

The Development of Music Reality Shows in the Postmodern Context: A Case Study of “The Rap of China” (Postprint)

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Abstract

“The Rap of China: Peak Battle” is a Chinese self-produced hip-hop music reality competition program launched in 2022. Since its debut, it has become a phenomenal hit that maintains its popularity to this day. In an era marked by severe market homogenization, the program’s emergence has created a refreshing experience for music reality shows, embodying postmodernist characteristics within its production. It has also reintroduced hip-hop music to the general public, transformed audience perceptions of traditional music reality programs, challenged existing prejudices, and created a seamlessly integrated model that perfectly fuses advertising with reality show content.

Full Text

The Development of Music Reality Shows in the Postmodern Context—Taking *The Rap of China: Peak Battle* as an Example

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Abstract: *The Rap of China: Peak Battle* is a self-produced Chinese hip-hop music reality show that premiered in 2022 and has remained a phenomenon-level hit to this day. At a time when homogenization is rampant, the show has created a refreshing experience for music reality programs, embodying postmodernist characteristics. It has reintroduced hip-hop music to the public, transformed audience perceptions of traditional music reality shows, challenged existing prejudices, and pioneered a seamless integration of advertising and reality programming.

Keywords: music reality show, postmodern, advertising

1. Innovation in the Postmodern Context

The essence of postmodernism lies in the symbolization of human rebellious emotions, reflecting the conflict between humanity and inhumanity. First, it pioneers spiritual wealth based on linguistic information; second, it generates numerous utopian ideas that transform actual society.

1.1 Innovative Language Standardization

The most effective expression of rebellious emotion manifests in lyrical content and performers' rap styles. Traditional music reality shows typically adopt rigid lyrics and formulaic promotion, easily triggering audience resistance. *The Rap of China: Peak Battle*, drawing on postmodern characteristics of “illogic and critical emphasis,” innovatively constructs “scattered and fragmented” lyrical content. Beyond its surface-level entertainment, the show invites analysis of its deeper implications.

From the perspective of traditional Chinese works, only poetry exhibits such jumpiness and fragmentation, with regulated verse particularly emphasizing tonal patterns and rhymes—representing a key convergence point between hip-hop and traditional culture. These seemingly illogical lyrics do not impede audience comprehension of their underlying meaning; instead, they disrupt conventional viewing patterns, creating a novel experience for music reality programming.

1.2 Creating Musical Novelty

A successful music reality show must embody universal musical principles. Historically, music belongs to traditional artistic categories with diverse forms and rich meanings. *The Rap of China: Peak Battle* emphasizes musicality while diminishing lyrical 寓意. However, shows focusing on music theory and meaning do exist, such as CCTV's Youth Singer TV Grand Prix, which created highly specialized distinctions among audience segments through vertical exploration of specific demographic needs. Yet this approach limits audience reach, remaining confined to an “insiders appreciate the craft, outsiders watch the spectacle” atmosphere, unable to satisfy interactive needs between viewers and content, thereby weakening the show's influence.

In the postmodern context, Western art forms like hip-hop and graffiti have entered Chinese audiences' 视野. As a subcultural form, hip-hop's destructive and folk qualities have propelled it into a vital and rapidly growing component of mainstream culture. *The Rap of China: Peak Battle* firmly grasps this cultural frontier, promoting the fusion of Western music with domestic traditional culture. By leveraging a novel variety show core, it guides audiences into a refreshing musical domain. While hip-hop maintains a leading position in Western countries, it possesses a novel character within China. This new musical style motivates audiences to voluntarily explore “new” genres, establishing advantages for domestic music reality show development. The show breaks

traditional music's universality principles by prioritizing musical appeal, weakening the “show” format, and displaying musical connotation, thereby creating a future trend for music reality programming.

1.3 Reducing the Essentialization of Reality Shows

Beyond musical professionalism, music reality shows emphasize the manifestation of “show”—a term derived from foreign variety programs that engages audiences through low-threshold talent displays for contestant selection, development, and packaging. Over the past two decades, music reality shows have undergone three major transformations: first, *Super Girl* emphasized grassroots characteristics and audience voting rights, using ballots to increase participation; second, *The Voice of China* built upon grassroots elements while highlighting approachability and professionalism; third, *The Rap of China: Peak Battle* refines *Super Girl*'s mechanism by reflecting 海选 (audition) processes onscreen while effectively streamlining professional elements. Reintroducing this original reality show format after 18 years constitutes innovation in itself.

In the postmodern context, consumption concepts have reached their peak, continuously evolving within cultural arts and giving rise to celebrity culture as an artistic byproduct. Traditional music reality shows centered on cultivating grassroots singers with weak competitive appeal among contestants. Conversely, *The Rap of China: Peak Battle* features strong star effects, with celebrities participating not to promote amateur development but to introduce emerging hip-hop music to the domestic market. Furthermore, celebrity cultivation through online media commercialization advances consumption concepts. The show's contestants are well-known domestic rappers such as Zhang Zhenyue and Liu Cong, and audiences “consume” the show by expressing admiration for their favorite stars.

While the show partially abandons grassroots and people-friendly characteristics, it does not lose its reality show essence. Instead, it promotes domestic musical diversity from an optimal efficiency perspective. Although *The Rap of China: Peak Battle* undeniably contains some deliberately sensational content, it prioritizes highlighting cultural similarities and progressiveness.

2. Impact of Product Placement Integration

Modern advertising integrates with reality shows through various creative methods: MC and celebrity endorsements, subtitles, decorative fonts, props, and other manifestations that fully incorporate advertisements into programs. *The Rap of China: Peak Battle* customizes advertising presentation, achieving genuine fusion. Contestants use Nongfu Spring bottles for battle pairings 抽签 (draws), brand logos name competition themes, and most notably, the show inserts rap advertisements where popular performers freestyle about products, creating a unique advertising format that feels neither intrusive nor 反感 (off-putting). Instead, it aligns with the show's style, enabling audiences to watch

advertisements attentively.

The show has pioneered numerous innovative advertising approaches: collaborative creative freestyle ads with popular contestants, situational ads during contestant visits, product displays throughout competition progression, and post-production decorative fonts and subtitles. These formats satisfy modern youth aesthetics and attract attention through creative advertising. Primarily, the show employs four product placement methods: prop placement, scene placement, dialogue placement, and sound effect placement.

2.1 Prop Placement

Prop placement refers to products displayed in films or television programs. *The Rap of China: Peak Battle*'s advertisers span beverages, food, daily necessities, and transportation, including Nongfu Spring, McDonald's, Xiaomi phones, and Chevrolet automobiles. These products appear through varied methods: contestants consume McDonald's and Nongfu Spring while waiting or evaluating performances; Nongfu Spring bottle caps are used for opponent selection draws with names written inside; Xiaomi phones are used for photography during highlight segments or guest performances; contestants arrive at the venue driving or riding in Chevrolet vehicles. Regardless of format, prop placement's key function is increasing product exposure to stimulate purchases while partially alleviating program tension and enhancing comfort.

2.2 Scene Placement

Scene placement involves brand appearances within program settings or as part of entire scenes. In *The Rap of China: Peak Battle*, scene placement has become a highlight and signature feature. For instance, background walls display Nongfu Spring logos during filming; interview and evaluation backdrops feature Nongfu Spring lettering; McDonald's logos appear before producers and contestants; different Nongfu Spring flavors are placed beside seats during interviews. This ubiquitous approach significantly increases audience attention probability. Regarding scene placement, audiences typically neither reject nor particularly favor it, often failing to notice it specifically.

2.3 Dialogue Placement

Dialogue placement integrates product or brand information into character conversations in films, television dramas, or variety shows. Through dialogue, it straightforwardly presents product features to audiences, facilitating information transmission while enhancing emotional connections or highlighting character personalities. As a music reality show, *The Rap of China: Peak Battle* contains fewer dialogues than other genres. After winning competitions, teams are rewarded with McDonald's snacks, and conversations center around these products—an approach that avoids audience annoyance while creating intimacy through casual chat. Other dialogue placements involve hosts or guests casually

inquiring about product features or flavors to introduce advertisements, a more direct method that increases product appearance rates.

2.4 Sound Effect Placement

Sound effect placement utilizes music, lyrics, and sound effects for advertising. In *The Rap of China: Peak Battle*, sound effect placement primarily manifests through rap advertisements. Popular contestants perform rap ads that, first, endow advertisements with distinctive character and flavor, and second, feature strong rhythms that break conventional boring presentations, refreshing audiences. This novel sound effect placement is particularly popular among youth.

The fusion of rap advertising copy with products perfectly aligns product features with the show's hip-hop theme. The advertising copy is highly distinctive, catchy, and easily comprehensible. However, the placement doesn't exist solely for advertising purposes; it fits naturally within program progression and content, inserted mid-segment or at endings for greater acceptance.

These four placement methods yield varying effectiveness. Scene placement, appearing on background walls or beside contestants with logo displays, features short durations but gains audience attention through frequent repetition. Audiences typically neither reject nor strongly notice this format. Prop placement proves more effective than scene placement, as frequent product use and multiple 画面 (shots) create stronger impressions. Prop placement is more memorable and harder to ignore, potentially influencing purchase intentions.

Dialogue placement creates the strongest audience impressions among the four methods. Audiences pay attention to their favorite stars' words due to celebrity effects, and frequent product mentions leave deep impressions, prompting consideration during similar product purchases.

Sound effect placement in *The Rap of China: Peak Battle* has garnered widespread acclaim for exceptional effectiveness. First, as a hip-hop program, rap advertising copy aligns with the theme naturally and unobtrusively. Second, this presentation method has never appeared in previous music reality shows, offering novel form and catchy melodies that generate strong audience engagement.

3. Development Recommendations for Music Reality Shows

Music reality shows cannot remain stagnant in the *Super Girl* era. While approachability and people-friendly elements are important, the key focus lies in rooting programs within local culture. *The Rap of China: Peak Battle* currently enjoys innate advantages built by the postmodern context, yet postmodernism also presents numerous drawbacks. "Decentralization" and "grassroots nature" can affect the show's 寓意 (implied meaning), making the integration of postmodernism with contemporary audiences crucial.

3.1 Unification of Fragmentation and Centralization

Both current media and postmodern contexts exhibit “fragmentation”—a sociological term common in postmodern theory referring to the decomposition of things into parts, resulting in lost integrity. The show’s onscreen lyrics display scattered and fragmented characteristics, presenting unique features as a new art form. However, fragmented content dissolves intended meaning, easily leading audiences into centerless 狂欢 (carnival). An excellent music reality show must maintain professional focus. Yet CCTV’s Youth Singer TV Grand Prix, despite its strong musical professionalism, ultimately declined—its failure warrants audience reflection. To prevent recurrence, music reality shows should unify fragmentation and centralization during implementation, creating excellent yet entertaining programs.

3.2 Inheritance and Innovation as Eternal Themes

Music reality shows can be simplified into “music” and “show.” Traditional music shows emphasize “show,” arranging conflicts to attract audiences. However, excessive entertainment focus causes loss of meaning and quality decline. *The Rap of China: Peak Battle* presents language and behavior that audiences cannot directly comprehend, using the “show” format to align with rap music and lead future music programs. Music reality shows should identify outstanding content within programs to lead Chinese cultural dissemination and provide refreshing audience experiences—this represents the essence for continuation and development.

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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