a rhetorical tactic, bridges symbolic signs and lived experiences to translate abstract mechanisms of societal oppression into tangible cognitive schemas, thereby covertly embedding critical discourse within humorous narratives. In gender discourse, metaphors circumvent direct confrontation while evoking visceral reflections on structural oppression. For example, the Female stand-up comedians Yan Yi and Yan Yue's "twin wardrobes" metaphor—"society offers women choices like twin wardrobes: two sets of clothes that are essentially identical"—concretizes patriarchal discipline through everyday objects. Here, the wardrobe transcends its physical function, becoming a microcosm of cultural norms. Binary labels like "virtuous wife" and "independent woman" are revealed as variations of the same gendered script. By miniaturizing macro power structures into relatable scenarios, this strategy facilitates cognitive leaps from individual experiences to systemic critique. Excellent gender narratives often need to construct a multi-layered network of metaphorical meanings, preserving local cultural qualities while injecting universal emotional connectors.

3.3 Parody: Body Politics against Stigmatization

As a rhetorical practice of cultural resistance, parody, through playful imitation, puts the mainstream discourse of gender regulation under the spotlight of absurdity, realizing the reproduction of critical discourse in the tension of deconstruction and reconstruction. The subversive efficacy of parody is based on Butler's theory of gender manipulation. When female comedians reconstruct gender performances through deliberately exaggerated body symbols such as rolling their eyes and shrugging their shoulders, they are essentially engaging in "critical reenactment"—repeating and distorting existing gender scripts, revealing the so-called "gender" of the stand-up comedians. By repeating and distorting existing gender scripts, they reveal that the so-called "natural" gender identity is actually a product of cultural construction. Stand-up comedian Xiao Lu "Menstrual Shame" mimics men's avoidance of sanitary napkins in a pompous tone, with comments such as, "That...that...bread...for you girls?" It reproduces society's stigmatizing narrative of the female body. Through dramatic reproduction, the originally repressed taboo is transformed into collective laughter, dissolving the shackles of "shame" on the topic of the physical body. While subverting the stigmatized discourse, the parody may be undermined by the consumption of entertainment, such as the pop-up screen brushstrokes "I can't live to laugh anymore", and fall into the cycle of "resistance-acceptance".

4. Dual Narrative Strategies: Resistance and Compromise

While challenging gender norms through narrative strategies, female stand-up comedians are inevitably constrained by the logic of entertainment, commercial discipline and cultural taboos. This duality reflects the complexity of gender discursive practices and reveals the laws of survival of critical expression in the media ecology.

4.1 Limitations of Entertainment Expression: The Tension between Laughter and Criticism

The entertainment attribute of stand-up comedy requires performers to transform poignant issues into "consumable laughs," but this process can lead to critical dissolution. Yang Li puts forward the concept of yet average confident in her stand-up comedy, with the intention of deconstructing the structural superiority of the male group under the patriarchal system. However, when the segment is fragmented through short-video platforms, its critical core is gradually diluted by entertaining

narratives. In addition, the humor of female comedians is often required to conform to "gendered expectations of what constitutes a punchline. For example, Si Wen's early use of the "independent woman" persona to flirt with marital conflicts, and her "Brother Sleeping on the Upper Bed" won applause, but she was forced to avoid a true indictment of emotional repression in order to conform to the audience's imagination of a "free-spirited woman". The "safe narrative" of the movie is a very good way to tell the story of a woman. This "safe narrative" reflects the erosion of critical depth by entertainment.

4.2 Commercialization: "Safeguarding" Sensitive Topics

The stand-up comedian industry is highly dependent on capital and traffic, and female performers' narratives often have to compromise between expressive effectiveness and commercial risk. When Niao Niao talks about sexism in the workplace, she retorts that "girls don't know how to use technology" in her segments, and transforms her accusations into self-mockery, for example, by adding lines such as "After all, I don't even have a uterus" in her performance, which increases self-deprecation and weakens aggression, and maintains the comedic label of "sociopathic humor". The comedic label of "sociopathic humor" is maintained by adding self-deprecation to the performance. Although Yan Yi Yan Yue's twins' narrative deconstructs gender norms through physical experience, the showrunner prefers to keep the entertainment label of "sisterly understanding" and downplay the political connotations. In addition, commercialization also pushes the individualization of issues. For example, Bu Jingyun transforms the dilemma of being "unmarried at an older age" into a personal choice, declaring that "Marriage is a game of 'elimination', but I choose to play in single-player mode", a tactic that avoids the risk of structural critique, but also dissolves the potential for collective resistance.

4.3 Plurality of Audience Decoding: Confrontation, Negotiation and Misinterpretation

The critical intent of women's stand-up comedy is often interpreted in a split manner depending on the audience's position. Young women tend to engage in "confrontational decoding", for example, Yang Li's critiques are transformed into symbols of "gender awakening" by women's communities, while conservative groups tend to "selectively misinterpret" them as provocations that "provoke gender confrontation". The conservative group tends to "selectively misinterpret" it as a provocation that "stirs up gender antagonism". This polarization is particularly pronounced in social media; for example, Xiao Lu's segment on appearance anxiety resonated with women on Weibo, but was stigmatized and adapted on short-video platforms by "average yet confident women". In addition, some viewers have double standards for women's humor. When Si Wen recounted her emotional trauma after her divorce, her sincere narrative was criticized by some male viewers as "selling suffering", while male stand-up comedians of similar content were praised for their "truthfulness and bravery". This kind of diversified audience decoding shows the difference in viewpoints of different groups, and also exposes the asymmetry of gender discourse.

4.4 Strategic Adaptation: Balancing Resistance and Survival

Faced with the dilemma of duality, female actors have developed dynamic adaptation strategies. Yang Li's has shifted from directly challenging the male community to more metaphorical narratives, such as the "tiger and hyena" analogy of gender power relations, which retains a critical core while using abstract symbols to avoid direct confrontation and reduce the risk to public opinion. Niao Niao, on the other hand, transforms acute problems into self-mockery through "sociopathic humor", taking advantage of the audience's tolerance towards the "sociopathic" group, wrapping

sharp criticism in a clumsy and cute appearance, and lowering the defensive reaction. This strategy of showing strength through weakness not only accomplishes the criticism, but also meets the audience's stereotypical expectation of "weak women". Li Xueqin has become popular on the short-video platform with her "waste of Peking University" persona, and her strategy of combining elite identity with grassroots discourse not only breaks through the stage constraints of traditional stand-up comedy, but also accurately reaches the target audience through algorithmic pushing, realizing a balance between resistance and communication effectiveness.

5. Conclusions

Female gender discursive practices in stand-up comedy, as a result of the wisdom of "dancing in chains" within a limited discursive space, use language as a lever to leverage gendered power structures. It is found that female stand-up comedians have opened up a unique critical discursive space within the framework of the entertainment industry by strategically deploying narrative shifts and rhetorical tactics through role-reinvention. Through role-reinvention, they have transformed their identities from the "other" to the "subject of speech", and used rhetorical tactics to express humor and personal views to attract widespread attention. On the one hand, it promotes people to re-examine gender and social expectations, but on the other hand, it is also constrained by the logic of entertainment, commercial discipline and cultural taboos, so the future practice of women's discourse needs to continue to seek a balance between strategic innovation and value persistence.

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