

A Preliminary Exploration of the Reasons Behind Viewers' Differentiated Empathy in See You Again IV

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Abstract. See You Again IV is a relationship-focused reality show that has sparked widespread discussion since its broadcast. In the program, the three female protagonists—Mai Lin, Ge Xi, and Huang Shengyi—all face marital difficulties, yet the extent to which viewers empathize with them varies considerably. This article compares the three women, employing two methods—analyzing program content and surveying online public opinion—with the aim of exploring the underlying reasons for differences in audience empathy. The primary data sources are the bullet-screen comments on Mango TV and the comment sections on Douban. The research findings reveal that audiences do not experience emotional resonance unconditionally; certain underlying conditions must first be met for resonance to occur. To be more specific, for a character to be more readily understood and supported by the audience, she needs to meet the public's expectations regarding the "ideal woman", the "plausible victim", and "appropriate emotional expression". Furthermore, the strength or weakness of one's social status also significantly alters the threshold for emotional resonance: the audience tends to be far more tolerant of those in positions of power who possess greater resources, while the greatest amount of hostility is directed towards vulnerable, ordinary stay-at-home moms. Furthermore, this emotional resonance shifts in tandem with the evolution of the characters' stories, as evidenced by the improvement in Ma Lin's public image in the later stages; behind this phenomenon, one can discern the cultural logic of gender and the implicit class biases embedded in the emotional dynamics of variety shows.

Keywords: empathetic communication, See You Again IV, female characters, differentiated empathy

1. Introduction

At the end of 2024, Mango TV aired See You Again IV. Whilst the programme continued to follow the "marriage and travel" format of the first three series, the level of discussion it sparked on social media far exceeded that of previous instalments; data indicates that following the release of the seventh episode, views of the main hashtag approached 200 million, while related compilations on TikTok reached 3.99 billion views [1]. Alongside the hype came a polarising rift in public opinion—the level of empathy the three women received from the audience varied considerably. Viewers watching the programme will notice a phenomenon: while Mai Lin is being savaged, Huang

Shengyi is receiving almost unanimous sympathy, while Ge Xi finds herself caught right in the middle between the two. Given that these are all women who have suffered injustices within their marriages, why is there such a marked difference in the audience's attitudes?

Reviewing existing research, Ma Dan analysed the storytelling methods of *See You Again IV* from the perspective of empathy, pointing out that the programme conveys emotions through themes, characters and forms of expression capable of evoking empathy [2]; Su Liqing, meanwhile, proposed that the programme employed three strategies: character empathy, symbolic empathy and empathy for the other [3]; Zhao Mingyu and his colleagues divided the process of empathy transmission in observational reality TV into three stages: emotional contagion, adoption of viewpoints and empathetic attention [4].

However, most of the aforementioned studies focus solely on how programmes "manufacture" empathy while rarely addressing a more fundamental question: why, within the same programme format, are viewers willing to empathise with some people yet close the door on empathy for others? This article examines this gap, using the three women—Mai Lin, Ge Xi and Huang Shengyi—as subjects for comparison. It combines an analysis of the programme's content with an observation of online public opinion—by repeatedly watching key clips from the programme whilst extensively reviewing the comments in Mango TV's live chat and on Douban—to trace the trajectory of public opinion.

This article seeks to answer the following question: within the same programme format, why do some women find it easier to gain understanding and support, while others face even more hostility? At a theoretical level, existing research on empathy in media communication has almost exclusively focused on how programmes generate empathy; this paper, however, shifts the focus to how audiences allocate their empathy, thereby attempting to fill a long-overlooked analytical gap. In practical terms, the social impact of reality TV programmes centred on emotional observation is growing ever greater. Examining the criteria that underpin viewers' empathy not only helps us reflect on the gender biases hidden within online discourse but also provides valuable insights into how such programmes might portray diverse female characters.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Review of related literature

This paper primarily addresses three areas. The first concerns the empathetic communication in reality TV programmes centred on emotional observation. Researchers including Zhao Mingyu have identified a generative pathway whereby empathetic communication begins with "emotional contagion", progresses to "adoption of viewpoints", and finally culminates in "empathetic engagement" [4]. Li Hongxiang and Deng Keyue, on the other hand, adopted the theory of the "interactive ritual chain". They observed that programmes first evoke emotions through discursive construction, then allow viewers to accumulate emotional energy within an immersive experience, and finally intensify collective excitement through emotional interaction, thereby completing the process of empathic communication [5]. Whilst these explorations have helped us understand how empathy actually occurs, they rarely address why it might break down partway through.

The second area concerns the audience psychology and public opinion generated by relationship-based variety programmes. Wu Zhilong observed that when watching such programmes, viewers treat the on-screen situations as a mirror, projecting their own values onto the characters; as soon as a character's actions fail to align with their inner standards, viewers are quick to criticise them [6]. Wang Feixiang and Xu Ye analysed this from the perspective of agenda-setting; they noted that the

programmes brought issues such as the "conflict between marriage and childbearing" and "trauma from one's family of origin", thereby transforming private emotional matters into public discourse [1].

The third area of focus is gender culture. Du Shichao and Shen Yifei discovered that young women who continue to fulfil traditional gender roles are actually more likely to divorce; this suggests that young women are already aware of the unequal gender dynamics within marriage [7].

In addition, researchers have analysed dating and romance reality TV programmes from a narratological perspective. Wang Dazhao notes that such programmes blend verbal, written and visual narratives, with the narrative perspective shifting between first-person, third-person and the production team's perspective [8]. Such explorations provide analytical tools for understanding the narrative framework of these programmes, but they too fail to address one key question: why do viewers experience different levels of empathy towards different characters within the same programme?

2.2. Theoretical foundation

This paper draws primarily on three theoretical frameworks: gender theory, stereotype theory and empathy theory. Gender theory posits that gender is, in fact, a social and cultural construct [9]. This paper seeks to explore why audiences harbour different expectations of the three female characters; this theory provides a basis for that inquiry. Stereotype theory posits that people form fixed perceptions of certain groups in their minds, and these perceptions influence how they recognise and evaluate others [10]. For example, notions such as "a full-time mother should be gentle and long-suffering" or "an independent woman should be level-headed and decisive" are examples of how stereotypes influence the audience's emotional judgements.

3. Manifestations of differences in public empathy

3.1. Malin: a paradox of accusations and misunderstandings

Malin's portrayal on the programme is rather complex: she is a full-time mother who devotes a great deal of time and energy to her family, yet she is rather controlling, emotionally unstable, and often contradicts herself. The livestream comments are flooded with negative labels, such as "selfish", "hypocritical", "controlling" and "drama queen" [6], and her less-than-dignified emotional outbursts have coincided with viewers' stereotypical expectations of "how a full-time mother ought to behave".

3.2. Ge Xi: the debate between independence and being love-struck

At first, many viewers referred to Ge Xi as "the voice of reason", as she was career-driven and clear-headed; however, as the programme progressed, people realised that when it came to relationships, she was actually quite "love-struck"—despite her husband's issues being glaringly obvious, she consistently chose to put up with them. Consequently, the impression she left became rather ambivalent, and public opinion was similarly divided: some praised her for being independent and capable, whilst others criticised her for being "weak-willed". Moreover, these two perspectives often came from the very same group of viewers, leaving people with very mixed feelings about Ge Xi.

3.3. Huang Shengyi: the public spotlight on resilience and awakening

When Huang Shengyi first appeared, she projected an image of quiet endurance and grievance; it was only later that she gradually revealed her journey of self-awakening. The vast majority of comments in the live-stream chat were supportive, with phrases such as "I feel for her" and "She's finally woken up" dominating the screen. The programme also incorporated themes, such as "personal space conflicts", allowing the audience to witness the predicament of her personal space being encroached upon [1], which took the viewers' empathy a step further. It could be said that the narrative arc "from resilience to awakening" is, in itself, highly conducive to evoking empathy.

4. Analysis of the causes

4.1. Empathy from viewers who can relate

Why is there such a stark difference in the level of empathy shown to these three women, despite them facing similar marital difficulties?

In the eyes of the audience, Mai Lin's way of expressing her pain is deemed undignified; she constantly complains, and her statements are contradictory, so viewers instinctively attribute her misfortune to her personality, believing she has brought this suffering upon herself [6]. Huang Shengyi's situation is precisely the opposite: she expresses her pain with restraint and dignity, and her path of personal growth is clear—this fulfils the public's vision of an "enlightened woman". Ge Xi, however, falls somewhere between the two: while her independent demeanor meets everyone's expectations, her "love-struck" behavior leaves viewers feeling anxious for her as they watch.

Judging by this, the audience's empathy does not arise casually; it requires passing through several hidden gates. The first gate is that the suffering must be justified—that is to say, your misfortune must not be the result of your own mistakes. Secondly, the expression must be appropriate; emotional outbursts must conform to society's expectations that women should be gentle and restrained. Thirdly, the character must fit the stereotypical standards of a "good woman"—she must be kind, sensible, and willing to sacrifice herself. Women who do not meet these criteria, even if they are genuinely suffering, will find it difficult to elicit empathy from the audience.

4.2. The strength of social identity and the threshold for empathy

In addition to the factors mentioned above, the differences in the three women's social status are also crucial. Huang Shengyi is a well-known actress with considerable financial resources and social capital; Ge Xi runs her own social media accounts and has a successful independent career, while Mai Lin is the least well-off of the three—she has no personal income and is simply a full-time housewife with no public profile.

Yet, it was Mai Lin who bore the brunt of the hostility, which highlights a phenomenon: Those in a position of strength are more easily forgiven when they make mistakes, while the vulnerable are subjected to greater scrutiny and harsher criticism. To put it more specifically, the audience was clearly more forgiving towards Huang Shengyi and Ge Xi: Huang Shengyi's restraint was seen as dignified, while Ge Xi's inner turmoil was viewed as the vulnerability one might expect from an independent woman. Yet when the same situation occurred with Mai Lin—who lost her composure and made a few demands of her husband—the audience's reaction was far harsher. A frequently

implied sentiment in the livestream comments is, "You're a full-time mum with food and drink to your heart's content—what on earth are you making a fuss about?"

When someone holds a fair amount of social capital, the audience unconsciously lowers their standards of judgment; conversely, when someone is already in a disadvantaged position, the audience tends to raise their expectations, as if to suggest that, having nothing to their name, they ought to simply keep a low profile [6]. Mai Lin is precisely that vulnerable, ordinary person, which is why she is more likely to become the target of people's online venting.

One change is also worth noting: after the program ended, Mai Lin lost weight and began live-streaming to sell products. Her image gradually shifted from that of a pitiful yet disorganized underdog to that of a come-from-behind success story striving to better herself, and online opinions shifted accordingly. This change serves to reinforce the point made above: once Mai Lin established her own business and demonstrated her determination to climb the social ladder, only then were viewers willing to grant her their empathy. All of this illustrates one thing: how empathy is distributed does not depend entirely on the severity of one's suffering but, to a large extent, on one's social standing and whether one is striving to rise higher. The strong are met with tolerance, while those who stage a comeback are admired; yet those who remain stagnant—particularly the vulnerable who are unable even to suffer with dignity—are often shut out from the realm of empathy.

4.3. The deep-seated mechanisms of gendered cultural logic

Behind the phenomena mentioned above lies a set of gender-based cultural logics. The first is the societal expectation of the "ideal wife and mother"; a major reason why Mai Lin was so harshly criticised was that she failed to fulfil this role. Secondly, there is the pressure stemming from the standards imposed on independent women; Ge Xi was criticised for being "love-struck" because she failed to meet the new standard of always remaining level-headed. Thirdly, there is a screening process regarding whether a victim is entitled to recognition: your suffering will only be acknowledged if it is expressed in a manner deemed respectable by the wider public.

5. Reflections and insights

The greatest lesson this has taught variety programmes is this: do not focus solely on how to make the audience shed tears; consider, too, what cultural expectations the audience harbours. The example of Mai Lin illustrates this: whilst bringing a complex, less-than-conventional woman to the forefront carries considerable risk, in the long run, it offers the audience an opportunity to engage with human complexity.

At the same time, when speaking out online, people must also be mindful of the double standards they harbour in their own minds—not just those based on gender, but also those regarding the powerful and the vulnerable. Before lashing out at Mai Lin, it is worth asking oneself: if she were a celebrity, would the criticism be quite so harsh? Empathy is not as natural or as fair as people tend to believe.

Viewed from the societal perspective, Mai Lin's ordeal lays bare a very awkward predicament faced by contemporary women: if you stay at home as a full-time mother, people say you're worthless; if you go out to work, they say you're neglecting your household. If you have neither the resources nor the means to suffer with dignity, you won't even be entitled to anyone's sympathy.

6. Conclusion

This article finds that viewers' empathy does not arise naturally; it is conditional. When comparing Mai Lin, Ge Xi and Huang Shengyi, viewers must overcome three hurdles in order to empathise: Her suffering must be legitimate, her manner of expression must be appropriate, and the character must conform to the stereotypical standard of a "good woman" held in the public consciousness. Women who fail to meet these criteria, even if they are genuinely suffering, find it difficult to elicit empathy from others. The thresholds for empathy are also linked to the strength of one's social standing. As Huang Shengyi and Ge Xi possess social resources, the audience is more forgiving towards them; Mai Lin, on the other hand, is a non-celebrity, full-time mother who has borne the brunt of the hostility. How empathy is distributed depends not on the extent of one's suffering, but on the social position of the person enduring it. By the later stages of the programme, Mai Lin's personal image had changed, and online sentiment improved accordingly. This illustrates that suffering alone is not enough to elicit empathy; one must also frame one's painful experiences into a narrative that others perceive as valuable.

All of this highlights the emotional filtering mechanisms at work in online public opinion. Before expressing empathy, viewers have in fact already passed judgement on the person suffering in their minds, assessing whether she is truly "worthy" of it; and the yardstick used for this judgement is society's entire set of stereotypical perceptions of women. The programme's editing and the commentary from the observation room have, in turn, objectively reinforced this particular form of empathy.

This study also has its own limitations. The data sources are primarily concentrated on Bullet-screen comments and Douban, with no research conducted on platforms such as Weibo or TikTok. The research methodology employed qualitative induction, and no direct interviews were conducted with viewers. In future research, the scope of platforms could be expanded further, and methods such as questionnaires or in-depth interviews could be utilised to more accurately measure the causal relationship between viewers' gender attitudes and their choices regarding empathy.

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