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The Alienation of Reason: Exploring the Social Impact of Debate Talk Show Varieties postprint

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Abstract

The ratings of debate talk shows such as “Qipao Shuo” and “Little Theater Talk Show” have continued to rise, with individuals increasingly preferring to watch online programs for leisure. However, we have observed that as talk shows have gained popularity, people are gradually exhibiting tendencies toward “spoofing” and “satirizing” in their daily lives, leading to further irrationality and online violence in public discourse. Talk shows such as Qipao Shuo analyze and refute social and cultural perspectives, yet their debate models tend toward parody and satire. This mode produces a “predictive effect” and “imitation effect,” causing online users to also tend toward jokes and satire when confronting social issues. Therefore, we employ audience survey and interview methods to investigate such users, in order to explore the relationships among these factors and identify the underlying causes of such phenomena.

Full Text

The Alienation of Reason: Exploring the Social Impact of Debate Talk Shows

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Abstract: Debate talk shows such as *Qipao Shuo* and *Little Theater Talk Show* have achieved rising viewership, reflecting a broader trend of audiences turning to online programs for entertainment. However, this phenomenon has coincided with observable changes in everyday communication patterns, including increased tendencies toward parody, satire, and ultimately irrationality and online violence in public discourse. While these programs analyze and refute social and cultural perspectives, their debate models heavily rely on parody and satire, producing both predictive and imitation effects that lead online users

to adopt similar joking and satirical approaches when confronting social problems. This study employs audience surveys and interviews to investigate these relationships and identify the underlying causes of such phenomena.

Keywords: debate talk show, variety show, predictive effect, imitation effect, meme culture

1. Introduction

In recent years, online language variety shows have experienced explosive growth. Broadcasting through new media platforms, these programs have captured the attention of younger generations through their internet-native expression, relaxed and humorous content, and distinctive innovative style. iQiyi's online debate variety show *Qipao Shuo*, branded with subcultural labels, has successfully “broken into the mainstream,” while Tencent's *Talk Show Conference* has repeatedly “gone viral” through contestants' blockbuster performances and memorable punchlines. Beyond meeting audiences' spiritual and cultural needs, these programs have infused new meaning into subcultures like talk shows, steadily expanding their unique cultural influence and communicative power.

However, we have observed that under this influence, people increasingly exhibit tendencies to “play with memes” and employ satire in daily life, contributing to escalating irrationality and online violence in public opinion. Online language programs frequently dominate headlines and rapidly spread among young audiences, becoming a significant factor in these phenomena. While other popular variety shows enhance attention toward celebrities and topics with direct, explicit impact on viewers, debate talk shows exert a more subtle, long-term influence on people's expression and thinking patterns. This raises important questions: Why does this particular genre have such distinctive effects? Does it alter people's modes of self-expression and thinking patterns? If so, how does this influence operate?

2.1 Literature Review on Talk Show Research

Debate-style talk shows represent one of many contemporary media forms, and their impact on audience cognition constitutes a form of new media influence. Scholars both domestically and internationally have conducted extensive research on this topic. The “magic bullet theory” that emerged from the early twentieth century through the late 1930s posited that media messages could directly influence attitudes and opinions, even dominating behavior. In 1960, foreign scholar Klappa proposed the “theory of limited effects,” emphasizing the constraints on media influence. McGuire and colleagues, beginning their television program investigations in 1962, summarized the “uses and gratifications” framework from an audience perspective, arguing that media exposure stems from fundamental needs including information, entertainment, social relationships, and psychological fulfillment. German scholar Neumann introduced the

“Spiral of Silence” hypothesis in 1980 to explain media’s role in shaping public opinion, while American scholar Gerbera developed “cultivation theory” to illustrate how media unconsciously constrains people’s perceptions of reality.

These macro-level theories examine media’s broad impact on audiences. Domestic scholars have also investigated specific phenomena: Zhou Min focuses on media literacy and media-youth relationships, attempting to map the contours of “online variety shows and youth development”; Lin Aijun analyzes internet “meme culture,” warning that it has evolved into an expression of aphasia and value dissolution, necessitating vigilance against its dissemination of misconceptions, excessive entertainment, and nihilism; Liu Yitao examines creative dimensions of online talk show variety shows, arguing that “as a media culture, television culture reflects and permeates postmodern logic and spirit,” and should provide not only information transmission but also emotional resonance and value pursuit.

These studies span macro theories to specific phenomena, exploring multiple perspectives from positive to negative, yet overlook the psychological mechanisms of predictive and imitative effects rooted in the audience itself.

The predictive effect refers to the Pygmalion effect, also known as the “Rosenthal effect,” proposed by Robert Rosenthal (1933–) in 1968 in *Pygmalion in the Classroom*. This theory posits that teachers’ expectations influence student academic performance and other outcomes, with students receiving high expectations showing significant improvement over time. A search of Global Academic Express yields 934 relevant keywords, primarily in clinical medicine, psychology, and education. For example, Peng Jiajia and colleagues authored “Application of Nursing Based on Rosenthal Effect Theory in Patients with Diabetes Nephropathy.”

Tarde is the founder of imitation theory in social psychology, which has significantly influenced communication studies on personality formation and socialization. The core concept is “social imitation theory,” which holds that no entity exists beyond personal psychological experience and that all social processes consist of interactions between individuals. Every human action repeats something; it is a form of imitation. Imitation constitutes the most fundamental social relationship, and society is a group of individuals imitating each other. Building on this theory, domestic scholar Liang Yi explores audience and social psychology in IP dramas; Jin Xiao examines pathways for online dramas to expand overseas based on imitation laws; and Li Meng and Chen Kang investigate public opinion formation and evolution through Tarde’s social imitation framework.

This review reveals that existing research has not analyzed the impact of online variety shows on audiences through the lenses of predictive and imitative effects, leaving questions unanswered about how debate talk shows specifically influence contemporary thinking patterns. Therefore, this article employs predictive and imitation effect theories to address several questions: Why do debate

talk shows have such distinctive impacts on audiences? What motivations underlie the influence on audience thinking modes, and what makes this influence unique? How does this special impact manifest at socio-cultural levels? What additional factors strengthen the uniqueness and socio-cultural consequences of this phenomenon?

3. Research Methods

This study employs audience surveys and interviews to address these research questions.

3.1 Hypothesis Development

Based on the above questions, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: The more individuals watch debate talk shows, the more inclined they are to discuss issues through sarcasm.

H2: The more individuals watch debate talk shows, the more inclined they are to “play with memes” when expressing opinions.

H3: The more individuals watch debate talk shows, the more superficial their analysis of social opinion becomes.

H4: The more individuals watch debate talk shows, the more inclined they are to seek sarcastic opinions from online influencers for support.

To test these hypotheses, this study developed a questionnaire survey instrument.

3.2 Sampling Method

The target population comprises audiences who watch variety shows, particularly debate talk shows. The study employed convenience sampling, selecting university students as the research population. A questionnaire was created using Questionnaire Star and distributed through social media channels including WeChat Moments and WeChat Groups. Blank and invalid questionnaires were excluded, with remaining valid responses retained as the sample.

Additionally, the study conducted 15-minute semi-structured in-depth interviews with 50 respondents aged 18–25 who had viewed such variety shows. Interviews began in April 2023 and concluded in May 2023. Initial respondents included university students from Beijing and Hebei, with additional samples recruited online from other universities.

3.3 Sample Description

Survey data collection, organization, and analysis were completed on May 15, 2023. The questionnaire combined open-ended and closed-ended questions covering: (1) basic demographic information including age, gender, and grade level;

(2) dimensional reduction statements for independent variable X; and (3) dimensional reduction statements for dependent variable Y. The 15-item questionnaire included nine multiple-choice questions, one multi-select question, four matrix questions, and one fill-in-the-blank item. Distributed through both online (WeChat Moments, QQ Space, Questionnaire Star sample library) and offline channels, the survey yielded 232 responses after excluding participants under 18 and over 25. After further excluding respondents who had never watched debate talk show variety programs, the final valid sample consisted of 202 participants.

Following the maximum sampling principle in qualitative research, data saturation was reached upon collecting the 50th interview, at which point all interview content sufficiently answered the research questions. Interviewees varied in age, interests, education level, and geographic location, ensuring low homogeneity. Interviews were conducted via telephone and WeChat text, producing verbatim transcripts totaling 10,000 words. Content analysis was completed individually. Interview questions were divided into three parts: (1) basic information including school, grade, and variety show viewing habits; (2) core research questions exploring views on debate talk shows, related phenomena, coping strategies, and self-assessment of influence; and (3) potential deep-dive issues for further exploration.

Throughout the interview process, we adhered to the four ethical principles emphasized by scholar Alan Bryman: (1) avoiding harm to participants; (2) obtaining informed consent; (3) protecting participant privacy; and (4) avoiding deception. Interviewees were informed they could remain silent or withdraw at any time, and any materials participants requested not be disclosed were excluded from the study.

4. Research Findings and Discussion

Viewing debate talk show variety programs produces a long-term, implicit impact on audience expression and thinking patterns through program content, characters, and plotlines. The following hypotheses were tested:

H1: The more individuals watch debate talk shows, the more inclined they are to discuss issues through sarcasm. Correlation analysis using Pearson's correlation coefficient revealed a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.255$), supporting H1.

H2: The more individuals watch debate talk shows, the more inclined they are to “play with memes” when expressing opinions. Correlation analysis yielded a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.215$), supporting H2.

H3: The more individuals watch debate talk shows, the more superficial their analysis of social opinion becomes. Correlation analysis revealed a significant negative correlation ($r = -0.211$), supporting H3.

H4: The more individuals watch debate talk shows, the more inclined they are to seek sarcastic opinions from online influencers for support. Correlation

analysis showed a significant positive correlation ($r = 0.280$), supporting H4.

While these results demonstrate correlations, they cannot reveal underlying mechanisms. Therefore, interviews served as a supplementary method to explore the internal dynamics of hypothesis formation.

When questioned about expressing opinions and personal thinking styles regarding hot-button events, most respondents provided diverse answers. Notably, despite this diversity, respondents showed remarkable consistency in several aspects: they preferred expressing views through sarcasm and playful storytelling, frequently citing popular internet influencers with substantial followings to support their positions. However, their actual analysis of social events and public opinion tended to be superficial.

Their commonality lay in extensive viewing of debate talk shows. Interview responses illuminated the rationale behind this approach: “There are many events that move us to express ourselves. To show our resistance, I think forms of satire and parody are very suitable—they’re almost a unique way for young people to voice their thoughts. In many talk show variety programs, performers use various jokes to satirize or mock events and involved parties, expressing their attitudes and ideas. This is a highly personalized and humorous mode of expression that we really enjoy. Some things cannot be stated explicitly or explained clearly, and sometimes reasoning doesn’t work. Therefore, using sarcastic or humorous methods can achieve better results, which also aligns with the trends of online communication.”

4.1 The Power of Irony: Personalized Expression Through Deconstructing Events

In the online environment, social public opinion events quickly trend and face scrutiny from countless netizens, creating both opportunities and challenges for expression. The central question becomes how to stand out amid information overload and fragmented attention spans. Satirical expression emerged as a solution, offering not only distinctive viewpoints but also enhanced dissemination effects. Debate talk show variety programs have amplified the “power” of satire as an expressive mode. Most performers in these shows possess exceptional eloquence, unique perspectives, and strong demonstration effects. Their successful use of satire to express personal opinions provides audiences with an experimental demonstration: satire emboldens people to deconstruct events and express themselves while enabling more positive self-projection.

Whether portraying performers as “silver-tongued scholars” on stage or assuming their views will garner countless shares and likes, this predictive effect is undoubtedly channeled through satire—demonstrating the Pygmalion effect proposed by Rosenthal. Individual power is inherently limited, and personal expressions about events lack authority. However, with the support of performers’ expressive techniques and satirical methods in variety shows, the desire to

express opinions and the credibility of deconstructing events increase accordingly.

4.2 Laughing at the Root but Not the Person: Communication That Avoids and Leaves a Way Out

Interviews with 50 respondents revealed that those who have watched more variety shows demonstrate greater understanding of meme culture and more frequently employ memes when expressing opinions. Across platforms like Bilibili, Weibo, Zhihu, and Xiaohongshu—anywhere young people congregate, especially on social media apps where they watch variety shows—the phenomenon of meme usage is ubiquitous.

Meme culture has continuously evolved since the internet’s birth, with its generation rate and volume becoming incalculable. Memes emerge through various pathways: deformation of celebrity quotes, crystallization of popular event truths, and official or personal creation of literary works. Debate talk show variety programs have become hotbeds for meme production. Both program content settings and guest language consistently provide raw materials for trending topics. For instance, during *Roast Conference* broadcasts, performers’ memorable lines dominate microblog headlines through hot searches, enabling audiences to receive the latest content immediately.

What significance does meme usage hold? First, meme culture carries humorous elements. When new memes appear in other viewpoints, audiences familiar with the meme experience consistent comedic effects, making them more receptive to the viewpoint. This gentle expression reduces hostility and increases listener acceptance. Second, memes imply the user’s personal attitude while hiding critical and oppositional stances through the industry rule of “laughing at the meme but not the person.” This expressive mode provides an exit strategy, allowing both communication parties greater leeway. Furthermore, meme content represents a condensed, abstracted version of a viewpoint, making meme usage an efficient and easily understood method beloved by most netizens. Finally, meme decoding varies across audiences, rendering understanding of meme-containing viewpoints somewhat vague and ambiguous, which leaves explanatory space for viewpoint expressers and thus provides them an escape route.

Most importantly, according to Tarde’s social imitation law, when meme culture becomes a trend, people’s expressions imitate each other, exacerbating meme usage phenomena. These variety shows undoubtedly serve as both originators and accelerators of this trend.

4.3 Loss of Rationality: Atrocities in Public Opinion

Unfortunately, questionnaires and interviews revealed that 80% of participants’ analysis of social public opinion has become increasingly shallow, falling into a state of rationality loss. This manifests in two ways: first, impatience with hot events and unwillingness to “let the bullets fly,” resulting in immediate

judgment based on initial reports and constant media trials and news reversals; second, sarcasm and parody in opinion expression lead to one-sided emotional public opinion. People obsessively deploy novel satirical methods and parody to demonstrate their “clear-sightedness” regarding events. This playful expression of “everyone is drunk, I alone am sober” fuels conspiracy theories and mindless speech, creating a miasma of public opinion. More critically, people lack personal rational thinking about public opinion and easily believe various claims, accelerating spiral of silence effects and inevitably falling into vicious cycles of uncontrolled public opinion.

While debate talk show performers also use these methods to demonstrate rational and positive thinking, this results from carefully designed programs and pre-prepared performers. Obviously, netizens in hot events lack such conditions. Simple imitation makes their thinking patterns fast and shallow, focusing only on expressive forms to attract attention rather than content correctness. The predictive effect stimulates expression demands and confidence, while imitation laws reduce expression costs and concerns, transforming irrational netizens into mobs and causing rampant violence in social opinion.

4.4 The End of the Argument: A Final Decision from Authority

Regardless of how netizens express opinions, they remain ordinary people. Even when borrowing satire and parody, their views cannot determine dispute outcomes until strong consensus forms. What happens next? Online influencers take center stage. In exchanges about hot topics, netizens with differing views frequently cite these authoritative figures’ sarcastic opinions for support. Although such influencer opinions cannot replace official voices, as opinion leaders they wield enormous jurisdiction. Once published, their views garner thousands of reposts and likes, demonstrating authoritative admiration, and netizens citing their views gather under this banner, playing decisive roles in judging events. An overwhelming viewpoint thus announces the final “civilian outcome” of hot topic events through irony. While this may not be correct or comparable to official truth, it clearly gains more public support.

5. Summary and Reflection

The popularity of debate talk show variety programs is undoubtedly positive, enriching leisure life, promoting talk show art and artists, and enhancing thinking and expression abilities while fostering attention to social hot events. However, from an implicit perspective, these programs also negatively impact thinking patterns, warranting reflection and vigilance.

This study’s hypotheses primarily focus on negative phenomena, with insufficient description of positive effects, potentially biasing conclusions and exaggerating negative impacts. Future research should strengthen dialectical thinking about such programs’ communication effects, analyzing from both positive and negative perspectives for more objective, comprehensive reflection.

Second, this study's examination of meme and satire expression remains insufficient. Satire operates through certain sociological and psychological mechanisms, yet this research only scratches the surface, failing to thoroughly analyze its essence. Moreover, satire culture has a long history and rich content, and the lack of deeper investigation represents a significant limitation. Simultaneously, this expressive mode's formation is diverse and cannot be comprehensively examined from the variety show perspective alone.

Furthermore, limitations exist regarding the shallow analysis of social opinion and reliance on authoritative opinions. Neither questionnaires nor interviews perfectly reflect rationality in current network society. The four questionnaire items cannot fully capture mechanisms underlying shallow social public opinion analysis, only presenting rough patterns. Interview methods can only reflect attitudes, viewpoints, and surface phenomena, failing to fundamentally reveal hypothesis relationships from formation mechanisms.

Finally, theoretical choices present issues. Explaining negative impacts on audiences watching such variety shows requires more than two theories for comprehensive results; they can only address limited aspects. This represents the study's greatest limitation. Additionally, the application of these theories is imperfect and not fully consistent with reflected phenomena, representing a direction for improvement.

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