

How Competitive Reality Shows Connect with Audiences in the Post-Television Era: An Affective Economy Perspective—A Case Study of “Sisters Who Make Waves” Postprint

Authors: Zhang Yinxiu

Date: 2023-03-24T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* introduces the concept of “affective economy”: “It attempts to understand the emotional basis of consumer decision-making as the driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions,” positing the affective economy as a new configuration of marketing theory. In the post-television era, the concept of television is no longer merely a medium or a mode of communication; with the development of all-media convergence, programs broadcast via television have acquired additional channels for interactive communication with audiences. The post-television era, characterized by all-media convergence and fragmented dissemination, has compelled competitive reality shows to place greater emphasis on interactive audience participation. Through the process of interactive participation between programs and audiences, it becomes possible to effectively capture the emotions of target audiences, conduct affective communication by leveraging distinctive program content tailored to the emotional characteristics of the audience, transmit the core values of the program to audiences, thereby fostering audience identification, and ultimately achieving the objective of audience consumption of the values promoted by the program. This paper examines, from the perspective of the affective economy, how advertisers and competitive reality shows interact and engage with audiences in the post-television era, and through what specific interactive methods they convey program values to audiences and promote advertising products.

Full Text

How Competitive Reality Shows Connect with Audiences in the Post-Television Era from the Perspective of Emotional Economy: A Case Study of *Sisters Who Make Waves*

(Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing 101100)

Abstract: Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* introduces the concept of “emotional economy,” which “seeks to understand the emotional basis of consumer decision-making as a driving force behind viewing and purchasing decisions,” positing emotional economy as a new configuration of marketing theory [1]. In the post-television era, television is no longer merely a medium or mode of communication. With the development of omnimedia convergence, programs broadcast on television have gained more channels for interaction and communication with audiences [2]. The post-television era of omnimedia convergence and fragmented communication has made competitive reality shows increasingly focus on interactive participation with audiences. In the process of program-audience interaction, effectively capturing the emotions of target audiences, utilizing distinctive program content for emotional communication based on audience emotional characteristics, conveying the program's core values to audiences, thereby generating identification and ultimately achieving the goal of audiences consuming the values promoted by the program.

This article examines how advertisers and competitive reality programs interact with audiences in the post-television era from the perspective of emotional economy, and through what interactive methods they convey program values and promote advertised products.

Keywords: emotional economy, post-television era, competitive reality show, interaction, consumption

The production team and sponsors of *Sisters Who Make Waves* have identified women as the target audience and consumers of the program and its advertisements. The selection of guests, content presentation, and core values align with contemporary female values. The program showcases the “real life” and “real emotions” of older female celebrities through front-stage and back-stage presentations, conveying the value of “fearless of age, live as yourself” to the target audience, thereby arousing emotional resonance among female audiences. Ultimately, it leverages this emotional identification to guide female audiences to wholeheartedly vote for celebrity guests and purchase sponsored products, achieving the goal of audience consumption.

Upon its premiere, Season 1 of *Sisters Who Make Waves* sparked heated discussion and attention among netizens, generating 2.721 billion topic discussions, with daily views reaching 88.24 million and cumulative views exceeding 800 million, topping the ratings chart. Season 3 achieved a real-time network popu-

larity of 12,515 and online broadcast popularity of 7,858.33, ranking third among variety shows. In the fierce competition for audience attention among variety shows, *Sisters Who Make Waves* carved out a unique path by shifting the focus from young female group formation competitions to female celebrities over 30 who have been in the industry for decades. By helping older female celebrities redebut and shine, the program highlights the unique charm of women at every stage, attracting the attention of female audience groups.

1. Multi-Channel Communication Through Media Convergence to Attract Audience Interaction and Participation

In the era of omnimedia convergence, as communication channels, tools, and technologies gradually become accessible to the public, audiences possess greater rights to disseminate and choose. Audiences can independently select any content they watch across various media platforms, engage in comment-based interactions with others who follow the same content on social media, and create videos for imitation or commentary on new media platforms like short-video apps. In short, compared to the traditional mass communication era, audiences no longer merely obtain information from television, radio, and newspapers; they can also construct multi-angle, multi-perspective information acquisition channels about content from emerging new media platforms, both horizontally and vertically. Moreover, they can participate in the production and discussion processes of programs.

Sisters Who Make Waves capitalizes on the characteristic that audiences can autonomously participate in discussions across various media platforms, employing various media channels familiar to and beloved by the public to promote the program. The program utilizes social media platforms led by Weibo for pre-show publicity and topic discussions during broadcast; launches short-video platforms centered on Douyin (TikTok) for series of short-video content promotion; and conducts integrated channel promotion on new media platforms such as Xiaohongshu and Bilibili. This allows audiences to extend their discussions beyond the television broadcast of *Sisters Who Make Waves* to various media platforms, participating in discussions about program content, guests, and advertisements, achieving secondary interaction between the program and audiences and facilitating secondary promotional purposes.

When Season 3 of *Sisters Who Make Waves* aired, “Sweetheart Goddess” Wang Xinling performed “Love You” again on her debut stage, and the broadcast date coincided with “520” (May 20th, a day for expressing love in Chinese culture). Wang Xinling’s school-uniform style outfit, combined with holiday marketing and her sweet singing and dancing, made countless netizens’ “youth DNA” dance. Many netizens followed and filmed themselves singing and dancing to “Love You,” bringing new highs in topic volume, readership, and discussion volume for the program on its premiere day, achieving another successful breakout.

2. Female-Perspective Narrative to Evoke Audience Emotional Identification

The target audience of *Sisters Who Make Waves* is positioned as female groups, not only because women are the main force in watching variety shows, but also because its uniquely distinctive selection of contestants allows it to stand out among many homogeneous reality competition shows. The program positions its contestants among female celebrities over 30 who have already debuted, each possessing unique personality charms: Na Ying subverts everyone’s impression of her as a musician, presenting herself as a joyful comedian in *Sisters Who Make Waves* and showcasing the straightforward character of a Northeastern Chinese woman; Zhang Baizhi boldly presents herself as a superwoman raising three children alone, allowing audiences to see the strength of a supermom; Joey Yung transforms from “the girl waving wings” to “the famous fitness coach of the Hong Kong Coliseum”... Every female guest in *Sisters Who Make Waves* has personality traits that female audiences can see reflections of themselves in, to varying degrees. *Sisters Who Make Waves* serves as a mirror that illuminates you, me, and her—real and face-to-face. Each audience member sees a life similar to their own in every female guest, instantly narrowing the distance with audiences and enabling them to develop role identification with the guests [3].

Upon its release, the program’s theme song “Priceless Sisters” immediately attracted widespread audience attention due to its catchy melody and unique lyrics. The lyrics “Public opinion is not favorable... Every kind of scrutiny is like a knife in the executioner’s hand... I create my own dreams, protect that most authentic and comfortable smile, I am my own priceless treasure” not only articulate the harshness of public opinion toward women and the reality of women being constrained by stereotypes, but also express the determination and courage of these 30+ female celebrity guests to remain unafraid of worldly judgment and steadfastly be themselves when facing continuous external evaluation. Such a song that encourages women from a female perspective quickly sparked competition among netizens to sing and imitate it across the internet. Not only did celebrity guests record the song and dance on their Douyin social media accounts, but many internet celebrities, short-video enthusiasts, and even Hong Kong garrison soldiers and Kunlun border defense soldiers joined the challenge. In no time, “Priceless Sisters” became an internet-famous song, and through netizens’ secondary participation, it invisibly provided solid secondary promotion for *Sisters Who Make Waves*.

3. “Peeking” into Female Guests’ Real Lives to Narrow Emotional Distance

Sisters Who Make Waves also utilizes front-stage and back-stage filming to document female guests’ rehearsals and daily lives, providing audiences with a “peeking” window to watch the guests’ authentic daily routines, thereby achieving the goals of increasing program popularity, attracting audiences, and narrowing

the emotional distance between audiences and guests [4]. The female guests' makeup-free and lazy living states in the back-stage area resemble everyday audiences at home: Lan Yingying eating hotpot with a bare face; Shen Mengchen crying loudly without any idol baggage, presenting the most authentic side of female guests to audiences. The unadorned, comfort-seeking home state of female celebrities makes audiences realize that although female stars appear glamorous on stage, they are ultimately just ordinary people. The back-stage behavior presented by female guests instantly makes audiences feel they have narrowed the gap with celebrities, creating greater authenticity and intimacy. Of course, female guests also performatively beautify their images through back-stage presentations, showcasing “pseudo-authenticity” to audiences.

During viewing, audiences search for experiences similar to their own in the guests' experiences, naturally projecting themselves into the guests' roles and transferring their own emotions from personal experiences onto the guests, forming a heart-to-heart emotional resonance. In the incident of Wan Qian's car accident, *Sisters Who Make Waves* filmed Wan Qian's hospitalization and her insistence on continuing filming despite incomplete recovery. This allowed many female audiences to see reflections of themselves—still gritting their teeth to persist in work and study while facing difficulties in life, smiling and encouraging themselves. Through Wan Qian, audiences saw the image of a brave woman who persistently pursues her dreams with fortitude and resilience. The production team of *Sisters Who Make Waves* also grasped the psychology of audiences engaging in role-playing by projecting themselves onto female guests, deliberately editing to present female guests' perfect images of striving upward, fearlessly facing aging, and bravely showcasing themselves and pursuing their dreams at every age stage. The brave, confident, and bold female image is most welcomed by female audiences, and the female guest images shaped by *Sisters Who Make Waves* undoubtedly inspire female audiences of different age groups. Through mirror-like immersive identification, the program team successfully captures audience emotions, laying favorable groundwork for the next step of guiding them to willingly vote for female guests and purchase program-advertised products [5].

4. Transformation of Program Advertising Strategies: Audience Consumption to Eliminate Fantasy Differences

Compared to traditional pre-roll and post-roll insert advertisements, in the post-television era, program teams continuously transform advertising strategies within programs according to changes in audience psychological acceptance of advertisements to achieve optimal effects.

Common advertising placement methods in variety show promotions include end-credit acknowledgments, prop placement, screen text, voice-over narration, pre-roll co-branded logos, previews, replays... To better align advertisements with program tone, *Sisters Who Make Waves* employs drama-style performance to present products consistent with the program's tone through advertising skits.

In the advertising promotion for Fanmilin skincare products, female guests were employed to endorse and perform skits: holding Fanmilin products while narrating how they use them in their daily skincare routines, demonstrating usage through personal presentation. Based on the emotional foundation accumulated with audiences in earlier program episodes, they output program and product values—“Win at any age, sisters all use Fanmilin”—while simultaneously driving audience consumption.

After some audiences become loyal fans of female guests, they even encourage guests to endorse more products in the program to “earn their meal.” Consequently, *Sisters Who Make Waves* features numerous prop placements: when female guests eat hotpot, they deliberately pick up the sponsored product “Jindian” milk to drink, intentionally reciting advertising slogans while drinking, and even teasing each other by directly pointing out that they are “earning their meal.” However, this deliberate approach does not arouse audience dissatisfaction; audiences even perceive the female guests as straightforward and unpretentious.

Although female guests and audiences share similar experiences, differences ultimately exist between them. The only solution to this difference is to own the same products as the female guests. When female guests showcase their excellent makeup-free skin condition, audiences compare their own skin condition with that of the guests. To narrow the skin difference with female guests, audiences often purchase products endorsed by the guests. Through this purchasing behavior, audiences achieve the illusory belief that “I also have the skincare products used daily by female guests, and my skin can be as good as theirs.”

Therefore, the program team and advertisers precisely capture this consumption behavior characteristic of audiences narrowing differences with shining female guests on stage through purchasing, implanting advertisement products consistent with program tone into the program and having female guests use and promote them intentionally or unintentionally, thereby stimulating audiences’ latent consumption desires, facilitating their purchasing behavior, and ultimately making audiences pay for advertising endorsement fees. Behind this purchasing behavior of audiences actually lies consumerism under emotional control [6].

5. Listening to Audience Needs to Maintain Program Loyalty

How can a competitive reality show stand out among many similar programs, garner fan and audience following, and continuously maintain popularity? The crucial method for the program remains establishing emotional connections with audiences. Only with audiences’ lasting support, affection, and loyalty can *Sisters Who Make Waves* transform the program into a brand and a “mark of love” in audiences’ hearts [7].

As audiences’ autonomy and choice become increasingly extensive, program production teams are no longer in the elevated position of the traditional mass

media era; audiences have the right to reject programs they dislike. Therefore, to gain audience affection, programs must continuously satisfy audience needs, engage in deep interaction with audiences, establish a profound emotional foundation, and welcome audience participation in the program [8].

As a variety show, *Sisters Who Make Waves* is essentially entertainment-based, attracting audience attention and discussion participation through hyped topics, creating a sense of participation under entertainment carnival. *Sisters Who Make Waves* is also adept at creating gossip hotspots: in Season 2, Huang Xiaoming, the host of Season 1, continued to host the first episode, but the program team surprisingly invited his ex-girlfriend Li Feier as a female guest. Their century-long same-stage appearance sparked heated discussions among numerous netizens. Huang Xiaoming later posted on Weibo announcing his withdrawal from Season 2 recording, which again successfully created entertainment gossip and attracted widespread discussion. The program team can also hype conflicts between female guests to satisfy audiences' entertainment gossip psychology: when Huang Ling encountered bottlenecks in dance practice, the program team deliberately edited footage of Lan Yingying discussing with Huang Ling, showing Huang Ling rolling her eyes, pushing their relationship toward conflict to cater to audiences' spectatorship psychology.

However, this kind of entertainment-to-death gossip hype, focusing program attention on female guests' interpersonal relationships to satisfy audiences' entertainment psychology, cannot make audiences loyal viewers of *Sisters Who Make Waves*. The program team should cater to audiences' cultural needs by improving program quality, diversifying program content, and enriching program characteristics. Only through content quality improvement can the program become uniquely distinctive in audiences' minds, making audiences willingly become its loyal fan base.

In the post-television era, *Sisters Who Make Waves* has recognized that audience needs are no longer merely satisfied with single-form program content; they increasingly focus on whether programs can bring emotional experiences and satisfaction. *Sisters Who Make Waves* successfully captures the awakened female consciousness in modern society among female audiences, emphasizing individual subjectivity, continuously demanding discourse power, pursuing self-dreams, and realizing self-worth [9]. Through the brave dream-pursuing images displayed by inspirational female guests, the program successfully moves female audiences and establishes deep emotional connections with them. Driven by emotions, audiences identify with female guests' behaviors and develop emotional resonance with the values conveyed by the program. The program also leverages its emotional foundation with audiences to subtly hypnotize them into symbolic consumption, paying for products endorsed by female guests.

References

- [1] Jenkins H. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New

York University Press, 2006. pp. 61-62, 79, 72.

[2] Lotz A D. *Television Will Be Revolutionized*. Translated by Tao Y. Beijing: China Radio & Television Press, 2015: 56.

[3] Yang L. “Fans, Emotional Economy, and New Media.” *Social Science Front*, 2009(7).

[4] Goffman E. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2018: 36-38.

[5] Wang S, Chen C. “Self-Identity and Symbolic Consumption: A Study of Symbolic Construction in Web Self-Produced Programs—Taking *U Can U Bibi* as an Example.” *Chinese Journal of Journalism & Communication*, 2016(10): 42-53.

[6] Baudrillard J. *Consumer Society*. Translated by Liu C, Quan Z. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2001: 10-20.

[7] Future Beyond Brands [EB/OL]. <http://www.saatchikevin.com/lovemarks/future-beyond-brands/>.

[8] Ye K. *Fan Economy*. Beijing: China Overseas Chinese Press, 2014: 5.

[9] Lin S. “Identity and Value Reconstruction in Consumer Society.” *Journalism University*, 2013(01): 106-112.

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

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.