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A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW OF FEMALE AUDIENCE RECEPTION OF INDEPENDENT WOMEN IN TELEVISION DRAMAS

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Abstract:

Television dramas function as powerful ideological apparatuses and socializing agents that shape gender norms. Recently, the “independent woman” archetype has become globally visible, yet female audiences’ interpretations of this figure vary significantly. To understand these diverse readings, this systematic literature review examines female audience reception of the “independent woman” archetype, defined here as female audiences’ interpretations, negotiations, and responses to this representation. Following PRISMA 2020 guidelines, studies published between 2011 and 2025 were identified from Web of Science and Scopus, screened according to predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, and synthesised thematically. The included studies employed diverse, predominantly qualitative methodological approaches across different research settings. The findings indicate that audiences actively negotiate the meaning of female independence, which shifts between neoliberal ideals of individual achievement and culturally embedded moral values. Four themes emerged: the use of realistic narratives as informal guides for everyday life; the cultural localisation and de-Westernisation of the independent-woman archetype; tensions between empowerment and social expectations; and the reconstruction of

identity among diasporic women. The theoretical literature has shifted from binary and individual-level models of gender representation toward intersectional and affect-oriented approaches that recognise the influence of culture, identity, and emotion. Nevertheless, the literature remains disproportionately informed by Western theoretical perspectives and selected cultural contexts. The synthesis suggests that representations of female independence can simultaneously expand women's sense of agency and reproduce neoliberal expectations of individual self-management and productivity. Future research should move beyond assumptions of audience homogeneity by adopting a more granular, micro-level approach that examines sub-national regions and demographic cohorts to identify how regional cultures and generational differences shape interpretations of female independence.

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Audience Reception; Female Audience; Independent Women; Neoliberalism; Post-feminism; Television Dramas;



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Introduction

Television dramas have thus become important sites where gender norms and ideals of femininity are represented and negotiated (Mahoney, 2019; Pinedo, 2021). While the "independent woman" archetype has recently gained much scholarly attention, evidence regarding female viewers' interpretations and negotiations of this representation is scattered across cultural contexts. Drawing on critical cultural theory, some scholars argued that media texts are ideological apparatuses that do not merely reflect social values but actively produce and reproduce them (Althusser, 1971 ; Storey, 2021). Among the various forms of media, television dramas occupy a central position since their serialized narrative and emotional investment heighten their role in constructing and disseminating gender roles (Gjylbegaj & Radwan, 2025).

Historically, this has been the case with female characters in television dramas: they were passively portrayed as dependent or domestically constrained, reinforcing patriarchal norms (Collins, 2011; McRobbie, 2009). Contemporary narratives have shifted dramatically, and the archetype of an independent woman emerged: autonomous, career-oriented, and controlling her life (Perkins & Schreiber, 2019). Television dramas construct images, yet the meanings of independence are neither fixed nor universally accepted. Instead, the meanings of the media are actively produced through negotiation processes among audiences. Audience reception studies have long argued that viewers are not passive recipients but active meaning-makers whose interpretations are socially positioned and informed by lived experiences (Hall, 1980; Hodkinson, 2024). In this sense, female audiences are placed at a significant point in the interpretive process. Since women are the prime subjects of such representations, female

viewers bring their gendered aspirations and constraints to bear on the screen (Press, 1991; Orgad, 2019). Therefore, how independent women are understood, embraced, or resisted cannot be analyzed without focusing on the female audience's point of view (Harp et al., 2018; Ip et al., 2024).

However, despite the growing body of research on this topic, significant differences in cultural contexts have prevented a clear consensus on whether representations of independent women genuinely empower female audiences or entrap them in neoliberal ideals. At the same time, there remains a lack of systematic literature reviews that synthesize these diverse findings and identify the underlying patterns of audience reception.

To address this gap and provide an evidence-based foundation for future gender-focused media research, this systematic literature review establishes the following objectives: 1) To synthesize the key themes and interpretive patterns in female audience reception of independent women in television dramas; 2) To clarify how the concept of independent women is conceptualized and operationalized in existing empirical studies; 3) To examine the theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches employed to investigate this reception process.

Methodology

Research Design

The aim of this Systematic Literature Review (SLR) is to explore the understanding of female viewers of representations of independent women in TV dramas. SLR provides clear and reproducible processes of literature search and analysis that help increase objectivity and reduce potential bias. This type of literature review is appropriate for our research question because it allows us to integrate scattered empirical results from various cultural contexts in a theoretical framework. We use the PRISMA 2020 statement as the methodological framework to ensure that the review process is systematic and transparent (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA is developed specifically for systematic reviews in healthcare but is widely applied in media and social science research to provide methodological transparency. Following the PRISMA guidelines, this review systematically identifies, screens, evaluates, and synthesizes applicable studies.

Search Strategy

We have followed the PRISMA 2020 guidelines to conduct the literature search process. The literature review has been conducted in three steps: identification, screening, and eligibility. According to this model, all the stages have been conducted in a systematic way to identify the studies by using appropriate keywords and inclusion criteria and finally, the eligible studies are included in the final dataset. To identify the applicable studies, we used the two most prominent databases (Web of Science [WoS] and Scopus). WoS and Scopus are reliable sources for indexing scientific studies and provide wide coverage of scholarly articles in different disciplines, including communication, media, gender studies, and sociology. We set the date range from 2011 to 2025 for searching. This date range is preferred because it reflects the continuing evolution of the "independent woman" ideal within the postfeminist field and at the same time implies a constant growth of scientific research related to gender representation and its reception (see Figure 1).

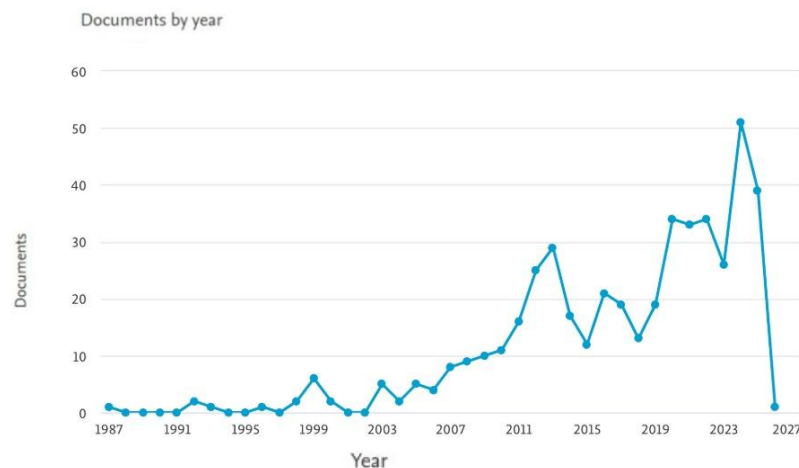


Figure 1: Publication Numbers by Year

(Source: Scopus)

Some studies published recently might not be fully indexed yet when conducting the search. We included studies published before 2025 in this study. We created search strings with four main keywords, namely, independent women, female audiences (research objects), audience reception, and television dramas. We combined the search terms using logical connectors such as AND and OR. In each dimension, we used the OR operator to combine synonyms and related words such as independent woman or strong female character. We also used the AND operator to combine the four dimensions together to make sure that the articles selected covered all key issues of the research topic. Different databases have their own indexing systems. We needed to change search syntaxes for WoS and Scopus. Table 1 presents the complete search terms and search strings.

Table 1: Search Strings

Database	Search Strings
Web of Science (WoS)	TS=("television drama" OR "TV drama" OR "television series" OR "TV series" OR "serial drama" OR "soap opera") AND ("women" OR "female" OR "gendered audience" OR "female viewer*" OR "audience reception" OR "interpret*" OR "decoding" OR "meaning making") AND ("independent woman" OR "independent women" OR "empowerment" OR "female empowerment" OR "feminism")
Scopus	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("television drama" OR "tv drama" OR "television series" OR "tv series" OR "serial drama" OR "soap opera") AND ("female audience" OR "woman audience" OR "female viewer*" OR "audience reception" OR "interpret*" OR "decoding" OR "meaning making") AND ("independent woman" OR "independent women" OR "empowerment" OR "female empowerment" OR "feminism")

The initial database search identified 508 records in total, including 121 records from Web of Science (WoS) and 387 records from Scopus. After removing 34 duplicate records, 474 unique articles remained for the subsequent screening phase.

Screening

This study used specific screening criteria to make sure the review is strict and consistent with our research purposes. We developed screening criteria for document types, languages, and subjects. For document types, we included peer-reviewed journal articles. To maintain academic quality, we excluded grey literature such as conference papers, dissertations, reports, books, and book chapters. This is because peer review plays an important role, in part, in ensuring the quality of academic studies. Regarding language, we only included articles written in English because English is the main language for international academic communications in media studies. Lastly, we included articles from the Social Sciences and Arts & Humanities because this study focuses on sociology and culture.

On top of these general screening criteria, we also applied screening criteria based on topics. Only studies that examined gender representation and/or audience reception within the context of television dramas were included. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on textual analysis without empirical audience research or discussed media effects in general without specifically addressing representations of independent women. In addition, to maintain a clear research focus, studies examining films, variety shows, or user-generated content were also excluded. The detailed inclusion and exclusion criteria are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Criteria	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Literature type	Journal articles	Books, book chapters, conference proceedings, review articles, editorials, notes, letters, interview scripts, thesis, dissertation
Language	English	Non-English
Subject area	Social sciences, humanities, arts	Medical, engineering, and natural science studies outside the social sciences/humanities
Media form	Television series, TV drama, serial drama, soap opera, web series	Film, short video, news, variety show, advertising
Research broad	Studies focusing on gender-related representations and/or audience reception, engagement in television dramas	Studies not related to television drama, TV series; studies discussing general media effects without focusing on a specific television drama text; production-only studies that do not address gender-related issues and/or audience reception/interpretation.

Based on the established criteria, 213 records were excluded in the first round of screening. These included 174 non-peer-reviewed articles, 11 studies outside the social sciences, 21 non-English articles, and 7 records with incomplete data. The remaining 261 articles proceeded to the relevance screening stage. We then reviewed the keywords, titles, and abstracts and

excluded studies that were unrelated to the research topic. After this round of screening, 56 articles remained for the subsequent full-text eligibility assessment.

Eligibility Phase

In the final screening stage, we reviewed the full texts of the remaining 56 articles to determine whether they met the inclusion criteria. To minimize bias arising from individual judgment, two researchers conducted the assessment independently using the same checklist developed in accordance with the PRISMA guidelines (Shaffril et al., 2021; Page et al., 2021). When disagreements arose, a third reviewer joined the discussion, and a final decision was reached through consensus.

During the full-text assessment, 36 of the 56 articles were excluded. From among these, 34 examined representations of independent women or postfeminist themes but also relied solely on textual analysis and did not provide empirical audience reception data. The remaining two addressed audience reception but did not focus on the “independent woman” archetype. After this phase of screening, 20 eligible articles were kept for inclusion in this review. Figure 2 shows the detailed screening process and the reasons for exclusion.

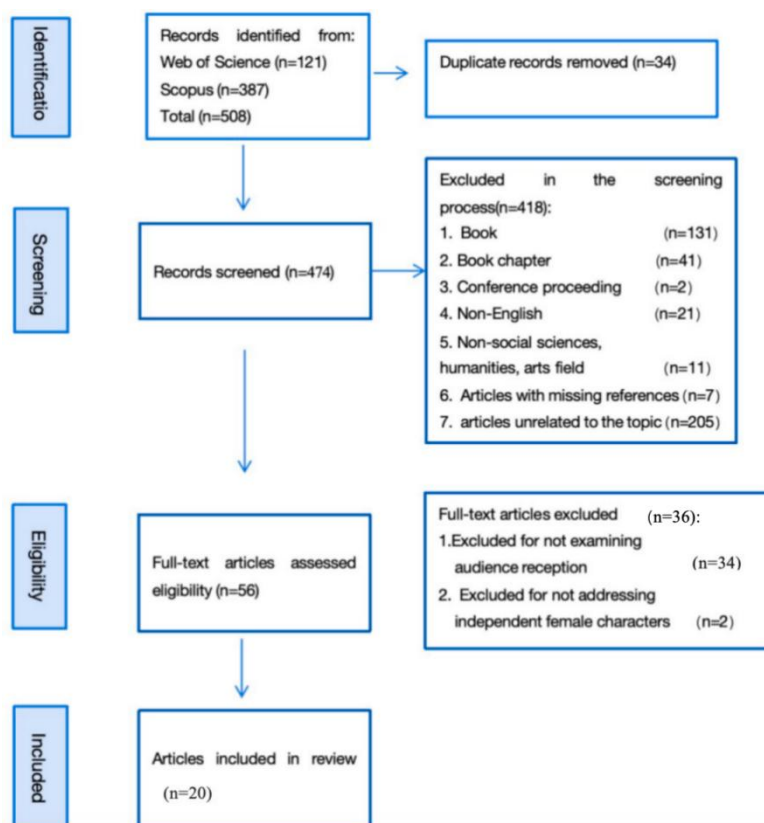


Figure 2: Data Selection Procedure

Quality Appraisal

While the PRISMA guidelines broadly recommend performing some form of quality appraisal of included studies in reviews, we chose not to undertake a separate formal quality appraisal in this review. Our goal is not to statistically aggregate or compare existing findings; rather, our objective is to identify and integrate different theoretical perspectives and empirical insights

across studies into a conceptual synthesis. We included only peer-reviewed journal articles in this review. In addition, all included studies passed through a strict screening process confirming that they were highly applicable to the research goals.

Data Extraction and Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was adopted during the synthesis stage to detect common patterns among the included studies. Thematic analysis is an iterative process whereby researchers examine data extracted from the included studies and organize them into meaningful themes. In brief, each of the included studies was examined in depth, and inductive coding was performed according to the findings section. Data were first coded, and initial codes that included "watching competencies," "lateral surveillance," and "critical proximity" were formed. Initial codes were then compared between studies and grouped into tentative themes. Themes were re-examined, revised, and discussed among the two primary reviewers. Disagreements were resolved through discussion involving the third reviewer. A theme was kept if it appeared in at least three studies of different cultures and captured significant patterns regarding the reception of female audiences. Through this approach, the study investigated how female audiences in different cultural regions perceive, accept, or reject the image of the independent woman in TV dramas, and synthesized the findings to develop a larger picture of audience reception trends around the world.

The Findings

The following section offers a thorough overview of the 20 studies included in this systematic review. Their geographical scope is notably broad: across Asia, they draw on cases from China, India, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam; within Europe, they cover Greece, Hungary, Spain, the United Kingdom, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Beyond these nation-based settings, the collection also extends to transnational diasporic communities, thereby adding a cross-border dimension to the analysis. The findings are organized into two parts. The first part presents a descriptive overview of the study characteristics, including publication trends and research methods. The second part applies thematic analysis to examine how female audiences from different cultural contexts interpret, negotiate, and reconstruct the "independent woman" archetype.

General Characteristics of Included Studies

The studies under review span a publication window from 2011 to 2025. Over this fifteen-year period, one can observe a clear upward trajectory in the volume of work devoted to this subject – a sign that scholarly interest has gathered steady momentum. This growing attention, in turn, speaks to a wider global shift: gender issues situated outside Western settings are increasingly coming into focus, while at the same time, the field of audience studies itself appears to be reorienting its priorities.

If we look at the chronological distribution, the earlier contributions – for instance, Krátká (2014) and Syed and Runnel (2014) – tended to concentrate on conventional soap operas and the dynamics of home-based television viewing. More recently, however, publications such as Cao and Aziz (2024) and Xu and Zheng (2025) have turned their sights towards digital platforms and the conversations unfolding across social media. This movement from broadcast

to online spaces suggests a broader methodological and thematic evolution, as research progressively embraces interactive and participatory forms of audience engagement.

In terms of geographic spread, the studies selected for this review cover a broad spectrum, encompassing both the Global South and societies undergoing post-socialist transition. Their reach extends far beyond the well-trodden ground of Western markets, incorporating fast-growing Asian economies – China, India, Malaysia, and Vietnam, for instance – alongside Eastern European nations with post-socialist legacies, such as the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovakia (see Figure 3 for a visual summary). What this distribution makes clear is a notable pattern: inquiries into how audiences interpret the “independent woman” figure are most heavily concentrated in regions where modernisation is proceeding apace, precisely those places where conventional gender expectations remain fluid and subject to continual renegotiation (Babot, 2023).

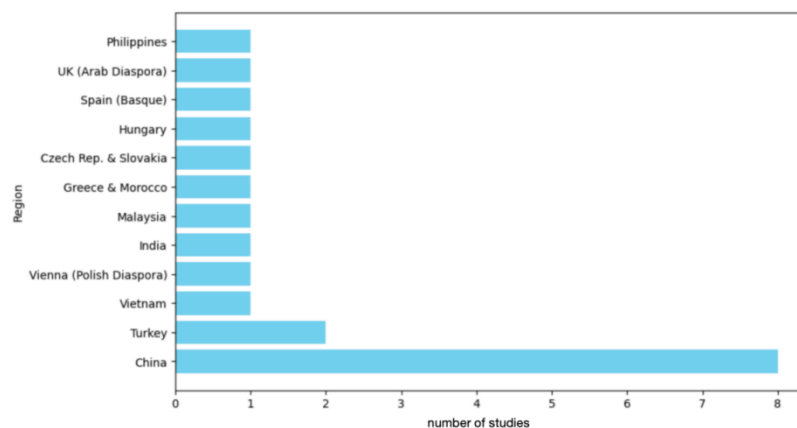


Figure 3: Geographical Distribution Of The Included Studies

Table 3 offers a concise overview of the 20 studies under review, laying out for each one the research methods employed, the theoretical lenses adopted, and the principal findings it yielded. This, in turn, should give readers a sense of the literature's overall shape and scope without having to comb through every individual paper.

Table 3.: Summary of Included Studies

Author (s)& Year	Region Audience	& Target Media	Methodology	Key Findings
Gammon (2023)	Vietnam	Korean Dramas (Romance)	In-depth Interviews	Negotiated reading of "wrist-grabbing"; nascent feminist consciousness.
Xu & Zheng (2025)	China	Nothing But Thirty	Social Media Data Scraping	Critique of consumption; reaffirming traditional marriage vs. independence.
Özalpman (2024)	Vienna (Polish Diaspora)	Magnificent Century	Semi-structured Interviews	Cross-cultural viewing as an identity marker; political reflection.
Zheng & Xu (2022)	China	Nothing But Thirty	Social Media Data Scraping	Stigma of "Leftover Women" (Shengnü) and marriage pressure (Cuihun).

Chang & Ren (2016)	China	Knallerfrauen (German Comedy)	Critical discourse analysis (CDA) & In-depth interviews	Empowerment through "craziness"; emotional catharsis.
Ip et al. (2024)	China	Ode to Joy, All Is Well	Content analysis & In-depth interviews	Affective economies; successful women triggering envy and fear.
Mehra (2019)	India	Pakistani Soaps (Humsafar)	Triangulation method	Seeking "realistic" female portrayals; the "Altagonist" character.
Syed Runnel (2014)	Malaysia	Non-Western Soaps	Focus Groups	"Watching Competencies"; negotiating modernity under religious norms.
Özalpman & Sarikakis (2018)	Greece & Morocco	& Magnificent Century	In-depth Interviews	Politics of pleasure; reimagining geopolitical and gender power.
Cao & Aziz (2024)	China	Ruyi's Royal Love in the Palace	Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)	Anti-fandom as a power struggle against hegemonic aesthetics.
Krátká (2014)	Czech Rep. / Slovakia	/ Sex and the City	Virtual ethnography & online interviews	Experiential Learning: Audiences identifying with characters to navigate modern relationships.
Strickland-Pajtok (2021)	Hungary	The Handmaid's Tale	in-depth individual interviews	Linking dystopian narratives to conservative political reality.
Agirre (2014)	Spain (Basque)	Mad Men	Focus Groups	Nostalgia and critique; reflecting on workplace sexism.
Georgiou (2012)	UK (Arab Diaspora)	Transnational Soaps	Focus groups	Critical Proximity: Diasporic women negotiating belonging through media.
Miao (2018)	China	Sex and the City	Netnography	Utilizing feminist media as a resource for self-reflection and empowerment over material consumption.
Zou et al. (2025)	China	Fireworks of My Heart	Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)	"Love-addled brain": Digital feminism's vigilance against romantic dependency.
Xu & Zheng (2023)	China	21 women-centred TV series	Observation and digital scraping of Zhihu comments	De-masculinization: Critique of rigid

Brillon & Dacanay (2025)	Philippines	Darna	Semi-structured interviews	"independent" portrayals. Queer Readings: Diverse interpretations of female superhero figures.
Zorlu (2022)	Turkey	Magnificent Century	Textual analysis & Examination of online viewer comments	Unraveling female authority through "gendered power reversals" and spectacle violence.
Onaran (2011)	Turkey	American daytime soap operas	Focus groups, interviews, and participant observation	Utilizing soap operas to challenge traditional gender norms and domestic power relations.

Conceptualization of “Independent Women”

The literature demonstrates that the meaning of the “independent woman” is neither fixed nor universal but varies across different cultural and socio-economic contexts. Across the studies included in this review, audience interpretations of this archetype can be broadly categorized into three discursive modes: the neoliberal subject, the educational model, and the moral agent. The first of these interpretive strands casts the “independent woman” as a figure shaped by neoliberal rationality. This reading is by no means confined to any single cultural setting, it surfaces in both Chinese and Western discourses, where women’s autonomy tends to be measured against their participation in the market and their capacity for economic self-sufficiency (Ip et al., 2024; Xu & Zheng, 2025). Under this framing, independence operates along two principal axes: on the one hand, career advancement; on the other, the construction of self-identity through consumption.

Take, for instance, the popular Chinese drama Nothing but Thirty. Audience responses to this series reveal that viewers in China tend to interpret independence in quite tangible, material terms – owning property, securing financial stability in the urban landscape, rather than treating it as a purely psychological disposition or personal philosophy. In such a reading, female agency becomes intimately bound up with purchasing power. Independence, then, is effectively redefined as the capacity to craft, through consumption, a lifestyle that signals success; in the process, the feminist aspiration is subtly translated into what Xu and Zheng (2025) term “consumer citizenship.”

A second line of interpretation moves beyond purely economic yardsticks. Drawing on audience research conducted in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, Krátká (2014) puts forward what she terms the “educational model.” Her argument rests on a particular social condition characteristic of transitional societies: older gender norms are slowly eroding, yet new cultural expectations have not been crystallised into a stable framework. In such a fluid environment, fictional figures can step in as informal guides to navigating everyday life. The characters of Sex and the City, for example, are taken up by viewers as reference points – not as blueprints to be followed slavishly, but as resources for thinking through questions of intimacy, sexuality, and professional conduct. Within this reading, independence is no longer reducible to financial

standing; it encompasses emotional literacy and the cultivation of practical know-how, acquired through what Krátká describes as “experiential learning” and a process of identifying with on-screen personas. What we see here, then, is an active use of media narratives: audiences draw on these stories to make sense of the uncertainties brought by post-socialist modernity, and to experiment – at least imaginatively – with ways of managing emotional and sexual identities that depart from traditional patriarchal scripts.

Yet another reading emerges from settings where religious or traditional values are deeply embedded – Malaysia and Turkey, for instance. Here, independence is reframed as a form of “moral capability” or “watching competency” (Zorlu, 2022; Syed & Runnel, 2014), a far cry from the Western neoliberal model that often posits autonomy as a break with tradition. What characterises this interpretation is its hybrid quality: women's assertions of independence need not entail a rejection of inherited norms. Instead, they may engage with Western or secular media while exercising their own moral judgement to uphold local cultural and religious standards. Syed and Runnel (2014) put it succinctly – for these viewers, independence means the ability to assess foreign media content through a moral framework, rather than passively absorbing whatever it offers.

Theoretical Frameworks and Methodological Approaches

If we step back and look at the theoretical evolution, one thing stands out: the field has largely outgrown the early dichotomy that pitted “resistance” against “dominance.” In its place, scholars have turned to more subtle frameworks – among them, affect theory and intersectionality – that allow for richer readings of audience engagement. It is within this broader shift that we find Krátká's (2014) reinterpretation of identification theory, which she refashions as “experiential learning.” The implication is that viewers can engage with media stories as a form of vicarious rehearsal: they anticipate and mentally prepare for the difficulties of modern life, all while maintaining a comfortable psychological distance from the actual stakes involved.

More recent developments in the field also bear mentioning. On one front, the combination of “affective economies” with contextualised postfeminism has drawn attention to how emotional dynamics circulate in social contexts and may inadvertently strengthen neoliberal gender norms even to the point of turning “female independence” into something that can be packaged and sold (Ip et al., 2024; Xu & Zheng, 2025). On another, intersectionality has been taken up in digital anti-fandom studies, where it helps to expose how class- and gender-based differences not only shape online commentary but also fracture digital spaces into competing camps (Cao & Aziz, 2024). Alongside these, research on transnational diasporic communities offers the notion of “critical proximity” – a concept that goes beyond mere nostalgia to highlight how audiences use media to critically examine the political and patriarchal orders of their home countries (Georgiou, 2012; Özalpman, 2024).

Methodologically speaking, the field remains overwhelmingly qualitative in orientation. Focus groups, in-depth or semi-structured interviews, and ethnography feature prominently across the corpus, as summarised in Figure 4 and illustrated by studies such as Agirre (2014), Gammon (2023), Onaran (2011), and Syed and Runnel (2014). Yet the landscape is evolving recent work – especially that focused on China – has shown a growing uptake of Critical Discourse Analysis and social media data scraping, driven by a desire to examine digital interactions and online gender debates (e.g., Cao & Aziz, 2024; Xu & Zheng, 2023; Zheng & Xu, 2022; Zou et al.,

2025). By engaging with platform content, comment threads, and interactive texts, researchers are now better positioned to observe gender discourses as they emerge in real time – spontaneous, unfiltered, and often deeply contentious within participatory digital environments.

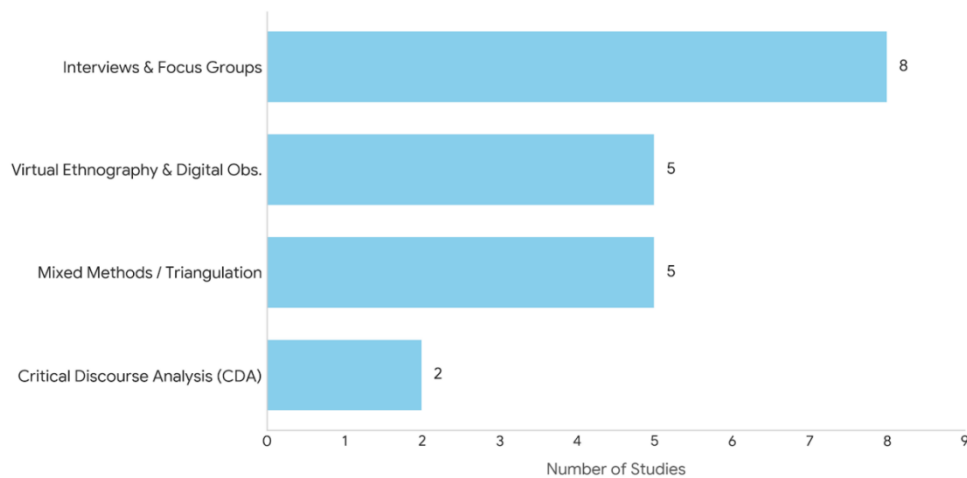


Figure 4: Overview of Research Methods

Key Themes in Audience Reception

Thematic analysis shows that female audiences across different cultural contexts actively engage with media narratives and negotiate between traditional gender norms and aspirations for modern lives. Through an iterative analysis of the selected literature, four dominant themes emerged: 1) the pragmatic use of realism as a "life textbook"; 2) the cultural localisation and de-Westernisation of the independent-woman archetype; 3) Affective tensions between empowerment and neoliberal expectations; and 4) the reconstruction of hybrid identities within diasporic communities. These themes collectively demonstrate that the "independent woman" is not a fixed representation, but rather a fluid cultural resource that can be reinterpreted, negotiated, and utilized by female audiences across different cultural contexts.

Theme 1: Realism as a Life Textbook

Female audiences tend to utilize drama as a tool for examining reality and learning life strategies. In China, debates regarding the "love-addled brain" (Lian'ai nao) reflect a collective effort by women to use drama discussions to navigate and avoid real world romantic risks (Zou et al, 2025). Similarly, Indian audiences prefer Pakistani dramas over domestic ones because the former offer a form of "alternative modernity" that is perceived as more realistic and culturally compatible, preserving Eastern family values while portraying modern women (Mehra, 2019).

Theme 2: the cultural localisation and de-Westernisation of the independent-woman archetype

Non-Western audiences display complex negotiation strategies when consuming transnational content. Malaysian women employ watching competencies to filter out sexual freedom in Western soaps, viewing it as a negative example to uphold their moral values and Islamic identity (Syed & Runnel, 2014). Meanwhile, Vietnamese viewers of K-dramas negotiate

patriarchal tropes (like wrist-grabbing) by interpreting them through a lens of fantasy and romance, despite a nascent feminist consciousness (Gammon, 2023).

Theme 3: Affective Tensions between Empowerment and Neoliberal Expectations

The emotional engagement of female audiences reveals a complex dynamic: on the one hand, they experience a sense of liberation; on the other hand, this liberation is accompanied by strict self-regulation.

For example, Chinese women derive a sense of empowerment from watching the German comedy *Knallerfrauen*. Through the protagonist's unconventional and norm-breaking behaviors, they are able to imaginatively challenge the restrictive expectations of the "ladylike" ideal imposed on women by society (Chang & Ren, 2016).

However, this sense of liberation is often weakened by the internalization of neoliberal standards. Studies on *Sex and the City* and Chinese urban dramas show that female audiences frequently evaluate whether female characters are "imperfect" or "not independent enough." This creates a culture of "lateral surveillance," in which women scrutinize one another, rather than offering unconditional support and solidarity (Miao, 2018; Xu & Zheng, 2025).

Theme 4: Identity Reconstruction in Diaspora

For transnational diasporic women, the consumption of transnational television dramas serves as an important means of negotiating hybrid female identities. Studies of Polish and Arab audiences reveal that they seek a "third space" that is distinct from both their host countries and countries of origin (Georgiou, 2012; Özalpman, 2024). On the one hand, through the lens of "critical proximity," they use media narratives to critique patriarchal constraints within their cultures of origin. On the other hand, they also reject moral standards associated with Western femininity that are perceived as overly permissive. In this way, these media narratives facilitate the construction of a transnational female subjectivity, in which modern autonomy and traditional values can be reconciled to some extent (Georgiou, 2012; Özalpman, 2024).

Discussion

Based on the systematic review of 20 empirical studies, this section discusses the findings from three perspectives: cultural contexts, thematic outcomes, and the development of theoretical perspectives.

Overall, early media studies tended to adopt the "cultural imperialism" model, which viewed non-Western audiences as passive recipients of Western feminist ideals (Mohanty, 1984; Schiller, 1976). However, the sociological studies included in this review indicate that this field is undergoing a significant theoretical paradigm shift.

First, the findings indicate that audience reception of independent female characters is neither singular nor uniform. Audiences in the Global South and post-socialist regions do not simply absorb Western feminist models as they are. Instead, they actively engage with these portrayals, reworking and translating them through their own cultural lenses. In doing so, they draw on global media content as a kind of resource, fashioning what might be called a "third space" – one where local tradition intersect with outside influences (Georgiou, 2012; Özalpman, 2024).

Within this intermediate zone, viewers are far from passive; they are active producers of meaning. They undertake what amounts to a critical sifting process: they might embrace certain facets of modern self-determination – for instance, professional skill and financial self-sufficiency – while simultaneously reinterpreting these within indigenous moral frameworks that privilege family cohesion and personal virtue. Through such interpretive work, they strive to reconcile the pulls of global modernity with a deep-seated sense of cultural belonging. The outcome is a kind of “safe independence”, one that unsettles conventional gender roles yet remains tethered to inherited values.

At the same time, this balancing act should not be mistaken for wholly free choice. As people navigate between received norms and contemporary ambitions, their very notion of “independence” gets reshaped often subtly by neoliberal market rationalities. As Ip et al. (2024) observe, in such settings, “independence” seldom signals collective political emancipation. Rather, it operates more as a regime of self-management: women, in particular, are expected to recast themselves as entrepreneurial agents, perpetually honing and upgrading their capacities so as to stay viable in competitive markets. Thus, space for negotiation, though real, is always inflected by broader economic imperatives that condition what kinds of autonomy are conceivable and desirable.

The commodification of independence in this discourse goes even further. Women need not only to be independent and ambitious professionals but also have to spend time on keeping up with their physical appearances. Spending money on cosmetic products or stylish clothes is often seen as a sign of success. The discourse focuses on individuals rather than social structures. When women are unable to achieve “independence,” it is often seen as an individual's problem regarding efforts or self-control rather than a limitation of the social structure of support. These findings are important to understand how global media may unconsciously reproduce local patriarchal capitalism. The media discourses represent independence as an individual choice and accomplishment that may mask deeper structural problems.

By examining the theories employed in past research, an important gap in the theoretical perspective used by current scholars is found. Current studies focus mainly on how female audiences understand the concept of the “independent woman” using Western liberal feminism and modernization theory. The two perspectives usually stress individual freedom, successful careers, and sexual liberation as essential components of female emancipation. They do have some limitations. First, Western-oriented perspectives might not entirely explain the social structures and cultures influencing women's experiences in non-Western societies. Research conducted in Malaysia and Turkey seems to imply that “independence” is highly connected to religiosity and family duties. The above aspects cannot be accounted for fully within a liberal feminist approach. This suggests that more work might require broadening of theoretical frames in order to understand how women deal with cultural values as they handle processes of modernization.

Future work should therefore incorporate postcolonial and intersectional approaches to further explore how gender relates to class, religion, and local cultural values. The approaches may help to understand how different social and cultural factors contribute to the meaning of independence. They may also offer some insights into why the concept of independence in non-Western and transitional societies differs from the Western model. The second major gap in the knowledge that arises closely out of the above theoretical problems is the contradictory

meanings of media representations of independence. There are two sets of views represented by existing research.

One perspective views television drama as texts of empowerment that support women's career aspirations, whereas the other considers them as disciplinary forms of neo-liberalism, reinforcing women's ideals of perfection. There is little research that explores the relationship between the two approaches. Female viewers tend to experience "emotional ambivalence" and admire the strength of the female characters in TV dramas but may question their morality and personal failings (Xu & Zheng, 2025). This is part of a process that gives rise to the culture of lateral surveillance, whereby women are constantly evaluating and policing each other's performance of independence. From the perspective of research methods, some shortcomings in the research methods used by existing studies are also found. Most existing television drama reception studies contain two aspects, namely, private viewership and public discourse.

The majority of current research still uses traditional methods such as interviews and focus groups, most of which are conducted in private settings. Such methods could reveal personal interpretations but might not fully represent the dynamic, collective, and contested nature of public discourse in the digital age. Researchers could think about more extensive research methods. The meaning-making process of "independent woman" increasingly takes place on social media platforms such as Danmu, Twitter, and Weibo in today's media era. Algorithm suggestions and online gender bias play an important role in shaping the discussion on those social media platforms. Digital ethnography is one valuable method that can help scholars examine such new forms of audience engagement. Analyzing real-time online interactions and contested digital discourses could enable researchers to gain a deeper understanding of how gender norms are challenged and negotiated in the digital public sphere. It also helps provide a more context-sensitive understanding of audience reception.

Conclusion

This study systematically reviews 20 articles regarding female audiences' reception of independent female characters in TV drama series across different cultures. It argues that the audience's reception is not simply a passive consumption process, but rather an active and tense negotiation process. First, "independence" has a fluid meaning. Independence is commonly interpreted in the West as a type of economic independence. However, in the case of transition society or non-Western culture (Malaysia and Turkey), independence is reconstructed within the context of traditional family values, which forms a more integrative model. In terms of theory, this review shows that the audience research field is in a state of transformation from the early "dominance and resistance" binarism to more diverse and complex theories such as intersectionality, affective economies, and digital discourse analysis. The review also tends to show that gender, class, and digital platforms are all playing roles in the reconstruction of women's agencies. On the other hand, this review has some drawbacks.

For example, the quality appraisal of included studies is not formally conducted in this review since its focus is conceptual synthesis rather than the evaluation of research quality, as stated in the methodology section. The scope of literature searching only includes two databases (Web of Science and Scopus) and peer-reviewed articles in English. Though this review could ensure certain academic qualities, it might have generated some language and publication biases. Some valuable studies in local languages and indexed in regional databases might be omitted. Third, this review only took traditional TV dramas as the object of analysis. With the further

diversification of new media, future research can further consider the "independent woman" figure's interpretation and acceptance under different new media platforms. In addition to the shortcomings of this review, there are also some significant gaps in the overall research field. On the one hand, the existing research mainly adopts Western liberal feminist thinking and does not fully analyze the contradiction between empowerment and neoliberal discipline. That is, empowerment, particularly "independence," may give women a sense of liberation but at the same time strengthen the expectation of neoliberal discipline of self-management and personal responsibility.

Existing research often takes the audience of the same country as a whole, ignoring the significant differences among the audience from different regions and ages. Future research can go in two directions to address these shortcomings. One is theoretical; future research can overcome Western liberal feminism, integrate postcolonial theory or local theoretical research, and further explore the contradiction between empowerment, self-management, and individual responsibility. Another is methodology; future research can avoid regarding the audience as a whole and use more microscopic research methods to study specific sub-national areas and target groups to reveal a deeper understanding of the audience's response. In this way, it can be seen that regional subcultures and generations are heterogeneously reconstructing the interpretation of independence in the same country.

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