

San Analysis of the Empathy Mechanism of Korean Travel Observation Slow Variety Shows from the Perspective of the Burnout Society

Yuexi Shen, Xiao Qian *

School of Cultural and Creative Management, Communication University of Zhejiang, Jiaxing, Zhejiang, China

**Corresponding Author*

Abstract: In the "burnout society" depicted by Han Byung-Chul, a series of Korean healing travel observation slow variety shows, represented by Born to Travel Once, have captured the pain points of spiritual exhaustion and emotional burnout among contemporary young people, becoming phenomenal cultural products. Grounded in burnout society theory and empathy theory, this study takes Born to Travel Once as its research subject and systematically explores the formation of the program's empathy mechanism from three dimensions of the industry value chain: creative planning, content production, and distribution and consumption. The findings reveal that the program lays the foundation for cognitive empathy through its "healing" theme, "slow travel" mechanics, "non-typical" scenes, and "non-typical" characters. It strengthens emotional empathy through narrative, audiovisual language, and post-production, and closes the empathy loop through highly interactive audience engagement, thereby achieving the transition from emotional resonance to brand loyalty.

Keywords: Burnout Society; Travel Observation Slow Variety Shows; Empathy Mechanism; Born to Travel Once

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Since the turn of the 21st century, South Korean society has gradually entered what Byung-Chul Han terms the "burnout society" [1]. The logic of performance evaluation spread into all areas of education and work, and young people fell into a vicious cycle of "involution — self-exhaustion — mental burnout." According to a 2022 survey by Asia Today in South Korea,

34.7% of respondents had experienced "burnout syndrome," and the proportion of young people aged 20-39 was as high as 43.9% [2]. Therefore, the demand of young people in South Korea for spiritual healing cultural products that can respond to deep psychological needs has risen sharply [3].

1.2 Research Significance

(1) Theoretical significance

Looking at the existing research, most studies on slow variety shows focus on surface-level patterns and have not paid enough attention to the psychological compensatory role that slow variety shows may play in the context of burnout society [4]. Against this backdrop, this study integrates Byung-Chul Han's burnout-society theory with empathy theory to construct an analytical framework, aiming to complement existing scholarship on empathy within slow-variety-show research.

(2) Practical significance

At present, domestic travel slow variety shows face problems such as content homogenization, excessive dramatization, and a lack of healing quality [5]. Empathy has become an important feature of high-quality online audiovisual content [6]. This paper takes the Korean travel variety show Born to Travel Once as a case study and tries to break down its strategies for building empathy, hoping to offer some modest reference for the development of healing slow variety shows in China.

2. Theoretical Basis

2.1 Burnout Society

Han Byung-Chul's concept of burnout society stands in contrast to Foucault's disciplinary society. A disciplinary society relies on external control through negative prohibitions, while burnout society is driven by "positive freedom"

at its core. Individuals actively exploit themselves according to performance standards, becoming both the perpetrator and the victim at the same time [7]. The single performance value standard causes mental numbness and lack of meaning. The common mentality of Korean youth, such as involution and mental internal consumption, gives rise to the healing demand of slow variety shows [3].

2.2 Empathy Theory

Empathy theory originated in the field of psychology and later extended into communication studies and media research. Mark H. Davis conceptualizes empathy along four dimensions: empathic concern, personal distress, fantasy, and perspective-taking [8]. In War for kindness, Jamil Zaki believes that empathy includes thinking, sharing and caring about other people's feelings. He pointed out that empathy refers to several different ways of responding to others, including recognizing others' feelings (cognitive empathy), sharing others' emotions (emotional empathy), and wishing to improve others' experiences (empathic concern) [9]. Arthur Ciaramicoli defined empathy as an ability to take action, with an "altruistic" quality, which makes it possible to effectively achieve emotional exchange [10]. This paper uses Zaki's three-component empathy theory as its core analytical framework.

3. Overview of the Development of Korean Travel Observation Slow Variety Shows

3.1 The Concept of "Slow Variety Show"

Chen Ying defined "slow variety show" as a type of variety program that does not have intense tasks or plot arrangements, does not preset character personalities, and does not set situational constraints. Instead, it takes the daily life and social interactions of the participants as its content, uses documentary-style filming and slow-paced editing, presents the authenticity, experiential quality, and slow rhythm of the program content, conveys certain cultural values to the audience, triggers emotional resonance, and at the same time meets the audience's entertainment needs [4].

The core value of slow variety shows is to provide rest space for tired people and convey the philosophy of slow life. It is an important cultural carrier to heal people's hearts [11].

3.2 Overview of Travel Observation Slow Variety Shows

3.2.1 Overview of observation variety shows

Observation variety shows adopt a dual-track model of "documentary reality show + observation room commentary." They use cameras to authentically record the daily lives of the observed subjects and satisfy the audience's emotional voyeuristic needs through real daily scenes [12]. This genre revolves around "observation" and "interpretation"; a full episode is constructed through two parallel timelines: on-location scenes and studio-observation segments [13].

3.2.2 Overview of travel variety shows

Travel variety shows are an important branch of slow variety shows, with travel experience as their central focus. By recording the daily interactions and emotional moments of guests in unfamiliar environments, as well as their encounters with local cultures and customs, these shows reflect the personal growth of the guests during their journeys [4,14].

Unlike fast-paced variety shows, their main characteristics still follow the true spirit of slow variety shows—"slow rhythm, no script, emphasis on authenticity, and strong healing power." They break away from the constraints of traditional travel variety shows that "emphasize checking in over experiencing," and have a certain effect in soothing emotions and healing the mind [11].

3.2.3 Definition of travel observation slow variety shows

Based on the above discussion, this paper defines travel observation slow variety shows as healing slow variety programs that use "travel" as the core vehicle and "real observation" as the key model. They downplay dramatic conflict and task competition, focus on recording the daily interactions, emotional moments, and growth experiences of guests in unfamiliar environments, and follow the philosophy of "slow" living.

3.3 Development Stages of Korean Travel Observation Slow Variety Shows

The development of Korean travel observation slow variety shows is in line with the changes in social context and audience needs. It can be roughly divided into budding, transition and mature stages. The representative works of each period have gradually improved and matured the category due to the different program characteristics, and have become an important

branch of Korean variety shows.

(1) Budding stage (starting from 2013)

From 2013 onward, the burnout atmosphere in Korean society intensified, and variety shows began to shift toward the track of emotional resonance. Driven mainly by the transformation of director Na Young-seok's production team, *Grandpas Over Flowers* was launched. It used no script and minimal intervention to record elderly celebrities traveling abroad, focusing on real interactions and emotional expressions. This opened up the slow variety show track and became the budding work of Korean travel observation slow variety shows [15].

(2) Rapid growth stage (2013–2017)

Travel observation slow variety shows moved away from the simple recording model and shifted toward "in-depth emotional exploration" [15]. Representative programs such as *Three Meals a Day* and *I Live Alone* were mainly life-oriented, but their delicate narrative logic and real-life settings provided valuable experience for travel observation slow variety shows. At the same time, they helped cultivate a professional production team and developed a production method that combined documentary filming with emotional exploration. As a result, travel observation slow variety shows gradually reduced their dependence on competitive elements and became an important part of the Korean variety show market [16].

(3) Maturity and diversification stage (after 2018)

The subject breaks through the limitation of "rural rest" and begins to explore a variety of travel scenarios. The representative program *Born to Travel Once* integrates global travel and deep emotional expression, strengthening the characteristics of "anti-routine and realism" [15]. At the same time, its cultural carrying function has also been reflected, integrating Korean local cultural elements and conveying the concept of "slow life". It is an important medium for Korean cultural dissemination.

4. Overview of the South Korean Travel-Observation Slow-Variety Show *Born to Travel Once*

4.1 Program Origin and Development

Born to Travel Once (abbreviated as *Around the World*) is a highly representative Korean healing slow variety show. It was produced by MBC Television and first aired in 2022. The main protagonist, Korean webtoon artist Kian84, had

long been living a closed creative life, feeling disconnected from reality and trapped in burnout. The production team seized the opportunity to help Kian84 "regain his lost vitality" and invited him along with three other guests to document their real travel experiences.

4.2 Program Content and Features

From 2022 to 2025, *Born to Travel Once* completed four seasons, with each season consisting of 8 to 10 episodes. Unlike slow variety shows such as *Running Girls*, which focus on "group social interaction," Kian84 sets off on his own first in each trip, and his friends join him later. The program highlights an innovative paradigm of shifting from "individual solitary experience" to "group warmth," deeply exploring Kian84's inner world [17].

The guests do not plan their itineraries in advance or set up task challenges. Instead, they follow Kian84's "bucket list" to destinations such as South America and India, presenting local cultures in an equal and authentic manner, breaking away from the fabricated feel of traditional variety shows [11].

4.3 Program Market Feedback

After the broadcast of the *Born to Travel Once*, it achieved multiple breakthroughs in viewership, topicality, and critical reception. According to data videos released by the official YouTube channel "iMBC 연예" of Korean broadcaster MBC, after the fourth season aired, it ranked first on Netflix Korea and topped the Sunday TV+OTT non-drama topicality chart for two consecutive weeks. Key cast members such as Kian84 and Dex also ranked high on the topicality charts. In addition, the program won the Korea Brand Award, and its influence continued to grow.

The program also achieved cross-cultural popularity through online distribution. On Douban, all four seasons received an average rating of over 9.0, and it was called "the ultimate travel variety show with no substitute across the entire internet" [6], achieving both local breakout success and cross-cultural reach.

5. Cognitive Empathy Design for Burnout Society

Cognitive empathy refers to a person's ability to recognize the feelings of others [9]. Through an analysis of the program's creative planning

aspects—namely core concept, game mechanics, scene selection, and character development—combined with audience feedback, it can be seen that the program completes the construction of audience cognitive empathy through these four dimensions. It allows the audience to first "understand" and then "resonate," providing space for the formation of cognitive empathy among viewers.

5.1 "Healing" Theme Positioning in Response to Burnout

At the beginning of the first season, the program presents Kian84's confusion as an ordinary person: "I wake up every day, go to work, lie down and play on my phone—everything feels boring." The show starts with this kind of dialogue, pointing out the common predicament shared by Kian84 and contemporary young Koreans, and creating an entry point for the audience to recognize Kian84's feelings.

Through the guests' spoken dialogues and on-screen captions, it can be seen that the program's narrative always revolves around emotional redemption and mental healing, frequently reinforcing the three core values of "escaping involution," "regaining vitality," and "living without a purpose." In a society where performance is placed above everything else, young people are influenced by the discourse of "must succeed." The program uses a "just go" attitude to build a "healing space" that stands against the real burnout environment, conveying the value that "life is not only about performance, but also about distant places and freedom" [1]. This is also the first step in successfully building audience cognitive empathy, laying the emotional foundation for the subsequent establishment of deeper empathy.

5.2 Anti-Efficiency "Slow Travel" Game Mechanics

In the context of fast-paced life, a travel mechanism that removes utilitarianism and goal-orientation is essentially a form of rebellion against and relief from the anxiety accelerated by modern society.

In the bullet comments of the first episode of Season 4, positive empathy-related comments such as "I no longer feel anxious after watching this" appeared very frequently. This fully shows that through the anti-efficiency slow travel game mechanics, the program successfully made the audience identify with the life philosophy it

conveys, significantly forming cognitive empathy. The audience gained temporary mental relaxation and emotional relief during the viewing process, which also promoted the initial formation of audience cognitive empathy [4].

5.3 Selection of Primitive "Non-Typical Scenes"

Across the four seasons, the program involves five main shooting locations: South America, India, Madagascar, Nepal, and Tibet. These are all primitive spaces that have not yet been overly developed. As Wang Qian mentioned, Korean slow variety shows have begun to pay attention to the return of program themes and sociocultural values, providing audiences with richer and more valuable cultural products.

The program focuses on the rustic space of niche natives such as traditional villages of the Naxi nationality, presenting the real life of the local people in a complete way, forming a strong visual and psychological contrast with the audience's tired daily life such as "workplace-home". Taking this differentiated original ecological scene as the visual carrier, a channel of "spiritual escape" has been built for the audience, and then reflected on their current fatigue and negative mentality.

The production team not only met the needs of the audience, but also guided the audience to form a correct aesthetic concept, successfully stimulating the audience's resonance with the value conveyed by the program [11]. Based on this, it provides a prerequisite for the audience to deepen cognitive sympathy.

5.4 Selection of Imperfect "Non-Typical Characters"

The guest-selection strategy of *Born to Travel Once* is also critical for building audience cognitive empathy. The show breaks away from the traditional "perfect celebrity" persona commonly seen in variety shows. It boldly chooses Kian84, who has a sensitive personality, direct emotional expression, and is somewhat moody, as the core guest, while pairing him with supporting guests who have very different but equally authentic personalities, forming a group of "non-perfect" guests.

Why does this kind of "imperfect" persona actually appeal to the audience? Based on comments from Douban and Bilibili, many viewers said they could understand Kian84 and put themselves in his shoes. Behind this

understanding and identification lies a psychological process.

First, why is "imperfect" important? Han Byung-Chul points out that the biggest problem for modern people is not being controlled by others, but pushing themselves too hard. People are increasingly afraid to show their flaws, because that would mean "I am not good enough." But Kian84 does not deliberately hide himself in front of the camera. When he is anxious, he shows his anxiety; when he messes up, he accepts the outcome. So, for the audience, this is another kind of experience they yearn for. Kian84's presence seems to say: you don't have to pretend.

In the 1950s, Carl Rogers, the founder of humanistic psychology, believed that psychological healing requires mutual understanding and perception, and that the key to building an effective connection between therapist and client lies in two factors: empathy and presence. He defined empathy as the ability to enter another person's inner world and truly experience their subjective feelings. He also believed that a good therapeutic relationship between therapist and client—that is, a state of "presence"—is itself a force for psychological healing [18]. Rogers's idea of empathy is not just "I understand you," but "I can enter your world, and you allow me to do so." In this program, Kian84 does not deliberately please the audience. He honestly shows his clumsiness and vulnerability, which makes the audience willing to let down their guard. This is the state of "presence."

6. Emotional Empathy Construction through Narrative and Audiovisual Content

Emotional empathy refers to people sharing the emotions of others [9]. Through close textual reading and shot analysis of the program from three dimensions—narrative, audiovisual, and post-production—it is found that the documentary-style expression in the content production process shares the guests' emotions and achieves the effect of transforming cognitive empathy into emotional empathy.

6.1 Life-Oriented Narrative Empathy

The program adopts a life-flow linear narrative style, paying attention to the small details of travel. This aligns well with the empathic narrative concept proposed by Fu Tingyu [19].

Audiences process empathic narrative in three

sequential stages: empathy via emotional evocation, empathy via perspective-taking, and empathy via value-based concern. The emotional foundation of empathic narrative is mainly built around social relationships, and in the narrative process, people are at the core of the story [19]. Compared with traditional variety shows, life-flow narrative allows the audience to move away from passively receiving plot points, gradually shifting from "observer-style viewing" to "immersive companionship." In the plain yet real narrative rhythm, they form a deep emotional resonance with the guests and the program content, thus achieving an advancement in emotional empathy. This narrative strategy avoids the emotional distance that excessive dramatization may cause, and strengthens the empathic effect.

6.2 Documentary Audiovisual Empathy

Through an analysis of the audiovisual language—including camera work, shot composition, and sound design—it can be seen that the program uses documentary-style audiovisual expression to open up the audience's emotional perception channels.

First, handheld camerawork combined with first-person perspective shots. The program makes extensive use of handheld follow shots and first-person perspective filming, which restores the real visual experience of the human eye as much as possible and enhances the audience's sense of presence and participation. From a psychological perspective, this type of documentary filming technique can effectively activate the audience's mirror neurons [20]. In simple terms, "mirror neurons" refer to the phenomenon that when people see others doing something, their own brains simulate that action. The shaky feeling of handheld camerawork makes the audience's bodies unconsciously "enter" the frame. This physical response is more direct than "I understand him."

Second, the use of long takes combined with blank space shot design. The program abandons the fast-paced montage style with frequent shot changes, and instead uses continuous long takes. It deliberately keeps a large number of empty shots with no people or plot, such as natural landscapes and open scenes. This audiovisual approach precisely presents the mental state of "profound boredom" that Han Byung-Chul advocates. People need a little bit of "boredom" time to truly relax. Modern people are too filled

up with phones, work, and social interactions. The long takes and empty shots in *Bron to Travel Once* give the audience time where they "do not need to do anything." This stands in opposition to the fast pace and high pressure of an accelerated society, allowing the audience to let go of their anxiety through a soothing visual experience and gain a sense of ultimate relaxation.

Third, the use of original location sound combined with healing background music. The program keeps location sound such as guest conversations, ambient noise, and natural sounds to restore the real sound environment. At the same time, it pairs these with soft and soothing background music to achieve multi-sensory coordination between vision and hearing. Through the combination of sound and image, it helps to set the mood and evoke the audience's emotions. This audiovisual language, which balances documentary realism with atmospheric quality, is a direct trigger for the audience's emotional responses such as "feeling healed," "being moved to tears," and "inner peace," and serves as an important vehicle for triggering emotional empathy.

6.3 Post-Production Empathy with Emphasis on Blank Space

In post-production, the show adopts a restrained editing strategy with minimal intervention to preserve narrative breathing space. The program retains the rough picture presented by the handheld shooting, and the guests' silence, embarrassment, quarrels and other real moments are also fully displayed [13].

This restrained and sincere post-processing method completely retains the authenticity of the character's emotions and scene atmosphere, so that the audience can feel the sincerity and purity of the program content, and then generate a stronger sense of trust in the program. In a burnout society, people are particularly disgusted with "being forced to feed things". The later stage of *Bron to Travel Once* doesn't force you to feel anything. It just puts the picture there. This "not disturbing" attitude makes the audience more willing to walk in.

7. Formation of a High-Audience-Participation Empathy Loop

Empathic concern refers to the desire to improve others' experiences [9]. In the distribution and consumption stage, the program draws on the

collective psychological distress of burnout society, carrying forward the emotional energy accumulated from the creative planning and content production stages discussed above. Through the audience's real-time interaction and spontaneous sharing, it further transforms the "understanding" of cognitive empathy and the "resonance" of emotional empathy into the "action" of empathic concern, thus forming a complete empathy loop. This achieves the triple value of burnout compensation, collective identification, and brand loyalty [12,21].

7.1 Real-Time Empathetic Interaction of the Audience

After gaining deep emotional resonance from the content production stage, the audience urgently needs an immediate way to express themselves, releasing their own feelings of exhaustion and conveying their inner healing experiences. Real-time interaction becomes the first bridge connecting individual empathy and collective identification, laying the foundation for the formation of the empathy loop.

The program relies on bullet comments, comment sections, and interactions on the guests' social media to provide the audience with an immediate channel for emotional expression. These real-time comments form an online emotional community [22].

Through an SPSS analysis of 400 visible comments on Douban for *Bron to Travel Once* season 4, it was found that the name of the main character "Kian84" appeared with a word frequency of 173 times, accounting for over 40% of the total. The audience directly expressed their liking and support for Kian84. In addition, the high-frequency emotional words showed strong positive resonance characteristics. Words such as "sincere" and "kind" indicate the audience's longing for pure kindness and genuine emotions in a burnout society. The high frequency of mentions of "Kian84" essentially reflects the audience's projection of their "ideal self" and emotional attachment. When the audience discovers during interaction that they are not alone in feeling this way, individual emotional resonance turns into a source of collective emotional identification.

Interactive behavior is essentially an extension of "para-social relationships." Through interaction, the audience deepens their emotional identification with the program content, while also strengthening their sense of participation

and belonging, laying the foundation for the formation of the empathy loop [23].

7.2 Spontaneous Empathy Communication of the Audience

Why are audiences willing to promote a program for free?

Real-time interaction achieves the transition from individual empathy to collective identification. When this collective identification settles into deep emotional identification, it naturally externalizes into spontaneous communication behavior, pushing the empathy loop further. The audience moves from "being healed" to "recommending to others," which is essentially a shift from emotional empathy to empathic concern [9]. They spontaneously engage in secondary dissemination of the program—that is, acts of "altruistic" behavior.

Specifically, there are three common forms of spontaneous audience dissemination, each with different psychological motivations behind it.

The first is editing healing clips and posting them on social platforms. On Bilibili and YouTube, many fan-edited videos can be found. These audience members pass on the healing they have experienced. They do not expect anything in return—they simply feel that "good things should be shared with others." This is what Zaki describes as empathic concern—the hope that others can also experience the same positive emotions as you.

The second is writing long posts to analyze the program's strengths and personal feelings, and answering questions from netizens. Under these posts, there are often many comments such as "Where can I watch it?" and "Who is the main character?" It can be seen that this kind of spontaneous dissemination not only expands the program's influence, but also deepens the audience's identification with the program through the dissemination process. They are no longer just passive viewers, but rather communicators and guardians of the program's "healing value." The altruistic behavior of empathic concern is also fully reflected here [6]. This behavior is somewhat different from the first type. The first is driven by emotion, while the second is more driven by identification. Hill pointed out that a long-term and stable emotional connection can be established between the audience and the program [23]. The act of writing these long posts is actually a way for these authors to solidify their "fan identity"—by

helping others understand the program, they confirm their own sense of belonging to it.

The third is discussing with fellow fans in posts or super-topics, forming small circles. These discussions are not necessarily aimed at attracting new viewers, but more at serving internal communication. When people gather to discuss the content, they are essentially confirming emotions with one another. They have all gained similar emotional experiences from the program, and through these exchanges, they mutually affirm that "we are the same kind of people."

These three types of dissemination behavior appear different, but they share one common feature: they are initiated by the audience themselves, not by the program producers. In a burnout society, people can easily feel lonely. When the audience shares and recommends the program, they are essentially seeking like-minded others. And the process of finding those like-minded people, in turn, deepens the audience's identification with the program itself. This process not only continues the communication gene of "authentic healing" in Korean slow variety shows, but also allows the program to enhance its emotional value in the distribution stage of the industry value chain, completing the transmission of empathic concern [12].

7.3 Formation of Long-Term Brand Loyalty under the Empathy Loop

Through the above processes, the audience no longer views *Born to Travel Once* as just a "program," but rather as a friend closely related to themselves. Fournier refers to this relationship as "brand relationship"—a bond between people and a brand that is similar to interpersonal relationships.

The highest level of brand loyalty is "an affectionate connection like that of a human relationship." This loyalty is the result of the formation of the empathy loop. In essence, it is a strategic brand asset that can be translated into long-term commercial value [21].

When the second and third seasons aired, the return of the original cast sparked heated discussions on social media. According to fan statistics, Kian84's Instagram followers increased by more than 200% after the program aired. The audience's loyalty to the cast members is, in essence, an emotional recognition of the program itself [23]. This brand loyalty is a sign

of the success of the program's empathy mechanism. It completes the closed-loop transformation from emotional value to commercial value in the industry value chain [12], which is highly consistent with the development logic of Korean travel observation slow variety shows—centered on emotion and supported by industry. It also provides a replicable example for the sustainable development of similar programs.

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