



Mirroring the Workplace: Audience Identity Work and Cultural Communication in Chinese Workplace Observation Reality TV - A Mirror-Theory Analysis of The Exciting Offer

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Abstract. Workplace observation reality shows transform professional routines into shareable narratives and, increasingly, into sites of cultural communication in the platform era. Drawing on Lacanian mirror theory and cultural studies of audience negotiation, this paper asks how *The Exciting Offer* organizes nested gazes (interns-panel-online audience) and how viewers use this structure for identity work. We triangulate close viewing of four seasons with semi-structured interviews with ten viewers (five senior students preparing for employment and five early-career professionals). The analysis identifies two connected processes: reflective resonance, through which viewers evaluate habits, values, and employability via interns' performances and panel commentary, and practical learning, through which they collect workplace scripts and profession-related knowledge across platform discussion. The paper argues that the format operates as a three-level mirror machine: mirror-self enables an Imaginary rehearsal of coherent professional personhood; mirror-other places viewers under the Symbolic judgment of multiple evaluative Others; mirror-society translates private anxiety into publicly discussable issues about work culture. In this way, affective resonance is converted into cultural meaning-making. At the same time, elite casting and conflict-oriented editing can intensify misrecognition and employment anxiety. The study contributes to research on workplace media, platformed spectatorship, and cultural communication in contemporary China.

Keywords: workplace observation reality TV; mirror theory; cultural communication; platformed spectatorship; professional discourse; China.

1 Introduction

Chinese reality TV has increasingly moved from romance and family settings into the workplace, where programs combine field footage, mentor evaluation, a studio "observation room," and continuous online discussion. *The Exciting Offer* is exemplary because it turns internships and recruitment into a publicly narrated cultural event rather than a purely private career experience.^{[1][2][3][4]}

This format matters for language and cultural communication because it circulates not only images of work but also an evaluative lexicon of professionalism - "growth," "attitude," "responsibility," "communication," and "stress resistance" - across commentary, subtitles, danmu, and social-media recirculation. Workplace observation programs therefore function as sites where viewers learn how professional selves should sound, feel, and appear in public.^{[1][3][5][14]}

Yet we still know relatively little about how viewers form, test, and contest self-images through these mediated others. To address this gap, the paper uses Lacanian mirror theory not as a purely intrapsychic metaphor but as a communication-centered framework for understanding how professional identity is publicly assembled through observation, judgment, and circulation. Grounded in this perspective, we examine (RQ1) how the show structures nested gazes, (RQ2) how viewers describe their identity work and learning, and (RQ3) where realism gives way to misrecognition. We contribute a three-mirror model that links identification, evaluative discourse, and cultural meaning-making in workplace observation television.^{[6][7][8]}

2 Theoretical Framework and Related Work

2.1 Mirror Theory, Gaze, and Cultural Communication

Lacan's mirror stage theorizes subject formation as an identification with an external image that promises unity while simultaneously producing misrecognition; the subject comes to itself through an image that is both enabling and alienating. For media analysis, this means that spectatorship is never mere observation: viewers encounter themselves through images and through the gaze of the Other that confers recognition or lack. Lacanian film theory has therefore long treated the screen as a site where desire, self-coherence, and judgment are mediated rather than simply reflected.^{[6][7]}

For a study of cultural communication, however, the mirror must also be understood as discursive. Hall's encoding/decoding model clarifies that audiences do not passively absorb meanings but negotiate them within broader ideological frames. Recent work on media narratives and character recognizability further shows that viewers incorporate characters into their self-concept when they perceive value alignment, experiential closeness, or aspirational possibility. The mirror is thus not only visual; it is also symbolic and interpretive.^{[8][9][10]}

2.2 Observation Formats, Platform Participation, and Workplace Meaning

Observation reality TV intensifies this process by building a second-order gaze: participants act, mentors and panelists interpret, and audiences watch both the action and its interpretation. In workplace formats, this layered structure turns specific tasks into exemplary lessons about attitude, competence, teamwork, and emotional control. Existing studies of *The Exciting Offer* and related programs show that this genre is especially effective at linking personal growth narratives to workplace imagination and public discussion.^{[1][2][3][4][5]}

The platform ecology surrounding such programs extends the interpretive chain. Research on parasocial interaction and parasocial relationships suggests that audiences use mediated figures for self-orientation, comparison, and emotional regulation, especially in digital environments. Meanwhile, danmu and other real-time commentary systems turn viewing into distributed co-evaluation, allowing audiences to echo, contest, or satirize the judgments offered on screen. Workplace observation shows therefore operate as platformed sites of public pedagogy, where professional discourse is circulated collaboratively rather than delivered from a single authoritative source.^{[11][12][13][14][15]}

3 A Three-Mirror Framework for Workplace Observation Reality TV

We therefore conceptualize *The Exciting Offer* as a three-level mirror machine. Mirror-self corresponds to Imaginary identification: viewers temporarily rehearse a coherent professional self through interns' trajectories. Mirror-other marks Symbolic recognition: viewers position themselves under the evaluative gaze of mentors, peers, celebrities, and platform publics. Mirror-society refers to the public circulation through which personal stress, failure, or aspiration is reframed as a broader issue about employability, fairness, work ethics, or social mobility. The model does not treat these as separate stages but as intertwined scales of mediation that connect intimate feeling to shared cultural interpretation. Work on biographic resonance, public-problem framing, cultural resonance, narrative persuasion, and meaning-making helps explain why the same text can simultaneously console, instruct, and discipline its audiences.^{[6][8][16][17][18][19][20]} Table 1 summarizes these three mirror relations and their typical viewer outcomes.

Table 1. Three mirror relations and typical viewer outcomes.

Mirror	Core logic	Viewer outcome
Self	Imaginary self-image	Rehearsal; self-assessment
Other	Symbolic judgment by Others	Positioning; negotiation
Society	Public circulation of work discourse	Cultural sense-making

Mirror-self names an Imaginary rehearsal of coherent professional personhood; mirror-other denotes the Symbolic field of evaluative Others through which viewers seek recognition and position themselves; mirror-society describes the public circulation that converts private insecurity into socially legible issues. The analytic value of the model lies in linking micro-level affect to broader processes of cultural meaning-making.^{[6][8][17][20]}

4 Method

We triangulated (a) close viewing of four seasons of *The Exciting Offer* to document narrative devices, evaluative language, and panel framing with (b) semi-structured interviews with ten viewers (five senior students and five early-career professionals).

Interviews asked about viewing motivations, resonant topics, character preferences, perceived learning, and perceptions of realism and editing.

Interviews were conducted remotely, anonymized, and transcribed. We used thematic analysis in three steps: (1) open coding of identity-related talk; (2) axial coding into mechanisms aligned with the three-mirror framework; and (3) iterative comparison between interview themes and program-text observations. Throughout, we attended not only to emotional identification but also to how viewers borrowed, repeated, or contested the evaluative language through which the show defined a "good" professional self. We retained counter-examples to avoid overstating celebratory readings.

5 Findings

5.1 Reflective Resonance

Viewers repeatedly described "seeing myself" in interns' small failures and recoveries. One participant recalled an intern correcting their own excuse-making: "In the workplace, you shouldn't find excuses; being late is being late" (P1). What resonates here is not only emotion but a recognizable script of self-discipline. Panel commentary translates isolated moments into an employability vocabulary that viewers then reuse to evaluate their own "student mindset" versus "workplace mindset." Mirror-self thus works through both affect and language: viewers test whether they can inhabit the coherent professional image proposed on screen.^{[6][9][16]}

5.2 Ideal-Self Projection and the Other's Gaze

Audiences also project an ideal self onto exemplary interns and borrow strategies for communication, teamwork, and self-presentation. Yet identification is uneven: highly credentialed participants can feel distant, while "ordinary" interns become stronger mirrors because viewers see a more attainable route into professional recognition. As P2 put it, "for ordinary people, chances are rare - so you have to fight with your back against the wall." Mirror-other is therefore not reducible to admiration. It is a negotiation with multiple Others - peers, mentors, experts, celebrities, and imagined online judges - whose approval can orient self-improvement while also intensifying comparison and inadequacy.^{[10][11][12]}

5.3 Practical Learning via Virtual Co-presence

Beyond affect, viewers report learning workplace scripts and profession-related knowledge explained by mentors and panelists. Platform affordances (bullet screens, comments, short-video remixes) create a sense of virtual co-presence in which audiences occupy a quasi-panel position and rehearse evaluative talk for themselves. A viewer mentioned remembering CPR rhythm through a pop-song mnemonic and said it "might give life a chance" (P3). Learning here is practical not because the program

reproduces the workplace perfectly, but because it packages professional conduct into memorable, discussable communicative forms.^{[14][15]}

5.4 Misrecognition and Anxiety Manufacturing

Interviewees also emphasize the limits of the mirror. An "elite filter" and aestheticized realism reduce applicability for ordinary entrants, while conflict-oriented editing can construct dramatic personae and invite online attacks. An early-career viewer argued that some tasks shown were unrealistic for first-year employees (P10). In such cases, the promise of coherence turns punitive: the more polished the ideal image becomes, the more sharply viewers experience their own insufficiency. Mirror-society then ceases to reassure and instead amplifies neoliberal anxieties about employability, merit, and constant self-optimization.^{[6][17][19]}

5.5 Value Negotiation in the Observation Room

Viewers do not passively accept panel judgments. When panelists disagree - technical competence versus empathy, efficiency versus humility, confidence versus obedience - audiences use the disagreement to reposition their own values and debate what counts as "good work." This interpretive labor is central to the show's cultural communication function: the episode becomes a temporary forum in which professional norms are not simply transmitted but negotiated.^{[8][18][20]}

6 Discussion

Theoretically, the three-mirror model moves mirror theory from a purely psychic vocabulary toward a multi-scalar account of cultural communication. At the level of mirror-self, workplace television supplies a coherent professional image for aspirational rehearsal. At the level of mirror-other, it organizes a field of evaluative gazes through which recognition and anxiety are distributed. At the level of mirror-society, it converts personal workplace troubles into shareable frames through which publics debate meritocracy, professionalism, and everyday ethics. What circulates, in other words, is not just workplace imagery but a culturally authoritative lexicon of work.^{[6][8][17][20]}

This helps explain why workplace observation reality TV can feel simultaneously empowering and stressful. The same mechanisms that enable reflective learning and emotional resonance can also moralize structural problems by recoding them as individual attitude, resilience, or self-management. For responsible cultural communication, producers should diversify participant backgrounds, increase transparency about editing and evaluation, and contextualize individual stories with structural information such as entry barriers, workload realities, and unequal opportunity.^{[1][3][4]}

For scholars, the case suggests that workplace culture in the platform era is co-produced by program texts, evaluative language, and participatory audiences. Audience identity work is therefore inseparable from platform affordances and from the circulation of judgments across comments, clips, and secondary discussion. Future research

may extend this model to other professions, platforms, and cultural contexts to test how mediated work cultures travel and how local norms reshape the mirrors through which viewers see themselves.^{[14][18][19]}

7 Conclusion

Using mirror theory and interview evidence, this paper shows how *The Exciting Offer* enables reflective resonance and practical learning through nested gazes and platform participation, while also producing risks of misrecognition. More broadly, the study argues that workplace observation reality TV is a form of cultural communication: it turns professional selfhood into a public text that audiences interpret, rehearse, and contest. Limitations include the small interview sample and single-franchise focus. Future work can compare multiple workplace formats and conduct cross-cultural analyses of how evaluative discourse and mediated work cultures circulate in the platform era.

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