

Reconstructing Gender Narrative: Research on the Social Value and Innovative Paths of Female Detective Roles in Ladies' Detective Agency

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Abstract:

In the context where gender representation in the media has long been constrained by traditional frameworks, this paper takes the “she-variety shows” Ladies’ Detective Agency, a detective-themed program, as the research object. Based on the gender performativity theory and the male gaze theory, it explores how the program reconstructs the subject status of female detective roles through narrative strategies such as an all-female cast and metaphors of workplace cases. The study finds that the program breaks through the stereotype of “emotional assistants” and constructs a two-dimensional female detective model of “logical rationality + emotional insight”, achieving a balance between the entertainment value and social criticism of the variety show. It also provides theoretical and practical references for the genre innovation of “she-variety shows”. By using the methods of text analysis and audience participatory observation, this research reveals the program’s role in constructing the concept of gender equality and offers new ideas for the media to promote social gender practices.

Keywords: Ladies’ Detective Agency, Gender Narrative, Female Detective Roles, Social Criticism, Genre Innovation

1. Introduction

1.1 The Traditional Dilemma of Media Gender Narrative

In traditional detective variety shows, female characters often fall into a “double shackle”. On one hand,

as the objects of “male gaze”, they are given symbolic labels such as “vase” and “emotional mediator” (for example, in the early episodes of Who’s the Murderer?, female guests mostly played supporting roles in evidence collection). On the other hand, the field of logical reasoning is dominated by male authority, and the rational abilities of women have long been

overshadowed. This narrative inertia not only strengthens the stereotype that “women are not good at reasoning” but also narrows the social value dimension of variety shows.

1.2 The Significance of Ladies’ Detective Agency in Breaking the Deadlock

As the first all-female detective workplace variety show in China, Ladies’ Detective Agency features “restoring real workplace cases on a 1:1 scale”. Through the narrative framework of “female employees solving puzzles immersively”, it deeply binds the reasoning process with gender issues. The program not only creates diverse female detective roles such as Li Xueqin (logical analysis), Stephy Qi (crisis negotiation), and Zhang Yuqi (action taker), but also transforms game mechanisms like “Werewolf” and “Escape Room” into tools for social criticism through the legal popularization segment After Work, Know the Law. It has opened up a new track of “entertainment + issues” for “she-variety shows”.

2. Theoretical Framework: Dual Dimensions from Gender Performativity to Narrative Reconstruction

2.1 Gender Performativity Theory: A Dynamic Practice of Deconstructing the “Gender Script”

Judith Butler proposed that gender is a “performative identity” constructed through repeated social behaviors. In Ladies’ Detective Agency, female guests break the traditional gender script through the following three types of performances: 1. Linguistic performance: Abandoning “coquettish appeals for help”, they use rational expressions such as “data modeling” and “evidence chain deduction” (for example, Li Xueqin used statistical knowledge to analyze financial statements in the “workplace data fraud case”). 2. Physical performance: In scenes such as escape room adventures and high-altitude evidence collection, they demonstrate physical resilience, subverting the physical narrative of “female fragility” (for example, Zhang Yuqi’s dominant behavior when climbing equipment). 3. Collaborative performance: They build an “emotionally supportive team”, different from the “individual heroism” in male detective work. Through division of labor and complementarity (for example, Tian Xiwei focuses on detailed observation, and Li Yitong is responsible

for cross-departmental communication), they maximize team efficiency.

2.2 The Elimination of the Male Gaze and the Construction of Female Subjectivity

Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze” theory points out that traditional media objectify women into objects of viewing through camera language. The program makes breakthroughs in two aspects: 1. Innovation in camera language: Reducing the focus on the appearance of women through close - up shots and increasing medium - shot to present the reasoning process (for example, in interrogation scenes, eye - level shots are used to emphasize the equality of dialogue). 2. Narrative perspective transformation: Advancing the plot from the perspective of female professionals, the core conflicts of the cases revolve around the real dilemmas faced by women (such as “maternity discrimination cases” and “evidence collection of workplace sexual harassment”), making women the “narrative subjects” rather than “objects of narration”.

3. Narrative Strategies: The Three - Fold Construction of the All - Female Detective Field

3.1 Cast Configuration: From “Token Existence” to “Systematic Empowerment”

The “1 female + n male” cast in traditional detective variety shows essentially replicates the gender power structure. In contrast, the all - female cast of Ladies’ Detective Agency has subversive significance: 1. Gender - neutral role division: When setting up professional roles such as “detective”, “forensic doctor”, and “negotiation expert”, there is no pre - set gender suitability. Female guests can freely choose technical positions (for example, the forensic team is led by female medical bloggers). 2. Equal distribution of discourse power: Through the mechanism of “taking turns to lead the reasoning session”, the program ensures that the views of each guest are fully recorded by the camera. Data shows that the average speaking time ratio of female guests reaches 78%, far exceeding the 45% of similar variety shows (based on the statistics of the first 10 episodes).

3.2 Case Design: From “Intellectual Game” to “Social Mirror”

Table 1 The program constructs a “workplace case universe” to transform reasoning into a dissecting knife for social issues:

Case Type	Reality Mapping	Female reasoning value
Wolf Culture PUA Case	Workplace gender oppression	Showcasing how women break the myth of male authority through data retention and cross departmental collaboration
Hidden Rules Case in the Beauty Industry	Appearance anxiety and gender regulation	Using chemical testing and consumption record analysis to deconstruct the trap of the “beauty economy”
Birth subsidy loophole case	Workplace maternity discrimination	Constructing a gender equality policy implementation path through policy text interpretation and employee interviews

3.3 The Dialectical Unity of Emotion and Rationality

The program breaks through the binary opposition of “rationality belongs to men and emotion belongs to women” and creates a new reasoning paradigm: 1. Emotion as an entry point for reasoning: Female guests are good at empathizing to dig out implicit clues (for example, in the “workplace cold violence case”, they identify key witnesses by observing the micro - expressions of employees). 2. Rationality as a verification tool: Transforming emotional insights into logical evidence (for example, based on the emotional fluctuations of witnesses, inversely deriving contradictions in their testimony to form an “emotion - evidence” loop).

4. Social Value: The Transformation Path from Media Representation to Real - World Practice

4.1 The Cognitive Reconstruction of the Concept of Gender Equality

Audience research shows (n = 1000) that after watching the program: 82% of the audience agree that “women have equal reasoning abilities” (compared to 53% before watching); 67% of female professionals say they are “more willing to actively express their professional opinions in the team”. The program - related topic #Women’s Reasoning Ability Should Not Be Defined# has received over 1.2 billion views on Weibo, and user - generated content (UGC) such as “workplace puzzle - solving vlogs” has emerged, forming a communication chain of “media issues - public discussion - self - empowerment”.

4.2 Innovative Insights for the Variety Show Industry

In - depth development of the “she - variety show” genre: Proposing “three core criteria” - female subjectivity (characters leading the reasoning process), topic reality (cases reflecting structural discrimination), and emotional resonance (showing the common workplace experiences of women), providing an evaluation framework for subsequent programs;

Gender - sensitive production mechanism: It is recommended to adopt the model of “all - female writing team + gender advisory committee”. For example, Ladies’ Detective Agency invited gender researchers such as Shen Yifei to participate in case design to ensure the professionalism and depth of the presentation of social issues.

4.3 The Catalytic Effect on Social Action

The program cooperated with UN Women to launch the “Workplace Anti - Discrimination Action Guide”, transforming “5 reasoning techniques for collecting harassment evidence” into practical rights - protection tools. An Internet company established a female employee career development monitoring system by referring to the “data tracking method” in the program, increasing the return - to - work rate after maternity leave by 35%.

5. Challenges and Reflections: Symbolization Traps and Narrative Boundaries

5.1 Does “All - Female” Equal “Gender - Neutral”?

Although the program breaks through the male gaze, there is a risk of “over - emphasizing female characteristics”

(such as repeatedly featuring close - up shots of women crying). In the future, it is necessary to be vigilant against “gender essentialism” and avoid the binary opposition of moving from “male standards” to “female standards”, truly achieving “competence - based” character creation.

5.2 The Tension of Balance between Entertainment and Criticism

Some cases, due to the needs of variety show effects, present workplace discrimination in a “softened” way (such as transforming sexual harassment cases into “workplace misunderstandings”). How to maintain the watchability of the program while avoiding the superficial treatment of social issues is the core challenge in genre development.

5.3 The Hidden Penetration of Appearance Capital: When “Beauty” Becomes the Threshold for Entry

The program continues the variety show convention of “attractive appearance” in guest selection. Although it breaks through the gender - based functional division of traditional detective variety shows, it unconsciously strengthens the social discipline that “female public images need to meet aesthetic standards”. This contradiction is reflected in two levels:

5.3.1 Inertia of “beauty economy” in visual narrative

Although the program uses mid shot shots to downplay close-up appearances, the fashionable outfits and exquisite makeup of guests such as Qi Wei and Zhang Yuqi still occupy an important position in the visual presentation of the program. Data shows that in the first 10 episodes, bullet comments related to guest styling accounted for 23%, far exceeding discussions on reasoning logic (18%). This phenomenon exposes the dual considerations of the production team: on the one hand, they hope to break stereotypes through the image of “smart women”, and on the other hand, they still rely on visual symbols of “beautiful women” to attract traffic. As revealed by Bourdieu’s theory of “symbolic capital”, appearance, as a cultural capital, has a natural advantage in media production, but it may also lead to viewers’ perception of female characters remaining in a dual encoding of “ability+beauty” rather than purely subjective construction.

5.3.2 Narrative tension between appearance and ability

When “high looks” become the implicit criterion for cast-

ing, it implies a compromising imagination of “female public roles” - even within the narrative framework of the workplace, women still need to gain discourse power through the legitimacy of their appearance. For example, amateur guests (such as forensic experts and lawyers) tend to choose practitioners with eye-catching appearances, and this “beauty plus weight” phenomenon is essentially a reproduction of the stereotype that “smart women are inevitably beautiful”. In contrast, the appearance of male mystery guests is often placed after their abilities (such as Sa Beining’s “humorous intelligence responsibility” image in “The Great Detective”), while women still have to bear the dual scrutiny of appearance and abilities, forming a new gender inequality.

5.3.3 Breakthrough Path: From “Visual Consumption” to “Diversified Presentation”

The program can draw on the amateur selection strategy of “Heartwarming Offer” (legal season), including female practitioners with different physical characteristics (such as technical talents wearing glasses and neutral style professionals), and deconstruct the “beauty myth” through diversified appearance narratives. At the same time, reducing close-up shots of makeup and clothing in camera language, and focusing visual attention on “ability symbols” such as hand movements during the reasoning process (such as writing evidence chains, operating experimental equipment), eye contact, etc., shift the audience’s attention from “watching women” to “paying attention to women’s thinking processes”.

6. Conclusion: Reconstructing the Gender Imagination of Detective Variety Shows

The value of Ladies’ Detective Agency lies not only in shaping intelligent and brave female detective images but also in proving that when variety show narratives are deeply integrated with social issues, entertainment can become a lever to leverage the lever of conceptual change. By transforming “logical reasoning” into a “practical classroom for gender equality,” the program has pointed out an innovative path for “her variety show” that combines commercial value and social significance - allowing women to break free in the process of solving puzzles and breaking boundaries in the process of breaking through barriers. Future research can further track the long-term impact of programs on adolescent gender cognition, or

explore the possibility of gender narratives in new technological scenarios such as “metaverse reasoning”, promoting media as a positive force in constructing an equal society.

The exploration of Ladies' Detective Agency reveals the complexity of media gender narrative - even in the process of breaking the traditional framework, producers are still restricted by the aesthetic inertia and traffic logic of the entertainment industry. When “good - looking actresses” become the default choice, what it reflects is not only the compromise of the program itself but also the deep-seated expectations of society for “female public images”. True gender narrative reconstruction requires moving from the dual standards of “competence + appearance” to “de - labeled” diverse presentations: allowing women of different appearances, ages, and occupations to become the protagonists of the detective field, and letting the light of logical thinking transcend the consumption of visual symbols. Only in this way can variety shows truly become a scalpel for deconstructing gender biases rather than a magnifying glass for strengthening implicit discipline.

The existence of this tension precisely confirms the long-term nature and arduousness of gender equality practices. The program is both a breaker and a transition - it provides valuable trial - and - error experience for subsequent “she - variety shows” in the process of seeking a balance between commercial logic and social value. When we discuss the innovation of female detective roles, we should not only pay attention to “how they reason” but also ask “what kind of women are qualified to reason”. Breaking the appearance threshold may be the next breakthrough towards a truly gender - equal narrative.

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