



# Organizing Emotion: Mechanisms of Online Public Opinion Formation in Emotional Observation Variety Shows

Ziran Wang\*, Donghong Han, Hao Liu

Shandong University, Jinan, 250100, China

\*wang.ziran@mail.sdu.edu.cn

**Abstract.** Emotional observation variety shows have become a prominent genre in China's platformized media environment, generating large-scale and emotionally charged online discussion. Drawing on program texts, large-scale platform comment data, questionnaire surveys, and in-depth interviews, this study examines how online public opinion is formed around this genre. The findings show that such public opinion does not emerge from spontaneous emotional expression alone, but is structurally organized through the interaction of program production, platform circulation, and audience participation. At different media stages, emotional orientations are preconfigured, amplified, and stabilized into polarized opinion positions through narrative design, circulation mechanisms, and interactional feedback. By conceptualizing emotion as an organizing mechanism rather than a by-product of communication, this study provides a process-oriented account of emotionalized public opinion formation in platformized entertainment contexts.

**Keywords:** Emotional Observation Variety Shows, Online Public Opinion Formation, Emotionalized Public Opinion.

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, emotional observation variety shows have become a prominent genre in China's platformized media environment, generating sustained attention and large-scale online discussion. Localized from South Korean formats and rapidly expanding after 2020, these programs center on the mediated observation of intimate relationships and emotional interaction, and consistently attract high levels of audience engagement across social media platforms.

A defining feature of emotional observation variety shows is their dual narrative structure. Program footage presents participants' emotional exchanges within highly concentrated and continuously observed settings, while an observation studio composed of celebrities or professionals provides real-time commentary and evaluation. Through the interaction of these two spaces, private emotional exchanges are rendered publicly visible and pre-framed for interpretation through situational design, selective

editing, and authoritative commentary, laying the groundwork for emotionally polarized online discussion.

Existing research has examined this genre from perspectives such as program form, value representation, and audience motivation. However, less attention has been paid to the mechanisms through which emotion is organized and transformed into online public opinion across different media stages. Against this backdrop, this study asks a central question: how is emotion structurally organized across program production, platform circulation, and audience participation to generate emotionalized online public opinion around emotional observation variety shows?

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Theoretical Perspectives: Spectatorship, Media Situations, and Affective Publics**

A first set of theories helps clarify why “watching” and the public display of private life have become normalized cultural practices. Heidegger ([1]) describes modernity as an “age of the world picture,” in which reality increasingly appears as something to be represented and viewed. Habermas ([2]) argues that the expansion of the culture industry reshapes the public sphere by shifting participation away from rational-critical debate toward consumption-oriented cultural practices. Jameson ([3]) notes that postmodern culture privileges immediacy and surface experience over distanced reflection.

A second theoretical resource concerns how media reorganize the conditions under which judgment is formed. Meyrowitz’s theory of media situations ([4]) argues that electronic media restructure social situations by altering access to information and reshaping role expectations, thereby changing how individuals perceive appropriate conduct and evaluate others.

A third perspective addresses the dynamics of emotion in networked public communication. Papacharissi ([5]) conceptualizes “affective publics” as networked formations organized around affective intensity and shareable narratives rather than stable issue positions or rational consensus. Under algorithmic conditions, emotionally charged expression tends to receive higher visibility and engagement, reinforcing polarization and moralized judgment ([6]), which helps explain why discussions around emotional observation variety shows often intensify quickly and stabilize into emotionally loaded opinion positions.

### **2.2 Empirical Research: Trajectories in the Study of Emotional Observation Variety Shows**

Empirical research in the Chinese context has largely focused on genre characteristics, production logic, and audience responses. One strand examines program form and narrative strategies, noting that observation-based formats introduce a dual-space structure but may also compress audiences’ interpretive autonomy through dense and authoritative commentary ([7]). Related work discusses empathic communication and the stra-

tegic role of observation-room discourse in guiding emotional interpretation ([8]). Another line of research adopts audience-centered perspectives, drawing on uses-and-gratifications theory to analyze viewing motivations and emotional resonance, and exploring the influence of such programs on youth romantic values, gender norms, and family perceptions ([9], [10], [11]).

International scholarship tends to adopt more integrative perspectives. Studies of dating reality television such as *Love Island* emphasize the institutionalized integration of social media interaction and program content, showing how audiences become active participants in content reproduction and public controversy ([12], [13]). Feminist and cultural studies further examine gendered regimes of emotional regulation, noting that women's emotional expression is more readily moralized and stigmatized within public discussion ([14], [15]). Additional research suggests that dating reality television simultaneously reinforces dominant intimacy scripts and stimulates public reflection on relationship norms ([16], [13]).

Taken together, existing studies provide useful theoretical and empirical insights, but often treat program texts, platform circulation, and audience response as separate objects. Less attention has been paid to how emotion is organized across these stages and transformed into stabilized online public opinion. To address this gap, this study adopts a process-oriented approach.

### 3 Methodology

This study adopts a multi-source qualitative design to examine how emotionalized online public opinion is produced through the interaction of program production, platform circulation, and audience participation in emotional observation variety shows.

Program-level analysis focuses on representative emotional observation variety shows broadcast in China in recent years that have generated sustained public discussion. Program texts are analyzed with attention to narrative structure, situational design, editing strategies, and observation-studio discourse. The analysis examines how emotional orientations are preconfigured through concentrated interaction settings, selective reconstruction of footage, and evaluative commentary, which together provide affective cues for subsequent interpretation.

Platform-level analysis draws on a large-scale corpus of online comments related to these programs, collected from major Chinese platforms such as Weibo, Tencent Video, and Mango TV during peak broadcast periods. The final corpus consists of 1,535,511 comments, including bullet-screen comments and public discussion posts. Analysis focuses on patterns of emotional expression, fragmentation, alignment, and polarization, as well as the circulation of emotionally charged content across platforms.

Audience-level analysis combines questionnaire surveys and semi-structured in-depth interviews. The questionnaire survey yielded 1,101 valid responses and was used to map general patterns of viewing practices, online participation, and perceptions of program-related public opinion. Building on the survey, in-depth interviews were conducted with 60 viewers who had sustained viewing experience and frequent participa-

tion in related online discussions. Interviews focused on emotional responses, participation strategies, and perceptions of opinion escalation. Interview materials were analyzed to contextualize patterns observed in program texts and platform comment data.

## 4 Mechanisms of Opinion Formation in Emotional Observation Variety Shows

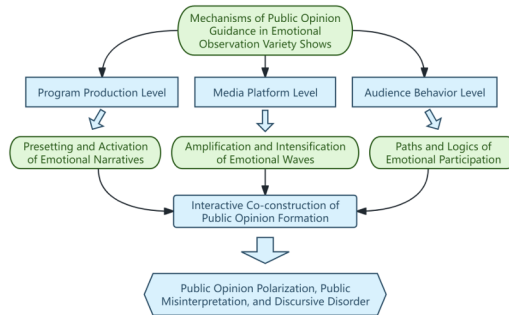


Fig. 1. Overview of the Mechanisms of Online Public Opinion Formation

### 4.1 Program-Level Preconfiguration of Affect

The mechanism operates on three levels (see Fig. 1). At the level of program production, emotional orientations are preconfigured through narrative structure, situational design, editing strategies, and observation-studio discourse. Emotional observation variety shows typically construct highly concentrated interactional settings, compressing intimate encounters that would normally unfold over extended periods into dense and continuously observed scenes.

Editing practices further intensify this process by selectively reconstructing emotional moments. From extensive raw footage, segments with heightened emotional tension are extracted, repeated, and juxtaposed, often accompanied by music and pacing techniques that accentuate affective meaning. This selective reconstruction transforms emotion from a contextual outcome into a narrative driver, encouraging audiences to form judgments under conditions of partial information. In addition, narrative withholding creates spaces for speculation and projection, heightening emotional engagement prior to contextual understanding.

Observation-studio discourse plays a central mediating role in this preconfiguration. Commentators frequently employ evaluative and emotionally charged language, offering interpretive cues that simplify complex interactions into recognizable affective positions. Interviews indicate that audiences often adopt these cues as reference points, especially in ambiguous situations. Through the combined effects of editing and commentary, participants are gradually symbolized into stable role types associated with specific emotional orientations.

## 4.2 Platform-Level Amplification and Reconfiguration

Platform dissemination mechanisms constitute the second stage through which affect is amplified and restructured. Emotional content from programs is fragmented into short clips and circulated across platforms, often detached from its original narrative context. These fragments disproportionately highlight moments of conflict, vulnerability, or ambiguity, and are frequently accompanied by emphatic titles or subtitles that signal predetermined emotional judgments.

Marketing-oriented accounts further intensify this process by repeatedly reframing controversial scenes through emotionally charged commentary, simplifying complex interactions into binary oppositions. Corpus analysis shows that such content consistently generates higher engagement than neutral interpretations, reinforcing incentives for emotional amplification. Algorithmic recommendation systems amplify these effects by prioritizing content that attracts rapid interaction, leading to repeated exposure to emotionally homogeneous material. As a result, emotion becomes increasingly detached from narrative context and transformed into a transmissible unit optimized for attention.

## 4.3 Audience Participation and Opinion Stabilization

Audience participation forms the third stage in emotionalized opinion formation. Emotional observation variety shows offer a low-cost mode of spectatorial participation, allowing viewers to express judgment without direct social consequences. Interviews suggest that viewers frequently project personal experiences onto program situations, intensifying emotional responses and motivating participation.

Within comment spaces, affective expressions exhibit clustering effects. Once a particular emotional interpretation gains visibility, similar expressions are rapidly replicated, producing dominant emotional tones. Over time, participation shifts from interpretation toward positional alignment, with “taking sides” becoming a primary mode of engagement. Interactional feedback mechanisms, such as likes and replies, reinforce dominant positions and discourage deviation.

Through repeated reinforcement, emotional positions stabilize into polarized opinion structures. Subsequent behaviors of participants are interpreted within preexisting affective frames, narrowing interpretive space and limiting deliberation. Combined with algorithmic filtering, this process produces affective enclaves characterized by emotionally homogeneous exposure, in which emotion operates as both a trigger for participation and a criterion for judgment.

## 5 Conclusion

Taking emotional observation variety shows as its empirical focus, this study examines how emotionalized online public opinion is formed within a platformized media environment. This study shows that emotionalized online public opinion around emotional observation variety shows is produced through a structured process involving program-

level affective preconfiguration, platform-level amplification, and audience-level alignment.

By adopting a process-oriented perspective, this study connects program production, platform circulation, and audience participation into a single analytical framework, highlighting how private emotional experiences are transformed into publicly visible and morally charged opinion positions. Rather than offering a normative evaluation of emotional observation variety shows, the analysis clarifies the operational logic through which emotion structures contemporary entertainment-oriented public discussion, providing a basis for further research on affect, platforms, and public opinion formation in digital media contexts.

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