

Research on the Landscape of Domestic Female-Centric TV Dramas from the Perspective of Visual Communication: Postprint

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Abstract

The Legend of Zhen Huan's unprecedented success in 2012 catalyzed the emergence of female-centric Chinese dramas as a distinct genre within the Chinese television market, rapidly evolving into a widespread cultural phenomenon. Notably, beyond sophisticated narrative techniques, these dramas have sparked extensive online discourse concerning their female characters. Within the field of visual communication, this study conducts a landscape analysis of domestic female-led dramas to investigate the relationship between female characters' costume design and audience viewing duration and frequency.

Full Text

Preamble

Research on the Landscape of Domestic Leading Female Dramas from the Perspective of Visual Communication

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Abstract: Since *The Legend of Zhen Huan* exploded in popularity in 2012, Chinese female lead dramas have emerged as a new genre in the Chinese television market, forming a cultural phenomenon within just a few years. Notably, beyond their brilliant narrative techniques, the female characters in these dramas have sparked heated online discussions. From the perspective of visual communication, this paper conducts landscape research on domestic female lead dramas to explore the relationship between female characters' costume design and audience viewing duration and frequency.

Keywords: Female lead drama, Landscape society, Visual domain

1. Introduction

The concept of “female lead drama” has been widely discussed on online forums since 2015. This genre focuses on portraying female protagonists and revolves around women’s coming-of-age stories. Its emergence stems from the rise of female consciousness and the promotion of women’s social status. Consequently, these productions concentrate on developing female characters and their personal growth narratives. The popularity of female lead dramas and the heated discussions surrounding female culture reflect audience resonance with women’s situations and their expectations and demands for themselves.

From *The Legend of Zhen Huan* in 2012 to the present, female lead dramas have swept the television market as a new genre. In just a few years, they have created a cultural phenomenon unmatched by other emerging drama types. After 2016, an increasing number of series marketed as “female lead dramas” appeared, generating substantial online discussion. From *Beauty Weiyong* (2016) to *Full Moon in Bloom* (2017), *The Legend of Chu* (2017), *Story of Yanxi Palace* (2018), and the successive hits *Menghualu* and *The Wind Blows Half Summer* in 2022, these productions have not only achieved high ratings but also generated significant profits. As cultural products that have maintained popularity for several years, the success of female lead dramas warrants thorough analysis.

Current scholarship on female lead dramas, beyond examining narrative modes, predominantly interprets female consciousness through character imagery. Taking *The Wind Blows Half Summer* as an example, beyond its brilliant narrative techniques, the female protagonist Xu Banxia triggered heated online discussions about her styling once the drama aired. This raises important questions: Is the meticulous production of female characters the reason for these dramas’ popularity? Under the trend of increasingly sophisticated visual production, are these works influenced by the society of the spectacle, thereby affecting audience expectations of female characters?

2.1 Literature Review on the Basic Concept of “Female Lead Drama”

Female lead dramas have attracted academic research from multiple perspectives. Although the concept has been discussed online and in media since around 2016, it did not enter academic discourse until later. Existing domestic research on female lead dramas can be roughly divided into two categories: studies focusing on the dramas themselves, primarily examining character imagery, female consciousness, narrative modes, and communication patterns; and research on audience psychology.

For instance, Lv Zeyi’s *Breakthrough in the Image Building of Emerging “Great Female Protagonists” in Costume Dramas* examines characters such as Dou Yifeng from *Beauty Weiyong*, Zhen Huan from *The Legend of Zhen Huan*, and Wu Zetian from *The Empress of China*, applying Beauvoir’s theory of gen-

der construction and Judith Butler's gender performance theory to "explore the desire expression and identity construction behind character building." In addition to analyzing the dramas themselves, existing studies also examine audience psychology. For example, Xu Mingyue's master's thesis *A Study on the Aesthetic Psychology of Female Lead Drama Audiences in the Context of Consumer Culture* investigates the aesthetic psychology and formative factors of female lead drama audiences under rampant consumerism, identifying phenomena such as the pursuit of sensory experience, identification with idol symbols, and the highlighting of empathy effects. This study also interprets the formation of this aesthetic psychology from the perspectives of social environment, aesthetic objects, and aesthetic subjects. These two approaches essentially cover existing research on female lead dramas.

However, although these studies examine both the dramas and audience psychology, they fail to identify that the fundamental reason for the excellent production quality of female lead dramas lies in the demands of the society of the spectacle.

2.2 Literature Review of Society of the Spectacle Theory

The theory of the society of the spectacle was proposed in the 20th century by French thinker Guy Debord in his 1967 work *The Society of the Spectacle*. French philosopher Jean Baudrillard noted that most foreign scholars have approached spectacle theory from the phenomenon of "spectacle," with research fields showing diversified trends. By analyzing spectacle images in real life, they link spectacle, media, and commodities, prompting attention to spectacle phenomena and reflection on social transformation. Following the 1929 economic crisis, mass consumption became the new driving force for economic development and the decisive factor for profit generation. Capitalists utilize ubiquitous advertising in daily life to achieve capital output, making visual images the basis for people's consumption and subsequently exporting consumerist spectacle values. Debord analyzed this process, pointing out that the external image of the spectacle has replaced the essence of society. Correspondingly, the popularity of female lead dramas can be understood through spectacle theory, as they rely on sophisticated costume and makeup design to capture the television drama market.

However, these studies have not analyzed domestic female lead dramas from the perspective of costume and makeup spectacle, leaving unanswered whether domestic female lead dramas that emphasize costume and makeup design meet audience expectations.

2.3 Problem Statement

In summary, this paper, starting from spectacle theory, seeks to answer why domestic female lead dramas increasingly emphasize costume and beauty. Is it true that the higher the female characters' appearance level, the more elab-

orate the costumes, the more exquisite the makeup, and the more exaggerated the props, the greater the audience attention? What other factors strengthen audience attention to domestic female lead dramas?

3.1.1 Hypothesis Development

Based on the above questions, this study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: The better the figure of the female lead, the higher the frequency of audience viewing.

H2: The more delicate the female makeup, the more frequent the audience viewing.

H3: The more exquisite the heroine's clothing, the higher the audience's viewing frequency.

To test these hypotheses, this study adopted a questionnaire survey method, sampling the general population.

3.1.2 Sampling and Survey Results

A total of 187 valid samples were collected. Female respondents accounted for over 80% of the sample. In terms of age, respondents aged 18-22 represented the highest proportion at over 50%. Regarding education level, bachelor's degree holders accounted for the highest proportion at over 80%.

In terms of viewing habits for female lead dramas, 79.7% of respondents reported watching 1-3 such dramas annually; 67.35% watched less than one hour per week; yet over 60% watched more than three times per week. Among the dramas surveyed, *The Legend of Zhen Huan* had the highest viewership at 70%, followed by *The Legend of Chu Qiao* and *Story of Yanxi Palace*. More than 76% of respondents indicated that the appearance of female characters in female lead dramas is an important factor influencing their interest.

The study divided the attractiveness of female characters into makeup, body shape, clothing, and skin condition. After summing and averaging these variables, a new composite variable "female character appearance" was generated for subsequent statistical analysis. The average rating for female protagonists was 89 points, while the average rating for female character makeup was 3.7 points (out of 5). These results indicate that respondents give high evaluations to the appearance and styling of female characters in female lead dramas.

In summary, Pearson correlation analysis revealed a significant positive correlation between audience affection for female characters and viewing frequency ($r > 0$, $P < 0.05$). This suggests that higher audience appreciation for female characters' figure, makeup, clothing, and other aspects correlates with higher viewing frequency. However, no significant correlation was found between audience evaluation of female characters' appearance level and their viewing time or frequency. Whether audiences have an immersive viewing experience does not

produce statistically significant differences in their evaluation and liking of female characters' appearance level.

3.2 In-Depth Interview Method

Based on the questionnaire data analysis, we conducted in-depth interviews to address two questions: (1) "Why does appearance level superficially affect audience viewing of female lead dramas but is not actually an evaluation criterion?" and (2) "Why does makeup quality affect viewing frequency and duration? Is it the production crew's positive attitude that audiences perceive?"

(1) Interview Design: The interview questions were divided into three parts. The first part covered basic interviewee information, including gender and age. The second part translated research questions into interview questions. The third part prepared follow-up questions for deeper exploration.

(2) Ethical Considerations: During the interview process, researchers avoided the four ethical problems emphasized by scholar Alan Bryman: harm to participants, lack of informed consent, violation of privacy, and deception. Interviewees could remain silent or withdraw midway if they encountered uncomfortable questions. Materials that interviewees requested not be published were excluded from this study.

(3) Sample and Procedure: This study conducted 15-minute semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 interviewees aged 18-25 between March 2023 and April 2022. The sample initially included college students, teachers, and other professionals, with additional participants recruited through social networks. Following the principle of maximum variation sampling in qualitative research, data collection was closed after the 10th respondent, as the content sufficiently answered the research questions. Interviewees varied in age, location, and upbringing environment, resulting in low homogeneity. Interviews were conducted one-on-one face-to-face, producing verbatim transcripts totaling 10,000 words. The interview content was processed by the author. See the table below for basic interviewee information.

Basic Information of Interviewees

Serial Number	Gender	Occupation
1	Female	Student
2	Female	Student
3	Female	Student
4	Female	Teacher
5	Female	Photographer
6	Female	Student
7	Female	Teacher
8	Female	Student
9	Female	Student

Serial Number	Gender	Occupation
10	Female	Journalist
11	Female	Student

4. Research Findings and Discussion

When conducting in-depth interviews on how “appearance level” and “makeup quality” affect viewing frequency and duration of domestic female lead dramas, we found that while the heroine’s appearance may initially attract attention, the plot is what truly affects subsequent viewing frequency and duration. The reason makeup quality influences viewing patterns is that audiences can perceive the production quality through these visual elements. Interviewee responses confirmed the author’s hypotheses.

4.1 Appearance Level Is No Longer a Persistent Traffic Driver

Appearance level is no longer the root cause of viewing frequency and duration. In the society of the spectacle, attractive appearance is no longer a scarce resource. Quality dramas still attract audiences through strong plot logic and vivid characterization, which constitute the foundation of any television series and represent the key factor in continuously attracting viewers.

According to interview results, audiences initially develop interest in a drama due to attractive appearances, but continued viewing is primarily driven by plot quality. As one interviewee stated: “I started watching *Menghualu* because of the heroine’s appearance, but the story attracted me most. *The Legend of Zhen Huan* is also story-driven. So appearance is one reason to start watching, but the story is more important” (S2). Another noted: “When first encountering a drama, you definitely judge it by appearance level. However, if the story is good later on, appearance issues can be ignored, but the premise is that the story must be attractive” (S3).

Appearance level can serve as a gateway for traffic, but maintaining or increasing traffic is definitely not dependent on female characters’ appearance. In the society of the spectacle, selection based on appearance has become an unconscious choice. This is particularly evident in television series that require visual processing. To a certain extent, appearance becomes the entry point to open the viewing market, and audience attraction to appearance becomes the reason for initial viewing. However, during continuous viewing, mere appearance cannot satisfy audience needs. Audiences become more attracted by plot development and enjoy the psychological experience it brings. When immersed in the plot, audiences can even ignore appearance factors and focus on characters’ fates. Therefore, in the society of the spectacle, the general improvement in appearance quality makes it no longer a scarce resource or a determining factor for viewing frequency and duration.

4.2 Makeup Quality Meets Deeper Audience Needs

Compared to appearance level, makeup quality demonstrates higher correlation with plot trends, character personality, and image progression, requiring greater detail and precision.

According to in-depth interviews, one respondent explained: “If the makeup quality is not very good, the first episode will definitely leave me with the impression that the drama lacks innovative points and shows poor production attitude, which affects my personal aesthetic and initial viewing experience” (S4). Another noted: “The makeup quality in *Story of Yanxi Palace* particularly appeals to female audiences. This is the most direct reflection of a drama’s production level. Whether you want to present a good story seriously or simply follow trends to cash in on dividends can be seen through scene layout, costume design for different characters, and other details” (S5). A third interviewee stated: “Good makeup reflects the crew’s attention and care for the work, unlike some ordinary web dramas that simply use perfunctory styling for traffic and clicks. Good makeup can enhance our viewing experience and improve our aesthetic appreciation” (S6).

In audiences’ eyes, the exquisite makeup quality in domestic female lead dramas not only satisfies their visual pursuit but also reflects the crew’s attention and the series’ excellent quality. Therefore, makeup quality in the society of the spectacle meets both visual and quality experience needs. Whether a domestic female lead drama is truly high-quality must include unexpectedly fine work in makeup quality.

Furthermore, makeup carries certain social responsibilities. Taking *Menghualu* as an example, the production team referenced the Song Dynasty historical background in makeup design, meticulously crafting details around popular aesthetic culture of that era. The costume colors chosen were fresh and elegant, avoiding high-saturation colors, which vividly reflected the Song Dynasty people’s pursuit of natural and simple aesthetics. This approach not only attracts audiences but also popularizes the aesthetic culture of the Song Dynasty.

5. Summary and Reflection

Against the backdrop of the society of the spectacle, audiences’ visual needs when watching television series have become more in-depth and detailed, adjusting and adapting around the core story experience. How to align female characters’ makeup quality with plot advancement and how to continuously optimize and refine makeup production to maximize audience visual satisfaction will be key issues for domestic female lead dramas to attract and improve audience viewing frequency and duration.

5.1 Refine Makeup Details to Avoid Uniformity

Detailed depiction in television drama visual arts can touch the softest parts of audiences' hearts, generating identification and resonance. Therefore, starting from details, producers can design different makeup styles for the same character during different transformation periods to reflect changes accompanying the female character's growth. In different situations, women's makeup shows different states. For example, when working overtime and staying up late during career progression, a woman's skin may not appear as polished and neat as usual. Makeup design can break through from such details, allowing audiences to feel the production crew's intention, thereby increasing viewing frequency and duration.

5.2 Improve Costume-Scene Integration

The atmosphere of story scenes in film and television works requires not only character performance through body language and dialogue but also the mutual transformation of clothing and styling to effectively guide audiences through plot progression and render story atmosphere. In film and television productions, costume styling is often integrated with the background or spatial scene to heighten scene beauty through clothing shape, style, and color, creating an immersive story experience. In future content production, producers can extend audience viewing time by improving the compatibility of female costumes with the visual space and story development.

6. Research Limitations

This study did not conduct targeted audience segmentation but rather analyzed all questionnaire feedback collectively. Future research could refine audiences by gender, age, and occupation to improve visual processing of domestic female lead dramas in targeted ways, thereby comprehensively enhancing viewing frequency and duration, expanding market share, and transforming them from niche to mainstream productions.

Additionally, this study did not contact producers of female lead dramas, thus lacking access to cutting-edge industry information. Currently, we do not know how the domestic female lead drama market will develop in terms of spectacle theory application or how to occupy the mainstream market.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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