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## The Marketing Value of Slow-Paced Annual Reality Variety Shows: A Case Study of “Mao Xue Wang” Postprint

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### Abstract

Reality shows are variety programs that employ television and the Internet as primary carriers, integrating multiple artistic forms. The rapid development of the Internet has spurred the creation and utilization of diverse social media platforms, propelling continuous evolution in variety show genres and marketing modalities, thereby affording marketing strategies greater latitude. This article will analyze the innovative year-round variety format and marketing methodologies of the slow-variety reality program ‘Mao Xue Wang.’ Through its lightweight format and extended-cycle content model, it spearheads the optimization and upgrading of variety production models. This shift also engenders expanded innovative space for variety programs at the brand marketing level.

### Full Text

## The Marketing Value of Year-Round Slow Variety Reality Shows: A Case Study of “Mao Xue Wang”

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### Abstract

Reality shows refer to variety programs that primarily use television and the internet as carriers while integrating multiple art forms. The rapid development of the internet has facilitated the emergence and adoption of various social media platforms, driving continuous transformation in variety show formats and marketing methods, thereby opening up new directions for marketing strategies. This paper analyzes the innovative year-round variety format and marketing approach of the slow variety reality show *Mao Xue Wang*, which leads the optimization and upgrading of variety production models through its light content volume and long production cycle. This transformation also creates greater innovation space for brand marketing within variety programs.

**Keywords:** variety show; reality show; marketing

Reality shows in China emerged relatively early, and various fast-consumption variety shows have garnered significant attention through their construction of dramatic conflict and atmospheric storytelling. The ultimate goal of marketing strategies is to establish deeper connections between audiences and programs, foster dependency, and thereby generate greater economic benefits.<sup>1</sup> However, as these reality variety shows have continuously proliferated, audiences have quickly grown “tired” of them. In contrast, slow-lifestyle reality shows gradually became the most sought-after format starting in 2017, with programs such as *Back to Field*, *Chinese Restaurant*, and *Dear Inn* standing out and capturing public attention. In these shows, participants distance themselves from the hustle and congestion of metropolises, choosing to showcase authentic life and construct the utopia that audiences envision in their hearts. As slow variety shows have continued to develop, game missions, product placements, variety scripts, and competitive mechanisms have frequently appeared. While this has indeed generated topical heat for such programs, it has simultaneously caused them to lose the very content and values that slow variety shows originally expressed. The variety show industry continuously innovates under the stimulation of changing audience demands and environmental factors; the previous route of concentrated seasonal blockbuster production can no longer maximize audience attention, naturally failing to secure advertising sponsorships necessary for program development.

## 2. Development Positioning of *Mao Xue Wang*

*Mao Xue Wang* is a new variety show under Tencent Video’s youthful short variety IP brand “Xiao Xian Zong,” following micro-variety programs such as *A Guide to the World* and *Only One Day to Love*. The “Xiao Xian Zong” brand represents a crucial component of Tencent Video’s medium-length video strategy. At its video content ecosystem conference, Tencent Video stated that medium- and long-form video content would be a key focus for future development, with scripted and non-scripted micro-drama content as its main offerings.

Centered on friendship, with “Mao Xue Wang House” as the primary filming location, and featuring weekly gatherings of Mao Buyi, Li Xueqin, and their friends engaged in “sofa chats” as its main content, the light-format, low-cost *Mao Xue Wang* has repeatedly ranked in the top ten of online variety charts since its premiere. Its first season has maintained high reputation and popularity, capturing over 150 hot searches across the internet, receiving a 7.9 rating on Douban and 8.9 on Zhihu, and winning awards including “2021 Pan-Lifestyle Variety Show” at the 2021 Weibo Awards and “2021 Innovative Variety Show” at the Sixth New Culture & Entertainment Awards. As one of the most outstanding variety shows of 2021, this powerful momentum has sparked numerous heated discussions across major social platforms, with the program’s viewership even surpassing many of the platform’s S-tier shows.

### 1. Small: Light Format and Micro-Topics

Tencent Video’s “Xiao Xian Zong” track is characterized by its light format and low cost, with episodes typically running around 20 minutes. This satisfies audience demand for light-content consumption under fragmented reading habits while reducing creators’ trial-and-error costs. Beyond its light format, the “smallness” of “Xiao Xian Zong” also manifests in the subtlety of its topics. Setting aside grand national sentiments, “Xiao Xian Zong” focuses on what is immediately visible to the eye. Beyond *Mao Xue Wang*, which depicts young people’s daily home life, the brand focuses on the three most discussed topics among youth: career, romance, and women. Through its light format and micro-topic characteristics, “Xiao Xian Zong” perfectly matches its target audience’s fragmented reading habits and hot-button issues, achieving strong audience alignment.

### 2. Fresh: Dynamic Content and Hot Topics

Based on the refined, clever, fast-paced, and highly interactive nature of micro-variety shows, the “Xiao Xian Zong” team can sensitively capture audience feedback and make timely adjustments, enabling flexible content creation and experimentation. This achieves multidimensional innovative expression in both program content and format while establishing emotional connections with audiences. Leveraging its lightweight video format, “Xiao Xian Zong” can quickly keep pace with topics and pain points that interest young people. By establishing a more open, timely, and inclusive production system, “Xiao Xian Zong” is not merely a collection of variety shows but rather an ecological philosophy. *Mao Xue Wang* features genuine companionship, relaxed chatting, and daily home life as its main characteristics and content, demonstrating an alternative insight into the slow variety concept—beyond the “utopia” of escaping urban life, healing can also be found in a corner of the city. This has earned audience affection. This represents not only Tencent Video’s experimental success in laying out its medium-length video track but also its success in reforming the expression form of slow variety shows.

### 3. Year-Round Variety: Companionship and Authentic Resonance

Year-round variety shows focus on personalities, relationships, and atmosphere, whereas seasonal programs focus on stories, conflicts, and plots. From the perspective of audiences’ active search logic for long-form video, seasonal programs actually attract audiences with short-term effectiveness and high attrition rates. When a seasonal program ends, audience attention is likely to be drawn to other content, posing a challenge to long-term audience retention on the platform. In contrast, once audiences develop viewing habits through long-term output in year-round variety shows, they exhibit strong emotional and behavioral stickiness. Year-round variety shows must be “cultivated” —only when audiences have sufficient awareness of the platform’s IPs and artists can year-round variety shows achieve high input-output ratios. The two MCs of *Mao Xue Wang*,

Mao Buyi and Li Xueqin, originate from Tencent Video's series *The Coming One* and *Rock & Roast* respectively, making them already beloved by platform audiences. Thus, the year-round variety format already possesses a certain growth starting point from its existing audience base.

Furthermore, compared to seasonal variety shows, the keyword for year-round variety has always been clear: “sense of companionship.” What it most wants to deliver within this “sense of companionship” is resonance with audiences’ lives, which is why *Mao Xue Wang* centers its theme on social interaction. *Mao Xue Wang* features intimate friend gatherings in the living room, with Mao Buyi and Li Xueqin inviting friends over for meals and conversation. Young people striving in big cities actually have strong social needs, and the process of playing with friends is itself a healing process. Especially under pandemic threats, young people have an even stronger desire for friendship and community life. To present authentic social interaction that young people believe in, it is essential to start from the guests’ original relationships. *Mao Xue Wang*, developed from the interaction patterns between Mao Buyi and Li Xueqin, maintains a similar style, inviting a different friend each episode for a meal at home, with conversation content serving as the program content. However, “what to talk about” and “what to eat” are also crucial for achieving audience resonance, which is why the production team selects trivial matters from daily life. This fundamentally differs from what attracts audiences to seasonal variety shows, as those require strong directorial intervention in program progression through powerful plot settings, using conflictual storylines and dramatic arcs to gain market exposure and attention.

When seasonal variety shows actually air, what the entire program will present is already clearly defined, with little possibility for change. However, year-round variety shows have sufficient space to accompany audience growth and make changes according to their needs. *Mao Xue Wang*'s authentic, free, and bold program design aims to approximate the most natural state of social interaction, as only this can resonate with young audiences and accompany them through different moments of real life. This steady, long-term creative model also brings year-round variety shows closer to audiences. This intangible further communication with audiences, built upon the program's foundation of authentic companionship, also enhances the program's sense of companionship. *Mao Xue Wang* has grasped the keyword of “companionship” for year-round variety, using original guest relationships and free-flow design within its social theme to achieve emotional resonance with audiences.

### 3. Brand Marketing Strategies of *Mao Xue Wang*

#### 1. Diverse Scenarios and Extended Cycle Lay the Foundation for Brand Marketing Innovation

In recent years, brand marketing in variety shows has mostly involved simple and direct exposure of brand logos and products or emphasized placement

ratios, advocating an “advertising-as-content” approach to create commercial custom variety shows. As a representative year-round variety show, *Mao Xue Wang* prioritizes innovation in brand marketing, leveraging program advantages and customizing solutions based on brand needs to achieve a balance between content quality and commercial viability. It builds brands through program content itself, disseminates positive energy and correct value orientation, and enhances program quality to establish a strong reputation. In terms of advertising integration, it optimizes advertisements and innovates profit models. Dull and lengthy advertisements often provoke audience aversion, whereas advertisements with personality and distinctive features can both resonate deeply and secure advertising profits.<sup>2</sup> The temporal and spatial advantages that emerge alongside continuous innovative output lay the foundation for brand marketing innovation.

*Mao Xue Wang* comprehensively documents young people’ s home life, encompassing both physical scenarios including bedrooms, kitchens, and bathrooms, as well as content scenarios such as dining, cleaning, gatherings, gardening, exercise, and TV watching. These rich scenarios can accommodate the marketing needs of different vertical brands, providing ample space and perspective for brand integration—whether decorating rooms with IKEA products or accenting life with beverages like Ruixing Coffee—integrating brands and their products appropriately into program content and making them important carriers for conveying life’ s small but certain happiness.

As a year-round variety show, *Mao Xue Wang* features a long cycle with distinct phases, which not only avoids the aesthetic fatigue caused by 52 weekly episodes but also reduces the probability of audience attrition from long gaps between seasons. This advantage creates a breathable yet intimate audience ecosystem. In its marketing approach, *Mao Xue Wang* combines content scenarios with brand needs to customize distinctive marketing strategies, while also coordinating with brands to create themed activities at important nodes and leveraging both official program accounts and artists’ social media accounts for dissemination. This process of integrating multiple resources maximizes brand communication potential.

## **2. One-Stop Shopping: Constructing a Closed Loop for Brand Marketing**

How to leverage existing program advantages to maximize brand marketing effectiveness is a major proposition that variety shows are currently exploring for commercial monetization. *Mao Xue Wang* insists on co-creating program content with brand needs, presenting interesting life themes based on young people’ s interests and lifestyles, and subtly integrating brand content related to IKEA and Ruixing Coffee. Through creative recommendations, it has already established a certain methodology. In terms of marketing format, it abandons traditional brand exposure and mid-roll advertisements, placing extreme emphasis on the compatibility between brands and program scenarios. It advocates

precise integration that caters to program scenario needs, using scenario-based recommendations and immersive experiences to gradually weaken audience resistance to passive placement and subtly trigger purchasing awareness. This deep, flexible, and highly penetrative marketing approach allows product placement to achieve intimate interaction with audiences in the shortest time, thereby rapidly enhancing brand attention, awareness, and value connotation, while subtly conveying the product' s core values and functions to audiences.<sup>3</sup>

Taking IKEA' s integration as an example, *Mao Xue Wang* starts from actual life needs, binding program scenarios with guest personalities to create one-square-meter spaces for music, reading, and pets tailored to Mao Buyi, Li Xueqin, and their pet Yuanbao. While enhancing their life happiness index, it conveys the brand' s philosophy and warmth. Additionally, *Mao Xue Wang* transforms guests into "ordinary consumers" through offline immersive store visits for authentic shopping and genuine recommendations, creating real resonance with the broad consumer base and subtly fostering goodwill toward the brand, greatly stimulating the desire to visit the same offline stores.

In terms of marketing targets, *Mao Xue Wang* breaks the singularity of subjects, covering everything from personal experiences to recommendations among friends, and broadly conveying the brand' s core selling points. Taking Ruixing Coffee' s integration as an example, Mao Buyi and Li Xueqin might drink a cup to pass time during leisure, relieve fatigue after housework, or serve it to guests. In authentic life scenarios, they mention Ruixing' s new product selling points, recommending to audiences the characteristics that Ruixing understands young people' s needs and that its new products taste good. The entire recommendation process is "remarkably smooth," accelerating audiences' purchasing decisions.

Beyond in-show content integration, *Mao Xue Wang* extends brand marketing beyond the program, integrating and utilizing the program IP' s virtual image to create customized creative materials for brands, thereby strengthening marketing effects both online and offline. *Mao Xue Wang' s* inherent characteristics of youthfulness, strong healing power, and warm companionship not only add new highlights and selling points to customized brand materials but also empower the construction of a youthful brand image, further promoting the leap in brand marketing value.

*Mao Xue Wang* allows audiences to develop interest through brand integration into program scenarios, attracts sustained interest through guest experiences and recommendations, and completes purchases through effective brand information delivery, thereby constructing a one-stop consumption chain. This series of tactics ensures audience acceptance of and goodwill toward brand integration. Compared to traditional one-way, hard-sell advertising, product placement adopts an indirect, tactful, and restrained appeal method to convey advertising information, possessing natural affinity and subtlety.<sup>4</sup> It also further strengthens the ultimate effectiveness of brand marketing, thereby endorsing the brand marketing value of year-round variety shows.

### 3. Differentiated Content Positioning Supports Program Monetization

Since Chinese video platforms began experimenting with paid services in 2010, more than eight years of development have brought earth-shaking changes in user recognition, acceptance, and payment behavior, primarily manifested in: gradually strengthening user payment awareness and continuously expanding the paid user base; and the gradual improvement of a high-quality, diversified paid video content system.<sup>5</sup> The variety show *Mao Xue Wang* employs a VIP membership payment system on Tencent Video, where users pay a certain fee to enjoy VIP membership services for a corresponding time period. The formation and maturation of the paid membership system can bring considerable traffic to video platforms' upstream and downstream sectors, promoting the continuous development and production of high-quality content; while complete and diverse high-quality content can bring more new members to video platforms, forming a mutually complementary and promotive ecological closed loop.<sup>6</sup> In terms of program content positioning, *Mao Xue Wang* lacks flashy elitism or idyllic pastoral aesthetics. Although the two MCs are celebrities, they possess a strong life atmosphere and inherent “working-class” attributes, making their lifestyles no different from most urban youth. Program guests grow vegetables they like with friends' encouragement, gather around tables for hotpot meals, exchange compliments; they discuss life-saving tips, rejoice over small bargains; help post “friend-seeking videos” for besties on social media; pour out stories of satisfaction and frustration to understanding confidantes; order takeout when too lazy to host friends, and complain about elders' quirks over meals together—these are the most authentic portrayals of contemporary youth. *Mao Xue Wang* requires no strong collisions or forceful value output; today's youth dislike being lectured. Simply presenting the most authentic state makes it a good program.

### 4. Mutual Success Between Variety Show and Brands

As a new species in the industry, year-round variety shows possess both novelty in program format and innovation in content form, providing ample exploration space for the differentiated development and expression of commercial value. *Mao Xue Wang*'s cooperation with IKEA and Ruixing Coffee in its first season demonstrates both pioneering spirit and experimental nature, greatly expanding the imaginative space and monetization value of year-round variety shows in commercial marketing. Reviewing these youthful marketing strategies with Ruixing and IKEA, *Mao Xue Wang*'s achievements are evident—the former saw brand awareness increase by 35.7%, brand favorability increase by 46.2%, and purchase intent increase by 47.0%; the latter saw brand awareness increase by 30.7%, brand favorability increase by 46.6%, and purchase intent increase by 35.1%. This data series demonstrates that deep cooperation with *Mao Xue Wang* can achieve dual leaps in brand value and product sales, serving as major testament to the mutual success between year-round variety shows and partner brands.

Beyond established brand tasks, *Mao Xue Wang* has also unintentionally popularized lifestyle peripheral products such as grilled sausages, sausage grills, and air fryers. In particular, the grilled sausages made by Mao Buyi and Li Xueqin using an air fryer have become the program's signature food, even serving as visit gifts backstage at *Family Fun New Year*. This exemplifies *Mao Xue Wang's* strong product-driving capability and provides a reference for subsequent brand marketing. From multifaceted brand cooperation to the serendipitous popularity of lifestyle peripherals, this represents not only a microcosm of *Mao Xue Wang's* commercial value but also a manifestation of the balance between content and commerce.

In terms of *Mao Xue Wang's* first-season achievements across various dimensions, it has not only accumulated a loyal audience base but also developed replicable marketing experience, undoubtedly providing clearer direction and support for future content creation and brand marketing. This also lays the foundation for attracting more brands to develop marketing models. It is foreseeable that in upcoming episodes, backed by guest interaction scenarios and content atmosphere, combined with relevant fast-moving consumer goods brands' needs, the production team and brand partners will have sufficient time and space to jointly explore more lifestyle-oriented and grounded marketing touchpoints, develop more variety show marketing tactics, further unlock marketing codes for target consumer groups, and create a year-round variety show model where content quality and commercial value advance side by side.

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