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THE MODERATING ROLE OF EMOTIONAL VALUE BETWEEN SOCIAL MOTIVATION AND SATISFACTION: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF CHINESE DATING SHOW AUDIENCES

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Abstract:

With the rapid rise and immense popularity of dating reality shows in the Chinese media landscape, understanding the underlying psychological drivers of audience engagement has become crucial for deciphering their success. Grounded in the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), this study constructs and empirically tests a model examining the relationships between social motivation, emotional value, and audience satisfaction. It specifically investigates the moderating role of emotional value within this dynamic. A structured questionnaire survey was administered to 591 Chinese viewers of popular dating shows. Data analysis using hierarchical regression revealed several key findings: (1) Social motivation, manifested through behaviors such as social discussion and interaction, exerts a significant positive influence on audience satisfaction. (2) Emotional value, derived from content through emotional resonance and affective involvement, directly and significantly enhances satisfaction. (3) Most importantly, emotional value serves as a positive moderator in the relationship between social motivation and satisfaction. This indicates that the positive effect of social motivation on satisfaction is significantly stronger for audiences who experience higher levels of emotional value from the program. The study elucidates the critical "amplifier" role of emotional experience, suggesting that content which successfully elicits strong emotions can substantially magnify the satisfaction gained from social utility. These findings offer valuable theoretical extensions to UGT in the context of new media entertainment and provide practical insights for content creators and platform operators seeking to optimize engagement strategies by strategically integrating social hooks with potent emotional design.

Keywords:

Audience Satisfaction, Dating Reality Shows, Emotional Value, Moderating Role, Social Motivation

Introduction

In recent years, dating reality shows have achieved remarkable success in China's media landscape. Programs such as Heart Signal, Elderly Romance, and I Am Also In Love with You have not only garnered high viewership and widespread online discussion but have also evolved into a notable sociocultural phenomenon. Against this backdrop, examining the underlying psychological mechanisms that drive Chinese audiences to watch, engage with, and derive satisfaction from such programs holds substantial academic and practical significance.

Existing research, largely based on the Uses and Gratifications (UGT) framework, has identified various motivations for viewing variety shows—including entertainment, social interaction, and information seeking—and has established their direct effects on audience satisfaction or continuance intention. Nevertheless, a critical question remains inadequately addressed: why do audiences with similar social motivations exhibit marked differences in their ultimate satisfaction levels? This gap suggests that the relationship between motivation and satisfaction may not be straightforward, and that an underlying mechanism may condition or transform this linkage.

This study proposes that emotional value constitutes such a mechanism. We argue that the emotional resonance, involvement, pleasure, and empathy experienced by viewers can significantly enhance the satisfaction obtained from program-related social interactions. In other words, deeper emotional engagement may amplify the positive effect of social motivation. To address this research problem, the present study develops a moderated model targeting Chinese dating reality show audiences. It aims to accomplish the following research objectives and answer the corresponding research questions:

Research Objectives

- 1.To examine the direct effect of social motivation on audience satisfaction.
- 2.To investigate the direct effect of emotional value on audience satisfaction.
- 3.To analyze the moderating role of emotional value in the relationship between social motivation and audience satisfaction.

Research Questions

- 1.Does social motivation exert a significant positive effect on the satisfaction of dating reality show audiences?
- 2.Does emotional value exert a significant positive effect on the satisfaction of dating reality show audiences?
- 3.Does emotional value positively moderate the relationship between social motivation and audience satisfaction?

By empirically testing these questions, this research seeks to clarify the role of emotional experience as a potential amplifier in the gratification process. The findings are expected to extend UGT in the context of contemporary media consumption and to offer actionable insights

for content creators and platform operators in designing more engaging and satisfying viewer experiences.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Social Motivation and Audience Satisfaction

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) posits that audiences are active media users whose consumption behaviors aim to fulfill specific social and psychological needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). Social motivation is a key driver for watching reality shows, referring to viewers leveraging program content to facilitate social interaction—such as gaining common topics for conversation with friends, family, or colleagues, participating in online community discussions, and fostering a sense of group belonging (Porter & Standing, 2020). These shows provide viewers with conversational fodder that enhances their sense of belonging and community connection (Tirasawasdichai et al., 2022). However, whether shared media consumption necessarily fosters meaningful community identification warrants further scrutiny (Pai & Tsai, 2016). Much of the interaction may remain at the level of superficial commentary, signaling participation rather than genuine social bonding (Shao et al., 2023). This study argues that whether social interaction ultimately enhances satisfaction may depend on deeper conditional factors. Based on this reasoning, we hypothesize:

H1: Social motivation has a significant positive impact on the satisfaction of dating reality show audiences.

Emotional Value and Audience Satisfaction

Emotional value originates from the field of consumer behavior, referring to the feelings and affective states consumers derive from a product or service. In the context of media consumption, emotional value denotes the emotional benefits viewers experience during watching, such as pleasure, relaxation, excitement, resonance, and a sense of involvement. Dating reality shows, through carefully crafted narratives, character relationships, and emotional conflicts, aim to evoke strong emotional responses from viewers. When viewers feel excitement over a couple's ("CP") sweet interactions or empathize with a guest's situation, they obtain high emotional value. This positive emotional experience is itself a significant source of satisfaction (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001). Therefore, we hypothesize:

H2: Emotional value has a significant positive impact on the satisfaction of dating reality show audiences.

The Moderating Role of Emotional Value

This study further proposes that emotional value not only plays a direct role in driving satisfaction but, more critically, acts as a moderator in the relationship between social motivation and satisfaction (Behm-Morawitz, 2016; El-Adly et al., 2024). Unlike research that examines variables in isolation, this study constructs a conditional framework: motivations effectively translate into satisfaction only under specific emotional conditions (Kim, Sam., & Kim, Sean., 2021).

The theoretical logic is as follows: When audiences derive high emotional value from a program, their viewing experience transcends simple information acquisition or superficial socializing. This profound emotional investment moderates and amplifies the effect of social motivation in two ways: First, it enhances the desire and depth of social sharing. Viewers with

high emotional value are not only more willing to discuss the show but their discussions are more passionate and in-depth, moving from describing "what happened" to sharing "how it felt." Second, it improves the quality of social interaction. Communication based on strong emotions is more likely to elicit mutual understanding and establish deeper social connections, thereby yielding social gratification that goes beyond superficial chatter (Azpiazu et al., 2025). Thus, emotional value provides more fertile "emotional ground" for the realization of social motivation. Conversely, weak emotional engagement may blunt the satisfaction derived from even strong initial social motivation (Azpiazu et al., 2025).

This moderating role has received empirical support in other consumption and cultural contexts. For instance, emotional value has been shown to moderate the curvilinear relationship between perceived customer orientation and relationship satisfaction (Arslanagic-Kalajdzic, 2020) and to significantly influence the relationship between consumer value and green product choice behavior (Khan & Mohsin, 2017). Research within the Chinese context also indicates that emotional and perceived value frequently function as conditional mechanisms, shaping how cognitive evaluations and motivations translate into affective responses and behavioral tendencies (Yang et al., 2010; Liu et al., 2019; Huang et al., 2025). This study extends such moderation-based explanations into the domain of digital media and reality television, positioning emotional value—operationalized as emotional resonance and emotional engagement—as a key theoretical mechanism within emotionally intensive viewing experiences (Hao et al., 2019; Periaiya & Nandukrishna, 2024). Based on this reasoning, we hypothesize:

H3: Emotional value positively moderates the relationship between social motivation and audience satisfaction. That is, the higher the audience's emotional value, the stronger the positive impact of social motivation on satisfaction.

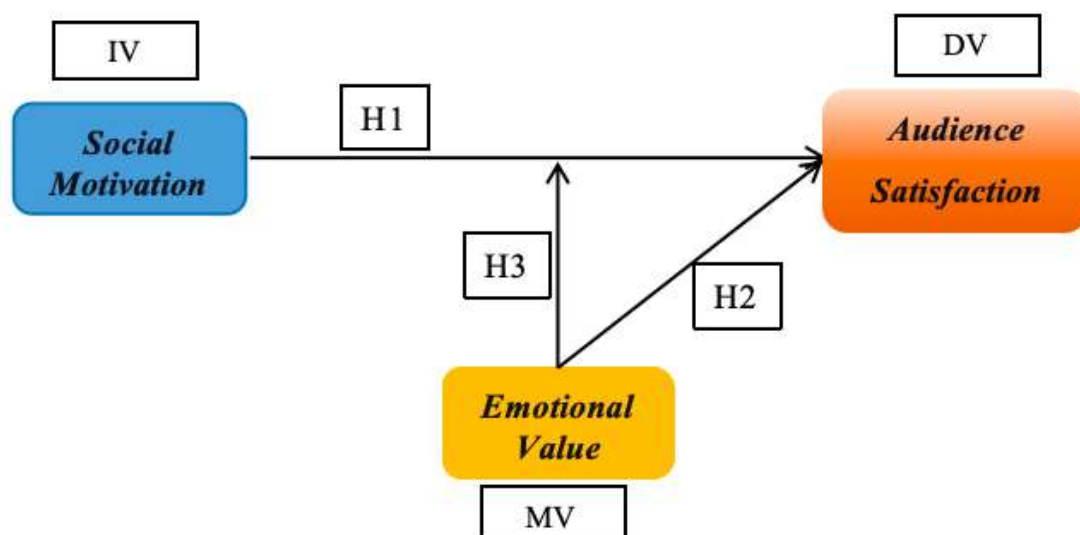


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Research Methods

This study employed a questionnaire survey method, utilizing the "Questionnaire Star" platform to collect data online within mainland China. The target respondents were viewers who had watched at least one Chinese dating reality show in the past three months. To ensure methodological rigor and sample representativeness, the required sample size was determined by referring to the sample scale proposed by Krejcie and Morgan (1970). A total of 600 questionnaires were collected. After excluding invalid responses, such as incomplete submissions or patterned answering, 591 valid questionnaires were retained for final analysis. The demographic characteristics of the sample were as follows: 56.8% female and 43.2% male; the majority were aged between 18 and 35 (87.2%); and most held a bachelor's degree or higher (78.1%). This sample profile is generally consistent with the core audience characteristics of dating reality shows.

The conceptual constructs and measurement instruments of this study were adapted, integrated, and refined from established prior research to ensure reliability and validity. The questionnaire design was grounded in an extensive review of the literature (e.g., Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; Rubin, 2009; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001) and was subsequently localized to fit the specific context of Chinese dating reality show audiences. The questionnaire consisted of five sections: demographic information, viewing behavior, viewing motivation, emotional value, and audience satisfaction. With the exception of the demographic section, all other variables were measured using a five-point Likert scale (1 = "Strongly Disagree," 5 = "Strongly Agree"). The decision to use a five-point scale was based on both methodological and practical considerations: this format helps reduce respondents' cognitive burden and potential misunderstandings in cross-cultural contexts while enhancing completion rates and response reliability in self-administered surveys (Babakus & Mangold, 1992; Krosnick & Presser, 2010).

The specific measurements were as follows:

Viewing Motivation: Based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory and referencing studies such as Perse and Rubin (1988) and Whiting and Williams (2013), the scale encompassed four sub-dimensions: entertainment needs, social needs, cognitive needs, and practical needs, comprising a total of 12 items. For example, social needs were measured with items such as "So I can talk with friends or family about the show's content."

Emotional Value: Drawing on relevant research (e.g., Bunjamin et al., 2024), this variable was operationalized and measured across two dimensions: (a) Emotional Resonance (e.g., "The emotions expressed in the show strongly resonate with my own experiences or feelings"); and (b) Emotional Engagement (e.g., "While watching, I become fully immersed, as if I were part of the story"). This variable was also examined as a moderator in the study.

Audience Satisfaction: Adapted from Oliver's (1980) satisfaction scale, this construct measured satisfaction across three dimensions: "plot arrangement," "participant performance," and "production quality," comprising 3 items in total.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS 26.0 and the Process macro. Reliability analysis and confirmatory factor analysis were first performed to assess the scales' reliability and validity. Subsequently, hierarchical regression analysis was employed to test the main and moderating effects. Before creating the interaction term to test the moderating role of emotional value (H3), both the social motivation and emotional value variables were mean-centered.

Results

Reliability, Validity, and Descriptive Statistics

Prior to hypothesis testing, the measurement model was evaluated to ensure robustness. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) demonstrated a good model fit ($\chi^2/df = 2.58$, CFI = 0.98, TLI = 0.97, RMSEA = 0.052), meeting the recommended thresholds (Hu & Bentler, 1999). All standardized factor loadings exceeded 0.70, indicating strong item-conceptual relationships. Convergent validity was established, as the Composite Reliability (CR) for each construct surpassed 0.86, and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) for all constructs was above 0.68, exceeding the critical values of 0.70 and 0.50, respectively (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). These results confirm that the adapted scales for social motivation, emotional value, and satisfaction possess excellent psychometric properties for the current sample.

Hypothesis Testing

Hierarchical regression analysis was conducted to test the proposed hypotheses, with the results summarized in Table 1. Model 1, which included only the control variables and social motivation, explained 13.0% of the variance in audience satisfaction ($R^2 = 0.130$). Social motivation exhibited a significant positive effect on satisfaction ($\beta = 0.36$, $*p < .001$), providing strong support for H1. This finding aligns with the core tenets of Uses and Gratifications Theory, reinforcing that media consumption driven by social needs, such as seeking common topics for discussion, is a potent source of viewer gratification (Rubin, 2009).

Table 1: Hierarchical Regression Analysis Results (Dependent Variable: Satisfaction; N=591)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Social Motivation	0.36***	0.23***	0.22***
Emotional Value		0.47***	0.46***
Interaction Term			0.13**
R^2	0.130	0.338	0.354
ΔR^2		0.208	0.016

Note: $*p < .05$, $**p < .01$, $***p < .001$

Upon introducing emotional value in Model 2, the explanatory power increased substantially ($\Delta R^2 = 0.208$, $*p < .001$), with the full model accounting for 33.8% of the variance. Emotional value demonstrated a significant and substantial direct positive effect on satisfaction ($\beta = 0.47$, $*p < .001$), thereby supporting H2. This result underscores that the affective benefits derived from viewing, such as pleasure and resonance, constitute a primary and powerful driver of audience satisfaction, consistent with research in consumer behavior linking emotional value to post-consumption evaluations (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001).

The critical test of H3 was performed in Model 3 with the addition of the interaction term between social motivation and emotional value. The interaction effect was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.13$, $*p* < .01$), and the incremental variance explained was significant ($\Delta R^2 = 0.016$, $*p* < .01$), confirming H3. To unpack this moderating effect, a simple slope analysis was performed (see Figure 1). The analysis revealed that for viewers reporting high emotional value (one standard deviation above the mean), the positive relationship between social motivation and satisfaction was strong and significant ($\beta_{\text{simple}} = 0.35$, $*p* < .001$). In contrast, for viewers with low emotional value (one standard deviation below the mean), this relationship was markedly weaker ($\beta_{\text{simple}} = 0.09$, $*p* < .05$). This pattern robustly confirms that emotional value acts as a positive moderator, amplifying the effect of social motivation on satisfaction.

The moderating effect of Emotional Value on the relationship between Social Need and Satisfaction

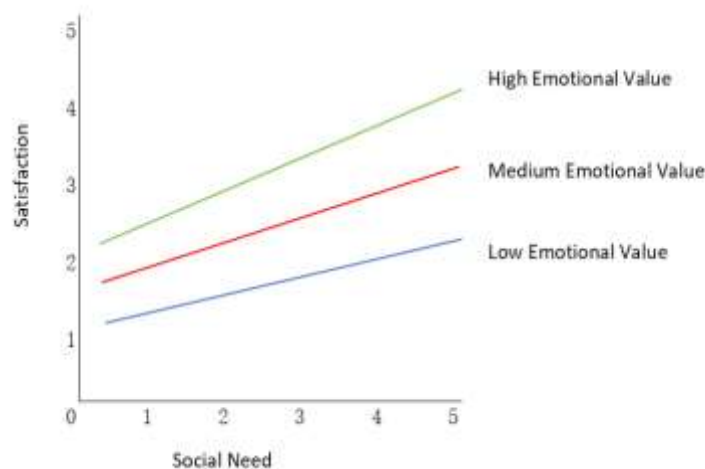


Figure 1: The Moderating Role of Emotional Value in the Link between Social Motivation and Satisfaction.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence on the mechanisms linking social motivation and satisfaction among Chinese dating reality show audiences, highlighting the pivotal dual role of emotional value as both a direct driver and a critical moderator. The findings first confirm the established UGT perspective that social motivation significantly enhances satisfaction, as viewers fulfill interpersonal needs through program-related discussions (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). More importantly, the results reveal that emotional value exerts an even stronger direct influence on satisfaction. This extends UGT by integrating a consumer psychology lens, affirming that the hedonic and affective experiences inherent in media consumption are fundamental to gratification, a point emphasized in evaluations of experiential products (Sweeney & Soutar, 2001).

The core theoretical contribution lies in the validation of emotional value as a significant positive moderator. This finding moves beyond linear, direct-effect models and introduces a crucial boundary condition. It demonstrates that the translation of social motivation into satisfaction is not uniform but is contingent upon the viewer's level of emotional engagement with the content. When audiences experience high emotional resonance and investment, their social interactions around the show become more passionate, meaningful, and gratifying. This amplifies the satisfaction derived from social utility, effectively acting as an "effect amplifier."

This insight enriches UGT by delineating how and under what conditions motivational gratification is enhanced, addressing a gap in understanding the interaction between different types of gratifications.

From a practical standpoint, these insights offer actionable guidance for content creators and platforms. The strong direct effect of emotional value suggests that producers must prioritize crafting authentic, emotionally resonant narratives and character arcs, moving beyond mere controversy or topic generation. Concurrently, the moderating role indicates that marketing strategies should be designed to leverage this emotional connection. Platforms can guide viewers to share personal emotional reactions ("heartbeat moments") rather than just factual content, thereby activating the more influential advocacy of high emotional-value users. Furthermore, data analytics can be employed to identify this valuable audience segment for targeted engagement, such as exclusive behind-the-scenes access, to foster loyalty and maximize their community influence.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations that point to future research directions. The use of a non-random, cross-sectional online sample limits generalizability and precludes definitive causal claims. Future studies could employ longitudinal or experimental designs to establish causality and examine the dynamic evolution of emotional value over time. Additionally, exploring other potential moderators (e.g., parasocial relationships with participants) or mediators (e.g., a sense of belonging to fan communities) could further unravel the complex psychology of audience engagement in the social media era.

In conclusion, this research underscores that in the context of contemporary dating reality shows, audience satisfaction is not merely a product of social utility but is profoundly shaped and intensified by emotional experience. Emotional value is not just another gratification but a key catalyst that transforms social viewing into a deeply satisfying activity.

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Ethics Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards. All procedures involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Hunan University of information technology, approval number 2024-0904. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and respondents were assured of confidentiality and

anonymity. The data collected were used solely for academic purposes.

Author Contribution Statement: All authors contributed significantly to the development of this manuscript. Zhang Shasha was responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, and overall supervision of the study. Megat Al Imran Yasin handled data collection, analysis, and interpretation of results. *Ng Chwee Fang contributed to the literature review, drafting, and critical revision of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript prior to submission.

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