

Popular Media as Gender Curriculum: Implicit Feminism and Informal Learning in Jia Ling's Yolo

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Abstract

This study investigates the educational significance of Jia Ling's 2024 film *Yolo* as a form of informal gender curriculum. Drawing upon feminist cultural analysis and the concept of the hidden curriculum, this research explores how the film's narrative, character arcs, and public reception work together to challenge patriarchal beauty norms, disrupt hypermasculine representations, and cultivate gender awareness among Chinese audiences. The paper situates *Yolo* within the broader context of celebrity feminism and demonstrates how popular culture can operate as a vehicle for implicit education in societies where feminist discourse is constrained. Findings suggest that *Yolo* provides a culturally safe yet powerful space for women to negotiate identity, body autonomy, and social agency. Recommendations are offered for integrating media literacy and gender equity discussions into educational policy and classroom practice.

Keywords

Informal Learning; Gender Curriculum; Celebrity Feminism; Media Literacy; Feminist Cultural Analysis; Chinese Cinema

1. Introduction

Popular culture is more than a form of entertainment; it is a powerful socializing agent that communicates values, shapes identities, and establishes expectations. Film and television are especially influential because they transmit what educators call the "hidden curriculum," teaching lessons about norms and power relations outside formal schooling. In China, where open discussions of feminism are often politically sensitive and framed as "Western" or "bourgeois" (Zheng & Zhang, 2010), cultural products become vital vehicles for circulating ideas about gender in a less confrontational way.

Jia Ling's *Yolo*, released during the 2024 Lunar New Year, broke box office records and sparked nationwide debate on body image, self-empowerment, and gender equality (China Film Information Network, 2024). The film's popularity ensured that

its messages reached a wide audience, while Jia Ling's celebrity persona provided a socially acceptable platform for introducing feminist ideas. This paper analyzes Yolo through the framework of the hidden curriculum and feminist cultural theory, exploring how the film challenges patriarchal beauty norms, disrupts hypermasculine narratives, and fosters critical reflection among viewers

1.1. Research Objectives

The primary research question guiding this study is: How does Yolo act as an informal educational tool to promote gender consciousness and challenge entrenched patriarchal norms? To answer this question, three interconnected objectives are proposed. First, the study seeks to identify and critically analyze the implicit feminist messages embedded within the film's narrative, character arcs, and visual representation. Second, it explores how celebrity feminism—specifically Jia Ling's public persona and highly publicized physical transformation—shapes audience interpretation, stimulates online discussion, and creates a safe cultural space for feminist reflection. Thirdly, I hope to learn from Yolo how to provide useful advice on integrating media literacy and feminist cultural analysis into formal education environments, so as to gain some educational value from it, not just to better understand the cultural phenomenon of Yolo, but also to link some of the social impacts brought by Yolo with broader issues of gender equality and educational development.

1.2. Significance of the Study

This study is very interesting as it redefines a commercially successful film as a teaching resource that can contribute to informal education. When there is no formal curriculum for gender equality, or when it is excluded from these courses and politically restricted, mass media becomes an unobstructed place to engage in and promote critical dialogue. When regarded as an 'implicit curriculum', this study demonstrates how media texts challenge deeply ingrained aesthetic norms, break through traditional gender hierarchies, and cultivate reflective thinking in audiences. This study clearly demonstrates how cultural products play a role in filling educational gaps, developing social awareness, and promoting transformative learning, supporting policy actions that aim to promote gender equality and improve important media literacy in school curricula.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Feminist Media Studies and Hidden Curriculum

Feminist media research has always focused on the dual role of mass media, which is both a tool for social reproduction and a potential resistance field. McRobbie (2015) believes that the dissemination of mass media products reinforces mainstream gender ideology, legitimizing social hierarchy, but critical media texts can

break everything and bring new gender understanding and explanatory structures to the audience. The widely used concept in education is the 'implicit curriculum', which explains how values and norms are implicitly learned through institutions and cultural practices outside of formal classroom teaching. When used in movies, it turns film storytelling into a powerful teaching text, teaching people about gender roles, power relations, and social expectations with engaging emotions and broad accessibility. In this way, we can view *Yolo* as a form of entertainment, as well as an educational intervention for the general audience, and teach a lesson on agency, empowerment, and self definition.

2.2. Celebrity Feminism

Celebrity feminism refers to the practice of public figures using their own popularity to bring feminist issues into mainstream discourse, although usually in diluted, market friendly forms. Jackson (2020) believes that celebrity feminism is at the intersection of popular culture and social advocacy, making feminist messages more easily accepted by a large audience. This is especially true when public radicalism may be stigmatized or censored. Celebrity led information dissemination provides a cultural safe passage for participants, and Jia Ling's public image is an important factor in *Yuluo*'s influence. Jia Ling is known for her approachable, humorous, and approachable personality. She fills the gap in serious feminist topics and popular entertainment, allowing audiences to participate in the movie's views on self-worth, body ownership, and gender equality without feeling politically inclined. When the movie was released, her weight loss journey was discussed by everyone, and the movie was no longer just a movie, but a national discussion. Unconsciously, the information contained in this movie became even more evident.

2.3. Body Politics and Beauty Norms

The use of aesthetic expectations to regulate women's bodies has always been a focus of feminist criticism. The mainstream aesthetic standards in contemporary China are slim, young, and light skinned, which reflects traditional cultural preferences and global aesthetic standards (Lotti, 2018). These standards are continued by advertising, social media, and entertainment, and trends such as the "A4 waist challenge" indicate that these standards are internalized among young women (Jackson et al., 2021), which can lead to eating disorders and physical dissatisfaction (Jung, 2018). In this situation, Jia Ling portrayed Du Leying in "*Yueluo*", providing a counter narrative that praises strength, health, and resilience, but not a narrow beauty. It is the path taken by the protagonist that gives new meaning to the body, no longer a beautiful face, but a way to regain one's own strength and dignity. It is an education that will make the audience question the social construction of beauty and empower them on some seemingly happy but actually unattainable standards.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design to explore the implicit educational potential of Jia Ling's "Yueluo". Qualitative research is suitable for examining the process of meaning generation and can demonstrate how audiences interpret cultural texts in detail. This study mainly relies on film text analysis, focusing on narrative structure, character development, photography, dialogue, etc., in order to find the feminist themes hidden inside. In order to triangulate the research results and better understand audience participation, this study includes discourse analysis of public reactions, including online movie reviews, Weibo reviews, and popular media articles that appear during movie releases. The data corpus was created between February and April 2024, when YOLO's film screenings were in their peak season. It was necessary to pay attention to comments and reviews that included body image, gender connections, power, and social expectations in order to convey the cultural acceptance of the audience. These comments and reviews can provide data on how the audience can participate in the implicit classroom.

3.2. Analytical Framework

This analysis is guided by a comprehensive theoretical framework that combines feminist theory, narrative analysis, and the concept of implicit curriculum. Feminist theory provides a critical perspective to determine how power relations, gender roles, and bodily politics are portrayed in films. Narrative analysis is used to examine plot development, character arcs, and visual symbolism to demonstrate how the story tells the story of transformation, resistance, and autonomy. Borrowing the implicit curriculum framework from educational research, YOLO can be regarded as a teaching text that implicitly teaches gender equality, self-worth, and agency, the code is analyzed and divided into two cycles. The first cycle identifies recurring themes such as "bodily transformation," "critique of masculinity," and "female solidarity," while the second cycle checks whether these themes align with the audience's discourse. This process saturates the theory, and no new themes emerge after analysis. Triangulation is performed between textual evidence and audience reception data, which enhances the credibility and credibility of the research results and meets the qualitative research standards proposed by Creswell and Poth (2018).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Challenging Aesthetic Norms

One of Yolo's greatest contributions is rejecting the dominant beauty concept in China, which is slim, young, and beautiful. Du Leying went from a lonely unemployed woman to a powerful athlete, redefining physical changes as empowerment

rather than submission. This movie does not see weight loss as someone else's acknowledgement or romantic desire, but rather as a way to control oneself, as a way to update one's own psyche, which reshapes what is associated with thinness and value in popular media narratives (Jackson et al., 2021), leaving space for body politics, where the core is health rather than appearance. The emotional tone of Le Ying's training montage is even more so. This film does not beautify her pain, nor does it turn her pain into a beautiful embodiment. Instead, it showcases her sweat, bruises, and fatigue, emphasizing discipline, perseverance, and herself. Therefore, this film indirectly prompts the audience to reflect on their true aesthetic standards, placing happiness and agency above the pursuit of unattainable aesthetic ideals (Jung, 2018).

4.2. Deconstructing Masculinity

Hao Kun's portrait represents the complete opposite of the dominant super male prototype in mainstream Chinese cinema. In mainstream Chinese cinema, male heroes are often imagined as physically strong, morally upright, and emotionally strong (Siddhanta&Singh, 2015), Hao Kun is depicted as having flaws, financial difficulties, emotional avoidance, unwillingness to publicly acknowledge her relationship with Le Ying, and relying on her both financially and emotionally. This breaks traditional gender scripts and prompts people to question the idea that men must always be guardians or saviors. Describing masculinity as multifaceted and fragile rather than a mere existence helps to break patriarchal stories and, based on educational purposes, can spark classroom discussions about how media shapes people's expectations of masculinity, extending these expectations to include emotional expression, vulnerability, and mutual giving relationships.

4.3. Representation of Imperfect Women

Another notable finding is the film's portrayal of women who are morally complex and sometimes unsympathetic. Leying's sister, best friend, and cousin each betray her trust in different ways, exposing the fractures in female solidarity under social and economic pressure. This choice resists the cinematic tendency to depict women either as pure victims or flawless heroines. As McRobbie (2015) notes, the cultural construction of the "perfect woman" often serves to discipline women into compliance with heteronormative and neoliberal expectations. By contrast, *Yolo* offers a spectrum of female characters who are selfish, opportunistic, or indifferent, thereby humanizing them and breaking free from the "angel in the house" ideal. The educational implication here is significant: by normalizing imperfection, the film validates the idea that women's value is not contingent upon moral or aesthetic perfection, opening space for more authentic representations of female experience in media and encouraging viewers to embrace complexity in their own lives.

4.4. Celebrity Feminism and Informal Learning

Jia Ling's public persona and real-life weight-loss journey functioned as an extension of the film's message, effectively turning its release into a national conversation about health, discipline, and body autonomy. Weibo hashtags about her transformation trended for weeks, generating thousands of user comments that debated whether her weight loss was empowering, market-driven, or a publicity stunt. This collective discourse functioned as a form of participatory informal education, where audiences learned from one another by sharing personal stories, negotiating interpretations, and challenging each other's assumptions about beauty and self-worth. In this sense, Jia Ling exemplifies what Jackson (2020) calls "celebrity feminism"—where a public figure's visibility enables feminist conversations to reach mainstream audiences. The educational value lies in the process rather than the conclusion: the debates encouraged critical thinking, media literacy, and reflexivity, which are essential competencies in democratic citizenship and lifelong learning.

4.5. Economic and Political Dimensions

Finally, it is crucial to situate *Yolo* within its broader political and economic context. The film's success—grossing over 3.4 billion yuan—demonstrates the market viability of female-centered narratives, challenging the industry assumption that "women's stories" lack mass appeal (China Film Information Network, 2024). At the same time, the film carefully avoids overtly activist rhetoric, opting instead for a depoliticized message of "love yourself." As Simone de Beauvoir (2010) pointed out, the project of women's liberation involves rejection of external definitions and subjective persistence, and *Yolo* symbolically achieves this without calling for structural changes. This strategic restraint may mean that the film can smoothly pass censorship but still bring disruptive content, which puts educators and policy makers in a dilemma of how mass media can slowly promote social change under state control without sparking backlash and changing attitudes.

Table 1. Key Themes and Educational Implications

Theme	Description	Educational Implication
Challenging beauty norms	Focus on strength and health	Encourages health-centered identity formation
Deconstructing masculinity	Non-heroic male character	Promotes critical thinking about gender roles
Celebrity discourse	Jia Ling's real-life transformation	Provides socially safe feminist dialogue
Imperfect women characters	Moral and emotional complexity	Normalizes diversity in female identity

5. Educational and Policy Implications

Education policy makers and curriculum designers need to understand what movies like 'Yolo' mean, whether they are popular entertainment or social 'venues'. These cultural texts of movies can serve as a supplement to formal schools. As part of such cultural texts and other media literacy courses, students can use their knowledge and discussions to discuss issues such as gender equality. In media literacy courses,

there are some classroom activities that support reflective participation, such as guiding movie screenings, writing reflective text assignments, conducting structured debates, etc., allowing students to ask questions instead of simply receiving information. Similarly, teacher training courses should also include some critical media teaching content, so that educators can learn how to teach media related content, so that they can more responsibly discuss issues such as feminism, bodily autonomy, gender roles, etc. in the classroom. When open feminist discourse encounters obstacles, this situation is clear because media communication can bring cultural acceptance. In terms of policies, the Ministry of Education can work together with the cultural industry to support media that shoulder social responsibilities and achieve gender equality. Perhaps economic rewards will be given to filmmakers who produce narrative films about women, or media analysis will be included as part of the national gender equality plan. In this way, the education system can use the cultural effects of films to cultivate students' critical, sympathetic, and social awareness, and contribute to the inclusive and transformative education stipulated in UNESCO's 2030 education plan.

6. Conclusion

This study points out that Yolo is a powerful informal curriculum that shapes gender perspectives and engages audiences in critical thinking. The film relies on portraying a protagonist regaining their agency through physical and emotional changes, challenging mainstream aesthetic norms and deconstructing traditional gender scripts. Its narrative relies on the celebrity image of Jia Ling, prompting audiences to reconsider how to define the social structure of femininity, masculinity, and personal values. The film avoids public political language, ensuring that its feminist message is still easily understood and accepted culturally, allowing it to reach a large and diverse audience without censorship or backlash.

These meanings are all related to educational practice and social development. YOLO demonstrates how mass media can become a catalyst for critical thinking, providing a common cultural reference point for teachers, students, and policy makers to engage in dialogue about equality and empowerment. It realizes and demonstrates the increasing interest of the public in telling women's stories, indicating that the education sector has opportunities to collaborate more actively with media producers and establish a progressive social discourse.

In the future, we will conduct in-depth longitudinal research and explore whether movies like YOLO will change people's gender positions, especially among young people. Comparing different cultures can help us understand how these informal courses shape gender rules in various societies. Experimenting with YOLO in formal classrooms can estimate its potential as a teaching tool to enhance media literacy and gender equality outcomes. YOLO is both fashionable and culturally rich, bridging the gap between entertainment and education, and providing many lessons for

people to pursue gender equality and transformative learning.

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