

# Reshaping Suspense Web Dramas: A Study of Nonlinear Narrative Strategies and Audience Feedback in Tencent Video's 2022 Suspense Series

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**Abstract:** In recent years, China's streaming platforms have increasingly invested in the production of original suspense web dramas, making suspense dramas a popular genre that frequently sparks social discussions and crosses audience boundaries. In 2022, Tencent Video released six major suspense series, including *Under the Skin*, *Are You Safe?*, *Talking Bones 2*, *The Neuron Doctors*, *The Fight*, and *Reset*. This study delves into the programming strategies and audience feedback of these series, analyzing their unique narrative structures, script content creation, and their alignment with real-world social issues. Additionally, the paper examines audience reviews on platforms such as Weibo, Douban, and Tencent Video, revealing how these phenomenon-level suspense dramas successfully captivate viewers through their realistic themes and innovative nonlinear storytelling methods, showcasing their strong appeal and market competitiveness.

**Keywords:** Suspense Dramas; Tencent Video; Narrative Innovation; Audience Engagement.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Tencent Video

As modern technology and the Internet have developed, video communication has gradually become dominant. As the primary communication channel of network video, the video website has a large influence and popularity rate among the population. As a new media platform representative of the comprehensive video site, Tencent Video has gradually formed a full industrial form in market development. According to the data of QuestMobile (2020) data, Tencent Video has 510 million monthly active users, ranking in the top three of the total list of users' data [1]. Tencent Video was officially run online in April 2011 and adheres to the brand values of focusing on the content of the video (Wu, 2021) [2]. Since 2022, Tencent Video has been paying more attention to mainstream narrative dramas with the hallmarks of *The Times* and humanistic sentiment. In addition, aside from the theme of humanistic care, Tencent Video incorporates "diverse" themes into the creation of the series, so as to cover user groups of users from different walks of life. It continuously contributes to China's networked series of works by creating greater diversity and difference in form and subject matter (Chen, 2022) [3].

### 1.2. The Suspense Network Dramas of Tencent

Given the integration of network and the relatively relaxed climate of censorship, suspense dramas on the network have gained great popularity in the market due to their suspenseful plots and tight narrative pacing (Chen, 2022) [3]. Based on the findings of the Research Report into the Development of Internet Audiovisual in China (2020), suspense network themes are expected by both industry and the public, and TV drama practitioners also consider the creation of good suspenseful stories to be a general consensus [4]. Suspense dramas also have a strong alignment with society concerns and the ability to break through differences in age and gender of audience (Yu, 2021) [5]. Based on statistics of the number of domestic suspense dramas aired on Douban (2021), up to

91 domestic suspense dramas are available online throughout the year, of which the number of broadcasts and market share continue to increase steadily (Fan, 2022) [6,7].

As a well-known video network platform in China, Tencent Video has created suspense series of "phenomenon level" in 2022. Using unique filming techniques and art forms, it builds unique aesthetic features and opens up a new creative perspective for domestic suspense drama (Fan, 2022) [7]. *Reset* is a time-loop themed drama produced by Tencent in 2022, which surpassed 100 million views on the platform two days after its launch, and finished with a high 8.2 rating on Douban (Bai, 2022) [8]. At the same time, most suspense dramas of Tencent Video are based on realistic themes, focusing on ordinary characters and social events from the point of view and breaking the traditional linear narrative mode in the story, to achieve innovation in the content of suspense dramas in the domestic network (Zhang & Qi, 2023) [9]. Accordingly, this proposal will select Tencent's six suspense dramas with high ratings in 2022, *Under the Skin*, *Are You Safe?*, *Talking Bones 2*, *The Neuron Doctors*, *The Fight* and *Reset* as analysis objects, to explore Tencent Video's programming strategy for this type.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. The General Descriptions of Six Suspense Dramas

Firstly, the six suspense dramas all take realism as the heart of their creation. All characters selected are classic characters with distinct real-life characters while the actual social cases are skillfully combined in the creation of the plot line. Furthermore, in terms of character formation, the emphasis is on group images of people at the bottom of the society and marginalised occupations in works of film and television (Guo, 2022) [10]. *Under the Skin*, for example, uses the simulation of a marginalised police officer, a portrait painter, as a point of entry for the principle characters in the plot (Deng, 2022) [11]. *The Neuron Doctors* focuses on the profession of neurosurgeon, and combines the minority theme

of the culture of traditional Chinese medicine into the market for suspense TV dramas (Yang, 2022) [12]. *Are You Safe?* as the first work themed on network security in China, reveals the value of "Tech for Social Good" in a top down manner (Zhao, 2022) [13]. In *The Fight*, the focus shifted to the chaos of the small closed county and took the phenomenon of criminal syndicate as the entry point for the plot (Liu, 2022) [14]. *Reset* combines the passengers from the Number 45 bus who live at the bottom of society, including farmers, middle-school students, game architects and other characters (Guo, 2022) [10].

Secondly, the story pacing of all six suspense dramas is compact. Suspense is considered to be the key in the construction of the plot, so as to promote the development of the story and attract the audience's attention (Yu, 2021) [5]. The story structure of the six suspense plays is also based on the pattern of the main line and the branch model. Connections between the development of the main story can be made through the unlocking of the episodic game or the story line of new characters, combined with the immersive reasoning mode. Finally, the story development of the series focuses on social and livelihood issues. For example, *Reset* combines the social hot spots of molesting girls and cyber violence (Guo, 2022); *Are You Safe?* includes cases of network information fraud; The physician-patient relationship is in *The Neuron Doctors*; The social dilemmas of domestic abuse and appearance anxiety that women in *Under the Skin* are faced; The emphasis on the parent-child relationship and adolescent growth in *Talking Bones 2* and the eradication of evil in *The Fight* (Huang, 2022) [10,15].

## 2.2. Selection and Schedule Strategies

### 2.2.1. Program Selection

Beginning in 2022, the National Radio and Television Administration has followed the call of the state to focus on realistic topics in life and to actively convey cultural confidence and social responsibility. The development of realistic works is promoted by carrying forward the main melody and spreading positive energy (Li, 2023) [16]. The suspense network series of Tencent Video set up a heroic character for the public, and fostered the audience's identification of national feelings and the pursuit of faith in a culturally-oriented manner. In *Under the Skin*, through the depiction of the police "hero", the individual's pursuit of the social belief that good and evil will ultimately be rewarded is met. People's search for truth, goodness and beauty are also guided to some degree behind the social cases portrayed in the drama (Zhang, 2023) [17]. *Talking Bones 2* utilizes a new perspective to look at good and evil in real life society, and calls on people to see their inner desires properly and to adhere to the pursuit of justice (Ren, 2022) [18]. Also, in *Reset*, as ordinary people, the hero and heroine repeatedly rescue passengers from buses in the game, which is also a reflection of the example of the pursuit of justice (Bai, 2022) [8].

Tencent Video concentrates on selecting program ideas for suspense series, which is different from the traditional niche point of view. For example, *Are You Safe?* opened up the first national network information security as a suspense drama theme; *The Neuron Doctors* focuses on traditional Chinese medical culture. Meanwhile, the six selected series combine suspense with other genres, including love, fantasy, psychology, women and adventure, in order to expand the age and gender of the target audience (Fan, 2022) [7].

### 2.2.2. Program Schedule

According to the airing schedule of the six suspense dramas on Tencent Video, *Reset* was launched on 11 January, 2022 and updated with an episode every Tuesday at 8p.m, and two episodes each Tuesday and Wednesday at 8p.m for VIP members. Regular users of *Talking Bones 2* update one episode each Tuesday through Saturday at 20:00 from 22 February. From March 6, the show have an episode every Sunday to Thursday at 8p.m, and from March 14, it have an episode every Monday to Thursday at 8p.m. Starting May 10, *The Fight* broadcast two new episodes each Tuesday through Saturday at 8p.m. *Are You Safe?* an episode updated every Sunday through Wednesday at 20:00 as of September 11. The *Neuron Doctors* series be updated with two new episodes each Sunday through Friday from November 2 to 19:30. Consequently, based on the dayparts' analysis, the timeslots of the six suspense shows were broadcast during prime time weekdays between 8 to 10p.m, and simultaneously the target audience for that timeslot is primarily built by the mainstream audience.

Analysis of user portraits by Yien Data (2023) has shown that Generation Z users are the primary audience group of suspense dramas [19]. Of these, according to the user age analysis, the post-1995 user population rises to 30.3%, and is mostly concentrated in the first to third tier cities. Analysis of users' needs suggests that this type of audience tends to select the story with conflict and attraction, while the development of the narrative of the story is not too serious and may convey some social issues. As a result, the storytelling method of nontraditional narrative structure used in the six suspense dramas with high quality aesthetics can effectively appeal to this segment of users. On the other hand, the social phenomena contained in the plots, such as injustice in the workplace, appearance anxiety, Internet violence and other common social problems, may also provide some resonance for the audience.

The actors in the series are also currently famous young actors and seasoned actors, which is successful in meeting the preferences of most younger audiences (Bai, 2022) [8]. Such as the two younger actors Bai Jingting and Zhao Jinmai at *Reset*, Tan Jianci as *Under the Skin* and the child star Rong Zishan as *Are You Safe?* The cast members of *Talking Bones 2* and *The Neuron Doctors* are also experienced actors and actresses, fulfilling the audience's demand for high quality dramas.

Meanwhile, Tencent Video adopts a countering strategy of the concept of infinite flow and the niche profession portrait on its broadcast of suspense dramas in order to gain a greater audience flow. For example, *Reset* created a unique perspective of suspense drama creation and introduced the concept of infinite flow into suspense drama for the first time (Bai, 2022) [8]. *Under the Skin* initially introduced the niche profession of portrait model. Tencent Video also uses stunting strategy that schedules specials for a program. For example, in *Reset's* watch schedule, members can get the benefit of updating an episode more than they used to on January 19th. Furthermore, this surprising strategy also makes users more engaged. In the background of the comment section of *Under the Skin*, the actors of the characters will randomly discuss the plot with users in the comment section.

## 2.3. Audience Evaluation

The algorithmic measure showed that Tencent Video had 1.13 billion views in the less than 10 days after *Reset* started

broadcasting. Douban received a score of 8.2 at the same time, with over 247,000 people participating in the rating (DT Finance, 2022) [20]. During the first week of *Under the Skin*'s launch, a total of 487 related topics appeared on the hot search list on Weibo, and the popularity in Tencent video exceeded 8900, earning the series' first-ever network spot (DataNET, 2022) [21]. *Are You Safe?* after the broadcast, the video was played by 12,594,000 people in Tencent, and the discussion of the subject on Weibo has grown to 2.56 billion people (ZhiHu, 2022) [22]. Meanwhile, according to data from Tencent Website (2022), *Talking Bones 2* was ranked number one on the TV series' high IQ reasoning list within a week of its release [23]. On the night of its premiere as a medical drama, *The Neuron Doctors* peaked at number one in the urban ratings on CSM63 (2022) [24]. Tencent Video's cumulative views in the first six episodes of *The Fight* were in excess of 14.326 million. These data shows that Tencent Video's suspense dramas have demonstrated high audience engagement across major platforms and have received widespread acclaim from viewers. These dramas, with their high view counts on the platform and extensive discussions on social media, further attest to the strong appeal of suspense dramas and their significant market influence.

### 2.3.1. Douban Content Analysis

This article hopes to obtain the audience's evaluation of the Tencent video suspense drama by analyzing the content of the six suspense dramas set in Douban. In this article, the study was conducted on Douban users who had watched six TV shows: *Under the Skin*, *Are You Safe?*, *Talking Bones 2*, *The Neuron Doctors*, *The Fight* and *Reset*. Through a purposeful sample, three separate user reviews from each suspense show, or a total of 18 reviews, will be taken as a sample for the study.

Word of mouth for Tencent Video's 2022 suspense dramas have been mostly positive. Audience acclaim includes the novelty of the subject matter and the acting skills of the lead actors. Meanwhile, negative reviews of the six suspense dramas have focused on the logic of the storyline, the way it was filmed and the lines spoken by some of the actors. In general, most viewers focus on the quality of the story and the logic of the content. In terms of the young actors who appear in the series, the main comments of the audience focus on the actors' acting skills. The acting skills of the young actors received mixed reviews from the audience. Some viewers praised their performance in portraying complex emotions, while others pointed out inconsistencies in their character portrayal and believability, indicating a lack of acting experience.

## 2.4. Programming Strategy

First, Tencent Video has adopted the advertisement model in its promotional strategy for the 2022 suspense dramas. Trailers have been released on Weibo and streaming platforms ahead of the show's official launch. *Reset*, for example, unfolds in the release of the ultimate trailer, featuring intense verbal snippets of the male and female masters, and delivers a wealth of suspenseful information in the words to pique viewers' curiosity about the film's central storyline (China News, 2022) [25]. In addition, in the official poster released by Tencent Video, posters for all six suspense episodes feature the show's core cast, using the celebrities to attract audience. For example, Tan Jianci and Jin Shijia in the poster of *Under the Skin*, Bai Jingting and Zhao Zhenmai in *Reset*, and Rong Zishan in *Are You Safe?* Posters are in part appealing to younger audience since these young actors are familiarized by

the Generation Z users. In addition, the positions and objects in the posters also hint at the foreshadowing of the plot and the relationships between the protagonists.

Second, Tencent Video promoted the dramas by partnering with other new media platforms. Tencent Video has accounts on both Weibo and WeChat official account. In Tencent Video's Wechat official account, for example, there are three separate menus dedicated to pushing the program. In addition, Tencent video obtains the professional content promotion from other famous official accounts such as Art Seeking and Iris by writing pitch letters. Tencent Video will also post posters and behind-the-scenes glimpses of the show on its official Weibo account. As a result, Wechat account and Weibo, as mainstream new media platforms, have become important channels for Tencent to promote its video works and expand its influence (Du, 2022) [26].

## 3. Conclusion

User analysis and platform strategies suggest that Tencent Video should strengthen integration with technology in content promotion and have a more in-depth understanding of users' points of interest. The reason for this is that it is easy to cause the problem of stereotyping if the content is produced solely on the basis of user big data. As a result, there is a need for regular investigation and collection of users' comments in the bullet screen and comments section. In addition, in the content creation, Tencent should avoid the homogenization of content, and implement more thoughtful and innovative plot arrangement in the content creation. Based on the premise of ensuring the high quality of the plot content, diversified exploration is performed. Finally, Tencent Video needs to strengthen its publicity in new media channels of Wechat account and Weibo, making the content of the platform younger and more engaging. The frequency of publication on the new media platforms should be increased to at least daily or several times per day, in order to satisfy the browsing preferences of new media users who expect frequent and up-to-date content.

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