

From Haircut to Scars: Social Media Presentation and Feedback on Female Bodies in the Prevention and Control of the COVID-19 Epidemic

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Abstract: Based on the gender perspective, this article mainly answered three questions: in the prevention and control of the COVID-19 epidemic in China, how did social media present the female bodies, how did they give feedback, and what were the internal reasons of such presentation and feedback. The research found that the female bodies' images presented by the social media were a manifestation of power in a gendered society, and the male-centered narrative logic dominated the gender representation framework of media. What were hidden in the reports was Male Gaze and the male perspective narrative methods. Media reports from Weibo used videos or pictures to attract the attention of audiences, highlighted the femininity and used the narrative methods of Benevolent Patriarchy to carry out "sacrifice" narratives and "flattery" narratives, which were accepted easily by audiences and achieved a good effect. When We-Media using the WeChat Official Accounts as the carriers gave feedback, they took full advantage of the characteristics of the social media and expressed the authors' own opinions in those articles actively and strongly. On the one hand, they gave women the right to speak, helping to improve the dilemma of women passively accepting their subordinate status. On the other hand, they still profoundly influenced and constructed the gender stereotypes in the public mind, responded positively to Male Gaze, confirmed and consolidated Benevolent Patriarchy and exacerbated the reality of gender inequality.

Keywords: Female Bodies; Social Media; Male Gaze; Benevolent Patriarchy; Content

Analysis

1. Female Bodies & Women's Haircut

The researches on the cultural meaning of the female bodies have a long history. Jean Baudrillard (2007) believed that the bodies were the "most beautiful consumer products". With the development of history and culture, the female bodies have become one part of modern discourse, and have been constructed and shaped into the images required by today's consumer society through the social media. Body anthropologists believe that the bodies were biological, but understanding of them might be cultural. As a kind of symbols and metaphors, the bodies were constructed in history, society and culture (Long, 2010). The main rules in culture, hierarchy and even metaphysical beliefs were expressed and strengthened through the specific language of the body. And in the opinions of feminist scholars, it has almost been a custom for men under the patriarchal culture to dominate women as creators. The female bodies were usually the symbols, carrying men's desire for women (Gao & Ye, 2009). The disadvantaged position in society made women the "being watched" ones, unable to get rid of the male gaze (Yang, 2004).

Media presentation is a method by which the media portrayed organizations, communities, experiences, opinions, or themes derived from a special ideology or value perspective (Stuart, 1997). Women can be presented in the media for any part of the body, such as hair, face, lip, hands, legs etc., which can also be as the materialized commodities to attract and cater to men (Mu & Zeng, 2013). Long hair is often regarded as the gender indicator of women (Ma, 2020). And especially, haircut of women has special significance in different periods of Chinese history. After the Revolution of 1911, people cut their pigtaileds to show their new social identity, but it is the privilege of men, and women still had to endure the discipline of long hair (Liu & Wang, 2019). After the May Fourth Movement in 1919, on the one hand, haircut of women became a symbol of independence, autonomy, and self-improvement influenced by Western feminist thoughts.

Women could decide, dominate and control their bodies, so as to escape Male Gaze. On the other hand, it had become a physical symbol of modern women's pursuit the freedom of marriage, economics, education, social rights, and political engagement. About in 1940s, women's short hair was gradually accepted in Shanghai, while the mainland still regarded it as a violation of old ethics (Liu & Wang, 2019). After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the images of women with short hair were more and more general.

2. Social Media & Female Issues

A number of surveys showed whether in normal times or during the COVID-19 epidemic in China, people obtained information mainly through social media such as WeChat (Yu & Yang, 2020; Chu, Lu & Shen, 2020). In the prevention and control of the COVID-19 epidemic in China, social media play an important part in the presentation and feedback of female bodies. Social media are a series of network applications based on a new Information Production Mode where users can lead and generate contents. They are the new types of online media that give users the great space for participating, allowing users to generate contents and communicate, with the characteristics of participation, openness, communication, dialogue, community, and connectivity (Mayfield, 2020). The advantages of social media are significant: Firstly, they integrate the communication advantages of all media, combining the characteristics of the network's large amount of information, wide coverage, strong interactivity, and instant speed with the advantages of mobile phones. So they can carry out texts, images, sound and so on. Secondly, they change the inherent top-down communication mode and create a two-way flow of information. The mode of communication change from point-to-point or point-to-face to face-to-face, and at the same time they feed back to the audiences. Anyone can transmit information conveniently, so it is easy to form a second or multiple dissemination and a new information source. Thirdly, the contents are shorter and shorter so users can get more information in a second. Fourthly, it takes a very short time from information

production to release. The audiences' need for instant information exceed the need for in-depth information so they pay more attention to the continuity and rolling reporting of news, and emphasize the speed of updating information (Yuan, 2010; Cao, 2011). As a typical representative of social media, Weibo enables diverse, small-scale, two-way interaction, and equal autonomous communication behaviors, which has a significant impact on the formation and development of a new social public opinion environment (Chen, 2010). The WeChat Official Accounts, the "We-Media + We-Media platform" represented by personal accounts and syndicated news applications makes information feedback more sufficient, and users also have strong autonomy in information selection, and will take the initiative to obtain relevant information to satisfy their own needs (Bai, 2015). Conversely, the precise pop-ups of big data will also strengthen this preference.

As the social platform for public participation and equal communication, social media provide ordinary netizens with a space to express and struggle, and it has become the important channel for female groups to express their opinions and fight for rights (Sheng, 2020). The design concept of social media can encourage users to participate provides women with opportunities for communication and interaction, allow a variety of women's topics to enter the public view, increase women's media presentation, make feminist voices increasingly influential in society, have a strong driving effect to break female stereotypes and improve the status of women (Guo, 2017; Liu, 2017). At the same time, there is also a large number of We-Media producing mixed gender awareness, although the importance of women themselves get affirmed to a certain extent, it still is not deviated from the patriarchy. The prevalence of consumerism accelerates the pace of business operations and reaping benefits, and there is also misappropriation and misuse of feminine terms in the contents they produced.

3. Questions, Theories & Methods

In the early stage of the prevention and control of the COVID-19 epidemic in China, there

were lots of media reports about the daily life of female doctors and nurses to shave their short hair and the scars of their hands and faces. When the female bodies were presented by the media, why were such "injured" images such as shaving hair and scars reported? Specifically, how did social media present the female bodies? How did they give feedback? And what was the internal reasons?

This article selects Male Gaze and Benevolent Patriarchy as the analysis framework. Male Gaze was proposed by Laura Mulvey (1975). It referred to visual arts and literature that portrayed women and the world from the perspective of heterosexual men by default and male audiences saw women as pleasant sexual objects. As the objects of visual identity, men produced pleasure in viewing and consolidated the operation of the patriarchal system. Furthermore, John Berg (1972) believed that women lost their subjectivity of Male Gaze. Male Gaze had three perspectives: the men behind the lens, the male characters in artistic expression and the male audiences.

Benevolent Patriarchy refers to a society where men hold the main power and lead the society for the benefit of all people, especially the benefit of women and children (Piper & Grudem, 1991). So it is what women desired. They want someone to protect and take care of them, and they obtain the greatest safety and care in their affiliation with men (Deasy & Illinois, 2009). Another concept related to Benevolent Patriarchy is Benevolent Sexism, which continue the ideology of gender inequality, emphasizing complementary and traditional gender roles, the exquisite and gentle female nurturers while the strong and cool male protectors (Glick Peter, 2010). Benevolent sexism is achieved through three different mechanisms: Firstly, it is believed that women are warm and weak, while men are capable but cold; Secondly, it highlights the unique and positive characteristics of each gender so the power of men can provide positive social identity to women (peter & Susan, 2001); Thirdly, it is implied that society is fair, arguing how warm female nurturers can complement powerful male protectors, and emphasize that gender roles are

“complementary but equal” (Bem & Bem, 1970). Benevolent sexism is precise through flattering women with positive traits, such as admiring, protecting and favoring etc., and emphasizing the complementarity of traditional gender roles, so that the status quo seems more acceptable (Sakall, 2001).

This article used an interpretive content analysis method to analyze the contents of original articles from Weibo and WeChat Official Accounts that involved female medical staff's haircut and scars to answer those questions. Interpretative content analysis is a method of clarifying the author's intentions through intensive reading, understanding and interpreting the contents (Qiu & Zou, 2004). The meaning of “interpretation” is not only at the level of simple explanations of facts (for example, word frequency analysis), but also discover the true meaning of the contents from the complex background and structure at the overall level. About the presentation of female bodies, Weibo was used as the information platform. And in terms of feedback on female bodies, WeChat Official Accounts were as the information platform. Using "medical staff" as the keyword, the author searched original articles from January 20, 2020 to May 20, 2020 (During this period, relevant news reports appeared densely). After inspecting and screening, 34 texts were selected from each platform, so there were a total of 68 texts as the analysis objects.

4. Social Media's Presentation of Female Bodies in the Prevention and Control of the COVID-19 Epidemic in China

With the development of new media technology, a large amount of image information has rolled up like a mat people's lives. Human society has entered a visual era dominated by image information, especially the construction and dissemination of female bodies' images, which has been attracting attention of audiences successfully (Du, 2017). In the prevention and control of the COVID-19 epidemic in China, many media used visually impactful pictures or videos to present female bodies. Weibo allows users to update short texts in time and publish them publicly. When the texts are short, the pictures or videos

are more eye-catching. Only one of the 34 news reports from Weibo used long texts and others used texts of different lengths in conjunction with pictures or videos, and the titles drew people's attention to the picture or video more. According to *Male Gaze*, the female bodies became the objects to be seen, and the presentation of female medical staff's haircut and scars was a profound manifestation of the perspective of the men behind the lens and the male audiences. On the one hand, in the patriarchal society, most of the reporters and photographers are men. A seemingly fair news message often highlights the narrator's masculinity and consumerism, which is more concealed, deceptive, and instructive; On the other hand, men are mostly the leaders of media companies, and the presupposed audiences are men mostly, so sensory consumption is more likely to be captured by men (Zhou, 2008).

"The mother of two children, Shan Xia, a post-90s nurse of People's Hospital, is on the front line of the fight against the epidemic."— 《Exchanging my long hair for your health and safety: There is a "bald nurse" in the People's Hospital》

"The 26-year-old Fan Li has been working in the critical ward for 24 days. After leaving the isolation ward, she rubbed the scars on her head hurt by the mask with her hands."— 《#hope you come back soon# Your scars hurt by the mask are distressing!》

"Before the video call with her mom, she covered the scar on her nose, hoping that her mother could see an energetic daughter fighting on the front line."— 《Distressed! A nurse made up to cover the scar before chatting with mom in video》

In media reports involving haircut and scars, descriptions of age such as "26 years old" and "post-90s" and descriptions of roles were very common, such as "mother of two children", "daughter", "bride-to-be", etc. Whether they emphasized the age or role of women, they showed the construction of femininity by the culture of patriarchy. According to *Male Gaze*, "young" and "beautiful" were used to evaluate women, and young women were more attractive to men. The emphasis on women's roles intuitively

reflected the expectations of women in a patriarchal society: women still needed to assume the family responsibilities of the “mother”, “daughter”, “bride-to-be”, “wife” and other roles while assuming their work performance. In media reports, male doctors only needed to appear as doctors, while female doctors were presented as women. The emphasis on the importance of women’s roles developed into a theoretical basis for detaining women in the family, and formed a social concept of binding women. (Wang, 1995).

As a mainstream social culture, patriarchal culture shaped passive, dependent, and weak femininity (Gao &Ye, 2009). According to Benevolent Patriarchy, women wanted men to protect and take care of them, and they obtained the greatest safety and security in their affiliation with men (Deasy & Illinois, 2009). Therefore, women should be protected and they can rely on their femininity to seek for the protection of men. However, the heroes and warriors created by media reports seemed to be directed towards men. If female medical staff wanted to become heroes and warriors as well, they must be shaped to the male images, so they removed the female gender symbols of the bodies—beautiful long hairs and delicate faces. The results of such practice of them were very different from the femininity established by the patriarchy and the protected female images constructed by Benevolent Patriarchy. As a result, haircut and scars, the "injured" female bodies' images, were more likely to fall into the sight of male audiences. What's more, the "sacrifice" narratives in media reports had also awakened men's desire to protect women according to Benevolent Patriarchy. Among the 34 news reports from Weibo, "resolute", "decisive", "not even thinking about it", "tearful", "painful", "distressed", "tears", "tears streaming down", such words appeared many times. When a weak and kind woman shaved her long hair and her delicate face was covered with scars, there is no doubt that these sacrifices aroused strong sympathy from the audiences, so a good propagation effect they could achieved.

"Which girl doesn't want to be beautiful? Which girl is willing to cut her long hair?"—
《Thank you for working hard for us! ——50 photos about the epidemic are exposed》

"There must be a bit of reluctance in my mind. After all I am a girl. Everyone wants to be beautiful and I usually take good care of my hair."— 《#frontline anti-epidemic nurse in Wuhan responded to shave hair#: There is no compulsory but to prevent infection》

"Naturally loving beauty, but they ignore the scars on their faces."— 《Take care of lives with lives! Pay tribute to the most beautiful retrograde heroes!》

The above descriptions emphasizing that beauty was a feminine nature were also seen frequently in media reports. According to Male Gaze, "beauty" as a femininity was judged by men, and women were constantly pursuing "beauty" in order to cater to men's favors. In the prevention and control of the COVID-19 epidemic in China, words such as "most beautiful" and "true beauty" were a kind of "praise." These positive traits were used to flatter women, appreciate, protect and favor women, and emphasize the complementarity of traditional gender roles, thus it seemed to make the status quo more acceptable (Sakall, 2001). But these words also had another meaning: it seemed that only when female medical staff made physical sacrifices in the serious epidemic could they acquire public admiration and be praised as the "most beautiful" and "true beauty." Just as men did not need "sacrifice" narratives to show their full professionalism, this kind of "flattery" narratives would hardly be used to describe male doctors, because Benevolent Sexism emphasized that only women met the gender role norms they could be appreciated, protected and favored (Sakall, 2001) while there was no requirements for men. The essence was to support patriarchy with a positive attitude and rationalize gender inequality.

To be honest, the most fundamental reason for haircut was to save time and energy to work with concentration. Behind this action was the identity, mission and responsibility of female medical staff. Such excellent qualities as well as their professional skills and hard-work which were inherently gender-neutral, were precisely ignored by media reports,

and replaced by a profound construction and confirmation of their female roles and femininity. In short, in the prevention and control of the COVID-19 epidemic in China, the female bodies' images presented by the media were a manifestation of the power of a gendered society. The male-centric narrative logic still dominated the gender representation framework of the media (Feng, 2020). What were hidden in the reports were the Male Gaze and the narrative styles of the male perspective that occupied the position of the main body of power. The sense of identity, mission and responsibility of women in the workplace was ignored. When a large number of news reports with a male perspective as the main narrative method were presented to the audiences, the final result was still influencing and constructing the impression of men and women in the public mind profoundly. The femininity established by the patriarchy still ran through the media reports about female medical staff, and Benevolent Patriarchy made the "sacrifice" narratives and "flattery" narratives in these reports acceptable to the audiences, thus achieving a good dissemination effect.

5. Social Media's Feedback of Female Bodies in the Prevention and Control of the COVID-19 Epidemic in China

The need for instant information of social media exceeds the need for in-depth information, so people pay more attention to continuous and rolling reports of news, and emphasize the speed of information update (Cao, 2011). About the publication time of the original articles from Weibo and WeChat Official Accounts analyzed in this article, it could be seen that the spread speed of the contents of social media was extremely fast, and many articles gained a huge amount of reading and had been reposted by many other WeChat Official Accounts.

Social media usually use eye-catching headlines in pursuit of mass reading. Wu, Liu & Tang (2015) pointed out that the guiding words and sentence patterns of the titles were important that affected the reading of WeChat Official Accounts. Negative words,

interrogative sentences, and rhetorical questions were common in the titles. In the titles of the 34 original articles from WeChat Official Accounts analyzed in this article, the articles whose title include negative words, questions or rhetorical questions received a large amount of reading and successfully attracted the attention of the audiences.

Social media allows users to produce their own contents, and the good feedback mechanism provides users with timely opportunities to feedback, though the rights of production and expression are limited and controlled by digital platforms, but they seem so real and sufficient. They take the initiative to participate in the release and dissemination of information, and choose the contents of production and consumption by themselves. Faced with the issue of whether female medical staff voluntarily shaved their hair, most of the authors of those original articles stated that they did not believe, such as:

"Were the female medical staff in Gansu province willing to shave their hair collectively? How were their expressions so painful and disgusting from the video?" —
《Stop promoting female medical staff to shave their hair!!!》

On the contrary, a few authors of articles believed that shaving hair was a voluntary action of female medical staff, such as:

"I believe more in what the leader said in this video: 'they were voluntary'." — 《I haven't figured this thing out yet.》

In addition, another author changed his/her previous point of view by a comment:

"I want to update my feelings now: I would like to believe that all girls participating in the haircut ceremony were voluntary." — 《Stop discussing with the female medical staff's hair!》

Researches on news production found that facts and opinions could not be truly separated. The selection and presentation of facts were all expressions of opinions, and they were systematically biased towards the authority (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). The articles from WeChat Official Accounts analyzed in this article were expressions of opinions. The sympathy for female medical staff of them was actually emphasized that men should protect women according to Benevolent Patriarchy, and it was a systematic approach that favors men. In the contents of these articles, facts and opinions were more fully intertwined, and opinions were often expressed mainly in colloquial and subjective languages, as well as languages with strong emotions and irony.

Through the social media, feminism can easily spread widely in the form of concomitant or turning points when a certain public opinion hotspot appears. This may be related to the lack of information depth in social media. The discussion of female issues in the social media is like a "double-edged sword". On the one hand, it expands the space for discussion of gender issues, also for women themselves to communicate and express, such as some articles wrote:

"These things are not only about women's rights, they are about the dignity of each of us."— 《Is it appropriate to use "shaving hair of a female nurse" for publicity?》

This kind of feminist discourse spreading through social media was timely, interactive, and highly feedback and helped to improve the dilemma of women passively accepting their subordinate status; but on the other hand, the femininity constructed by Benevolent Patriarchy and the discussion of female issues influenced by Benevolent Patriarchy keeps female images still be trapped in traditional stereotypes. So not only do they fail to improve the status of women, but they will cause more serious gender inequality. As some other articles wrote:

"Whose child, princess, and mother are they when they take off their heavy protective clothing?"— 《countless people cry for the hands of a 22-year-old female nurse...What else can we do for them?》

Such descriptions seemed to be rebellious and challenged patriarchy, but in fact they continued to affirm the perspective of Male Gaze, continued to emphasize, spread and consolidate the multiple gender roles of women under patriarchy, the femininity constructed by patriarchy and the weak female images that need to be protected. And they were also strengthened by the use of negative words and question sentences. Only when the media realize that they are in the vortex of Male Gaze and Benevolent Patriarchy, can they prevent the discussion of women's topics and women themselves from being swallowed up.

6. Conclusion

In the prevention and control of the COVID-19 epidemic in China, the media in Weibo used videos or pictures showing the haircut and scars of female medical staff to attract the attention of the audiences, revealing the gaze of the men behind the lens and the male audiences. By highlighting the femininity such as passive, weak, beautiful, and family-friendly, and using the narrative methods of Benevolent Patriarchy to carry out "sacrifice" narratives and "flattery" narratives, those reports could be accepted by the audiences and achieved a good dissemination effect. When the media using the WeChat public account as the carriers gave feedback on news involving female bodies, they gave full play to the characteristics of social media, such as strong feedback and the contents that users choose to produce and consume, and actively and strongly expressed their own opinions in the articles. On the one hand, it empowered women the right to speak and helped to improve the dilemma of women passively accepting their subordinate status. On the other hand, it still profoundly influenced and constructed the stereotypes of men and women in the

public mind, responded positively to Male Gaze, confirmed and consolidated Benevolent Patriarchy and exacerbated the reality of gender inequality.

This is an era encouraging diverse discourse. The collision of gender relations, gender power, and gender roles in gender issues of media reflects people's high attention to the maintenance of their own rights and self-worth. The dissemination of gender issues through the media, with the help of certain events, affects the social and cultural environment and public opinions. Although some gender issues that are highly reposted and discussed, they have not promoted gender equality and social justice in the true sense. There are several hopes at the end of this article: Firstly, media reporters should report and present women with a true gender equality standpoint. They must not only pay attention to the immediacy of news, but also the depth of information; they must not only strive to influence the audience's "what to watch", but also guide the audience to "correctly review what they watched". Secondly, business operations should reduce and finally abandon the misappropriation and misuse of women's words, sincerely care about women's rights and spread the awareness of gender equality. Thirdly, society should try the best to give all women the same opportunities and respect as men, actively promote the dissemination and practice of the awareness of equality between men and women.

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