

An Exploration of Emotional Narrative Strategies in Rural Life Slow Variety Shows: Taking the Show "Let Us Farm" as an Example

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Abstract: The labor documentary reality show "Let Us Farm" focuses on the theme of "young people going to the countryside to farm," showcasing the new developments in rural areas in the new era from various aspects of life and work. It serves as an excellent model for telling Chinese rural stories and opens up new possibilities for the slow variety show market, which has been experiencing aesthetic fatigue. This paper takes this show as an example to explore innovative approaches in emotional narrative for rural life slow variety shows: balancing idealism and realistic logic; awakening and anchoring the collective emotions of the public based on national conditions; the combined role of media and landscape in emotional transmission; and selecting guests who reflect the audience's true inner feelings.

Keywords: Slow variety show; Emotional narrative; Let Us Farm

DOI: 10.62639/sspjiss21.20250202

In contrast to traditional fast-paced, competition-based variety shows, slow variety shows have gradually gained significant traction in the market. Slow variety shows abandon fast pacing and competitiveness, creating a relaxed and natural viewing experience through casual plot settings and soothing content. With the continuous development of science, technology, and the economy, the fast-paced urban lifestyle and the overwhelming influx of fragmented information have become major sources of stress for audiences. The emergence of rural life slow variety shows, which focus on rural settings, not only provides audiences with a "Utopian" space that exists in the real world but also offers a "spiritual Utopia" that heals, resonates, and provides emotional value.

"Let Us Farm," launched by iQiyi in 2023, is a labor documentary reality show that invites ten young people to form a "farming team." The show records their 190-day journey on a 142-acre farm, where they plant, irrigate, fertilize, harvest, manage the farm, and even sell their produce through live streaming, creating a self-sustaining farmers' market. Since its premiere, the show has sparked widespread discussion and has been dubbed the "Electronic Utopia" by netizens. As a representative of rural life slow variety shows, "Let Us Farm" explores a unique presentation style for domestic slow variety shows through its distinctive emotional narrative strategies.

1. Material as the Foundation: The Logic Beyond Idealism

Previous rural life slow variety shows, with their weakened plots, have guided audiences to focus more on the expression of idealism. However, these expressions often overlook the fact that the narrative aesthetic logic of slow variety shows must also be based on material foundations. Narrative logic that transcends materiality is difficult to sustain and establish.^[1]

(1) Realistic expression

The call for the return of rational logic in narratives is a realistic demand of contemporary society. " Chinese
(Manuscript NO.: JISS-25-2-62014)

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path to modernization is the modernization of material and cultural-ethical advancement, and the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature."^[2] "Let Us Farm" consistently revolves around "material" for its logical expression. At the beginning of the show, the young participants need to harvest eight rice fields and use the proceeds as startup capital to manage the farm and fields. This clear narrative logic based on financial resources is rare in rural life slow variety shows. The premise of material life makes the show's narrative logic more complete and closely aligned with real life. Unlike previous rural life slow variety shows that created a sense of enjoyment based on the material foundation provided by the production team, "Let Us Farm" avoids making the audience feel detached and unattainable. The sense of urgency in the show's "harvest and plant in a rush" is different from the deliberate setup of competitive segments in other variety shows; it reflects the traditional farming life's respect for "not missing the farming season." This urgency not only enhances the show's appeal but also addresses the issue of insufficient relevance between segment setups and thematic positioning in variety shows. All the segments in the show are not the result of the production team's intervention but naturally arise from the participants' farming lives, ensuring that the show's progression follows realistic logic and real-life problems.

"Let Us Farm" stands on the daily labor life and human reality, starting from the aesthetic logic of reality, without letting the ideal surpass materiality. This approach avoids the criticism of being illusory and detached that previous rural life slow variety shows faced, overcoming the issue of "show" outweighing "reality."

(2) Satisfaction of hierarchical needs

Humanistic feelings include attention to people and nature and reflection on society.^[3] Under the promotion of rational logic and realistic expression, the show is not just a monotonous record of farm labor life but also reflects the growth and changes of the participants, using small details to reveal larger themes. Change is the most important aspect of humanistic care and the focus of the record.^[4] "Let Us Farm" observes the changes in rural revitalization through the emotional relationship changes of small characters, reflecting humanistic feelings by focusing on and understanding human nature, starting from human needs, and satisfying those needs.

Maslow's "Hierarchy of Needs" theory posits that human needs include physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization.^[5] When a lower-level need is satisfied, the next level of need emerges. Physiological and safety needs can be satisfied through labor. After these needs are met, people's needs shift to emotional and belonging needs. At this level, individuals attempt to establish connections with others and crave social relationships.^[5] "Let Us Farm" not only showcases the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature but also strengthens the emotional bonds among the ten young participants through seven months of living, eating, and working together. Modern labor is social labor. In modern labor organizations, workers, unlike in the past, do not rely on blood or geographical ties but come from different backgrounds. This makes it even more necessary to create a harmonious and warm atmosphere through respect and understanding. Marx believed that workers not only create abundant material products but also idealized relationships. By changing the relationship between humans and nature, they change the relationships between people, creating a more harmonious social relationship.^[5] The young participants overcome problems together and hold summary meetings every night, evolving from initial awkwardness to genuine friendship. Through the labor process, they satisfy their emotional and belonging needs, constructing an ideal model of intimate relationships in the audience's minds. This emotional connection is authentically presented to the audience, creating a humanistic narrative system for "Let Us Farm."

2. National Conditions as the Basis: Awakening and Anchoring Collective Emotions

Implementation of the rural revitalization strategy, clearly stating the need to inherit, develop, and elevate agricultural civilization and follow the path of rural cultural prosperity.^[6] Agricultural civilization determines the characteristics of Chinese culture, and emotions, as a tangible social construct, largely depend on the social

environment and the emotional interaction patterns derived from it.

(1) Narration constructs social observation

The title "Let Us Farm" appears to wrap the core of farming in the shell of a "return to the countryside" slow variety show, but in essence, it is a social observation of humans returning to the most natural environment. Exploring the deeper meaning of the show's name reveals the evolution and vivid experience of agricultural and rural modernization under the background of China's rural revitalization strategy. This complex emotion aligns with national conditions and is conveyed to the audience through catchy textual symbols.

In the prelude, "Let Us Farm" first raises the topic of "why young people should farm." In terms of content, the prelude uses narration to start from the current national food security situation and discusses the confusion and uncertainty of young people "just entering society," often feeling "lying flat" and "involution," as well as their "yearning but ignorance" about the future. This sets up the social environment the show aims to present. Then, the show further establishes a connection with the audience through text. "Young people aged 18 to 25" specifies the show's participants and also targets the main audience as young people. Meanwhile, the narration consistently uses the first-person perspective, closing the distance with the audience and maximizing resonance, creating a sense of identification. This situational shaping also determines the emotional interaction patterns derived from it. Finally, through positive emotional words like "future," "serious," and "reward," complete the overall context creation and emotional expression for the specific group.

(2) Triggering emotions and memories

China's current food security situation is not optimistic. In terms of topic selection, "Let Us Farm" revisits the topic of farming, aligning with current national conditions and giving modern meaning to "Food is the most important thing for the people, and safety is the most important thing for food." By having young people seriously engage in farming, the show reshapes the younger generation's memory of farming and promotes a deeper understanding and appreciation of the current happy life.

In traditional pastoral slow variety shows, "countryside" and "land" are often used as symbolic representations, not directly connected to the show, remaining at the perceived surface level. "Land," as the core image in "Let Us Farm," carries the main emotional narrative function. The 142 acres of land carry the deep emotions of the Chinese people based on cultural traditions, providing a sense of reality. The interaction between laborers and the land slowly and strictly synthesizes personal emotions and national perceptions into a national symbol.

Professor John Bargh of Yale University proposed the priming effect theory, which suggests that the stimuli people receive earlier affect their judgment of events later.^[7] In other words, as long as video content producers activate the emotional setting mechanism, emotions as leading information will take effect.^[8] The show first constructs a discourse system between young people and farming in the prelude, then continuously builds the image of "land." These texts and images trigger collective memory, where the priming effect becomes prominent, and implicit memory is awakened^[7], making subsequent emotional narratives more easily accepted by the audience.

"Let Us Farm" selects the topic of "agricultural interaction documentary reality show," authentically restoring traditional farming life and showcasing how contemporary Chinese farmers achieve prosperity through labor, promoting the spirit of diligence and thrift. This continuously deepens the construction of the Chinese nation's collective memory, forming a unified narrative style and serious national emotions.

3. Scenery as Emotion: The Emotional Transmission of Landscape and Media

As the country gradually emphasizes rural revitalization, rural spaces enter the audience's view through media. Media beautifies and packages the countryside, turning it into a living space that meets the spiritual needs of

urbanites to escape the pressures of reality, but this creates a gap with the real rural society. "Let Us Farm" shapes emotional expression through real labor scenes, making subsequent narratives smoother.

(1) Scene construction

Rural life slow variety shows often use natural landscapes as the main setting. In the early stages of the show, the visual presentation of bare land, simple rough houses, earthen stoves, and manual farming tools accurately restores the audience's memory of farming. These pre-modern landscapes provide the natural scenery and artistic imagination needed by the audience when watching slow variety shows, satisfying their emotional needs. As farming progresses and living needs increase, the show's later visual presentation mainly features modern landscapes such as the house renovated by the young participants, modern farming machines, and household appliances. These landscapes, while meeting basic modern living needs, showcase the current state of modern agricultural development.

These landscapes allow the audience to gain a deeper understanding of the responsibilities of new farmers and serve the function of conveying the show's emotions and themes. Pre-modern and modern landscapes together form the visual spectacle of the show. These diverse composite landscapes combine emotional imagination with the real world, creating an "artificial utopia."^[9]

(2) Different expressions of media

Media can shape narrative spaces. In specific fields, different media convey different visual images for emotional narratives, influencing the audience's emotional cognition. Different media communication methods convey different emotional content.

"Let Us Farm" breaks through traditional variety show production thinking by innovatively adopting a combination of "vlog + live broadcast + main show," with long and short content collaborating to narrate from multiple angles. The "main show" follows a chronological order and undertakes the main narrative task, primarily meeting the viewing needs of TV audiences. It often presents vast natural scenery and more complex character arrangements, focusing on narrative completeness and relevance to the main storyline. The daily vlogs shot by the participants and released on short video platforms supplement the overall narrative of the show from individual perspectives, showcasing each person's distinct characteristics beyond the group portrayal in the main show. The vlogs also align with the tone of short video platforms, breaking down the grand theme of farming into more audience-friendly "short, flat, and fast" communication forms, with detailed presentations that cater to the more nuanced emotional needs of audiences in the new media era. "Live broadcasts" complement the shortcomings of TV media, which only allows viewing without commenting, and short video platforms, where comments do not receive timely feedback. Through live broadcasts, the audience can interact with the show's participants in real-time, establishing an emotional communication bridge. Additionally, the interactions between members are more directly presented to the audience, making emotional resonance smoother.

The different expressions of media are not just simple records of rural labor life but aim to immerse every directly or indirectly involved young audience in the charm of farming through such warm and real life, sharing the joy of "growth and harvest" with the participants.

4. Guests as Reflections: Emotional Wrapping Through Identity Recognition

In 1936, psychologist Lacan first proposed the "mirror" theory. He divided the stages in which people gradually unify themselves with their mirror images, forming the "self" and transitioning from the "ideal self" to the "mirror self."^[10] The "mirror" theory has since been widely applied. This theory is more common in movies but also has guiding significance for the casting of TV reality shows. The audience enjoys seeing small characters with

extraordinary skills turn the tide and achieve victory, a type of character we can call "legendary small characters." The emergence of the internet has continuously decentralized user discourse power, with the audience's discourse power invisibly guiding the content and form of shows. "Legendary small characters" fit the audience's self-identity recognition when their "ideal self" and the "mirror self" on screen synchronize, as per the "mirror" theory.

"Let Us Farm" selects ten "disappointed youths" who are relatively unknown in the entertainment industry. Among them are singers with championship titles from singing competitions but no stage, idols who have participated in numerous talent shows but failed to debut, and actors who can only play domineering CEOs in short dramas and lose themselves. The selection of these guests fits the definition of "small characters" and aligns with the dilemmas faced by most people in society: confusion about careers, the tension between dreams and reality, and the practical problems of survival. The situations of these characters are precisely expressed through the camera, creating a strong emotional resonance with the audience. At this point, the audience is no longer an irrelevant bystander but becomes the "mirror" of the show's guests^[10], allowing the "ideal self" and the "mirror self" to emotionally connect. The audience enjoys seeing small characters turn the tide, and this scenario frequently occurs in the show: harvesting 62 tons of rice in six days despite back injuries, desperately clearing drainage ditches during continuous heavy rain, and moving 4,000 pots of roses in five hours leading to alkali poisoning. These seemingly impossible miracles, accomplished by small characters, are even more touching due to the contrast of identity and outcome. The platform gives them the "opportunity to be seen," writing a "fate reversal" through farming, aligning with the diverse value orientations advocated by society under the current diploma education background. The setbacks and failures experienced by the teenagers not only satisfy the curiosity of the audience who are far removed from rural life about the current state of rural existence, but also evoke a strong resonance in them for the spirit of remaining high-spirited despite being covered in mud. This imparts the positive values of "hard work pays off" and "no pain, no gain" to the audience, while also injecting spiritual strength into those who see the young participants as a "mirror" for self-reflection. In a spiritual sense, "Let Us Farm" is a youth experiment field cultivated jointly by the guests and the audience. The audience, acting as "online-supervisors," constantly keep track of the progress and daily activities of farming, and undergo a transformation alongside the guests as the wheat fields grow, constituting a realistic metaphor for the show's endeavor to thrive.

5. Conclusion

"Let Us Farm" uses a documentary approach, with "farming" as the main narrative content, timely satisfying and soothing the potential emotional needs and life traumas of contemporary young people. With a sincere, authentic, and genuine creative attitude, the show explores themes such as food security, rural development, and agricultural culture from the perspective of ordinary laborers, providing effective ideas for agricultural and rural development and rural cultural inheritance under the background of urbanization. "Let Us Farm" not only focuses its lens on the land, but also on the laborers who work on it, presenting the audience with an authentic portrayal of the daily farming activities and interactions of ordinary people, showcasing a labor journey characterized by diligence, kindness, and genuine friendship.

"Let Us Farm" employs different emotional narrative strategies, integrating the third-person perspective into the first-person experience, deeply combining realism with spiritual enjoyment, laying the groundwork for underlying narrative logic while achieving emotional resonance. Meanwhile, slow variety shows should also delve deeply into the themes of the programs, contemplating the logical relationships and value advocacy behind the themes, rather than forcibly elevating the themes solely by relying on buzzwords like "pastoral" and "rural," and thereby integrating real-life reflections to generate practical significance.

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