

A Preliminary Analysis of the Reasons for the Rise of Online Variety Shows: A Case Study of “Qipa Shuo” (Postprint)

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Abstract

In recent years, the development of television variety shows has entered an intense stage; however, no new phenomenon-level programs have emerged. Conversely, online variety shows have risen rapidly, attracting substantial young audiences through their personalized content and posing a potential crisis to the development of television variety shows. As one of the earliest online variety shows, ‘Qi Pa Shuo’ has set new records in both viewership and advertising revenue, establishing itself as a veritable phenomenon-level online variety show. This paper will draw upon the program characteristics and content of ‘Qi Pa Shuo’ to conduct a preliminary analysis of the factors contributing to the rise of online variety shows from three perspectives: the online environmental context, the inherent features of the programs themselves, and the support of new media technologies.

Full Text

A Brief Analysis of the Reasons for the Rise of Online Variety Shows: A Case Study of *Qi Pa Shuo*

Abstract: In recent years, television variety shows have reached a state of intense saturation, yet no new phenomenon-level programs have emerged. Conversely, online variety shows have risen rapidly, attracting large numbers of young audiences through their personalized content and posing a potential crisis for the development of television variety shows. As one of the earliest online variety shows, *Qi Pa Shuo* has set new records in both viewership and advertising revenue, making it a veritable phenomenon-level web program. This paper will use the program characteristics and content of *Qi Pa Shuo* as a foundation to briefly analyze the reasons for the rise of online variety shows from three

perspectives: network environmental factors, inherent program features, and support from new media technologies.

Keywords: online self-produced variety shows; *Qi Pa Shuo*; big data; new media

Online variety shows are a product of the rapid development of the Internet. Since 2013, the number of online variety shows has maintained rapid growth, with the five major video platforms accumulating approximately 150 programs throughout 2014, representing a year-over-year growth rate of 200% [?]. In 2015, television variety shows proliferated, yet no new phenomenon-level programs emerged. Online variety shows, leveraging their excellent Internet-native attributes—“7×24-hour continuous live streaming, creative advertisements more entertaining than the main program, and seamless online-to-offline integration”—rose swiftly, planting new seeds of crisis for traditional television variety shows [?]. Entering 2016, online variety shows experienced explosive development, with increasingly novel program formats and frequent emergence of phenomenon-level web programs.

Qi Pa Shuo, as one of the earliest pure online variety shows, is a veteran in the web program sphere. Since its debut in the first season, *Qi Pa Shuo* has achieved tremendous popularity, with subsequent second and third seasons following closely behind. By the finale of its third season, *Qi Pa Shuo* had accumulated over 1.6 billion total views. After the fourth season launched on March 31, 2017, its success continued; as of April 29, 2017, the highest viewership among the ten aired episodes reached 56.73 million, while the Weibo topic “*Qi Pa Shuo*” garnered 4.15 billion reads, cementing its status as a true veteran-level online variety show. This paper will combine the program features and content of *Qi Pa Shuo* to provide a brief analysis of the reasons behind the rise of online variety shows.

1. The Rise of Online Variety Shows is an Inevitable Trend in the Network Environment

1.1 Video Platforms Entering the IPGC Stage

Initially, major video platforms rose rapidly through the User Generated Content (UGC) model. However, due to issues such as copyright infringement and serious content homogenization, this model faced widespread criticism. Platforms subsequently shifted to the Professionally Generated Content (PGC) model, where video sites purchased copyrights for professional content from television stations or film production companies to broadcast on their own platforms. However, exorbitant copyright fees, combined with the “Entertainment Restriction Order” that significantly reduced television variety show production, caused copyright costs to soar and placed heavy burdens on video platforms. Consequently, platforms began transitioning to the Internet Professional Gener-

ated Content (IPGC) model, where video websites produce programs according to their own style and audience demands. Online variety shows including *Qi Pa Shuo* emerged precisely under this background.

1.2 The Rise of Youth Subculture

Subcultures are typically constructed as disenfranchised, hostile, and unofficial groups that cannot express themselves through conventional channels [?]. Represented primarily by the post-90s generation, youth constitute the main force of the Internet-native generation and the primary user base for major video platforms. However, their non-mainstream labels have made it difficult for them to possess adequate discursive space and voice in traditional interpersonal society, whereas Internet platforms grant this group unlimited freedom [?]. They yearn to release self-imposed pressure and escape authoritative control under the free and open platform of the Internet to achieve physical and mental pleasure, and online variety shows precisely satisfy this need. The debate topics selected in each season of *Qi Pa Shuo* focus on issues that concern youth groups and cause them distress in daily life, such as “Big City Bed or Small City House” and “My Boss is an Idiot, Should I Tell Them.” Moreover, contestants’ remarks are avant-garde and sharp, often conveying the true voice of youth groups. The “BIBI” sound used for audio censorship also makes the program more “down-to-earth.” Even Ma Dong jokingly states at the beginning, “People over 40 please watch accompanied by post-90s individuals.” In this way, *Qi Pa Shuo* greatly narrows the psychological distance with youth groups, which is also why it gained widespread attention upon launch.

2. Online Variety Shows Better Align with Modern Aesthetics

2.1 Relaxed Content Restrictions and Lively Program Atmosphere

Due to policy restrictions and the need to accommodate the broadest possible audience, traditional television variety shows often exercise restraint in production. Online variety shows face relatively fewer constraints in this regard. In the relatively free cyberspace, web programs have greater room for creativity. Additionally, most online variety show production teams consist of young post-90s talent with active thinking and prominent personalized styles. *Qi Pa Shuo* selects bold debate topics each season, such as “Is Forced Marriage an Act of Love or Perversion” and “Should One Come Out to Their Parents.” These topics are not only direct and straightforward, striking at the hearts of audiences troubled by these issues, but also involve socially sensitive topics like sexual minority groups, which would be difficult to address in traditional television variety shows. Furthermore, *Qi Pa Shuo* breaks the unequal status between contestants and mentors seen in traditional television variety shows. In the program, mentors and debaters tease each other—for instance, Ma Dong’s eye bags and Gao Xiaosong’s selfies are frequent targets of contestants’ jokes—creating a

relaxed atmosphere for the audience. This also demonstrates how online variety shows differ from television variety shows in their casual hosting style, unconventional approaches, pursuit of self-liberation, and continuous dissolution of the gap between refined and popular culture.

2.2 Creative and Engaging Advertising

Due to time slot and channel resource limitations, advertisements in television programs are mostly hard-sell placements positioned at the beginning and end of shows, with little connection to the program content, negatively impacting viewing experience. Mobile viewers often choose to skip these segments. Online variety shows differ fundamentally. Their lively production philosophy, combined with flexible program duration, allows advertising placements to permeate the entire program in forms that audiences willingly accept. *Qi Pa Shuo* features approximately five minutes of oral advertising per episode—what would be considered an extreme waste of channel resources in television variety shows—yet *Qi Pa Shuo*’s creative advertisements achieve excellent promotional effects. The advertising segments are not dry recitations of ad copy but are typically introduced through mini-talks between the host and guests before formal debates begin. For example, in one episode of the second season, Ma Dong posed the question, “If you could only bring one thing to another planet, what would you bring?” After other guests gave serious answers, Ma Dong unexpectedly stated he would bring a bag of “MM’s,” instantly making the entire audience laugh with the surprising advertisement. Similarly, *Qi Pa Shuo*’s debaters occasionally use sponsors as examples when elaborating their viewpoints, achieving effects comparable to Ma Dong’s mini-talks. Moreover, the advertising slogans used in *Qi Pa Shuo* are highly entertaining, such as “Mosilian, drink it and live to 99” and “International hunger-resistance big brand Yili Guaniduo oat milk.” All these examples demonstrate that in online variety shows, even watching advertisements becomes a source of enjoyment—something clearly difficult to achieve in television variety shows.

3. Support from New Media Technologies

3.1 Precise Audience Targeting Through Big Data

In the era of big data, users’ search and browsing information on the Internet is recorded, providing video websites with corresponding data. Through analysis of this data, video platforms can identify user habits and preferences, delivering different content and employing different marketing strategies for each audience member [?]. According to the 2016 Tencent Entertainment White Paper, among deep online variety show users (those who have watched more than five shows), the post-95 generation accounts for the highest proportion at 42.35% [?]. As a flagship online variety show under the iQiyi video platform, *Qi Pa Shuo* leverages Baidu’s massive database to precisely target its audience, firmly grasping the preferences of the post-90s generation. Each season’s debate top-

ics resonate strongly with this demographic, maintaining audience engagement with the program.

3.2 Excellent Interactivity

A key distinguishing feature of new media from traditional media is its excellent interactivity. As an online variety show, *Qi Pa Shuo* not only releases each episode regularly on iQiyi but also maintains its own WeChat public account “Dong Qimen” and official Weibo account. Popular contestants such as Ma Weiwei, Xiao Xiao, Fan Tiantian, and Jiang Sida also have their own social media accounts, establishing an instant communication bridge with audiences. For the program, immediate audience feedback enables the production team to make timely adjustments to program format and topic selection, enhancing program quality. For contestants themselves, interaction with audiences helps them identify deficiencies in their performance and make improvements. Additionally, interaction between contestants and audiences can create fan effects, increasing audience activity and stickiness.

The rich formats and enormous commercial value behind online variety shows indicate their tremendous development prospects, with reverse output models from online to television variety shows already emerging. However, alongside the massive proliferation of web programs, issues such as homogenization and vulgarization have begun appearing in some online variety shows, while excessive pursuit of entertainment can easily lead to a lack of core values. The present era represents the best time for online variety show development, but investors must look beyond immediate interests. Only by overcoming these chronic problems, cultivating core talent, and continuously developing new program formats can online variety shows achieve sustainable development.

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

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