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**WOMEN WATCHING WOMEN:**

*An Audience Research on Reality TV Show's Engagement and  
Chinese Women's Identity in "Sisters Who Make Wave"*

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## ***ABSTRACT***

This thesis focuses on the prevalence of female identity in Chinese reality television. One of the representative female (age 30+) reality shows is Sisters Who Make Waves (SWMW), which has aroused widespread discussion in China. In the field of Chinese reality TV, SWMW is the first show in China composed entirely of women aged 30+. This study aims to contribute to a further exploration of its representation of female identities and stereotypes in reality television, and most importantly, what is meant behind the representation how the female identity has changed.

The main research area of this thesis is female audience research. Guided by a qualitative methodology, the study applies interview method in the examination of the case of SWMW. In order to explore the female identity and stereotypes, it analyses female audiences interview toward this reality tv show; and beyond that, it also highlights female audiences's preference, performance, daily talk and interaction, in reproducing a sense of belonging in their engagement with the program. In addition, this study investigates the sense of identity and emotion embodied in the female audiences' participation and interaction, which is considered a rise of female self-awareness. This contextual knowledge assists the main analysis of the female audience study in the investigation of the rationale of the female identity. Moreover, it probes into the female audiences who constitute the core audience of the program and discuss their power of women appearance in the program.

As is shown in the findings, the thesis argues that the representation of female identity and stereotypes in the show is a collaborative between the audience and the program, in which a new perception of female stereotypes is contested. There are various elements in the contribution of female identity and stereotypes, including the level of audience engagement, the excellence of the production of the program, the skills and attitudes of the performers and the publicity of the celebrities and, more crucially, the self-awareness of the female audiences. It further uncovers that the progression and development of the image of women through reality TV shows.

**Keywords:** reality tv show; genre; performance of self; audience engagement; female identity; women stereotype; China; media representation; emotion; Chinese women

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# *Chapter 1*

## *Introduction*

Reality TV research has always been an essential part of understanding the media landscape. The best reason reality TV can be exciting is that it teaches us how the media tell a new way of telling the human story (Poniewozik, 2004:13). In this thesis, reality TV is studied in a way that is seen as an offshoot of the genre, particularly a study of female audiences' engagement to a specific reality TV show. It is because "genre work involves multiple modes of engagement" (Hill, 2007: 84). The reality TV show can allow the audience to immerse in watching a genre and reflecting on this experience (Hill, 2007). The reality TV show research is used to better understand the audience as responding to factual content on conscious and unconscious levels (Hill, 2007). Therefore, in this thesis, female audiences' engagement will focus on the Reality TV show named *Sister Who Make Waves (SWMW)* and the extent to which it reflects female stereotypes. When female audiences see themselves in the act of watching the show of SWMW, this is a compelling part of the reality TV process of genre work, where they reflect on their feelings and experiences as an audience (Hill,1997: 85).

The reality tv show SWMW from China is the case study for this thesis. According to the II Media official media data, in July 2020, among the four major video sites' variety shows, this show had a broadcast index of 77.36, media buzz of 62.53 and user buzz of 64.46. All three indicators include the highest of all online variety shows on the four major video sites. <sup>1</sup>The reality show of SWMW is at the tops of the list of all popular reality shows of the season. It makes the genre of Chinese reality tv show salient in the study of female identity and female engagement around the domestic show; these become the main focus of this thesis. Thus, this thesis's direction will combine the female audience engagement and female identity issue. Notably, driven by the high popularity of SWMW, the market value of 'Mango TV Media' (the company that owns the show) has soared, with its commercial value exceeding 100 billion RMB, making the show the most influential representative of the natural hot show of the season. At the same time, as of the current commercial history of

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://www.iimedia.cn/c1061/73475.html>

reality TV, SWMW is also the most commercially valuable representative in the history of Chinese reality TV. Both the impressive statistics and engagement-framed articulation, prompt this thesis to take a closer look at female identity as constructed by female audiences in the process of watching the reality TV show.

The thesis chooses SWMW as the case study because the show is the first reality show in China that altogether has female participants. All performers and contestants are made up of Chinese female artists over the age of 30, and all the performers are influential female celebrities from different areas of the cultural industry. The performers have different identities as women in society and are representative of their role in transmitting the image of women in China. The discussions on Chinese female identity will be discussed in detail in the analysis. For the role of celebrities in the show of SWMW, this is due since celebrity culture creates evident representations of people who are manufactured example- but who also connect with the audience in a profoundly meaningful way (Douglas, 2019: 59). Celebrity representation in the study of reality TV also has a value that cannot be ignored, and it helps to set the correct values in society to a certain extent. Another aspects, for genre analysis of reality tv show, “the power of context is crucial, as genre categories work to link assumptions which viewers undoubtedly bring to bear in their interpretive practices” (Mittell, 2004: 97). It is essential to explore the relationship between the female audiences and the show of SWMW based on the Chinese female identity debates in society. In the context of China, the traditional stereotypes of women must be related to specific roles based on age, including marriage and family. Nevertheless, in the show, these same stereotypes are given a new meaning for Chinese women, which is strongly meaningful for the development of female identity issues.

The ethnographic model’s works assumed a particularly limited notion of the audiences as “people watching and interpretive television” in any previous studies (Mittell, 2004: 99). It, in part, denied the audience's emotional perceptions, cognitive understandings and evaluations of the reality TV show. In order to avoid neglecting the role of the show in the emotions of the female audience, the resonance between the female audiences and the show will also be the focus of the research in the analysis of the thesis. The extent to which female audiences interact with the show depends largely how it touches them emotionally,

which is determined by the space between the performers and the audiences in the program. This space is designed to deal with the emotional and mental impact of the show on the female audiences, allowing women to have a different voice, whether based on the definition of female identity or the perception of female stereotypes.

The encouragement of female competition and the loss of extended family in China's feminine gender environment may prompt China's younger generation to express themselves more explicitly, a trait that is not unwelcomed in traditional Chinese culture (Ren, 2016: 96). Meanwhile, the show of *SWMW* is worth examining for its success as a media platform that allows female audiences to watch and negotiate female stereotypes. It provides the power to explore the rise of female self-awareness. Butler suggested that “the binary division of ‘male’ and ‘female’ identities should be shattered, and replaced with multiple forms of identity - not a new range of restrictive categories, but an abundance of models of self-expression” (cited in Gauntlett, 2008: 285).

This thesis, therefore, aims to address how the female audiences were watching and negotiating the stereotypes through a reality TV show. It uses *Sister Who Make Waves* as the particular case in examining Chinese reality tv show due to its strong desire for female audience participation and the influence of the top-ranking topic in Chinese media. Meanwhile, there are also two thesis objectives to help the study to complete this aim, they are (1) investigating how female audiences perceive female identity and their role in society through a reality TV show and (2) examining female audiences' everyday experience in dealing with stereotypes on Chinese women on their digital social media. This thesis includes an analysis of engagement and female identity and addresses the female audiences' emotion in terms of performance perspective. Based on these backgrounds and the research focus described above, this thesis proposes three research questions, as follow:

- RQ1: How do Chinese female audiences form their sense of self and identity through a reality TV show?
- RQ2: To what extent these Chinese female audiences deal with stereotypes about women in society?

- RQ3: How can reality TV show help female audiences think about women's identity in their everyday lives? Why is it important?

Several chapters are presented in this thesis. The first chapter introduces the examined topic, namely the reflection of female identity and female stereotypes in reality tv show of China, which is a crucial factor for reality TV shows to attract female audiences engagement. It also demonstrates the research aim of this thesis, which is to explore the women audiences watching and negotiating the stereotypes through the reality tv show SWMW.

Moving on to the second chapter, it provides an analysis guide of this thesis among relevant theoretical frameworks. To be more precise, it starts with a review of the concept “audience engagement studies” as a theoretical basis for this thesis and is followed by locating this thesis in the field of female audience engagement. Then this thesis discussed the representation of female stereotypes under the media representation and contested the female identities in China. It ends by discussing the audience performance of self in the reality TV show.

After a scholarly walk of the literature, this thesis provides a detailed process and application of the methodological choices in the third chapter. Guided by a qualitative methodology, it illustrates the importance and necessity of the one-to-one semi-structured interview method for audience research, and more than that, it gives rationality of coding process for the interview transcript. In addition, this chapter also complemented by the application of in-depth interview, sampling and digital observation. Moreover, the application of digital observation is mainly used analysis on online media comments with the issue of female identity and women stereotypes.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters are in regards to the principle analysis of the proposed research questions. Starting with unveiling how Chinese female audiences form their sense of self and identity through a reality TV show in the fourth chapter, it mainly focuses on a sense of belonging for female audience engagement with the show. The fifth chapter is dedicated to addressing to what extent these Chinese female audiences deal with stereotypes about women in society? More precisely, it investigates changing the female stereotypes by

the media representation. Furthermore, the sixth chapter moves research question 3-how can the reality TV show help female audiences think about women's identity in their everyday lives? Why is it important? It uncovers the meaning behind the play with play from a performance perspective.

The final chapter ends by exhibiting the results, critically reflecting on this thesis project, and considering potential future studies on reality TV shows.

## *Chapter 2*

### *Literature Review*

This chapter consists of four subchapters: female audience engagement with a reality tv show, female stereotyping in and through media representation, contested women identity in China and audience performance of self in the reality tv show. Firstly, it reviews the concept and theoretical basis of audience engagement and explains why audiences in particular female audiences engage with reality shows. Then it discusses the stereotype of Chinese women and the value in media representation. This chapter also discusses the different attitudes and identity choices regarding Chinese women's controversies. Last but not least, it also explains how the audiences perform themselves in the process of participating in the reality show.

#### *Female audience engagement with reality tv show*

##### *—Dialogue between female participants and audience*

Dahlgren and Hill (2020) understand engagement as a nexus of individual and collective relationship. Thereby, engagement is the relationship between the audience and the media, which can help the audience realize the social, cultural and economic value of the media in their life experience. In reality shows, celebrities or guests will be invited to perform performances to convey the culture and themes that the show wants to reflect. In the process of delivering information on the show, the public has already had a relationship with the show when it chooses to accept the show's information. As the show composed entirely of women triggers female audiences to think about life and daily issues, think about the cultural and social value that the show brings to the audience. The audience's thinking process is a dialogue between the female audience and the show, and this kind of dialogue is a way of output that reflects society and culture. The dialogue is the right granted to female audiences by the engagement process, an opportunity for dialogue with society and culture. We can also understand it as a way of communication, a way of dialogue. Female audiences

can find out what disputes and problems they will encounter in society through engagement with the show and how we should face and resolve them.

On the other hand, digital engagement also plays an viral role in the engagement aspect. In addition to the engagement relationship established with the show, online interaction and online community can also be used as a dialogue link and audience. Hill (2018:2) advocates that audiences are essential for digital media landscapes, arguing for multi-faceted, pragmatic approaches to various audience experiences in social and cultural contexts. Furthermore, digital engagement is also a form of a dialogue between the show and the audience. As noted over a decade ago by Hannah Rudman(2006), interactive online communication is becoming an increasingly common cultural consumption feature. The use of digital media to engage audiences is a tangible manifestation of the broader cultural economy and society (Walmsley, 2019:200). Online communication is also powerful support for audience engagement in the show. Except for some audiences who can participate in the show on-site, most audience interactions are realized through digital media. In other words, this is also the only convenient way for the audience to participate in the show in life. The audience can participate in online communication anytime, anywhere without being restricted by time, place and space. Most of the audiences' engagement are activities behind the TV and the Internet, and online communication is the best direct way of participation and dialogue in digital engagement. The audiences can express their views and support for the show through various digital platforms and online communities. The show can also collect the audience's response to the show through the audience's digital engagement to analyze the audience's psychology and tendencies more specifically. The process of this kind of interaction is to demonstrate the participation of the audience by conceptualizing, analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating the information collected from observation, communication and reflection.

—*Resonance as engagement guide among female audiences*

Establishing a sense of resonance is a necessary to a great extent or stimulating audience engagement in reality shows. Establishing female emotional resonance is a powerful way for reality shows to attract female audiences. Dahlgren and Hill (2020) say the “engagement

is an energizing internal force, rooted in effect and identity, and it is a subjective disposition that can propel us to do things.” When the audience chooses attention to a specific program, this means the engagement is produced, “when engagement happens, it is a powerful subjective experience” (Hill, 2000).

The studied reality TV show has first established an emotional connection with female identity. The social facts and controversies reflected in the show are also real problems that Chinese women need to face and resolve in their lives. It can be said that emotional resonance is the emotional guide for female audience engagement. After the emotional recognition is generated, it will be put into practice. For example, audiences will express their opinions on the Internet, vote for their favourite participants through the various platforms, and even are participate in live performances to watch the show directly. These behaviours are all participation based on emotional resonance as a guide. It is an important element for the audiences to engage with reality TV show. The performance in the show can insinuate their own life or career. Because in reality shows, the performer acting true to themselves is a quick way to get closer to the audience. On the other hand, especially regarding women’s socially sensitive topics, some of the show’s participants have become a celebrity in China. They have their social influence, and afterwards, through the life experience and experience of dealing with women’s issues shared by these celebrities in the show in terms of emotion, letting it go naturally arouses the emotional resonance of Chinese women, thereby intensifying the motivation to promote female audience engagement.

For Chinese women, the 30 is a watershed of female youth within the social construction of identity in the country. Women before the age of 30 have more freedom to choose, but women after the age of 30 have to face various social or moral problems. For example, family and work have always been the most topical issues around women. Whether women should get out of the family and live independently has always been controversial in society. How to balance the two concepts of life and family for women over 30, and set up questions about whether they should be full-time housewives and so on. Kamhawi&Grabe(2008:35) once mentioned that the viewpoint of female approach-avoidance had been proved to be practical in the field of theoretical viewpoint and inquiry. It proves that age is a sympathetic issue for women’s social restrictions. The participants of this studied show come from many

roles among women, singles, single mothers, or divorced women. There are also various perspectives on the definition of this group in society, whether women over 30 should belong to the family or the society. Although today's Chinese women have escaped from the traditional and inherent image of relying on their husbands, they will still be affected by age. It is also an important reason why reality TV shows can resonate with female audiences.

—*Embedded engagement in everyday life*

Hill (2019:121) proposes that “‘embedded engagement’ refers to the kind of long-lasting relationship we form with media content during our lives.” That kind of relationship takes time to accumulate. When we bring media into our lives and practice continuously, we will form a connection with entertainment over time. One thing worthy of recognition is that embedded engagement is closely related to the life of the audience. In the *Sister Who Make Waves* (SWMW) program, the audience watched their talent show on stage and watched the daily life of the participants and the process of participating in the competition. The program uses the participants' lives' fragments to allow the program and the audience to have an embedded life interaction. For example, the daily training life segments of the contestants in the show are intended to promote a reality show that advocates a passion for the stage and a positive attitude toward life. In addition, in order for the producer of the show to allow the audience to embedded participant in the show, the producer will create a time relationship between the audience and the show (Hill, 2019:123). That kind of relationship between the show and the audience will be embedded in the daily life trajectory of the audience as the power of time flows.

A reality TV show is based on live events and based on audience expectations, and the live experience is embedded in routines, year on year (Hill, 2017). When the audience voted and encouraged the contestants in *Sister Who Make Waves*, there were certain expectations. When the show shows the celebrity's life practice of dancing or singing skills, the audience will increase the expectations of the celebrity, because the severe attitude in the celebrity's life aims to have a better display on the stage and present a more exciting performance to the audience. This show is different from the traditional reality show. It not only shows real

life but also shows the behind-the-scenes footage of every stage performance. The creative mode of this reality show combines two parts of life practice and stage expectations, which further enhances the audience's sense of embedded engagement.

For reality show types of programs, the analysis of audience engagement should consider that there is not only one type of audience but switching between different engagement modes, performing the roles of viewers, users, fans, critics even participants (Hill, 2018). When the producer creates a show, it is necessary to understand what role the audience plays in their lives. The factual record of the show is not only to present an excellent performance, and the performance is derived from the reaction of life. Reality shows not only bring the audience a visual experience but also a motivation for the audience to participate actively. Reflecting society and culture through reality shows can involve audiences and embed them in different roles.

Moreover, most of the roles in the programs come from the real-life of the audience. For example, audiences can think about the employment environment in society through reality shows in the workplace or, get an idea about young people's mate-choosing views through reality shows. These different roles over time have been embedded in the life of the audience.

### ***Female stereotyping in and through media representation***

#### *—Visual representation*

Hall has explained in the past, "the representation is how meaning is somehow given to the things which are depicted through the images or whatever it is, on screens or the words on a page which stand for what we are talking about" (Hall, 1997:6). The reality TV show is demonstrating to the audience in the form of images through the packaging of performances and participants. Female audiences can get the actual content discussed in the program through images. For example, there are some issues related to women's make-up and clothing, or issues that women face in their careers. The image is an expression channel full of associating, "the image itself – whether moving or still and whether transmitted by a

variety of different media – seems to be or to have become, the prevalent sign of late-modern culture" (Hall, 1997). The image of women can also be represented and spread through the images in reality TV show. This section mainly focuses on the visual representation of women's appearance. Through images, we get the aesthetic standards of women's appearance. For example, many women in reality TV shows are keen on cosmetic surgery to make their entire face and body look fuller, which affects the aesthetic standards of women to a certain extent. Through images, the audience understands that women no longer pursue natural beauty, and artificial beauty is another way to show ourselves.

Social representatives can reflect social pressure on women's appearance, and that social representation can also be constructed, transformed, and communicated through the communication between audiences and reality shows (Mannarini, 2020:21). An image is a way of presentation; audiences communicate with programs through images. The facts about its subject matter reflect the objectivity of the social representation. Therefore, the actual operation of the image (recording the aesthetics of the female visual appearance) can provide objectivity of the record for the audience (Hall, 1997:82).

#### *—Female mental and representation*

Another way to build resonance with the audience is a mental representation about reality shows attracting audience engagement and interaction. The mental representation can help the audience explain the motivation of participating in the show. Hall (1997:17) states that without mental representation, we would not interpret the world meaningfully. This meaning depends on the system of concepts and images formed in our thoughts that represent or represent the world, allowing us to refer to things inside and outside of our minds. For example, the female image under the social and cultural structure, how should we understand and treat this object with a particular imaginary composition? In an inevitable process, we need mental representation to explore the inner world of women themselves and transform them into real existence.

For the research field of audience studies, it is indispensable to pay attention to the psychological dynamics of the audience. Especially the reality TV show of female, not only for the general public but also for women in society. Because people and events are correlated with concepts or mental representation that we carry around in our heads (Hall, 1997). The studied of the show needs to cater to women's mental representations to gain support and resonance from female audiences. The show appears about women's social and life problems will touch the psychological representation of the audience, thereby driving the audience to participate and interact.

—*Stereotyping: the representation of women based on tradition*

The issue of female stereotypes has always been a more controversial discussion and research in modern society. Löfstrand (2018:11) says that “stereotypes are easy to adopt but harder to avoid.” Because public values and culture are affected, society will automatically perform group-based classification, so stereotypes can easily lead to prejudiced judgment and personal and ethnic identification behaviours. To a certain extent, this prejudice is understood as an attitude composed of feelings, cognition and behavioural component (Löfstrand, 2018:12). In the Chinese cultural background, the most apparent female stereotype is the expression of “house women”. Although this is due to historical reasons, it has to be admitted that there are still stereotypes of women today that they give each other and teach their children. The husband and child are also women's value in society. Supporting their husbands and caring for their children are the traditional primary responsibilities of women. However, it is precise because of traditional female stereotypes that it is possible to use a clever and brief way to represent social value (Lacey, 1998:139). Although there is no standard to judge whether traditional female stereotypes are true or false, it reflects a specific set of ideological values. The degree to which a stereotype is accepted as “real” or “false” depends on a person's perception of the group.

Lacey(1998) states in the perspective of the stereotype of representation, “Stereotypes are only effective if they are believed to be a view of a group which has a consensus.” Furthermore the stereotype of “housewives” can also be produced because part of society, the female community, has reached a consensus. Just like homemakers can reduce the

pressure from the economy and life, avoid injustice in the workplace, and so on. Traditional Chinese homemakers rely entirely on their husbands and children to live, and the most significant expression of value is to solve life problems for the husband and children, such as cooking, the daily life of husband and children or housework. In other words, the traditional female stereotype is that everything in the life is an expression of value with family, husband and children as the core. This kind of value expression generates meaning through media representations and captures the "reality" in the symbol (female stereotype) using the way of stereotype (Orgad, 2012:47). At the same time, this value also recognizes the actual existence of women in society through the consensus of some female groups in society. When women choose whether to accept the stereotypes of traditional value expressions, it is a process of self-categorization. Self-categorization usually forms the in-group favoritism that extends trust and empathy to in-group rather than out-group members (Mannarini, Salvatore and Giuseppe, 2020:7). At the same time, this also confirms the consensus reached by this part of the group.

*—Reshape the female stereotyping in reality TV show*

The celebrity effect plays a crucial role in why the reality TV shows can attract a large number of audiences to engage. Reality shows rely on celebrities and mass media's power in the dissemination process to reshape a screen image from multiple ways. Representatives of famous people in mass media, stars and celebrities portraits are all tools for creating social meaning (Mary-Talbot, 2007:127). Thus, celebrities always represent more than themselves because of the accumulation of social influence (Mary-Talbot,2007). Therefore, the celebrity can directly or indirectly convey specific social values, such as the meaning of women's work and achievements and gender identity (Mary-Talbot, 2007). Reality shows use celebrity influence to reshape the stereotype of women in the show. The most prominent aspect is the traditional Chinese female stereotype. The impression forms a sense of "contrast". This sense of contrast comes from the breakthrough of traditional female impression, reshaping the new "female stereotype". For example, it is similar to single mothers returning to the stage or the second blooming of divorced women. "Single mothers"

and "divorced women" are essentially classified due to identity and then use stereotypes to summarize and generalize their life experiences, weakening their social status and making female identity discussion. In disseminating information, images of "single mothers" and "divorced women" have been formed. When the audience receives information, they often look at this group with coloured eyes. It just confirms the Taylor and Francis (2013:2) statement that women are often judged based on their appearance and marital status, which weakens women's ability to be active in society. Therefore, reality shows use the public image of female celebrities or start to reshape female stereotypes can attract many female audiences and use the power of the media to emancipate female stereotypes to some extent.

In addition, the show of SWMW also reshaped the traditional impression of gender. Traditional gender stereotypes include information about attributes that are likely to characterize men and women and attributes that are supposed to characterize them (Kollmayer, 2018:366). The representative of celebrities in the show is gentle and virtuous, but also it can be to compete as a combative, powerful, independent and decisive image. In celebrity performance, the audience is gradually allowed to accept the reshaping of such stereotypes, and the reshaping process can also contribute to the equality of gender stereotypes. When reality shows are getting the audience's engagement and attention, they have already aroused a certain consensus among the audience to some extent. The process of the performance watched by the audience is a process of reshaping the female stereotype, and then the audience will give it to reflect and express their perceptions. After the audience expresses the cognition, it can reflect how the reality show is reshaped and what the "stereotype" is shaped to convey to the audience. Especially female audiences, when they are concerned about the social problems that also need to face female stereotypes, it is easy to accept the "stereotypes" of women's emancipation shaped by reality shows.

### ***Contested women identity in China***

—*The identity of gender in traditional Chinese society*

The first is the definition of female identity caused by female appearance aesthetics. Androgyny is a topic of debate about female identity in modern Chinese society. With the development and innovation of reality TV shows, masculine or tomboyish female appearances are also highly sought after. This female appearance of androgyny identity has become a hot topic in Chinese society. Women who tend to be tomboyish in appearance are described as androgyny identity groups in society. This view challenges traditional femininity and is primarily regarded as a flexible gender identity because it combines women and stars' good appearance and personality characteristics (Cui&Zhang, 2017:400). The androgynous aesthetic is used as a criterion for evaluating identity construction because this aesthetic stands on the opposite of femininity. "Femininity is socially and culturally constructed by patriarchy and ideology in China" (Zhan,1996 cited in Cui&Zhang, 2017:403). Chinese normative femininity was primarily based on Confucianism, emphasizing obedience, passiveness, and deference (Cui&Zhang, 2017). Because androgyny aesthetics and popular groups are entirely contrary to femininity, they are defined as androgyny identities. However, in their study, androgyny identities are products of patriarchal society, only due to women's identities. The degree of openness has allowed them to renegotiate their gender identity (Cui&Zhang, 2017).

However, the process of renegotiating their own identity is also a process of female identity disputes, which proves that women have a certain degree of self-awareness. Because they have not allowed themselves to be forced to accept the Chinese female identity under the framework of traditional values, they need to use their knowledge, life perception and various pressures (whether from society or family) to restructure their own identity. When the woman leaves her family to integrate into society actively, her social ability and life experience will help them have a part of the social discourse in society, for example, by choosing the job they prefer or being financially independent to be free from the bondage of marriage as well as, women can also construct their own female identity from controversial identity and have the right to fight back and say no in the face of controversial voices about their lifestyle.

Women's identity is controversial because people hold different perception of their own identity. Self-identity expresses our background awareness and national cultural heritage and expresses a desire to challenge the existing capital and norms (Chen, 2006:4). Women use culture to rebuild their female identity based on their culture, education, and life experience (Chen, 2006). According to Chui&Zhang(2017), empirical evidence shows that female audiences can obtain pleasure from constructing meanings of their own identities, emotional lives, experience, and knowledge development. Moreover, the controversy of female identity is because some women refuse to deny or deviate from the patriarchal order. This way of rejection is a susceptible area in interpersonal relationships. When women's identity begins to be controversial, if women reject the traditional definition of identity, in other words, they reject the agreed-upon female identity, this time it will bring society and life to life, coming under certain pressure (Ren&Woodfield, 2016:89).

—*Family VS society (how to balance work and family)*

Every Chinese woman likely faces an identity challenge, that is, how to balance family and work. That means what kind of role women will be active in this country and society. Here, this section divides female identity into family roles and social roles, which seems to be a little closer to the housewife and iron lady(women who have achieved specific achievements in society). Johansson (1998:61) states that contemporary Chinese female identity generally suffers from the pressure on both traditional and Chinese society. The pressure from the traditional structure is the role of the family. This role supports women's identity as wives and mothers and rejects all other social roles (Zhan, 1996:403). The role is created through Chinese propaganda and laws to serve the role of the family (Zhan,1996). So the female identity of the family role is the identity the female compulsorily accept as a Chinese woman. What kinds of identity may be related to the physical characteristics of women and stereotypes. Because when Chinese girls grow up, love, marriage and childbirth are a heavy burden that it becomes challenging to pursue a career. Therefore, the role of the family at this time will be used by some women to avoid the problematic situation of career pursuit (Johansson, 1998:2).

Another role of female identity comes from society. The identity of this role is because women are unwilling to accept the traditional family female identity created under the traditional social structure. It can be understood as a kind of the rise of female self-awareness. The rise of self-awareness emphasizes the independence of personality and spirit. The independence of personality and spirit is reflected in four aspects: self-respect, self-confidence, self-reliance, and self-improvement (Croll, 1995:153). The four parts mean that the awakening of women's self-awareness is not only on appearance and decoration; they need to re-position themselves in a new spiritual identity (Croll,1995).

When women choose their social identities, which means they need to reduce their commitment to their families, the four components of independence are essential. First of all, women need to get out of the family and integrate into society, and the most direct manifestation is professional women. They are exposed to various environments, such as work, companies, negotiation meetings or bonding entertainment places. Self-respect and self-confidence are required as a criterion for judging female identity and as a support for female identity. What more, self-reliance and self-reliance are used to measure women's attitudes towards progress in the workplace or society, including family and marriage, which correspond precisely to how women should balance family and work. Luo (2005:18) states in his research on Chinese female consumer culture that increased consumption of women in fashion and education means increased desire for self-expression. The increase in desire for expression requires an increase in spiritual independence before it can rise to consciousness and behaviour because women need to have a certain degree of economic independence to hold the industries they want to consume so that women are willing to change the recognition of identity.

#### —*The age boundary*

The number 30 is a turning point in life for Chinese women. As mentioned above, people tend to use marriage to judge the identity of women. If women after 30 years of age are not

married, they will be included in a team like "older leftover women".<sup>2</sup> "Older leftover women" in China generally refer to single women over 30 years of age who have not been married. So, in essence, the standard for this boundary judgment still comes from marriage. Marriage is an essential legal system to restrict society, but for Chinese women, the social customs of marriage are more important than their legal status (Bardsley, 2007:105). Because for women entering marriage, it is a process of identity transformation from the role of a daughter to the role of a wife. That means females are taking on the responsibilities of a family, not just themselves responsibilities. The boundary of 30 in age is a group that does not choose to change their identities. These single women are often referred to as Daling shengnv (leftover women), reflecting the importance of marriage in becoming women or adults. Rather than saying that 30 is a boundary, marriage is an vital factor influenceing women's identity in China.

According to a survey in China, the state media's portrayal of "leftover women" almost always shows that they are "highly educated", and urban women have made significant progress in education (Fincher, 2004:47). Women who have received higher education are more capable of independent thinking and question whether the traditional framework of female identity is consistent with their educated ideals. The four self (Croll, 1995:153) is more evident in older leftover women. The 30-year-old boundary does not bring them a sense of crisis because they have a certain social status and ability to think independently. In fact, the status of single women over 30 in society still brings them specific difficulties, and there are even many daughters who want to get married even if they have no desire because they think that the marriage still can give the best chance to gain social recognition (Croll, 1995:159).

### ***Audience performance of self in reality TV show***

The part of the performance is followed Goffman's concept is that "we perform ourselves in multiple ways, living life as part of a social drama"(Hill, 2014:52). In the field of television

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<sup>2</sup> Older leftover women: That means is a derogatory term popularized by the All-China Women's Federation that classifies women who remain unmarried in their late twenties and beyond.

program research, reality shows have always been a new genre, and it was a subgenre of drama. In the existing research area, the performance aspect has always been under the genre of television. In this thesis, performance will continue to be extended and supplemented, followed by the genre of the reality research field. The case study of this thesis is a reality show named *Sister Who Make Waves* (SWMW), where all the participants are women. Another the significance of this part of the research coincides with a point that Goffman once mentioned, "that the individual offers his performance and puts on his show 'for the benefit of other people'" (Goffman, 1990:10). In the reality tv show, all performances involve a degree of ceremony and ritual. The performer creates an image of his true self to the greatest extent in the program, intending to gain the recognition and support of the audience (Misha Kavka, 2012:146).

In this case study of the reality tv show SWMW, the participants' performance needs to consider the audience's acceptance of the female image. Goffman (1959) claims impression management is a common feature of everyday life (cited in Hill, 2014:60). The essence of the reality shows is to reflect reality of life and select natural performance segments to resonate with the audience. In other words, when the viewers are watching a reality show, they are watching real life. Brian (2021:41) once proposed, "critical to what it means to be a member of an audience is the idea of performance." From the perspective of audience research, performance can be used as a concept to help audiences interpret life through the reality TV show. After the audience watched the performance, the audience, in turn, talked about the performance in daily conversations and social media gossip, rethinking their own identity. In a sense, the performer plays a role or demonstrates the talent of a role to establish a connection with the audience, thus forming an invisible performance interaction (Hill, 2014:54). That is the part of the contribution of performance to audience research.

#### —*Performance space*

The beauty of distance is an crucial space for reality shows to connect with the audience. "Performance involves a relationship between performer and audience in which a liminal space, however slight, is opened up" (Nicholas, 2021:40). Producers create a space between

performer and audience, the space left to the audience to think and play. In this thesis, performance space is divided into two distances, distance-physical and distance-social.

The first space is distance-physical. The performance space separates the audience from the performers and the audience. In the case of mass media, the physical separation is, of course, more pronounced. This distance-physical injects ritual into the performance and uses ceremony to emphasize the importance of performance. That kind of ceremony distinguishes the performer and the audience from daily life. From a space perspective, the performance creates two worlds, the audience and the performer are in two different worlds. The performer is an independent living in a secular world different from the audience (Nicholas,2021).

Followed by distance-social, Brain (2021:42) said, social distance is more crucial for audience research. The space of distance-social is similar to "entertaining forms of tele-factuality"(Corner, 2002:257). The producer uses the social distance between the performance and the audience to highlight the sacredness and mystery of the performance. The social distance between audiences, performances and performers is significantly increased, creating an unattainable phenomenon. The distance-social has to stress that sacredness qualities are attributed to performance in very different ways and very different degrees (Nicholas, 2021:41). Reality shows use performance space to amplify the daily experience of performers. Close the distance with the audience, let the performance come from life and daily life, but use the performance space to make the performance, and the audience has an insurmountable distance-physical and distance-social. It is also part of the contribution of performance to audience research.

#### *—Performance reflexive*

In the performance of audience research, Nicholas(Nicholas, 2021:40) states that the interaction between performers and audience occurs in the vital area of social self-reflection, and this interaction provides a window. Through this window, it can check social and cultural issues. Reality shows mostly start from the perspective of life and reflect different

roles in society. For example, workplace rules revealed by reality shows of occupation, the dating reality show reflects the contemporary young people's notion of dating and choosing a spouse, and the parent-child reality show teaches you how to get along with children, and so on. These fundamental problems from society and life surround every citizen; at the same time, nobody can avoid these problems from society and life.

There is a crucial reason why the reality TV show is top-rated among the audience in contemporary times because such a show can leave the audience with the space of performance reflexive. Each audience has their own performance space in this space, and this space only belongs to them. Other people cannot empathize with them because each person's growth experience and the emotions that resonate are different. In fact, "being an audience can be like participating in a show" (Hill, 2011:472). A public performance is showing people's cultural customs and social status. The performance allows the audience to see the problem of one kind or another and then sets a like-minded space for the audience to reflexive-self in this space. According to the research in this paper, this is also a communication between the audience and society. Hill (2011:73) suggested in her study of performance that performers and audiences create shows together as a new style of entertainment and communication. This new format just confirms Nicholas's point of view, "when members of an audience people attend to a performance, they concentrate their energies, emotions and thoughts on the performance and try to distil from that performance a meaning of one kind or another" (Nicholas, 2014:43).

It is also worth mentioning that Lothar Mikos et al. ever put forward in a study of the German reality show Big Brother, "Performance is the key to understanding participants-contestants" (Hill, 2014:69). Before the performance, the settings of the performer and the performance should revolve around the understanding of the audience. Different performances will face different audiences. For example, the female social issues faced by the reality tv show of case study (SWMW) are a manifestation of female identity under the status quo of Chinese society. After the show was broadcasted, it gained a large number of audiences. In this reality show, all participants are all women over 30 years old, which means that all groups of female identity in China will face the challenge of age for women, whatever from society or family. Therefore, in the performance of reality show, the audience

is also the participant in the performance, and the audience has the right to choose in accepting or rejecting the traditional definition of age for women in the performance.

## *Chapter 3*

### *Methodology and Methods*

This thesis chooses qualitative methodology as the guidance of research methods. Qualitative research methods focus on ‘observation, description, interpreting and analyzing’ the way people experience, act or think about themselves and the world around them (Bazeley, 2013:4). It is precisely in line with this project, focusing on exploring audience research, that is, to understand how female audiences rethink female identities in the viewing experience of the reality show and how Chinese women deal with the problem of female stereotypes in life. This methodology can guide this project on how to analyze the female audiences experience and perception of the case study of the reality TV show “Sisters Who Make Waves”. The project will use the following method to analyze the case study under the guidance of a qualitative research approach.

#### *The case*

A case study applied to qualitative research is a crucial step for audience analysis. As Bazeley (2013:5) notes that “qualitative analysis is fundamentally case-oriented.” To some extent, using a case study will make the analysis results more specific and focused. Regarding the analysis of a reality show, the reality show is a phenomenon that is something hard to qualify because this offers space and a moment when everyone can discuss, and the audience can watch, share, discuss and vote. Some commentators call this moment a cultural zeitgeist (Hill, 2015:5). Therefore, the case study can be used as an effective tool for more specific exploration. Because the case study contains different assumptions, it is closer to the accurate and specific depiction of the reality TV show.

The *Sisters Who Make Waves* (SWMW) is currently received the highest-popularity and heated discussions on the social platform of Weibo<sup>3</sup> among the reality TV shows

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<sup>3</sup> Weibo: Sina Weibo is a platform for sharing, disseminating and accessing information based on user relationships[6]. It accounts for 57% of all Chinese microblog users and 87% of all Chinese microblog activity, and is one of the most visited websites in mainland China

in China. Another, SWMW is the first reality show in China entirely, showing female participants. The heated online discussions of the show have achieved 235.3 billion's<sup>4</sup> reading quantity on Weibo. At the same time, due to the explosion of the program, the market value of the program's company reached 129.96.8 billion RMB<sup>5</sup>, making it the most profitable reality show in China.

This case study also fully provide a space for discussing the issues of women identity. From the information of the statistics and evident identity sensibilities, SWMW can be seen as an appropriate, concrete case to fulfil this research's aim. Because in the statistics of audience gender, the female audience of the program is as high as 90.74 per cent.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, this reality TV show is utterly worthy of research and exploration from the perspective of female audiences.

It may be argued here that a single case study cannot represent everything and summarize everything. However, according to Eckstein (2000:120), case studies are valuable at all stages, and the most valuable part is to test theories. Since more than 90% of the show's audiences are female audiences, in this research, SWMW can be used for exploring the issues of woman identity. This research is also an effective way to test the theory of audience engagement in the reality TV show.

### ***Methods and samples***

The purpose of this research is to understand how female viewers watch and negotiate stereotypes through reality TV shows, taking in the case of *Sisters Who Make Waves*. To be more precise, it is necessary to study how female audiences get a sense of resonance in the program in order to help women re-recognize their identity. In addition, it is crucial to include the analysis of female audience engagement and stereotypes. It helps to explore

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix 3 Data collection

<sup>5</sup> See Appendix 3 Data collection

<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 3 Data collection

whether the audiences of this show can rethink the identity of women and reshape stereotypes of women in society from the perspective of women.

The primary research method of this thesis is a one-to-one semi-structured interview, and at the same time, it is also followed by the method of digital observation. The coding process of collected empirical materials from both methods are designed to discover how female audiences perceive female identity and how to deal with the stereotypes of Chinese women in digital media through the reality tv show. Bower mentions that common sense suggests that “the best way to find out what the people think about something is to ask them” (Bower, cited in Bruhn-Jensen, 2012:270). People talk with others to understand how they experience the world, how they think, act, feel, and develop as individuals and groups (Brinkmann, 2013:1). For audience research, the application of the interview method can help the researcher to understand the psychological changes and viewing experience of female audiences. At the same time, interview research can also put some ideas and concepts of interviewees into discourse (Bruhn-Jensen, 2012:271). The interview method in this research first determines the theme of female audience engagement and then begins to construct an interview guide.<sup>7</sup>The interview guide will focus on four theoretical aspects, namely audience engagement, representation, women identity, and self-performance. These four fundamental theories are used as the guidance of the interview method to conduct one-to-one semi-structured interviews.

### ***One-to-one semi-structured Interview***

The semi-structured interview method requires preparation of the interview’s guide in advance, and the interview questions should be designed sufficiently open that the subsequent questions of the interviewer cannot be planned in advance but must be improvised in a careful and theorized way (Wengraf, 2001:5). In other words, the application of the semi-structured interview method is focused more on the interviewees’ narration of all or part of their life experiences, which has considerable significance for research (Wengraf, 2001). At the same time, it can also well illustrate more general principles of semi-structured interviewing.

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<sup>7</sup> See Appendix 7 Interview Guide

As Seale (1998:207) emphasized, the semi-structured interview method should be paying attention more to allowing speakers to express their views on things in their language rather than following the research schedule. Because during the process of interview, not only the description given by the interviewee is evaluated based on their accurate reflection of the entire society, but also the researchers can discover things that cannot be seen or heard, such as the interviewee's inner state and the reasons behind their behaviour, or their emotions (Wengraf, 2001). Thus, in this project, it choose the method of one-to-one semi-structured interviews as the primary data collecting tool to support the theoretical and empirical analysis, and it is intended to create a social connection with the interviewee more easily in a short time (Wengraf, 2001). Meanwhile, this kind of semi-structured interview with “high-preparation, high-risk, high-gain and high-analysis operations” (Wengraf, 2001:P6) can help research clear ideas about the motivation and reflections of female audience engagement in a particular reality TV show.

Secondly, the face-to-face interview method is a tool that will help the semi-structured to be better implemented. While using the semi-structured interview method, the project also used the face-to-face interview to explore the program's experience further. The reason for choosing face-to-face interviews is that facial expression management is a way to establish a friendly relationship, such as smiling in the interview, and it can also avoid non-verbal ways of reflecting disapproval or any other form of judgmental reaction (Berger, 2016:277). The viewing experience of reality TV shows is essentially different based on personal experience and emotional factors. Using a face-to-face interviews approach can help the interviewer directly witness respondents' facial expressions to determine their feelings towards the program. For the expression of emotions, the face can be the most prominent non-verbal channel, and it is also the most complex psychological system in the body (Berger, 2016). The interviewer must gain insight into the interviewee's emotional state, intentions, motivation, personality, trustworthiness and credibility based on their facial changes.

All interviews were conducted using a face-to-face interview mode in order to be able to interact with the interviewee in the same place. When the interviewer and interviewee are in the same place, there can be two-way emotional and physical interaction. For example, they

can look into each other's eyes to convey more sincere emotions towards the interview. They can clap their hands to express their agreement with their emotional experience and opinions to feel the interviewer's direct response both physically and emotionally. "Roisman et al. pointed out that the expression of emotions appropriate to the verbal message is a key feature of a well-adapted effective system" (Altmann, 2021:48).

The face-to-face interviews have contributed to method directly get the emotional expression of the interviewees, this significant for thesis of getting can avoid outside interference, such as the impact of location and network. In the meantime, the interviewer can also make appropriate communication and adjustments based on the information conveyed by the interviewee's emotions or facial expressions during the interview process. For instance, they are changing the original fixed questions and continuing the discussion according to the interviewees' interests and hobbies to better the interviewees' desire and ideas to express and enable the interviewees to capture more valuable information. Therefore, the face-to-face interview allows the research to be more exploratory, uncertain and potentially innovative (Winggraf, 2001:4).

### ***In-depth interview***

An in-depth interview has always been considered a tool of choice for exploring users' or other communicators' views on media, especially in interviews closely related to daily conversations (Bruhn-Jensen, 2012:270). In the process of the in-depth interview, speech is the most basic way for communication with the interviewee; this will help the interviewer to sort out the interviewee's language after the interview, extract key information and analyze its meaning (Bruhn-Jensen, 2012). In this project, the in-depth interview method was also used to understand the female audiences of the program; conversation is carried out as well. Moreover, the answers and opinions of the interviewees about each question are recorded; this part will be presented in a complete transcript.<sup>8</sup> In-depth interviews, in fact, is a necessary form of the semi-structured interview, but in-depth interviews are often highly

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix 8 A full transcript of one-to-one semi-structured interviews

ideological concept, needs to prove rather than take it for granted (Overlien, 2005:333). The in-depth interview method used to test the conclusion should not be taken for granted; it result from the dialogue of respondents usefully meaningful for the coding and analysis. So, the application of in-depth interview will enhance the scientific reliability and validity of this research.

### ***Sampling***

In the sampling process of the audiences of SWMW, this project selected ten female audiences for semi-structured interviews; eight respondents were interviewed online using Wechat among interview, and the remaining three were interviewed offline by face-to-face format. The ten interviewees were all Chinese women, and their age groups were between 25-45 years old.<sup>9</sup> In the sampling design, considering the different life and emotional experiences of women at different ages, interviews were conducted with female audiences of different age groups. Sampling application is to conform to the background orientation of qualitative research (Bruhn-Jensen, 2012:268). And another, sampling of the project also focuses on comments on the Weibo platform of Sister who make waves account,<sup>10</sup> there will guide the analysis through observation.

Among all the interviewees in this study, three were Chinese students at Lund University, studying a different course, including media, Middle Eastern studies and gender studies. The other eight respondents were office workers from China's top tier cities, including businesswomen, police, managers, journalists and government workers. During the interviews, it can be said that their media consumption habits tend to be younger, and they prefer to use internet media platforms over traditional media such as TV and newspapers, with apps being their preferred choice because of the convenience and time savings. The interview time for each respondent was on average 50-60 minutes, with some moments of random questioning according to the topic chat, not exactly referring to the questions in the interview guide, but all the questions in the interview guide were included. At the same

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<sup>9</sup> See Appendix 6 A full transcript of one-to-one semi-structured interviews

<sup>10</sup> The account of Sister Who Make Waves has 1.1 million followers.

time, the interview was conducted in a friendly and pleasant way, and because of the similarity in age, the interview process was relatively relaxed and harmonious.

### ***Digital observation***

Although Internet observation has initially been considered an effective tool for "fans research", it has now become a new way to study audiences in general and how they express and share their views and feelings about the show (Hansen&Machin, 2019:101). The use of this method in this research is mainly to focus on observing the social media platform where the online discussion about SWMW take place. This thesis will concentrate on the Weibo platform; it is ranked the first in terms of activity in the social platform in China. The focus being observed in this digital platform is the official account of SWMW.

Beger (2016:386) mentions in the research of media ethnography that observation is one of the few methods we use to research a natural (non-laboratory) environment. It allows us to understand what people are doing. In comparison, digital observation can help this project understand what the show's audience is thinking on social media. In the observation process, this project mainly Beger (2016:386) mentions in the research of media ethnography that observation is one of the few methods we use to conduct research in a natural (non-laboratory) environment. It allows us to understand what people are actually doing. While digital observation can help this project to understand what the audience of the show is actually thinking on the social media. In the observation process, this project mainly focuses on the comment section of the show and especially pays attention to the audiences' views and perception in watching and talking about the show. For opinions related to women identity, the observations will be more emphasized.

Through digital observation, the audience's engagement in its mediated social network can be observed to a certain extent. By observing the Weibo account of SWMW, the project can conclude that female audiences are more inclined to pay attention to those issues and enthusiasm in the show, and thus analyze the stereotypes of Chinese female identity. The

importance of using digital observation as part of the research methods is explained as in a quote below:

If we are entering a[n] 'observation society', a society in which observing (as interviewing) has become a fundamental activity, and watching and scrutinizing are becoming important cognitive modes alongside the others, like listening, feeling, hearing and eavesdropping, typical of the 'interview society'. (Gobo 2011: 48, cited in Edwards and Holland, 2013:90)

In observing audience engagement online, it is better to place the observation in another virtual 'observation society' and listen to the feedback and voice of the female audience for the show. At the same time, a large number of observations of audience comments can also help observers find out what female audiences care about and are willing to spend time for. It is conducive to making the research results more comprehensive.

### *Coding*

The vital step of the analysis is coding. "Coding involves placing like with like so that patterns can be found" (Seale, 1998:146). Coding is an essential step for analysis because coding is the first stage of data analysis, and all decisions at this stage of the research project will have a significant impact (Seale, 1998). The primary coding of this project is to extract crucial information and keywords from interviewees' answers.<sup>11</sup> Based on the keyword information extracted, it can be roughly known what elements in which female interviewees will pay attention to in the show, such as female appearance, makeup, or female stereotypes. Through coding, we can get the frequency of female attention, which makes the research method of this thesis more scientific and convincing.

In the coding process, the first step was to extract keywords from each respondent's answers to each question and summarized the key information among the answer content. The second part of the coding process was to categorize the keywords into female identity, women stereotype, engagement, performance, reality tv show and so on. The third part of the

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<sup>11</sup> See Appendix 9 Coding table

coding process was to categorize the answers to each respondent's question and finally derive the frequency of keywords used concerning the topic. Finally, all the data was collated for analysis.

### ***Reflection on method***

In terms of the one-to-one semi-structured interview, written informed consent has been obtained from participants to ensure that they are informed and safe.<sup>12</sup> In this study, a total of 10 respondents will be given fake names in writing which aims to ensure the privacy protection of the interviewees.<sup>13</sup> Interviewees agreed to give their answers to any questions related to this research. In addition, qualitative research using specific types of interviews can be either a help or a hindrance. Because potential participants will have some idea of the expectations and requirements of the interview, this can be helpful, but it can also affect their behaviour and expression and become a hindrance (Rosalind&Holland, 2013:9)

In order to avoid the disclosure of personal details of the interviewees, the interview data are registered in the appendix table under a false name. Another is that a consent form was signed with the interviewees and will not be used for any other purpose than the analysis of this thesis. In addition, during the process of digital observation, it was found that due to the rapid update of information on the web and the fact that some of the comments did not allow for an analysis of the gender of commenters, this thesis took the period approach to collect comments. In the digital observation analysis part, the comments of the two programs with the highest ratings were selected to collect, emphasizing on the comments with a feminine slant, and the gender of the commentators was roughly determined according to the expression of the words. The last point is that due to the epidemic, it does not have the opportunity to participate in the lives program, so digital observation was used for the analysis, which to some extent may have been less confident, but this was also due to the unavoidable factors of the epidemic.

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<sup>12</sup> See Appendix 10 Consent form

<sup>13</sup> See Appendix 4 Comments

## *Chapter 4*

### *A sense of belonging for female audience engagement with the show of SWMW*

This section will focus on answering the first research question of this thesis: how do Chinese female audiences form their sense of self and female identity through a reality tv show. This part will develop a narrative from the perspective of belonging.

#### *A sense of belonging of online identity*

I've seen comments on the show from bloggers I follow, so I still enjoy reading feedback on the show and then going to talk to people about it.

Hui, 24, master student

I prefer to go and comment under Weibo's account, where I can see other people's views to think about. And, you know, [this] social media platform probably has entire Chinese audiences, and everyone can go and express their opinion about the show.

Gong, 25, police officer

Personally, I prefer to go and watch this show with my family or friends. It makes me happy because I can interact with them, spit or discuss with them.

Chen, 30, business women

In categorizing the content of the 11 interviews, the respondents received information about the video or recommendation about the show through social media platforms. These included tweets of the picture or videos on social media platforms, ad placements or retweets from celebrities' accounts. Couldry (2012:38) has claimed that media institutions engagement with social media is a way for them to remain socially relevant, so it is not surprising that the mainstream media quickly amplify news retweets on social media. Here, Gong, Chen and Hui, they are received the information about reality tv show through the social platform, it is shown that people have now become accustomed to digital platforms as a form of online engagement because it increases the effectiveness of their online participation. Moreover, the analysis of this part needs to emphasize the concept of online identity, which is “possible to think about identity as something one did, performed, engaged with, or represented differently online from offline, as if an online identity was

somewhat fake, virtual, unreal and then we had our real, embodied selves” in this space (Cover,2016:X).

Today's social media platforms allow audiences to search for and access information of interest to them as quickly as possible while interacting and sharing, allowing information to be cascaded. In the discussion, both Chen and Hui preferred to share with their families, and Gong was more inclined to internet comments to see other people's views. In fact, the process of audience participation in digital social platforms is the institution playing the ‘mediator role’ (Edward, 2016:6). For example, the Weibo is the most prominent social platform in China; it has over 550 million active users (frequency of interaction) from 1.4 billion people in China. Weibo, therefore, plays the role of mediator between the audience and the reality tv show, providing virtual space for the audience's thoughts and feelings online. In this space, the audience automatically forms an ‘online identity’ and thus becomes a real self. The terms of real self in this space refers to the representation of the real self in the online world to a greater extent, that is, “the process of setting forth an image we want others to perceive is known as self-representation”.(Wood,2001: 47)

In other words, the audience is, in fact, contributing to their online identity in this space. Just as Hui contributes to online identity when she watches others' comments and comments to other. Conner (2015:x) has shown in his research on digital identity that "Today, identity is always online", and that our lives are very close to the digital communication device. We are always online, and we leave traces of ourselves on the internet and social networking sites, such as browsing pages, tweets, Twitter, and other sites that contribute positively to our identity components. In a sense, it is an alternative identity for the audience, an effective way for others to get to know a person in a short time. Therefore, “identity and its online representation is not something we switch off, move away from, or otherwise demarcate from the everyday practices of selfhood” Conner (2015 :x). As Gordana (2011:17) mentions, “virtual communities are often more real to their users than certain constructed communities from the so-called real reality” (cited in Edward, 2016: 6). Therefore, another concept of the online community will be highlighted that online community is a virtual space where audiences can communicate in a virtual network, which may be disembodied, with its chat

rooms for community participants to engage with each other in conversation (Wood, 2001:115)

I didn't vote for the show, but I prefer to read the comments on the Internet. Because I can see a lot of different opinions on the program from netizens in the comment section, and even some of them are critical. You know, although I hate this kind of behavior, it is unavoidable.

Hua, 32, journalist

I have made comments on Weibo, I remember it was because the last star got a chance to make her debut, but there were many netizens against it, because she was a celebrity I liked very much, so I made comments online to support her.

Mia, 30, business women

On the other hand, the audience prefers online engagement because the social media platforms allow for more 'engagement voice' to be heard about *Sisters Who Make Wave* (SWMW). A specific online identity exists before the audience interacts with the show, and when the audience engages with the same online community, it acts as an identity and creates a sense of belonging. For social platforms, the audience is, in fact, no longer the original audience, but an active participant (Ryan, 2012:151) in an evolving debate where online discussions, content retweets, social networking and peer review sites are all ways in which the audience can build a more productive and meaningful relationship with the show of SWMW. In the interview above, Mia's voting behaviour during the show, as audiences engage with social media platforms, she may consider how the information they convey through the media is reflected in themselves. Hence, an essential aspect of identity is how we present ourselves to others (Wood, 2001:52).

However, online participation is as much a performance as any other 'real life' behaviour, and it also constitutes a sense of self and online identity (Cover, 2015:3). Just as responses from the interviewees, interaction and sharing of the show content are all driven by online identity, they also hope that friends on their social accounts can also learn about the information and opinions they want to share. Similar to what Barker (1999:3) emphasizes, the vital point of audience participation is that online identity is best regarded as a project that we actively participate in, a process toward a certain sense of identity (cited in Cover, 2015:7). Within the community of this online platform, where everyone has the same online

identity to participate in the show actively, it is often more accessible for people to gain a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging naturally brings the show and the audience closer together, as the audience does not exist as a viewer but as a participant in the process of participation.

### *A sense of belonging of empathy*

I don't really talk that much offline. But online, when I see some relevant articles on WeChat, I will share them in my circle of friends, and sometimes I will click "Like" to express my affirmation.

Ying, 26, shop assistant

Um, you know, it's like more like a thing than before, but it's more important, like in front of all women. So like I think for this reason, this show came up, because of this. So there's the show must come up.

Mia, 31, business women

I am really curious to watch this program. I see many friends forwarding and following this program, so I want to watch it. And I found that really, you know, you can see a lot of the problems that you face yourself.

Yuan, 33, manager

Using the interview method has shown that most the audiences will assign an emotion to watch the reality show of SWMW. That emotion comes more or less from the same female identity or from the audience's personal emotional experiences and socially constructed controversies. This is what creates a sense of belonging of empathy among the female audiences. Firstly, in the way, the show uses the age of women to promote itself, which is an important means of engaging the audience. Yuan, Ying, and Mia both mentioned in their interviews that they wanted to see the impression of women in the show and the problems that women in the show face in performances. The show of SWMM captures the commonality of women's issues to create hype and to provoke an emotional response from the female audiences. Female audiences gain a sense of empathy by watching others in the performance, which corresponds to Paula M. Niedenthal et al.'s evidence-based claim about empathy that "imagining other people and events also produces embodied emotions and corresponding feelings events, also produces embodied emotions and corresponding feelings" (cited in McConachie, 2008:66). When watching the show SWMW, female audiences embody the emotions they feel in the actors' faces, bodies, and voices, and

because they feel these emotions, they are more likely to share them with friends or family (McConachie, 2008).

I mean, I think she's a strong woman as the fans. I'm like really moved by that. It's really touching. I can see I can tell that she is trying all her best to make an effort in her life. I have voted my favorite celebrity.

Mia, 30, business women

Hill (2013:117) has mentioned in her audience research on Reality TV Experiences that audiences' senses and performances are an integral part of the reality TV industry and part of the way audiences experience these formats. The show of SWMW fully engages the audience throughout the performance, focusing on the 'sensory abundance' (Hill, 2013). Thus allowing the female audience to identify emotionally with the performer or the show's competition. As Mia expresses above, she witnesses performers struggling and fighting for their work in life without ever thinking of giving up. The facts that "the show of SWMW structure the actions of real people" (Hill, 2013), for example, through the construction of multiple characters of women with different identities (single mother, 'leftover women' and androgynous), narratives, setting and interactions. All the audiences can participate realistically by being invited to live events, voting online or interacting with mobile and social media. This series of actions is designed to create emotional identification with the female audience and fully engage the sense of empathy of the female audience.

But I usually found the comments of netizens very offensive. Some of them couldn't see the hard work of the "sisters", and blindly criticized the characters of some "sisters" they couldn't understand.

Zhan, 26, master student

I like to watch it because the competition is very fierce. So you can see a lot of celebrities, especially female celebrities. They compete with each other, especially when they are already celebrities.

Hua, 32, journalist

In addition, being interesting is also a way to stimulate emotions in the appraisal approach (Silvia, 2005:346). Just as Zhan's disgust about the netizens' offensive comments and Hua's excitement about the competition, there was a stark contrast between the two emotions, but

it was all emotionally invested to some extent. Strictly speaking, “empathy is not an emotion, but it readily leads viewers to emotional engagements” (McConachie, 2008:66). Here we can understand the female audience's participation in the show of SWMW interactions as a manifestation of both ‘sympathy’ and ‘antipathy’ in their expression of emotional identification. A sense of empathy does play a role in this, as the show's portrayal of the performers and the packaging of their performances stimulate the female audience's interest in age issues, thus to lead empathy of the female audience. Each female audience is influenced by culture, past experiences, daily habits and communication, so when they watch the show and put themselves in it and interact with others, they have different interpretations and different emotions about the show (Rosenfeld, 2015:64). This emotion may be agreeable or repulsive, but it is all based on the feelings brought about by the female audience's empathy, contributing to a sense of belonging.

It is also worth noting that the 'tight interactivity' (Hill, 2013:119) format of the show and the audience is an important part of creating a sense of belonging for the female audience. In the show of SWMW, the outcomes of all performers' competitions are voted by the audience, so the show of SWMW heavily relies on audience viewing and participation. The audience needs to vote either live or offline to choose the most popular performer; the competition would not go ahead without the audience voting. So it is a requirement that the audience watches the show and get to know the performers not to waste their precious vote. In other words, the audience's vote is an emotional response to the show's content, which is considered a core element of the broad concept of engagement (Hill, 2013). The audience will only know which performance or performer they prefer after watching the show and talking about the performers, which must be a vote based on emotion. It reinforces the theory that the audience is the participant in a reality show. It also proves that tight interactivity (Hill, 2013) is a key driver for audience engagement through the reality show of the SWMW.

### *A sense of belonging of mental resonance*

You know, I like watching this program very much, I have watched every episode, my favorite celebrity is Zhang Yuqi, I think she is a strong single mother. You can live a wonderful life without marriage.

Xiang, 26, accountant

I didn't vote, but I spent a lot of fragmented time and experience watching a lot of comments, comments, videos and discussion groups about the project on Weibo or Bilibili [a video-sharing platform] video website. I had a discussion with my friends about who your favorite people are, what your dislikes are, very basic issues.

Gong, 25, police officer

Embedded resonance is a conclusion drawn from the embedded engagement of reality TV shows (Hill, 2019:121). This part focuses on thinking about how female audiences will form connections with the show overtime in their daily lives. The first important point is that the show of SWMW captures common social women issues, such as age, appearance and stereotypes. Consequently, the show creates an emotional connection with the female audience in a sensitive topic that makes the female audience fully interested in participating in the show. Then, the show uses 'embedded time' (Hill, 2019) to encapsulate the strong connection between the audience and the show, such as the audience takes time to live experience, the time reflection after the experience and the time devoted to remembering past experiences (Hill, 2019:122). Within the above timeframe, the audience is embedded in the show of SWMW. For example, the audience needs to adjust the time of their lives to the fixed time of the show, or the audience also needs to vote at the time set by the show. When Xiang voted for Zhang Yuqi on the show of SWMW, she had to spend time watching her performance, spending energy reading online comments about Zhang Yuqi, and finally spending time and experience voting for Zhang Yuqi on the online platform. So, the degree of embedded engagement is determined by the audience's commitment to the show's time, accompanied by the audience's emotion that a 'time-related emotion' (Weiner, 1986:153). Therefore, this embedded engagement is an emotion built up with the practice, a sense of belonging generated by a long period of empathy.

Another point is that Lazarus (1991:104), in his research on emotions states that everyone experiences certain emotions, anger, anxiety or guilt, over and over again, mainly because emotions change and flow over time and on occasions. However, the relationship between the show of SWMW and the emotions of the female audience can be seen as a process

where the emotion is a momentary shift. The audience's emotions shift with the length of the show and the content of the show, whether it is laughter or tears, attesting to the time and effort that the female audience puts into the show and their support as participants. Thus, this means that audience immersion participation is not solely determined by time but by the strength and composition of the inner emotional bond (Hill, 2019:122). Although it has to be admitted here that this is inextricably linked to the 'tight interactivity' created between the show of SWMW and the audience, it is the show's ability to capture a sense of empathy that allows the 'tight interactivity' to be produced. The 'tight interactivity' combined with the prolonged audience engagement with the show that makes the audience pay the cost of time and emotion promoted a sense of belonging, which comes from embedded resonance.

In fact, I prefer to watch gossip in the show, you know, the disputes between the female stars and the contradictions in life in the show. I think this is very interesting more attracting for me.

Cai, 25, government worker

Another thing is to pay special attention to their behind-the-scenes stories in the show and feel that they are working hard, that will be powerful for me and Very encouraged.

Ying, 26, shop assistant

There is another point that this part would like to emphasize here is that the censorship system and policies for a reality tv show in China are not very friendly. There are very few sensitive social issues that can be touched on in terms of content and choice of topics. For example, the issue of the scale of women's clothing and the lyrics in the show. As Katz (2013:135) even mentions, do not underestimate the effectiveness of using social media to communicate with your audience, nor the challenges of using social media to communicate with your audience. So the show's bravery in picking the controversial topic of women's age for its production serves as a side note to its sincere motives. While there is no denying the commercial value of the show, at the same time, many female audiences have learned a lot of new perceptions and ideas about women in the show. It seems like the show's treatment of female gossip and life conflicts captivated Cai's viewing; the show's behind-the-scenes stories and the performers' behind-the-scenes training inspired Ying to live. More than

anything else, it will be about encouraging women to face the challenges of society in a positive way. At the same time, it reflects on women's identity in society, which resonates because both the show and women's identity are in a restricted environment in society to some extent. For example, the constraints that women face in the workplace, in marriage, and even in the family all these restrictions make the female audiences feel resonant.. Just like the show's brutal competition system, the different demands placed on the performers are all pressures that the female performers in the show have to face and endure. When a female audience sees the show, 'public value is established', as the audience is at the heart of everything the media does (Richardson, 2013:105).

## *Chapter 5*

### *Chancing the female stereotype by the media representation*

The second section will answer research question 2 from the perspective of Chinese female stereotypes and media representations, focusing on how Chinese female audiences correspond to social stereotypes of women from three perspectives: female representations, celebrity effects and stereotypes.

#### *The representation of women impression*

The program still has a set of standards that are very stereotyped about women. For example, women should be white and thin. Even though you are already an elder sister riding the wind and waves, and the image of a mature woman, they will still expect to say that you are still "young and beautiful" with a thick waist.

Zhou, 25, teacher

Following the visual representation theory mentioned in the previous literature review, women beauty is the most direct representation in the show of SWMW. Sentilles (2012:42), in studying female beauty, had stated that before the 20th century, when the media did not develop so rapidly, people understood themselves through religious beliefs and self-control rather than through outward appearance. In an interview with Zhou, she still believes that the show is still based on the stereotype of youth as beauty and that women are still stuck in the definition of white skin and beauty. However, as the media grew in influence, the focus shifted from inner character and service to society to outer beauty. Girls are beginning to understand personal identity, including body shape and size, and maintaining and controlling their appearance. Reality TV show as a media representation, therefore, has a large degree of influence on the behaviour and thinking of female audiences, and it can serve to convey stereotypical, even patriarchal and hegemonic values about women and femininity (Wei, 2000:6). The stereotype of female beauty is still present in the show's visual presentation, such as white as the women's beauty standard, vegan as a beauty standard, skinny as women body beauty, smooth skin, and looks like a teen is considered beauty. All of the above are beauty standards that are communicated to the audiences through the show

of SWMW. In fact, the show of SWMW, in a way, re-emphasizes the beauty that history and society have defined for women. In the stereotypical texts of Chinese women, the female role is primarily young, beautiful and domestic. This is a male-centric view of women's appearance, characteristics, and value in life (Wei, 2000:25) and an aesthetic of female beauty from a male perspective; we can still vaguely sense the aesthetic of traditional female stereotypes in the show of SWMW.

Through interviews and research ,on the show of SWMW, it was found that women beauty's stress, on the other hand, comes from husband body pressure and make up pressure. All the performers and crews of the show are made up to perform on stage, conveying the perceived beauty of the women in the show to the audience. Due to the need to appear on stage, performers must not be overly fat, and a skinny body is one of the criteria used to select performers. This is due to the fact that the social media, fashion, advertising and a host of other media representations have made thinness the most desirable appearance, which has led to the public's desire to be slim (Jackson, 2016:176). According to an anthropologist, Peggy Reeves Sanday, “Body and society are mirrors of each other, each mirror reflecting the results of the conscious desires and repressed desires of the other; through body image, human beings are not only self-conscious but also socially conscious.”(cited by Whitehead, 2001) The show of SWMW looks like a mirror in which the standards of socially conscious women's beauty can be seen.

In one thing, you hear that female stars over 30 are still in the elective program and will work very hard to show themselves. This is a very inspiring place.

Zhan, 26, master student

I really like Zhang Yuqi as a single mother, I didn't know her before, her real personality in the show, which is good because I think she is very attractive. She's like a very strong mother figure.

Xiang, 26, accountant

I guess the purpose of this show was to encourage women to be especially the aged women. I guess the oldest celebrity in this show was over 50 years old. Right? Uh, she is 52 years old.

Hua, 32, journalist

One of the most controversial changes in the stereotype of women in the show must be age and marriage. All the performers are women over the age of 30, but they have different identities including, 'leftover women', single mothers, working women and housewives. Most of these identities are defined by age and marriage. As Hua mentioned above, the oldest female performer in the show is 52 years old, and the youngest is 31 years old. In a survey of Chinese media, Xu (2000: 178) shows that the media have significantly increased the audience's modern awareness and sensitivity to the show that addresses women's modernity. The show of SWMW uses women's age 30 as a boundary; in other words, there is a clear difference in women's aesthetics and judgment before 30 and after 30. Traditionally in China, the age of 30 is the beginning of a woman's journey into married life, and the role she plays in society changes, from girl to woman, from daughter to wife, and even from wife to mother. So the number 30 means independence and responsibility for a woman's age, but it also means that she will be challenged with more difficulties that women need to face, such as the compromise of age, still dreaming at 52, workplace values questioned, etc. Age and marriage exist as struggles for women, but the show uses the power of the media and the diversity of female characters in the performers' identities to convey to the audience including, like do not only focus on beauty but the talent. Both Zhan and Xiang said they were inspired by the performers' efforts while watching the show and that the performers wanted the audience to appreciate my talent rather than my appearance, whether I was a single mother or 52 years old. Thus, marriage is no longer a necessity, and beautiful women not only own physical beauty. Ying (2000: 169) once proposed in media research of China's TV that "homogenous viewing fields are those in which viewers are one another's equals." The female audience is an equal presence in a homogeneous market that resonates and belongs to women's issues, and this is what the show contributes to women's identity and women's age. At least, to a certain extent, it can serve as a model and inspiration for women dealing with stereotypes in society.

### ***The promotion of celebrity "Flow"***

Ning Jing, she is between 40-50 years old. In fact, in this show, she embodies a point of breaking the traditional scrutiny of women. She already has a certain qualifications in the entertainment industry (in her industry), and she has a certain weight in society (whether in behavior or speech).

Hui, 24, master student

You see, Zhang Yuqi in the program, she is already a very famous movie star, she has a large number of fans, which is not very fair to other people in the competition in my opinion

Zhan, 26, master student

Another major attraction of the show is that all the performers (contestants on the show) are celebrities from the arts or entertainment industry, including singers, dancers and actors. It means the celebrities themselves bring their own 'flow' and even a huge fan group. In other words, before the show has even started, it has already lent its influence to the celebrities for publicity and has a regular audience fan base. It is undoubtedly adding to the show's effect, and some of these participating celebrities are growing with the audience as moral support. That means some of the audience still have memories of some celebrities who participated in the show SWMW. According to D.L. Schacter and others, "when a specific experience in long-term memory influences a person's present action without that person's awareness, implicit memory is operating" (cited in McConachie, 2008:36). Hence, when the show invites performers who are already celebrity status to compete, the show's communication of female identity becomes more compelling to an audience with memory because memories are representative - not of the actual images in mind, but the information already stored in the brain, like the 'memories' stored on a computer's hard drive (McConachie, 2008).

I like Jinsha very much, although she is an actress, her works accompany me to grow up, she can appear in the public again, I am very moved. You know what? I'm looking forward to it. I still remember her youthful image in those days.

Hua, 32, journalist,

Another way we can understand with the promotion of celebrities to the show of SWMW is that by inviting them on board, the show adds more emotional input from the audience. The emotional input engagement is where part of the audience is watching and participating in the show because of the celebrity's popularity, such as voting for their favourite celebrity

and helping the celebrity to become popular again. There is a part of the audience with a fondness for the stars that existed before the show existed. So, the process of selecting celebrity performers is also a process in which the audience is emotionally invested. Respondent Hua voted for celebrity Jin Sha because of the memories she had of liking Jin Sha when Hua was a teenager, and it was this memory that made Hua choose to continue to support the celebrity in the show. However, by the time the show of SWMW is broadcast, it has evoked a memory of the celebrity's past, which is an important factor in encouraging the audience to participate in the show. Here it remains undeniable that the show also uses the audience's emotional engagement to cash through the show, that 'selling the performance' and 'buying the reputation' (Corner, 2003:87). Nevertheless, in the mutual benefit of the celebrity and the show, the interactive effect between the celebrity and the audience is also facilitated through social media (Hunter, 2009), which further allows the feminine theme and female identity created by the show to be spread and promoted on a large scale in China. As Hunter's (2009:157) experiment demonstrates, perceptions of emotional engagement and credibility can be manipulated. Perceived emotional engagement and credibility appear to be higher when a celebrity is behind the communication (Hunter, 2009).

You see, Yi Nengjing in the show, she feels that she is a bit older and seniority in the show, and may be regarded as a representative in the industry. She prefers to instruct others to do things or teach others how to do things. But I personally don't like this feeling very much.

Mia, 30, business women

People who have become known through outstanding professional achievements or through the creation of an artistic medium but are also able to influence public consciousness (Hunter, 2009). In this way, it seems, by using the 'flow' of the celebrities to promote the show of SWMW, the reach of the show can be further increased, and the relative spread of the image of women also increased. In particular, the older the performers in the show means they have a longer fixed audience group in society before the show. Mia's endorsement of Ning Jing (the oldest celebrity) in the program is a testament to the success of female representation through the show of SWMW. It is confirmed that the show of

SWMW is fully inoculated with Kavka's (2012:166) research on third-generation reality TV. Kavka (2012) indicates that “celebrity formats constitute the core of third-generation reality TV”. That means the show of SWMW is not about fabricating a celebrity out of ‘nothing’; it is about adding to the fame that is already there. Meanwhile, the exposure of a celebrity received from the show of SWMW increases the celebrity value of the performer, which is proportional to the show's popularity and communication impact. The infusion of celebrities into the show of SWMW and the producer creates a relationship of mutual benefit for each other—also known as a win-win situation— the celebrities increase the value of the women themselves through the show, and the show increases its social value, female value and commercial value through the celebrities.

### ***The stereotype of women in the reality tv show: from weakness to power***

This show should tell all women that no matter how old you are, no matter what kind of appearance you have, you are still yourself and you need to have confidence in yourself. You still have your own stage to express yourself. I think this is the meaning of this drama.

Hua, 32, journalist

You heard that female celebrities over the age of 30 are still in the elective program and will work very hard and hard to show themselves. This is a very inspiring place.

Cai, 25, government worker

A total of 30 female celebrities participated in the show SWMW. Each celebrity comes from different professions in the entertainment industry and is on age average over 30 years old. For Chinese women, 30 is a boundary in an unfriendly environment, signifying a move from naivety to maturity, from dream to reality. However, after researching the show of SWMW, it was found that the show communicated to the female audiences through media representatives how women should fight to breakthrough and how to dilute traditional stereotypes. The show of SWMW provides an ideal platform for mature women over 30 to present themselves, such as respondent Cai expressed hard-working women impression. In the show, the performers communicate rising female self-worth through their performances and efforts. For example, respondent Mai believes that diverse female performers in the show promote women needing to be themselves or perform rap music, encouraging them to

define their own identities. The show has captured the mindset of many female audiences because it shows women in a way that contradicts the traditional stereotypes of women, but this is exactly what the audience needs, which confirms Stuart Hall's theory of 'mental representation' (Hall, 1997). Another point worth adding is the female image self-presentation on the digital platform, both in terms of the performers' presentation on top of the digital platform through the show or the audience's engagement with it through the digital platform identity recognition and self-representation. Both the audience and the performer can be involved in self-(re)presentation, creating a sense of self and making women more aware of the stereotypes in Chinese society.

You know, China is not very friendly to female celebrities over 30, because that means you are not young and your resources and commercial value may be not as good as young girls.

Mia, 30, business women

Another significant element here is the age stereotype. It is the first issue that the show is trying to address and deliver to change the stereotype of women. As Mia said in her interview, the value of a woman's age determines to some extent the value of her business. Starting with women's age as a promotional gimmick evokes the female audience's self-awareness that being 30 can also mean having the opportunity to self-constructed discourse both in society and daily life. In the show of SWMW, female celebrities against age and stereotypes in various ways, such as choosing 18-year-old schoolgirl outfits for their outfits, pink teenage girl styles for their makeup, or 52-year-old actors taking on the challenge of singing and dancing in a girl-band. From the celebrity 'sisters' who are challenged to perform against their age on the show, the 'sisters' have earned the name of "reverse-age" from the show. That is why the show of SWMW captures the sensitivity of women to the issue of '30 is boundary' and analyses the mindset of the female audience to encourage their participation. Dobson (2015: 76) says that in wanting to express female self-representation, it is important to consider the ways in which young women are involved, which highlights the possibilities for women to express their desires and self-presentation through social media but aware of marginalization. Therefore, 30 as the age boundary for the Chinese women is also an important factor for the show to consider to female audiences' perception

and a significant psychological condition that can resonate with women. When the show was broadcast, and the female audience watched it, a new sense of women's self-awareness from the show is formed, increasing the desire of women to directly reconstruct the meaning of women's status and rights in society they are won daily life. It is beneficial for women to break through the limitations of age and be brave enough to express themselves and have a sense of self.

I really like the final speech of Zhang Yuqi in the show, that I am a single mother and have experienced two failed marriages, but I want to say to my children that I am not only beautiful, but I can also “ride the waves”.

Mia, 30, business woman

Last but not least, the power of new female values shown in the show is also an essential factor in contesting stereotypes of women. From Mia's favourite celebrity speech (ride the waves) of Zhang Yuqi on the show found that most of the time, the value of women is mentioned as a sensitive issue, traditionally judged based on marriage, family and age, like ‘single mothers’, ‘leftover women’, or ‘sub-marriage women’, etc, and in the show of SWMW, such controversial issues are presented in an expanded manner and then appeared publicly. However, there are many voices of opposition on the internet who are concerned that allowing women of the above status to be overexposed will affect the growth of values among the youth in society and consider it an overexposure detrimental to the development of society. Moreover, the show also receives criticism<sup>14</sup> from the internet for women who wear sexy clothes, but as stated in Kingston’s self-representational project, the female body is a metaphor for gender rather than a natural and singular source of gender (cited in Gilmore, 1994:173).

The natural side of the female gender that we can find in the show is that each of the performers struggles to be themselves and not be gender-defined. Moreover, the performers in the show SWMW are also Chinese celebrities, using their performances and efforts to convey to the female audiences that women have their priceless treasures. Thus, the value of women is not only gathered in marriage and age, but every woman in the show is

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<sup>14</sup> See Appendix 4 :Digital observation comments of SWMW office account in Weibo

encouraging a self-representation. For instance, the clips of video and attitudes of the performers in the daily dance practice demonstrate that women's values can also come from women's courage and personal effort. The performance part of the show, which requires teamwork to finish, also shows that the value of women can also come from their solidarity; the performers who are actors by profession in the show are challenging themselves with complex dance techniques, and although they are not professionals, they are confidently completing the typical tableau to prove their confidence. This also demonstrates a female power through representing – and promoting – the new values of women's views, women's security, and women's potential power; all these are considered the actual values in defining who you are and your value in society.

## *Chapter 6*

### *The play within the play: A Performance perspective*

This part of the analysis focuses on the third research question of this thesis on why the reality show can help female audiences rethink women's identity. The section will use performance perspective to illustrate the connection between the female audiences and the show.

#### *Self-reflexive in performance*

So it can feel a bit like male scrutiny, using a patriarchal perspective to gauge whether women of these ages are attractive enough. Haiwaiji returns to this traditional set of scrutiny of women's attractiveness stemming from their appearance.

Hui, 24, master student

I think the show may still not have escaped some of the aesthetics defined by the outside world.

Ying, 26, shop assistant

The power of the first performance perspective is to stimulate self-reflexivity among the female audiences through SWMW. Beus (2009: 21), in a research on performance, mentions that the essence of theatre is a drama with illusion and reality between the characters and the spectator/reader. The development of reality TV can also be traced back to the origins of drama. The show SWMW is more entertaining and popular than traditional forms of theatre, but both are "illusion" and "reality" theatre. It is the collision of illusion and reality that provokes the female audiences to think more. This blurring of boundaries and some of the ironies of female identity in the show force female audiences to look at the reality of female identity and female stereotypes on a different level and to think about the reality of the show of SWMW's internal and external work. The audience's self-reflexive mood also reflects a rejection of stereotypical attitudes towards the traditional impression of women (Beus, 2009:17). For example, respondent Hui rejects definitions of femininity from patriarchal

perspectives and male aesthetic, and another shop assistant, Ying's discussion of the fact that women have not escaped the definition of femininity from Chinese society. In terms of the show's structure, the dramatic format also incorporates different levels of reality, such as the idea that women are still inseparable from the beauty of makeup or that cosmetic surgery is still considered a gourmet female pursuit of beauty. However, as most general female audiences are impossible to accomplish this either due to economic or real-life constraints, this somewhat blends the reality and illusion of theatre while maintaining a reflexive gesture through this design, as there is both the 'reality' and the 'illusion' of the audience within the larger illusion of theatre (Beus, 2009). In a way, the result of the show of SWMW is a highly self-aware product that allows its female audience to bask in the pleasure of such a world, precisely because of its conscious fictional nature, allowing the female audience to fictionalize themselves on stage to break out of their chains (Ravizza, 2019:29).

I hope my favorite celebrity can go all the way to the end, the final, because I really like her, although she has never married at 40 years old, I think this is very cool.

Xiang, 26, accountant

Moreover, in order to make the dramatic effects of SWMW more effective in the long term, all those involved in the process (both performers and staff) must acknowledge the current needs and desires of their audiences, including the past weight of generic expectation (Ravizza, 2019: 105). Therefore, the show can promote a process of self-reflexivity for female audiences, which is a positive influence among the female group in society. Because the structure and elements of some performances in the show of SWMW are always dependent on the environment in which they occur, the performers can play as much as they want in the show that they do not need to consider the real world outside the show. But this does not mean that all the female audiences can reach the same environment as the performers. Female audiences can use the show's performances as a self-reflexive guide in dealing with real-life stereotypes of women, or the limitations of female identities, such as Xiang thinks in the interview it was cool to female performers on the show who were not married at 40-year-old, which is also a beneficial effect helping female audiences to think about their female identity in everyday life.

I think celebrities are more attractive to me. Like I said, all the celebrities are very famous, very famous when I was growing up. The aspect of their lives on the show made me see a whole new look.

Mia, 30, business women

I myself am already 30 years old. My friends and parents around me are also pushing me to get married. When I see the program, then, I think why should get married.

Mia, 30, business women

There is a double performance, that of the performer on stage and that of the audience in daily life. Skeggs (2019:49) suggests that the media 'normalise' their power by building value distribution models as they extend their influence into everyday life. It means that the impact of the show of SWMW on the female audiences is due to its visual and behavioural elements and mental and attitudinal. Mia talked in the interview about how watching the show made her think about how her parents' push for her to get married and caused her to think about why she necessarily needed marriage in her life. Because the primary attention towards a reality TV show is on the performativity that breaks down and plays out over time, this has a degree of inspiration Skeggs (2019). The audiences often play their own and social roles in everyday life, such as parents, celebrities, entrepreneurs, etc. Audiences all live under different roles and correspond to different behaviours and understandings. Therefore, all the show segments where the celebrities (i.e., the performers) discuss themselves are significant, as the audience knows that their main mode of exposure to this type of performance is through the extensive judgmental descriptions of performance and personality (Skeggs, 2019). It seems to correspond to Nick Couldry's (2006) discussion on the new media landscape of reality television, where "the most puzzling aspect" is that "the media offers the notion of a 'central' space where people can disclose aspects of their lives that they might not otherwise disclose to anyone". where people can disclose aspects of their lives that they might not otherwise disclose to anyone (cited in Skeggs, 2019). The audience sees aspects of life that are not readily publicized, and in the space of this clip in the show, the audience sees a side of everyday life to feel the characters in their own lives. There are undoubted narrows the distance between the show of SWMW and the female audiences. For example, the single mothers opening up about the pressure of different roles that "mother" and "workplace"; the older 'leftover women' openly said that they received pressure from

different roles of “daughter” and “housewife”. If female audiences leave behind the performance space provided by the show and live as ordinary women in society, they are challenged by the pressure that comes with such roles. It is the illumination of self-awareness that the performance brings to the female audiences.

Another point worth noting is that the show of SWMW involves the disjointed structure of a dramatic narrative and likes to use the concepts of the ‘real’ and the ‘auto’ (Meerzon, 2012: 297). It is clear from the numerous clips of the performers' real lives that the show is deliberately trying to emphasize the concept of authenticity. Such as, in the show of SWMW, the performer’s onstage performance is played first, followed by the behind-the-scene struggling practice clips in the background. This disjointed narrative structure aims to highlight the authenticity of the characters. This form demands the instances of literary and performative meta-discourse and thus the self-reflexivity of the form itself, which introverted gaze directly at the work’s structure and meaning (Meerzon, 2012: 297).

### *The emotion of real and fiction in performance*

But at the same time, I'm going to take a little bit of a critical view and hope that it does a better job, actually, of breaking down the very stereotypical female physical appearance.

Yuan, 33, manager

In my opinion, it is still a group of older women or female stars gathered together to do the show with a set of standards that young girls choose to do, which I think does not properly explore the real strength of those older female stars.

Hui, 24, master student

The show of SWMW plays a more or less 'authentic' and 'real' to help the female audiences think about their identity as women in everyday life. Factual statements are important for how female audiences engage with popular factual entertainment (Hill, 2019: 59). Although reality TV was generally described as entertainment at the beginning of the 21st century, it does not mean that audiences thought everything was fictional. Many of the elements of the reality show have a solid dramatic dimension, and one of them ironically reflects some of the realities of society, such as the program mentioned by Hui does not promote age as

defining women, but it still reveals the quest for youth in the celebrities' dress code, the stereotyping of women for the female audiences and the flirtation with women's age in the show or the helplessness of women in marriage. Hill (2019:139) says that “the ‘real’ in reality television has always been tricky”. For some critics and academics, the real signal is a deception, but it is a staging of reality that plays with the boundaries of fact and drama (Hill, 20019). Female audiences want to see the characters in the show play themselves and exaggerate themselves for the show - “a combination of 'sometimes happening like this and ‘sometimes made up’” (Hill, 2015:60). The female audiences want to get a sense of resonance from the show’s role within the same female identity issues, the same stereotypical female situations, and even the same emotional experiences, whether successful or unsuccessful. For the female audiences, when they find themselves in the role of the performance from the show, the show has a meaning for the female audiences at that moment. Through the show, the female audiences can get the women’s impression that the female figure is hard-working, optimistic and self-worthy. That the performers are very familiar with their female identity and the difficulties they have to overcome professionally and socially. It is how the characters portrayed in the show helping the female audiences to think about their everyday identity.

For example, Yi Nengjing, she wants others to say, ‘Oh, I can't see. I can't see that you are over 50’. You are so young, in China you can say they have frozen the age, so I think all the women they want can be praised by the audience.

Hua, 32, journalist

The performance of different types of female identities in the show of SWMW incorporates elements of dramatic practice, which will produce different types of female audiences, constructing audience subjectivity in different ways. Moreover, the performers in the show can make audiences affected by the subjectivity and agency embedded in these dramas (Escolme, 2005:155). When the performers perform on stage is their understanding of the reality of female identity, the meaning of this moment is created by the show for audiences, rather than being erased in the character’s description (Escolme, 2005). In the interview, Hua sensed that the women in the show who were struggling and working hard were trying to get praise and recognition from the audience. Indeed, the women in the show are seen by

the female audiences as hard-working, positive and self-worthy, and the performers are very familiar with their female identity and the difficulties they have to overcome professionally and socially. In the show, the performers create two roles, one from their theatrical “performing the real” and one from their ‘real’ “true selves”, both of which help the female audiences to think about their everyday female identity. So when they enter the role of a performer, it is a performance with subjectivity because it is accompanied by the performer's self-understanding of the role. Thus, Thus, when female audiences watch what they perceive to be authentic performances, they transmit a viewing culture that embraces positive values, and the authentic pro-social side of the show enriches their lives in some way (Hill, 2015:60).

I can see that...um, all of these female celebrities, they are really hardworking to be recognized or to be approved by all of these audiences. So I think that's the the part that recently resonates to me.

Gong, 25, police officer

I really like Zhang Yuqi, she is really trying hard in the performance, with her influence completely cannot have hard in the show, but she still did it.

Mia, 30, business women

Richardson (2013: 103) argues that in audience engagement with media, compared with news (drama, entertainment and sport), emotionally engaging performances are considered central exploration how to address better the sense of belonging and the sense of belonging through regulation. Understanding the show of SWMW is that emotionally engaging performances are more likely to help female audiences think about their everyday female identities. The show recognizes that female audiences can be 'active' in various ways in the show of SWMW they choose to perform and positions them as recipients, sometimes explicit address, of media performances. The female audiences are emotionally engaged by watching the performances in the show to which the performers perform with genuine emotion. In fact, it is an imagined emotionally engaged performance- just as Gong said in the interview that I also want to be accepted by others, which includes the emotional participation of a dual female identity from both the participant and the performer. Hill (2005: 57) explains that “performance becomes a powerful framing device for judging reality TV’s claims to the real”. In this context, it can be understood whether the female

audiences can perceive the performance in the show as one in which there is genuine emotion.

Obviously, in terms of the resonance between the show and the female audience, the performances in the show have to some extent, awakened the female audience to the rising awareness and power of female identity. Zhang Yuqi's hard-working image as a single mother is admirable to respondent Mia as a businesswoman who is unafraid to talk and attack her identity, demonstrating the power of a strong woman. The effect of the show of SWMW is realistic for the female audiences, as the age, appearance, stereotypes, 'leftover women' and marriage issues are all real experiences for the female celebrities performers. Some of these factual elements present in the reality tv show SWMW and the modified factual elements are borrowed from the documentary genre and incorporated into popular factual television. From another view to see, this emotional involvement is incorporated into the show to make the female audience more active when watching SWMW. By watching the show SWMW, these female audiences allow themselves to compare with less fortunate people, which perhaps provides a way to control their emotion, at least in the sense that female audiences of the show can get away to explain their ideal female identity from the performance (Helsel, 2019:558). Therefore, the show's authentic performances are necessary for female audiences, as audiences are responsible for trusting the authenticity of reality TV, especially female audiences and sensitive topics for women. So that is why the show of SWMW has chosen to set up each celebrity reality format to capture the stories of everyday people in a relevant way to female audiences, which is undoubtedly a way for women to think about female identity issues. It is indeed a valuable way for women to think about female identity (Hill, 2005:58).

### ***The microcosm of the real-life***

But if the program itself added more to show the unique points of older women, such as their own experience, life perspective. They can even be made into a segment with some conversations or the output of ideas, which will be better and more attractive to the audience.

Another meaning of play within the play from the performance perspective is the realization of a space through performance, the space that tends towards the 'real' and the 'ideal', which is used to provide the audience with a space for subjective reflection reflexive. Corner (2011:86) indicates that the idea of subjective is the 'space of the self' both at conscious and unconscious levels, and the various factors contributing to the self's constitution and agency within the world has become steadily more important. We can understand this space in the middle between reality and the ideal as a space of self. In this space of self, the show of SWMW's performance is used by female audiences to think about female identity subjectively. In this space, the female audience will subjectively reflect on female identity through the performance of the show of SWMW. The respondent of Jing wanted to add more about performer experience and life perspective because she wanted to know more about the story behind the performance; this meant that Jing focused more on the emotion of the performance from the show. Of course, it depends on how the performances in the show of SWMW touch the emotion of female audiences. Gaylord (1983) mentions that "the performance takes place on at least two levels of 'reality' simultaneously and within at least two frames including the inner frame and outer frame" (cited in Bennett, 1997: 228). Concerning the show of SWMW studied here, double consciousness frames are all concerned that the outer frame is the female audience. The performer and inner frame is the performance space, which also involves the space between the 'real' and 'ideal'.

For older female stars, which is not something they are very good at, it is harder to get a female star in her 50s to dance and sing on stage like a young girl with the same energy. I think they can give play to their points in the years and time to bring them precipitation and accumulation, more inclined to the sublimation of thought.

Cai, 25, government worker

In fact, it creates additional appearance anxiety for the female audience, which means, when I'm 30 and I get wrinkles, I'm not beautiful anymore, but the female celebrities, they're still beautiful.

Ying, 26, shop assistant

When the female audiences watch the characters' performances in the show SWMW, the audiences feel a socially realistic reaction to the role of women. The show of SWMW is like a real-life microcosm of society, and the situations faced by the characters in it are, to some extent, a reflection of the controversies faced by women in real society. Real and actual things can happen to characters in interactive plays of the show and female audience, insofar as participants can in some cases change the characters' destinies (White, 2013:73). For example, online and offline audience voting can determine whether a performer can continue to perform and be exposed to the show or whether the audience can trust the performer to access better industry resources after the show. It means that the audience's subjective judgment determines whether a performer stays or leaves in the show. According to the data collected on the gender of the audience from the show of SWMW, 97%<sup>15</sup> of the show's audiences are women, and where the female audiences make subjective judgements about the performances, it comes from a space of reflection between 'real' and 'ideal'. It depends on how the performance allows the female audience to reflect on issues of female identity or female stereotypes. Respondent Ying still feels the anxiety of age after watching the show and still wants to look younger through skincare, and respondent Cai thinks about what kind of experience she should have accumulated after the age of 30. Thus, the space of the self between 'real' and 'ideal' can help female audiences to think about their everyday identity.

I think it's because they really want the audience to see who they are, so that's the part that I can relate to, even if they're famous, they're famous. But work hard. That's probably similar to a lot of us. It's a little hard.

Hua, 32, journalist

But these older sisters proved to the audience the beauty of women's maturity and their excellent professionalism.

Zhan, 26, master student

The last point of this part inspired from the performance perspective is that those female audiences as co-creators exist in SWMW. Here it can be understood as the co-creation of the show and the audience, in the process of secondary creation, always terms as participation,

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<sup>15</sup> See Appendix 3 Data collection and description

collaboration, and transformation (Heim, 2016:148). When audiences show unconscious laughter, sighs, discuss (online and offline), comment on the performance, they are participate in the production of the show. Because their participation has the potential to change the experience of the show, in other words, what the audiences do is their behaviour, their words, their expressions and their emotions in the show of SWMW.; it brings itself into being. It means that the performers and the female audiences create a space for the show of SWMW together, which detaches the female audiences from the experience of the show, severing the relationship between the stage and the audience, similar to creating a scene (Heim, 2016:163). “Scenes are a performance in themselves, but one that turns the attention and often the gaze of the audience from the stage to the auditorium” (Heim, 2016: 163). As Goffman (1959: 210) argues, “a new scene is created by such disruptions” (cited in Heim, 2016). The female audiences ‘perform’ themselves in scenarios created by themselves and the performers, and if I were a performer, how would I against the pressures of age? Furthermore, how should female deal with the 30 boundaries of age, or how can it change the stereotype of women? That is exactly like “drawing from a limited repertoire of actions, the contemporary audience plays their role of the audience during the actors’ performance” (Heim, 2016:20).

## *Chapter 7*

### *Conclusion*

This study has explored the viewing and negotiation of women's stereotypes by female audiences through a reality TV show in the Chinese context and has further shown how these audiences respond to female identity and female representation issues. The thesis has found that the show of SWMW can arouse discussion in society because the program is considered by these female audiences breaking the traditional stereotypes of Chinese women to a certain extent. The thesis has found that the reason why the show of SWMW can arouse discussion in society is that the program is considered by these female audiences breaking the traditional stereotypes of Chinese women to a certain extent. It has also encouraged and guided the female audiences in terms of self-awareness in positioning themselves in the current society. The specific findings regarding each research question will be summarized below.

#### *How does the Chinese women audience form their sense of self and female identity through the reality tv show?*

The thesis has uncovered female identity through a detailed exploration of the female audiences' engagement reflected in the sense of self and female identity of the show of SWMW. To be more precise, the sense of female identity and self are formed by the level of engagement in the show of SWMW, which is used as a core value of the show to create a 'true self' image (Stuart Hall, 1992 cited in Stevenson, 2003: 26) of women among the Chinese female audiences. The reality TV show, SWMW, seems natural to be just a show for women to demonstrate their talent and performance, yet it reveals that Chinese female audiences form a sense of self and female identity by watching and engaging with the show.

In addition, it was found that online identity is a necessary factor in the formation of self, sensing female identity for Chinese female audiences through the show SWMW. During the interviews, all interviewees used social media platforms to watch and learn the show and

participated and interacted with each other through comments and information posted on these digital platforms. More specifically, the female audiences were engaged through online comments, joining the show's specially created discussion community, voting and retweeting messages. Firstly, it was noticed that the social media platform is already immersed in the everyday lives of these audiences. Social media platforms are seen as a product of interpersonal communication, where all participants can contribute and search for knowledge (Weeet, 2003: 227). When the female audiences engage with the show SWMW through social media platforms, whether positively or negatively, they form an online identity for themselves in such a process.

It is also worth noting that this online identity is reflected in the audience 'engagement voice'. The digital platform contains the voices of all female participants, where audiences can speak for and or against the show SWMW and give a voice to those with the same identity. During the digital engagement process, female audiences comment or retweet content about the show that they recognize and follow, not only limited to the performer's performances but also reflecting the different perspectives from which female audiences view their local female identity depending on the content they are engaging with.

Secondly, it was found that a sense of empathy-based identity belonging was also an essential factor influencing female audience engagement with the show SWMW and the formation of their self-identity. Empathy can be the source of emotion for the female audience for this reality TV show. The female-centric theme of the show already creates an emotional connection with the female audiences in terms of identity recognition, so the behaviour of watching and reacting for female audiences is an emotional investment in the show SWMW. In other words, the level of female engagement in the show is a measure of how emotionally invested women are in the show. The focus of the show SWMW is the age boundary of 30, which is a resonant point for women's age. It is interesting since 30 years of age serves as a guide for women's participation in the program, thus stimulating these audiences desiring to watch it. Age as 'a system of communication' resonates with female audiences in terms of their emotional engagement with the program (Barthes, 1972: 107). After establishing, an emotional connection, the show also creates a 'tight interactivity' (Hill, 2013:119) with these female audiences. It is reflected in the fact that the show's format is

determined by the audience, meaning that the audience's vote depends on how long the performer can stay on the show.

Thirdly, the last significant finding was found from the embedded engagement that is time-based resonances. What kinds of resonances come from the different life experiences, emotional experiences working experience and levels of knowledge. In systematic terms of resonances, it represents the different stereotypical roles of women in society, such as 'leftover women', single mother, housewife and career women. Female audiences have the same sense of belonging of female identity to the diverse female characters in the program. The way of embedded engagement expands women's emotion as time played out and passes, with airtime, voting time, discussion time (offline and online), time of behind-the-scenes footage and time of celebrities sharing experiences, all of which are fixed spending of time taken out from the audience's lives. Beyond this, embedded resonance comes from the reflections of the female audience after watching the show, from the resonance and similarity to a particular experience in the show.

***To what extent these Chinese female audiences deal with stereotypes about women in society?***

According to the Confucian tenets, women assumed the submissive and unobtrusive roles of daughter, wife and mother (Yu-ning, 1994: 29). It has to be said that the Confucian type of woman impression was broken entirely in the show of SWMW. This part would like to highlight how visual representation of the program has changed the aesthetic awareness of the studied female audiences. It is easy to see from the performances in the show SWMW that white, vegan skinny, smooth skin, and looks teen are all aesthetic criteria as female performers in the program. It means that women are increasingly focused on looking attractive, with white skin and thin body, being pursued as goals for appearance and beauty. More than anything else, it was found that the female celebrity representatives on the show had escaped the traditional Confucian female role of self-sacrifice, devotion, chastity and obedience as celebrated female virtues and responsibilities (Yu-ning, 1994). Self-awareness and self-presentation become more important to these women, it is reflected in the fact that

they do not only focus on physical beauty but also talent, and marriage is no longer necessary. Women should not be stuck in the stereotypical aesthetics that society have given.

Moreover, age and marriage are no longer used as criteria for evaluating women in the show. The fact that single mothers and older women or career women are invited as performers in the show proves that society is gradually becoming more tolerant of women to a certain extent. Particularly in the over-30s group of women, there are more opportunities to choose not just responsibilities to marriage and family but also more emphasis on the self's value as an independent woman.

This thesis has provided a nuanced study on how the female audiences actively construct a sense of female identity when interacting with this TV program. It has initially examined the role of female celebrity representation in reality television, arguing that celebrity representatives on the show could act as role exemplary for female audiences and could designate an image of women in the public view for female audiences. It since that “celebrity culture has made being visible beyond our immediate of friends and family a singular and desirable mark of success” (Douglas, 2019: 264). This study also analyses the emotional connection between celebrities and female audiences. Because all of the celebrity performers in the show were over the age of 30, have been on the road for many years, they have a certain amount of public social influence. Inviting celebrities who already have a certain level of seniority will evoke the emotional memory of former fans or audiences. Besides, the voting channel created by the show is seen as more of an emotional investment in the celebrity by the female audiences (Hunter, 2009: 157).

It is important to note here that celebrities already have a particular audience and influence before joining the show, which will bring ‘flow’ and popularity to the show to a certain extent. There are 30 celebrity performers in the program, proving that the show had a strong audience even before it started. So in the show's run, it was all about using the 'flow' and social influence of celebrities to spread a new image of women, which helped to move female audiences away from traditional stereotypes. The celebrities use their influence and

entertainment power to guide the consciousness of the female audiences, which means using their value to create social value.

It is crucial to note that the combination of healthy confidence and female self-awareness is what audiences should take away from the program to change the stereotype of women. Female audiences can find the real side of women in the play, which is that each actor is trying to be herself, rather than being defined by her gender. The show features celebrity performers' stage shows and clips behind each performance, focusing on self-practice and the direction of one's advancement. It means that women's stereotypes have to be contested from the women's self-awareness and focus on self-value. What kinds of value comes from a sense of independent consciousness that is out of family and marriage. Having a skill allows women to have more options in society, and an independent sense of self can free them from the limitation of marriage and age. These are also the changing power of the show for the female audiences, as the presence of female celebrities in the public view is a form of self-identification of such an independent woman.

Furthermore, through interviews, this research has found another significant change. The program has reduced the sensitivity of women's age. 30 is no longer the boundary of female identity and stereotype but as a sign for women to re-recognize their female identity and question stereotypes. The performers in the show against the pressures of age in various ways, still choosing youthful and beautiful outfits and still taking on the challenge of dancing with a girls group at the age of 53. The program uses action to convey a sense of spiritual power that women do not need to be afraid to challenge the controversies and attacks that come with traditional female stereotypes. To be specific, the program provides essential guidance on the value of women and guides the female audiences on how to break away from the stereotypical definition of women's identity.

***How can the reality TV show help female audiences thinking about women's identity in their everyday life? Why is it important?***

The last part of the study on female identity specifically analyzes the theoretical perspective of performance. The female audiences are shown as a receiver and 'participants' in the process of watching this reality show. It means that the show SWMW makes sense to women when they find themselves performing in the show. The first point to emphasize is that thinking about the show SWMW from a performance perspective provokes self-reflection in the female audiences' mind. The show's performances and the reality of the controversies faced by female audiences have inspired women to think more about their identities and stereotypes. Reality TV presents an intermediate, both a form of work and a form of 'social monitoring' (Andrejevic, 2004: 53). It provides a neat segue into an era of interactive media, in which the TV we watch will watch us back, as well as encourage self-expression of women (Andrejevic, 2004). Another point worth noting is that the performances in the show SWMW are dependent on the platform and the context of the program, whereas the female audiences rely on the everyday environment, and there is a space between the virtual and the real, which is a space for self-reflection for the female audiences. The show SWMW has a double performance, namely the stage performance of the performer and the live performance of the audience. This performance is not only visual and behavioural, but more importantly, psychological and attitudinal.

The second aspect this research has found is that emotionally engaged performances are considered central to exploring how to address better the sense of belonging and belonging through performance (Richardson, 2013: 103). The emotional performance of the analyzed audiences watching the performers comes from the statement of the fact; that is, the truth is emphasized in the fiction. Through the show, the female audiences can get the women's impression that the female figure is hard-working, cheerful and self-worthy, and that the performers are very familiar with their female identity and the difficulties they have to overcome professionally and socially. It is how the characters portrayed in the show helping the female audiences to think about their everyday identity.

More clearly, the performance of different types of female identities in the show constructs the subjectivity of the female audiences. It is because performers create two roles, one from their theatrical 'performance the real' and one from their authentic 'true selves' (Escolme, 2005: 155). The female audiences participate in the two roles created by the performers to

self-reflect on the space between reality and the ideal. Therefore, female audiences make subjective judgements about the performance; it comes from a space of reflection between 'real' and 'ideal'. It depends on how the performance allows the female audience to reflect on issues of female identity or female stereotypes. Thus, the space of the self between 'real' and 'ideal' can help female audiences to think about their everyday identity.

Last but not least, the social reflection of women's roles can be felt through the audience's self-performance in the program. From the comments made by the female audiences both in the online and offline environment, it was found that although the show emphasizes reality in a degree of fiction (for example, the 53-year-old woman on stage dressed like an 18-year-old is there to perform and would instead face a massive amount of judgment in real life), the emotions built with the female audiences in the process are genuine. Mainly, in engaging female audiences through emotions, they are engaged as co-creators and not just receivers of information. These female audiences are both performers and viewers.

Finally, there are still different degrees of limitations in the process of research. The thesis topic mainly pays attention to the field of female audience research to discover the female identity and female stereotype issues through reality TV shows, which is no analysis of the psychological processes involved in other types of audience. Second, due to the epidemic period, it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews with all respondents, and it was not possible to capture more of the female audience's emotions and expressions through live chats, which is a limitation to the findings. Moreover, ethnographic research is unable to apply to this project because the epidemic resulted in the research not having the opportunity to conduct fieldwork, live engagement research, and interviews, which is also a limitation for this thesis. In fact, the stereotype of the Chinese woman can be felt through the study of reality TV shows as its changes from dependence on men to an independent themselves. In future research about the reality tv show, if the project can get closer to the producers and productions of the program, and combined with in-depth interviews and ethnographic methods, the study of female identity and female stereotypes will be more profound and concrete.

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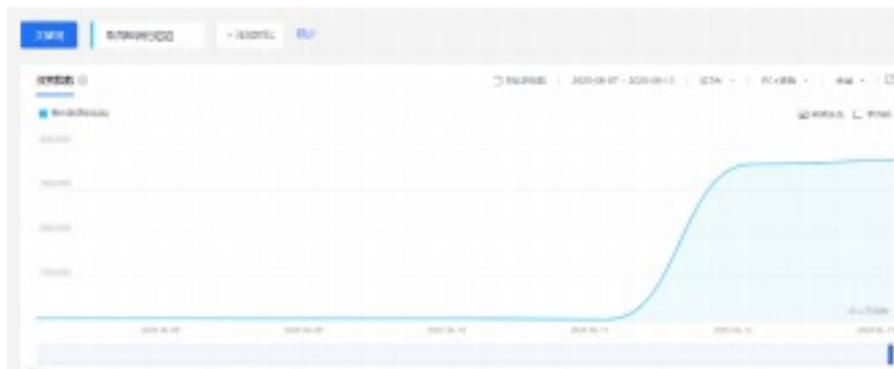
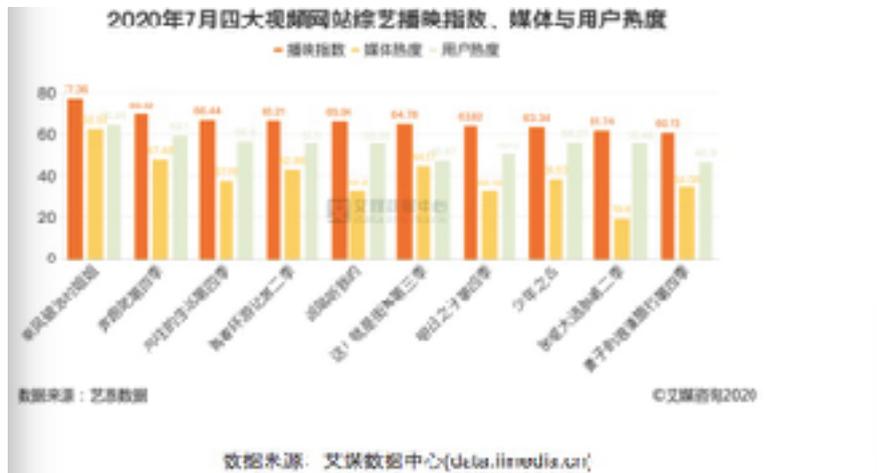
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## Appendix

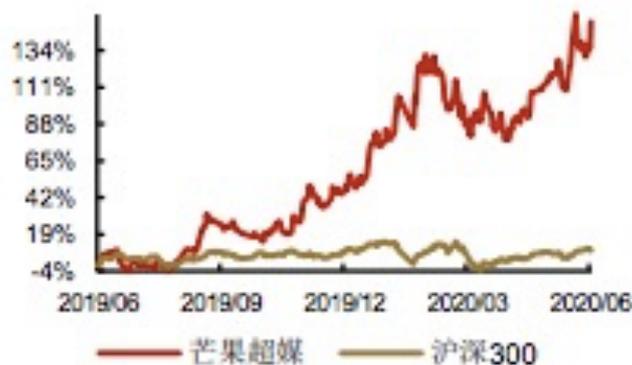
### Thesis Timetable Process

Time	Process	Content
1th Jan—10th Jan	Prepare thesis requirement	Understanding writing requirements and research scope
11th Jan	Supervision 1	Discuss case study and confirm audience studies
12th Jan—20th Jan	Collection material	Search female audience and identity material
1th Feb—16th Feb	Concept structure	Confirm concept: engagement, female stereotype and performance
17th Feb	Supervision 2	Discussion literature review structure and confirm method—interview and digital observation
18th Feb—18th Feb	Collection literature material and theory	Following the three concept and related to the reality tv theory
1th Mar—17th Mar	Writing the literature	female identity, female audience engagement, performance of self, self-representation
18th Mar	Supervision 3	Confirm literature review content and method structure
19th Mar—26th Mar	Continue the literature	Four parts: female audience engagement, female stereotype in and media representation, contested women identity, performance of self
29th Mar—5th Apr	Writing methodology part	On-to-one semi interview and digital observation
6th Apr-31th Apr	Writing the analysis part	A sense of belonging, female stereotype and representation, and performance
12th Apr	Supervision 4	Confirm analysis content and revise literature revise
1th May—7th May	Introduction and concluision	Summarize the finding and data collection
10th May	Supervision 4	Review analysis part problem and format
8th May—17th May	Revise thesis all parts	Analysis, literature review, method and intro+conclusion

**Appendix 1 The graphic of the data ‘Sisters Who Make Waves’ in Chinese media industry about reality tv show.**



资料来源：百度指数、新时代证券研究所



## Appendix 2 A synopsis of *Sisters Who Make Waves*

The reality TV show of *Sisters Who Make Waves* is the first reality tv show for totally women group in television. All the performers in the show are mature Chinese women over the age of 30, with the youngest age being 30 and the oldest being 60. The *Sisters who make waves* is a celebrity female group competition reality TV genre show launched by China's Mango TV in 2020. The show invites 30 debutant female artists over 30 years old from different careers in the cultural industry. Through closed training and competition, seven female celebrities will be selected by national vote to form a new female group to debut on the commercial stage. In the show, the female celebrities are grouped together to perform on stage and are ranked by the judges and the audience, with the last group being eliminated each time.

Program features: The struggle of the 30 sisters in “*Sisters Who Make Waves*” continues Mango TV's "Born Young" message. Through the program, viewers can see the real state of the sisters, their attitude towards marriage and career, so that no matter what stage of life they are in, they can set out to pursue their dreams and realize their values with confidence, upward mobility and hard work, just like the sisters.



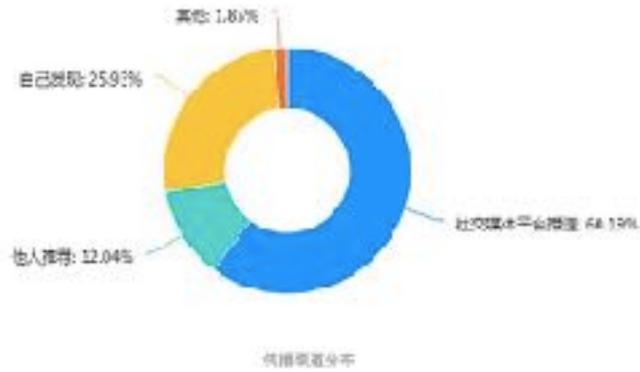
### Appendix 3 Data collection and description



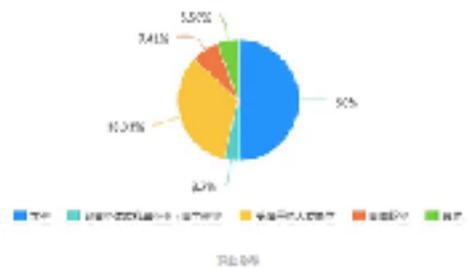
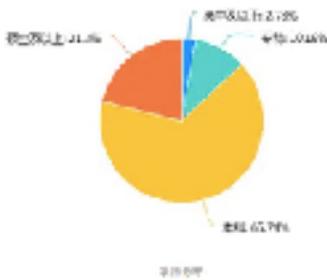
The picture mainly shows the Weibo activity in June to July 2020 (the time when the show was broadcast in China), with 15.33 billion reads quantity about the show and 9.567 million Weibo discussion frequency. The figures on the right show a total of 1.82 billion views during the show's run. This is an unassailable position in terms of reality TV ratings in China.



The picture represents the market value of Mango TV, the platform on which the show is broadcast. The high popularity of the show has driven the stock of MANGO TV up by 6.82%, with the market value of the platform approaching 130 billion RMB as of July 2020, as can be seen from the graphic flow, which has been trending upwards. This means that the shows are also outperforming other domestic genres in terms of commercial value.

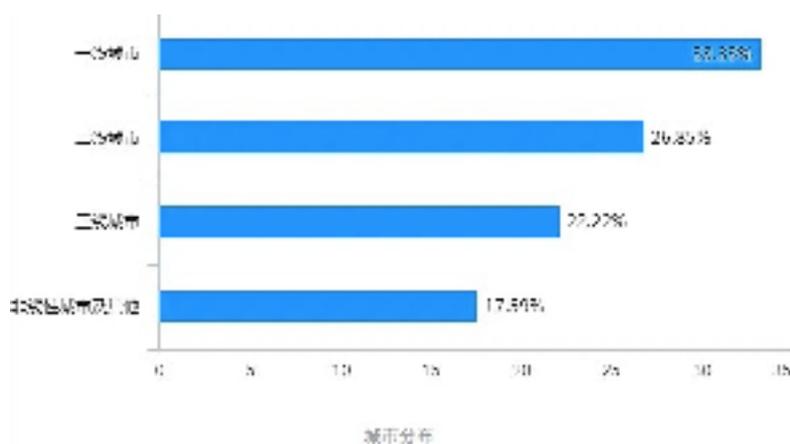
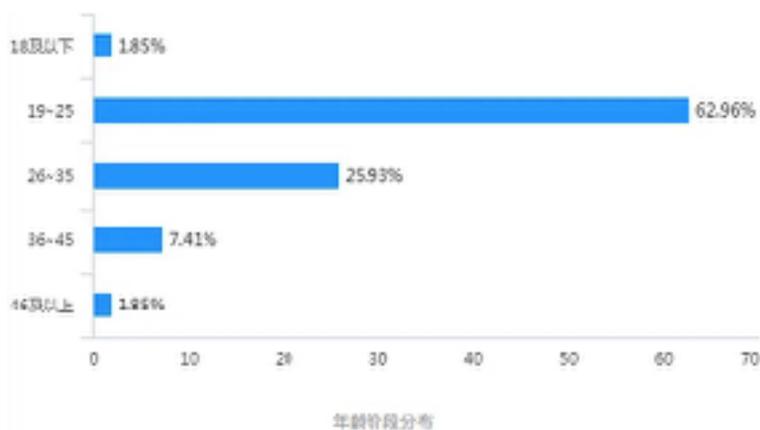
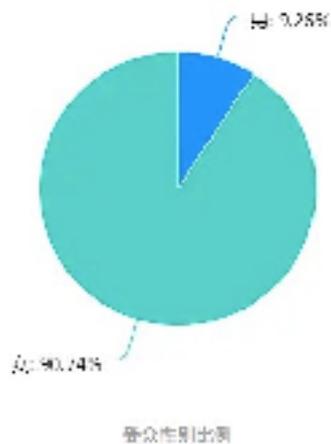


In the era of big data explosion and the rapid spread of online channels, these in themselves will bring a certain amount of heat to the show, and "The Sister Who Make Waves" itself comes with several heat-seeking bodies. The chart shows that the audience is mostly provided through the following channels: 60.19% of social media push, 25.93% of self-discovery and 12.04% of others' recommendation, which can show that the influence of online communication is already a mainstream way, and the public can spread it in a snowballing way through media such as Weibo, Douban and Zhihu, whether it is recommended by social media or self-discovery, or pushed by others. Although it seems to be a kind of "zero publicity", the era of big data has laid a good foundation for the promotion of "Sister Who Make Waves".

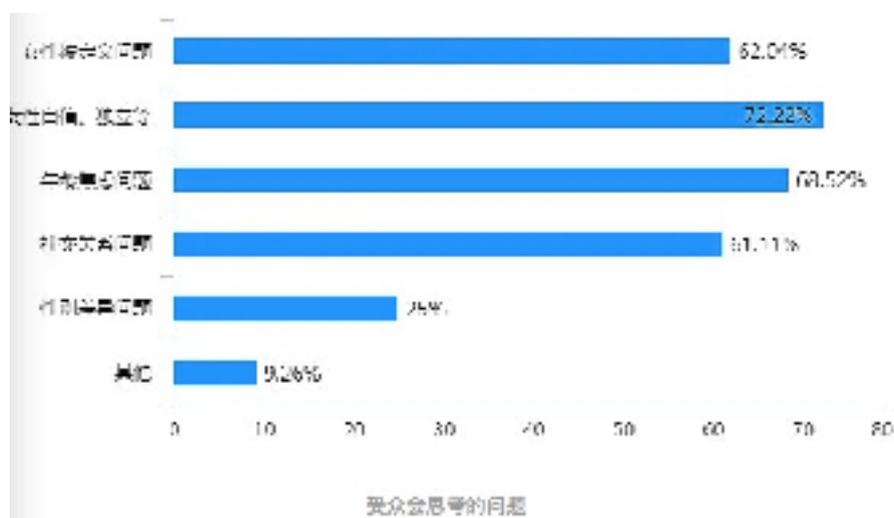


In terms of education, 87.04% are undergraduates and above, 10.19% are specialists, and 2.78% are high school students and below, thus showing that the number of audiences is also positively correlated with the level of knowledge and literacy. The distribution in terms of occupation corresponds to education and age, with 50% of students, 33.33% of those employed by other people or units, and 13.89% of other occupations. From the above analysis, we can understand that the audience of the program is mainly concentrated in big cities and is closely linked to their own literacy. On the one hand, being in a big city makes life stressful, and on the other hand, the intellectual literacy of the audience is relatively

high. What is particularly noteworthy is that a very large proportion of the audience is female, which is closely related to the positioning of the program itself and the situation faced by women as a group in the general environment.



This set of data focuses on the age, gender, location, education and occupation of the audience, which gives an indication of the program's main audience groups. The first of these figures shows that the female audience is 90.74% and the male audience is 9.26%. This means that the female audience is the main target group for the program. In terms of geographical distribution, among them, 33.33% are in first-tier cities, 26.85% in second-tier cities, 22.22% in third-tier cities and 17.59% in non-linear cities and others, with the proportion decreasing in order as the city division level decreases, it can be seen that the number of audiences for this variety show is positively correlated with the level of cities.



This picture contains six surveys on women's issues, namely the issue of women being defined, women's confidence, independence etc., age anxiety, social relations, gender differences and other aspects. The data shows that female confidence and independence are the most discussed and mentioned issues, followed by age anxiety, which means that the program is to some extent exacerbating women's age tensions. In third place, the issue of women being defined was also the most frequently discussed, followed closely by women's social relationships, i.e. how to get along with people. The issue of gender differences appeared less important in comparison.

All data collected above are from the Douban analysis platform: <https://movie.douban.com/review/12686143/>

## Appendix 4 Digital observation comments of SWMW office account in Weibo

Due to the information in the comment area of Weibo is updated very quickly, in order to select representative comments, the thesis will focus on digital observations in the two programs with the highest ratings, and select representative comments for analysis on the topic of the thesis.



The above picture shows the official Weibo account of *Sisters Who Make Waves*, with 1096466 followers and 3376 post moments, the main focus of the official account is to promote the show. Most of the content is feedback and information about the show, with a dedicated blog for the audience to discuss.



Gathering the strength of women and paying tribute to the spirit of women. Looking forward to *Sisters who make waves* next show and to Penelope Chow. Would like to see more challenges for women.



Throughout the four months of the show, I have seen a different kind of woman. The Na Ying who can dance, the Na Ying who can sing, and also see a Na Ying who can move people and feel the unconquerable impetus in her. She dared to fight and dared to do it, filling in all the different difficult dance types in the show, even though she is a singer. She is admired for her ability to explore her infinite possibilities.



- Just in time, tears in your eyes, you run forward, we love you forever.

-The future of each woman is visible in the program.

-Na Ying has always shone on stage, believing in herself and in the future.

-We look forward to performing after the group's debut and happy debut.



田菠萝virginia

2-8 14:40 来自iPhone客户端

+关注

今天看《乘风破浪的姐姐》非常感动，感动于女性的勇敢和力量

结合最近网上关于女性力量更多的讨论，才感觉到女性在三十岁以前被社会、文化所裹挟压抑，蜷缩着去适配社会的标准

而三十岁以后的女性，开始独立、觉醒，越来越有自我，伸展开来才越来越有了力量

就如姐姐所说“我们不需要完美，我们只需要做自己”

女性开始真正的做自己，才真正开始拥有girlpower

分享到



Jane\_A

2-2 来自iPhone客户端

+关注

刷微博刷到乘风破浪的姐姐，然后就看到这种评论，里面谁是肉眼可见的人婚姻幸福，评价女性的标准与十几二十年前并未改变，感觉自己下意识也会被带入，去分析，用婚姻幸福与否作为评价女性幸福的重要标准这种观念真是根深蒂固🤔。

转发

评论

赞

Watching the show today was very moving, moved by the bravery and strength of women.

Combined with the recent online discussions about women's power, I felt that women were suppressed by society and culture before they turned thirty, huddling to fit society's standards.

Women after 30, on the other hand, are becoming independent, awakening, becoming more and more themselves, stretching out and becoming more and more powerful. As the program shows, we don't have a thick waist to be perfect, we just need to be ourselves. When women start to be true to themselves, they really start to have women power.

I saw the wave sister on TV, and then I saw a lot of this kind of comments, inside who is fleshly people marital happiness, evaluation of women's standards and more than a decade and two decades ago did not change, it feels like their own consciousness will also be brought into, self-study analysis, with marital happiness or not as an important criterion for evaluating women's happiness this concept is really deep-rooted.108



F. 阿咪咪咪

20-7-20 来自Redmi 10X 4G版

#万茜谈女性价值#万茜读网友评论哭了#@万茜 读网友夸夸信哽咽大哭，说开节目之前就希望给大家传达一种讯号，想让女性知道三十岁的时候可以怎么样。年轻的姑娘们会知道未来会怎样，‘每个舞台都让我激动，让我忘记了他们的身份。忘掉了他们原本是主持人、演员这些身份，三十岁的女人不该被定义，也可... 全文



娱乐明星报道 娱乐谈古 · 6万次观看

Wan Xi cried reading comments from netizens. Read the netizen's complimentary comments choking back tears, saying that before coming to the show she wanted to send a signal to everyone and wanted to let women know what can happen when they turn thirty. The young girls will know for how. Every stage performance excites and thrills me and makes me forget who I am. Thirty shouldn't be defined, it should be more about the female self.



吃榴莲不吐榴莲皮5555

20-10-18 17:43 来自HUAWEI nova 3

+关注

最近有大量的文章在讨论三十的岁数，尤其是乘风破浪的姐姐打出三十而励，三十而骊这个口号之后，直接将“三十”及之后的女性这个年龄段推向话题热度顶峰！

😂😂😂不能理解，因为本身一直三十这个岁数只是人生一个普通的坎，反倒是媒体老提“三十”才会让观众反射性觉得过了三十之后的女性怎么怎么样了。可能本来大家觉得三十没什么，现在一看到三十，就emmm.....



Recently, there have been a lot of articles discussing the age of 30, especially after the broadcast of the show Sister Waves, where the slogan "Thirty and Inspiring, Thirty and Shine" was used by the sisters, which directly pushed the topic of 30 and the age of women after that to the top of the heap. It is incomprehensible that the media and the show have made this issue a bigger issue than it is because the age of 30 itself is a bump in life. Nowadays, when you see the number 30, you feel anxious about your age.

< 返回 叮当妈咪- +关注 ...

叮当妈咪- 3 10 11:10 来自微博 weibo.com 已编辑 +关注

#致她，致自己#

在中文语境里，对于女性而言，30岁是一个颇为可怕的字眼，它往往意味着女性逐渐失去青春魅力，很难再以貌胜人。

正因如此，当《乘风破浪的姐姐》将聚光灯对准30岁以上女性艺人，展现她们的外在美和内在沉淀，以全新的视角审视和关注30岁女性时，引发了大众的激烈讨论。

我一直在思考，作为一个30+母亲，当我成为一个【全职妈妈】的角色，不仅要面对社会有色眼镜的压力，还要承担孩子的养育、平衡父亲的空位。我该如何做得更好？

所以我虽然全职在家，但也没有放弃自我的学习与进步。

不管是20岁还是30岁，我都在为自己执掌画笔，自信有节，自尊有度，自律有为，我始终坚持让自己发光发亮~

转发 88 评论 572

赞 3万



问歌性炸毛

乘风破浪，踏浪不惧，没有人能够定义你，爱你@万苦

共1条回复 >

第57楼 4-10 17:25

71 113



Zz0020

孟佳来给姐姐颁奖啦

共1条回复 >

In the Chinese context, 30 is a rather scary word for women, it often means that women catching rape lose their youthful charm and find it difficult to win with their looks. It is for this reason that when the Long Sister program gathers the spotlight on female artists over 30 to showcase their outer and sedate beauty. When it looked at and focused on women in their 30s with a fresh perspective, it sparked a heated debate among the public. I have been thinking about how, as a mother aged 30+, when I become a full-time mother role, I not only have to face different voices questioning me in society, but also take on the education of my children and balance the space of fatherhood. How else can I do better? Whether I am in my 20s or 30s, I am taking control of my life for myself, with measured confidence, self-esteem to maintain, self-discipline and independence, and I always insist on allowing myself to shine and be socially competent.

Stand on the wind and tread the waves without fear. No one can define you.

The women's performances in the show were fantastic and I look forward to the next season soon.

**Appendix 5 Coding table of the online comments**

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Sub-categories</b>	<b>Descriptive codes (examples)</b>
Weibo Comments	Female identity	define women	the definition should leaves age and marriage 65 ; do not focus an my beauty but my talent 60; not judge balance between the work and life 66; nothing define myself 43; female celebrity as representation exemplary role 70 ;
		female self value	Women have self value 66; need be my self 70; the level of independence and confidence determines the degree of value 45 ; work and economics as a sense of safety 55;

		Self-awareness	Providing a space for reflexive 30; value representation from women self 53 ; the show gives emotion and mental encourage for female 67; the empathy of female as motivation for engagement with the show 57; there is a resonance of female identity in society 41, engagement as dialogue between female and show22; a sense of belonging as value for women 31;
	Stereotype	women beauty	make up as women's symbol; age is not standard for beauty; the beauty cosmetic operation is popular among women;
		age and marriage	30 is mature beauty attractive and responsibilities 11; marriage is not necessary in women's life 11, but 30 is boundary 70; female wants to escape from definition from society 34;

	women impression diverse	women should be work together 14; always face family vs society 67; the divers of female identity(leftover women, single mother, iron lady and so on) remains controversy 38; women is brave and mature 33; divorce means more mature and independence 41; women is hark working and life free 11; women have positive attitude face issue 23; the show can help women reshape women impression 47;
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## Appendix 6 The demographics of the interviewees and Weibo comments

Name	Age	Gender	Occupation	City
Hui	24	Female	Master Student	Lund
Jing	24	Female	Master Student	Lund
Ying	26	Female	Shop assistant	Denmark
Gong	25	Female	Police	Shenzhen
Zhan	26	Female	Master Student	Lund
Mia	30	Female	Business Women	Qingdao
Hua	32	Female	Journalist	Guangzhou
Cai	25	Female	Government workers	Chaoyang
Zhou	25	Female	Teacher	Tianjin
Xiang	26	Female	Account	Beijing
Yuan	33	Female	Manager	Shanghai

## **Appendix 7 Interview guide**

- The Reality tv show of “Sisters who make waves”
- all the interviewees are female audiences of this show
- consent form signature

### **1. General profile and viewing practice**

- How did you know about this show or how did you discover this show?
- How did you access the media in general, or how did you watch the show?
- What is your motivation to watch the show?
- Did you prefer to watch the show by yourself or together with others or family? and why?

### **2.Engagement with the show**

- What is your experience as a female audience in watching the show in general?
- Which plot/section of the show attract you the most?
- Could you tell me about some parts you like and dislike about this show?
- Who is your favorite celebrity in the show? and why?
- Did you interact with this show, such as voting for the performer you like or some other interactive ways? What motivate you to do such interactions?
- If you do not vote or directly build interaction on the show, what do you think about the audiences’ voting of this program?
- Did you participate in the discussion of this program after you watched this show, both in offline and online platforms? If so, can you elaborate more on the ways you do that?
- If not, why?
- Do you think this program is useful for women? If so, in what ways?

### **3.Opinion**

- What is your opinion to any related news or online comments about this show that you see/read?

-What do you think about the ways this show treat female participants? (For example, about the rules of competition and other aspects).

-What is your opinion on the ways this show deal with the stereotypes of Chinese women?

-Which part of the show make you produce a sense of resonance as part of Chinese women? Why so?

## Appendix 8 A full transcript of one-to-one semi-structured interviews

Interviewee Name: HUI

Age: 24-years-old

Occupation: Master student in Sweden

*All answers are the original words in the interviewee's recording.*

### 1. General profile and viewing practice

—How did you know about this show or how did you discover this show?

At first I knew that this show was seen on Weibo, reposted by people who followed, and a topic discussed on Weibo. I see articles or video clips shared by others in WeChat Moments. In short, it was indirectly contacted. Channel: digital media-Weibo.

—How did you access the media in general, or how did you watch the show?

I usually use some social platforms to participate in some discussions on the Internet. Individuals prefer to watch programs on the network platform, because it is very convenient, you can also see other people's comments, you can share information. Then this show is a fragmentary short film watched on Weibo. I saw it on Weibo in fragmentary time. I usually follow some bloggers and see that the top few on the discussion list are all about this show.

—What is your motivation to watch the show?

First of all, this show is very popular. Friends and classmates around me are chatting about this show. People around me are talking about it, which arouses my curiosity. Everyone is talking about it, what kind of show it is. I would like to take a look at things that have not kept up with the trend. The circles that follow Weibo are some bloggers who pay attention to women's identity and women's rights. So the topic of this show is very consistent, it is a show related to women. The people I pay attention to are very close to the area of interest, so I have the motivation to want to see it.

—Did you prefer to watch the show by yourself or together with others or family? and why?

I prefer to watched with friends and family. Because when watching such a show, I can discuss the plot with my friends, and listen to other people's views on the female image of this show and the views of this show. It is very interesting to communicate with you, and

you can exchange opinions. This is why I watch these clips on Weibo, because I can see the comments of netizens on Weibo. Seeing the comments of the bloggers I follow on this show, I still like to see everyone's feedback on this show, and then go to communicate with everyone. digital interaction or face-to-face interaction.

## **2.Engagement with the show**

### **- What is your experience as a female audience in watching the show in general?**

In my opinion, the first and most basic experience of such a female program is its age. In terms of domestic environment, 30 years old is an older group of women. First of all it's an age-related innovation, it's something special to me, and then it's something that appeals to me. In the first place, you hear that female stars over the age of 30 are still working very hard to show themselves in elective shows, which is a very encouraging place. You feel like there's a certain amount of room for this show to break the age limit. At the same time, as a female audience, I am a little dissatisfied. I think when I watch those clips, I find that in fact, his creation of women and the selection mechanism of the program are very much based on the standard of female stereotype. For example, women should be white and thin. Even though you are the older sister who is riding the waves and the image of a mature woman, they will still expect to say that you are still "young and beautiful" with a big waist, instead of saying what your career, your life, your life experience is like to dig into your feminine maturity.I think there's a certain emphasis on the appearance part of the show.

### **- Which plot/section of the show attract you the most?**

What attracts me most is that a group of female artists who have already gained fame and qualifications in China come to this program together for the same goal of making their debut as a group. What impresses me is the friendship and cooperation among female artists reflected in the program. When they work together for a goal. Especially for the slightly older female stars, who have experienced a lot of things in the entertainment circle, it is a very touching place to encourage each other. The part that shows solidarity, female friendship.

### **- Could you tell me about some parts you like and dislike about this show?**

What I don't like is that for the part that emphasizes the appearance of women, although the age-innovative and female-oriented reality show that attracts me, it still does not jump out

of the traditional examination of the appearance and body of women. It may also have something to do with the reality show of the talent show, or pull a group of women down on the stage for others to judge and choose, so you will feel the taste of some men's scrutiny, and use a patriarchal perspective to judge whether these women are attractive enough. It is still necessary to return to the traditional inspection standard that the charm of women originates from appearance. Women let others choose and pick.

- [Who is your favorite celebrity in the show? and why?](#)

Ning Jing, the first one is that she reached the end of the show and got a good ranking, the first place. One is that her age in the show is considered to be older, older women, she has been 48 years old. In fact, in this show, she embodied a point of breaking the traditional scrutiny of women. She already has a certain qualifications in the entertainment industry (in her industry), and she has a certain weight in society (whether in behavior or speech), so she did not choose to participate in this show for traffic and gain more attention participate. She is more focused on self-exhibition and exploration of her own breakthroughs, and has more of herself as the main component, rather than listening to the program arrangement in order to earn more attention. Secondly, she did not obey the program group to show a female image that meets the public's aesthetic standards, but showed a certain degree of autonomy, and she would be more free in the program. She will feel that I want to do this to highlight my beauty, not to cater to the show and the audience. I really like this kind of female initiative in tranquility

- [Did you interact with this show, such as voting for the performer you like or some other interactive ways ? What motivate you to do such interactions?](#)

I did not directly vote for this show, but I watched or liked their clips on Weibo and participated in some social media platform comments. Then there may be reposts on Weibo that support my favorite players. I will like it. My main way of interacting with the show is on Weibo. I will also repost some clips of this show that I changed first in my account so that my friends can also see it. In the process of chatting with friends, I will talk about this program and give my own evaluation. My motivation should be because I have always paid close attention to the topic of women in China, and my own research and interests have always been a series of issues of Chinese women, including the development of feminism through the Internet on Weibo. I think the show itself has actually promoted people's increasing attention to the status quo of women's survival in China or the difficulties faced by Chinese women to a certain extent. So for me, this program is very related to my interests. The reason why I discuss with others is because I want to communicate with each other and change some concepts. There will be some

critical attitudes during the chat. This show is very innovative and very good for women, and it has aroused everyone's attention to the female community, especially the issue of age restrictions. But at the same time, I will bring a little critical point of view, hoping that it can do better, in fact, it can do better in this part of breaking the very single female appearance and body. In fact, in my opinion, this show is still gathering a group of older women or female stars to do this show with a set of standards for young girls to choose from. I think this is actually not a good way to dig out those older. The real strength of female stars lies. You may not have any advantage in physical strength compared with young people, but if the program itself adds more unique points to show older women, such as your own experience and views on life. They can even be made into a link with some conversations or output points, which will be better and more attractive to the audience.

- If you do not vote or directly build interaction on the show, what do you think about the audiences' voting of this program?

I may not be very familiar with the operation of the voting part of this show, but I think this mechanism is a need for this show. The program needs the audience as a very important part of participation to create a sense of elimination and victory for the program. So audience voting is a very important part. But if I personally look at it, I actually don't really care about the audience voting. Maybe this can really determine whether the celebrities in the show can continue to perform in this show and how often they go abroad, but I'm watching this show. People who like it will not be affected by the popular vote. If you like her, you like her, no matter how many votes she has and how popular she is. But to a certain extent, it may affect my thinking and reflection on the format of the show or the standards of audience preferences. Because I would assume that these audiences' votes are very important to the results of the competition, whether their songs are good, and their dances are good, which is not very consistent with my original intention of watching this show. My original intention of watching this show is to give more, more flexible and tolerant images of women, but the audience's vote may still be related to the show's original singing and dancing competition system, so I may still be critical. Think about these votes and reflect on them.

This part of voting can reflect the standard of public aesthetics to a certain extent. Without considering fairness, I think it can reflect the public's preference and affection for these older female artists. What kind of image do you like.

-Did you participate in the discussion of this program after you watched this show, both in offline and online platforms ? If so, can you elaborate more on the ways you do that?

- If not, why?

I don't actually talk a lot offline. But online, I see some related articles on WeChat and share them in my circle of friends, and sometimes I click like to express my affirmation. On Weibo, you will read some comments under the official account of the show, and you will like the comments you agree with. Mainly online, because the online discussion method makes me feel more free and flexible, both in terms of time and space. Secondly, there are more viewers in cyberspace. I can see a lot of comments from different viewpoints and can accept more opinions about social issues reflected in this show.

-Do you think this program is useful for women? If so, in what ways?

I think it is useful to a certain extent. For example, the useful point lies in returning to innovation. This point is enough to receive a large number of audiences, because there is no similar reality show before. Very innovative program. The first purely female elective program for women over 30 years old in China. Its own program format is an innovation. Another is that it gives a good example of the domestic issue of the age of female celebrities. Chinese women's age is a very sensitive word. You may traditionally think that female celebrities want to be young and beautiful, but it actually provides an opportunity to a certain extent. This opportunity allows older female celebrities to still express themselves. Let some audiences know that even in the entertainment industry, where age is extremely important, they still have the opportunity to show themselves and express themselves, so being an ordinary woman may be encouraged to some extent. For me or some women, age may no longer be an important constraint, and I can continue to explore myself no matter what age. Yes, one is the innovation of the program, and the other is that the program offers women the possibility of breaking the age limit.

One more thing to add is that I personally think that this show can alleviate women's anxiety about age problem to a certain extent. Women who enter the 30years old node will make them more self-conscious and careless to enter this year. For women over 30, reduce their age limit. Compared with Western society, Chinese society is more acute with regard to women's age issues. The broadcast of this program, I think, at least provides you with a possibility, but the female audience realizes that even older female stars still have Opportunities to shine, explore yourself, and pursue a higher platform. An ordinary woman

can also set no restrictions on herself in her daily life. I can explore more of my career development and my own personal pursuits.

### 3.Opinion

- [What is your opinion to any related news or online comments about this show that you see/read?](#)
- On Weibo, I saw a lot of people reposting some clips about Yi Nengjing's performance in the show. She had a very righteous topic at the time. In the show, she would feel that she was a little older and seniority, and would prefer to instruct others to do things or teach others how to do things. I think that putting aside the controversy of this behavior itself, in those comment areas, I saw many comments attacking her age, saying that she is over 50 years old, and then criticizing her for plastic surgery. I think these audiences are actually in such a program. Still struggling with women's appearance and age. I feel in the comments that criticizing a person is not criticizing his behavior, but criticizing her appearance and her figure. I think these audiences sometimes make people feel a little disappointed, and they still haven't escaped a traditional scrutiny of women. When it comes to women, we can only see whether she is beautiful, her figure is good, whether she is young, and whether she has plastic surgery. In another good aspect, I also saw some articles and comments. Lan Yingying showed a very hard-working and ambitious attitude on the show, and some audiences accused her of her ambition and attitude on the Internet. Although some commentators praised her for her ambition and attitude, many people still attacked her that women should not be ambitious, and many audiences would not accept it. But I personally like this very much. She has set an example. I will strive for what I want. I think she has added more possibilities to the traditional characteristics of women. In fact, Pinnacle, fighting, ambitious and aggressive are all qualities that women can possess.

[-What do you think about the ways this show treat female participants? \(For example, about the rules of competition and other aspects\).](#)

The competition system of this program itself still does not escape the restrictions of an elective program. It still requires a group of women to compete with each other and to pass the selection and elimination of the competition system. In the end, only 7 people can form a group. I would think that in the final analysis, it is to put women into a fixed rule for selection. For example, you should be able to sing and dance. If you need more or more audience's likes and favors, I think there is some unfairness to older women in the

competition system. It doesn't really reflect the advantages of older women compared to younger women. For example, the skill of singing and dancing can fight physical strength to a certain extent, and younger women will be more pleasing. For older female celebrities, this is not what they are very good at. It is more difficult for you to make a 50-something female celebrity dance and sing on the stage like a young girl energetic. I feel that I can show their points of precipitation and accumulation brought to them by time and time, and I am more inclined to the sublimation of thinking. Can show the growth of their personal thought traits, casual programs can be more flexible in the competition system. In addition to singing and dancing, you can also select other aspects, such as acting skills, interview styles, and doing something that is not so deducting from age. Let the female celebrities show their strengths.

[-What is your opinion on the ways this show deal with the stereotypes of Chinese women?](#)

In my opinion, this show still reflects some popular aesthetic stereotypes of Chinese women to a certain extent. For example, the female players inside are still very delicate in makeup and clothing, and they tend to dress up in the new year. The whole show still reflects a set of beauty, it must be beautiful. Even for an older woman, his makeup and image are modified in a youthful direction through various means, such as cosmetics to cover their wrinkles and make their appearance look younger. Then the chamber pot reflects the whiteness of Chinese society on women's aesthetics. They are small and thin, that is, they have standard body and appearance. So I think this program still reflects the singleness of Chinese society's aesthetics towards women to a certain extent. After all, there is still no female image that does not cover up wrinkles and does not make-up. It is an attractive middle-aged female image that appears in the public view in a plain state. It is also trying to modify the contestants in a youthful direction through makeup or dressing.

Another point is that, to a certain extent, it will aggravate Chinese women's external appearance anxiety. I have seen articles on Weibo with critical views, that is to say, although this show is a sister who rides the wind and waves, after entering the show, I still have to get closer to the direction of becoming younger on the Internet. It will make everyone feel that I am 30 years old. To be as delicate as they are, and still young. In fact, it brings additional appearance anxiety to the female audience, that is, when I am 30 years old, I start to have wrinkles, I am not pretty anymore, but those female stars are still so beautiful. But in fact, female stars will have a professional team to help them specify a plan, but in fact, ordinary women in their 30s or 40s cannot have such good skin conditions, so ordinary women feel

more anxiety. I am 40 years old. What about the female status without them? For example, more female audiences want to rely on medical beauty to change their original appearance.

-Which part of the show make you produce a sense of resonance as part of Chinese women?  
Why so?

I think the points that resonate most are the points that have already been mentioned. One is to break the shackles of age and reflect the friendship between women. Because I think these two points are often stigmatized in Chinese society. One is an older woman. Everyone will have a very harsh attitude and set a mocking standard to judge them. They say that you are a woman when you reach a certain age and you have no value. If you don't want to get married, it may mean you can't get married. . No longer young, no appearance, nothing in society anymore. The other is friendship with women. There is a certain degree of stigmatization in Chinese society, which means that there is no real friendship between women, and there is more competition between women. For men, each other is jealous and framed each other. But I think true female friendship is actually very powerful and moving. For example, in this show, the female stars in these older shows, they encourage and support each other, in fact, it will make young girls realize that it is In fact, the friendship between women is very precious, and there is no need for female competition, because this is a shackle instilled in women by the patriarchal society, that is, competition between females in order to get a male, or the favor of a male. In fact, I think this point needs to be reflected. Establishing friendship between young girls and helping each other can actually promote the development of a society in the direction of more gender equality. When women and women realize that they can connect and unite.

Another point is that you can see in the program that you can get rid of some of the judgments of women in marriage to a certain extent. For example, in the traditional value system, women who have been divorced and have children will be treated differently. Judge you. To a certain extent, they will get rid of the standard of judging women by marriage. The reason why the age of women is so important in China is also because the country believes that women are tied to marriage, and marriage is very concerned about age, and the degree of anxiety is closely related to the marriage system. I think the reason why women care about their age so much is that you are the easiest to marry at the golden age, but when you find that marriage is not the only choice for women, women can build their own careers, and she also She can stay single, so her age is not so restrictive. When marriage is no longer a necessary option for judging women, then the constraints of age will also be weakened.

## Is there anything you'd like to add to today's interview?

I think I have something to say. I have observed that in recent years, the topic of Chinese women has become more and more popular. For example, after the metoo incident, everyone will pay more attention to female sexual assault and harassment. The topic will require some institutional improvements. At the same time, there are also some, such as women during the epidemic, and medical workers whose labor is neglected. This topic is also followed by many people on Weibo. The needs of women's menstruation and hygiene products need to be taken seriously. Moreover, I recently saw a blogger on Weibo called Peter. This account is actually giving some life advice to some poor rural women in China. Other households encourage poor women not to rush into marriage just because they are old, but to reflect on what marriage can bring to you, whether you need it, and what you need it for. So I will pay attention to more and more young women on Weibo last year who are participating in gender discussions through the Internet and they are slowly awakening. They are slowly thinking about the meaning of marriage and the meaning of the Aegean. They may embrace women's friendship more and more and establish friendship with women.

Moreover, being able to reflect is the shackles placed on women by the patriarchal society. China is a country where patriarchal patriarchy is very serious, and women need many ways to express that they are more gender equal. On the other hand, what is not very optimistic is that now this freedom of speech is becoming more and more tightened, and then the space for discussing gender topics is getting smaller and smaller, such as Yang Li's talk show incident two days ago. In fact, the audience for the talk show program needs to be tolerant. Yang Li's satire and ridicule caused a lot of disturbances and aroused counterattacks from many male netizens. This is actually quite a terrible phenomenon. The setting involves the personal safety of the artist, for example, someone threatens to physically attack her. The artist originally received an advertisement, but the address of the male netizen was also cancelled. Many male audiences say that you can't let a female artist who creates gender antagonisms make money and appear too much in public. So I think gender issues are becoming more and more popular, but at the same time, its sharpness and its space are getting smaller and smaller. And two days ago, a number of accounts on Weibo that focused on women's rights disappeared, so I am actually not particularly optimistic about the future prospects of the development of women's rights and feminism in China. I am more, I believe that those female individuals will slowly explore and discover self-awakening, but I think the degree of tightening of the overall environment is actually not optimistic.

## Appendix 9 Interview coding data

Theme	Categories	Frequency
Engagement	Social platform	11
	Interaction online	7
	Discussion with family and friends(Wecha and Weibo)	11
	Post comments	6
	Comments other	8
	View the show	11
	Empathy	9
	Online identity	11
	Tight interactivity	6
	Resonance	9
	Voting	5
	Media representation and stereotypes	Women appearance
Age limitation		11
30 is boundary?		11
Celebrity representation		11
Beauty pleasure		5
Beauty standard		11
Social platform representation		11
Weakness to power		8
Performance	Reflexive self	8
	Entertainment life	4
	Voting performance	5
	Emotion tinking	11
	Real reaction in life	9
	Microcosm of the real life	7
	Real and fiction	10
	As-creater	11

## Appendix 10 Consent form

### Consent Form

This research is conducted under the module of master's thesis in MSc Media and Communication at Lund University, Sweden. It aims to investigate audience research and female engagement of Chinese reality TV shows. This interview hopes to use Sister Who Make Waves as a case to explore how the program attracts audience engagement and interaction, focusing on female perspective and motivations.

The interview will last for around one hour. The researcher would like to record the interview and use the dialogue in the thesis. The interview will be recorded only with your written consent. Please feel free to say as much or as little as you want. You can decide not to answer any question, or to stop the interview any time you want.

Your identity will always be protected and a pseudonym will be given to guarantee the confidentiality. The data will only be used for research purposes. If you agree to participate in this interview, please fill in your information and sign your name below.

(  If you agree with the use of your information posted on social media, please tick the box.)

(  If you want your real name to be used instead and realise that this may be identified, please tick the box.)

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_ Job \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_