The Construction of Celebrity Persona in Variety Shows from the Perspective of Nonverbal Communication: A Case Study of Back to Field

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Abstract. Nonverbal symbols are widely used in various social contexts in daily life. In the context of variety shows, nonverbal symbols play a role in constructing celebrity personas and driving plot development. In an era dominated by short videos, the use of nonverbal symbols by some content creators has become more evident for segmented communication. Due to the inherent authenticity of nonverbal symbols, inconsistencies in their use within variety shows can lead to "persona collapse." This paper analyzes the role of nonverbal symbols in constructing celebrity personas within variety shows through case studies. Furthermore, it explores how the public's trust in information is influenced by various factors amid the widespread dissemination of information on short video platforms. The findings offer insights for the planning and performance of variety shows and the analysis of public opinion on the internet.

Keywords: nonverbal symbols, construction of celebrity persona, nonverbal communication

1. Introduction

As television and other information media have become part of everyday life, entertainment options have evolved with each technological advancement, heralding a new era. In recent years, Chinese variety shows have transitioned from imitating successful foreign programs to developing innovative formats. In response to the localized needs of different age groups, local television stations have produced a wide range of variety shows, including cultural and entertainment programs, interviews, and more, contributing to the rapid and diverse development of Chinese variety shows. A recent incident, referred to as the "Huang Lei String Bean" controversy, prompted reflection on the role of nonverbal symbols in variety shows. Currently, academic research on the role of nonverbal symbols in variety shows remains underdeveloped. The popularity of nonverbal cues such as micro-expressions on short video platforms has brought new dynamics to this research. Nonverbal symbols are prevalent in variety shows and have a significant impact on the dissemination and reception of the program. Therefore, studying the role of nonverbal symbols is valuable for understanding content design, atmosphere creation, and program positioning.

Existing research on nonverbal symbols focuses primarily on their lubricating role in interpersonal communication within interview programs. As public media dissemination evolves and creative voices diversify, small details in variety shows—once overlooked—are now increasingly scrutinized by the public. The pursuit of online traffic has led to a surge of new ideas, with commentary on older incidents proliferating across social media. Whether in the recent hit Goodbye My Love or the traditional variety show Back to Field, the public's attention to micro-expressions and other nonverbal cues has grown significantly. Previous research highlights the authenticity of nonverbal symbols, which reflects subconscious perceptions of events or individuals, shaping character traits and storylines within variety shows. This is particularly evident in reality and lifestyle-oriented variety shows. However, the recent "Huang Lei String Bean" incident illustrates how the inconsistency of nonverbal cues—revealed through host He Jiong's micro-expressions while tasting Huang Lei's cooking—challenged Huang Lei's persona as a "master chef." This paper further analyzes how the authenticity of nonverbal symbols influences the construction and collapse of celebrity personas during public opinion controversies.

2. Symbolic Representation: Nonverbal Symbols and the Assignment of Specific Labels to Individuals

Nonverbal symbols play an irreplaceable role in human communication, especially in conveying information and expressing emotions. They complement verbal language to complete the communication process and achieve the ultimate goal of interaction. The study of nonverbal symbols has attracted considerable attention [1]. Samovar once stated: "Most research experts believe that in face-to-face communication, only about 35% of social content is conveyed through verbal behavior, while the rest is communicated through nonverbal behavior." According to Baidu Encyclopedia, nonverbal symbols are defined as: a symbolic system that does not rely on artificially created natural language but uses other visual, auditory, or sensory symbols as information carriers. While verbal language is the most important symbolic system for humans, nonverbal symbols also play an indispensable role in daily communication activities.

American scholar Ray Birdwhistell estimated that in interpersonal communication, 75% of social meaning is conveyed through nonverbal symbols. Specialist in nonverbal communication Albert Mehrabian also proposed a formula illustrating the significance of nonverbal symbols [2]. In China, nonverbal symbols play an even more important role within context. Phrases such as mei lai yan qu (exchanging meaningful glances) and an song qiu bo (secretly flirting with one's eyes) have long been used to describe how people express their thoughts and complete communication through nonverbal means. Additionally, certain Chinese interjections and tone particles like "嗯" (en), "哇哦" (wao), and "啧啧" (zeze), when accompanied by facial expressions, affirm or deny statements and enhance emotional expression. In variety shows, the coordination of elements like space and costumes helps enhance tone or emphasize opposition in specific contexts.

The term "persona" refers to the crafted image of an individual, originally used in novels, films, and animations to define a character's background, appearance, personality, attire, and style [3]. In variety shows, personas are symbolically presented to the public through celebrity performances. Writers and media producers shape personas such as "master chef," "master strategist," or "little cheetah" based on guest performances. These personas help audiences immerse themselves in the program's setting, facilitating the spread and promotion of the show's brand identity.

Back to Field is a lifestyle reality show co-produced by Hunan TV and Zhejiang Hesong Media, starring celebrities such as He Jiong, Huang Lei, and Henry Lau. The show depicts the protagonists embracing rural simplicity, showcasing a self-sufficient and warm community-oriented life, promoting ideals of "self-reliance, self-sufficiency, hospitality, and harmony with nature." Upon its debut, the show sparked widespread discussion and attention. This type of "slow variety" show targets urban youth experiencing high work pressure, presenting the daily lives of the guests in a reality format, set in a rural environment, and filmed without scripts. In this setting, guests are randomly assigned tasks for each episode. In the current digital era, numerous video clips scrutinizing Huang Lei's persona as a "master chef" have circulated online. This reflects the increasing public attention to nonverbal symbols. As fragmented communication becomes more prevalent, a single glance or expression can spark widespread speculation and debate among netizens.

2.1. Grabbing Attention: The Skillful Use of Vocal Elements in Persona Construction

The concept of paralanguage related to sound was first defined by the American linguist G.L. Trager. In 1958, he stated that paralanguage phenomena do not belong to the linguistic system and cannot be classified within the phonemic system. In 1974, British linguist David Crystal noted that while pitch, stress, and "tempo" are phonemic elements, features such as extremely high pitch, pronounced loudness, extended duration, and other suprasegmental effects should be classified as paralanguage. In 1964, N.N. Markel asserted that a person's voice quality can reflect their physical and behavioral traits [4]. In 1966, P.H. Puttasik and E.K. Sandell noted that vocal characteristics can help determine the speaker's age. However, these vocal features differ from phonemes, making strict classification difficult and a precise definition even harder to achieve. In addition to speech, a person's gestures also play a role. From a broad perspective, gestures are considered non-vocal paralanguage. In 1959, American anthropologist E.T. Hall observed common phenomena such as a listener looking at the speaker's face, especially their eyes, as a sign of attentiveness. To show they are engaged, listeners might nod gently or say "hmm."

On platforms like Douyin (Chinese TikTok), clips from the Back to Field variety show have gone viral due to the "Huang Lei String Bean" controversy. In these clips, the most direct way to convey the deliciousness of Huang Lei's cooking is through He Jiong's series of paralinguistic expressions, such as interjections and vocal cues. Compared to the praise from other guests, He Jiong's distinguishing feature is his use of exclamations like "嗯" (en), "哇" (wa), and "哇哦" (wao) after tasting the food. These paralinguistic elements immerse the audience in the scene, evoking memories of savoring delicious food and recalling similar reactions from people in everyday life. This relatability makes it easier to believe in the exceptional quality of Huang Lei's cooking. In these variety show segments, He Jiong's voice becomes a focal point for audience commentary on Huang Lei's food. While others are silently eating, a sudden "哇哦" (wao) from He Jiong effectively sets the tone and transitions the scene from merely tasting food to discussing its qualities. He Jiong skillfully plays the role of the program's host, seamlessly blending with Huang Lei's culinary persona to create a signature feature of Back to Field.

2.2. Gleaning Insights from Subtle Cues: The Impact of Micro-Expressions on Persona Construction

In linguistic literature, paralanguage can be categorized into narrow and broad definitions. The narrow definition refers to suprasegmental features like intonation, stress, and sudden vocal characteristics such as laughter, crying, or secondary articulation. These features can indicate the speaker's attitude, social status, and other contextual meanings. The broad definition of paralanguage includes not only the narrow features but also non-vocal cues such as facial expressions, eye contact, body posture, gestures, and the physical distance between speakers during conversations. Modern studies of paralanguage typically adopt the broad definition, where micro-expressions have become key research subjects and supporting evidence [5].

Micro-expressions are subconscious movements that carry a certain degree of authenticity and immediacy. However, because they do not overtly or explicitly convey an individual's attitude, netizens frequently analyze micro-expressions seen online, extrapolating subjective interpretations. In the Huang Lei String Bean controversy, this type of analysis led to He Jiong being tagged as the "Evil Gardenia." In the second episode of the first season of Back to Field, He Jiong and Huang Lei had a disagreement while setting up a rain shelter. When He Jiong finally compromised, his "smile that looked worse than crying" was captured, screenshotted, and circulated by netizens, laying the groundwork for Huang Lei's persona collapse. This moment was humorously dubbed by netizens as a "trap set by He Jiong."

Micro-expressions are influencing persona construction in variety shows in new ways. Short video formats, popular today, often present fragmented content. Netizens enjoy deducing storylines from these decontextualized snippets. In the case of Back to Field, discussions among netizens far exceeded the show's viewership on its original broadcasting platforms. Many netizens share their interpretations of variety show clips based on their own reasoning, leading to a distortion or even "demonization" of the original personas. The participation of influential online personalities (key opinion leaders) amplifies these tendencies, increasing the discussion and engagement around such topics.

A search for "Evil Gardenia" on Bilibili returns videos with view counts ranging from hundreds of thousands to millions. One video titled "Huang Lei's Eight Great Dishes" has a staggering 14.004 million views. These video creators often analyze the facial expressions, gestures, and vocal cues of celebrities like Huang Lei, He Jiong, and Song Dandan. In ten-minute video clips, they provide "frame-by-frame analysis" of events, presenting their conclusions in a manner that appears logical and aligns with public expectations. This format generates high engagement, transforming otherwise subtle micro-expressions into definitive proof supporting the public's theories.

2.3. Tailor-Made: The Role of Audiovisual Language in Persona Construction

Audiovisual language, a fundamental narrative technique in films, television dramas, and similar programs, refers to the strategic arrangement of audiovisual stimuli to convey information to the audience in a sensory manner. It includes elements such as imagery, sound, and editing. In Back to Field, a pastoral-themed program, the main activities of the hosts and guests revolve around gathering ingredients, exchanging food, and cooking meals together. In the first episode of the first season, Huang Lei plays the role of the program's head chef. During the cooking segment, from the 18th to the 28th minute, the camera focuses predominantly on Huang Lei frying sunflower seeds in front of the stove. Guest appearances, such as those of Song Dandan, serve as mere background elements in these shots. This shooting technique and the duration of the scene emphasize Huang Lei's persona as "Chef Huang" (Huang Xiaochu), establishing his dominance and solidifying his identity as the central figure in the program. Additionally, costuming, as an essential part of audiovisual language within nonverbal symbols, plays a significant role in shaping Huang Lei's persona as "Chef Huang." Back to Field features numerous guests who frequently appear in the kitchen, the primary shooting location. However, Huang Lei's consistent use of an apron serves as a unique chef symbol, enabling the audience to instantly identify his role as the chef whenever the camera captures a kitchen scene.

3. Conclusion

The construction of celebrity personas is a critical factor in helping variety shows stand out among numerous productions. Since the inception of reality TV programs, persona construction has been an unavoidable topic. Celebrities with distinctive and relatable personas can quickly bridge the gap with audiences, helping the show achieve mainstream popularity. However, with the rise of social media platforms, the public now enjoys greater freedom to voice opinions about variety shows. Unrealistic and exaggerated personas can backfire, negatively impacting the show's reception.

The frequent appearance of nonverbal symbols in the public eye demonstrates that audiences are increasingly reflecting on the source, content, and guidance of the information they receive. At the same time, this trend highlights the need for greater control and intervention in handling the micro-expressions, language, and other nonverbal symbols displayed by celebrity guests in variety shows. In an era dominated by short videos, even a single gesture or smile can trigger widespread online discussion. Without proper intervention and authoritative explanations, these discussions can lead to uncontrollable public opinion during the secondary wave of attention generated by a show.

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