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Knowledge Mapping of Female Image Research from the Perspective of Journalism and Communication Studies

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Abstract: This study explores the development of research on female images within China's media and communication fields from the mid-1990s to 2023. Originating from the second wave of the women's movement and influenced by foundational feminist media studies, the academic inquiry into female media representations has significantly expanded, particularly following landmark events like the Fourth World Conference on Women. Analyzing 510 scholarly papers from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the research identifies a clear progression from initial critiques of stereotypical and superficial portrayals of women in television advertisements to a broader examination encompassing various media forms, including social media and reality television. Utilizing CiteSpace software for knowledge mapping and keyword co-occurrence analysis, the study categorizes the research into four primary areas: theoretical frameworks, micro-level case studies, macro-level media analyses, and comparative studies. Findings indicate a notable shift from traditional media platforms to digital and interactive media, with recent studies emphasizing the impact of technological advancements on the diversity and complexity of female representations. The research highlights the dynamic nature of female image studies in China, underscoring the critical role of media in shaping and reflecting gender relations. Future research directions call for expanded methodologies, including interactive text analysis and empirical testing, to further understand the nuanced portrayals of women in an increasingly digital and interconnected world.

Keywords: female image; media representation; feminist discourse; social media; content analysis

1. Introduction

The second wave of the women's movement, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, marked the beginning of scholarly research on women and media. The publication of American communication scholar Gaye Tuchman's (1978) collection of essays, Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media, marked a significant moment in the emergence of feminist media studies within journalism and communication disciplines [1]. Today, discussions on feminist discourse are inseparable from the study of women's images in media communication, making this perspective a crucial component of content analysis in mass communication studies.

Due to significant cultural differences between Western and Eastern societies, Western media studies on women's images typically explore the relationship between women and society within a synchronic framework. In contrast, Chinese research not only examines the relationship between women and society but also seeks to uncover the historical origins of media-constructed female images within a diachronic context. The Fourth World Conference on Women, organized by the United Nations, was a globally significant

event that also contributed to increased academic focus on women and media in China. Notably, Bu Wei's (2001) *Media and Gender* became the first domestic publication to systematically investigate the interplay between gender and media in China [2].

Both Western and Chinese scholars maintain a high level of interest in how mass media constructs female images. The rapid rise of new platforms such as social media in recent years has further intensified discussions on gender roles and media discourse, making these topics frequent subjects of societal debate [3]. To address the needs of building journalism and communication studies and to support societal development, the author utilizes the scientific knowledge mapping visualization technology provided by CiteSpace software. This approach involves systematically reviewing key studies on female media representations within the field of journalism and communication, thereby elucidating the developmental trajectory of female image research in China's media studies.

2. Literature Review

The study of female images within China's media and communication landscape has undergone significant evolution since the mid-1990s. Initial research efforts were sparse and predominantly concentrated on television and advertising, reflecting the nascent stage of this academic inquiry. Over the years, the volume of scholarly work expanded notably, particularly following pivotal events such as the Fourth World Conference on Women, which catalyzed a surge in academic interest and output. By 2023, a substantial number of academic papers had been published on this topic, indicating a robust and growing field of study [4].

A comprehensive analysis of publication trends reveals distinct phases in the development of female image research [5]. From 1996 to 2004, the focus was primarily on critiquing superficial and stereotypical portrayals of women in television advertisements. This period laid the foundational critique of media representations, emphasizing the need for more dignified and empowering images of women. The subsequent years, particularly from 2004 to 2009, saw a steady increase in research output, expanding the scope beyond television to include broader advertising contexts. This growth continued, albeit with fluctuations, reaching a peak in 2021, underscoring the sustained and evolving interest in the subject [6].

The advent of new media platforms such as social media and self-media has significantly influenced contemporary research trends. Recent studies have increasingly explored the representation of women in diverse media formats, including reality TV shows and online video platforms like Weibo and Douyin [7]. This shift reflects the dynamic nature of media consumption and the corresponding need to analyze female images across various digital landscapes. The proliferation of female-centric entertainment and the rapid development of interactive media have become central themes, driving scholarly discussions on gender power dynamics and female discourse in the digital age [8].

Keyword co-occurrence analysis highlights four primary research areas within the field: theoretical frameworks, micro-level case studies, macro-level media analyses, and comparative studies. Theoretical research delves into concepts such as social gender, stereotypes, symbolic alienation, feminism, and consumerism, providing a critical foundation for understanding the construction and implications of female images in media. Micro-level analyses focus on specific media texts, including television dramas and advertisements, examining how these portrayals reinforce or challenge cultural hegemonies and societal norms [9].

Macro-level explorations investigate the broader media environment, assessing how mass media, television advertising, and news reporting collectively shape public perceptions of women. This level of analysis often incorporates critiques of media bias and the influence of commercialization and traditional cultural values on gender representation.

Comparative studies further enrich the discourse by contrasting female images across different cultural contexts, such as between Chinese and Western media, thereby highlighting the interplay between global media practices and local cultural dynamics [10].

Longitudinal analyses reveal the shifting priorities and emerging hotspots in female image research [11]. Early focus on television advertising gradually gave way to more complex discussions involving internet-mediated communication and the multifaceted roles of women in contemporary media. Recent trends emphasize the transformative impact of technological advancements on female media representations, exploring how digital platforms enable more diverse and multidimensional portrayals of women.

Therefore, the research on female images in China's media and communication studies has matured into a multifaceted and dynamic field. The integration of traditional media analysis with contemporary digital media studies reflects the adaptability and depth of scholarly inquiry.

3. Overview of Research on Female Images in China

3.1. Publication Quantity and Annual Analysis

From 1996 to 2023, a total of 510 academic papers were published in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) with "female image" as the subject term under the specified search conditions. The earliest study by Zhi Gang (1996) titled "Discussing the Female Image in Television Advertising," published in *Xinwen Sanmei*, critiques the shallow and unappealing portrayal of women in television advertisements. Zhi argues that Chinese female images should be more dignified and empowering, not confined to such stereotypical and negative portrayals in advertisements. Up until April 7, 2024, the most cited paper is Zhang Chenyang's (2005) 'Female Advertising in Shenbao: Female Image, Modern Imagery, and the Essence of Consumption,' published in *Women's Studies Series*. Zhang conducts a content analysis of female advertisements in Shenbao from 1928 to 1937 [12]. He concludes that female advertising culture, as a typical representation of modern advertising culture, not only pioneered media operations in the history of the newspaper industry but also contributed to the construction of Shanghai's metropolitan culture and urban temperament. This aligns with contemporary aesthetic cultural perspectives in advertising.

Overall, research on female images in China remained relatively underdeveloped before 2004, with limited studies primarily focused on television and advertising. From 2004 to 2009 (excluding 2008), research on female images steadily increased. Between 2009 and 2023, publication numbers fluctuated, reaching a peak of 49 papers in 2021. In recent years, the rise of female reality shows such as *Sisters Who Make Waves* and *Youth With You*, alongside popular television dramas like *Nothing But Thirty* and *Beijing Women's Picture*, has sparked widespread discussion on "female-centric entertainment". Additionally, the rapid development of self-media and social media platforms, including Weibo and Douyin, has led to a proliferation of studies on female images within these mediums. Research on female images in the field of journalism and communication in China is burgeoning, with an increasing number of scholars approaching the topic from a media and communication perspective (see Figure 1).
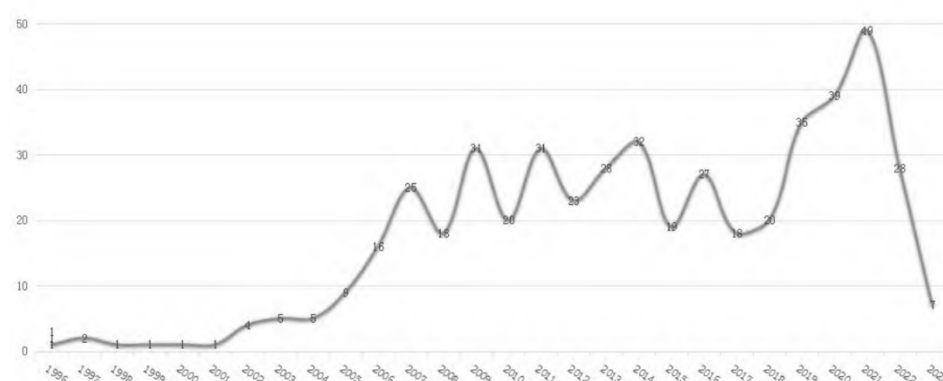
Figure 1. Number of Published Papers on Female Image Research in China (1996–2023)

3.2. Hotspots and Trends Based on Co-word Analysis

CiteSpace, a knowledge visualization analysis software, was utilized to create temporal views and co-word clustering maps. Keywords, derived from paper titles, abstracts, and full texts, reliably reflect the substantive content of the research. Using keyword co-occurrence algorithms, the knowledge map of domestic research hotspots was delineated, and burst detection was employed to explore the frontiers of female image research.

3.2.1. Horizontal Analysis: Distribution of Research Topics

The co-occurrence analysis of keywords related to female image research identified keywords as nodes within the timeframe of 1996 to 2023, segmented into one-year intervals with a Top N threshold of 18. The resulting co-occurrence map revealed the most frequently occurring and central keywords over the 27-year period in the domestic journalism and media field. Both centrality and co-occurrence metrics indicate the research intensity of these keywords.

Applying a centrality threshold of ≥ 0.1, eight key nodes emerged, representing the most significant research frontiers: "female image", "social gender", "stereotype", "media image", "feminism", "mass media", "female news" and "female". Table 1 lists the top ten keywords by frequency and centrality, all appearing at least eight times and spanning the historical progression of female image research in China. To elucidate the academic significance of these keywords, a high-frequency keyword clustering map was generated, categorizing female image research into four main areas:

Table 1. Top Ten Keywords in Female Image Research by Frequency and Centrality

Rank	Keyword	Frequency	Centrality
1	Female Image	510	0.22
2	Social Gender	330	0.19
3	Stereotype	280	0.17
4	Media Image	270	0.16
5	Feminism	210	0.15
6	Mass Media	200	0.14
7	Female News	180	0.13
8	Female	160	0.12
9	Television Advertising	150	0.11
10	Consumerism	140	0.10

3.2.2. Longitudinal Analysis: Evolution of Research Hotspots

The longitudinal analysis of female image research from 1996 to 2023, using co-word clustering and burst detection techniques, offers significant insights into the development

of this field within journalism and communication studies. Over the years, the evolution of research hotspots has reflected both the shifting media landscape and broader societal changes. This section further delves into the dynamic evolution of these research themes, emphasizing the crucial role of knowledge mapping in understanding the ways in which female images have been studied in the context of media and communication.

During the first phase (1996 to 2005), the focus was predominantly on defining core concepts such as "female image", "social gender", and "stereotype". These terms laid the foundation for the academic exploration of how women were portrayed in media, both in terms of content and the underlying social and cultural norms that shaped those portrayals. Research from this period was largely theoretical, aiming to critique and deconstruct traditional gender roles within media. The prominence of the keyword "female image" as a central term indicated that scholars were primarily concerned with identifying and analyzing how female characters were represented across various media forms, particularly in print, television, and film. This research phase also highlighted a growing recognition of the importance of social gender dynamics, as researchers began to see the relationship between gender roles in media representations and broader social practices.

From 2005 to 2015, there was a marked diversification in the research themes surrounding female images, with new keywords such as "media image", "feminism", and "mass media" gaining traction. This shift mirrored the increasing role of digital media in shaping societal perceptions of gender. The internet and the expansion of digital platforms provided new venues for the circulation of media content, which had a profound impact on how gender was represented. The emergence of "feminism" as a central keyword during this period reflected the increasing alignment of media studies with feminist theory. Scholars sought to explore how media both shaped and reflected feminist discourse, particularly regarding gender inequality. The growing recognition of "mass media" and "female news" underscored the increasing role of news reporting in constructing public perceptions of women. As news outlets became more widely available through digital channels, the way in which women were represented in the news was scrutinized more intensely.

At the same time, the rise of "television advertising" became a key focus area in research, particularly in terms of how advertising campaigns portrayed women and perpetuated stereotypical images. Advertisements, as powerful visual and commercial tools, became crucial sites for studying the commodification of female bodies. The research at this stage highlighted the role of advertising in shaping societal attitudes toward women, demonstrating the power of media to both reflect and influence public perceptions. Through advertising, female images were not only stereotyped but also marketed to consumers, contributing to the broader discourse around the objectification and commercialization of women.

Starting around 2015, and continuing into the present, the research focus began to shift more significantly toward newer forms of media, such as social media platforms, reality television, and live-streaming. This period marked a significant transformation in how female images were represented in the media. Researchers increasingly began to explore how social media platforms enabled women to create their own media images and narratives. The interactivity of these platforms, along with the growing prominence of user-generated content, offered new opportunities for women to represent themselves outside of traditional media structures. This shift was accompanied by the rise of the "female empowerment" discourse, with increasing attention on how women were portrayed as more independent, dynamic, and multifaceted.

The concept of "gender fluidity" also emerged as an important theme in media representations, as researchers began to explore how gender representation in media was becoming more diverse and inclusive. This trend is particularly significant in the realm of social media and reality television, where content is more spontaneous and offers a broader spectrum of female identities. The concept of "independent women" gained increased visibility, marking a shift toward depictions of women as self-reliant and assertive,

marking a departure from earlier media depictions of women as passive, submissive, or dependent. Female characters in media, especially on platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok, increasingly reflected a broader spectrum of identities, lifestyles, and experiences.

This shift also coincided with a rising academic focus on "consumerism" — the ways in which media representations of women are intertwined with neoliberal consumer culture. Scholars began to analyze how media representations of women were increasingly intertwined with consumer culture, reflecting neoliberal ideologies that commodify women's bodies. Advertising, particularly in digital spaces, played a pivotal role in this process, continuing to shape public perceptions of women while also contributing to the ongoing commercialization of female images. Researchers explored how consumerism in media not only objectifies women but also reinforces specific gender roles and societal expectations. This intersection of gender, media, and consumerism highlights the powerful role of media in shaping both individual and collective understandings of femininity.

The evolving research areas also reflect the growing importance of platforms like social media, where the interaction between media producers and audiences has fundamentally changed how female images are constructed. Traditional media, with its one-way flow of communication, has been increasingly replaced by more dynamic, interactive forms of media that allow for greater agency and autonomy in how women are represented. As a result, Feminist scholars have increasingly focused on new media forms like social platforms and reality TV to explore how they challenge and reinforce traditional gender norms.

4. Conclusion

The examination of female images within China's media and communication landscape offers profound insights into the evolving dynamics of gender relations and societal transformations. This study has mapped the trajectory of female image research from its nascent stages in the mid-1990s to its current status in 2023, highlighting significant developments, trends, and scholarly contributions. By employing CiteSpace software for knowledge mapping and keyword co-occurrence analysis, this research has systematically reviewed over five hundred academic papers, thereby providing a comprehensive overview of the field.

One of the foremost achievements of this study is the identification of distinct phases in the evolution of female image research in China. Initially, from 1996 to 2004, scholarly efforts were primarily focused on critiquing the superficial and stereotypical portrayals of women in television advertisements. This foundational period established a critical framework for understanding how media representations could either perpetuate or challenge existing gender norms. The emphasis during these years was on advocating for more dignified and empowering images of women, thereby laying the groundwork for subsequent research.

Keyword co-occurrence analysis revealed four primary research areas: theoretical frameworks, micro-level case studies, macro-level media analyses, and comparative studies. Theoretical research has provided critical foundations by exploring concepts such as social gender, stereotypes, symbolic alienation, feminism, and consumerism. These studies have elucidated the underlying mechanisms through which media constructs and perpetuates female images, offering valuable insights into the interplay between media representations and societal attitudes towards gender.

Micro-level case studies have focused on specific media texts, including television dramas and advertisements, examining how these portrayals reinforce or challenge cultural hegemonies and societal norms. This granular approach has enabled scholars to dissect the nuanced ways in which female images are constructed and perceived within particular media contexts. Comparative studies have enriched the discourse by contrasting female images across different cultural contexts, such as between Chinese and Western

media. This comparative approach has illuminated the influence of global media practices on local cultural dynamics, underscoring the importance of context-specific analyses in understanding female image construction.

Despite its comprehensive approach, this study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the analysis mainly relied on quantitative methods, focusing on publication trends and keyword co-occurrence, but did not explore the qualitative aspects of individual studies in depth. This approach, while effective in identifying broad patterns and trends, may overlook the nuanced arguments and theoretical contributions of specific papers.

Secondly, the scope of the database was limited to the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), potentially excluding relevant research published in other databases or in languages other than Chinese. This limitation may result in an incomplete representation of the global discourse on female images in media, particularly studies that incorporate cross-cultural perspectives beyond the Chinese context.

Additionally, the study's focus on academic publications may have excluded "gray literature" (non-peer-reviewed materials such as government reports, industry publications, and media analyses), which could provide valuable insights into the practical aspects of female image construction and its societal implications and its societal implications.

Lastly, the rapid evolution of digital media presents a moving target for research. While recent studies have begun to address the impact of new media platforms, the fast-paced nature of technological advancements means that the field is continually evolving, potentially outpacing the scope of current academic research.

To address these limitations and further advance the field, future research should adopt a more integrative and multidisciplinary approach. Expanding the database to include a wider array of sources and languages would provide a more comprehensive understanding of global and local dynamics in female image construction. Incorporating qualitative methodologies, such as in-depth content analyses and ethnographic studies, would complement the quantitative findings and offer richer insights into the complexities of media representations.

In conclusion, the research on female images in China's media and communication studies has matured into a multifaceted and dynamic field. The integration of traditional media analysis with contemporary digital media studies reflects the adaptability and depth of scholarly inquiry. This study has highlighted significant trends, key research areas, and the evolving nature of female image research, underscoring the critical role of media in shaping and reflecting gender relations.

As media continues to evolve in the digital age, the portrayal of women will remain a pivotal area of academic investigation. Sustained scholarly attention is essential to understanding and influencing the ways in which media representations contribute to societal perceptions of gender, ultimately fostering a more equitable and inclusive media landscape.

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