

The “De-celebrity” Trend of the Chinese Reality Show Industry from the Perspective of the Main Audience: Take *Exciting Offer* as an Example

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, China's variety shows market is full of different types of reality shows and favored by the public. Celebrity reality shows were once popular, but with their development away from "reality". The market focuses gradually shifted to the reality shows of ordinary people. In this study, the researcher analyzes the development process of reality show de-stardom. To study how the public views the problem of de-stardom in reality shows. The researchers chose focus groups as one of the research methods in this study. Utilizing convenient sampling, 12 participants, aged between 20 and 30 years old, were selected as representatives of the mainstream audiences of Reality shows in China. The analysis shows that the public is gradually inclined to accept reality shows of people. Audiences pay more attention to the programs with social significance, and they think that the stars and real people use unreasonable propaganda methods and scripts. Reality shows are a sharp contrast. Ordinary reality shows focus on reviewing the quality of content, controlling the fit between guests and content, providing positive guidance to the audience, and forming a high link with society. "De-celebrity" has become a node in the development of reality shows, which provides a positive development direction for the reality show market.

Keywords: Chinese reality show, De-celebrity, *Exciting Offer*, Ordinary people reality shows

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

In recent years, reality shows have become a popular and mainstream entertainment genre in China. In 2020, Reality shows occupied nearly half of all kinds of variety shows. The top 10 shows that created a communication buzz online in 2020 were all celebrity reality shows: *Keep Running* and *Go fighting* are considered the national variety shows with 56.36 and 43.11 popularity indexes that achieved top 2; *Back to Field* as 40.15 indexes in the third position. A new kind of celebrity talent show, *Sisters Who Brave the Winds and Waves*, famous female stars compete together; it gained an index of 40.44 and 5.19 billion views among online variety shows. According to the January to June (2020) rating, *Keep Running* was topped by 2.57%, *Back to Field* was rated 2.32%, and *Go Fighting* enjoyed 2.26% [1]. The popularity of celebrity reality TV is the attention and traffic brought by the famous people themselves, the buzz that can be generated by various interactions [2]. They usually have unique

personalities that capture the interest and resonance of the audience. The selling point is the affability, authenticity, and closeness of famous people. The story and scene in the game missions are also based on daily life, giving the audience a sense of identification and a feeling that "celebrities are also common" [3]. Differentiation and conflict created by celebrity guests enlarge the drama element and leave a deep and distinctive memory for the audience [4]. In addition, the audience consists mainly of 19-24 (35.26%) and 25-34 (30.26%) age groups; the female is attracted and interested more than male (3:1 distribution).

Moreover, the reality shows that participation by celebrities is also an opportunity to increase their popularity. Cai, through *Keep Running*, became the most popular guest in a celebrity reality show with a 22.97 popularity index. Actress Zhang gained more exposure as *Sisters Who Brave the Winds and Waves*; her name was on the Weibo trending list 60 times during the broadcast, while idol Wang acquired another important host label with his participation in the show [1].

However, these reality shows are gradually being criticized by audiences. Because it is always scripted, structured, and edited, it also became a platform for celebrities to showcase. At the same time, in 2017, the China Association of Network Audiovisual Program Services stipulated that reality shows should reduce the number of celebrity participants and increase the proportion of ordinary people [4]. Reality shows that do not feature celebrities, i.e., focusing on the normal, have started to gain popularity among viewers. *Exciting Offer* Season I released in 2019 accessed an 8.7 rating. By contrast, *Keep Running* and *Go fighting* just got 5.5 and 4.1, respectively. The play volume of season II (64.85 million) exceeded *Keep Running* (52 million) and *Go Fighting* (14.05 million) [5]. Far from now, it has had 8.78 billion readings and 11.851 million discussions on Weibo. The common people in the show become the main topic. *Exciting Offer* is about eight students from different universities to a top law office in China that has brought empathy and sympathy to the public who struggle to find a job or not yet be in the workplace or those who are already in the workplace [6]. This ordinary people reality show not only points out Employment difficulties for high school graduates in Chinese society nowadays but also presents the rules in the workplace and humanity through Diversify content. Its reality and entertainment successfully Breaking new ground in reality TV [7].

1.2. Literature Review

1.2.1. The prosperity of celebrity reality show

Since reality TV is an essential industry in China, many scholars research to analyze this aspect. The development of technology allows each individual to hold media devices; in this case, people enter a peeping era. Huang summarized a self-centered aggressive mentality embodied in “voyeuristic” programs --- reality shows that are watched to learn about different stories and social trends [8]. Most people, especially fans, are curious about the life of celebrities. Zhang cited the term based on Jenkins in 2006 that is fan activism. It refers to fans as active audiences who display an intense participant; they want control to exert control over media flow [9]. The fandom as a powerful group will support the show having their preferred celebrities joined. As models of success in society, Steen said that stars become the role models chosen by the public to gain skills from emulation [10]. According to Haq and Rahman, people, especially young adults, always entertain, gain knowledge, and reflect on social issues through watching reality shows. Programs can use celebrities to amplify and convey positive messages. Katz, in 1974 conducted the user and gratification theory that explained the media exposure in personal use of mass communication chain process: socially and psychologically elements induce mediated expectation and get the satisfaction of needs

[11]. Based on the definition, Brown, and Lauricella studied that the U&G emphasizes individual needs when using media channels to satisfy specific needs and desires that will provide them with longing gratifications [12]. Li researched why celebrity characters in reality shows have popularity because people gain alternative emotional experiences and satisfaction, compensating for the lack of vibrant personal life [2]. In detail, Liu presented that “putting the stars in areas they are not good at removes the aura of stardom, and they go about their tasks like an average person” can stimulate emotion and pursuit. The downside of the celebrity in a field that the audience is familiar with can satisfy the contrasting psychology of the audience [13].

1.2.2. The declining reputation and rating of celebrity reality show

The joining of famous people indeed helps to increase the ratings and economic benefits of the program. However, the high appearance fees of stars will inevitably lead to other filming and production costs being reduced, thus lowering the quality of filming and production standards and cause extreme imbalance among the general public, affecting the social atmosphere [4]. Besides, some celebrities falsify in the show to maintain their image; some regard participation as a means to earn profit and deliberately create topics to increase exposure; some purposely act funny or pompous, making viewers feel fake and pretentious. Zhou pointed out that these phenomena violate the principle of “authenticity” and are against the mainstream positive values of the show [4]. The reality show is turning out to be a platform for celebrities showcasing themselves. According to Deller, the stages in fame circle: firstly, ‘Proper’ celebrity’ those who are on the pinnacle of fame, they want to use such programs as promotional vehicles; secondly, ‘(Re)-purposed celebrity’ aims at re-branding themselves in some capacity like reinventing and looking for acceptance after scandal; and also, the ‘post celebrity hopes restore them to public prominence [14]. Chan and Jekinson criticized the program team. The celebrity participants always consider their interests first to gain profits, ignore the significance of the reality show itself and set up fake personas and scripted shows to gain traffic fan support through the hype [15]. Moreover, Li analyzed the success of *Exciting Offer* also mentioned that some reality shows had an awkward blend of public participation and forced inclusion of ordinary people [7]. Ni concluded the rules and designs of the game are often directly copied from similar Western programs, ignoring the differences in entertainment, moral standards, and humanity. This situation has resulted in viewers becoming visually tired due to the excessive homogenization of content [3].

1.2.3. The prospect of “de-celebrity”

Xu studied that from the stage of single star character, reality shows have changed into the current combination of celebrities and ordinary people, which has the potential and occupies a great market. Through public participation, the program allows a high degree of integration between the two groups, bringing a strong sense of involvement and interaction and satisfying the psychological needs of the audience [16]. According to Chang, separating the stars and ordinary people is a new trend. First of all, the central theme of the program and the rules of the game revolve around ordinary people. For example, in the *Exciting Offer*, celebrities act as an observer group with the audience to see the story from an omniscient view. In this way, the star's motion line is also around the ordinary guests. The focus of the show and the heat are around ordinary people [17]. Xu presented the measures to break through the field: 1. reduce the attention and influence brought by the celebrities and improve the attractiveness of the program; 2. make the celebrities natural and approachable, and guide ordinary people to discover their characteristics; 3. use the Internet to do pre-publicizing [18]. The process toward “de-celebrity” is still tricky. But these are the paths that must be taken.

These theories and researches support this paper and offer helpful background and knowledge. However, there are still some gaps. The researchers found that the current foreign literature little focused on celebrity reality shows and lacks study mentioning ordinary people reality shows. Moreover, there is no overall analysis for the celebrity reality show for Chinese literature and a lack of survey about audiences’ attitudes. The current articles mainly focus on the program mechanism and analyze the content but ignore the audience's perspectives. This point raises the question about the feasibility of de-celebrity. The purpose is to pave the direction for the future development of reality shows in China and give reasonable suggestions to improve the quality of programs based on the audience. Additionally, the study is hoped to be a reference to the program producer team. To achieve the result, the researchers study the “de-celebrity” trend of the Chinese reality show industry from the perspective of the main audience, taking the *Exciting Offer* as an example and conducting the Focus group as *Exciting Offer* as a topic among the 20-30 Chinese females who are the dominant audience (twelve people in total and dividing into two groups).

2. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this paper is to inquire about the audience's views on the phenomenon of “de-celebrity” in China's reality show industry. Currently, the most popular academic methodologies for audience perspective research are questionnaire surveys and focus groups. And the researchers believe that these two

methods both have merits and weaknesses for the audience research. The questionnaire survey focuses on the breadth of samples. Thus the results may be more representative, but the depth of the results will be superficial. So, the questionnaire cannot meet the requirements of this study. In contrast, the focus group of the qualitative research may lose the external validity of the results to some extent, but the depth of the results will overwhelm other methods. Therefore, to achieve the research objectives of this paper, the researchers chose a focus group as one of the main research methods in this study.

For the selection of participants, according to the previous analysis of the audience of the Chinese reality show market, in this paper, ten women aged between 20 and 30, the mainstream audience of Chinese reality shows, were selected as participants through the convenient sampling. At the same time, to match the real audience environment and improve the validity and reliability as possible, the researchers also chose two men aged between 20 and 30 as the participants in the focus groups.

In this study, 12 participants were randomly assigned to two focus groups of 6 people (5 women and 1 man) based on gender quotas. And due to the limitation of the environment, both focus groups for the study were discussed online. The moderator established the seminar rooms and were formed by inviting relevant participants and other observers into the group. The researchers moderated both groups who prepared questions on topics such as “celebrity effect”, “de-celebrity,” and *Exciting Offer* and other topics, and the focus group communication centered on these topics. The observers, who were also the researchers in this study, remained silent in the groups except for necessary guidance and only recorded what the participants had said.

The discussion lasted about an hour for each group. During the period, the host first introduced himself and introduced some basic information of the research, including the research topic and related brief background, and then entered the relevant topic discussion. Besides, the host is only for the topic guide function. After a simple heat session, the observers said that every participant expressed their own opinions about a particular topic guided by the hosts. Followed then, the free discussion was conducted under the guidance of the moderator. The whole process is conscientious and harmonious, and the results have research value. Thus, the researchers collected and analyzed the participant's statements and attitudes and finally formed the main content of this paper.

What’s more, it should be noted that all participants were informed of the relevant information of the research before entering the focus group. So the whole research process strictly followed the principle of informed consent of participants. Meanwhile, in accordance with

the confidentiality and anonymity requirements of the participant, the participants had given the relevant demographic information separately to the researcher before entering the focus group, and his/her real name had been omitted.

3. RESULT

In the future, Chinese reality show should take "de-celebrity" as the mainstream of development. Through the investigation method of the focus group, the researchers followed two conclusions.

Firstly, lots of excellent ordinary reality shows are becoming more popular nowadays. It means that "de-celebrity" has gradually gained an advantage in program production. The audience thought ordinary reality shows are more real and meaningful. The popularity of these ordinary reality shows meets their requirements of them. "De-celebrity" means get rid of the scripts, traffic, and bad economic benefits. Hence, come to the point of view that future Chinese reality shows should take the "de-celebrity" as the mainstream.

Secondly, the celebrity reality show became a failure because the audience was tired of relying too much on the "program script" and "commercial marketing" of star characteristics. Most audiences thought, "I don't reject scripts. Reality shows always have scripts. This is a very common phenomenon. But what we care about is whether the script of the program is used reasonably." So, the audience accepts the celebrity reality show with a script. Still, the audience believes that the unreasonable use of script and propaganda methods is the main reason for declining celebrity reality show ratings. Although the "star" characteristics can bring traffic and hot topics to the reality show, the distortion of the script and the excessive hype of the program lead to the decline of the reality show's quality and the audience groups. The audience wants to see what is real and interesting. Meanwhile, have positive energy.

4. DISCUSSION

According to the results, at present, more and more audiences begin to pay more attention to the connotation of reality shows. Therefore, "de-celebrity" has become an unavoidable topic in the development of reality shows in China. So how should practitioners correctly develop the "de-celebrity" strategy and avoid inappropriate celebrity marketing? With this in mind, the researchers suggested the following discussions and using the *Exciting Offer* as an example:

4.1. The program strictly checks the selection of program guests.

This is the most direct expression of "de-celebrity". *Exciting offers* strictly selected well-known law firms as

internship companies, at the same time invited elites in the legal field to be the team leader, and chose fresh students who graduated from famous schools, have the solid basic legal knowledge and rich internship experience. Compared with the celebrity reality show, the current celebrity reality show focus more on squeezing the traffic brought by the stars, ignoring the quality of content that runs counter to the original intention of reality show production. In contrast, *Exciting offer* pays more attention to the fit between guests and programs. The choice of program guests is more like the representatives of the elderly, novices, and backbone in the workplace. In the first season of the program, lawyer Jin said, "the various forms of life are things not mentioned in the book." The novice interns, experienced teaching lawyers, and the star observation group taught the audience an important lesson in life and career.

4.2. The content of the program is close to life

"De-celebrity", as the name suggests, is to make the program content more grounded and closer to the audience's daily life. Work life is a stage that every person will experience. The observational program form of *Exciting offer* has attracted wide audiences. From the interview to formal internship and then to assessment in the internship process, the audience can obtain useful work information through the performance of these guests. For example, Students who have just finished the college entrance examination can clearly understand what law majors will learn and what career planning will be like after graduation by watching this program. Through the presentation of the program, these students can avoid the phenomenon that they found they are not really interested in the law and then waste time changing majors after into the university. In addition, law students can learn about law knowledge and experience that are not available on campus or in books through this program and can also summarize some suitable interview skills and the etiquette that needs to be paid attention to the workplace through observing the interns in the program. *Exciting offer* not only entertains the audience but also bring useful knowledge to workers of all ages. Compared with celebrity reality shows and meeting the audience's prying into stars, these celebrity reality shows put more emphasis on the entertainment and economic benefits brought by the program.

4.3. The program conveys positive values and sets a good example in the workplace.

Compared with the program characteristics of star corruption, "de-celebrity" brings a more positive value guide to the program. In recent years, the scripts of reality shows have generally been filled with the wind of impetuosity and absurdity. It seems that the more intense the conflict between guests will attract the audience, the more it can be widely spread on various new media platforms. However, with a positive atmosphere as the main theme, the *Exciting offer* presents the guests work seriously and help each other in the workplace. The

narrator of the first episode of the first season mentioned that “the workplace is not only a battle with the world but also a battle with yourself. Bright is only the surface, and hard work and pragmatism is the core.” Several ordinary interns did not engage in intrigues, and their positive values infected a large number of audiences. Here are some inspirational quotes from interns in the first season: “I think talent is the foundation and the same thing as the ceiling, but you don't work hard and can't reach the ceiling all your life”---Li ; “The law is our last line of defense”--- Mei; “If I am lucky enough to be a lawyer, I will defend the dignity of the law all my life”---Xue [19]. Every intern shows the determination and ambition of contemporary young people and personally conveys the quality of being practical, hardworking, low-key, and pragmatic at work, which is in sharp contrast to the phenomenon of celebrity reality shows squeezing star traffic and script.

4.4. The program has the attribute of the topic and focuses on a hot social issue.

The application of “de-celebrity” in the program also closely connects some key links with hot social topics. For example, in the second season of *Exciting offer*, Ding interviewed after naked resignation. The star observation group immediately discussed and analyzed this phenomenon. After the program was broadcast, the relevant topic rushed into a trending topic on Weibo and was hotly discussed by citizens. At the same time, the legal cases involved in the internship process are also highly consistent with social hot spots, such as housing rental, alimony, College students cheated and so on, which have aroused the resonance of the audience. A large part of the reason why ordinary people show the trend of "surpassing stars" is that ordinary people touch hot social topics, have a degree of social discussion, and are spread and discussed in the era of highly developed and free Internet, to achieve the result of causing public emotional resonance.

All in all, something can be found from the above discussion that the importance of “de-celebrity” in reality shows becomes clearer. Influenced by the script, editing, shady, traffic, and other factors, not only does the audience resist the “celebrity” characteristic, but many star guests also begin to resist the negative development brought by “celebrity” to reality shows. The content of the reality show needs to be strictly controlled and improved, closely connected with social hot spots, establish a psychological connection with the audience and provide practical effects for society, the integration development of ordinary people and reality shows are bound to be flourishing, and "de-celebrity" should be regarded as the development trend of future Chinese reality shows.

5. CONCLUSION

The success of the reality show shows that in the current reality show market, de-celebrity has become a favorable development direction. The unreasonable publicity means and excessive hype of star reality shows cause the audience to lose interest in them. Star reality shows rely on scripts, but excessive commercialization leads to the loss of truthfulness of scripts, making the audience unable to accept them. Reality TV is more about authenticity. Make it easy for the audience to relate to the show. Normal reality shows get rid of scripts and their economic interests and cater to the audience's demand for programs positively. There are various factors to make ordinary reality shows successful. For example, the program group will avoid selecting the number of guests inconsistent with the program theme to improve the audience rating but pay more attention to the fit between the guests and the program content. If we blindly pay attention to the flow of guests and ignore the quality of the program content, the program's significance will be lost, and the original intention of the program will be far away. The theme of the popular reality show is also more realistic. In addition to entertaining the public, it provides a platform for the audience to deeply understand different areas of society and understand different social knowledge. The program also pays more attention to conveying positive values to the audience. Give positive guidance to the public and reject vulgar and funny content. In addition, the content of popular reality shows closely follows current social affairs and effectively resonates with the public. The existence of the reality show helps the reality show market to find more possibilities.

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