

Study of Audience Needs for Slow-Paced Variety Shows from the Perspective of Use and Gratification

-- Taking Back to Field as an Example

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Abstract

As a representative “slow-paced variety” program, “Back to Field” has attracted the attention of many scholars with its novel format and rich content. Most of the studies have focused on the cultural and economic phenomena in the program, the analysis of the production and successful experience of the program, and the analysis of related theories. This article is based on the theoretical framework of use and gratification, taking the slow-paced variety show “Back to Field” as an example, to study the users’ use of the medium and how the program meets the audience’s needs. The article adopts a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods to explain and analyze the phenomenon of audience viewing “Back to Field” in terms of media use and demand motivation.

Keywords

Use and gratification; Slow-Paced Variety Show; “Back to Field”.

1. Introduction

Based on the use and gratification theory in communication science, this paper investigates the needs of domestic slow-paced variety show audiences in the context of the specific research object of the slow-paced variety show “Back to Field”. A quantitative questionnaire analysis method and a qualitative literature study and secondary analysis research method are used. Currently, there is a vacancy to fill in the field of studying slow-paced variety shows adopting use and gratification theory and quantitative questionnaire analysis. To address this gap, this paper uses this research method to investigate the needs of domestic slow-paced variety show audiences, innovating a research approach that combines theory and quantitative data analysis to explore audience needs for slow-paced variety shows. Therefore, the author believes that this paper has research significance and value. This study provides a more comprehensive interpretation of audience demand for slow-paced variety shows from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives.

2. Literature Review

The theory of “use and gratification” has gone from being ignored to being recognized, to being explicitly proposed and taken seriously, and now to becoming a theory frequently used by many scholars in the field of media. It can be said that it is a dynamic, constantly developing and improving audience research in the field of communication, which is very closely integrated with practice. Based on the articles related to use and gratification research, the researcher focuses on three aspects: the history of use and gratification theory research, research on variety shows, and the application of use and gratification theory to variety shows. The research

of scholars is summarized, and the academic areas that have yet to be studied and analyzed in depth are outlined to establish the direction and provide theoretical support for the research analysis of this paper.

2.1. Research History of the Use and Gratification Theory

The study of “use and gratification” originated in the 1940s. Some scholars have proposed the hypothesis that “audience is active”. This led to the study of audience motivations for using media and how they use them. For example, one of the first studies of radio programs was conducted by H. Hertzog, who interviewed 11 fans of a radio program called “Expert Knowledge Contest” in 1944. From this study, he concluded that “even though it is the same program, people have different motives for listening to it, their focus of appreciation and the satisfaction they get from it. He also summarized three basic psychological needs that make people enjoy the competition programs [1].

Later, the American sociologist E. Katz, in his book “Personal Use of Mass Communication”, first proposed the theory of “Use and gratification”. He summarized media exposure behavior as a causal chain of “social + psychological factors - media expectation - media exposure - need satisfaction”. He proposed a basic model of the “use and gratification” process [1].

“Use and gratification” research views audience members as individuals with specific “needs”. Their media exposure activities are seen as the “use” of media based on the motivation of specific needs. As a result, these needs are “satisfied” [1]. According to the database on the Internet, research on the use and gratification theory started around 2000 and can be broadly classified into the following categories. In the first category, the theory is used to analyze and interpret social issues or social hot topics or trends. For example, from the perspective of use and gratification, we interpret the “spy war fever”, “Korean drama fever”, Internet pushers, and the embodiment of use and gratification theory in online chatting. In the second category, studies are conducted on specific TV programs, dramas, and variety shows to analyze and explore the reasons for their success. For example, the exploration of popular TV shows and variety shows such as “Family Guy” and “Do Not Disturb”. The third category is critical thinking about the theory itself. This category of articles seems to be relatively “rare”. In Lu Heng’s “Use and gratification: A Labeling Theory”, he mentions “use and gratification” as the most frequently cited theory in the field of communication. In fact, the most important and critical criticism of U&G comes from the researchers of U&G themselves [2]. In fact, the phenomenon of “labeling” is not only reflected in the development of the theory from ancient times to the present. Many studies in China that have used the theory since the beginning of the 21st century have also tended to “label” use and gratification. The connotation of the theory itself is not reflected, but rather the object of one’s research is “linked” to certain needs of the audience. Scholars have not paid attention to the deeper theoretical meaning of “use and gratification”.

Through the above summary, it is concluded that the study of the combination of use and gratification and specific communication phenomena or popular movies and TV has been the focus of research and hot spots in this theory in China. The previous and contemporary scholars can accurately grasp the hot spots and the latest communication dynamics of the times. The use and gratification theory is used to analyze how the psychological needs of the audience behind the phenomenon interact with the elements of the phenomenon and achieve the effect of satisfying the “needs” of the audience. The psychological needs of the audience are analyzed. The theories used in the article are indirectly empirical, and the final conclusions are mostly subjective, lacking the support of objective research data. As a kind of social science, communication science should not only pay attention to the empirical evidence of theories, but also to the research using direct and reliable data.

2.2. Study of Slow-Paced Variety Shows

Along with the boom of the domestic variety show market, viewers have become aesthetically fatigued with the long-standing competitive, conflict-ridden and fast-paced variety shows, and with the increasingly fast pace of life in modern society, people have always needed an outlet to relieve the fatigue of their busy lives and seek solace and emotional values. The representative “Back to Field” is a representative of a typical slow-paced variety show in China: it does not have exciting and shocking images and episodes; it puts the guests in a relatively relaxed and quiet environment, records their lives in a natural and simple rural environment, showing their real side, which satisfies people’s desire for an idyllic life.

From the available literature on the CNKI, the paper screened out articles related to “slow-paced variety shows” and specific variety shows. The earliest research on slow-paced variety shows dates back to 2017, when the first season of “Back to Field” was a hit and cultural variety shows were booming. Most scholars chose to analyze one or several slow-paced variety shows, and the programs analyzed showed a certain pattern over time: slow-paced variety studies followed the latest developments in variety shows and showed the phenomenon of “piling up”. In 2017, studies on variety shows mainly focused on “Chinese Restaurant”, “Back to Field” and “The Reader”. In 2017, the study focused on the “pioneers” of domestic slow-paced variety shows such as “Chinese Restaurant”, “Back to Field” and “The Reader”. In the first half of 2018, “Dear Inn” and “The Beautiful House” were again the focus of researchers’ attention. Meanwhile, in this year, the second season of “Back to Field” was launched, which immediately attracted the attention of researchers again.

In terms of research content, it mostly focuses on analyzing the reasons why a particular slow-paced variety show is hot and the distinctive features or shortcomings of slow-paced variety shows. The research focuses on the artistic characteristics, production methods, cultural connotations, and how to meet the psychological needs of the audience. For example, in the article “Understanding ordinary life, listening to the wisdom of life—interpreting Hunan TV’s Dear Inn”, scholar Liu Bo affirms the success of the program in terms of production, plot narrative, cultural connotation, and audience marketing characteristics [3]. Of course, with the popularity of slow-paced variety shows in the domestic market, some problems such as homogenization of slow-paced variety shows have been exposed. The study is not without some scholars’ criticism of the current situation of the development of domestic slow-paced variety shows as well as the content of the programs. For example, Tao Di wrote in his article “Don’t let “slow down to live” be just a slogan—a brief discussion of the slow-paced variety show phenomenon” that “some slow-paced variety shows are now using truth as a selling point. The essence is the vulgarization of characters’ words and actions and plots. The contrast is the pursuit of a sense of formality in the picture, deliberately beautifying the scene. The frequent appearance of “chicken soup” flower words and animation are not in line with the purpose of the program to record real life” [4].

2.3. Study of Back to Field

Back to Field is a life service documentary program launched by Hunan TV and Zhejiang Hexin Media in 2017. The program has now launched five seasons, from the first season in order into: “Farmer Chapter” (2017), “Jiangnan Chapter” (2018), “Xiangxi Chapter” (2019), “colorful clouds” (2020) “peach blossom source” (2021). As soon as the first season of the program was broadcast, it received a good rating of 1.46% on the national network, and the overall rating of the first season was “remarkable” [5].

As a representative “slow-paced variety” program, “Back to Field” has attracted the attention of many scholars with its novel format and rich content. From the literature on the Internet, I have selected 167 articles that are closely related to the program “Back to Field”. From the perspective of research, they can be summarized into the following categories: cultural and

economic phenomena in the program, analysis of the program's production and successful experience, and analysis of the combination of related theories.

The special background and character setting of the program, as well as the collision between the cultural connotation of the variety show and the variety market, make "The Back to Field" have unique cultural and economic research value. For example, Zhao et al. wrote in "An analysis of the cultural and nurturing elements in variety shows: The Back to Field" that the show contains both cultural elements of food and local culture. The program also has elements of nurturing such as the sense of family and country, the concept of ecological civilization, aesthetic awareness, and the concept of healthy life [6]. In the economic aspect, He Lingyan in her article "Research on the development strategy of implantable advertising in variety shows: The Back to Field 4 as an example" explores the decline of the program's reputation caused by too many implantable advertisements and too hard [7].

As one of the first "slow-paced variety" reality shows in China, "Back to Field" has enjoyed high buzz and popularity, and its success is worth studying and learning from. Most of these studies have explored the reasons for its success from the perspective of various aspects of the program's production. For example, Yuan analyzed the success factors of slow-paced variety shows in his article "An Analysis of the Success Factors of Slow-paced variety shows: Back to Field, from the perspectives of humanistic sentiment, audience orientation, and program innovation [8].

From the perspective of communication and other theories, "Back to Field" also enriches the theoretical connotation. Among the existing papers, the audience analysis, use and gratification theory, etc. in communication science have been combined with the program for significant results. For example, in "Analysis of Audience Psychological Needs of Slow-paced variety Arts under the Threshold of Mass Communication: The Back to Field as an Example," scholar Wang Qing analyzes how the program meets the audience's various psychological needs from the perspective of audience psychological needs. Huang and Gong, in their article "Poetic Dwelling: The Poetics of Life in the Fourth Season of Back to Field", use poetics theory to judge the content and effects of the program: with this "poetic" concept as a guide, the program is constructed to meet the psychological needs of modern In the article "The Poetical Writing of Life in the Fourth Season of Back to Field", poetics theory is used to judge the content and the effect of the program: this "poetical" concept is used as a guide to construct a Chinese "poetic habitat" for the psychological needs of modern people [9].

Based on the above analysis and summary of the existing research results on use and gratification theory, slow-paced variety shows, and "Back to Field", I believe that there is deficiency in the field of slow-paced variety shows using use and gratification theory and objective data survey analysis. To address this gap, this paper examines the needs of domestic slow-paced variety show audiences by using use and gratification theory and objective data survey analysis as entry points. It is an innovative way to combine theory and data analysis to explore audience demand for slow-paced variety shows. Therefore, the author believes that this paper has research significance and value. Therefore, this is identified as the basic research approach and idea of this paper.

3. Data Analysis

In order to study the audience's need to watch "Back to Field" and how the need is met, the author designed a questionnaire around the channels, frequency and motivation of watching "Back to Field". The questionnaire was created, published and collected through Questionnaire Star. The survey collected 207 questionnaires, 207 valid questionnaires, the completion rate is 100%. After analyzing and organizing the collected data results, the following findings were obtained.

3.1. The Ratings of Slow-Paced Variety Shows of Slow-paced Variety Shows

Before analyzing the data related to “Back to Field,” it is necessary to understand the current status of audience exposure to slow-paced variety shows. According to the data obtained, among the five major types of variety shows available, the three types of variety shows that respondents watched the most were, in order, 61.84% entertainment and funny, 57% celebrity reality shows, and 46.86% slow-paced variety shows.

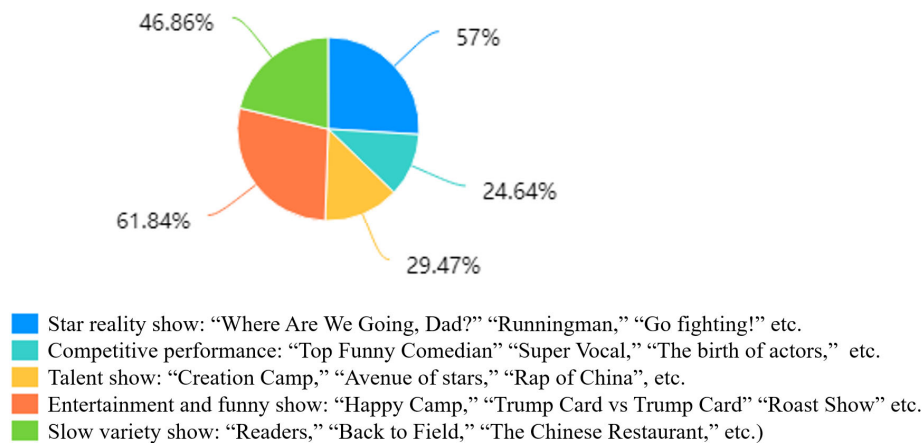


Figure 1. Proportion of Different Types of Variety Shows Watched

Meanwhile, among the slow-paced variety shows given, the slow-paced variety show that respondents liked and knew best was “Back to Field”, accounting for 53.14%. It can be seen that the program has a considerable audience base and popularity, and it is more objective to analyze the data on this basis. Moreover, it also reflects that there is some practical significance in conducting research on the viewing needs of “Back to Field”.

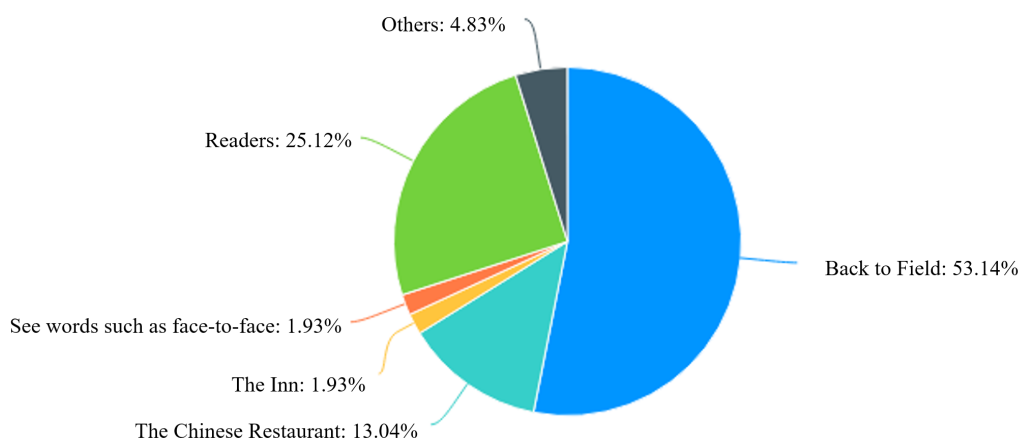


Figure 2. The Most Popular or Familiar Domestic Slow-Paced Variety Shows

3.2. Analysis of the Viewing Habits of “Back to Field”

57.97% of the respondents chose to “watch it only when they want to”, 28.02% chose to “watch the program as soon as it is updated”, and 14.01% “save several episodes to watch it all at once.”

From this data, it can be concluded that most of the respondents have not developed a regular habit of watching the program, which to a certain extent indicates that the loyalty of the users of the program among the respondents has yet to be improved.

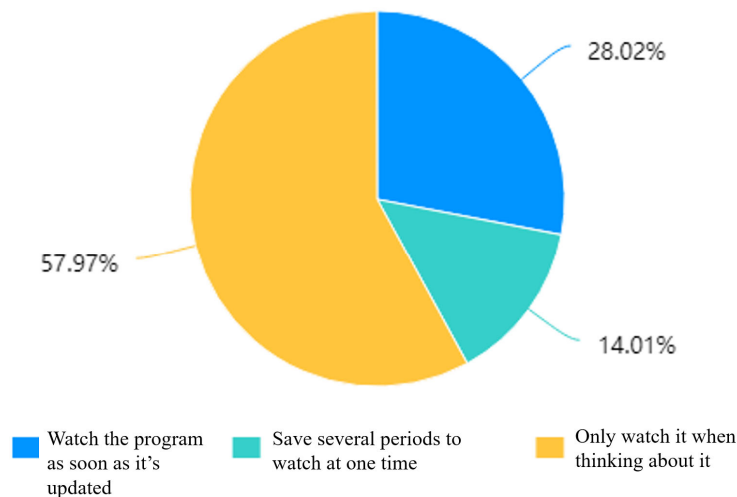


Figure 3. The Habit of the Audience Watching “Back to Field”

While 52.17% of the audience chose to watch the program on MANGO TV, 18.84% and 17.39% chose to watch the clips on TV or on “other video platforms”, and 11.59% chose to watch it on “short video platforms such as Douyin and Racer”. platform” to watch.

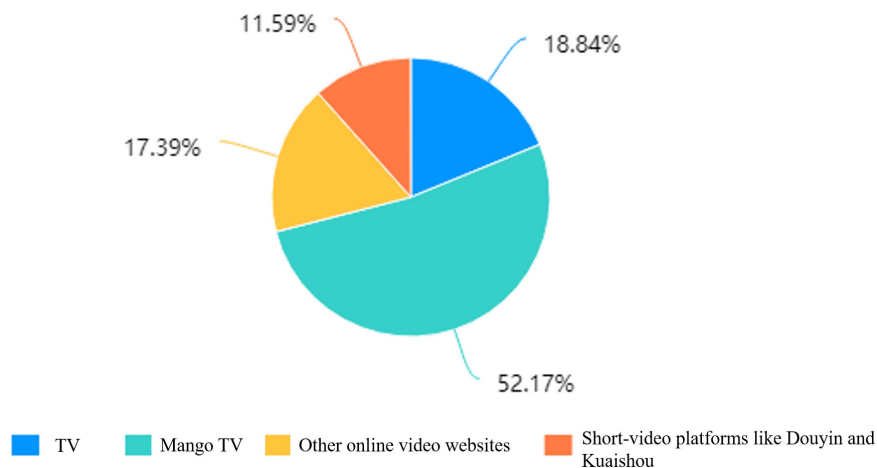


Figure 4. Channels for Audiences to Watch “Back to Field”

Reasons for choosing this channel 51.69% of the respondents chose “I like to watch the best part of the program after editing” and 47.83% chose “I am used to it”.

The reason for this is that most respondents choose to watch on Mango TV because the video platform has the exclusive rights to “Back to Field” and as an exclusive app for Hunan TV, it is conducive to better cultivating audience stickiness and viewing habits. However, there are also many respondents who like to watch some secondary created clips from other video platforms, for example, like in B station, they often see some clips of the program with guests, program introductory topics, etc. as clues. And according to the survey, some respondents said that the clips released by the video clip makers because of their concern can attract themselves. In fact, it is possible to lump together respondents who are used to watching programs and those who watch them on short video platforms. Most of them do not want to immerse themselves in the soothing atmosphere of the whole program from the beginning to the end. Instead, they actually want to hold a fast-paced variety viewing demand. Understanding the audience’s viewing habits, frequency and channels of “Back to Field” can better grasp their deeper motivations for watching the program.

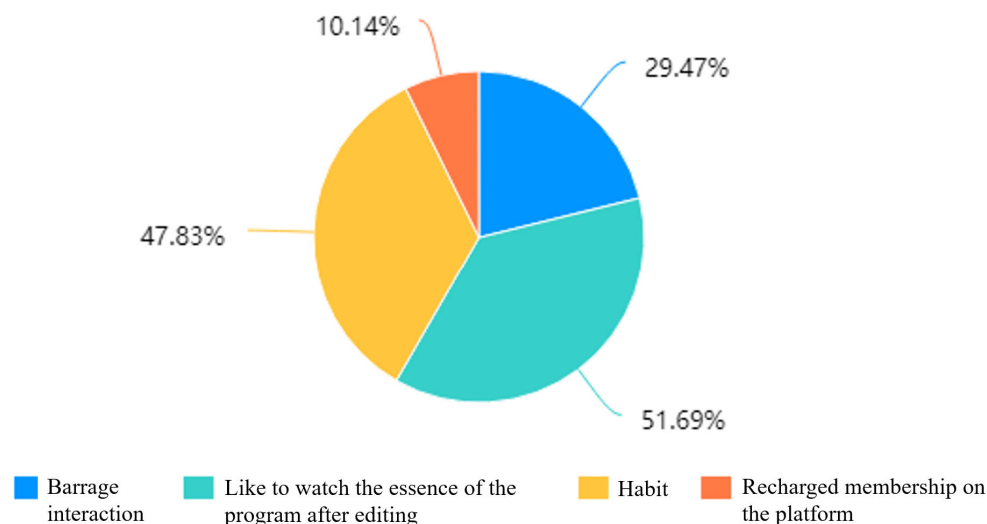


Figure 5. Reasons Why Audiences Choose a Channel to Watch "Back to Field"

3.3. Watching Motivation and Demand Satisfaction

The reasons for watching a program can be varied. However, by asking the respondents about the characteristics of the program itself, we can find more subtle and deeper reasons. 23.19% of the respondents chose "to pass the time during meals or breaks", 22.17% chose "to relax during the program", and 21.26% chose "to relax during the program". "21.26% chose "personal preference for this kind of relaxing variety show" and 14.01% chose "I have always been interested in idyllic life".

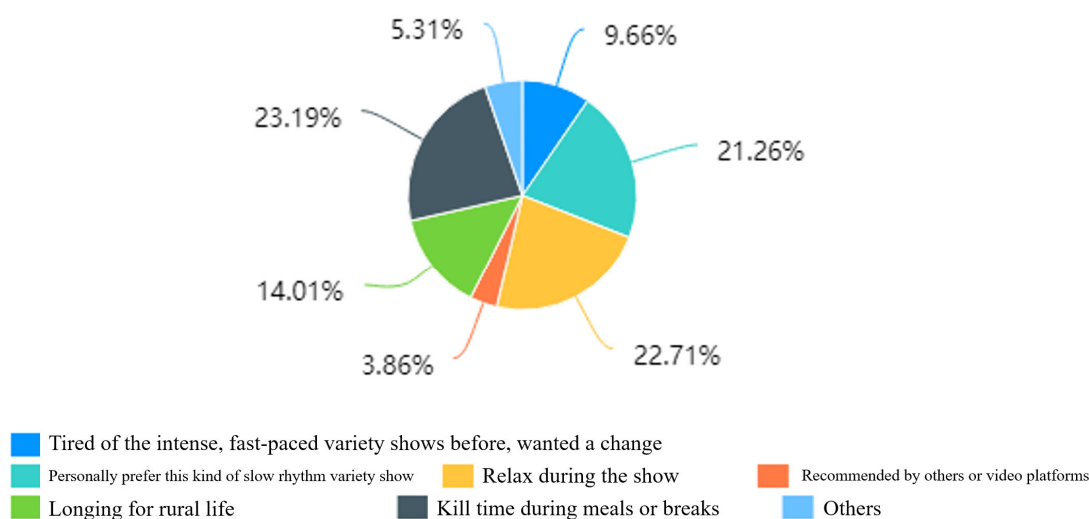


Figure 6. The Main Reason for The Audience to Watch "Back to Field"

The reasons for watching the program are more evenly distributed in the data. Respondents watch "Back to Field" mainly to pass the time, entertain and relax. In this regard, "Back to Field" fulfills its "basic task" and "special task" as a slow-paced variety show. That is, it satisfies part of the audience's "slow-pace" demand, and also satisfies the audience's demand for entertainment and recreation. But it has not yet developed the program's characteristics into a more competitive program. After all, nearly a quarter of the respondents just want to pass the time.

Regarding the features of the program, 63.29% of the respondents considered "the harmony between human beings and nature" to be the most attractive aspect of the program. 57.49% and 56.62% of the respondents considered "the soothing narrative pace of the program" and

“the quiet and relaxing atmosphere created by the program” to be the most attractive. “47.83% said “the guests cooking and working with their own hands”. 35.75% said “the guests who participate in the program”. 30.43% said “the stories of the guests resonate with me”.

As China’s urbanization accelerates, more and more people have become familiar with the steel and concrete of the city, exhaust honking, and the opportunities are diminishing for people to get close to the natural environment. The popularity of Li Ziqi’s video also illustrates this point to some extent. “Back to Field” not only shows the audience “the beauty of people and people”, but also turns some audiences’ fantasy of getting close to nature into a visible reality: in the mushroom house, there are Shiba Inu H and O, the duck-colored lights, the lamb Tianba, and the three sisters of the chicken house. Through their interaction with the guests and some special effects later, the program team made these animals more “humane”. And some of Shiba Inu H’s performance in the program can cause some dog owners, dog lovers to resonate. The program adopts a very soothing and natural narrative rhythm, that is, the camera language, to create a peaceful and idyllic life for the audience, the real country life may not all be as leisurely and rich as the program. But the program team creates a “landscape” and this landscape fits well with the audience’s fantasy. In addition, the program does not set up too many games, but records the guests and celebrities in the simple and real side of the camera, which on the one hand meets the audience’s demand for “real”, and on the other hand also satisfies the audience’s desire for voyeurism. The program set up a chat session, closer to the distance between the audience and the program guests. The celebrities shed their halo and become ordinary people who can communicate and talk with the audience on an equal footing. To a certain extent, this also satisfies the audience’s need for interpersonal interaction and group affiliation.

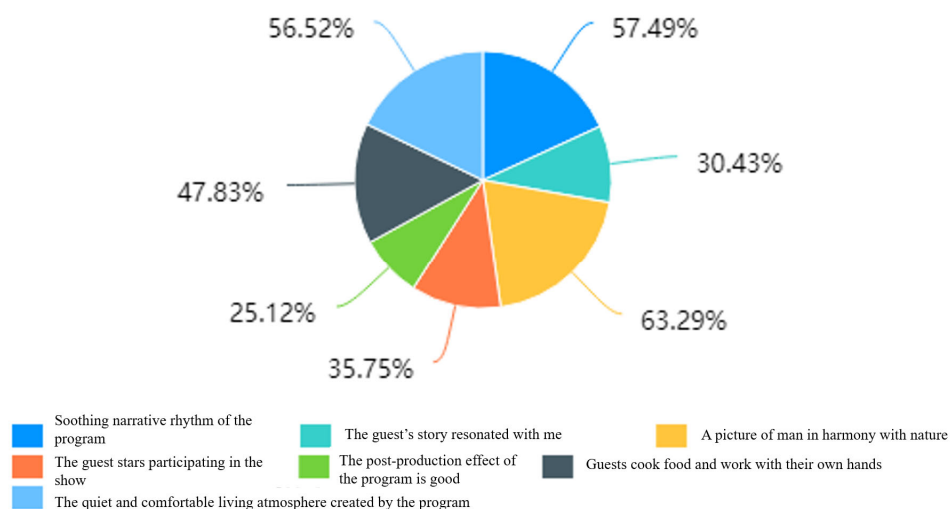


Figure 7. What Audiences Think “Back to Field” Attracts Them

In addition, the questionnaire also surveyed respondents’ opinions on what could be improved in “Back to Field”. 59.42% of the respondents thought that “there are too many advertisements and the implantation is too unnatural”. 45.41% of the respondents thought that “the program feels like there is a deliberate performance”. 34.78% of the respondents thought that the program is “forcibly sensational and lacks empathy”. 27.54% of the respondents thought that “the replacement of permanent guests or temporary guests is not interesting”.

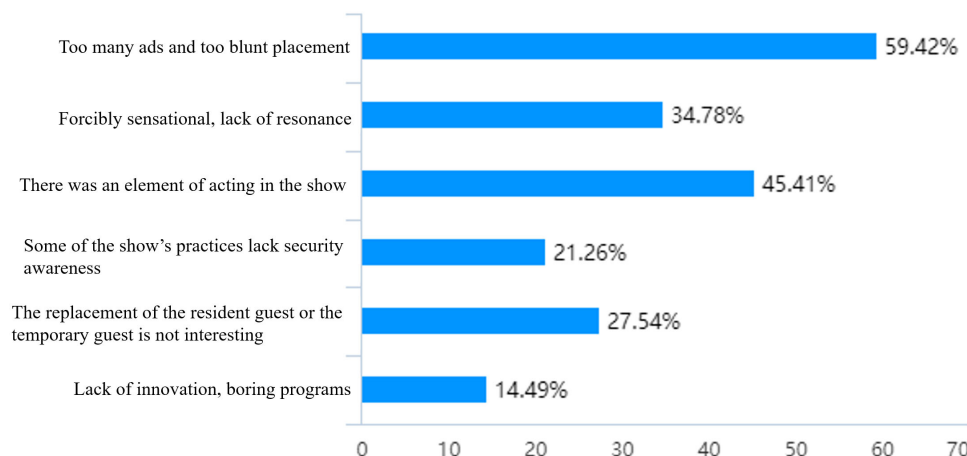


Figure 8. What the Audience Think is Worth Improving in “Back to Field”

Regarding advertising implantation, it is common to see it in many variety shows. However, if in the case of a variety show like “Back to Field”, which builds a peachy country life and focuses on a slow pace, too much and overly raw advertising will affect the perception of the show more than other variety shows such as fast variety shows. More importantly, it will affect the audience’s satisfaction of the program’s needs. Excessive advertising implantation breaks the illusion of the audience in front of the screen to the peach country. In the long run, the audience will form a kind of resistance to the matter as far as advertising is concerned. They think that the program is no longer able to meet their needs well. Thus, they lower their expectations of the program and refuse to watch it.

4. Insights and Discussion

4.1. Use and Gratification Theory Applied in Audience of Various Levels

From the audience to the content delivered by the media, there are many links to go through in between. Take the example of a user watching “Back to Field” on Mango TV. The audience will have access to the program because of the exclusive channel of Mango TV or the habit of using the platform to watch videos. This media-based “use and gratification” can provide the conditions for the content-level “use and gratification” or contribute to it.

Take the example of users who like to watch the program clips on Bilibili site. According to E. Katz’s basic model of “use and gratification” process, the rapid development of mobile network technology today, we only need a cell phone and mobile network, we can install various video APPs in the cell phone, and the audience can access the beeping APP in the cell phone anytime and anywhere. This provides the material conditions for users to access this channel, which is what Katz calls “media access possibility”. In addition, users’ impressions of the video platform: various secondary creation and quality video pop-up sites, under the dual effect of “media exposure possibility” and “media impression”, will produce two results: the demand is satisfied, the use of the channel is positively reinforced, which increases the likelihood of using the platform again. If the need is not satisfied, the audience will seek other means of satisfaction.

Of course, when watching “Back to Field”, the main thing is to get “satisfaction” by “using” the content of the program. Because of the special nature of “Back to Field” as a slow-paced variety show, many audiences come to watch the show because of its features. For example, the show is one of the few slow-paced variety shows of high quality in China. The pacing, narrative approach, and the context in which it is filmed are all highlights of the show. The people who are interested in these features will develop their interest in the show because of these elements and become part of a more regular audience. But some of the features of Back to Field

may not stand out to other audiences, who may watch the show out of boredom or fear of losing the conversation with others around them, driven by a herd mentality.

4.2. Diversity of Internet Audience Needs

Most of the respondents choose to watch programs on online platforms, so the needs of users in the network then cannot be ignored. Users' needs for the network can be divided into three main areas: relationship needs, content needs and service needs. For users, an important demand of using the network is to gain a sense of social belonging [1]. The bullet-screen comments, which are widely popular on major platforms, are a way for Internet users to satisfy their sense of social belonging while watching videos. Many video platforms now have bullet screen comments that can be liked, and the Bilibili website also highlights pop-ups with more likes. There are also long-standing video comment sections, which are a way for netizens to share their viewing experience with each other and find a sense of belonging to a group.

In addition to watching the show, there are a variety of places on the web for the audience to further satisfy their diverse needs. They can follow the program's Weibo and WeChat to get the latest news about "Back to Field". This corresponds to the "three functions" of mass communication proposed by Lasswell, which is the environmental monitoring function. This function can satisfy the audience's need for information about the program. The program team also sets up interactive discussion topics in the Weibo account to meet the audience's needs for interpersonal communication. In addition, "Back to Field" also appears in the Weibo hot search list from time to time. The agenda is set in the network to alert the show's potential audience and attract their attention. In particular, the show sometimes has a cumulative effect when it hits the hot search list for several days in a row. This practice not only increases awareness and exposure, but also adds clicks to the show.

4.3. Domestic Slow-Paced Variety Show Slow Down to Go Farther

As one of the first representatives of slow-paced variety shows in China, "Back to Field" also has some of the common problems of domestic variety shows when it comes to achieving certain success. First of all, the most obvious one is the improper way of implanting advertisements. The first season began with the show's inability to pull in sponsorship, and later had the sponsorship of Jiangzhong's exclusive title. Because the great popularity of the first season, the second season of the sponsor actually up to 13. Especially the overwhelming title "Jiangzhong hericium erinaceu porridge". And then to the fourth and fifth season of Mengniu Telunsu diary drink, zuoyebang (a homework helper app) and other strong sponsorship, the program suddenly implanted advertising to make the program image greatly reduced. The dazzling advertisements make the audience ask: Is this still the "desired" life? Under the banner of slow-paced variety show, the idea is to make quick money, which will certainly make the show's reputation decline. The program team should take the attitude of content first, plan the ads reasonably, and do their best to reduce the negative impact of the ads on the program.

In addition, the "Back to Field" to create a slow-paced variety show, that means the program's dramatic conflict and eye-catching plot than the fast variety show is lacking a lot, so it is easy to cause audience aesthetic fatigue, so that the audience feel that the program lacks novelty phenomenon. Therefore, slow-paced variety shows should remember their original intention, more from the emotional point of view to find the audience resonance, to create a good self-sufficient peach country life atmosphere. At the same time, it is also necessary to push the envelope and innovate the program format to enhance the fun of the program.

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