

# The Communication Strategy of Hip-Hop Online Variety Show in China—A Case Study of “Rap for Youth”

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**Abstract:** The communication dilemma of hip-hop culture in China has a long history, because it was born out of resistance to the dominant mainstream and has been free from the mainstream media in China. However, the development of new media technology has made it possible for the popularization of hip-hop culture, entering the public's view since the popularity of “The Rap of China” in 2017. In 2020, an online variety show “Rap for Youth” once again made hip-hop known outside of its fixed circle. This paper uses citation, content, case and comparative analyses to discuss the communication strategy of the “Rap for Youth” program. In addition, the paper summarizes and analyzes hip-hop culture as the practice of subculture in China and gives a feasible methodological reference.

## 1. Introduction

In 2018, the Pan Entertainment Big Data Platform published the 2017 China Online Variety Market White Paper, stating that 2014 was the first year of online variety show development. Since then, the genres of online variety shows have become increasingly diverse, the production has become more and more sophisticated, and the communication strategy of online variety shows has been perfected. Through integration with the Internet, variety shows have broken through the limits of TV programs in terms of subject matter, scale and content. The Chinese saw the explosion of the program “The Rap of China” heralding a new stage in the development of hip-hop culture in China in 2017. In the “2018 Annual Online Self-Produced Variety Show Hot Ranking”, “The Rap of China” topped the popularity list. The combination of subculture and online variety shows has not only contributed to the innovation of online variety shows, but has also elevated hip-hop culture to a new stage[1-3].

However, with the rise of hip-hop culture in 2017 and the increased social concern from the government and citizens, the negative features of hip-hop culture sparked controversy and were banned by the Chinese authorities. How can hip-hop culture be presented in a more positive and highly accepted form in China? In August 2020, Bilibili launched a rap program called “Rap for Youth”, which was widely acclaimed on bilibili, Douban and Zhihu platforms, with a score of 9.3 on Douban list. This far exceeded “The Rap of China” [4.5] and “Listen Up” [6.7], making it the highest scoring music variety show at present. The total viewership reached 350 million, which was the best result for a variety show on bilibili. Therefore, “Rap for Youth” has implications for studying the communication strategies of the hip-hop culture on online variety shows.

## 2. Dissemination Overview of Hip-Hop Culture and “Rap for Youth”

### 2.1 Dissemination Overview of Hip-Hop Culture

Hip-hop culture emerged in the late 1970s in the Bronx of New York City, known as a poverty-stricken, crime-filled, and racist neighborhood in New York. Black people wrote about their living conditions, desires, and emotions into hip-hop music, gradually making hip-hop music a vehicle that could reflect social problems. Contrastingly, their music was filled with a lot of profanity and illegal behavior, thereby making hip-hop music unwelcomed by mainstream culture.

In 1979, three young black men from All Platinum Records formed a rap group called the Sugarhill Gang. Since then, hip-hop culture has been slowly integrated into the mass market, and hip-hop music has become more popular.

With the development of mass media after the 1990s, hip-hop music has become closely integrated with mass media. As a large number of hip-hop music companies emerged, this made hip-hop music enter a full-scale commercialization stage. Hip-hop culture began to appear in the commercial market in various forms, such as rapper Kanye West's restaurant chain "Fatburger" in 2008.

Hip-hop culture was first introduced to China after the Reform and Opening-up in 1978, known in the West as the opening of China. Many musicians and overseas returnees were influenced by the hip-hop craze, bringing the culture to China, first in Hong Kong and Taiwan. However, in the early days of hip-hop culture, its rebellious form and connotations conflicted with mainland China, so hip-hop culture remained obscure.

In 1989, Cui Jian published the album "Rock on the New Long March", the first original rock album in mainland China. The album included the song "It's Not That I Don't Understand" with elements of rap. It is the first time hip-hop culture had ever entered the mainland. In the following decade, the Chinese music circle also gave birth to many independent works of hip-hop music, and more musicians began to create hip-hop music.

After entering the 21st century, China's economy boomed, and the Internet gradually began to gain popularity. The people's acceptance of foreign culture increased dramatically, all of which laid the foundation for the growth and increasing exposure of hip-hop culture.

In the summer of 2017, iQIYI launched "The Rap of China", which caused a phenomenal excitement. Since then, the spread of hip-hop culture has stepped into a new stage in China. Over time, hip-hop music, artists, clothing and phrases have been frequently known, and hip-hop culture has flourished and created huge commercial value. At the same time, parts of hip-hop culture that do not conform to mainstream social values have been scrutinized, and bad hip-hop artists have sparked a great deal of controversy. The hip-hop culture circle has undergone localized changes in order to develop, focusing on the transformation of the content of hip-hop works, changes in the behavior of hip-hop artists, moving closer to the mainstream of society, and the parallel development of the mainstream "underground".

As hip-hop culture in China has developed and grown, hip-hop culture has continuously been incorporated into popular culture. This trend is reflected in the change of hip-hop culture ideology towards mainstream cultural values and the commercialization of hip-hop culture. Therefore, an overview of the spread of hip-hop culture will also help the domestic hip-hop market better conform to the trend of development[8-9].

## **2.2 Dissemination Overview of "Rap for Youth"**

According to data from the show's launch on August 22, 2020, to April 22, 2021, the entire season of "Rap for Youth" has been broadcast 540 million times on Bilibili, with a total of 9.629 million bullet screen. 79,159 people rated an average of 9.3 points in Douban.

In 2020, there were three rap online variety shows in Chinese mainland, "The Rap of China 2020" from iQIYI, "Listen Up" from Mango TV and "Rap for Youth" from Bilibili.

As of April 22, 2021, the Douban scores of the three programs were 4.5 for "The Rap of China 2020", 6.7 for "Listen Up" and 9.3 for "Rap for Youth". "Rap for Youth" is far ahead[10].

## **3. The Communication Strategy of "Rap for Youth"**

### **3.1 Communication Content**

#### **3.1.1 Find Target Audience to Design Content**

In the 1970s, the famous American marketing experts, Al Ries and Jack Trout, proposed the positioning theory, where advertisers would locate the target audience group and identify their own products in a certain market position according to the audience's awareness of a certain product. If

the target audience is positioned as people who love rap music, the show “Rap for Youth” has no advantage at all. “The Rap of China”, which triggered the rap boom in 2017, had already garnered a high level of attention and a mature program mechanism through four years of experience. In the face of such an old rap show, Yang Liang, general manager of Bilibili's marketing center, said, “Bilibili is going down a different path - redefining rap and opening up a new audience.”

“The Rap of China” has more famous rappers competing and requires strict rapping skills, and most of the viewers are young people who love hip-hop culture and often listen to rap daily. The “Rap for Youth” is aimed at an audience that is not interested in rap or even resistant to it, a market that had not yet been explored[11].

The target audience determines the content and method of communication. In order to attract these audiences, who rarely listen to rap. The show's trailer used a down-to-earth scene in the countryside to express the concept of “everything can be rapped”. This form of publicity instantly closes the distance between hip-hop and the audience, by allowing viewers who were previously uninterested in rap to not be kept away from hip-hop culture. The whole pilot film promotes the idea that rap is down-to-earth music, whether in the city or in the countryside. Hip-hop is closely related to each of our lives.

### **3.1.2 Take Advantage of Celebrity Effect**

Compared to the other two rap shows, the guests for “Rap for Youth” are the largest and brings together well-known figures from various fields. Guests include principal Huang Zitao, referee MC Hot Dog, Ma Siwei and KnowKnow from Higher Brothers, Rich Brian, special guest witness Li Yuchun, who also invited Teng Geer, and a lot of Bilibili influencers. Such a guest lineup has the following three advantages.

First, the guest lineup in different fields can effectively activate loyal audiences, infect stray audiences and wake up dormant audiences. In this group of guests, Huang Zitao has a considerable fan base, and the portrait of these fan groups is highly overlapping with the fandom. MC Hot Dog and Higher Brothers represent Chinese rappers, with a majority of hip-hop fans. Rich Brian, a rapper from Indonesia, represents international rappers and can attract some overseas fans. Li Yuchun and Teng Geer are well-known singers in China and represent a high level of judgment and authority. Lastly, the Bilibili influencers can attract a large number of Bilibili users from Generation Z. The fans of these public figures watch the show because of their idols, and largely increases the visibility of the show.

Second, guests from different fields can represent the voices of different groups. In the first episodes, there were three guests of different ages and fields: Li Yuchun, Teng Geer, and an influencer were invited to sit in the same room to watch the show. These three people represented the young, middle-aged, and mature groups. After watching Yu Zhen's rap show “She and She and She”, which speaks out for women, Li Yuchun and the influencer had a sentiment that resonated with the audience: “I didn't expect rap here to be like this.” The three guests had an in-depth discussion addressing the audience's point of view, explaining the show's theme of “everything can be rapped”.

Third, the influence of the media from Bilibili was able to attract audiences. In the age of fragmentation, exposure is basic. Vertical cognitive penetration of the audience is essential, which requires influencing media that have influence on the audience. The biggest difference in the guest lineup of “Rap for Youth” is the influencers from Bilibili. Over the years, Bilibili has been motivating influencers by creating various ways to cash in and rewarding them for their creativity. In the current communication environment, users are scattered in various circles and attracted to the influencers in their respective fields. By integrating these influencers with a large fan base, “Rap for Youth” not only attracts more audiences, but also increases the show's influence.

### **3.1.3 Shaping the Image of the Contestants**

Yan Min, the director of “Rap for Youth” and also the director of variety shows said in an interview that he would remind the editors to pay attention to the shining points of each person who came to the show. Min stated, “No one in the world is perfect, 99.999% of people are gray. What I

need to tell people is a three-dimensional image, not a flat stereotypical image. What we want to shoot is not an idol, but a lovely person.” Just like the philosophy pursued by director Yan Min, the program makes full use of the contestant screening, race, editing, and management system to show the uniqueness in each contestant.

First, in terms of screening, the program team screened 40 contestants by communicating with them to fully understand their personalities. There was an unaired round of elimination, whose screening criteria was the contestants themselves. Yan Min said: “Real and cute is the standard that should be adhered to when casting. Don’t recruit some real but unlovable people in order to promote him to perform unlovable performance beef in the show. It is not necessary. You have your standards; you recruit those you appreciate. You have to recognize that you have tested them before you recruit them in.” In addition, a smaller number of people is more conducive to showing the individual characteristics of each contestant, making it easier for the audience to remember the personality of each contestant.

Second, the program uses the elimination system. The contestants’ dormitory is divided into first ring, second ring, third ring, fourth ring. According to personal ranking, each contestant needs to consume “Bite coins” to survive for a day. They are allowed to borrow or exchange coins. Once the coins are used up, the contestant is eliminated. This system allows audiences to observe the different choices made by the 40 contestants in the show in the face of survival, and each person's character is shown to the fullest in these months of life. For example, contestant Siweite, who didn't want to eat the plain boxed lunch in the fourth ring, found a secret way to get into the first ring for a buffet without a key. When the staff asked him during the interview how he got to the first ring, he smiled at the camera like a child: “Sis, I can get through even if you lock the doors! Look how I wave to you in front of the surveillance from the fourth ring, and then wave to you in front of the first ring.” From this interview, audiences can easily feel Siweite’s wit and humor. In addition, in the first and the last episode, the contestants were asked to make many choices. For example, they were asked, “Does hip-hop makes you poor or rich?” “Do you want yourself to be popular or want your songs to be popular?” “Do you think smartphones give us freedom or enslave us?” “When the plot of ‘The Wandering Earth’ comes true, will you choose to stay underground or go above ground?” These questions subtly present each contestant's self-positioning and character to the audience. And according to the different choices of each person, the contestants were divided into four quadrants, teaming up to complete different music.

Third, in terms of editing, the show gave each contestant ample footage. Most contestants on regular talent shows have no footage or a separate stage. But audiences can only remember a few contestants who have enough footage. In “Rap for Youth”, however, each contestant is shown on camera and has the opportunity to show their rap individually on stage. In addition, through the clips, audiences can directly see each contestant's personal image, which albeit not perfect, has its uniqueness. Wang Zhan and Guo Ruolan call it a “‘micro-tilt’ gaze relationship”, a grass-rooted, superficial, public and popular cultural manifestation. They are “virtual but real” idols in the audiences’ mind. This imperfect yet individual personality, allows viewers to fall in love with the contestants, and strengthens the stickiness between the contestants and their fans.

Fourth, “Rap for Youth” has a unique contestant management system. In an interview, contestant Yuchi said that the show provides each contestant with a service similar to an agent system, with each contestant having a dedicated director and manager. “We each have a group. The team is in charge of us every day. We enjoy the treatment of a famous artist in the program. I came to this program team and felt being taken care of.” It is this kind of respect and care that the show gives to the contestants that allows them to show their true self without any worries.

### **3.1.4 Telling Good Variety Stories to Enhance Content**

The French structuralist semiotician, Todorov, introduced the concept of narratology in “The Grammar of the Decameron” in 1969, now widely used in the analysis of variety shows. The narrative technique of a variety show determines the authenticity and fun of the show. “Rap for Youth” adopts a linear narrative structure, forming the narrative momentum through the course

setting, setting up suspense, surprises and conflicts, and then using editing techniques to strengthen the fun of the story.

First, the course is designed with a storytelling approach. The program's survival course is designed with reference to the scenes of *The Hunger Games*, *Big Brother* and other films. The contestants are divided into four neighborhoods: the first ring, the second ring, the third ring and the fourth ring, each with different living conditions. This schedule provides a strong pressure mechanism that allows the plot to advance. New plots are constantly created around the “Bite coins” and survival, presenting a three-dimensional image of the contestants.

Secondly, suspense, surprise and conflict are also common narrative techniques used in variety shows. “Rap for Youth” differs from other rap variety shows in which it does not deliberately create conflict between contestants. Instead, it uses some unexpected spin-offs to add interest to the show and shape the characters. For example, in the second installment, the contestants performed in groups, and the group leader chose the theme and beat of each group on behalf of the group members, at which time Huang Zitao made a bet, using “Bite coins”. Jiang Yunsheng came out to guess which theme each person had chosen. The program is edited together with Huang Zitao’s “I’m lucky, I can’t lose”, the process of guessing the final result, making the result of each bet won by Jiang Yunsheng more reversal. The gambling game of this derivative plot is full of suspense, surprises and reversals creating a very successful narrative.

Third, the program has its own unique editing ideas. Yan Min has talked about his point of view on editing, to cut out the complete process in its original form. “If you cut a person cursing, you have to cut in why the person is cursing. If a person is in conflict with another person, must cut out what these two people have done before respectively. The conclusion is for the audience to draw.” This way of cutting the cause, the passage, and the result of the incident all into the program avoids quoting out of context, but succeeds in recounting one complete story after another in the program.”

### **3.1.5 Focus on Humanism**

Du Junfei, a professor at Nanjing University's School of Journalism and Communication, once summarized nine characteristics of netizens' psychology: the psychology of curiosity, the desire for new knowledge, the manifestation of individuality, entertainment and fashion, stress reduction and catharsis, the psychology of following the herd, the pursuit of equality, the desire for innovation and self-actualization. The reason why “Rap for Youth” is so well received is because its content caters to the audience's psychology.

The stereotype of hip-hop music revolves around “money, gangs and women,” which is one of the reasons why many people are resistant to it. But the theme of “Rap for Youth” is “everything can be rapped”. In the program, you can hear rap for feminism, campus violence, and what happened at the Yuzhang School. Director Yan Min talks about his viewpoint: “The essence of rap is to speak out.” It is these rap works that cater to the audience's desire for new knowledge, the pursuit of equality, and the desire for self-actualization, attracting many people who have never heard rap to fall in love with rap music.

From the perspective of subcultural incorporation, the Birmingham School suggests that subcultures will eventually be incorporated into mainstream culture, in the form of both “ideological incorporation” and “commoditized incorporation”. The progress of “Rap for Youth” is that the show has ideologically transformed rap, a music that originated from the black niche in the United States. It has presented listeners with a music that is no longer filled with profanity and violence, but rather a gentle vocal style that has been adapted to the land of China. This music is more acceptable to the public and avoids the consequences of being banned by the authorities for its negative effects.

## **3.2 Dissemination Platform**

### **3.2.1 Play the Advantages of Bilibili Itself**

The success of “Rap for Youth” cannot be separated from the platform of Bilibili. It is different from other video sites as it can perfectly fit the dissemination needs of the program.

First, the users have a great advantage. According to the “2020 bilibili content marketing report”, after more than a decade of development, Bilibili has become a multi-cultural community covering more than 7,000 interest circles, while providing an open and free communication platform for youth groups. People are able to find others who share their interests and gradually form their own circles and cultures. This group is known as “Generation Z” and accounts for 81.7% of the users of Bilibili. They are inclusive, sticky, interactive, love subculture and self-expression. According to the “2020 China Music Industry Development Research Report”, hip-hop listeners are also concentrated under the age of 25. They pursue individuality and love to express themselves. These two audiences have a high degree of overlap. Therefore “Rap for Youth” can attract the target audience group precisely and vertically by choosing to broadcast on Bilibili.

The second advantage is the platform mechanism. Bilibili chairman and CEO Chen Rui said: “many platforms are content-driven, but Bilibili is ecology-driven. What we do is not good content, but a good mechanism for generating content. The soil is good, and all kinds of flowers can bloom on it.” The good ecology of Bilibili itself also provides a platform for the development of “Rap for Youth”. Now, the audience is not satisfied with receiving information unilaterally, but wants to participate in the collection and dissemination of information. The bullet screen culture of the Bilibili satisfies this psychology, opening up a vertical interaction mode, and reduces the distance between the program and the audience. This allows the audience to get the information they want in a shorter time. In addition, the fun of the bullet screen in the program is sometimes even greater than the program itself. For example, the bullet screen gives the nickname “Xiong Er” to Sheng Fan who speaks in a funny tone like a cartoon character Xiong Er, and collectively brush the screen when Huang Zitao makes harsh remarks, etc. This mode of interaction between the audience and the show also increases the “twist” of the program. Moreover, this bullet screen mode can also develop unique bullet screen advertisements by actively inducing the audience's attention and interaction through sending an inquiry bullet screen or a reply bullet screen when relevant products appear. For instance, there is an octopus bag often carried by contestants in the program. Whenever the octopus bag appears in the program, the bullet screen says “Seeking the same bag”, “Where can I buy it” and so on, driving the audience's consumption behavior in this covert way.

Third, the atmosphere of Bilibili encourages creativity. For many years, Bilibili has been encouraging innovation by creating various ways to cash in along with a rewarding creation mechanism, and fans' derivative work. Covering songs in it, making derivative videos, editing contestants' videos, etc. have indirectly promoted the program and added more fun to the program itself. This environment where everyone can create has also brought the audience closer to the show, making them participate in the collection and of information.

### **3.2.2 Using Other Online Social Media Platforms**

Online social media platforms have now replaced TV, newspapers and radio to dominate young people's lives. In these platforms, everyone can be the disseminator of hot topics. Data analysis shows that the current main channels for users to learn about variety shows in China are WeChat, Weibo, TikTok, etc. The average number of users who choose these channels to learn about news reaches more than 50%.

On TikTok, the official account of “Rap for Youth” has a total of 606,000 fans, and the official account has released 433 short videos, which have received a total of 14,431,000 likes. Among them, the content is mainly the excavation of the program's twists. Short videos saying “the program team is so poor that they pulled the daughter of the production director as a supporting actor” and “Li Yuchun's Sichuan dialect is overbearing”, all hilarious passages and classic images of the program. There are also exciting clips of the contestants' stages, combined with social hotspots, such as the acrostic of Shengdai's lyric to speak out for the Yuzhang School incident. On Zhihu, “Rap for Youth” has 8,995 discussions, far more than those of the other two rap shows. These discussions have ranged from topics about the show to comments about the contestants. On Douban, the Rap for Youth group has more than 90,000 members, once again far more than the other two rap shows. Topics in the group are mainly divided into discussions about the show and

contestants, stage and music discussions, complimentary posts and more. Both the positive publicity and the box news can objectively lead the audience to participate in the discussion and expand the show's popularity.

However, the show lacks trending topics on Weibo due to funding issues. According to statistics from NetEase Digital Reading, the length of Weibo's trending topic for "Rap for Youth" is only a quarter of "The Rap of China". In addition, the show's team also has some problems with the selection of trending topics. Most of the trending topic titles contain a lot of useless information. Gimmicky publicity and hot social topics are more likely to get clicks on Weibo. This is also a defect for the show's communication strategy on the other online social media platforms.

### **3.2.3 Integrating Commercial Platforms to Expand Market Space**

As a subculture online variety show, the program also reflects the commoditized integration of subculture. The show cooperated with Jubilee, inserting brainwashing rap jingles, funny commercials shot by popular contestants, and appearing elements such as the Jubilee logo and merchandise in the show. The contestants of the new label W8VES in the finals landed on the cover of a major magazine, conducted offline live events, released a single, and recorded a travel variety show "Making Waves" in December. All kinds of e-commerce, advertising and performances are pushing the show to occupy the market.

## **4. The Communication Strategy of Hip-Hop Culture in China**

### **4.1 Positioning the Target Audience**

Audience positioning is a method of locating the target audience for program propaganda by studying in advance the audience's age and cultural level, economic status, appreciation taste, basic needs, and collective tendencies. This is the prerequisite for the mass communication of subculture and the basis for subcultural variety shows to meet the content of the audience. What "Rap for Youth" does well when positioning its target audience is that it does not locate its target audience as hip-hop music lovers, but rather as people who do not know about hip-hop music. There are several advantages to targeting an audience outside the subculture circle.

First, the current market of online variety show users is large and the supply of online variety shows has not yet reached saturation in China. This means that hip-hop culture variety shows can target an audience that does not yet know about hip-hop culture. This is a large audience that mostly has some stereotypes. If we can attract these people to understand the appeal of hip-hop culture and eliminate their stereotypes, we can open up a larger market.

Second, there are many variety shows of the same genre on the market, and competition is fierce, while older variety shows have already captured the market and have a large fixed audience. Therefore, emerging hip-hop culture variety shows can compete with established shows by attracting audiences outside of this group, i.e., those who have not seen the genre before.

### **4.2 Promoting the Localization of Hip-Hop Culture in China**

Subculture has a closed and conservative appearance, with a kind of cohesiveness that cannot be known by outsiders. In 1992, Lippmann introduced the concept of "stereotype". Stereotype refers to the fixed and simplistic perceptions and impressions that people have of a particular thing, which are usually accompanied by value evaluation and good or bad feelings.

The reason why cultural variety shows can attract many audiences is based on the convergent cultural connotations shared by such groups. The basis of mass communication of hip-hop culture is the integration of cultural connotations in line with local values.

Therefore, online variety shows featuring hip-hop culture should try to avoid showing negative stereotypes and discard connotations that do not fit China, such as elements of guns and drugs in American hip-hop culture. It should also explore what unifies hip-hop cultures with our local values, such as love and peace.

## 5. Research Results and Discussion

The “Rap for Youth” has opened up a new way for hip-hop culture to be disseminated to the masses in China. It is a completely different communication strategy from other hip-hop variety shows. This attempt has its successes. For example, the show has gained a high reputation and popularity from Douban and Zhihu reviews. However, there are also failures, such as a lower level of hip-hop songs. Among them, many popular contestants in the show were rocked by scandal after the show.

This shows the process of hip-hop culture in China has a long way to go. Online variety shows should assume the role of value guidance, and establish a positive image of the culture. The development of hip-hop culture in China still needs effort

The values advocated by “Rap for Youth” are a good model for the development of hip-hop culture in China. Online variety shows should pay more attention to proper guidance thereafter, which is the key to maintaining the longevity of hip-hop culture in China.

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