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# *The Underlying Logic Behind Young Chinese Women's Consumption of Stand-up Comedy*

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***Abstract.*** For young Chinese women, consuming stand-up comedy is not merely a form of entertainment. It serves as an awakening to feminist ideology, a method of learning, and ultimately a means of self-rescue. Through stand-up comedy, women can alleviate gender pressures, deepen their understanding of feminism, and build a sense of belonging within their community. This paper explores why young women consume stand-up comedy, the logic behind this consumption, and its broader cultural significance. By analyzing themes such as recognition of everyday struggles, safe engagement with feminism, emotional resonance, identity negotiation, community-building, the polysemic space of feminism, and the cultural implications, the study reveals that consumption functions as both entertainment and feminist affective practice. While comedy offers opportunities for empowerment and solidarity, its critical edge may be diluted through entertainment and commercialization, potentially yielding unintended consequences. Overall, this study demonstrates that within contemporary China's patriarchal social context, young women engage with stand-up comedy consumption as a gentle yet profound means to confront and negotiate sociocultural inequalities.

***Keywords:*** Stand-up comedy, Feminism, Female audience, Cultural consumption

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, driven by platforms like Weibo, Douyin, and various variety shows, stand-up comedy has rapidly gained popularity in China. Particularly noteworthy is the emergence and rise of female stand-up comedians, which has sparked widespread online discussions and social responses. Their audience is predominantly young women, who not only form the core viewership but are also the most active participants in fan-created content, commentary, meme creation, and online discussions. Numerous studies have examined the humor in stand-up comedy, feminist expressions in its content, and audience reception. Conversely, few have directly examined how young Chinese women navigate their personal circumstances and identity conflicts through the consumption of stand-up comedy. This research gap warrants deeper exploration. How do young women negotiate gender identities, alleviate social pressures, and connect with feminist ideas through watching and participating in stand-up comedy?

Based on this, this paper poses the following research questions: Why do young Chinese women choose to consume stand-up comedy? What logic underpins this consumption? How does stand-up

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comedy function as a cultural space offering women possibilities for empowerment, solidarity, and identity negotiation? What cultural implications does this consumption practice hold within a patriarchal societal context?

Employing a cultural studies analytical framework, this paper integrates feminist theory and audience research methodologies to explore the symbolic meanings and affective logic of stand-up comedy consumption.

Practically, this research offers guidance for media platforms and cultural producers on how to support gender-inclusive content more effectively while meeting entertainment demands and preventing feminist discourse from being diluted by commercial logic. Theoretically, it underscores the importance of an "audience-centered" analytical approach in feminist media studies.

## 2. The logic behind consumption

### 2.1. Recognition of everyday struggles

Women also face invisible pressures within the family, such as being constantly questioned by relatives and friends about marriage, relationships, and childbearing. This feeling of being overly scrutinized leaves many suffocated. Regarding economic independence, while an increasing number of women aspire to achieve freedom through their own capabilities, society still harbors entrenched expectations of "men working outside the home while women manage the household." This often leads to women's pursuits being misinterpreted as "being overly assertive." Beyond this, double standards in gender roles remain pervasive. Women must strive to prove themselves in the workplace while simultaneously being expected to manage household chores and care for families. This inequality frequently fuels daily conflicts. Even in minor aspects of daily life, women face unnecessary judgment over their clothing choices, body shape, appearance, or personal interests. Audiences find solace and resonance through laughter, realizing, "I'm not alone in facing these issues" [1]. To face these challenges, stand-up comedy offers a collective cathartic space.

### 2.2. Safe engagement with feminism

In China, feminism remains a sensitive and often contentious topic, and directly voicing gender critiques carries risks in public discourse. However, stand-up comedy offers a lighter, seemingly "safer" avenue to address feminist issues. The growing number of female comedians on popular talk show platforms signifies not only an amplification of women's voices but also their increasing visibility in society. For many, performing comedy has become more than entertainment—it's a livelihood and, in some cases, an act of liberation. Comedian Fang Shaoli, for instance, discussed how comedy provided her with economic independence and emotional strength to escape an abusive husband and raise her daughter alone. Her story illustrates how humor can simultaneously serve as both survival and empowerment.

Stand-up comedy is particularly compelling as a unique avenue for expression. Through relatable experiences, comedians weave criticism into satire and humor. Female performers create a discursive space where feminist ideas can circulate without being perceived as "radical." Scholars note that comedians like Yang Li and the Yan Twins carefully balance self-deprecation and satire to challenge patriarchal norms while remaining within culturally acceptable boundaries [2]. In this example, comedy serves as a disguised form of feminist critique, one that elicits both laughter and reflection. Meanwhile, online platforms like Douyin amplify these feminist expressions but also expose them to gendered attacks [3]. This indicates that when female stand-up comedians voice

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feminist opinions, it can also be disadvantageous for them personally. They face the risk of online abuse, yet they still choose to speak out. In addition, it represents a new pathway for learning and a form of self-rescue. Through this process, women learn to counter PUA tactics, understand gender equality, and develop self-protection strategies. The laughter during stand-up performances makes difficult truths easier to digest when they resonate with personal experiences. The content often touches on workplaces, relationships, and family life.

When confronting crises, these scenarios pose for women, and laughter frequently serves a distinct purpose. For many in the audience, witnessing female comedians succeed on stage represents a symbolic victory. If these performers can openly mock unfair gender expectations, perhaps viewers can resist inequality in everyday life too. In this way, stand-up shows become more than just comedy; they transform into quiet rehearsal spaces for feminist ideas, encouraging women to recognize their struggles and consider other possibilities for empowerment.

### 2.3. Emotional resonance

Stand-up comedy can bring laughter and also provide emotional value to audiences, soothing present anxieties. Many female performers adeptly showcase vulnerability through self-deprecating humor during their acts, a tactic that paradoxically makes them more relatable. Research indicates that female comedians, through self-disclosure and self-deprecation, not only defuse audience criticism but also challenge entrenched societal expectations by sharing personal imperfections—empowering viewers in the process [4]. Simultaneously, Hannah Gadsby's performance reminds us that emotion itself is a form of capital. When emotions like shame, anxiety, or discomfort are brought onto the stage, they can become a bond connecting the audience and the performer, generating a collective resonance and sense of solidarity [5]. From the perspective of young female audiences, this emotional resonance is particularly significant. In fast-paced and high-pressure lives, they often struggle to find a safe space to express anxiety or vulnerability.

Stand-up comedy provides precisely such a space, where laughter allows audiences to release emotions while offering the comforting reassurance that “I am not alone.” More significantly, when performers exchange their vulnerability for shared resonance, audiences are in turn encouraged to confront and embrace their own imperfections. This mechanism elevates stand-up beyond mere entertainment, transforming it into a form of collective healing and social support that empowers women to face their circumstances and challenges with greater composure. Online feminist stand-up also leverages affective interventions such as disgust or shame to highlight gender inequality and mobilize reflection [6]. Therefore, the spread of stand-up comedy clips online allows users who enjoy scrolling through Douyin to quickly gain inspiration and learn from them.

In summary, stand-up comedy is an entertaining way for young women to embrace new ideas and liberate themselves from old ones. It represents a novel path to self-growth, carrying profound social and cultural significance. Importantly, it offers a unique space where women release emotions, alleviate stress, gain self-awareness, and discover new life goals. Therefore, the logic behind young women's consumption of stand-up comedy extends beyond merely seeking pleasure. It represents their carving out of a distinct discursive space within a patriarchal society. Through laughter and soulful resonance, young Chinese women discover psychological support and a source of strength.

## 3. The meaning of stand-up comedy

The preceding section has already demonstrated the primary motivations driving young women's consumption of stand-up comedy, including identification with the everyday struggles of women,

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learning feminism within a relatively safe context, engaging in interaction and exchange with a broader audience, and gaining psychological comfort through emotional resonance. These factors reveal that stand-up comedy serves women as a pathway for self-regulation and introspection. Building upon this logic, the next section will further explore the cultural significance of stand-up comedy, including identity negotiation, community building, and the space for multifaceted interpretations of feminism, thereby deepening understanding of the social role this art form plays in contemporary Chinese society.

### 3.1. Negotiating identity

Women in stand-up comedy often navigate a constant negotiation between their "gender" and "professionalism." On one hand, the comedy stage remains deeply influenced by male-dominated traditions, requiring female performers to prove their "credibility" and earn audience acceptance through profound textual mastery, substantive comedic substance, and effective impression management. Research indicates that female comedians adapt their gendered presentation based on performance contexts: in male-dominated settings, they often downplay "feminine" traits to avoid being labeled as non-conformist, whereas on more gender-diverse stages, they have greater space to express their feminine identity and diverse feminist perspectives [7]. Therefore, women face greater pressures and must navigate more complex factors in the workplace.

For young female audiences, this "onstage identity negotiation" holds mirror-like significance. They similarly confront the tension of gender roles in daily life—balancing societal expectations of femininity while yearning for personal independence and authentic self-expression. Watching female performers navigate identity conflicts on stage effectively becomes a "rehearsal" for their own circumstances. This viewing experience entertains while also subconsciously training women to negotiate and reshape their identities in real life, fostering a deeper understanding of their roles. In other words, stand-up comedy transcends mere entertainment. Its significance lies in providing women with a symbolic space where they can probe, practice, and reconstruct their identities through "watching." This is precisely the core logic driving young Chinese women's choice to consume stand-up comedy.

### 3.2. Community-building

Stand-up comedy is more than mere entertainment; it forges a unique cultural community through laughter. Research indicates that live comedy performances cultivate a sense of "communitas" among audiences, allowing people to momentarily transcend social identities, class distinctions, and age differences to share an equal emotional experience [8]. In this context, laughter transcends mere individual emotional release; it becomes a cultural bond connecting strangers, forging a temporary yet potent social solidarity.

This cohesion extends beyond physical venues. With the rise of the internet, the sense of community generated by stand-up comedy has expanded online. Audiences continue discussing shows through comments, memes, and fan-created videos on social media platforms. These interactions not only prolong the life of laughter but also help viewers find fellow enthusiasts in the digital realm. This community-building that bridges live and online spaces fulfills young people's dual needs for belonging and expressive space. Stand-up comedy's significance has long transcended the stage, continuously weaving new social and cultural connections through laughter. People share their show-watching experiences on social networks, where strangers can comment. Through these discussions, the meaning of stand-up comedy is elevated, and the art form itself is expanded. This

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dynamic holds true cross-culturally as well, as immigrant stand-up in the Czech Republic has demonstrated its power to foster integration and belonging [9]. Online communities are also places where people's views can be rapidly unified and where relationships can be strengthened. At this time, stand-up comedy serves as a beneficial medium.

### 3.3. Polysemic space of feminism

One of the charms of stand-up comedy lies in the space of ambiguity it creates, where audience interpretations are rarely singular. Research indicates that female comedy audiences engage in multi-layered “referential interpretations” during viewing, understanding meanings by considering the performer's identity, the targets of jokes, and the intended audience [10]. Then, the same punchline may simultaneously be interpreted as self-deprecating humor, satire targeting patriarchal culture, or an exposé of social inequality.

For young women, this ambiguity is particularly crucial. What they experience in laughter is not merely lightheartedness but potentially a form of empowerment. Some view this laughter as a wry response to their own predicaments, while others interpret it as a subtle resistance against authoritative discourse. Laughter can serve as a release from helplessness, a form of ironic self-expression, or even a silent act of defiance. This layered space of meaning elevates stand-up comedy beyond mere entertainment, transforming it into a vital avenue for women to carve out discursive positions within public culture.

## 4. Cultural implications

Currently, patriarchal values still permeate many aspects of daily life, and stand-up comedy offers young women a safe and meaningful way to push back. The content delivered through stand-up comedy is humorous, and when women laugh in this specific setting, they are free—their laughter is liberated. Within this scene and moment, women break free from their shackles. It fosters a sense of connection among women, reminding them they are not alone in facing these struggles. For many women, these shared moments of humor become a small yet tangible source of strength, empowering them to confront challenges with greater confidence and agency.

Conversely, this form of resistance has limitations. Since stand-up comedy remains fundamentally a form of mass entertainment, its critical edge can easily be blunted. When a female comedian's performance is packaged as a “selling point” for commercial markets, the original gender critique risks being diluted into mere entertainment consumption. For this phenomenon, the audience's laughter may no longer represent collective protest but serve as an outlet for defusing tension. While stand-up comedy's “mild resistance” offers emotional release, it also risks being tamed by entertainment and commercialization. This tension reveals the dual predicament women face when resisting within consumer culture: they must rely on these spaces to voice discontent while remaining vigilant against the latent forces of assimilation lurking within.

Furthermore, young Chinese women's consumption of stand-up comedy is not merely about “seeking amusement.” It is intertwined with complex emotional needs and strategic thinking. They find solace and strength in laughter while continually navigating the relationship between self and society amidst these contradictions.

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## 5. Research findings and results

The study indicates that young Chinese women's consumption of stand-up comedy carries multi-layered significance. First, comedians' material provides a collective space for catharsis and resonance by addressing everyday struggles such as appearance anxiety, workplace inequality, and family pressures. Second, it offers a "safe" avenue for feminist engagement, as female performers critique gender injustices through humor and satire, enabling audiences to absorb and reflect on gender issues within a lighthearted atmosphere. Third, performers' self-deprecating humor and the emotional vulnerability conveyed through their material resonate deeply with audiences, empowering women to confront and embrace their imperfections through laughter. Moreover, the sense of sisterhood and solidarity fostered by stand-up comedy extends into online spaces, driving the ongoing formation of communities. Finally, stand-up serves as a form of "soft resistance" for women navigating patriarchal culture.

Young women's consumption of stand-up comedy is not merely passive entertainment but an active intellectual awakening. They harness laughter to navigate social pressures, experimentally engage with feminist ideas, and reshape their identities within public cultural spaces.

## 6. Research significance

By focusing on the audience role of young Chinese women, this study enriches academic discourse on gender, media, and cultural consumption. It shows that consuming stand-up comedy serves as an emotional release and feminist practice, demonstrating how young women navigate patriarchal environments to find subtle yet effective empowerment strategies.

Future research could further employ empirical methods such as podcast interviews to directly explore female viewers' subjective experiences or conduct synchronous dialogues with celebrities knowledgeable about feminism. Alternatively, comparing Chinese contexts with feminist comedies in other countries could deepen understanding of how entertainment and identity construction intertwine in the digital age, thereby advancing women's cultural practices.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper examines the logic and significance of young Chinese women consuming stand-up comedy from the perspectives of cultural studies and feminism. Stand-up comedy is not only an entertainment format but also a crucial avenue through which young women engage with and negotiate gender structures. Through multifaceted interpretations, female audiences release stress, reflect on personal experiences, and continually attempt to understand and reshape their identities. Consumption practices offer new modes of expression and survival within patriarchal constraints while offering a channel for disseminating feminist discourse in Chinese society.

Stand-up comedy serves multiple roles for contemporary Chinese female audiences: it functions as an "emotional outlet" alleviating anxiety, a "subtle classroom" transmitting feminist ideas, and a "cultural arena" where young women negotiate identities and forge community connections. Audiences are active participants, interpreting content and generating meaning based on personal and social contexts. Online and offline interactions further amplify their cultural influence, demonstrating creative strategies of resistance and reconciliation through laughter.

However, this study has limitations. Its methodology relies primarily on textual analysis, lacking empirical surveys of individual audiences. Future research could employ in-depth interviews or surveys to explore audience experiences more comprehensively. Additionally, Second, this study

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draws heavily on international literature, with less focus on domestic empirical studies, limiting local contextualization. Future research could compare Chinese and international female audiences, investigate interactive mechanisms between comedians and audiences, and examine the dissemination of stand-up comedy across media platforms such as short videos, variety shows, and live performances.

In summary, the consumption of stand-up comedy by young Chinese women is a multifaceted practice that encompasses entertainment identity negotiation, emotional engagement, and cultural transmission. It provides a visible, tangible, and participatory public space, transforming a leisure activity into a collective practice with significant cultural and social implications.

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