

Exploring the Development and Breakthrough of Online Variety Shows from the Perspective of Youth Subculture

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Abstract: Many program formats are shifting from traditional variety shows to online variety shows as internet technology continues to develop. Online video platforms, led by iQiyi, have focused their content creation on the market for online self-produced variety shows. In many fields, program teams and directors choose youth subculture as the core creative concept of the programs. Different audience groups can find organizations and be entertained within their respective niches. In this thesis, we will take two classic online subculture variety shows, “U Can U BB” and “Street Dance of China”, as examples to explore how the in-depth combination of youth subcultures and online variety shows has aroused attention and threatened mainstream culture. At the same time, mainstream ideology and capital have been incorporated into the subculture market, and the modern audiovisual industry needs to reap stable benefits from the transition. In addition, the research methods of case studies of Chinese internet variety shows and comparative analysis will be utilized, bringing new thoughts and inspiration to media practitioners and content creators.

Keywords: youth subculture, online variety shows, media transition, “U Can U BB”, “Street Dance of China”

1. Introduction

In 2014, a notable milestone was reached when the first purely online variety show “U Can U BB” in Chinese history aired on iQiyi and quickly became a hit. Subsequently, various niche cultural programs such as “The Rap of China”, “The Big Band”, and “Street Dance of China” were launched one after another. In segmented audience market environments, highly vertical variety shows attract large volumes of traffic. The intervention of capital also creates opportunities and platforms for further network variety shows. Simultaneously, the youth subculture propagated by network variety shows plays an increasingly vital role in youth culture. Until 2023, the variety of network shows that are publicized and broadcast on various online platforms have differing focuses on program forms and styles. However, subculture is always a significant theme and source of inspiration for the program. This essay focuses on the development and revelations of network variety shows from the perspective of youth subculture. In doing so, it will focus on the connotation of subculture, the rise of network variety art, and the connection between the two. The article then focuses on outlining the current difficulties facing subculture and the reasons why it is forced to turn to mainstream culture. It will also look at how subculture content creators are trying to break out of this dilemma in order to

find a balance with mainstream culture. Finally, the article presents the implications and prospects for the audiovisual industry. Based on the development process of online variety arts and the flow of subculture in the past decade, this article focuses on the new ways of variety arts content creation in the new era.

2. The phenomenon of subculture in online variety shows

2.1. Subculture and its characteristics

The term “youth subculture” first originated with the Chicago School, which saw youth subculture as a form of deviant behavior [1]. As a result of economic change and technological innovation, the class gap in society has gradually widened. Williams argued that while the powerful groups secure their vested interests through hegemony, the underprivileged need to obtain their legitimate rights and interests through a form of deviant or even transgressive behavior [1]. The “subcultural group” is seen here as a special group that is dangerous and unstable in society. Until the 1960s, the Birmingham School identified youth subculture as a ritual of resistance, which is also the study most in line with the perception of modernity. Dick Hebdige proposed that subcultural resistance is realized through a “style” shared by members of the subculture but distinct from the dominant culture [2]. Subcultural resistance has distinctive forms of entertainment and principles of interaction that do not require acceptance by the dominant culture but instead resist it [3]. For example, metal lists, bikers, and freak culture are all classic subcultures in early Western countries.

2.2. The Rise of Internet Variety Shows

Variety shows in China have been developing since the 1980s and have gone through several rounds of different types of shows, including game variety shows, talent shows, reality shows, and talk shows, to name a few. Until the beginning of the 21st century, with the deepening of the internet, variety shows broadcasted on traditional TV platforms showed a lack of success. Coupled with the rise of online video platforms, many program groups chose the broadcast strategy of station-network integration, i.e., a program was broadcast on both TV channels and online video platforms to meet the needs of different audiences. In 2014, the debating program “U Can U BB” was launched on iQiyi and kicked off the prelude of network self-produced variety shows [4]. Many video platforms followed suit, and China produced a total of 95 online variety shows in 2016, the highest number in the world, accounting for 42% of total global online variety production [5].

2.3. The Network Picture of Subculture

The censorship of variety shows on online platforms is lax, and the rise of internet content has weakened the role of gatekeepers in the traditional communication process, resulting in content of varying quality and the inclusion of niche cultures. In the case of “Street Dance of China”, for example, the subcultures of “cool culture”, “youth movement” and “love and peace” have become the core of the program and have been promoted. According to the Birmingham School, the establishment of a “style” is a central symbol in the resistance rituals of youth subcultures [1]. The rules, staffing, and topic setting of the program should be in line with the characteristics of presenting young people’s unique ideas, building community links, and not compromising with mainstream culture. In terms of audience participation, subculture programs can resonate with young people who are tired of being disciplined by mainstream values [6]. For example, “U Can U BB” is a niche debate program that sets topics and debates ideas not in line with mainstream culture but deeply exposes real social problems and expresses the values of modernity. Each subculture variety show injects “style” into its soul and realizes the resistance of minority aesthetics to mainstream culture.

3. The Mainstreaming Turn of Youth Subculture in Internet Variety Shows

3.1. Mainstream ideological output of program content

In recent years, the number and scale of subculture-type variety shows have been increasing, as have the social impacts they cause. In order to establish a correct and positive value orientation, online variety shows have been required to incorporate mainstream ideology. <The General Rules for Auditing the Content of Network Audiovisual Programmes>, adopted in 2017, strictly defined the auditing standards for network audiovisual content and eliminated “high-risk” subcultural works by political means. The National Radio and Television Administration established the “Four Don’t Allow” standard in 2018, which requires that artists participating in the recording of programs should not show tattoos or wear clothing with taboo symbols. In response, two entire seasons of “U Can U BB” were ordered off the air due to content violations and artist issues [4]. Moreover, the media, as the main force of communication, must promote positive ideologies that reflect the characteristics of traditional culture. “Street Dance of China” has been intentionally incorporating “Chinese style” elements since its third season, often using “Tai Chi”, “Pipa”, “Brush”, and other Chinese cultural symbols in its choreography [7]. As a result, the spread of subcultures in online variety shows has suffered a severe blow due to the output of mainstream ideology.

3.2. The Commercial “Incorporation” of Capital Culture

Bennett et al., who studied post-subculture, have pointed out that subcultures are about to cease to exist or become subordinate to mainstream culture [8]. An important reason for this is the capitalist takeover of subculture. As one of the internet industries, online variety shows belong to the category of mass consumption. This means that network variety art has to incorporate commercial aspects into its program settings, such as advertisement placement, commodity economy, and so on. Capital’s commercial incorporation of subcultures is reflected in the integration, simplification, and reconstruction of marginal cultures for market demand [3]. Once the subculture styles known for rebellion and resistance become commodities, they will lose their unique subculture scenarios and become an overall culture that caters to mainstream consumption and has homogeneity. In the program “Street Dance of China”, towels, necklaces, hats, and skateboards, which originally represented cool culture and non-conformity, are reproduced as souvenirs and peripheral merchandise by merchants. Even the style of street dance and the dancers themselves have become a part of commercial realization, with the transaction value replacing their original value.

3.3. Subculture’s Breakthrough to Mainstream Culture

Under the above circumstances, subcultures are also trying to break through this dilemma in order to find a balance with mainstream culture. For example, “U Can U BB”, in the opening of the first season, hit the tip: people over 40 should watch in the company of the 90s. This initially set the style and tone of the program, expressing the niche connotation and rebellious spirit that the subculture represents. In the choice of topics, the program team retains as much as possible the value of non-mainstream cultural topics, such as death, homosexuality, workplace subterfuge, feminism, etc., to complete the ritual resistance to mainstream ideology with a subversive expression [4]. At the same time, in the configuration of the debaters, many of the guests represent representative minorities and special groups, to show that the program has shifted from the public space to the private sphere of “incorporation”, presenting a kind of subversion of the traditional variety show. Such online variety shows often use commercial programming to tap into the subculture market. Searching for “Street Dance of China” on Tmall, a shopping platform, reveals a combination of IPs and toys. This creates a closed loop from platform diversion to thematic shopping interfaces to content consumption [9].

Bourdieu put forward the concept of “cultural capital”, subcultures are creating unique styles of “cultural capital”, and these capital symbols can be distributed in the commercial market, creating opportunities for subcultures to “break the circle” [10].

4. Implications and Prospects of the Internet Audiovisual Industry

4.1. Respect for Multiculturalism in Online Variety Shows

At present, subculture continues to compete with mainstream culture for the right to speak in the content market. However, it is undeniable that niche culture has entered the public eye and is being scrutinized by mainstream media and audiences. Youth subculture represents marginal culture and underappreciated social groups, and its connotation lies in expressing and resolving the hidden or open cultural differences between contemporary young people and the older generation [7]. Therefore, it is wise to listen to different voices and accept diverse cultural forms. Most online variety shows also communicate with mainstream culture in their respective cultural forms, and this interaction is a prerequisite for understanding each other and creating identity.

4.2. Strengthening Value Orientation in Online Variety Shows

In the new media environment, all kinds of value advocacy are emerging. Just as the program objective of “U Can U BB” says, “What is seen is only a certain perspective, not the truth.” Mainstream media have an obligation to provide correct value guidance to their audiences and encourage the development of subcultures within a basic ethical system. Mainstream culture needs to learn more about the content of youth subcultures and construct cultural wholeness, which will help to fulfill the guiding role of mainstream culture, and also control and avoid risks in time.

4.3. Enriching Cultural Connotation in Online Variety Shows

Andreas Reckwitz broke down the concept of “Society of Singularities”, where he argued that respecting the direction of individual and institutional interests will be the hallmark of the transformation of modern society [11]. This requires producers to be uniquely different and highly understand the symbolic connotations of subcultures, guiding the content creation of all programs with subcultures at their core. This cultural connotation is the integration strategy for future innovative programs, i.e., the integration of an individual’s particular hobbies, spirituality, or beliefs into mainstream trends and discursive scenes. Any project that is an obsession for a small group of people but is not known or recognized enough by the general public can be tried to break through the limitations and make it more energetic. In this way, content products that combine the unique connotations of youth subcultures with the formal expression of mainstream culture are more likely to be favored by the market and loved by the audience.

5. Conclusion

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of a range of subcultural variety shows represented by bands, debates, and street dance. With the development of the internet, this trend is only becoming more prevalent. To be honest, this article focuses on the beneficial development of subcultures, ignoring some of the disadvantages and negative impacts of subcultures. In fact, subcultures also need to take the best of what is good and get rid of the worst of what is bad. However, the consensus is that the booming development of online self-produced variety shows creates opportunities for subcultures to “break the circle” and stimulate innovation in the content market. The disruptive innovation of online variety shows can drive the development of niche cultures in their own communities while building a diverse and inclusive social and cultural environment. Creating

emotional connections with the general public and seeking common ground while reserving differences is the current development strategy for subcultures.

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