

A Study of the Social Psychology and Spatial Construction of Workplace Observation Reality Shows — Take A Heartwarming Offer as an Example

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Abstract: In the current era of involution, the employment situation is complex and severe; the workplace reality shows have a large audience space. In recent years, the emergence of workplace observation reality shows, which address the pain points of young professionals, has stood out against the backdrop of the “pan-reality show” trend. These shows have quickly gained popularity, sparking a boom in the "reality TV + observation" format. This study focuses on *The Heartwarming Offer 5* as a core case to conduct a multi-dimensional and in-depth analysis, revealing the internal logic of this kind of programme in achieving cross-circle communication. The study finds that the programme transforms topics such as individual employment anxiety into group issues of group empathy through “social reality”, and then stimulates the audience’s participatory interpretation through the two-layered narrative space of “observation room-internship field”, which eventually creates a cultural breakthrough effect by relying on social media communication.

Keywords: Workplace observation reality show, personal and social relationships, empathy issues, multi-spatial perspectives

1. Introduction

With the development of the entertainment industry, the genres of reality TV programs have been enriched, and workplace observation reality TV has attracted much attention. In a competitive employment environment, the demand for workplace information among youth groups has increased, and the popularity of social media has transformed viewing and interaction patterns, leading to the rise of workplace observation reality TV shows.

At present, academics have carried out certain research. From the perspective of cultural communication, some scholars have pointed out the role of the programme in spreading workplace culture and guiding young people's career views [1]. Other scholars focus on the narrative skills of the programme, exploring how to enhance the attractiveness through plotting [2]. However, most of the existing research analyses social factors or programme production alone, and there is a lack of systematic research that links and integrates social reality, audience psychology and programme communication mechanisms.

This study applies the case study method and takes *The Heartwarming Offer 5* as the core research case, aiming to deeply analyse the circle-breaking factors of workplace observation reality TV. This

study helps to enrich the theoretical system of reality TV programme research and provide practical guidance for the subsequent production of related programs.

2. Status of development of reality TV variety show

In the 1990s, the United States was the first to set off a wave of reality TV programmes, and China's reality TV programs started later. The broadcast of the programme *Survival Challenge* in 2000 opened the prelude for domestic reality TV. In recent years, television and online media complement each other, and the development of reality TV variety shows has become increasingly mature [3]. Since the debut of the entertainment reality show like *Running Man*, *Trump Card vs. Trump Card*, as well as science knowledge competitions *Super Brain*, *Who's still standing*, audience interest has surged. These programs have opened up a number of new high-rating programs, like the workplace observation and love observation reality shows, quickly becoming hot topics in the public eye. The convergent communication of reality TV variety shows demonstrates that the new communication environment can produce new emotional needs; these shows not only satisfy the audience's entertainment and recreation but also have the role of value leadership [4]. The workplace observation reality shows focus on contemporary social focal issues, getting rid of the pure entertainment of domestic reality TV programs, and in the endless reality shows, this genres stand out.

3. The influence mechanism of social and personal relationships on variety show of workplace observation reality show

The audience base of workplace observation reality TV shows is closely related to the psychology mechanism, the core of which lies in the chain transmission effect of social and personal factors.

3.1. The impact of social employment conditions on personal anxiety

According to the People's Daily Online report, the expected size of China's college graduates will reach 12.22 million in 2025, and the youth unemployment rate within the age range of 16 to 24 years old is 19.9% [5-6]. Employment pressure has further surged, with many graduates expressing great anxiety about their future employment situation, and even some university students desperately roll their academic qualifications, GPA, competitions and internships, to lay the foundation for future employment or postgraduate exams. In the current era of anxiety, coupled with the emergence of the "post-00s" gradually entering the workplace, the topic of "rectifying the workplace" has gained significant attention. As a result,, how to cope with workplace challenges and manage workplace relations has become a key focus of "workplace freshman." Whether it is school students with employment anxiety or the majority of workplace freshmen are in urgent need of a platform to vent their emotions and resonate with each other [7]. The workplace observation reality TV variety show is the best platform of choice.

3.2. The influence of social media development on upward social comparison behaviour

According to the survey report of CNNIC in 2024, China has 1.08 billion Internet users, with the youth still accounting for the highest proportion. University-educated users (college and above) account for 20.7%, and college students are among the most active online groups [8]. Social media controls what people "think" through agenda setting, which shapes college students' desire for, attention to, and comparison with the upward society. The concept of "social comparison" is originally derived from the social comparison theory proposed by Festinger, which defines it as an intrinsic motivation to compare one's own views and abilities with those of others, and this drive

pushes individuals to compare themselves with others, hence the term social comparison [9]. The workplace observation reality show *The Heartwarming Offer* 5 selects highly educated and capable ordinary guests (e.g., students from prestigious universities such as Oxford, Peking University, Tsinghua University, etc.) and labels them as “school masters”, “elites”, “face value bearers”, etc. As shown in Table 1, this deliberately creates a sense of “eliteness”, which triggers viewers’ upward social comparison behaviour and makes them want to keep following the programme to be in touch with more upward social information. Wheeler et al. found that individuals always choose to compare themselves with those who are better than them, in order to find the gap with others to achieve self-improvement, which is the process of upward social comparison [10]. Therefore, the audience of the *The Heartwarming Offer* 5 will subconsciously compare themselves with the program's highly educated guests for self-improvement and learning, and under certain conditions, they will also feel envy and jealousy.

Table 1: Symbolic label analysis of interns in The Heartwarming Offer 5

Programme interns	Graduate school	Tagged topics
Hu Minghao	Bachelor's Degree Shandong University Master's Degree Peking University	super scholar, professionalism, and tiger teeth.
Xiao Yang	Bachelor's Degree Wuhan University Master's Degree Oxford University	super scholar, calm, and not actively arguing
Zhu Chuoying	Bachelor's and Master's degree The University of Hong Kong Minor in Accounting	sister Hong Kong, free-spirited, confident, strong aura
Xu Wenting	Bachelor's and Master's degree China University of Political Science and Law Overseas Second Master's Degree	stable output, relaxed demeanour and appropriate behaviour
Huang Kai	Bachelor's Degree Fujian Medical University Master's Degree Tsinghua University	5 years of exam reversal, poor family of origin, and inner strength
Zhang Yaqi	Bachelor's degree Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics Master's degree Boston College	Lively and eloquent
Wang Yuyu	Bachelor's Degree East China University of Political Science and Law Master's Degree The University of Hong Kong	Solid legal foundation, no self-confidence
Liang Wei	Bachelor's Degree Suzhou University	Conceit, self-importance
Wang Yiyanyu (Kick)	Bachelor's Degree East China University of Political Science and Law Master's Degree Cornell University	Academic, mature, stress-resistant, emotionally stable

4. Programme creation strategy

4.1. Empathic creative strategies

4.1.1. Empathic character setting

The empathy setting is required to transmitters and recipients having the same or similar experience in a certain event, the audience sees the experience of the story characters and will associate it with their own encounter. This individual experience projection of the psychological process is easy to trigger emotional resonance to achieve the effect of empathic communication [11]. The fascinating thing about *The Heartwarming Offer* 5 is that it is a mirror in a kaleidoscope, and the beauty of it is that every viewer can find their own reflection at a certain moment, and there is emotional resonance at that moment. Watching these interns from prestigious schools, although they have got the opportunity to enter the top law firms, they also bear great pressure and responsibility, which makes countless “workplace freshman” feel a sense of empathy, thus generating an emotional attachment to the programme that projects their own experience.

The programme team of *The Heartwarming Offer 5* chose Huang Kai, who quit his job at the hospital and went to Tsinghua University for his master's degree in law after five rounds of exams, to achieve a counterattack, and the programme highlights the misfortune of his original family, in which his parents didn't do their best to bring up children. In the dinner conversation with the lawyers, Huang Kai lightly told experience that he spent 28 years to get out of the small mountain village, into the domestic top institutions. And teaching lawyer Li's father is a professor at Peking University. Since childhood, he studied in Peking University kindergarten, Peking University primary school, Peking University secondary school, Peking University to achieve the "Peking University one-stop" education. The programme group intends to show that "your finish line is someone else's starting line", which is an unfair comparison of the world's differences. It is only Wang Yutong who graduated from undergraduate school. Even if she graduated from five colleges and four departments, having a solid foundation of the legal system. In the face of highly educated master's interns, she also felt inferior and denied herself. When she first entered the workplace, she was afraid of humiliating the school, failing the expectations of her families, teachers and friends, and desperately trying to make up for the gap. This is undoubtedly the true portrayal of most newcomers in the workplace. Lacan divides the subject of heteromorphic confirmation into the "me" that exists objectively, the "substitute me" that is mediated in the mirror, and the "ideal me" in his dreams or fantasies [12]. At this moment, viewers see Huang Kai and Wang Yu as the mediatised "substitute me" in the mirror and see their own figures in their struggles and find resonance. Career observation reality shows are widely loved by the audience because most people project themselves onto the highly educated vegetarian guests to regard them as "substitute me", and realise their fantasy "ideal me" through the mirror of the variety show. While Lacan believes that the mirror stage is an essential part of life, where we can find ourselves and construct ourselves [13].

4.1.2. Setting empathy topics and focusing on real hot issues

Due to the interaction and association characteristics of social media networks, the content of netizens' discussion and communication under specific network hot even has obvious group. When some netizens with the same or similar views and emotions reach a certain scale, a specific network hot topic will be formed [14]. The implantation of hot topics in workplace observation reality shows triggers public emotional resonance, fully exploits the potential audience, and enhances the program's hotness and topic degree. In the sixth episode of *The Heartwarming Offer 5*, the issue of gender discrimination suffered by female lawyers in the workplace is talked about. Liu Siyuan, a female lawyer who has already been a partner of Red Circle Law Firm, remarks that women often need to be significantly better than their male counterparts to receive the same opportunities. She also emphasizes that achievements are largely driven by one's desperation. Her statements likely struck a deep chord with many women, resonating intellectually and emotionally. In terms of career entry and promotion paths, female job seekers often experience a more pronounced "glass door" problem. College graduates are an important group for employment, and female college students have also encountered varying degrees of gender discrimination in the process of searching jobs after graduation [15]. Outside the programme, Lawyer Liu also shared this video on Weibo and encouraged netizens "We are just not easy, not impossible", so the programme relies on the topic of "sexism in the workplace" to once again hit the hot search, and entered the vision of more women in the workplace who had not paid attention to the programme before. The programme has opened up a wider audience market for workplace observation reality shows.

4.1.3. Empathy symbol setting

In a way, a symbol is a perception that carries a specific meaning, and the meaning must be conveyed through symbols [16]. In variety shows, the information content will be transmitted by using a variety of symbolic forms, and different language symbols of the corresponding scene will be set in different situations. The text that flashes through in a few seconds also conveys the tonality and values of the program. In *The Heartwarming Offer* 5, when an intern loses an opportunity due to his lack of active courage, “The most regrettable thing in life is not failure, but what I could have done” is the text that matches the psychology of the characters in the programme, which triggers the audience's empathy. In addition, the guests also speak out the text through the way of narration, making the text more tangible and mobilising the audience's emotions more directly.

4.2. Multi-spatial perspective construction strategy

Figure 1 shows that in the era of “pan-reality TV”, workplace observation reality TV is different from other reality TV programs in that it has constructed multiple spaces. Firstly, it is the audience's first visual space, the real workplace life illustration of the vegetarian guests. Through the “panorama” presentation mode, the programme puts the interns’ internship process in a transparent time and space with a “panoramic perspective”. The viewers get to know the interns with different “labels” in every aspect of the internship process from a “God’s perspective”, which satisfies the viewers’ desire for voyeurism and increases the visibility of the programme. Secondly, the audience’s second visual space, the discourse interpretation space of the observation room refueling regiment, expresses professional or non-professional views on the situations fed back from the first space. At the same time, it plays a leading role in “agenda setting”, leading to thoughts and discussions on topics such as “discrimination against women in the workplace”, “some people are born in Rome”, and “should I quit my job at the age of 30”, thus enhancing the program's topicality and discussion.

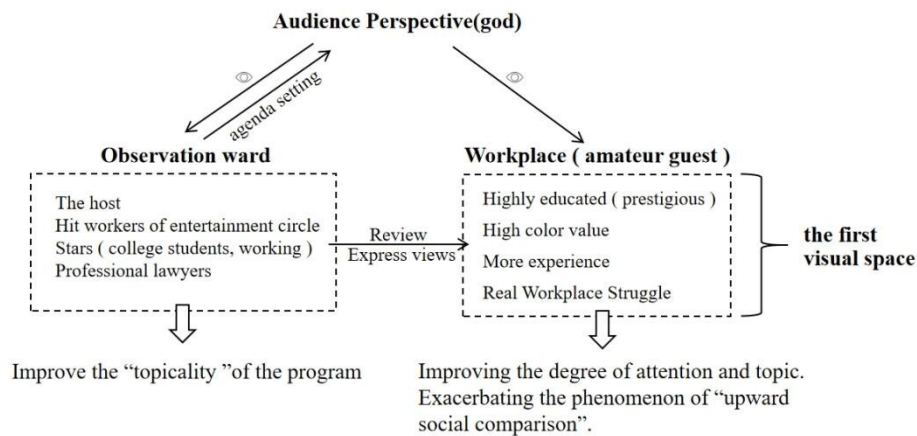


Figure 1: Concept map of the multi-space observation model

5. Conclusion

Under the background of “pan-reality TV”, workplace observation reality TV has got rid of pure entertainment, breaking the predicament of single entertainment form of domestic reality TV, and the mode of “reality TV+observation” has come into the public's field of vision and set off a craze. The series of *The Heartwarming Offer* not only focuses on social reality, sets up multiple identity labels, reflects the image of young people in the workplace, and triggers the identity and emotional resonance of the audience. As a new opinion leader, the members of the observation group guide the

audience to “think what”, focus on social hot spots, and convey the correct value orientation. Therefore, the success of the reality show of workplace observation is inevitable, and it also provides a new form and new thinking for the development of reality show variety in the future.

There are some limitations in this study. For instance, the methodology of the case study is relatively single. The follow-up can increase the questionnaire survey, interviews and other empirical research to obtain quantitative data to enhance the persuasive conclusions. Future research can focus on the communication effect and adaptability of workplace observation reality shows in a multicultural context, as well as the innovative path of their integration with emerging technologies such as VR and AR. In addition, the psychological impact of the program on audiences of different ages and professional backgrounds, as well as the balance between entertainment and social responsibility, are also important directions for future research.

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