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Audience Psychology of Localized Variety Shows and the Impact of Copyright: Postprint

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Date: 2023-10-08T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

At a time when intellectual property rights are receiving increasing attention, whether variety shows import copyrights has also become a focal point for audiences. In response to the current phenomenon of widespread localization of foreign programs in domestic variety shows, this paper takes “Running Man” and “Back to Field” as case studies to analyze the audience psychology of both programs, and further examines the differential impacts of copyright awareness on the audience psychology of the two programs, thereby providing a brief analysis of the developmental direction of the copyright-oriented path for Chinese variety shows.

Full Text

Audience Psychology of “Localized” Variety Shows and the Impact of Copyright Issues

Abstract: In an era of growing intellectual property awareness, whether a variety show has imported copyright has become a focal point for audiences. In response to the prevailing phenomenon of localizing foreign programs in China’s variety show market, this paper analyzes audience psychology toward two programs—*Keep Running* and *Back to Field*—and further examines how copyright awareness differentially impacts audience psychology toward these programs, thereby offering a brief analysis of development directions for copyright-based Chinese variety shows.

Keywords: localized variety shows; copyright import; copyright awareness; audience psychology

1. Analysis of *Keep Running* Audience Psychology

1.1 Program Overview

Keep Running is the localized Chinese adaptation of South Korea's hit variety show *Running Man*, produced by Zhejiang Television. The original *Running Man* is a large-scale outdoor competitive reality show, and Zhejiang Television imported its copyright to China, connecting game segments through situational storytelling. The program largely follows the original production model, particularly in its classic game designs, plot arrangements, scene concepts, and host roles, while incorporating some localized modifications. Currently, *Keep Running* has aired five seasons, consistently ranking first in television ratings during its broadcast slots, though its reputation has declined season by season while audience satisfaction has decreased.

1.2 Stages of Audience Psychological Activity

Audience psychological changes can be divided into four stages: the fresh stage, the admiration stage, the fatigue stage, and the aversion stage.

1.2.1 Fresh Stage: Situational Game Design Satisfies Novelty-Seeking Psychology

Unlike previous ordinary competitive reality shows, *Keep Running* was China's first situational competitive reality show that connected games through storytelling. Each episode establishes a complete narrative that drives the program forward, with every guest and host playing different roles within the story. As the story unfolds, different mini-games are designed to match the narrative theme. This uniqueness and peculiarity precisely satisfy the audience's novelty-seeking psychology—the desire for stimulation and adventure. Specifically for variety show audiences, this novelty-seeking psychology makes them hope to see distinctive and rare content that provides life and aesthetic experiences they currently lack, thereby generating fresh experiences. *Keep Running's* unique game scenario design satisfies their self-substitution into roles within the reality game, unconsciously cheering for program participants, which helped the show gain a large domestic audience and contributed to its initial popularity.

1.2.2 Admiration Stage: Idol Complex Drives Further Audience Pursuit

Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory posits that human needs can be categorized from low to high as physiological, safety, belongingness and love, and self-actualization needs. Idol psychology is latent in everyone's inner world, representing an individual's pursuit of beauty and other excellent personality qualities. Therefore, idols have considerable influence and charisma in society, with their every move attracting attention, pursuit, and emulation. Introducing idol actors into variety shows can attract more audience attention and significantly improve television ratings. Additionally, each episode invites celebrities with new works or high public attention. Each of them is a popular idol with unique personal charm and a substantial fan base, thereby attracting considerable audience attention to the program.

1.2.3 Fatigue Stage: Repetitive Game Plots Generate Aesthetic Fatigue

As an outdoor competitive reality show, game plot design plays a crucial role in driving the entire program flow, showcasing program charm, and sustaining audience engagement. However, in later seasons of *Keep Running*, the program continued to follow the game plot designs from the first two seasons. While the early seasons featured many clever game settings beyond finger-pressing boards and name-tag ripping that left deep impressions, by the end of the third season, the problem of depleted game design lacking independent innovation gradually emerged. During later viewing, audiences gradually discovered that repetitive plots could not satisfy their thinking and expectations for game design conception. Numerous comments such as “same jokes, same games, same gags” and “you can tell the ending from the beginning” revealed that audiences had fallen into viewing fatigue.

1.2.4 Aversion Stage: False Marketing Tactics in Later Stages Trigger Mass Backlash

Authenticity is the lifeblood of reality shows. Although programs have certain planned arrangements, participants’ reactions and behaviors should be genuine. Reality shows thus cater to ordinary people’s psychological needs for knowledge, curiosity, gossip, and peeping into others’ privacy. However, *Keep Running* in its later production stages ignored the documentary nature that reality shows should possess for marketing hype. To increase attention and amplify marketing efforts, the hype intensified further. This move pushed audience dissatisfaction to its peak, with numerous accusatory and abusive comments about the program team deceiving audiences for marketing purposes appearing on Weibo, causing the program’s reputation to plummet to a low point.

2. Analysis of *Back to Field* Audience Psychology

2.1 Program Overview

Back to Field is a large-scale lifestyle service documentary program produced by Hunan Television, documenting the entire life process of three hosts in a residential house on the outskirts of Beijing. They need to pick crops to make a living, and every meal must be cooked by themselves. Meanwhile, each episode invites friends as guests, and they complete designated dishes according to their friends’ requests. The program presents audiences with a life picture of “self-reliance, self-sufficiency, warm hospitality, and perfect ecology.” The program has currently aired 14 episodes, consistently ranking in the top three in television ratings on Sunday evenings. However, on social platforms such as Douban and Weibo, many netizens have launched negative evaluations against the program for plagiarizing the Korean variety show *Three Meals a Day*.

2.2 Audience Psychological Activity Analysis

Since its broadcast, *Back to Field* has generated considerable popularity, with many viewers presenting positive attitudes toward the program's quality. Compared with many other "fast-paced" game competition variety shows, the program's content arrangement, personnel configuration, and theme delivery demonstrate unique "clear stream" characteristics, better aligning with current reality show audience psychological traits by satisfying their pursuit of realism, voyeurism, curiosity, vicarious participation psychology, and identity recognition.

2.2.1 Observational Slow Variety Satisfies Audience Demand for Realism The biggest characteristic of reality shows is realism. Currently, an increasing number of game competition reality shows on the market adopt a method of integrating games into situational storytelling, which heavily relies on pre-shooting scripts and large amounts of biased post-production editing, greatly compressing the sense of realism delivered to audiences. In contrast, as an observational slow variety show, *Back to Field* has no clear script beforehand, and guests' roles are not fixed—their positioning in the program is simply their personality in real life. It displays life itself as the program, establishes no tasks, and participating celebrities have no sense of oppression from game competition shows. Guests live a relaxed rural life, finding ingredients, cooking meals, inviting friends over, and chatting about recent life. After participating, guests exclaimed: "I thought I was called here to endure hardship, but it turned out to be enjoying life." In this situation, the state presented by celebrities is completely relaxed, making it easiest to show their most authentic life appearance. Although slow variety shows lack fast-paced plots and fierce competition, they do not tire audiences because of the complete sense of realism they provide.

2.2.2 Comprehensive Exposure of Celebrity Life Satisfies Audience Voyeurism Voyeurism refers to the desire to pry into and peek at others' privacy, while curiosity refers to the eagerness to understand unknown things. The psychology of curiosity and peeping is universally present in humans. The publicization of privacy for stars and other public figures greatly stimulates audience curiosity and voyeuristic desires. *Back to Field's* comprehensive filming of participating guests' rural living conditions allows audiences to clearly see guests' living states in the countryside, with detailed records of the entire process from waking up in the morning, preparing meals, to sleeping at night, while simultaneously presenting complete details of their interactions with old friends, satisfying audience curiosity about celebrities' private lives and social interactions.

2.2.3 Pastoral Life Provides Vicarious Satisfaction "Vicarious satisfaction" comes from Freud's psychoanalytic psychology. According to Freud's theory, individuals strive to pursue lifestyles that bring them happiness to satisfy

their instinctual desires. When individual needs conflict with social reality, people often need to transfer their instinctual desires elsewhere to eliminate the depression and tension when desires cannot be satisfied. Looking back at history, the hermit sentiment and pastoral ideal were pursuits of a generation. Nowadays, affected by high living pressures in big cities, as well as cultural discontinuity and the influence of utilitarianism, lifestyles such as “wandering freely between heaven and earth with contented hearts” and “walking to where water ends, sitting and watching clouds rise” can only become wishes for contemporary urbanites. *Back to Field* allows people to return to the countryside and authenticity, which precisely becomes the call for most people currently struggling in big cities day and night. Many netizens directly commented after watching the program: “I really love this kind of life: beloved relatives and friends by my side, far from hustle and bustle, working at sunrise, daily meals, accompanying livestock, sleeping with mountains and waters, having ordinary sentiments, living a leisurely life” and “I saw my dream in *Back to Field*.” The program regulates and relieves the suppressed emotions of many urban audiences who wish to return to a leisurely rural life, providing them with spiritual comfort and fulfilling wishes they temporarily cannot accomplish themselves.

2.2.4 Program’s Emphasis on Chinese “Renqing” Theme Strengthens Audience Identity Recognition Identity recognition is the psychological process through which individuals confirm their self-identity, recognize the groups they belong to, and integrate the accompanying emotional experiences and behavioral patterns. Identity recognition psychology, also known as proximity psychology, is a sense of identification and belonging to one’s self-identity—content that is geographically and psychologically close to the audience receives more attention and interest. The reason audiences have this proximity-seeking psychology, from a cognitive perspective, is that familiar content can easily be incorporated into audiences’ existing cognitive structures, making them feel intimate and credible, while also facilitating comparison and analysis with existing knowledge and experience, leading to faster and deeper understanding. *Back to Field* prominently displays Chinese “renqing” (human sentiment) relationships, which is the interaction mode of China’s “acquaintance society.” The network of renqing relationships covers every aspect of Chinese society, and every Chinese person’s life is accompanied by the shadow of renqing. The program makes audiences focus more on relationships between people, and in various interpersonal collisions, each episode tells a heartfelt story, sharing simple truths and life experiences. The renqing 世故 (worldly wisdom) conveyed through different relationships, with its subtle and delicate interaction methods, resonates deeply with large audiences. This identity recognition brings emotional and behavioral pattern identification that echoes their real lives, generating interest in continuous viewing and ultimately internalizing it into the source of their self-value system.

3. Impact of Copyright Awareness

3.2 Influence on Audience Psychology Changes

In recent years, as the general public's knowledge and education levels have continuously improved, Chinese people have increasingly emphasized copyright protection issues for variety shows. Consequently, the phenomenon of "rampant plagiarism" in the domestic variety show market has aroused widespread audience dissatisfaction, and South Korean protests have further pushed audience negative evaluations of this type of program to their peak. *Back to Field*, as a program that imported the Korean variety show *Three Meals a Day* without purchasing copyright this year, undoubtedly became a primary target of netizens' protests. Although some voices affirmed the program's content quality, many audience members on rating websites such as Douban still chose to lower their evaluations because it did not purchase copyright. In news information communication, reverse psychology refers to the psychological consciousness of audiences making simple reverse thinking and negative understanding of media information, thereby building a psychological defense line against the forward transmission of information between communicators and audiences, causing distortion and degeneration of media information meaning and weakening or shifting the intensity of information transmission.

3.3 Developing Original Variety Shows Should Become China's Development Direction

The variety show industry should break away from intellectual and practical inertia and encourage an innovative atmosphere. Analyzing the current domestic television industry's enthusiasm for importing program models reveals two reasons: first, importing mature program models provides rating guarantees, and second, it reduces the time and cost for television stations to develop original programs. Under the constraints of this industrialized model, standardization, patternization, and marketization have become the primary production and sales methods for television variety shows. Consequently, the prevailing inertia leaves no room for original ideas, making it natural for audiences to see no successful original programs. Therefore, values and atmospheres that encourage innovative consciousness, critical spirit, respect for talent, respect for originality, and tolerance for failure should be promoted.

Second, funding allocation for variety show creation must be balanced. Originality cannot emerge from nothing—it requires a material foundation. In contrast, current domestic variety show funding allocation is unbalanced, with hiring well-known celebrities accounting for a considerable portion of program budgets. Under the market economy system, increasing investment in original ideas will gather more creative elements, and capital intervention will provide guarantees and more room for improvement for originality. The economic and material foundation is always the driving force for spiritual innovation.

Utilizing China's excellent traditional cultural heritage should be the unique de-

velopment path for Chinese variety show creation. Variety shows created based on traditional culture have sparked a wave of rating popularity. Integrating China's rich traditional cultural heritage into domestic variety show original materials helps enhance the international influence of Chinese culture, ensures national cultural security, constitutes an important measure for improving cultural soft power, and simultaneously provides a platform for Chinese cultural export.

4. Conclusion

This paper demonstrates the bumpy development path and important value of digital art aesthetics through multi-faceted elaboration. Starting from digital technology, it impacts film's artistic culture. Conducting research from the perspective of artistic culture perfectly displays digital art aesthetics and connects it with Chinese culture, which represents a better development approach.

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