The Uses and Gratifications of Life-Based Reality Television among Chinese College Students

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*Abstract:*The study explores what satisfaction viewers obtain by watching life-based reality shows. In the article, anonymous questionnaire will be administered to college students and participants will complete surveys regarding their reasons for watching life-based programs. The study assumes that watching the life-based reality show Back to Field is positively correlated to five factors, including perceived reality, vicarious participation, social utility, passing time, and personal utility. The comprehension of audiences' gratifications in this study will carry practical implications for the television industry.

Key words: reality television, life-based, uses and gratifications, Back to Field

1 Introduction

At the turn of the 21st century, reality-based television is a force that has altered the TV industry and the surrounding culture [1]. Reality-based television programs, which increased rapidly, are popular worldwide [2] and attract large audiences [3]. However, whereas the boom in reality-based television may have been more concentrated on shows with the characteristics of extreme stunts and stunning challenges [4], the current trend in reality TV has been a return to reality shows based on life, presenting the most natural state of the guests in front of the audience through the simulation of family scenes [5], for instance, Three Meals a Day in Korea and Back to Field in China. Although there exist some arguments in regard of the exact nature and criteria for life-based reality television, its impact is nothing short of phenomenal. Back to Field, with a 19.37% market share, ranks first among all the variety shows at the same timeslot. As life-based shows has established itself as the preeminent subgenre of reality TV, as well as the most influential genre on television, it becomes imperative that we gain a fully understanding of what appeal reality-based shows has for audiences.

To address this, the study explores what gratifications viewers get from life-based reality programming and their motives for watching by using one typical example: Back to Field. As broadcast and cable networks race to develop and promote reality-based programs at an unprecedented rate, a thorough grasp of viewers' gratifications from the perspective of life-based programs not only carry practical significance for the television industry, but also produce a better understanding of how viewers use television to fulfill psychological needs.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Dissecting the Reality Genre

Reality TV, which offers viewers a large variety of viewing options [6], emerged as one of the most well-liked types of TV shows [7]. It is inexpensive to produce reality programming for the television industry itself [8]. With its increasing number, the current literature on this burgeoning TV genre is growing, including a range of theoretical perspectives [9].

Although people might consider some programming as reality-based television, there is no general consensus on what constitutes a reality TV program [10]. This might hamper focus on the phenomenon of curiosity. The study adopts the theory of Nabi et al (2003), who defined that the reality-based television programming is features several elements:

(a) people portraying themselves (i.e., not actors or public figures performing roles), (b) filmed at least in part in their living or working environment rather than on a set, (c) without a script, (d) with events placed in a narrative context, (e) for the primary purpose of viewer entertainment. [3]

This clear definition includes programs like Back to Field but precludes shows captured by other genres, for instance, news programming, talk shows, documentaries, programs characterized by reenactments, as well as simple video clips not placed in a narrative context.

This relatively focused, conservative definition, to some extent, provides a starting point where it is more favorable to divide reality shows into subcategories, and then to study each individually [6]. The difficulty of studying particular subgenres of reality shows is similar to the problem of examining the whole genre: not a standard or exhaustive list of subgenres exists for programs based on life [4]. However, as different types of shows are categorized under reality shows, it seems necessary to examine these subtypes to get better knowledge of reality-based television as a whole.

2.2 Uses and Gratifications of Reality-Based Television

The uses and gratifications perspective pays attention to audience's motivations for making specific media choices and how these choices meet audience's needs [11]. The central tenets of the Uses and Gratifications Theory are that viewers are goal-oriented, conscious of their needs, and select media to gratify those needs [12].

Viewers' use of media is further theorized as driven by particular reasons and affective needs, wants or interests [13]. Rubin (1984) identified two higher-order or fundamental viewer motivations—instrumental and ritualistic. McQuail, who adopted a more detailed approach to studying the motives of television viewers, identified four audience motivations: information gathering, personal identity, integration/social interaction, and entertainment [14]. Papacharissi & Rubin (2000) found that audiences use the Internet to kill time, seek information, entertain, and communicate [15].

Given all the facts, there still existed a problem that motivational taxonomies of earlier researches did not take the programming genre into account [16]. Subsequent researches have paid attention to study viewer motivations and gratifications for particular genres, for instance, reality programs.

Nabi (2003) analyzed the psychological appeal offered by reality television. Reiss and Wiltz (2004) examined the relationship between reality TV viewing with 16 kinds of human desires and values [17]. Barton (2009) conducted a research, which looked at the Uses and Gratifications theory associated with competition-based programming, a certain subgenre of reality TV [1]. In a recent study of 640 students at a Southeastern college who watched reality shows, Barton (2013) found five viewer motivations of talent-based shows:

1) Perceived reality—viewers' attitudes and trust in the level of authenticity displayed on reality-based program;
2) Vicarious participation—the viewer desires to participate in the program;
3) Social utility—the viewer will use the program as a topic for interpersonal utility;
4) Pass time—the viewer wants to use the program as a background when doing other tasks;
5) Personal utility—the viewer wants to occupy and kill time with reality-based programming when there is nothing else worth watching [4].

Following the methods and practices of the research already proposed by Barton (2013), the study does similar research. The practice of fairly comparing two subgenres of reality TV has been suggested useful in previous research [8]. The research adopts original measurements and similar questions proposed in Barton's study. The differences

between two studies are that this paper focuses on a life-based show and only pays attention to the gratifications of the audience while Barton's research, which focuses on talent-based shows, divided gratifications into gratifications sought and gratifications obtained and analyzed correlations between the particular content of shows based on reality and the gratifications obtained by the audiences.

The question to be addressed in this study is as follows:

RQ1: What are the gratifications from watching the life-based reality show Back to Field?

Based on the above studies, five hypotheses are relatively proposed:

H1: Watching the life-based reality show Back to Field is positively correlated to perceived reality.

H2: Watching the life-based reality show Back to Field is positively correlated to vicarious participation.

H3: Watching the life-based reality show Back to Field is positively correlated to social utility.

H4: Watching the life-based reality show Back to Field is positively correlated to passing time.

H5: Watching the life-based reality show Back to Field is positively correlated to personal utility.

3 Methodology

3.1 Sampling

The respondents to the study will be selected from universities in ""first-tier cities", including Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou at random, who will receive credit for participation. The decision to use college students as participants is based on the valid example presented in previous reality-based television researches which demonstrated that the primary age demographic for programs based on life is college students between the ages of 18–24 [3] [18] [19].

To minimize errors in the analyses, only students with the knowledge of watching the life-based reality show Back to Field will be included in the study. Also, students younger than 18 or older than 24 will be excluded from the sample, as their TV watching patterns may deviate from the typical college population [20].

3.2 Procedures

To examine the gratifications from watching the life-based reality show Back to Field, an online, anonymous questionnaire will be administered to college students. Five factors are included in the research, including perceived reality, vicarious participation, social utility, passing time, and personal utility.

All participants will sign an informed consent form before participating in an online survey for this study. To minimize social desirability deviation, the anonymity of the research will be emphasized before conducting [20]. To ensure the accuracy of collected data, items will be presented randomly to avoid order effects and the set of questions will be structured succinctly to prevent participant from feeling fatigue [21].

A cover page will be attached to the questionnaire which will clearly define life-based reality programs. In addition, the example of Back to Field will be given.

3.3 Measurements

The questionnaire is based on prior reality-based programming studies [4] [22]. The questionnaire consists of a section of 20 particular questions asking participants the reasons for watching the life-based reality show Back to Field and 3 demographic questions, including age, gender and race. The 20 items are each preceded by the statement, ''I watch the life-based reality show Back to Field because:''. And by following a 5-point Likert scale (Strongly Disagree= 1, Strongly Agree= 5), participants will be required to evaluate each of the 20 items.

3.4 Data analysis

Appropriate data filtering procedures will be employed before data analysis. Researchers will use Explore and Q-Q graphic in SPSS to screening the data. Missing data will be replaced by the means [23].

Data will be coded according to Hesse-Biber and Leavy's (2010) four-step data analysis strategies: data preparation, data exploration, data reduction, and data interpretation [24]. Varimax rotation is applied to better explain the correlations between factors [25].

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Appendix

"I watch the life-based reality show *Back to Field* because:"					
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5
Vicarious Participation					
I like to "plot and scheme" as if I were on the show					
I like to imagine myself as a contestant					
I relate to the contestants on reality shows					
I'd like to be on a reality TV show					
I'd like to be famous like reality TV contestants					
Perceived Reality					
They are "real"					
They are unscripted					
I enjoy watching "real" people, not actors					
They are "real" drama					
Pass Time					
It gives me something to watch when I am bored					
Because there is nothing else on TV					
I like to have it on in the background when doing other things					
Personal Utility					
They make me feel less lonely					
They are different from anything else on TV					
They help me forget about my problems					

They help me relax					
Social Utility					
Everyone else watches them					
I like to discuss them with others					
It is what everyone else likes to discuss					
I like to gather with others to watch					