

## An Analysis of the Success Factors of Talent Shows from the Perspective of Narrative Strategy: A Case Study of “Sisters Who Make Waves” Postprint

**Authors:** Jin Yuwei

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### Abstract

In recent years, China’s variety shows have been undergoing rapid development, with various innovative programs entering the public sphere. In this era of equality and progress, women’s status has garnered increasing societal attention. Mango TV has astutely responded to this prevailing trend by launching its self-produced variety show “Sisters Who Make Waves,” which primarily invites female artists aged 30 and above to participate in competitive performances, ultimately debuting as a group. This initiative has captured widespread attention from both society and the broader female demographic. This paper will analyze the key factors contributing to the program’s success from three perspectives: narrative characteristics, narrative framework, and narrative discourse.

### Full Text

#### Analyzing the Success Factors of Talent Shows from a Narrative Strategy Perspective: A Case Study of *Sisters Who Make Waves*

Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing 100000

**Abstract:** In recent years, China’s variety show industry has experienced rapid development, with numerous innovative programs entering the public consciousness. In this era of equality and progress, women’s status has garnered increasing attention. Mango TV capitalized on this trend by launching its original variety show *Sisters Who Make Waves*, which invites female artists aged 30 and above to compete in performances and ultimately debut as a girl group. The program has captured widespread social attention and resonated deeply with female audiences. This paper analyzes the key success factors of the show through

three narrative dimensions: narrative characteristics, narrative framework, and narrative discourse.

**Keywords:** narrative strategy; success factors; *Sisters Who Make Waves*

As a crucial component of television art communication, variety shows serve as a primary platform for audience entertainment and stress relief. In recent years, China's variety show market has experienced explosive growth, with platforms like Mango TV, iQiyi, and Tencent launching diverse original programs tailored to different demographics, striving to capture viewer loyalty in an intensely competitive ratings environment. For a variety show to stand out, it must not only cater to audience preferences but also possess distinctive and novel features. From a storytelling perspective, an engaging variety show should reflect the zeitgeist of modern society while addressing hot-button social issues that resonate with viewers. Additionally, artist selection should feature unique personalities whose character positioning and scripting align with both the program's theme and their individual traits.

Mango TV's inaugural celebrity girl group development program, *Sisters Who Make Waves*, adopts the theme "Thirty and Inspiring, Thirty and Established, Thirty and Magnificent" to express its aspirations and blessings for the female participants. Since its premiere in June 2020, the show has amassed 250 million views and received widespread acclaim from netizens on Douban. Recently, Mango TV has aired the third season, which continues to generate heated discussions on Weibo, sparking strong social reactions and capturing public attention. This paper selects *Sisters Who Make Waves* as a case study to conduct a detailed analysis of the narrative strategies underlying its success.

## II. Analysis of Program Narrative Characteristics

Narrative originates from literature, where every literary work can be analyzed through aspects such as theme, subject, structure, mode, and language. The narrative model of variety shows builds upon literary narration, designed according to the program's concept, format, and unique characteristics to suit its expressive form. The choice of narrative approach profoundly influences a show's quality and audience appeal.

### (一) Narrative Themes Keep Pace with the Times

The year 2018 was dubbed the "first year of idol groups," with talent shows primarily targeting young men and women in their early twenties. However, some Douban users predicted that mature women over 30 would become the main force breaking through the idol group circle in the future. The television drama *Thirty Only* focused on urban women in their thirties, exploring female growth, work-family balance, career development, and self-actualization from a female perspective, showcasing the courage and decisiveness of thirty-something women "riding the waves." *Sisters Who Make Waves* similarly presents the diversity and infinite possibilities of women, conveying positive female values

while breaking societal stereotypes about women and traditional groups. The program demonstrates the combined strength and resilience of women over 30 and their courage to explore life's value.

By centering on hot social topics and transforming them into a unique talent show format, the program both entertains audiences and broadens its scope, opening a new pathway for discussing contemporary issues. In Chinese female-oriented variety shows, the portrayal of women carries significant practical meaning for shaping contemporary female images, reflecting their worldviews, redefining Chinese women's values, and fostering a sense of self-awareness. The most distinctive feature of *Sisters Who Make Waves* is its invitation of female artists around age 30 to compete, delivering new values to mature women in society. The show demonstrates that they are not merely mothers or wives but can be themselves—capable of breaking through self-imposed limitations, courageously pursuing their own values, and achieving growth and recognition. The gradual revelation of female self-consciousness throughout the program, along with the participants' confidence and beauty, inspires other women in society, representing a crucial factor in the show's positive reception.

## (二) Narrative Plot Satisfies Audience Pseudo-Participation

American political commentator Walter Lippmann introduced the concept of “pseudo-environment” in his study of public opinion. He argued that the pseudo-environment is an information environment created through mass communication activities. The human mind can imagine this pseudo-environment and respond accordingly, which influences actual objective conditions and constrains human cognition and action. Lippmann believed that “subjective reality” is built upon objective reality and mediated through the pseudo-environment presented by media—where media content satisfies audience pseudo-participation and creates resonance.

A prevalent social mentality today involves scrutinizing or judging women based on age—whether they have reached a suitable marriage age or are appropriate for a job—with judgmental elements pervasive everywhere. Consequently, most women in society, constrained by this scrutinizing perspective, have fallen into age anxiety. A survey conducted by China Youth Daily and Wenjuan.com among over 2,000 respondents revealed that 40.5% frequently experience age anxiety, while 52.5% occasionally feel it, with the 30-34 age group being most susceptible [1]. The broadcast of *Sisters Who Make Waves* brings ordinary people closer to celebrities while breaking the age barrier of 30+. The participants' efforts to surpass themselves, their authentic self-presentation, and their free-spirited life values constantly showcase their female charm. By repeatedly revisiting their youthful stories, the sisters evoke emotional memories in female audiences, encouraging numerous female viewers to more courageously discover their optimal path to self-actualization. Simultaneously, when female audiences cheer for the 30+ sisters on stage, they are essentially encouraging and comforting their pseudo-environment selves, thereby alleviating their age anxiety.

### III. Analysis of Program Narrative Framework

The central idea of this framework involves capturing and reconstructing the external world. Narrative structure constitutes a crucial element of overall storytelling, representing the development trends and logic of characters and events. Within the entire narrative system, *Sisters Who Make Waves* employs a narrative framework that makes the story of 30+ women “riding the waves” more logical, fluid, and spectacular in its presentation.

#### (一) Nested Narrative Framework

*Sisters Who Make Waves* is an inspirational program that tells the story of female artists undergoing training and evaluation to ultimately complete the group formation mission. Within this narrative system, telling this story completely and movingly becomes particularly important. In talent shows, narrative structure primarily reflects the overall story development trend—that is, the program’s game rules. *Sisters Who Make Waves* adopts a “nested” narrative structure, using large frameworks to encompass smaller ones and building upon multi-layered stories.

In this program, its competition rules and objectives can be regarded as narrative logic, which can be divided into three levels. The first level represents the program’s ultimate goal: selecting outstanding individual participants to create a high-quality girl group. To achieve this final objective, participants must be assigned and challenged, leading to the second level: completing stage performances under the audience’s watchful eyes and determining winners through live audience voting. To highlight the preciousness of performance stages and participants’ efforts, the program establishes a third level comprising more detailed stories within each competition to enhance atmosphere. This third level serves as a subset of the second-level stories, enriching participants’ personalities and program content while also forming part of the first level, strengthening confidence in the ultimate goal. This nested narrative structure allows a theme to repeatedly appear and be reinforced across multiple stories, with each story reflecting participants’ confidence in the team. Simultaneously, in terms of format, the program focuses on layered plotlines, combining life and competition so audiences can understand participants’ daily lives while also appreciating their stage performances after diligent training.

#### (二) Warm Narrative Moves Audience

As a talent show, the “competition” mission runs throughout the entire program. Competition rules constitute the fundamental tone of program narrative, serving as an important means to guide program direction and direct participant and audience behavior. Rule formulation concerns both narrative trajectory and participants’ states and story presentation, making whether the competition rules are reasonable and valuable clearly evident in the program.

Compared to other girl group talent shows, *Sisters Who Make Waves* appears

more approachable in its team formation and classification methods. The program's grouping shows no obvious hierarchical differences, with no distinct class distinctions in aspects like food, clothing, and accommodation. Moreover, each participant maintains an equal and peaceful mindset, making no special or unreasonable demands regarding camera angles, shooting methods, or team positioning. For example, team members frequently praise and encourage each other, working hard toward common team goals. Yi Nengjing voluntarily assumed leadership responsibilities, guiding her teammates in singing until she became hoarse. This demonstrates that the program features no intense or aggressive competitive environment but instead presents precious friendships among participants and understanding and tolerance among women. During editing, the program avoids malicious editing techniques, instead emphasizing participants' appreciation and support in an alternative manner that moves audiences with warmth. In the recently aired third season, team leader Na Ying's "motherly" care and concern for other team members also resonates with audiences, with the mutual care and greetings among sisters adding another layer of meaning beyond competition to the program.

#### IV. Program Narrative Discourse Analysis

Narrative theory contains two central viewpoints: one is story—what someone does; the other is discourse—how it is narrated. "What to say," "how to say it," and "from what position to say it"—that is, discourse content, form, and tendency—are all constituted by complex forces, with the systematic expression of these forces representing an ideology. The communication process involves meaning transmission, conveying both information and significance.

##### (一) The Female Body Under Public Gaze

The body serves as the primary expressive form of language. Compared to men, women's bodies possess greater tension and more easily trigger others' voyeurism and self-expression. For female celebrities, beauty and physique constitute their greatest discursive capital, and *Sisters Who Make Waves* maximizes the expression of the female body.

First, the program provides sisters with songs and dances to better showcase their bodies, making bodily display a fundamental competition rule. Second, sisters often select clothing styles that reveal their body curves. Notably, this linguistic expression of bodily display and the content of independence and confidence challenge societal norms regarding female bodies to some extent while also intensifying female audiences' anxiety about physique and appearance. The program's underlying logic of "traffic consumption" and "female" body consumption remains unable to escape the constraints of consumerism.

In the third season, participant Zhang Tian'ai's physique drew continuous praise and admiration from other celebrities and audiences, with comments like "You're so thin" frequently appearing. As Baudrillard stated: "The obsession with body

lines and slenderness is so profound precisely because it constitutes a form of violence” [2]. From being abused to self-abuse, from passive to active, this represents a new form of violence. This type of girl group, after meticulous design, creates perfect physiques, and through this phenomenon-level promotion, unconsciously raises expectations for women’s bodies, creating greater anxiety about “substandard physiques” among participants and audiences. Under such pressure and anxiety, women increasingly focus on body shaping, further catering to male consumption psychology regarding female bodies. Pursuing beautiful appearances originally represents an expression of female self-awareness awakening. However, currently, the term “more beautiful” is judged from a male perspective, not aimed at achieving one’s own value but satisfying others through “to-be-looked-at-ness.” “Pleasing others” has become a subconscious psychological characteristic among women.

## (二) Female Beauty Under Diverse Aesthetics

Some scholars have noted in books about women that female temperament is relatively weaker than male temperament, more emotional and easily controlled by feelings, and generally kinder. This habitual consciousness leads women to measure themselves against such standards and behave “femininely.” Traditional concepts closely link female beauty and femininity with women’s age and appearance.

*Sisters Who Make Waves* breaks previous thinking and aesthetic views, expanding the conventional vision for variety shows featuring women over 30 and making this long-“invisible” female group in media no longer “ignorable.” The talent show accurately captures the era’s emotions and, through its care for women, conveys new era values about female life to society. Its existence helps enhance women’s autonomy and weaken age-related female stereotypes.

Due to traditional cultural influence, mass media always focuses on young and beautiful women, while wrinkles, age spots, and other signs of aging on women are not tolerated and are often consciously erased. In the program, participants each have their own merits and characteristics: Wang Xinling’s sweet style, Ning Jing’s queenly style, and Zhang Qiang’s disco queen style all prominently display individual charisma. They use their own ways to tell audiences that being 30 is nothing—everyone must be themselves, and you are priceless. Participants hope to break age constraints and the monotonous, stereotypical aesthetic of thin, fair-skinned female beauty, instead showcasing the charm of mature women.

*Sisters Who Make Waves* innovates in both theme and format, demonstrating attention to and innovation in narrative context through its nested narrative strategy. The program’s innovation lies in its focus on 30+ women, aiming to promote their spirit of riding the waves and facing adversity, breaking age constraints, and spreading positive values. Additionally, the program positions itself to encourage women to strive for improvement and guide audiences, regardless of their life circumstances, conveying positive values to other women

in society—the message that everyone can, like the participating artists, break age constraints and courageously be themselves and improve themselves. *Sisters Who Make Waves* has made beneficial explorations in building female communities and displaying female beauty, which can effectively resist constraints on female bodies to some extent but has not completely broken free from the aesthetic shackles of traditional female groups emphasizing “youthful beauty” and “uniformity.”

For society, governments and media should promote and support female power more extensively, strengthen women’s independent consciousness, elevate their social status, avoid being constrained by others and traditional ideologies, pay more attention to women’s workplace dilemmas, and provide reasonable solutions so that women no longer occupy a lower position in society. From an individual perspective, this would further break traditional female aesthetic views and fully demonstrate the diversification of female beauty. Meanwhile, the television media industry still has a long way to go, must not forget its original aspirations, should be brave in innovation, and prepare for more phenomenal female-oriented variety shows.

[1] Wang Pinzhi. Survey Shows 30-34 Age Group Most Prone to Age Anxiety [N]. China Youth Daily, 2020-07-09(10).

[2] Jean Baudrillard. The Consumer Society [M]. Nanjing University Press: Contemporary Academic Prism Translation Series, 201410.238.

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

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