

Cultural Adaptation and Innovation in Chinese Variety Shows: A Case Study of “Running Man” and “Keep Running”

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Abstract. With the advancement of globalization and the deepening of cultural exchange, the South Korean entertainment industry has achieved tremendous success globally with its unique charm and creativity, especially excelling in the field of variety shows. Simultaneously, Chinese variety shows have experienced rapid growth, solidifying their position as an essential part of mass entertainment. Against this backdrop, this paper conducts an in-depth comparison and analysis of the Chinese variety show “Keep Running” and South Korea’s “Running Man.” The study primarily focuses on the imitation and localized innovation of “Keep Running,” exploring how to adapt and innovate culturally while maintaining the essence of the original program. Furthermore, the paper delves into the roles of culture and audience psychology in the success of these two shows, emphasizing the importance of continuous innovation and high-quality development. Through this comparative analysis, this paper aims to reveal the challenges and opportunities inherent in cross-cultural variety shows in the context of globalization.

Keywords: Localization; Innovative Imitation; Cultural adaptation; Audience psychology.

1. Introduction

With the advancement of globalization and the deepening of cultural exchange, the South Korean entertainment industry has achieved tremendous global success, thanks to its unique charm and creativity. Simultaneously, Chinese variety shows have also rapidly risen to become an integral part of popular entertainment [1]. In contemporary society, variety shows have become a vital component of mass entertainment. With the acceleration of globalization, numerous foreign variety show formats have been introduced to China, undergoing a process of imitation, absorption, and eventual localization [2]. South Korea’s “Running Man” as a representative variety show in the Asian region, has not only achieved immense success in its home country but has also left a widespread impact in other countries and regions. Against this background, China’s “Keep Running” was born.

However, what distinguishes imitated variety shows that achieve explosive popularity in a short time from those that become fleeting choice? How does localized innovation enable variety shows to take root in foreign cultures and gain long-lasting affection from audiences? This paper takes “Running Man” and “Keep Running” as examples, exploring the imitation and localized innovation of variety shows from the perspective of cultural transmission, aiming to reveal the communication principles and audience psychology behind their success.

2. The Variety Show of “Running Man”

“Running Man,” first aired in 2010 on South Korea’s SBS TV station, is a South Korean urban action reality show [3]. It integrates various variety show elements, including competitions, challenges, and guest interactions [3]. In the early stages of the show, the production team made a lot of attempts and explorations to discover the program format and content that best aligned with the audience’s tastes and expectations. During this phase, the show underwent multiple adjustments in content and format, such as modifications to game rules and changes in program themes. These changes were implemented to enhance audience engagement and improve the show’s ratings.

Through continuous attempts and optimizations, the show gradually found a stable and popular program format, progressively solidifying its unique style and form. In this mature phase, the themes, formats, and content of the program grew richer and more diverse, thus attracting a broader audience group. For instance, the “Running Man Name Tag Ripping Battle” became a signature segment of the show, deeply cherished by the audience [3].

Running Man has explored a wide array of themes, showcasing creativity, ranging from simple hide-and-seek scenarios to complex urban chases. Each episode’s theme kept the audience in eager anticipation of what would come next. Through entertaining games, close interactions with celebrity guests, and continuously innovative theme designs, the show has gained remarkable popularity and influence not only in its home country, South Korea but also in various other countries and regions across Asia, including China, Japan, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia, where it became a cultural phenomenon.

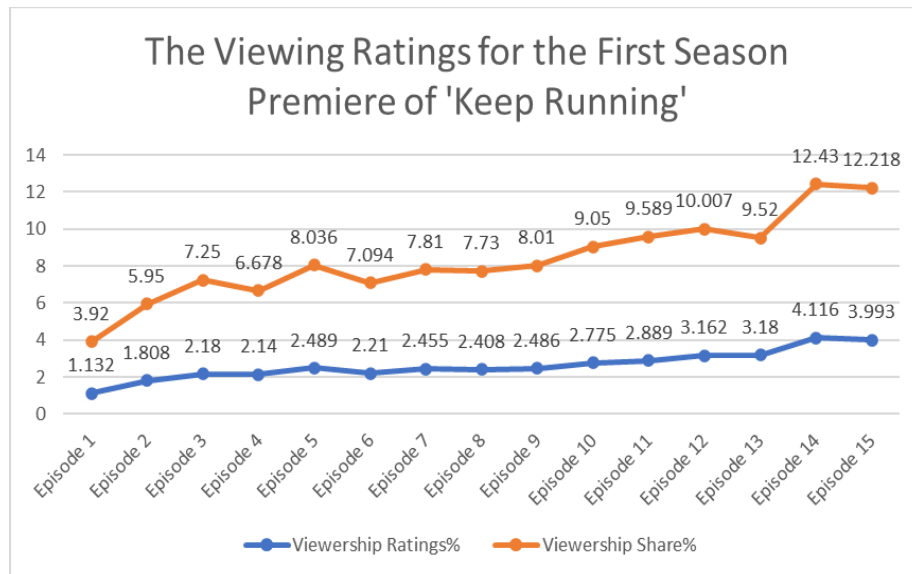
Furthermore, the program has received numerous domestic and international awards and honors. These accolades include the Best Program Award and the Highest Online Popularity Program Award at the South Korea SBS Entertainment Awards, as well as the Variety Award at the 2014 DramaFever Awards, further affirming its global influence and success [4].

3. The Inception of “Keep Running” and Its Localized Innovation

With “Running Man” achieving massive success in Asia, especially in China, discussions and introductions regarding its format became a prominent topic among Chinese media and producers. Such a cultural and media atmosphere gave birth to “Keep Running” – A Chinese version of “Running Man.” The show made its debut in 2014, a collaborative effort between Zhejiang Satellite TV and South Korea’s SBS. While the program boasts distinct localized characteristics, particularly in aspects like game backgrounds, its core mechanism still draws inspiration from “Running Man.” This influence is evident in elements like player configurations and task designs [5]. In terms of its overall program structure, “Keep Running” largely follows the basic framework of “Running Man” [5]. This includes a set of regular members complemented by occasional celebrity guests, as well as a mode of completing a series of competitive and puzzle-solving tasks in groups [6,7]. The game formats, including tag battles, chases, and various challenges, also bear a resemblance to the spirit of “Running Man.”

“Keep Running” borrowed the successful model of “Running Man” and quickly secured a place within the Chinese variety show market, attracting a large audience. This imitation strategy has not only earned the program initial brand recognition but also cultivated a dedicated viewer base, which is especially precious in the highly competitive variety show landscape [8,9]. Since its premiere, the show has enjoyed unparalleled popularity and influence, consistently securing its leading viewer ratings (as shown in Table 1) and amassing substantial playback counts on online platforms. Consequently, it has firmly established itself as a landmark variety show in mainland China [3].

Table 1. The Viewing Ratings for the First Season Premiere of ‘Keep Running’



However, while imitation has brought rapid success, it has also planted the hidden danger of audience aesthetic fatigue. To continuously attract audiences, the show keeps innovating with localization, coming closer to the cultural backgrounds and tastes of Chinese audiences. Within the theoretical framework of cultural transmission, localization is a key concept, involving the integration of foreign cultural elements with local culture to meet the needs of local society and cultural environment [10]. Localization is not merely a simple translation or replacement of certain elements; it is more of a profound cultural adaptation and innovation, enabling foreign cultures to take root and sprout in the local culture.

For instance, there was an episode centered around the traditional Chinese Zodiac. In this special edition, the program designed a series of games and challenges brimming with Chinese characteristics. This not only enhanced the appeal of the show but also cleverly integrated the games into an intriguing story infused with suspense and conflict. This kept the audience utterly engrossed, with the plot intensifying in tension and excitement [4]. In this episode, the participants needed to complete the game through deduction, and in the process of deduction, the suspense continuously escalated. This displayed the high production standards and profound creative foundation of the production team, presenting an extremely creative and innovative side in terms of program design and content.

The program also pays special attention to the integration of public welfare elements. Audiences often see that the program team visit schools to play games with teachers and students and use “running shoes” as a part of a charitable project to help more children. “Keep Running” not only added a charitable running shoe project, focusing on children in impoverished mountainous areas, but also raised funds for people in need through the games completed by guests and hosts, bringing warmth to them. The program gradually increased the proportion of public welfare projects, attracting more people to pay attention to and join in public welfare through the emphasis of the program, thereby strengthening the power of charity [2].

This incorporation of charitable elements is not only one of the local innovations of “Running Man” in China but also makes the audience realize that the charitable elements in TV programs can also convey love. The mutual and harmonious spirit exhibited among the members of the show, such as “We are ‘Famulei,’” also let the audience feel warmth among the laugh points. Whenever difficulties are encountered during the games, there are always mutual supports among the members. This spirit of working together cooperatively has been recognized by a broad audience. This innovative model, blending culture, charity, and entertainment, enables “Keep Running” to stand out quickly among similar variety shows, becoming a program with depth and extensive influence [11].

“Keep Running” has also received extensive international attention and even gave a speech at the United Nations. This is not only a high recognition of the quality and influence of the program itself but also indicates that localized successful cultural products are having increasingly high international influence. In the context of rapid globalization, such a success story provides valuable insights for cultural export: that is, while maintaining global resonance, localized innovation can endow products with deeper cultural connotations and broader social impact.

4. The Limitations of Imitation from the Perspective of Communication Studies

In communication studies, audience psychology is a core subject of study, profoundly affecting the acceptability and influence of media content [12]. Audiences have their unique cultural and psychological presuppositions about content, which impact their evaluations and acceptance of media content. Therefore, merely imitating foreign program formats can hardly satisfy the diverse needs of audiences with different cultural backgrounds.

While single imitation may attract audience interest in the short term, this is often due to the audience’s curiosity about novelty or identification with the original work, rather than a genuine fondness for the localized version. Once the novelty effect disappears, if the program cannot offer content that aligns with the audience’s cultural and psychological needs, it would struggle to maintain long-term attention and popularity [13]. From the perspective of communication studies, mere imitation lacks depth and lasting power, unable to generate a potent social and cultural impact.

In contrast to imitation, localization is a higher level of cultural adaptation and innovation [14]. It not only meets the audience’s demand for fresh and diverse content but also endows the program with profound cultural connotations and social values. This kind of profound cultural adaptation is more likely to earn the audience’s recognition and emotional investment, thus forming lasting and far-reaching impacts. For instance, in “Keep Running,” by incorporating Chinese cultural elements and relevant social topics, the program has successfully resonated with Chinese audiences on both emotional and cultural levels.

From the perspective of communication studies, while imitation may be a way for media content to gain initial attention, its limitations are also obvious. Those programs and contents that can successfully innovate through localization are the real winners of audiences’ hearts and capable of forming long-lasting impacts.

5. Summary

The evolution of entertainment variety shows has experienced three crucial stages: media addition and diversification, media integration and experientiality, and media co-creation and industry value enhancement [15]. Taking Running Man and “Running Man China” as examples, the latter has drawn the essence from the former, eliminating its non-mainstream content while performing deep innovations to better align with the characteristics of the Chinese market. This transformation is not just an innovation in variety shows but also a perfect combination with traditional Chinese cultural resources.

However, this combination has also encountered challenges. For instance, the diverse values of Chinese cultural content have not been fully displayed, and their profound connotations have not been fully understood and embodied. Faced with the influx of Korean Wave culture, the Chinese entertainment industry should maintain steadfast cultural confidence and strive to transition toward innovation. This involves a deep understanding of the domestic market, meeting audience expectations, and accurately grasping their acceptance psychology, behavior, and the interactive communication effects of variety shows.

At the same time, the Chinese entertainment industry also needs to improve quality from a supply chain perspective, strengthen the influence of local variety show brands, thereby enhancing their

international impact, dissemination, and commercial value. This will further strengthen China's cultural soft power.

In conclusion, the future development of China's entertainment variety shows needs not only continuous innovation but also a pursuit of high-quality development. While seeking development, it is also essential to pay attention to the integration and inheritance of excellent traditional Chinese culture, ensuring to find the optimal balance between entertainment and cultural heritage.

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