

Borders and Bridges in Gender Discourse: A Comparative Study of Feminist Stand-up Comedy in China and the United States

Yuwen He ^{1,*} and Yixiao Zhang ²

¹ Graduate School, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China

² School of Foreign Languages, Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Chongqing, China

* Corresponding author: 23053713g@connect.polyu.hk

Abstract. This paper selects the textual content of Yang Li's and Iliza's stand-up comedy for a comparative analysis, aiming to foster a dialogue between Chinese and American feminist stand-up comedy. This research findings uncover numerous similarities as well as several noteworthy differences. Additionally, to further explore the female discourse in Chinese and American feminist stand-up comedy, this paper employed quantitative analysis to assess the audience sentiment in the comment sections of the two comedians' videos, aiming to analyze the discourse power and expression rights of these two feminist comedians. The findings offer insight into the potential and difficulties faced by female comedians tackling gender problems by highlighting the cultural quirks and social attitudes toward feminist humor in both nations. In addition, the study looks at how these comedians' performances affect the public conversation about feminism and gender equality, offering insights into how feminist comedy is changing in China and the US.

Keywords: Gender Discourse, Stand-up comedy, Yang Li, Iliza Shlesinger.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background and Definition

Stand-up comedy is a kind of humor in which a comedian addresses a live audience and engages with them while delivering jokes [1]. It is one of the types of Stand-up comedy. "Borders" refers to the differences between the two, and the cultural separation therein. "Bridges" refers to the possibility of communication and understanding between the two.

Stand-up comedy originated in the UK in the 18th century, and the rise of American stand-up comedy shows began in the 1930s. Its true sense of program type began with NBC (National Broadcasting Company), and it was introduced to China in the 1990s [2]. Comedy was not seen as an acceptable method of social and cultural representation by women until a few decades ago [3].

Although Chinese female stand-up comedians are brave enough to speak out, the core themes they address are mostly emotional and family-oriented, and their perspectives are relatively homogenous. Actresses end up consciously or unconsciously confining themselves to the safe zone of "women-only" issues [4]. However, Yang Li's stand-up comedy performances discuss gender issues in a sharp manner, and as a result, she has been subjected to an extreme barrage of negative criticism online. For instance, after making fun of "ordinary and confident men", she faced a massive onslaught of personal attacks on the internet.

Iliza Shlesinger's stand-up comedy *Unveiled* focuses on feminism, gender relations, stereotypes, wedding culture and marriage, using humor to critique the societal expectations women face. However, Iliza Shlesinger was constantly brought down and ostracized within the comedy community by her male peers [5].

As American actress and comedian, Beth Littleford aptly states, "Society gyps women, because comedy is often perceived as boys' territory, women have to undo society's 'lady-izing' of them." [6]

1.2. Research Objectives and Significance

The comparative analysis aims to bring Chinese and American feminist stand-up comedy into dialogue on the topic of gender discourse, as well as a comparison of their respective discourses.

This study aims to analyze the comedic material of Chinese and American comedians, focusing on how they address gender relations and social justice within their routines. Additionally, the research will examine the differing social environments in which comedians operate, as well as the nature of audience feedback in both China and the United States. Furthermore, the comparison will extend to exploring the freedoms of expression and speech rights afforded to comedians in China and America, highlighting any disparities or similarities.

2. Theoretical Framework

The sustainability and development of “transnationalism” require the formation of a worldwide interconnected perspective, the establishment of a cognitive system that transcends hierarchical ethics, and the existence of a diverse, open social space and community [7]. Transnational feminist perspectives focus on the diverse experiences of women who live within, between, and at the margins or boundaries of nation-states around the globe [8].

Since the emergence of the third wave of feminism in the 1980s, influenced by postmodernism and post-structuralism, it has actively advocated for the diversity and hybridity of identity. Against this backdrop, transnational feminism has gone a step further, comprehensively integrating factors such as gender, class, race, and more into the discussion of women's issues, deeply acknowledging the diversity, fluidity, and hybridity of women's experiences [9]. The process of dialogue is not to eliminate differences, nor to lose one's individuality, nor to attempt to assimilate the unique pursuits of others. In summary, the goal is to establish a truly dialogic relationship in order to break any kind of hegemonic discourse [10].

3. Research Design

3.1. Qualitative Analysis Method

First, the performances of Chinese stand-up comedians were screened and the recorded content text was translated from Chinese to English; the performances of American stand-up comedians were screened and recorded. Then, each performance video was scrutinized to identify salient themes within it, such as marriage, intimacy, gender employment, and body politics. Finally, the identified categories were grouped together and compared.

3.2. Quantitative Analysis Method

3.2.1. Process

To enhance the presentation of viewers' feedback, a data-driven methodology was adopted to analyze the feedback from viewers in both countries. Specifically, Python was used to conduct sentiment analysis on the comments from the two video zones. This method researched viewers' discourse and sentiments, using the resulting data to illustrate the social context within which these opinions were expressed. The process will be introduced briefly as follows.

First, comments under YouTube and Bilibili were collected and sorted into two tables. For YouTube comment text, text data was converted into numerical features by using TF-IDF (Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency) Vectorizer for text feature extraction. Then, the extracted features were trained by random forest classifier, decision tree classifier and logistic regression classifier respectively, and the sentiment classification model was established. The model with the highest evaluation index later was automatically selected for the sentiment prediction of the review text.

For Bilibili comment text, by loading the trained deep learning model and word segmentation dictionary, the text data to be predicted was preprocessed, including filtering irrelevant information such as English, numbers and punctuation symbols, and the text was segmented by stutters. The pre-processed text was then converted into a sequence of values, and a deep learning model was used for sentiment prediction.

3.2.2. Tools

As shown in Table 1, YouTube and Bilibili are used as platforms to collect analysis materials, and TF-IDF Vectorizer and Python serve as the analysis tools.

Table 1. Tools

Tool's name	Nature	Functions
YouTube	An American online video-sharing platform owned by Google	To provide the comments under Iliza's videos.
Bilibili	A Chinese video-sharing platform	To provide the comments under Yang Li's video.
TF-IDF Vectorizer	A method used in information retrieval and text mining	To convert text documents into numerical vectors, representing the importance of each term in relation to the documents in a corpus.
Python	A high-level general-purpose programming language	To conduct sentiment analysis on the comments from the two video zones.

4. Results

4.1. Body Politic Issues

Table 2. Body Politic Issues

Yang Li	Why is it that everyone's fantasy of women is just always to be young and pretty and fit, why can't Black Widow she be old, can't she be 60, you know, just full of life.
Iliza	If I had a man here and he was heckling me the whole show, ruining the show and just being an idiot, I could snap and I could say something hacky like, "Well, you're bald and you're ugly and fat. I bet you got a small dick, right?" And most of your laugh. No one's anger. If I had a woman here who was yelling at me, and I snapped and I was like, "Well, you're a fat ugly "she's not even real! And you're like, "Don't shame her!"

Body politics refers to the two-way struggle between the power and the body of controlling and anti-controlling, which includes both aspects of the power's discipline to the body and the body's resistance against the power [11]. This relationship goes beyond the physical control of the body and encompasses the dimensions of power in disciplining the body through social norms, expectations and cultural values.

Yang Li has given the example of MARVEL characters in her stand-up comedy (see Table 2). Black Widow has been genetically engineered with special care and attention by the Soviet military because of her particularly sophisticated genetic technology, so she ages much slower than anyone else. In addition to slowing down her ageing, they also sterilized her by the way. The character of Black Widow serves as an extreme example of body politics. Through genetic modification, she gains extraordinary physiological traits such as delayed ageing, but this is backed by the coercive intervention and control of power (in this case, the Soviet military) over her body. This intervention not only alters her natural ageing process but also sterilizes her, highlighting the deprivation of bodily autonomy by power. Iliza also made the point that a man's worth does not depend on his looks or what people think of his looks. Yet when it comes to women, no matter what they look like, appearance can be a problem for them.

Both Chinese and American societies harbor implicit expectations and norms regarding women's appearance. These expectations often stem from traditional gender roles, media propaganda, and

societal aesthetic standards. They act like an invisible net, restricting women's self-perception and self-expression of their bodies, making them feel that they must conform to certain appearance standards to be accepted and recognized by society.

4.2. Gender Stereotypes

Table 3. Gender Stereotypes

Yang Li	The division of labour in our family is such that my mother is responsible for doing a lot of things, as far as the eye can see, she does all the housework, such as laundry and cooking, raising pigs and children. My dad only has to do one thing, sit on the couch whenever he can, and that's "be himself".
Iliza	you say something good like, "I got married," and what I'll get back is like, "Amazing!" I am here running on a platform to eradicate the usage of the word "amazing" from our female vocabularies, because I know what "amazing" means. Okay, girls, when you say "amazing," I know you don't mean amazing. Okay, so save it for your boyfriend. They're not paying attention. I know what "amazing" means when a woman says "amazing." What she actually means is, "Oh, my God, this isn't about me and I don't care and I'm a little insecure about it, but I want to make sure that I'm being a good feminist and saying 'amazing' back." When in actuality, it's boring. We become like raw robots, just like, "Amazing, amazing, amazing." It's amazing because in the wake of MeToo and Time's Up, all of these important, very necessary movements, what's come out of it is women policing other women. And we walk around terrified as women of being called bad feminists, but quite frankly, other bad feminists.

As shown in Table 3, Yang Li grew up in the countryside of Henan Province, China, where her parents were farmers and raised pigs as their main job. The stand-up comedy is about Yang Li teasing her parents about the division of labor in her family. The background of Iliza's stand-up comedy is the aftermath of the MeToo movement and the Time's Up movement, where women began to police each other. Women are all afraid of being labeled as "bad feminists," but frankly speaking, there are indeed "bad feminists".

Unlike feminism in the West, which had a massive societal movement in the 1960s and 1970s and decades of significant criticism, transformation, and reconstruction of patriarchal gender culture, Chinese feminism lacks such a history. Therefore, Yang Li's mockery of her parents' household division of labor in her stand-up comedy, as a way to question patriarchy through individual examples, is like an ant trying to shake a tree.

Iliza's stand-up comedy content touches upon a complex and nuanced issue concerning language, social expectations, and the dynamics within feminist movements. The criticism you've raised seems to focus on how words like "amazing" can become placeholders or automatic responses that don't always convey genuine emotion or interest. This serves as a part of a broader discussion on authenticity, support, and how women communicate with each other in both personal and public spheres.

The concern about women policing other women's language and actions is a significant aspect in feminist discussions. It highlights the tension between promoting collective progress and respecting individual expressions or choices that may not perfectly align with one's interpretation of feminist principles. Such policing can sometimes make individuals feel inadequate or inauthentic when they navigate the desire to support others while staying true to their own feelings and perspectives.

The mention of movements like MeToo and Time's Up underscores the importance of these discussions. These movements have played a pivotal role in challenging systemic sexism and advocating for women's rights and safety. However, the aftermath of such movements also reveals the complexities of solidarity and support within communities. It's crucial to strike a balance between advocating for change and embracing diversity in voices and experiences.

Encouraging more nuanced and sincere forms of communication can be a step towards addressing these issues. This involves being mindful of the language we choose and striving for authenticity in interactions. It also means creating a space where women feel comfortable expressing a range of emotions and opinions without fear of judgment or backlash.

Ultimately, the goal should be to foster a culture of understanding and support that elevates all individuals, recognizing that everyone’s experiences and expressions of feminism can be diverse and unique.

4.3. Comparative Quantitative Analysis

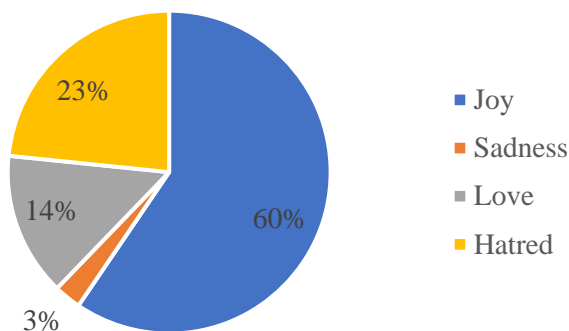


Figure 1. Sentiment Distribution of Yang Li’s Stand-up Comedy

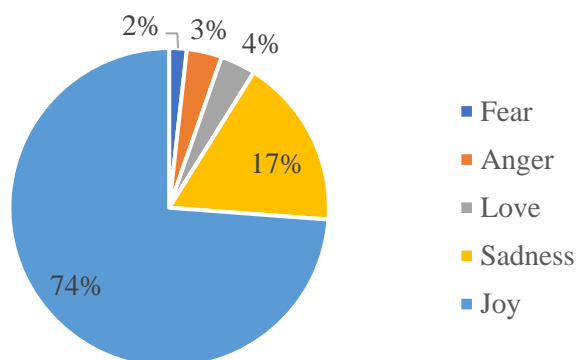


Figure 2. Sentiment Distribution of Iliza’s Stand-up Comedy

After crawling through the video comments of the two apps, YouTube has a total of 243 and BiliBili has a total of 131. Based on sentiment analysis, the results were shown as listed.

As can be seen from Figures 1 and 2, 77.9% and 78.5% of people hold positive viewpoints respectively towards Yang Li and Iliza’s stand-up comedy. The public’s emotional response to feminism is mostly positive.

5. Conclusion

The research of Chinese and American stand-up comedy is still a little involved in China and there are few reference materials, but it also opens up a new perspective for researchers to explore the cultural differences between China and America from the perspective of feminism.

Global/transnational feminist theory is a relatively new theory, less combined with stand-up comedy in China, which can provide references for other professionals and people interested in feminist stand-up comedians.

The comments on the selected videos will change with time, which may not reflect the most real feedback from the audience when the stand-up comedy is displayed at that time, and the comments under the videos have a large time span.

Some of the complex dynamics and expectations that exist between women. Iliza suggests that in the wake of important movements like MeToo and Time's Up, women have instead become overly critical of one another, fearing being labeled unqualified feminists.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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