

The Construction of Female Gender Images in Chinese Marriage TV Show

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Abstract: Since the 1990s, Hunan TV's "The Rose Date" and Shanghai TV's "Meet on Saturday" have led the way to develop marriage programmes in China, bringing a new form to the traditional Chinese model of love and marriage. With the rapid evaluation of the economy and expansion of the commercial media, marriage shows are no longer about "marriage", but have become a consumer culture, where the actresses and viewers consume and also are consumed. The mass media reshapes a new stereotypical image of women. Television, as a kind of mass media, accelerates the spread of this consumer culture and deepens the stereotypical image of women, based on its wide audience and fast dissemination. The prevailing consumer culture continues to shape our consumption habits, making it difficult to break this status quo in a short time. Based on Baudrillard's theory of "consumer society", this article explores the media image of women in contemporary Chinese marriage programmes in consumerism. From the perspective of the five basic elements of the communication process, it combs the relationship between the programme producers (media operators under the market mechanism) and the actresses (women taking part in the programme), the relationship between the media and the audience, and the impact of marriage programmes on the stereotyped image of women.

Keywords: Consumer culture, Chinese marriage shows, Gender image of women.

1. Introduction

1.1. Mass Media Under Consumerism

As the culture of consumerism continues to permeate social life, the mass media and mass communication has also been transformed, as a tool for the propagation of ideologies by government agencies and others, also as a participant competing in the market. Under consumerism, audiences are more demanding. In a stressful environment, individuals place their expectations for entertainment and direct attention to different media. To attract many potential and non-potential audiences and to reap more efficient and sustainable profits, the media require producing programmes that cater to the needs of audiences. For the marriage programmes, "marriage" has become a consumer product, or even a "show", just to gain pleasure and profit in the shortest time.

The commercialisation of the media means that the production and dissemination of the media system and its products are integrated into the process of marketisation, with the media eventually becoming industrially produced and marketed[1]. The media are overwhelmed because of emerging a hot topic. As a result, there are many similar shows in the same period, and the producers of the show have to resort to different tricks to stand out. This has resulted in the popularisation, entertainment and homogenisation of media culture.

1.2. Mass Media and The Image of Women

The study of media and women which originated in European and American academia, emphasizes the interaction between the media and women. It is linked to the feminist movement for the emancipation of women and their rights, including the quest for equal rights and statuses for both sexes. The development of research on the theme of media and women in China is due to the Fourth United Nations World

Conference on Women, held in China in 1995, and the study of the image of women in the media is receiving an increasing attention. The theoretical construction of media and gender studies has shown three important directions of academic development: 'the integration of feminist critical thought and communication studies', 'the convergence of post-school thinking and feminist forces' and 'the connection between the political economy of communication and feminism'[2].

2. The Audience That Is Consumed When It Consumes

Marriage programmes are constantly adapting to the consumer demand and habits of youngsters, using "short and quick" marketing models to maximise the capacity of the programme in the shortest possible time. The audience is given a more exciting experience, both in terms of the staging and the content of the programme. In this process, the audience and the actresses are actively or passively involved in this feast of consumer culture. While the media (producers and advertisers) become the manipulators behind the scenes.

2.1. The Satisfaction of Snooping on Others' Privacy

Live matchmaking, relationship parenting, reality TV, whatever the format of the show, on condition that it is human interaction, it involves the exchange of information about others and oneself, and this is even more evident in the case of marriage shows. The actress' bodies, looks, clothes and make-up are all magnified and judged on the screen. Those behaviours and desires that are indecorous in everyday social interaction are gratified behind the screen. This "peek" is often untraceable, which brings a certain sense of security and makes the act more stimulating.

In live matchmaking, actresses exchange basic information about themselves, including their education, jobs, hobbies,

income conditions, family backgrounds, love experiences and so on. Viewers can see the unbeknown hardships of a successful woman and the story of a girl who is brave enough to pursue love despite meeting someone disloyal, etc. Out of curiosity, the audience will unconsciously focus on this part of the programme that involves personal privacy and will be absorbed. Under the big-data environment, people are terrified of revealing their own privacy, but content to know the privacy of others. This because in a consumer society, privacy has become a commodity.

2.2. The Consumed Public

The pressure of work makes people seek light-hearted, entertaining content when using mass media. The audience loses its standard of “beauty” and even accepts, actively or passively, a vulgar and intense sense of euphoria. The glorified stagings and conflicts created by the programmes exert influence on people, consuming love, marriage as well as ugliness.

After turning off the TV, the audience focus on the sensory experience, but return to the mundane. The media acts as a ‘magpie bridge’ between the virtual and the real. The stories of the men and women in the show provide people with rich feelings when the ‘magpie bridge’ is connected, but once they are in reality, all the satisfaction experienced before is gone. The gap between the virtuality and the reality is a further incentive for the audience to keep on exploring a more intense sense of satisfaction. So in this case, it is easy for the audience to fall into the fast-moving mode of entertainment that media and programme makers expect. When the audience watch a television programme, it may emerge that they are being entertained, but it turns out that’s not the case. This false need is created by the constant stimulation of the entertainment culture, where the audience are consuming the media content and are also consumed by the culture of consumption.

2.3. Enjoying God’s Perspective

Reality shows are surveillance for the participants, meaning that they are put naked in front of all television audience, erasing the line between public and private and this greatly satisfying the audience’s desire for Snooping on someone else’s privacy. On observational programmes, such as Hunan TV’s “Heartbeat Signal”, the programme team arranges for five to seven people (often an equal number of men and women) to stay in a villa and spend a month together, including individual dates and plenary activities. And each person is required to send an anonymous text message to someone that they love each night. The men and women can only identify their dates by the clues they leave with each other, so there will be cases where they miss out due to misjudgements. In addition, the show also has an “Emotional Observation Room”, where other people are assigned to interpret and predict the emotional direction of the male and female guests. The audience becomes an omniscient viewer, immersing themselves in the relationship's sweetness and at some point taking a break to look at the relationship from God’s perspective.

3. The Disintegration of Traditional Marriage Culture

Through the packaging of marriage programmes, marriage culture is dissolved, the ritual of marriage is broken, “traditional ways of choosing a spouse are displaced by

games” [3] and turned into a kind of “adventure” and “competition”. Marriage and interaction among the sexes have become superficial and utilitarian, with an implicit logic of consumption. Marriage has become consumer behaviors. The choices are made to maximise the benefits and optimise the conditions as far as possible. In this process, the producers know how to turn conflicts and contradictions into selling points, and the male and female guests already know the show’s formula. The show appears to be about choosing a marriage partner, but in reality it is a performance. The public’s expectations of marriage dropped as they watched the show.

4. The Stereotypical Image of Women Being Shaped

In marriage shows, women appear as a representative image, inevitably scrutinised by men or by women with male perspective, in this situation, “beauty becomes a religious and absolute command for women. Beauty is not a natural effect or an additional component of moral qualities, but a fundamental, commanding identity for women who maintain their faces and lines as much as their souls” [4].

The women in the programmes appear to be free from the constraints of conventional wisdom and speak to men on an equal footing within the same discourse, but they still face the fate of being objectified. It is difficult to escape the material attached for women, and they are falling into new stereotypes once again.

4.1. The Objectified Woman

Productive development and technological innovation have created more and broader platforms for people to present themselves, and the drive for consumer culture has led to a growing number of people being active in front of the mass media. “Media such as television portray specific types of people through repetitive factors such as appearance and behaviour, and use these types of characters to reproduce social groups. With Zhejiang TV’s “Do Not Disturb”, the male guests are asked to place female guests in the “heart zone” or “observation zone” in the ten seconds.

While in “Who Can Pick the Best” on Dongfang TV, women become the “exhibitor” on stage. When people faced with a large number of choices, need to evaluate and select through first impressions in a short period, external conditions such as body shape and appearance become the only way to understand women. Women are more like commodities on display in the window. In the list of Jiangsu TV’s “New Matchmaking Conference” 2019, the headlines are all about the external image of women which could create selling points in this way. “The body becomes a commodity and people manipulate it narcissistically. Then women become the primary protagonists of show and hype, and their bodies become objects of public consumption”[5].

4.2. The "Others" Under Scrutiny

The women featured in the programme contain a mix of different types in society. In one episode, the female guests often include women with different identities, professions and experiences, such as “unisex”, highly educated, returnees, one who have had brief marriages, entrepreneurs and employees. In the programme, the female guests are able to express their own opinions on life, values and marriage, and even refute and fight back against the stereotypical image of women. On

stage, women with different personalities are able to develop their character traits. But this is only an illusion of a pluralistic reshaping of the image of women, and gender concepts still exist.

The image of women portrayed in dating programmes is a kind of “popular women”. Because they are tender, considerate, independent and so on, which are highlighted by the programme team and then amplified by the mass media. It is easy to replicate these impressions in real life, believing that they represent the majority of women. Yet, because of their public “performance”, women are labelled as “new age, brave and non-attached”. As a result, marriage shows inevitably construct new stereotypes while subverting the stereotypical image of women. It schematizes the public’s perception of women and reinforces the superficial and programmed image of women on television.

4.3. Material Dependency Leads to A Lack of Independent Identity

The female guests on marriage programmes are often portrayed as new women, who are independent and non-dependent. However, the social status and economic power of the men are often the most realistic and important factors in their considerations. The mass media and programme makers provide the women with the image of “independent status”. They also given them the power to look at men as equals, even to use this power to judge material conditions more explicitly and to make choices. Many of these rejections because of the men who are less materially well off. This is interpreted superficially to mean that women have an equal right to choose with men, but they still face the fate of being chosen.

5. Conclusion

In this commodified age, both material and spiritual products can be chosen and purchased. Similarly, popular

culture as a superstructure can also be sold as a commodity. This has led to mass culture to pursue maximum profit, and the content it provides for the public is mainly based on pursuing sensory stimulation and pleasure. In this situation, everything with entertainment value and consumption potential can be used. As part of popular culture, the emergence of television entertainment is a product following the trend of the times. The media and programme producers, under the supervision and guidance of the government, should increase their sense of social responsibility and should not only reflect social existence, but use its unique functions regulate the progress of the society and the evolution of human nature. Otherwise it will only have a negative effect on the image of women.

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