

# *Shaving Hair: A Criticizing of the Female Image on the New Media*

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**Abstract:** With the sharp rising of new media like Weibo that shares short and real-time information, female discourse power has increased because of the increasing openness and interactivity on the platform. However, stereotypes and prejudice of the female image still existed. This paper takes the media's reports of the event "female medical staff shaved their hair for rescuing COVID-19 in Wuhan, Hubei" as an example, to criticize how the media portray such stigma of the female image by analyzing the description of the female staff's hair, the depiction of male characters in women-related reports, and media's deviation in Leading Responsibility as news disseminators.

## 1. Introduction

On February 17, GansuDaily.com has posted a blog on Weibo, one of China's largest social media platform, with a video recording female medical staff expressing their complete disappointment and sadness when getting tonsured. In the video, the female medical care staff were wholly shaved by hair clippers. Many of them cried a lot as the camera kept flashing. 14 out of 15 were female, however, the only male staff was not being shaved. Later, CCTV.com praised this action and wrote: "Among Gansu medical team bold-headed members, there are soon-to-be-married brides-to-be. Your hairstyle is the most special medal of the war", with the hashtag "#Throwing my life to the wind, who needs hair anymore?". The video went viral as more hospitals took "cutting hair" as a means of inspiring medical staff to rescue Hubei. After the post, responses of the parties have been revealed, sparking a huge discussion on the social media.

As for the rapid growth in social media in China, online platforms such as Weibo seem to be a very effective place where sparks information sharing and communication. However, the female images depicted by blogs or bloggers on those platforms might still be constituted with deficiency and dissimulation. In this event, the purposive reports of women with shaved heads and corresponding descriptions of the female image as "fighters" have again stirred up people's thinking about the female image.

In this article, the author is going to argue about the female images constructed by the media, covering respects including media's description of hair, male's roles in relevant reports, and the discussion about media's leading responsibility. This author would be using theories including

Symbolic Anthropology, Gender Theory, and the Leading Responsibility of media, and would generally be from post-modern feminism's point to view.

## 2. Literature Review

There's no hard to see that the female image of those medical staff has been unfairly constructed by the media. Hair has become the spotlight of such biased reports. The three objectives aforementioned, the analysis of symbolic anthropology, gender theory, and the leading responsibility of the mass media have all influenced the formation of what we receive today--the groundless prejudice toward the female images online.

Scholars have suggested that from the perspective of Symbolic Anthropology, bodies are a natural object that can be described from a cultural perspective and a symbolic system that represents a certain society. Human hair has been regarded as one of the most striking external features that distinguish different genders. And hair is not only a physical being but also a cultural symbol shaped by a mixture of political power and social culture[1].

Through observing the construction deviation of the image of "female drivers" by the news media and the public in recent years, female discourse power is still a missing and alienated phenomenon in the Internet context. Some scholars claimed that under the male-centered ideology coupled with the catalytic effect of consumerism culture, the news media and the public are still having the stereotypes and sexism of women. They suggest that in order to construct and enhance the discourse power of women, and make women and men engage in equal dialogue and game, it is not only necessary for women groups to arouse the subject consciousness and participate more autonomously in the discussion of public topics, but also necessary for all sectors of society to comprehensively strengthen the gender equality consciousness and media literacy[2].

When it comes to the lack of mass media's Leading Responsibility, some scholars find that there is a paradox in reality that on the one hand, the era and society pay increasingly great attention to mass media, while on the other hand, the deviation events of the leading responsibility of mass media emerge endlessly. The unprecedented emphasis and enhancement of the Leading Responsibility of nowadays' mass media to two factors: the environmental requirements of the mass media era caused by the amplification of their own power, and the guidance of economic factors such as the law of values under the influence of the consumerism society[3].

In terms of the different gender images depicted by today's media, scholars suggest that compared with traditional media, the research of exploring different gender image problem in the new mass media from the perspective of the role image is still not enough in-depth and still lacks enough empirical data to support at present. Firstly, in the coverage of gender role image of media official account, the influence of the patriarchal ideology deeply rooted. Secondly, consumerism culture extended to the Weibo platform was one of the important factors influencing the differences between the sexes in the media official Weibo's coverage. Finally, because of the differences in nature and function orientation of media, the party newspaper media official Weibo account and the one of the metropolis daily showed different report tendency about gender role image[4].

### 3.1. The Portrayal of the female image Based on Media's Description of Hair

Since the COVID-19 outbreak being taken seriously by the Chinese government, medical staff all over the country were heading to rescue Wuhan from the emergency. Before heading off, there were ceremonies that were meant to cheer the leaving staff up. However, many hospitals and medical teams demanded female staff to cut their long hair off, even shave the hair, as a signal to show their

determination.

On February 15, Gansu Daily posted a report of the ceremony using the title: “After the ‘silken’ hair being cut, they are ready for the ‘war’”. After Gansu Daily’s post, CCTV news appraised the female staff’s behavior in its post and wrote with the title: “Dared to sacrifice, why bother to keep the long hair?” Later, several media reported female staff cut hair from other regions. However, in the choice of the narrative vocabulary of the object “hair”, there was a clear tendency of emotional bias, shown the media’s certain clear attitude and position according to the text. There were basically two types of adjectives. First, by using descriptive words such as “silken” and “flowing”, hair has been described as an object supposed to be showing women attraction and beauty. Media have intentionally revealed an emphasis on female staff’s femininity, using non-harmful descriptions of hair to reflect on female’s “originally” weak image. Via descriptions toward hair, female’s statue symbol was defined “not masculine”, since media would not describe male medical staff shaven hair with previous words depicting weakness. The second category of narrative words is by using adjectives such as “time-consuming” and “trouble-making” and regarding female staff’s hair as a burden which hinders the working progress. Bonding female’s hair with a certain bother emphasizes the media’s intention on portraying the female image just like the characteristics they wrote in the text—a troublesome encumber. Both categories revealed the stigmatization of women through combining their hair with an unconnected but negative adjective, which is overwhelmingly unfair and groundless.

From a Symbolic Anthropological point of view, there exist similarities between the characteristics presented by the hair and the long-established concept and cultural phenomena in certain societies, which are often used to be compared to the conceptual awareness and cultural phenomenon. Hair, a symbolic symbol due to its multiple characteristics, may refer to different conceptual consciousness and mental state. Hair is now suggested as one of the most prominent external features that distinguish genders. In China, even these days, long hair represents more of “femininity”, and short hair is more likely to be a symbol of “masculinity”[1]. The meanings of hair length might wear off, but would not be likely to disappear. Cutting hair off is still highly regarded as an action which could be a means to be capable and experienced, which could convey the idea of being more “of a man” rather than with femininity. The disciplinary power and dominance of hair to women is keeping causing stereotypes and therefore, easily be utilized by media as a method to be eye-catching if cutting off women’s hair. Since the female medical staff were with expectations to be portrayed to be powerful and masculine in the fight against the COVID-19, cutting off or even shaved their hair could depict their masculinity and be modeled as “heroes”, instead of “heroines”.

The patriarchal mindset of media where the decision-makers are mainly males allows restriction in the public’s expectations of the female image. The power of the media to shape certain the female images cannot be underrated. Because of the men-intended internet environment, the public is more likely to look upon heroes as “male’s thing”, rather than female’s. Therefore, empowering female medical staff with masculinity. Moreover, under the canalization of commodity culture and consumerism on social media, it could be even harder for female characters on media, which has been invaded by stereotypical the female images, to “reverse” for themselves[2].

### **3.2. Male Characters in Female-centered Reports Reflecting on Female's Passivity**

On February 10th, China Women Daily posted with title: # “Her” power in the fight # [Husband shaved his head because of her bareheaded wife: “baby and I are waiting for her to come back safely!"]. In the content, the media wrote only one sentence about the female medical staff who is heading toward Wuhan. Instead, there were more words praising and describing the husband’s action,

using sentences: “To make it easier for his wife to shave her head, Mr. Zou voluntarily shaved his hair.” On February 18th, after the report of female staff being forced to shave hair, Red Star News posted the response of the hospital from Gansu. In the passage, the person who defended the hair-shaven female staff’s “self-willingness of cutting hair” is a male “relevant person”. Those women haven’t expressed themselves for even a word, but all being covered by a male’s speech. It is no difficult to find that though centered on female characters, the male image in this kind of news still appears frequently, suggested as a woman’s companion or even a “higher-level” person such as a speaker or a leader.

From a Gender Theory point of view, the social roles revealed by text have been readily constructed. The difference between female and male physiological structure is indeed innate. However, the temperament of the sexes (also known as gender characteristics) is not innate, but constructed in the day after day under the immersion and edification of traditional gender culture, and was infilled under the social culture and gender differentiation which determines that there are great differences between the sexes[4]. British scholar Roger Fowler believed that media discourse is a social-cultural representation, and the discourse report of the media on specific social groups could reveal which aspects of the reality are constantly attracting the audience’s attention[5].

According to the first piece of report, the intention of portraying female characters as “a man’s someone” has emphasized female’s gender role in a family, highlighting female’s biological sex, such as being suggested as a wife. Being a wife traditionally requires a woman to follow the husband’s willingness. Though in modern China, the stereotypical role of the wife in the family has been weakened, however, the fact that wife and husband are co-existing in a news report supposed to be female-centered could claim still assume that wives are more likely to be husbands’ companion, rather than an independent role to media. On the other hand, the language used in the second report was involved in the traditional and prejudiced gender order, such as being in a less powerful position at work compared to males. With the order, the media revealed the intention to depict that male is still in a prominent place in society, especially at work, as leaders and commanders. In turn, women are pictured as the weaker ones who demand to be protected or represented by male characters. That is the social role of Female Role which under a public space with risks, their voices and power are fragile, passively allowed male voices to become even more prominent.

Although in the report, the official media have also shown the the female image with selfless dedication on a society or family basis, women are still being in a passive place and showed their helplessness, to some extent, with a weaker image. Therefore, in general, it seems reasonable to regard the female staff’s voice in a passive tone, where the image was meant to be weak and helpless. In contrast, the male images were domestically and socially launched as professional and strong, according to their behavior either being regarded as a warmhearted husband or a representative with absolute power, which renders female’s passive, weak role image with sharp contrast.

### **3.3. Media’s Deviation in Leading Responsibility Led A Wrong Way of Public Opinions**

After the controversial actions of shaving female staff’s hair as well as the biased reports made by the aforementioned media, there were a bunch of voices questioning or accusing of the motives behind the reports, criticizing whether there is the necessity to zoom the female with flashes when they are being shaven. In contrast, people who responded were mainly explaining the reason why the staff should shave their hair, instead of why the media made the over-exaggerated reports toward this passive event. For example, if searching the term “Gansu, Hair-shaven” on Weibo, the hottest post with one of the most comments and likes is a medium uploading screenshots from a “related” person of asking a person “the staff involved in the event”, claiming that all the staff were voluntary in order

to lower the chance of being infected or save more time and that the crying was because of “a complex sentiment mixed with the proud of fighting for the country, the worry about potential risk and the sense of debt to their families.” According to the screenshots, the person thought it was unnecessary for those Internet users to believe shaving hair is a shame to the staff, and that the Internet users are “ignorant, emotional and craven”. The medium described as “This is the voice from the parties, you should see this even unwilling to. Changing people’s opinions is the most difficult thing to do in the world.”

Nevertheless, it seems that both the media and the person responded missed the point of why the public’s (especially female Internet users) were outraged. It might be true that the staff were shaving hair because it could decrease the possibility to be infected or to higher the efficiency. However, according to the comments on the event, what the Internet users are actually angry about is the way the media lavishly praised the behavior. The media failed to lead the public opinions to a right way of discussion.

The Leading Responsibility of mass media is through verbal communication or other means of communication to influence the behavior of oneself and others, to guide them to act in a certain direction more objectively[3]. Spreading truth is the core of news and seeking truth from facts is one of the most important spirits that keeps media running. In this event, the media has put too much effort to intensively discover and report different voices, however, it failed to take into account their own Leading Responsibility. The intention to report on “another voice” and therefore attract the public with a different way of thinking has led to a misleading of the main reason for the public’s thoughts. For example, the sentence: “you should listen to the voice even you are unwilling to” portrays how the media is consciously intending to lead the other voice, on the other hand, let the actual doubts alone.

Some scholars have studied that, once media activated on the basis of inertial thinking, the authenticity of the media would be questioned. Here, the media chronically thought that there must be a different explanation to the event on another angle, and they were needed to be reported, even it could be a strong misguidance to the public opinion. Therefore, its credibility is bound to be damaged, and would gradually lose its leading power towards public opinion, become nothing but a soliloquy. The "media misbehavior" of the media is challenging the principle of the truthfulness of the news, and media is deliberately or unintentionally misdirecting public opinion, which is another important manifestation of the deviation of the current responsibility of media in China[3].

#### 4. Conclusion

The post from Gansu Daily’s report toward the event of shaving female staff’s hair before their departure to Wuhan has caused an intense discussion on Weibo. Firstly, the medium’s description of the shaving process using words that intend to depict a woman’s femininity is overly exaggerated and groundless. From Symbolical Anthropology’s point of view, according to the representation of hair’s length, hair-shaving may endow the female staff with masculinity, since they were playing live-saving “heroes” which were more likely to be “male’s role”. The characteristic of hair has been intentionally utilized by the media to shape the biased female image. Secondly, when it comes to the male’s image in similar reports, the image of the female staff was constructed as “a man’s someone”, instead of an independent individual. Represented as a “wife”, the female staff’s discourse power was easily taken away and transferred to her husband, a traditionally more powerful character in Chinese culture. Women are likely to be forced in a passive tone and being “represented”. Thirdly, the media were highly intended to see “another angle” of voices and to attract views. However, they have missed the point of why a large number of Internet users are outraged by their descriptions and comments on the

event. Instead of spreading the information prone to get more views, the media, especially in these days, should follow the principle of telling objective and comprehensive truths.

In general, though the rise of Weibo may bring female Internet users with greater chances and space to speak for themselves, the succession and internalization of traditional patriarchal mindset still appear on the open-forum-like platform. The media's intention to satisfy the public's expectation for the female image in the outbreak by using biased and sex-specific adjectives have exactly allowed the "legitimacy" of the patriarchal society, leading the public to see things from a male's perspective. If the media continues to strengthen the consciousness of male power and suppress the concept of feminism, the female image may face greater communication dilemmas on the media.

Thus, in order to improve female's status quo which is yet with stripped voice and stereotypical images, the society needs to participate in the progression, not only women themselves. Firstly, the concept of gender equality should be strengthened in the social context. Concepts and consciousness of "equality" are the root causes of determining people's next behaviors on the Internet. Secondly, women themselves should strive to break the "imprisonment" of the patriarchal culture and consumerism on the Internet, more actively construct the living and expressing space for themselves and shape the positive image of women as independent individuals.

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