

# Analyzing the Innovation of “Flowers and Youth” from the Perspective of Communication Theory: A Case Study of “Flowers and Youth · Silk Road Season” Postprint

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## Abstract

**[Objective]** As one of China’s early travel-themed variety shows, “Flowers and Youth” was most memorable to audiences for its diverse interpersonal dynamics and vivid character portrayals. However, “Flowers and Youth · Silk Road Season” sheds these previous labels, presenting a wonderful journey that showcases amicable interpersonal interactions. While guiding audiences to explore the world along the Silk Road, it also effectively disseminates outstanding Chinese culture. This paper analyzes the innovative aspects of “Flowers and Youth · Silk Road Season” compared with previous seasons, aiming to provide insights and references for travel-themed programs. **[Methods]** Based on broadcast performance, this study comprehensively employs communication theories including cold versus hot media, uses and gratifications theory, characteristics of mass media audiences, and communication functions. **[Results]** It thoroughly examines the underlying logic behind its success in attracting audiences and becoming a phenomenal hit, offering new perspectives for similar travel variety shows. **[Conclusion]** It multi-dimensionally verifies the significant impact of innovative promotion, diversified content arrangement, and mainstream value dissemination on shaping hit variety shows.

## Full Text

### Preamble

Analyzing the Innovation of “Flowers and Youth” from Communication Theory Principles: A Case Study of “Flowers and Youth: Silk Road Season”

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**Abstract:** [Purpose] As one of China’s early travel variety shows, “Flowers and Youth” left audiences with the deepest impression of its diverse interpersonal relationships and distinct character traits. However, “Flowers and Youth: Silk Road Season” shed these previous labels, presenting a beautiful journey that demonstrates the friendliness of human interaction. While leading audiences to see the world along the Silk Road, it also effectively disseminated excellent Chinese culture. This paper analyzes the innovative aspects of “Flowers and Youth: Silk Road Season” compared with previous seasons, aiming to provide reflection and reference for travel programs. [Methods] Combining broadcast performance, this study comprehensively applies theoretical methods from communication studies including cold media/hot media, uses and gratifications theory, characteristics of mass media audiences, and communication functions. [Results] It thoroughly analyzes the logical reasons behind its success in attracting audiences and becoming a phenomenon-level hit, providing new ideas for similar travel variety shows. [Conclusion] It multi-dimensionally verifies the important impact of innovative promotion, diversified content arrangement, and mainstream value dissemination on shaping hit variety shows.

**Keywords:** communication theory; Flowers and Youth; innovation; travel reality show; variety show

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## 1. “Cold Media”and “Hot Media”–Pre-Broadcast Promotion and Warm-up

### 1.1 Innovation: Reversing Program Image and Expanding Audience Groups

Program promotion is the critical step of placing well-produced excellent works before audiences. Many variety shows choose to maintain secrecy during filming, with promotional materials mainly releasing vague content marketing. However, “Flowers and Youth” adopted an unusual promotional approach. By initiating the “Walking with Light” campaign on Weibo before broadcast, the show neither hyped up guests nor artificially created conflicts. The production team generously shared content before the premiere, which instead generated enormous heat. Utilizing an aurora livestream for promotion, the show leveraged nature’s unique landscapes to enhance intimacy with audiences. As a travel program that takes viewers who cannot travel thousands of miles to see the world,

audiences can experience cultural differences between countries through the program. The aurora livestream's ability to break circles lies in its expansion of the audience group while promoting the program—regardless of whether viewers continue following after the main episodes air, simply entering the livestream to watch the aurora counts as successful promotion. It achieves the goal of making those unaware of the program aware of its existence, transforming some potential audience members into actual viewers.

### 1.2 Practice of “Cold Media” and “Hot Media”

Marshall McLuhan proposed the concepts of “cold media” and “hot media.” Cold media refers to media that convey limited and ambiguous information, requiring the mobilization of multiple sensory coordinations and rich imagination to understand. Hot media refers to media that transmit relatively clear and explicit information, where recipients need not mobilize more senses or associative activities to comprehend—the media itself is “hot,” requiring no “warm-up exercise” for information processing [2]. Many programs maintain secrecy to preserve 热度 for the main broadcast. If pre-broadcast promotion diverges from audience expectations, viewers may abandon watching. Moreover, releasing substantial program content beforehand contradicts the idea of stimulating audience curiosity, and some novelty-seeking audiences may already determine the program's theme and tone from promotional materials. If promotional content becomes homogeneous with other market shows, it loses competitiveness. Innovative promotion can compensate for many drawbacks of “hot media.” “Flowers and Youth” fully utilized this characteristic, breaking audience stereotypes and presenting scenes different from their expectations, thereby stimulating audience curiosity and generating discussion. Employing an aurora livestream for promotion—without hyping guests or forcing conflicts—the production team generously placed it before the premiere, generating tremendous 热度 instead.

## 2. Audience Characteristics – “Belt and Road” Study Tour Disseminating Chinese Culture

### 2.1 Innovation: Not Focusing on Interpersonal Conflicts, All Cast Members as Comedians

The core challenge in building China's audio-visual image for the world is how to construct the complex and multi-dimensional China into limited image narratives through audio-visual media to change overseas audiences' cognition and attitudes toward China [3]. This season of “Flowers and Youth” combines “study tour + travel,” and its interaction model reveals that the current media landscape is no longer limited to spectacles created by a few. Different character relationships construct diverse dialogic landscapes [4]. The show's quiz segments become a mouthpiece for China's recent achievements, with each astonishing number symbolizing China's honor and each major project demonstrating great power demeanor. National image possesses characteristics of continuity and sta-

bility—it changes with China’s development and international communication structures, while continuously being reproduced, evolved, and renewed through ongoing communication practices [5]. The “Flowers and Youth” cast sincerely praises local folk customs, dietary cultures, and natural landscapes. While appreciating each other’s beauty, they also promote excellent Chinese culture. Foreign Ministry spokespersons have also praised “Flowers and Youth: Silk Road Season” on international platforms, stating that “Dilraba, wearing Xinjiang attire and dancing Xinjiang dances, shines brilliantly.” This season has also been recommended multiple times on overseas social platforms. Transforming grand narratives into story-based narration, diluting didactic colors and traces, reducing communication barriers caused by cultural differences, and enhancing cross-cultural communication effectiveness [6]. The motivation for travel is “mobility,” and travel narratives contain the meaning of breaking away from daily life and moving toward distant places [7]. Although audiences come from all corners of the country, under regional connections, they share unified commonalities—being surprised by unseen world landscapes and proud of the widespread dissemination of excellent Chinese culture.

## **2.2 Analyzing Mass Media Audience Characteristics to Create Common Content**

Characteristics of mass media audiences include massive scale, dispersion and heterogeneity, anonymity, mobility, disorganization, and homogeneity [8]. To increase program 热度, high viewership is needed, which requires expanding the audience group. To find content that all viewers enjoy among many people, emotional common ground must be identified. This season’s study tour allows Chinese excellent culture to go global, enhancing national cultural confidence and long-buried pride. “Flowers and Youth” utilizes mass media audience characteristics, grasping the essentials of broadening audience groups and understanding what audiences need. The invited guests each have distinct colors, allowing audiences to observe each guest’s unique charm. Appreciating beauty together is the source of the program’s eternal vitality. Audiences have grown tired of long-standing plotlines where character traits create conflicts and are more willing to see program content develop toward positive social influence—this is also a new magic weapon for variety show creation.

## **3. Communication Functions –Entertainment and Social Functions**

### **3.1 Innovation: Breaking Free from Interpersonal Relationship Constraints, All Cast Members as Comedians**

The program’s function is its effect—only when something has an effect will people acknowledge its significance. The 20th Party Congress report points out that socialist core values are a powerful force for uniting hearts and gathering popular support [9]. One reason “Flowers and Youth” attracted large audiences

is that viewers can relax while watching. The show's chief director frankly spent four months on casting work. After broadcast, audiences quickly discovered Hu Xianxi, who has been a comedy star since childhood; Wang Anyu, who lets himself go when serving as tour guide; Dilraba, showing her true personality; the straightforward Zhao Zhaoyi; Xin Zhilei, whose personality differs greatly from her appearance; “Electronic Dora” Qin Lan; and the cute and warm eldest sister Qin Hailu. Following the trend where everything can be shipped, “Flowers and Youth” is the variety show with the most successful pairings. Almost every variety show develops one or two pairings to increase program 热度—for example, Angelababy and Zheng Kai's Thursday on-screen couple in “Keep Running,” and the “Three Fools” and “Three Smarties” combinations in “Go Fighting,” which all became major hotspots. Different from before, “Flowers and Youth's” pairings blend perfectly. The friendly atmosphere creates a pairing for every two people, with relaxed and friendly relationships being one of the program's brilliant aspects.

### 3.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory

In the new media era, media development stimulates and broadens people's content demands. “Audience demands on one hand involve media technological development, because without it there would be no program positioning, guests, entertainment value, or program themes, etc. On the other hand, they relate to content presented by media. Therefore, audience demands on programs are unlimited, and both remain in a tense state of ‘use and dissatisfaction’ ” [10]. A major function of variety shows is entertaining the public—most audiences watch TV variety shows hoping to harvest happy leisure time, shifting attention from tedious life to discovering life's pleasures and beauty, which is the winning weapon for variety show ratings. Moderate “slow living” has become young people's consensus, and audience demands for variety shows have shifted from compact-paced to relaxed-paced [11]. Uses and gratifications theory examines the psychological and behavioral effects of mass communication by analyzing audience motivations for media contact and what needs these contacts satisfy [12]. Program creation is a dialogue between creators and audiences—creators must figure out audience psychology. In this information age, intermittent conflicts admittedly make programs more watchable. Under such creative circumstances, travel variety shows daring to try new watchability creation are very rare. When travel programs focus cameras on guests' different viewpoints and solutions, attention naturally shifts to discussing guests with different personalities. Audiences transition from watching excitement to learning life strategies, not only adding character highlights for guests but also allowing audiences to enhance their sense of gain, thereby increasing audience stickiness. Uses and gratifications theory also tells variety show creators that audience satisfaction is no longer confined to the realm of “amusing ourselves to death” —it should move toward more meaningful, higher-quality content creation.

## 4. Diverse Programming and Communication Effects

### 4.1 Innovation: Diverse Arrangements Providing Beautiful Experiences

“Flowers and Youth’ s” broadcast arrangement is also distinctive. Beyond the main episodes, there are pilot films, advance business segments, extended versions, extra behind-the-scenes footage, and “Flowers and Youth” companion reaction shows, with new materials every day. Through mass production, “Flowers and Youth” wins audience favor, demonstrating full sincerity. The more creative content goes online, the more highlights there are; the more artists appear on camera, the higher the program’ s 热度, enriching audience viewing experiences. In the companion reaction show, guests’ instant reactions to their on-screen performance are highly interesting, extending beyond filmed guests’ performances to include post-production exchanges of inner thoughts while watching together, showcasing everyone’ s chemistry after becoming familiar. “Flowers and Youth” also values interaction with audiences, launching secondary creation editing activities to expand program influence and promote the program comprehensively. Guests’ livestreams during travel also capture audience preferences, with rich highlights immersing audiences. The program occupies hot lists across major platforms, strongly interacting with Xiaohongshu’ s “grass-planting” attributes to obtain 8.2 billion exposures, repeatedly breaking records and receiving Xiaohongshu’ s official certification as TOP1 in the variety show category. The production team also launched “Flowers and Youth Travel Guidebook” to share travel routes, achieving cross-circle dissemination for effective and efficient widespread promotion.

### 4.2 Factors Influencing Communication Effects

The main factors influencing communication effects are fourfold: communication media, content and presentation style, information repetition, and audience reception conditions [13]. “Flowers and Youth” first adopts weekly consecutive broadcasting for information repetition, raising audience expectations through repetition and satisfying audience desires, forming a closed loop between stimulating desire and satisfying desire—satisfaction immediately stimulates further desire, which is then immediately satisfied again, creating cyclic viewing inertia memory. “Flowers and Youth’ s” daily broadcast content varies, starting with pre-travel pilot films, advance business segments, then main travel episodes, extended behind-the-scenes footage when audiences want more, and later combining guests to watch filming reactions together. In terms of content innovation, this effectively reduces audience aesthetic fatigue and enhances viewing satisfaction. Through multi-platform broadcasting, exposure and discussion are increased. The traditional weekly broadcast model no longer suits today’ s fast-paced era. In this age pursuing exposure, “Flowers and Youth’ s” broadcast provides full sincerity, releasing filming materials daily to increase audience memory points and maintain program 热度. The program’ s promotional methods across major platforms also blossom everywhere, with guests commu-

nicating with audiences on platforms, covering multi-level crowds, achieving cross-boundary breakthroughs, and becoming one of the public's favorite variety shows.

## 5. Long-tail Effect –Derivative Program Innovation

### 5.1 Innovation: After-sales Plus Derivatives, Innovative Expression Forms

After the latest season of “Flowers and Youth” aired, it achieved significant response. The creative team capitalized on the program's 热度 by launching livestreams revealing artists' interpersonal relationships long after travel ended. Audiences with 意犹未尽 feelings naturally continued following with the program's beautiful filter. When artists asked the production team how they should perform in the program, the answer was—be yourself. When positive feedback is obtained, the overall trend for variety shows is formed, allowing the entire team to focus on topics with high 热度 and discussion, creating two-way feedback with audiences. The creative team immediately created the season's IP derivative program “Flowers and Youth Friends,” using Season 5's guests as regular cast members, continuing the latest season's 热度 and satisfying loyal audiences' psychology, maintaining the program's inherent viewership. Derivative program innovation doesn't stop at simple expansion of original content—it adds regular guests from previous seasons and first-time participants as flying guests to the “Flowers and Youth” group. This is an unprecedented grand gathering of guests across seasons and a friction of each season's style—different guests create different chemistry, which is precisely what interests audiences.

### 5.2 Capturing Dissemination Under the Long-tail Effect

The long-tail theory posits that people usually only focus on important people or events—the “head” of the curve—while ignoring the “tail” of the curve that requires more energy and cost to notice [14]. In program industry chains, the original program is such a head program, while derivative programs become tail programs. Derivative programs early on mainly appeared in talent competition shows, composed of behind-the-scenes footage and filming materials to increase newcomers' exposure. Derivative programs have now become necessary components of variety show launches. “Flowers and Youth 5's” broadcast brought the “Flowers and Youth” IP back to public view. The creative team seized the program's residual heat, investing costs to create derivative programs. This move continues the parent program's 热度 while offering different ideas in content creation. Obviously, after program 热度 disperses, what remains are loyal audiences with continued expectations. For this portion of people's needs, there exists space waiting to be satisfied. This program tried many new combinations and content—cross-season group travel is a form never attempted in previous variety shows. The new elements and changes in derivative programs break fixed thinking and inherent models, achieving a cross-dimensional effect, innovating

program expression forms, adding discussion topics and new highlights, helping alleviate audience aesthetic fatigue and expanding program development space.

## 6. Implications and Future Development

Under high-quality development background, the cultural industry must face modernization, face the world, and face the future, innovatively promoting mainstream value dissemination and expression, strengthening people's cognition and understanding of mainstream values [15]. Variety shows bear the responsibility of disseminating social mainstream values, shoulder the heavy burden of China's film and television industry going global, and lead the advanced trend of Chinese cultural development. Content creation originates from the people and reacts upon them. National image possesses tremendous influence and cohesion, representing a country's overall strength [16]. "To better promote Chinese culture going global, carrying the Dao through culture, transmitting sound through culture, and influencing people through culture, we must explain and recommend to the world more excellent culture with Chinese characteristics, embodying Chinese spirit, and containing Chinese wisdom" [17]. With continuous development of digital technology and internet technology, new media shows vigorous development momentum. In the future, traditional media needs to continuously seek innovation and development [18]. Good variety shows must be works beneficial to audiences ideologically. Currently, many variety shows blindly pursue entertainment and disputes for ratings and viewership, ignoring the deep meaning the program should express. After brief laughter, endless emptiness remains. Such homogeneous program flooding makes it difficult for quality variety shows to stand out, representing one reason why the variety and film industry struggles to change and innovate. Therefore, variety shows themselves must make breakthrough changes. In this content-is-king era, they must steadfastly convey social thought—this is also why "Flowers and Youth: Silk Road Season" succeeded. Characters are no longer dispute creators in variety shows but become the program's mouthpieces and artist brands going global. Audiences harvest the beauty of interpersonal communication and learn the art of speaking. When variety shows remain true to their original intention and explore what ideological influence they can bring to audiences, they can see the next breakthrough point for variety shows.

Variety show audience positioning is fixed due to program type, guests, entertainment value, program theme, etc. Data shows China's variety show audiences tend to be young people in their twenties and thirties, with fixed age circles, creating a variety show gap. The film and television industry struggles to produce works suitable for all ages. Travel variety shows focus on stories occurring between people and people, people and nature, and people and society, possessing unique advantages for breaking age circle fixation. Therefore, they should break assembly-line production models and create programs conforming to mainstream values. Meanwhile, precisely because audiences are fixed in the youth demographic, content creation should be even more refined. The essence

of quality content creation requires programs to have rich and profound connotations. While pursuing variety show comedy effects, programs must emphasize educational significance, creating quality works with subtle positive influence on individuals and organizations. Integrating these two aspects is a long and arduous journey—overemphasizing either side would be biased. Future variety shows must move toward excellent works with clear themes and rich forms. This requires program creators to generate new ideas and continuously practice, making more and better works through exploration.

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