

The Tripartite Collusion: A CDA of the Commodification of Feminism in Weibo's SFL Discourse

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Abstract. As 'Strong Female Lead' (SFL) narratives gain mainstream popularity, related discussions have become a significant arena for gender studies. However, the underlying power dynamics shaping these conversations remain underexplored. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), this study investigates the nature of the discourse surrounding SFL dramas on the Chinese social media platform Weibo, and systematically analyzes 100 popular posts related to 'SFL dramas' on it. The findings reveal that this discursive field is not a bottom-up, grassroots feminist practice but is predominantly led by commercialized key opinion leaders. A tripartite collusion of algorithms, capital, and fan culture politics profoundly shapes the construction of this discourse. The ultimate effect of this collusion is the 're-disciplining' and commodification of the potentially subversive issue of women's empowerment into a controllable and marketable product. This study highlights the critical role of platform technology in shaping contemporary gender discourse and offers a critical reflection on the commodification of feminist narratives in the social media era.

Keywords: SFL Dramas, Weibo, CDA, Fandom Industry, Gendered Consumerism

1. Introduction

Da Nv Zhu, which can be translated as 'Strong Female Lead' (SFL), refers to a female protagonist who is independent of the male protagonist and can determine their own fate, possessing strong capabilities in their profession [1]. In recent years, with the spread of feminism in China, TV dramas featuring independent, SFL have become mainstream, and discussions about these characters on social media have gradually increased, mostly focusing on gender power and women's personal value. However, there is a phenomenon that can not be ignored—the SFL cannot escape the constraints of patriarchal gaze, and the surge in the number of SFL dramas seems to have been co-opted by the logic of consumerism, with the underlying logic being the commodification of neoliberal feminism. Existing literature also points out the issue of gendered consumerism in Chinese film and television dramas, and has studied the attitudes of audiences toward these consumable characters. However, this literature overlooks another important actor besides the audience: social media platforms and their algorithms. Platforms are not passive, silent containers of speech. Through traffic allocation and content moderation via algorithms, they determine which voices are heard and become popular, and which voices are marginalized.

Therefore, this research attempts to employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to evaluate SFL discourse on Weibo as not a bottom-up feminist discussion, but rather a highly commercialized arena shaped by the collusion of algorithms, capital, and fandom politics, with the ultimate effect being the re-disciplining and commodification of women's empowerment. Through the research, the impact and significance of social media platform algorithms on feminist discourse can be recognized and valued.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Representation of women in contemporary media and on-screen

The portrayal of women in contemporary Chinese film and television presents a complex and contradictory picture. Although there has been an increase in female-centered dramas, their representation is often stereotypical, one-dimensional, and heavily influenced by patriarchal ideology [2-3].

Amid the prevailing societal pressure on women at the time, the media also created new social labels such as 'leftover women,' portraying outstanding women who actively choose to remain single as passive, old single women left behind. Through repeated depictions in TV dramas and reality shows, this further distorted the representation of specific groups of women and exacerbated real-world marriage anxiety, such as being pressured to marry [4].

Similar audience reactions are also discussed in the following literature: research found that watching female topic television dramas was significantly associated with female viewers internalizing societal beauty standards and engaging in continuous 'body surveillance,' which could ultimately lead to self-objectification [5]. In addition, the agency of the audience is also reflected in another study: Chinese audiences strongly resist the perfect female images under the discipline of patriarchy, most of the female audience prefer 'imperfect' and 'ordinary' female characters [6].

2.2. Gendered consumerism in Chinese media

This section overlaps with the previous section in some respects: for example, many articles also discuss how the image of contemporary Chinese women on screen has changed, but they tend to link this change more to consumerism and commodification: the 1980s China, female characters in film and television works bid farewell to the 'genderless' and 'revolutionary ideal woman' and begin to explore the ideal of individualized women [7]. However, this rediscovery of 'feminine qualities' was quickly captured by consumerist logic, with women's media images also incorporated into the mechanisms of market operations and commercial systems [7-8]. Although the appearance of female characters is diverse and personalized, their essence is still fixed as symbols of consumerism [8].

In recent years, with the spread of feminism and the influence of the market economy and consumerism, the topics of 'women's empowerment' and feminism themselves have become commodities with significant market value. However, the 'empowerment' portrayed in the TV series is often defined by neoliberal discourse, narrowing the issue of structural gender inequality and oppression to the achievement of personal value and social status through consumption and professional success [9]. Furthermore, another quantitative study shows that this empowerment in film and television is often a form of 'post-feminist disguise,' with female characters' power being superficial and failing to challenge deep-rooted patriarchal structures truly [10].

2.3. Neoliberal feminism in China

Feminism has become a central issue in contemporary Chinese media and screen. Existing research typically combines women's empowerment with consumer culture and individualism, emphasizing the achievement of success through individual effort. In particular, the expression of neoliberal feminism on social media in China has commercial characteristics. For example, KOLs like liberal feminist Mimeng use WeChat public accounts to combine the discourse of 'women's self-reliance' with advice on how to manage intimate relationships and enhance personal charm. At its core, this approach guides women to address systemic gender challenges through self-management rather than challenging structural inequality. This model transforms feminist issues into a consumable lifestyle [11].

In summary, this literature explores female-centered and male-centered portrayals of women in Chinese media and on screen, as well as audience agency. However, many studies do not address the agency of algorithms of platforms in shaping discourse.

3. Methodology

3.1. Analytical framework: critical discourse analysis

This study uses CDA as a primary research method. First, CDA aims to explore the ideologies as well as the power dynamics underlying language and the complex interplay between them. This aligns closely with the purpose of this study, which seeks to explore the ideologies embedded in 'SFL' related discourse, such as consumerism, neoliberal feminism, and patriarchy. Second, CDA can connect micro-level phenomena (language use, discourse, and communication) with macro-level phenomena (power, hegemony, and social inequality). Through CDA, micro-level content such as Weibo posts can be analyzed in conjunction with macro-level social and cultural practices such as gendered consumerism and fan culture politics.

3.2. Research approach and data collection

The data comes from Weibo, one of China's largest and most influential social media platforms, which is also a public sphere for popular culture discussion. This study collected the top 100 Weibo posts under the 'trending' filter and search term Da Nv Zhu Ju (SFL drama). The purpose of this research is to use purposive sampling as the primary data collection method, as it captures the most mainstream and influential discourse. The 'trending' list, curated by algorithms, reflects content with the highest interaction rates (likes, comments, shares). It is a reflection of how the platform and users collectively elevate discourse to the forefront. In addition, apart from the Weibo post content, accompanying images and videos, as well as publicly available user information (such as username, number of followers, whether they have V certification, etc.) will also be recorded and analyzed.

4. Results analysis: the constructed discourse

4.1. The imbalance of discursive power

Among those Weibo posts, the majority of users are Internet influencers (orange V verification, nearly all of whom are entertainment influencers and content farm/clickbait accounts), with fan numbers ranging from 1000 to 4millions, whereas posts by ordinary users are significantly marginalized. Only a few (under ten) users are identified as ordinary users, whose posts are pushed

to the bottom of these 100 posts. This phenomenon suggests that public discussions about 'SFL' are predominantly led dominated by influential figures who can set the agenda, rather than being a grassroots, bottom-up discussion field.

Data also shows that 29% of top-tier accounts intentionally stir up controversy to generate buzz (e.g., emphasizing that the STL does not need the male lead), while 31% take the fans' stance (e.g., "We're excited for Tian Xiwei from STL in the opening sequence!"). Among these, 16% of accounts stand in support of SFL (one such account, which has 12,000 followers, posted: "Tired after watching several SFL dramas? Think again—it's our fault; they're just too successful and unforgettable. I don't recall men crying out about 'audience fatigue' back then.") Additionally, 11% of accounts criticize 'fake SFL'. They focus on stereotyped plots and empty value labels (such as the long complaints of 76000-followers account Zhou Er Xiao Er.). Apparently, the power and dominance of some Internet influencers in the female lead narrative.

4.2. Characterization of strong female leads

Via CDA research, the study identified that the narratives employed to define the concept of Strong Female Lead can be divided into the following types

4.2.1. Capability-oriented SFLs

Capability-oriented, which emphasizes the capability and agency of SFL, who takes charge in the development of storyline, and this kind of TV series also reflects an ideal image of a meritocratic SFL, embodying a meritocratic ideal strongly shaped by neoliberal feminist ideology. For example, one post praising the drama *Our Generation* states, "you get to see her whole life, including her friends, family, career, but not just romance....The love story is so minor".

4.2.2. Relationship-oriented SFLs

Relationship-oriented, while a female-centric focus is portrayed, the plot development and achievements realization depend on the assistance of male characters, romantic relationships or family ties. A post from a Weibo user serves as a prime example of this narrative: "...they claim to want a queen, but lose interest when they cannot ship her with a man. Their love was hollow. What they really want is a tragic, beautiful hero to adore. The heroine? A mere plot device, criticized for everything. Her only sin is not loving him; her only prize, after endless suffering, is him".

4.2.3. Empathy-driven SFLs

This type emphasizes the 'soft qualities of SFLs, such as their emotional depth, empathy capacity, willingness to self-sacrifice, and kindness. It defines a "worthy woman" as one who evokes emotional investment and identification from the audience. A Weibo video post matches this narrative perfectly: "The truest 'SFL' shows are those directed by women. Even in an episodic format, the heroines are portrayed with depth and dimension, never as flat archetypes. Their strength feels natural, not forced, and is rooted in empathy. These stories celebrate genuine female solidarity and friendship, finding connection even in conflict."

4.2.4. Marketed-oriented SFLs

This type criticizes the SFL label for being exploited as a mere marketing gimmick—a hollow package designed to generate online traffic, yet ultimately lacking substantive content. One post supports this perspective: “Why must ‘strong female lead’ dramas be so preachy, always telling women how they should be? ‘Be independent! Build a career!’ It’s because slogans are easier to write than a good story. When you can’t show strength through the plot, you just have the characters shout empty mottos.”

The emergence of these four discourse types stems from the combined influence of multiple ideologies. They simultaneously cater to the needs of diverse groups while serving the platform and the capital’s pursuit of maximizing traffic utilization. Their coexistence and interaction reflect the reality of women’s empowerment discourse being commercialized.

4.3. Ideology behind the discourses

4.3.1. The infiltration of neoliberal and consumerist ideology

For instance, one Weibo post notes: “It’s impressive how the heroine in relationship-based drama is portrayed as genuinely independent, resilient, and career-focused”. Another post states that “Behind every beautiful face, a more beautiful face always looms. A truly great series should shape its female characters within this endless, unforgiving hierarchy of beauty.” These posts reveal that female empowerment is not framed as a structural struggle, but an individual project. Market values measure the female protagonist’s success—her earning power, beauty, and social status—which turns her agency into a desirable commodity.

Other discourses further illustrate gendered consumerism, where the value and legitimacy of a ‘SFL’ and the actress portraying her, lie not in narrative connotation or artistic merit, but in their commercial and market value. A typical post claims: “Advertisers remain silent; their sole action is to increase their ad buys relentlessly. Top-tier power to carry a drama (i.e., attract a large audience and ensure its commercial success), top-tier appeal to attract investors, and top-tier influence to carry a platform—all are embodied in Yang Zi’s No.1 SFL drama.” In such a context, terms used to praise the female protagonist are the measure of capital instead of the character, such as ‘attracting investment’ and ‘carrying the platform’. Thus, the identity of ‘SFL’ is being commodified.

4.3.2. Patriarchal logic beneath the surface of empowerment

One of the most striking findings of this study is that topics related to defending or discussing male characters accounted for over 10%, a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. This indicates that the male lead is not constructed as an independent character, but rather as a “discursive mirror” that defines and measures the legitimacy of the SFL.

This ‘discursive mirror’ operates in two ways. First, it can positively construct the female protagonist’s independence. For example, fans emphasize that “the female protagonist is so powerful that she doesn’t need a male counterpart.” (such as a post by Gua Ji Hua Hua Chong Sheng Ban, “Fan says the female protagonist in this show does not need a male counterpart.”). They essentially affirm the female protagonist’s subjectivity by downplaying the necessity of men.

Second, it can also negate the establishment of the SFL. For example, when the discussion focuses on the male lead’s screen time and his prominent role in the show, his excessive presence becomes evidence that weakens or even cancels out the female protagonist’s central position. This

phenomenon reveals a dependent logic of empowerment: even when discourse attempts to empower female protagonists, it cannot escape the framework of measuring their value against men. This indicates that patriarchal standards remain a persistent default in mainstream discourse today. Women's strength is still defined and confirmed in relation to men, rather than existing as an autonomous value that does not require reference.

Furthermore, underlying many critiques of "fake SFLs" is not a genuine pursuit of female empowerment, but the reproduction of the male gaze and an explicitly anti-feminist narrative. A typical complaint, for example, states: "The male protagonist is literally about to die, and the great heroine can only cry. All narratives centered on men. Whether they aim to reinforce women's "independence" or criticize "fake SFL" most discourses have yet to break free from deeply rooted patriarchal norms.

4.3.3. The patriarchal critique of women's survival strategies and "purity"

One post stands out dramatically from the others with the highest number of views. It gains popularity by accusing female characters of being 'hypocritical', which is, 'proclaiming resistance to patriarchy while relying on patriarchal privileges to survive.' This criticism views the character's survival strategy as a form of moral hypocrisy.

For example, an influential user with over 4 million of fans criticized female characters for advocating "independence and awakening" while relying on the male protagonist's privilege to survive.

Yet the underlying logic of this criticism relies on a false binary, ignoring structural inequality and women's dilemmas. It imagines patriarchy as a monolithic, purely oppressive structure and imposes an unrealistic choice on women: either resist completely and purely, or be deemed fully compliant. This logic overlooks a crucial point: survival under oppressive structures is inherently a complex practice of strategy, compromise, and agency. Power is not a top-down, monolithic oppressive force but diffuse and productive. This suggests that resistance to power is not a single act from bottom to the top, but rather a strategic everyday resistance [12]. In addition, women's complex strategies for negotiating and coping with power through small, ambiguous means such as storytelling, joking, and non-cooperation in daily life that should not be overlooked [13].

This criticism ultimately reproduces patriarchal logic: it demands women be 'pure' and uncompromising in resisting the system, lest they be labeled hypocritical and double-standard. This unreasonable moral demand on female activists reflects the hostile construction and stigmatization of 'fake feminism' in the current online environment.

Another critique of a drama's plot similarly reveals the patriarchal reshaping of mainstream narrative structures. Collectively, these statements continually pull female-led narratives back into patriarchal territory, limiting women's imagination of awakening, growth, and action.

4.3.4. The construction of gender discourse within the fandom industry

In Weibo discourse surrounding SFL dramas, the capital logic of the entertainment industry and fan culture profoundly intervenes in the construction of gender ideology, directly influencing discursive constructions such as "strong male leads" and "female leads' commercial value."

On one hand, the actions of male lead fans advocating for capital-driven treatment for "strong male leads" indicate that gender discourse is completely commercialized and in the fan culture, 'SFL' is not about the potential narrative of feminism but a tool for shaping celebrity brands and power struggle among fans.

On the other hand, discussions about “male actors being relegated to supporting roles to female leads” (including the emergence of derogatory online terms like “chasing illusions”) reflect fans’ and public opinion’s anxiety and dissatisfaction with the erosion of male-centered order. For example, a post states that, “no one complain about objectifying of female characters in male-lead dramas, but when the situation is reversed, people get upset about it”. Capital value further restricts female-led narratives. The commercial value of female protagonists always needs to be “verified” by male co-stars. Otherwise, they are questioned for their lack of independent appeal. Thus, it is not just a praise for capital but more importantly displays how capital logic and hierarchy politics in fan culture are deeply intertwined.

5. The tripartite collusion: a discussion on algorithms, capital, and the commodification of feminism

Among all narratives, fandom narratives and controversial narratives account for 31% and 29%, totaling more than half of all narratives. Moreover, a significant portion of these discourses belongs to both narratives simultaneously: while promoting their own idols, they also disparage others, which is exactly the politics of billing. Furthermore, the analysis revealed that controversial discourse surrounding the SFL exhibits high levels of repetition and homogeneity. This suggests that online users are not freely generating original perspectives but are instead repeating, copying, and disseminating discourse frameworks that attract the most traffic. This phenomenon stems from the collusion between platforms, capital, and fan circles. First, social media platforms’ algorithmic mechanisms inherently favor pushing content that can ‘stir controversy’ and generate high interaction rates, as conflict equals traffic. Second, capital welcomes such high-profile topics, as they enhance the commercial value of the series. Finally, fan culture itself relies on conflict and debate to consolidate fan identity and highlight the idol’s status.

In summary, the ultimate effect of this collusion is the degradation and commodification of the SFL narrative itself. The focus of public discussion is intentionally shifted from narratives with potential structural revolutionary elements—such as those about women’s growth and agency, to issues that are easier to commodify and more likely to drive conflict: the ranking of actors and actresses and their commercial value. This process represents a form of ‘re-disciplining’: an opportunity that could have led to structural empowerment is transformed into the consumption of specific characters and fandom performances. This process aligns perfectly with the logic of gendered consumerism, where feminist issues become another product to be packaged, sold, and consumed, eventually stripping the SFL of any political potential it might have had.

In addition to the above validation of the main argument, the final discussion reveals that Chinese SFL dramas still face several challenges: First, the SFL dramas currently available on the market still use men as the reference standard, judging whether a female protagonist is a qualified independent female character by comparing her to men. Second, SFL is subject to moral judgment and criticism, with its resistance to patriarchy being stigmatized as impure. Third, there are practical concerns regarding feminist discussions: in addition to being constrained by commercial frameworks, there are also limitations on the ‘legitimization’ of feminism, which involves discussing feminism within a nationalist framework, attempting to localize and legitimize feminist ideology.

6. Conclusion

In summary, this research addresses the issue of how the SFL label is constructed, debated, and consumed on social media. The study finds that online discussions about SFLs on contemporary

Chinese social media present a complex picture. First, this discourse is led by commercialized KOLs, and the voices of ordinary users are severely marginalized. Second, behind the seemingly diverse narrative types (e.g., capability-oriented, relationship-oriented, etc.), lie entrenched patterns of gendered consumerism, patriarchal logic, and the male gaze. Most crucially, this study reveals a tripartite collusion among algorithms, capital, and fan circles: algorithms amplify controversies to generate traffic, capital leverages traffic for commercial monetization. In contrast, fan circles instrumentalize gender issues to fuel the billing politics and commercial value comparisons between celebrities. The combined effects of these three parties ultimately transform a potentially disruptive issue of women's empowerment into a safe, controllable, and consumable commodity.

While this study reveals some key insights, it has several limitations that future research could focus on. First, its cross-sectional data provides a snapshot of the discourse but does not capture its dynamic evolution over time. Second, the research is confined to Weibo, and future studies could conduct comparative analyses across other platforms like Xiaohongshu and Douyin. Finally, this study focuses on discourse production but ignores audience reception research, such as interviews, to explore how ordinary users interpret these narratives. Addressing these aspects would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between technology, culture, and gender politics in the digital age.

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