

Research on the Communication Effects of Nostalgic Variety Shows from a Collective Memory Perspective: Postprint

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Abstract

Recently, a proliferation of novel variety programs with nostalgic characteristics has emerged, including titles such as “Through,” “Waves,” “Sound,” and “Happy Start.” Although these programs do not explicitly position “nostalgia” as their primary branding, their promotional slogans—including “I Want to Wake Up” and “Re-employment Boy Group”—are imbued with the emotional core of nostalgia. We observe that these programs thoroughly excavate multiple elements and strata encompassing “old” personalities, “old” works, “old” artifacts, and “old” sentiments, thereby stimulating multidimensional interactions between emotion and memory, triggering emotional consumption, and garnering increased audience engagement. This study adopts an audience survey methodology to investigate the communicative effects of contemporary nostalgic variety programs through the lens of nostalgic resonance and collective memory, aiming to elucidate the nexus between nostalgic “resonance” and collective memory effects within such programs.

Full Text

Preamble

Research on the Communication Effects of Nostalgic Variety Shows from the Perspective of Collective Memory

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Abstract: Recently, a wave of nostalgic variety shows has emerged, including programs such as “Breaking a Thorn,” “Riding the Wind and Wave,” and

“Happy Start Again.” Although these programs are not explicitly labeled as “nostalgic,” they embed an emotional core of nostalgia within slogans like “I Want to Wake Up” and “Re-employment Boy Group.” We observe that these shows thoroughly explore multiple elements and dimensions of “old” people, “old” works, “old” objects, and “old” feelings, stimulating multidimensional interaction between emotion and memory, triggering emotional consumption, and generating substantial public interest. This study employs audience survey methodology to examine the communication effects of current nostalgic variety shows through the lens of nostalgic resonance and collective memory, aiming to understand the connection between nostalgic “resonance” and collective memory effects in such programs.

Keywords: collective memory resonance effect, emotional consumption, nostalgic ritual sense

1 Introduction

In recent years, the dual impact of recurring epidemics and economic downturn has left people feeling generally weary of reality. As a form of pastime entertainment, variety shows that incorporate nostalgic elements can alleviate the pressures of real life under these challenging circumstances. Currently, domestic nostalgic variety shows such as “Breaking a Thorn,” “Riding the Wind and Wave,” and “Happy Start Again” have become a prominent trend in the variety show market. We observe that these nostalgic variety shows primarily brand themselves through emotional appeal, successfully linking content with audience sentiment. They capture audience curiosity and psychological unease, helping viewers seek appropriate comfort from the familiar past, stimulating multidimensional interaction between emotion and memory, triggering emotional consumption, and gaining increased popularity. This raises two key questions: Why can nostalgic variety shows gain more praise and attention? And what is their social impact?

2 Literature Review

2.1 Literature Review on Nostalgic Consumption

Nostalgic consumption has attracted academic research from multiple perspectives. Foreign scholar Rajaram Suparna (2022) points out the dynamic reciprocity between individual and collective influence, the changing structures of individual and collective memory, and cultural impact. Roediger Henry L. (2021), in his work on three facets of collective memory, notes that collective memory is filled with numerous arguments within and between groups. In 2020, domestic scholar Hao Wenqi, examining the meaning production of Chinese variety shows from a nostalgic sociological perspective, argued that television variety shows produce meaning by creating nostalgic elements and constructing people’s collective memory, thereby attracting attention and achieving a form of meaning sharing. In 2018, Dong Tingting conducted a comprehensive

analysis of the diversified use of nostalgic elements in variety shows from the perspectives of social environment, media development, and audience demand. Chinese scholar Zou Qi, in a study on the construction of collective memory by nostalgic TV variety shows in the media era—taking the Shenzhen TV Time Show as an example—points out that collective memory has been continuously reconstructed throughout historical evolution. However, although these studies analyze the collective memory of variety show audiences, they largely ignore the influence of the resonance effect.

2.2 Literature Review on Collective Memory

The theory of collective memory was first proposed by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs in 1925 and has since attracted considerable scholarly attention both domestically and internationally, yielding numerous research findings. Foreign scholars Chris Weedon and Glenn Jordan (2012) examine the relationship between memory and history and its social, cultural, and political roles in *Collective Memory: Theory and Politics*, supplementing the theory with issues of influence, continuing memory, and counter-memory. Foreign scholar Bunnell Ryan (2022) identifies similar functions between collective memory and autobiographical memory, arguing that collective memory serving the collective functions similarly to autobiographical memory serving individuals. In 2010, domestic scholar Liu Yaqiu supplemented the theory's state of existence in his work *A Reflection on the Study of Social Memory: From Collective Memory to Individual Memory*. In 2021, domestic scholar Bai Jin supplemented the theory from a semiotic perspective in his *Semiotic Reinterpretation of Halbwachs' Collective Memory Theory*. In 2016, Chinese scholar Liu Yaqiu connected the theory with present and past perspectives in his *Social View in the Halbwachs Theory of Collective Memory*.

2.3 Research Questions

In summary, existing studies do not examine the collective memory phenomenon in nostalgic variety shows from the perspective of resonance effect, and therefore fail to answer why nostalgic variety shows can gain more praise and attention. Consequently, starting from the theories of collective memory and resonance effect, this paper attempts to address the following questions: Why can nostalgic variety shows gain more praise and attention? What is the social impact of nostalgic variety shows?

3 Research Methodology

This study employs audience survey methodology to address the above questions.

3.1 Hypothesis Development

Based on the research questions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: The greater the nostalgic “resonance” in the program, the deeper the collective memory effect.

H2: The more nostalgic elements in the program are connected to reality, the deeper the collective memory effect.

H3: The stronger the sense of nostalgic ritual in the program, the stronger the audience’s identification.

3.2 Sampling Method

The target population for this study comprises teenagers and middle-aged groups who frequently watch variety shows in daily life. The audience survey was conducted primarily through questionnaire surveys. First, we conducted representative sampling of this group through a general questionnaire survey. Second, we prepared the sampling frame based on individuals aged 15–35, including both students and working professionals. Third, we conducted multilevel sampling with a 95% confidence interval and 3% sampling error, selecting over 200 students and office workers as the sample.

The survey completed data collection, collation, and analysis on May 1, 2023. The survey consisted of both open-ended and closed-ended questions with the following main contents: (1) Basic information confirmation, including age and gender; (2) Items measuring the independent variable of “nostalgic resonance” in programs; (3) Items measuring the dependent variable of collective memory. The questionnaire contained 19 questions, including 8 single-choice, 10 multiple-choice, and 1 fill-in question. We employed a combination of online and offline methods, distributing questionnaires through WeChat Moments, QQ Space, Wenjuanxing sample database, and offline distribution.

4 Study Findings and Discussion

A total of 214 valid responses were collected. In the sample, men accounted for 35.98% and women for 64.02%, with women representing a relatively high proportion—similar to the gender ratio of variety show audiences and consistent with initial audience expectations. In terms of age distribution, the post-1990 generation accounted for the highest proportion at 27.1%, followed by the post-1985 generation at 25.7% and the post-1995 generation at 24.77%. This indicates that nostalgic variety show viewers are relatively young, aligning with groups who frequently engage with and enjoy variety shows.

4.1 Nostalgic Variety Shows Can Meet Audience Emotional Demands

The survey revealed that 40.65% of respondents spend 2–4 hours watching TV programs, while 33.64% spend 0–1 hour. Thus, respondents’ attention to TV watching is not particularly concentrated, and longer viewing times may lead to fatigue, making the background entertainment attribute more pronounced and increasing substitutability between different programs. However, variety shows

constitute an important category of TV programming, with 34% of respondents indicating that “variety shows account for 31–50% of their viewing.” Regarding viewing frequency, 38.32% of respondents watch variety shows often, 32.24% watch daily, and no respondents selected “hardly ever watch.” Therefore, variety shows enjoy wide audience coverage with relatively high viewing frequency, gradually becoming a necessity for audience life adjustment.

Since different types of variety shows exist, the questionnaire further investigated audience preferences among categories. Idol selection shows were the most popular, accounting for 57.94%, followed by game shows at 56.54%, nostalgic slow variety shows at 47.66%, and competitive variety shows at 42.06%. This demonstrates that nostalgic variety shows, as an emerging category in recent years, have occupied a certain market share and become a relatively popular type among audiences.

Regarding what attracts audiences to variety shows, the survey found that the top three reasons are interesting content, realism, and having favorite stars. The influence of watching variety shows reveals that life attitude and expanding knowledge are the two most important effects, accounting for 66.82% and 62.62% respectively. As entertainment programs, variety shows are endowed with multiple factors such as knowledge, interest, and realism, which on one hand meet the emotional demands of audiences while simultaneously creating memorable points for different variety shows.

4.2 Nostalgic Variety Shows Can Stimulate Audience Resonance

In the targeted survey of nostalgic variety shows, to test respondents’ awareness of nostalgia, the questionnaire listed three common and popular nostalgic variety shows. “Brother” had the highest recognition at 83.18%, followed by “Happy Start Again” at 66.82%, and “Sister” also at 66.82%. Overall, most respondents have had experience watching nostalgic variety shows.

In investigating perceptions of nostalgic variety shows, we further examined why audiences believe these shows become popular. The top three reasons were “close to reality, creates resonance, and funny/entertaining,” which overlaps somewhat with general reasons for liking variety shows. “Paying attention to stars’ follow-up trends” accounted for the highest proportion at 61.21%, verifying the phenomenon of “archaeological upsurge” caused by nostalgic variety shows. Additionally, “sharing variety content with others” and “watching similar types of variety shows” are also behaviors stimulated by nostalgic variety shows. This explains why, after the success of “Sister,” Mango TV launched the similar program “Brother.” Furthermore, survey results show that nostalgic variety shows are more likely to inspire audiences to recall memories of their own experiences.

This study also investigated why audiences watch the phenomenally popular show “Sister.” “Attractive publicity” ranked highest at 63.55%, followed by “novel variety format” at 54.21%, and “focusing on stars’ reemployment issues”

at 52.34%. These findings reflect audience resonance derived from variety shows and attention to current practical problems regarding reemployment.

Using “Sister” as a case study to investigate the influence of watching nostalgic variety shows, 70.09% of respondents chose “youth memory resonance,” and 56.54% chose “contemporary golden song performance.” This demonstrates that compared to actors and stars who trigger nostalgic memory, their past connections and shared memories with the audience constitute the main influence of nostalgic variety shows and serve as an important driving force for subsequent behaviors.

Regarding future development directions and current shortcomings of nostalgic variety shows, survey results showed the highest proportion (63.08%) identified “vulgar content lacking connotation,” followed by “program segments lacking innovation” at 57.01%, and “weak program segment links” at 56.54%. For future development, nostalgic variety shows need to remain close to reality to sustain phenomenal attention over the long term.

5 Stimulating Audience Collective Memory Based on Reality

This study examines the communication effects of nostalgic variety shows from the perspective of collective memory through audience surveys. The findings indicate that the greater the nostalgic “resonance” in a program, the deeper the collective memory effect; the more nostalgic elements are connected to reality, the deeper the collective memory effect; and the stronger the sense of nostalgic ritual, the stronger the audience’s identification. This is primarily because the collective memory effect in variety shows mainly depends on nostalgic resonance and connection with audience reality.

This study argues that greater nostalgic “resonance” in programs leads to deeper collective memory effects, reflecting that high praise for nostalgic variety shows primarily stems from resonance between nostalgic elements and audiences. On the other hand, it provides a development perspective that emphasizes connection with reality and audiences within the context of contemporary China’s multicultural prosperity.

However, it is worth noting that this study also finds the prevalence of nostalgic variety shows brings negative impacts, particularly the lack of long-term content support. In the future narrative of variety shows, only by emphasizing the connection between content and reality can sustainable development be achieved. Due to the narrow survey scope, this study also has limitations regarding one-sided results. Future research may require scholars from psychology, sociology, and journalism and communication to pay greater attention to homogenized images in contemporary variety shows and expand research and practice on nostalgic variety shows.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire on Nostalgic Variety Shows

In order to understand people's understanding and feelings regarding current nostalgic variety shows, we hereby conduct the following survey. We hope to occupy a few moments of your valuable time. Please answer the following questions based on your actual views and situations. Thank you very much for your cooperation!

1. Gender:

- A. Male
- B. Female

2. Age group:

- A. Pre-1980s
- B. Post-1980s
- C. Post-1985
- D. Post-1990s
- E. Post-1995

- F. Post-2000s
- G. Post-2005

3. How much time do you usually spend watching TV shows?

- A. 0–1 hour
- B. 2–4 hours
- C. 5 hours or more

4. Do you have a habit of watching variety shows?

- A. Watch
- B. Frequently watch
- C. Occasionally watch
- D. Almost never watch

5. What types of variety shows do you usually choose to watch? (Multiple choice)

- A. Competitive category
- B. Games category
- C. Idol selection category
- D. Nostalgic slow variety show
- E. Knowledge category
- F. Parent-child category
- G. Other {__}

6. What do you think attracts you to variety shows? (Multiple choice)

- A. Emotional appeal
- B. Interesting
- C. Has favorite stars
- D. Fits with reality
- E. High visibility
- F. Increases one's knowledge
- G. Other {__}

7. What influence do you think watching variety shows has on you? (Multiple choice)

- A. Lightens up mood
- B. Broadens knowledge
- C. Influences life attitude
- D. Goofing off
- E. Other {__}

8. Which of the following nostalgic variety shows have you watched? (Multiple choice)

- A. My Sister
- B. Happy to Start Again
- C. The Big Brother
- D. None
- E. Other {____}

9. Why do you think nostalgic variety shows are so popular? (Multiple choice)

- A. Emotional appeal
- B. Close to reality
- C. Creates resonance
- D. Funny and fun
- E. Lightens up mood

10. When watching nostalgic variety shows, will you recall some related memories?

- A. Very much disagree
- B. Disagree
- C. Neutral attitude
- D. Agree
- E. Very much agree

11. After watching nostalgic variety shows, what behaviors will you be more likely to be stimulated by the nostalgic content in the show? (Multiple choice)

- A. Focus on the stars' past works
- B. Follow the stars' follow-up dynamics
- C. Share and exchange variety show content with others
- D. Watch similar types of variety shows
- E. Participate in online and offline interactions of variety shows

12. After watching nostalgic variety shows, you will talk with people around you and recall the artists' previous works.

- A. Very much disagree
- B. Disagree
- C. Neutral attitude
- D. Agree
- E. Very much agree

13. The aspect you pay more attention to in nostalgic variety shows is content related to or similar to yourself.

- A. Very much disagree
- B. Disagree
- C. Neutral attitude
- D. Agree
- E. Very much agree

14. Taking the variety show "Sister" as an example, the main reasons you watch it are: (Multiple choice)

- A. There are familiar stars
- B. Publicity is attractive
- C. Variety format is novel
- D. Focus on star reemployment issues
- E. Can find resonance

