

Social Media Users' Response to the Chinese Spring Festival Gala

– A Case Study of 2024 Dragon Year's Spring Festival Gala in Weibo

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Abstract: As getting into Web 2.0, social media as a way of constant interaction is popularizing, with users discussing events that are related to their lives on social media. Spring Festival Gala (SFG), as an annual event on the last day of the lunar Chinese year, is of significant meaning. This paper uses content analysis, choosing the case of 2024 Dragon Year's Spring Festival Gala, analyzing netizen's responses and evaluations on Weibo, to discuss how netizens respond to this year's Spring Festival Gala. This study is helpful in exploring the audience's acceptance of the SFG through social media, as well as the causes of different responses, to make suggestions and provide considerations for improving the SFG in the future. Stuart Hall's theory is used as the framework to classify the responses from netizens, which are dominant reading, negotiated reading, and resistive reading. As a result, this paper argues that the dominant reading demonstrates the identification of cultural confidence, Silk Road diplomacy. Negotiated reading demonstrates a kind of stress for the present and uncertainty for the future.

Keywords: Participatory culture, Web 2.0, Social media, Spring Festival Gala, Stuart Hall.

1. Introduction

Spring Festival Gala (SFG), as an annual event on the last day of the lunar Chinese year, is of significant meaning. As a national gala, it arouses the attention of the whole country, thus, the relative discussion and evaluation can be seen frequently online. For this year's SFG, there are many reports from official news institution, from its convergence of tradition and innovation to its quantity and scale of live broadcasting and rebroadcasting on media platforms [1-2]. It attracts the attention of the whole country. At the same time, with the development of Web 2.0, online communities and user-generated-content popularized rapidly. Weibo, that is, microblog, has become the most influential online community in China. Information spreading and public opinion mobilizing are getting rapid growth with the emergence and popularization of Weibo [3]. This paper uses content analysis, choosing the example of 2024 Dragon Year's Spring Festival Gala, and analyzing netizens' responses and evaluations on Weibo, to discuss how netizens respond to this year's SFG. This study is helpful in exploring the audience's acceptance of the SFG through social media, as well as the causes of

different responses, to make suggestions and provide considerations for improving the SFG in the future.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Media, Participatory Culture, and Web 2.0

Social media, a new media form that appears as applications or websites, establishes an online community for information sharing [4]. It provides opportunities for people who want to express thoughts online with fewer qualifications [5]. Scholars have sufficient research on social media, which can be classified into three categories. Some scholars researched social media use in the political context. For politicians, Ott analyzes the logic of Twitter, indicating that Trump achieved success and support by following the characters of Twitter, which are, simplicity, impulsivity and incivility [6]. For the public, Park and Kaye claim that social media user can improve their knowledge of political issues through reaching political news [7]. Some scholars focus on the cultural use of social media. Bond and Miller explain how LGBTQ individuals use YouTube to make connections [8]. Imoka analyzes the context of Nigeria, indicating that Nigerian youth use social media to disseminate popular urban youth culture [9]. Some scholars analyze the psychology of users. Social media users are socially sorted, which inspires an identification that makes them sensitive to various content and conflicts [10]. These researches demonstrate the existing fields of social media research.

For Chinese social media, its development is a reflection of social transformation, the third industrial revolution, which triggers a second modernization of society [11]. This modernization can occur as so-called ‘hashtag activism’ on Weibo, and also occur as ‘media convergence’, which refers to official mainstream media converging with social media, as well as ‘Authoritarian Participatory Persuasion’ [12-14]. However, most researches mainly focus on political phenomena, this essay will choose a cultural context, analyzing users’ responses after a significant national cultural event.

Participatory culture, which is defined by Jenkins, is a term that integrates media consumers and producers, who are both regarded as interactive participants [15]. Through this culture which is featured by civic engagement, users are encouraged to create their own content, sharing online, feeling social connections [16]. The development of participatory culture related to Web 2.0. O’Reilly indicates that Web 2.0 spans all connected devices, as a network, working as a platform [17]. Compared with Web 1.0, the read-only web, Web 2.0, as the read-wright web, involves interaction between active users and content producers [18]. Consequently, the boundaries of media producers and users are blurred.

2.2. Spring Festival Galas

Spring Festival Gala is an annual event that is played by China Central Television (CCTV) every Chinese New Year’s Eve which is called ‘chuxi’. As an important event in Chinese cultural context which is also beyond merely cultural meaning, scholars have sufficient research on this topic. Wang analyzes the ideological elements in SFG, claiming how the ideology is propagated through SFG [19]. Feng uses a social semiotic framework to analyze how moral messages and values are constructed through discursive strategies [20]. Yuan researches the SFG in the past 21 years, analyzing the ritual communication of SFG, as well as the shaping process of the role ‘rural migrant’ [21]. From the literature above, it can be seen that existing literature mainly focus on how SFG influence the public, regarding SFG as the subject, analyzing in a traditional media context. However, this essay regards users as ‘active users’, and mainly focuses on users in Weibo, analyzing how users respond and evaluate SFG.

2.3. Encoding, Decoding, and Stuart Hall

Encoding and Decoding theory is an important output of Stuart Hall. In his claim, ‘encoding’ means producers transforming meanings into media discourse, and ‘decoding’ means audiences interpret the meanings that are encoded [22]. While media texts are encoded by producers with dominant ideological meaning, the audience might not decode them in the ways that producers intended [23]. Stuart Hall claims that when interpreting media texts, the audience will take a position from one of the three positions: (1) dominant position, which refers to the audience interpreting media text consisting with the meaning encoded; (2) negotiated position, which means the audience accept the overall meaning that is encoded in the text, while rejecting with specifics; (3) resistive position, which refers to the encoded meaning is identified while rejected by audience [24]. This essay will use these three different positions to classify the responses that got from Weibo users.

3. Methodology

This research uses content analysis, typing keywords #春晚# #2024 龙年春晚# #2024 春晚# #2024 央视春晚# #春晚大赏# on Sina Weibo, gaining relevant 463 posts. After eliminating posts that are not comments or interpretations on SFG and posts from actors on SFG and official accounts that are less objective and representative, there are 121 posts that met the criteria for content analysis.

This research classified audience’s response into three categories according to Stuart Hall’s theory: dominant, negotiated, and resistive. Posts that admire or express emotions of pride and happiness can be classified as dominant reading. Posts that admire the most but point out some drawbacks or express disappointment can be classified into negotiated reading. Posts that merely express dissatisfaction or clearly show opposition or aversion to the ideas and views the show conveys can be classified as resistive reading.

This research also classified the show into Song & Dance Shows (songs, dances, acrobatics) and Verbal Shows (magics, cross talk, sitcoms, or ‘xiaopin’) to explore whether the proclivity of interpretation position is related to different shows. However, some comments are not for specific shows, so they will be classified as ‘overall’.

4. Results

For the remaining 121 posts, this research picks the keyword of each attitude and comments from netizens, counting the frequency of each attitude (see Table 1).

Table 1: Keywords of Attitudes and Frequency

Show	Attitudes	Frequency
Song & Dance Shows	“good special effects”	7
	“touching”	12
	“disappointing but looking forward”	1
	“innovative”	3
	“local special”	8
	“not innovative”	3
	“waste of actors”	4
Verbal Shows	“embarrassed” “poor content”	14
	“resonate” “comfortable”	6
	“topic is good”	3
	“in a mess”	7

Table 1: (continued).

	“waste of actors”	4
Overall gala	“enjoyable” “gathering”	7
	“progressive”	4
	“songs and dances are good, verbal shows should be cut off”	8
	“presenting traditional culture” “showing cultural confidence”	4
	“knowledge required”	1
	“deliberately sensationalise	2
	“disorder” “boring” “perfunctory”	11
	“retrogressing years by years”	5
	“focusing on common people”	1
	“a sense of ritual”	1

Attitudes from netizens are above. For Song & Dance shows, this research classifies “good special effects”, “touching”, “innovative”, and “local special” into dominant reading, as these views show that audiences are accepting the meaning that is encoded. “Disappointing but looking forward” can be classified into negotiated reading, and “not innovative” “waste of actors” are classified into resistive reading as they show rejection to the meaning encoded. The encoding results are as Table 2.

Table 2: Position for Song & Dance Show

Show	Position	Frequency
Song & Dance Show	Dominant reading	30
	Negotiated reading	1
	Resistive reading	7

For verbal shows, “resonate” “comfortable” “topic is good” are classified into dominant reading. While there are no attitudes negotiated, “embarrassed” “poor content” “in a mess” “waste of actors” are classified into resistive reading. The encoding result are as Table 3.

Table 3: Position for Verbal Show

Show	Position	Frequency
Verbal Show	Dominant reading	9
	Resistive reading	25

For attitudes about the overall gala, “enjoyable” “gathering” “progressive” “presenting traditional culture” “showing cultural confidence” “focusing on common people” “a sense of ritual” are classified into dominant reading. “Songs and dances are good, verbal shows should be cut off” “knowledge required” are classified into negotiated reading. “Deliberately sensationalized” “disorder” “boring” “perfunctory” “retrogressing years by years” are classified into resistive reading. The encoding results are as Table 4.

Table 4: Position for Overall Gala

Show	Position	Frequency
Overall gala	Dominant reading	17
	Negotiated reading	9
	Resistive reading	18

In conclusion, the whole encoding result can be gathered in a table (see Table 5), as well as the account.

Table 5: Frequency and Accounts for Position of Decoding

Show	Position	Frequency	Account
Song & Dance Show	Dominant reading	30	79%
	Negotiated reading	1	3%
	Resistive reading	7	18%
Verbal Show	Dominant reading	9	26%
	Resistive reading	25	74%
Overall gala	Dominant reading	17	39%
	Negotiated reading	9	20%
	Resistive reading	18	41%

From Table 5, dominant reading takes the most position when Weibo users responding to Song & Dance Show (79%), followed by resistive reading (18%). When responding to Verbal Show, resistive reading takes the most position (74%). For posts that evaluate and respond to the whole SFG, resistive reading still takes the most position (41%), more than dominant reading (39%) and negotiated reading (20%).

5. Discussions

5.1. Dominant Position: Ideological Identification

According to the response from netizens, their admiration focuses on songs and dances. This year's SFG has two characteristics on Song & Dance Shows: traditional dance and performance of SFG sub-venue.

Chinese traditional dance is one of the symbols of Chinese traditional culture, also as a necessary element in every year's SFG. This encouragement of traditional culture demonstrates an official attitude to inherit and carry forward traditional culture. Wang and Wang have researched Chinese cultural traditions education in Mainland China, claiming that nationalism advocated in relative cultural policies is interpreted in an entertaining way in primary school education [25]. However, China has been claiming its cultural policy as improving cultural confidence. In this year's international cultural industries forum, establishing and maintaining cultural confidence was emphasized, as well as promoting traditional Chinese culture, to integrate it into modern life production [26]. From the result of this research, Weibo users mostly accept and admire the traditional culture disseminated on SFG, demonstrating a success on country's cultural policy.

The performance of SFG sub-venue also places the traditional culture as the center. This year, three cities have been chosen to become SFG sub-venue: Xi'an, Kashgar, and Changsha. The reason for the admiration of Xi'an venue is also about traditional Tang culture, however, what should be emphasized is Kashgar venue. Kashgar is a city located in northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur

Autonomous Region, and the performance on Kashgar venue is a dance of Uyghur ethnicity. On the one hand, Kashgar is an important city on the Silk Road. China has taken Silk Road diplomacy as a vehicle with nationalist and geopolitical ambitions [27]. It aims to connect countries along the ancient Silk Road for economic and cultural exchanges and cooperation, to form a community of interests. However, the implementation of this diplomacy has also encountered challenges such as political instability, economic problems, cultural and religious conflicts, which hindered the confidence of Silk Road diplomacy by international communities [28]. During the performance, the history and cultures of Kashgar and Xinjiang are demonstrated, emphasizing its role as the cultural center since the ancient Silk Road flourishing [29]. This affirms the effectiveness of Silk Road, refuting those voices of doubting, and instilling confidence in countries along the Silk Road.

5.2. Negotiated Position: Stressful for the Present, Uncertainty for the Future

Negotiated position demonstrates users admire some shows or some parts of the show, but dislike some others. This attitude reflects a stressful and uncertain psychology in netizens. In 1983 CCTV SFG, an optimistic outlook was illustrated as the country had just overcome various troubles, aspiring for a 'new era' [30-31]. Compared with those who hold resistive positions, regarding shows as 'boring' and 'perfunctory', people can realize and accept some meanings that are encoded while rejecting some they disagree with.

5.3. Resistive Position: How to Meet Audience's Needs

Resistive position refers to as audience decoding the information that the propagator does not intend to. Through the collection of Weibo users' feedback, the resistive position is mainly reflected in the senses of 'boring' and 'embarrassment'. The main reason for this sentiment is the mismatch between the content of the communication and the needs of the audience. With the development of the social economy, the social problems that people face and the resulting social mentality have changed. The increase in living costs leads to an increase in living pressure, with fierce competition for studying and employment.

From the aspect of verbal expression, people's dissatisfaction with it mainly focuses on the lack of humor innovation. The performances of verbal shows like xiaopin, and crosstalk, are expected to reflect a topic through their humorous verbal expression. However, in recent years, the humor of verbal shows in the SFG has gradually declined. A post on Weibo claims "In the past, those stalks appeared on SFG would get popular in society; nowadays, those stalks popular in society will appear in SFG." These satirical words reflect audiences' disappointment with the declining humor of verbal shows in SFG. This leads to people taking a resistive position for SFG.

6. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the response of SFG from netizens on Weibo platform. Through content analysis and Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory, users' responses are classified into dominant reading, negotiated reading, and resistive reading. For dominant reading, it demonstrates the identification of cultural confidence and Silk Road diplomacy. For negotiated reading, it demonstrates a stressful for the present, and uncertainty for the future. for resistive reading, it demonstrates a mismatch between the content of SFG and people's needs. For future suggestions, SFG should focus on people's needs and improve its enjoyment. The scope of this research is limited as this paper only chose Weibo and this year's SFG as an example. For horizontal, there are various different social media platforms that can be researched. For vertical, the response of different years can also be researched as a comparison.

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