Vol.5 Iss.8 2024 Communication & Education Review
https://doi.org/10.37420/j.cer.2024.106

Research on the "pseudo-resistance" of online short plays to gender hegemony from the perspective of media production

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Abstract:
With the rise of the feminist movement and women becoming the mainstay of the consumer market, the entertainment sector has become more and more focused on women's needs, the stereotypes of women in film and television have gradually been corrected, with the emergence of online short plays featuring absolute female protagonists who rebel against gender hegemony. However, this kind of short plays embodies a kind of "pseudo-rebellion" phenomenon. this paper chooses three female-oriented short plays with the highest popularity in the first half of 2024 in DouYin as the research object, adopts the methods of text analysis and narrative analysis, and draws the following conclusions through decoding: in character image, the difference between male and female characters still reflects the hidden gender hegemony, men have more perfect images while women are stereotyped. In content, women still do not have actual means of resistance that rely on them. In narrative, female characters have stronger instrumental attributes.

Keywords:
Gender hegemony, online short play, female-led, pseudo-rebellion

1 Introduction

Gender hegemony, as a long-standing social construction, persists due to the deep-rooted patriarchal society. After the founding of People's Republic of China, the women's liberation movement and the three waves of feminism were introduced to the country, which made women gradually independent economically and ideologically. And these new phenomena started to be reflected in film and television works, manifesting in the transformation of the image of female characters from limited stereotypical imagery to diversified ones. However, as a form of film and television emerging in the last decade, online short plays, while catering to the wave of feminism, also shows the phenomenon of "pseudo-rebellion" against the hegemony of gender. Based on this, this paper discusses the construction of women's image and gender narratives in online short plays.

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2 Literature review

2.1 Gender Hegemony

Gender Hegemony was coined by Raven Cornell. Masculinity is at the heart of gender and organizes practices ranging from self-identity to social agency. The construction of hegemony also relies on the object construction of femininity, and in *Gender Power Theory*, Bourdieu argues that gender status is gradually becoming symbolic and that women are excluded from formal settings in the social construction process.[1]

Gender Hegemony was coined by Raewyn Connell. Masculinity is at the heart of gender and organizes practices ranging from self-identity to social agency. The construction of hegemony also relies on the object construction of femininity[2]. In *Gender Power Theory*, Bourdieu argues that gender status is gradually becoming symbolic and women are excluded from formal settings in the social construction process[3]. Mimi Schippers goes further that any conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity must also be defined by the way in which it articulates a complementary and hierarchical relationship to femininity.[4]

2.2 Images of gender roles in online short plays

Jinhua Dai points out that the images of women in Chinese traditional film and television are limited stereotypes. She categorizes the basic images of women into four types: "earth mother" "slut" "witch" and "sacrifice". They all lack the subjective discourse to varying degrees[5], reinforcing the gender oppression of the patriarchal society.

The image of women in China's film and television has gone through three developmental processes: genderless person, woman differentiated from men and individual with a sense of subjectivity. Nowadays, women's roles have begun to subvert the binary gender structure of "seeing and being seen"[6], changed the gender order of male superiority and female inferiority, gradually broken women's identity anxiety and identity crisis[7].

However, the portrayal of men in "female-led" plays has not departed from the role position of "hegemonic masculinity". The theme of "sweet love" and "female lead focused" is to construct female subjects on the surface, but in reality, they fall into a vicious circle of "pseudo-rebellion": men still represent the power, and women, although bold and opinionated, still have to be dependent on men. Thus, despite the assimilation of key attributes associated with masculinity, this particular expression of idealized femininity does not necessarily have an impact on changing gender hegemony[8].

The males in the online short play perpetuate the hegemonic tier of characterization. Cornell divided masculinity into a four-tiered pyramid, with femininity at the invisible bottom of the pyramid[9]. The topmost tier of hegemonic masculinity is the concrete manifestation of the current widely accepted legitimization of patriarchy, and the idols in cultural production and consumption are also the field where hegemonic masculinity is produced and constructed, reinforcing male hegemony in subtle ways[10]. In 2023, the proportion of female audience in online short plays has been nearly seventy percent, the proportion of love themes has been 31%, the female oriented works have a greater possibility of becoming a breakout hit[11]. However, the male image in short plays still has the hegemonic masculinity at the top, while the female image is still constructed as

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male subordination and needing men's support in order to achieve success in life and career, the dependence of the female image is still strong.

2.3 Research questions

Existing literature has analyzed the gender roles of past film and television works, pointing out that female-led short plays have to some extent continued the anti-hegemonic mode of portraying women, but it has not paid attention to the phenomenon of gender "pseudo-hegemony" that has emerged in short plays.

Therefore, this paper innovatively explore the phenomenon of "pseudo-hegemony" from the perspective of the content production of online female-led short plays, in an attempt to address the following two questions: what kind of construction of women's image does the short plays make? What kind of construction reflects people's imagination of gender relations in a gender-hegemonic society?

3 Research methodology

3.1 Selection of samples for analysis

As the most mature short play platform, DouYin hosts the largest number of online short play programs and has more comprehensive data. Therefore, based on the short play projects with Douyin as the main broadcasting platform, this paper selects the three female-led short plays with the highest "heat value" in the "Short Play Heat List" in the first half of 2024 according to Dataeye, namely "Unattainable Love", "The Rapunzel Arrives" and "The Princess Who Are You" as the research objects. The "heat value" is calculated based on the number of DouYin's explosive materials , related materials and related programs during the statistical period, which can accurately reflect the degree of popularity. The three short plays are ranked first, second and fourth on the list respectively, all of them conforming to the labels of "female-led" "top-selling" and "coolness", which are in line with the purpose of the study.

3.2 Analysis process

This study adopts the method of narrative analysis. The steps are followed to conduct the analysis:(1) Repeatedly watching the plays and coding the characterization of the 4 main characters, including their class (upper class, middle class and lower class), overview of their backgrounds, their personalities, character labels (villainous, positive, etc.), and the heroine's means of resistance. (2) Narrative analysis based on plot development, coding the role functions of the 4 main characters, including their roles in the development of the plot and their relationships with other characters.

3.3 Code book

Table 1 Short play code

Title of the short play	Code of the short play	Rank in the Dataeye
Unattainable Love	T1	1

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The Rapunzel Arrives	T2	2
The Princess Who Are You	T3	4

Table 2 Character code

Character code	Role Attributes	school of thought	all segments	Personalities
T1-F1	Female lead	upright	Upper floor - lower floor	Introverted, tolerant, filial
T1-S1	Female Support 1	villain (of a drama etc)	Middle - Upper	Greedy, vicious.
T1-N1	Male support 1	villain (of a drama etc)	upper class	Irritable. vicious.
T1-N2	Male support 2	upright	demersal	Simplicity, forbearance, justice
T2-F1	Female lead	upright	Bottom to Top	Low-key, courageous, indifferent to fame and fortune
T2-M1	Male lead	villain (of a drama etc.)	middle to ranking	Greed, arrogance
T2-N1	Male support 1	upright	upper class	Warm, generous, dominant.
T2-N2	Male support 2	villain (of a drama etc.)	upper class	Gentle, calm, inscrutable.
T3-F1	Female lead	upright	upper class	Alert, intelligent, brave.
T3-M1	male lead	villain (of a drama etc.)	Middle to Upper	Ruthless, vicious, greedy.
T3-S1	Female support 1	villain (of a drama etc)	upper class	Stubborn, dependent on the male lead
T3-S2	Female support 2	villain (of a drama etc.)	upper class	Love of money, viciousness, dependence on the male lead

Table 3 Role Function code

Role Code	Role Attributes	Role in plot development	Relationships with other roles
T1-F1	Female lead	-	The younger sister of Male Support 1, who was bullied by him before her identity was revealed. Protected by Male Support 2.
T1-S1	Female Support 1	Increase the female lead's humiliation, her "defeat" is a plot point.	Replace the Female lead's identity and bully her and Male support 2
T1-N1	Male support 1	A key figure in determining the fate of the Female lead	The female lead's brother, bully her before her identity was revealed.
T1-N2	Male support 2	The comfort of the Female lead, reinforces her vulnerability	Female lead adoptive father, bullied by male support 1 and female support 1

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T2-F1	Female lead	-	Be cheated on emotionally by the male lead Be cheated on emotionally and rebelling by the male support 2
T2-M1	Male lead	Reflect the Female lead's passivity, reinforce the thrill of the Female lead's reversal	The Female lead's first husband, whose power was eventually stripped by the royal power of his male support 1
T2-N1	Male support 1	The source of the Female lead's power, his tragic end reinforces the perfect image of men	The Female lead's father, who was hated and killed by his male support 2
T2-N2	Male support 2	Weaken the Female lead's ability and emphasize her fault in love	The Female lead's second husband, the male support 1's son-in-law, plotted to overthrow the regime of male support 1
T3-F1	Female lead	-	A stand-in for female support 1, taking revenge on the male lead to protect female support 1
T3-M1	male lead	The object of the Female lead's vengeance, the focus of the three female characters' fights	Husband of female support 1; cheat on and used female support 2; fight for the business from the female lead
T3-S1	Female support 1	Introduce the female lead's double scene, make it more difficult to take revenge	Be hurt by the male lead and the female support 2 without realizing it Be protected by the female lead but not trust her
T3-S2	Female support 2	Reflect the ruthlessness of the male lead, her "defeat" is the highlight of the plot	The fake friend of the female support 1. Mistress of the male lead.

4 Image differences: the hidden hegemony of gender

4.1 Masculinity: the collective presentation of the "perfect image"

In the female-led short play, the male lead is still portrayed as rich, upper class and decision makers of the company, who occupies the top in terms of resources and power, and continues the setting of "domineering CEO". However, unlike the traditional idol TV-play, the male lead of these online short plays are all villains, become a vital threat to the female lead' career and even her life. The study found that the male images in this type of short play is divided into two categories: one is "the elite" as the female lead's main rival or the mission to defeat, which is mostly borne by the male lead. This type of males are in the hegemonic class and has higher status than the female lead(T2-M1; T3-M1); the other category is the "father", who selflessly and unconditionally supports the female lead and is the source of her main means of resistance (T1-N2, T2-N1). This type is mainly played by the male supporting role.

The moral superiority that the male lead lacks is supplemented by the "father" figure of the male counterpart. The "father" is the female lead's greatest support, with those of high status providing her with power, and those of low status taking the place of her in being "punished" when she is in danger. The "father" has certain instrumental attributes, but carries a moral sense of goodness and devotion, which is not present in the

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construction of female characters. Therefore, as a "father", the male supporting role makes up for the lack of moral construction caused by the male lead's "villainous" qualities, and the two together build a perfect male image.

4.2 Female presentation: stigmatized stereotypes

The images of the female leads have been expanded and enriched. There is a continuation of the image of the innocent, weak "sacrificial" woman (T1-F1) of traditional movie and TV plays, but also an increase in the image of the dominant person with means and strong leadership (T2-F1, T3-F1). According to the coding table, the female supporting characters are reflected as being similar in age and appearance to the female leads, and ostensibly in a higher class than the female protagonist. Unlike male characters, female supporting roles have ambiguous occupations and appear in the form of relying on their family backgrounds and men to bully others. In the plot, they make use of their appearance and class to design themselves as the "stand-ins" for the female protagonist and exercise suppression and violence against the female lead to achieve their goal, plundering the female lead's resources and upgrading their class. For example, the female supporting character (T1-S1) steals the female lead's(T1-F1) birth token, brutalizes her, replace her and utilize her identity to achieve class transcendence. Therefore, the primary object of the female lead's struggle is not men but other women who try to oppose her. This is not in line with the advertisement of "liberating women and surpassing men" advertised by the female-led short plays.

The stereotype has not disappeared as well, there has never been a selfless image in the female role like the "father"type. In traditional male narratives, the image of women as hysterical and desperate is constantly enriched, annihilating the social environment of women[[

]] . While the female protagonist is portrayed in a richer way in the female-led short plays, the female supporting roles is transfered with more stereotypes. Along with the female supporting character matching male inseparable is the blurring of her occupation in order to ignore her working ability. On this basis, the female supporting character is portrayed as a "slut" (T3-S2) with insatiable appetite, and unconditional dependence on the male lead which reinforces the subordinate position of women in society (T3-S2). At the same time, as the image of the "slut", the female supporting role takes on most of the "dirty" means, and eventually ends up in the traditional punishments like the parade (T3-S2) in the name of "mistress" and "gold-digger".

To summarize, although female-led short plays have subverted the traditional gender imagery in the construction of protagonist roles, the gender power stratification has not been changed, the original stereotyped gender division of labor has been inherited by the supporting characters, and even shows a tendency to be strengthened.

5 Thrill of revenge: the gendered oppression of the "hegemonic class".

"Reversal" is the main source of the "thrill" in female-oriented short plays. The reversal here includes both the success of the female lead after careful preparation and active planning, and the female lead's reversal in unknown circumstances with passive help from others. These two types of "reversal" of the source of power to the female lead appear in the logic of exaggerated family history□strong background or hidden back-

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ground, not through the struggle of the female lead but through the background of resources to complete the so-called "reversal ".

Under the attack of the villain centered on the male lead, struggle of the female protagonists is divided into active resistance and passive resistance, their choice of struggle is closely related to her character and family background.

5.1 Women's Active Resistance: Outrageous Self-Confidence Out of Family Prestige

The female protagonist of this category presents the ability to be brave, to go into danger alone, and to dare to deliberately,extremely intensify the conflict to maximize the exposure of the villain's sinister face. This type of the female lead is bold and confident, unafraid in the face of danger, and faces the blows of the male lead and the female supporting character head-on. The positive roles and villains confront each other head-on, bringing the audience a strong, direct feeling of pleasure. In the play named "The Princess Who Are You?", the female lead pretended to gift her company to the male lead, secretly transfered the industry, turns the original company into a debt-ridden shell at the same time, eventually dismantles the male lead's money-grabbing ruse in public. The use of the traditionally male occasion of business battle to portray a wise and courageous woman breaks the original gender space. But in essence, the premise that supports the female lead’s confident confrontation is that she holds more power than the villain, and this power comes from her family background, from "patriarchal power" rather than the female lead’s own efforts.

5.2 Women's Passive Resistance: Tolerance of Vulnerability and Introversion

The female lead of this type of image is soft, passive and willing to be vulnerable . The ways of resistance are categorized into two types, depending on whether or not the female lead is aware of her background:

The first category is the image of the female lead who has a hegemonic family background but actively chooses to hide it. In the aim of "not caring about fame and fortune", they are actively in a weak position, determined to accompany with the male lead for life but betrayed by him, witch made the female lead decide to fight against the male protagonist. Their struggle is initially transformed from being tolerant and vulnerable to try to resist the hegemony of the male lead, but often to no avail; the female lead can only succeed in her struggle by showing her special identity and revealing her superiority over the male lead. The second category is the image of the female who lives at the bottom for various reasons, but actually has the status of "the daughter of the hegemonic class". The female lead is humiliated in the early stage because of her superficial class of poverty, and due to the class disparity, it is difficult to resist and the female lead has no self-awareness to fight against the villain, so she is at the mercy of others; it is only through the later stage when her identity is revealed that the villain repents and begs for forgiveness to make the plot has the thrill feeling of revenge.

The passive resistance of female protagonist is also the presentation of stereotypes. The villain's reason for attacking the female lead is usually because of her weak position when hiding her family background and skills, which reinforces class discrimination as a product of a patriarchal society. At the same time, the female leads all emphasize that strive for success is not their own intention, they just want to a peaceful life. Do not actively pursue their own power, but only choose to fight back when they are forced to do so, it reinforces the stereotype of women as the weak image.

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It is found that both types of female protagonists have a similar role model, legitimizing birth and background as women's own abilities. In fact, the female protagonist's means of competition are still externally endowed, mostly coming from male protection and male power inheritance by the“father”image, her own strategies and abilities are weakened, and the essence of "thrill" is the crushing of the hegemonic class status.

6 Narrative analysis: pseudo-resistance to gender hegemony

The short plays of female-led continue the concept of the gender hegemony pyramid, in which the female protagonists, with the mission of defeating the male protagonist, replace the male protagonist who is the villain, at the top of the pyramid and become the new member of hegemonic class. On the one hand, women have finally gained power and challenged the traditional gender stratification, but on the other hand, this is due to the power background of the female protagonists rather than their own efforts. In the narrative of "growth against all odds" as the path of the female protagonist, the female-led short play only subverts the relationship between the protagonists of traditional idol dramas, but does not really break the gender stratification. On the contrary, stereotypes such as jealousy and dependence on males are transfered onto other female supporting roles, the logic of the supporting roles' lives still follows the path of patriarchy.

6.1 Narrative Annihilation: Women as a Silent Community

The theory of the silent group was developed by Edwin Adenauer and Shelley Adenauer. There is an inherent male bias in the actual language of the social culture, and female voices are suppressed or "silenced". Especially when male and female meanings and expressions are in conflict, male meanings tend to prevail. In the female-led short play narratives, male discourse is interpreted as class power, and the expression of prevailing is reflected in class oppression and discrimination against women's abilities. On this basis, there is often a transformation of female character and means of counterattack: the female protagonist is expected to be easy-going, gentle and tolerant but being bullied at beginning , and on account of society dominated by men's interests, she is forced to rebel through "depravation" or "rebirth". Whether active or passive, the female lead is denying her own narrative and joining the discourse of male power.

The theory of the silent group further suggests that in order to participate in public life, women must transform their ways of knowing into the language of the male world view. Thus, the success of the female protagonist in the short play is reflected in the fact that she conforms to the patriarchy discourse, a triumph under the male value system, while the other women, including the instrumentalized female supporting characters sacrificed for the plot, remain the silent majority symbolically annihilated by the class power derived from gender power. This invariably points out that female discourse alone cannot achieve success, the female protagonist's struggle all the way to fight other women and become the top of the power hierarchy essentially perpetuates the process of male mastery of power, and does not embody the unique narrative appeal of women.

At the same time, even though there are episodes at the end of the plot in which the female protagonist defeats the elite type of male protagonist and breaks away from the "father" male supporting roles in order to reflect the self-reliance of the female, it does not account for the major part of the plot, and the female lead chooses to give up the fruits of her struggle after accomplishing the mission of "defeating" the male protag-

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onist. For instance, the female protagonist (T2-F1) regains power at the end but chooses to go back to the mountains and forests.

6.2 Role function: women with strong instrumental attributes

The short plays with a female character as the absolute protagonist weaken the clear delineation of the other characters. There is no male protagonist set up in short play T1 and no female supporting roles set up in short play T2, the villainous character attributes of both are replaced with the suppression of the hegemonic class.

The male characters in this type of plays respectively take on the functions of suppressing the female lead and providing the background of the female lead's life. All women except the female lead take on the attributes of the female lead's competitors and victimizers. In the growth path of the female lead, the male characters are the key to the her growth . But the other female characters are portrayed as "sluts", which is a stronger instrumental attribute than the male characters.

The "thrill" comes from the female lead's struggle against adversity. As the female lead and supporting roles have similar external appearence and opposite stances, the counter-suppression and anti-humiliation of female supporting roles is often the embodiment of the female lead's path of growth, the relationship between them has a typical subject-object distinction. For instance, after losing the struggle, the female suppoting character is put up with the sign of "mistress" and marched in a critisim (T3-S2). Many of the crimes that are originally committed by men are presented in a way that the female is extremely humiliated or even "substantially annihilated", while the male only loses his career as a punishment.

To sum up, in the so-called female-led narrative, the role attributes of the female lead are opposed to the traditional female roles represented by the female supporting cast, so as to reflect her disdain for and subversion of the "male dependence", but it only realizes the subversion of the individual male, the female lead herself still conforms to the male discourse system, which is a pseudo-rebellion against gender hegemony.

7 Summarize

As women are increasingly becoming the mainstay of the entertainment consumer market, entertainment field is focusing more and more on women needs, that's the reason why online short plays with female as the absolute protagonists have emerged. The protagonists of these short plays try to create a female-oriented narrative logic by subverting the gender image of the tradition, but according to the analysis in this paper, they still follow the logic of gender hegemony as a kind of alternative "pseudo-rebellion", which risks exacerbating the gender stereotypes on the premise that these short plays are the most popular ones in this half of the year. It is imperative to address "pseudo-resistance" plays and to portray truly independent women.

First of all, if the female protagonist's means of resistance all come from the legacy of patriarchal power, then the process of "reversal" is the inheritance of gender hegemony. In the portrayal of the female protagonist, it is not desirable to have a single-minded "identity only", and online short plays based on female protagonist should break the "rationality" and "means" that have been monopolized by hegemonic males, such qualities should not be gender-specific in the first place. Secondly, male and female supporting characters have taken on the images of "perfect men" and "stereotypical women" in the traditional image of film and

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television plays, leading to the incomplete anti-gender construction of such short play works, which should strengthen the three-dimensionality of the supporting characters and weaken the strong gender attributes of male and female. Finally, in the reverse narrative of female-led, female character has to be subordinated to the logic of male narrative, which does not change the gender stratification. Therefore, it is crucial to construct the logic of female perspective and get rid of the patriarchal gender narrative of the subject-object dichotomy.

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