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Assessing the engagement of reality show audiences:
an analysis of audience responses in fan culture to *Produce 101 China*.

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# ABSTRACT

In the rapid development of the new media age, audience engagement with reality shows has increased. The talent variety show *Produce 101 China* has awakened and motivated its audience to become involved in fan culture. This study was researched through the analysis of reality shows, participatory culture and social media content. It also interviewed six fans of *Produce 101 China* to gather first-hand research material and a valuable, new data set. The study found that in our highly online society, fans need to find emotional belonging and identity construction in reality TV shows and fan culture. Therefore, this research study focuses on the relationship between the fan base and the social media of *Produce 101 China*, analysing the ways in which its audience engages with fan culture and its motivations through a number of different perspectives.

# KEYWORDS

Reality show, fan culture, social media, participatory culture, audience participation, identity

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# 1  Introduction

To begin with, this research is situated in a relatively new area which has emerged from online reality shows and fan culture. Based on the rapid development of digital technology, the Internet has created many social platforms for media culture, especially fan culture. These social media platforms, such as Weibo and WeChat, provide a space for people to communicate and post their opinions. Furthermore, traditional media outlets are beginning to change their mediums of communication to online platforms, such as online reality shows. Some scholars argue that the Internet as a platform reflects contemporary society and culture and is at the core of communication online (Smutradontri and Gadavanij, 2020, p2). Therefore, by using such social platforms, audiences are moving from 'passive' to 'active' participation in media culture and products, which promotes the development of participatory culture.

Building on this context, this research study will explore the determinants of audience participation in online reality shows, focusing on *Produce 101 China*, and examining the ways in which viewers engage with reality shows. Within this, an in-depth study of the reasons behind the formation of fan culture and a close look at the actual behaviour of fan groups is one of the most important parts of this research paper. This study also speaks to a broader research question that could be relevant to other researchers: Based on *Produce 101 China*, why and how do audiences get involved in reality shows and fan culture?

In order to understand in more detail how fan culture is reflected in reality shows, this review will use the talent variety show *Produce 101 China* as a case study to analyse audience behaviour. This will have implications for other reality shows and for online cultures beyond this study, however, *Produce 101 China* is a particularly promising starting point for this

research because many audiences would interact with its media texts, and even change and innovate new media content during their participation in this reality show. Additionally, fan culture as a movement has even become increasingly popular as a direct result of this talent reality show and plays a very important role in it. While I offer primarily my own research and analysis on Produce 101 China, I would also draw on other online reality shows for context and combine this with existing research in the literature. Finally, I will use qualitative interviews to further examine the research questions I have asked and discuss my findings.

# 2 Literature Review

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter will address the theoretical background of reality television and fan culture, as well as examine the changing role of viewers in talent shows within the context of the transformation of reality television. As my research study requires an understanding of the reasons and motivations for audiences to become fans and to engage with fan culture, the behaviour and culture of fan groups will also be reviewed in this chapter. Furthermore, I would like to draw on and discuss theories about the reality TV show *Big Brother*, which is one of the most iconic and influential reality TV shows in the world. I will also review theories about how audiences use social platforms to interact with media as the overall purpose of my research is to unpack the motivations and methods by which audiences become involved in reality TV shows

## 2.2 Theoretical Context: Reality Shows

The media is currently undergoing a period of profound transformation, as popular television, dominated by soap operas, has gradually begun to be replaced by more interactive media. This interactive media is often expressed in terms of allowing people to actively communicate and interact with others. It has been argued that the audience is an active recipient and communicator in this new interactive media, rather than the passive and compulsive recipient of information (Tincknell and Raghuram, 2002, p200). Reality television has played an essential role in this media transformation, since it was introduced as factual popular television in the 1990s (Hill, 2004, p2). Furthermore, the success of reality television has forced the media industry to reconsider the interaction and engagement of media production with viewers (Jenkins, 2006, p59). Tincknell and Raghuram (2002) also suggest that reality television programmes are one of the types of television that rely on audience participation, presenting real lives and conflicts through the camera (2002, p203).

In particular, the release of the reality show *Big Brother* in 2000 attracted worldwide attention and was watched by nearly 15 million viewers (Tincknell and Raghuram, 2002, p201). This is a very important moment in the history of media and popular culture, setting trends in motion which help to explain both the development and the success of Produce 101 China. It is therefore necessary to unpack this moment in reality TV history and the scholarship surrounding it further. *Big Brother* set up hidden cameras in the lives of the participants, providing the audience with the opportunity to observe others in real time on a television screen. Moreover, the audience could indirectly experience the pleasure and pain that the participants experienced and become part of their reality (Jones, 2003, p401). Jones (2003) argues that this model gives the audience the impression of participation and interaction, which increases the sense of the viewing experience (2003, p401). I will argue

that Jones' argument has truly come to fruition perhaps beyond what he even could have expected in 2003. As my interview material will show, new platforms and new shows like Produce 101 China exploit and expand the possibilities of this human impulse towards participation and interaction. The success of the reality show *Big Brother* contributed to the development of "interactive" television, which is a notable innovation in the popular television medium. What is more, Tincknell and Raghuram (2002) found that Big Brother effectively changed the relationship between the show and the audience by including the viewer as a participant in the development of the show's content (2002, p201). *Big Brother* combined the competitive element of game shows with a rare sense of authenticity by satisfying viewers' curiosity and voyeurism about other people's lives (Tincknell and Raghuram, 2002, p202). It is therefore reasonable to conclude that *Big Brother*'s success came from the combination of real life and compelling personalities that resonate with the audience, along with the opportunity to feel part of this on-screen 'reality'. The key takeaway from this is that audiences crave a peek into the lives and contradictions of others without the modifications of performance. The live recordings of hidden cameras in reality shows help viewers perceive reality on a different level and desire to explore more privacy (Jones, 2003, p418). Although some of the audience had doubts about the authenticity of Big Brother, Hill (2002) demonstrates that viewers were keen to discover the truth in the show and to find evidence for the real story (2002, p337). In addition, in this era of new technology and media development, Thicknell and others (2002) argue that reality TV shows are a simplification of the aesthetics of film and media texts (p203). However, on the basis of my research, I would argue that claiming reality TV and the development of that genre is a simplification of film and media, is itself an over-simplification that diminishes the very real impact that reality shows can have on viewers' lives. In contrast to soap operas and news programmes, viewers are able to experience reality in a way that they have never seen before and both empathise

and pass judgement with on-screen characters in a new manner. This is a very effective way of what some scholars have called bringing the media closer to the audience (Tincknell and Raghuram, 2002, p203).

According to Jenkins and Deuze (2008), the relationship between the audience and the media industry is one of the most significant factors in the transformation of media (2008, p5). Reality shows can also be described as 'people shows', which allow viewers to put themselves in the place of the participants and empathise with them. Moreover, the viewer is aware of the emotions and can vicariously feel them in the participants while watching the show (Tincknell and Raghuram, 2002, p205). I was able to verify this experience through my own first-hand interviews, supporting these scholars' arguments. Audiences watch ordinary people doing ordinary things rather than fictional, inaccessible characters. Clearly, this is a great way to minimise the gap between the media text and the audience (2002, p205). Besides, interactive television programmes change the affiliation between viewer and media into a relationship of mutual influence and acceptance. This concept of influence is multifaceted and crucial to understanding the impact reality TV has on audiences - and how, increasingly, audiences are able to influence this genre of content in turn - as seen in Produce 101 China. There are also additional positive implications that are worthy of mention. For example, Thicknell and other scholars (2002) believe that the participation in reality television has in fact increased the democratisation of television. Reality television is far more inclusive of black, Asian, lower middle and working classes, which in turn attracts a greater range of audiences all over the world (2002, p205). Additionally, Jenkins and Deuze (2008) have shown that democratising media can expand access to and the receipt of information at the grassroots level of society (2008. p6). The audience for reality shows includes a large range of citizens at the ground level of society, who also have the right to

express their opinions and suggestions. In fact, this is encouraged and becomes a new way to find communities. It can therefore be considered a positive way to facilitate communication between viewers and the media. Furthermore, the development of a new type of media was marked by the creation of Web 2.0, which has created a level playing field between media professionals and audiences, and promoted democratisation and creativity in the media (Keen, 2006). While critical attention has been paid to the impact of Web 2.0, it is necessary to contextualise and update the body of media theory in light of the current advent of Web 3.0. *Produce 101 China*, although it launched several years ago, I argue is a continuation of these trends but brings the audience and show participants closer together than ever, in line with the immersive, participatory culture of Web 3.0. The scholars also point out that 'convergence' is an effective way to accelerate the distribution of media content and expand the market, which strengthens viewers' loyalty and control of the media (Jenkins and Deuze, 2008, p6). On the basis of these researchers' findings, when taken together, it becomes obvious that reality shows can establish a greater connection between audiences and the media than was possible before, which strongly enhances viewers' engagement with media. It is therefore an important area of research and worthy of further investigation.

The development of interactive television programmes has therefore transformed the relationship between viewers and the media. The unique authenticity of reality television attracts people who want to explore more information. It also becomes more widespread in nature as the audience grows larger. Reality TV has accelerated the development and convergence of media products. In the following sections I will discuss more about reality TV in the new media environment.

## 2.3 The Medium of Reality Shows

Due to the transformation and creativity of the media industry and the rapid development of the market economy, reality shows are increasingly influenced by audiences. In the case of *American Idol*, the talent show in which ordinary people sing and compete, it generated over $260 million by the third season (Jenkins, 2006, p60). The success of these reality talent shows is dependent on audience participation and support. The participation of larger numbers of viewers has helped to increase the discussion and impact of the reality shows. According to Jenkins (2006), this well summarises the fact that television is aiming for an interactive model in the age of digital media. In connection with the interactive media mentioned above, television and the audience have evolved from a single producer and consumer to a two-way influence (Jenkins, 2006, p245). The success of this interactive model, and its associated high level of profitability means that network television is a serious challenger to cable television in attracting its core audience. Jenkins suggests that reality shows are an effective tool for attracting viewers to broadcast network TV. Moreover, it should be admitted that lower cost reality shows can receive the same or even a higher response than cable TV (Jenkins, 2006, p60). Thus, in order to avoid the loss of online viewers and to reach out to young people's culture, reality television has to shift its vehicle from cable to online media platforms.

According to Jenkins and Deuze (2008), the Internet is the medium that connects new media production and audiences, which has a significant impact on media culture (2008, p6). With the continued success of online reality shows, media producers have introduced the idol development talent variety show, which is a new type of talent show. Different from traditional talent shows, idol development programmes focus more on the growth of the participants in front of and behind the scenes, rather than just the stage competition, which is a way to create empathy and psychological identification with the audience (Deng, 2019,

p112). The idol development programmes satisfy viewers' voyeurism and desire for truth in reality shows, which promote audiences to observe and understand the contestants. Significantly, *Produce 101 China*, one of the most influential idol development programmes, was released on the Tencent Video platform instead of on the cable TV channel. The Tencent Video platform is one of the most influential video digital media platforms in China, which has led the way in exposing online programmes to the public. Made possible by the show's online existence, the programme's producers could share many behind the scenes stories of the show's contestants on the social media platform. This helps viewers to watch the reality show while getting to know a lot about the contestants and encouraging them to discuss them on social media platforms such as Weibo and WeChat. Sheil (2020) believes that social media has helped reality TV shows to extend and develop their content. This confirms one of the tenets of Web 2.0, which is that social media is mutually beneficial to viewers and the media (Sheil, 2020).

I believe therefore that the development of new media has helped the gradual improvement of social media and digital platforms, bringing fans and idols closer together. Different from the fans who used to look up to the stars, idols are now no longer mysterious when facing their fans and they actively need their fans. The development of talent reality shows like *Produce 101 China* has driven fan discussion and engagement on social platforms. This supports Deng's (2009) conclusion that idol development programmes are in fact a product of social media platforms and have a heavy reliance on the Internet for their very existence (2009, p112).

## 2.4   Understanding Participatory Cultures in Social Media

Jenkins (2006), when he introduced the influential term "participatory culture", argues that citizens should be active in creating and sharing art, as well as teaching and communicating their experiences to others (2006, p7). With the advent of the digital age, citizens around the world are using the Internet and social platforms to publish and exchange information. Delwiche (2012) found that traditional media such as newspapers and television stations have been replaced by video sites and social media platforms. He considers this a positive way to use multimedia content to promote personal and political interests (Delwiche, 2012, p22). What's more, people are allowed to search and share real-time information freely. They are not only receivers of knowledge but also participants in a broader culture. Philosopher Pierre Lévy (1997) shows that an active approach to participation in culture is a product of collective intelligence and an effective way to promote a culture of knowledge (Jenkins, 2006). Moreover, people can not only meet new people on the Internet, but also exchange academic and intellectual opinions. This has contributed to modern people asking for help from the internet whenever they face a difficult problem. Since knowledge from people of different cultures from all over the world can be received on the internet, this has encouraged the development of participatory knowledge cultures. People rely on and trust these knowledge cultures and even find it hard to live without them (Delwiche, 2012, p23).

Due to the fact that participatory culture started to dominate people's daily lives, there were also many minority groups that formed their own cultures on websites. For example, the contestants of the reality show *Produce 101 China* have fan groups and organisations generated on social media platforms for each of them. Social platforms have helped popular culture lovers to find organisations and attract more users. Sheil (2020) indicates that fans need a space to express their views and share their passions, and social media platforms

satisfy the emotional expression of fans. Fans as a youth subcultural group are dedicated to finding young people with similar interests and values, and creating cultural practices of self-expression together (Ma and Chen, 2015). Online platforms are one of the easiest and quickest ways to meet the pursuit of fan groups and realise the value of participating in culture. When fans rely on digital platforms, their personal value is greatly reflected. Furthermore, Delwiche (2012) states that social media are aimed at providing details of fan objects, not only idols or bands, but also fictional story worlds. The discussion of these novels, comics and films has attracted many fan groups to converge (2012, p38). Fans do not have particularly expert academic knowledge like those in other fields, but their sharing of knowledge also plays a large influence on fan culture, creating a cyclical, ever-growing effect. Furthermore, Internet platforms provide fans with a sense of collective participation through consensus rather than individual success (Delwiche, 2012, p40). This is a very effective way to promote the development and production of participatory culture. Therefore, it can be considered that collective participation has a great impact on cultural development, and promotes creativity and activism in fan culture as well. Nevertheless, the purpose and reasons for these actions of fans is a direction we still need to explore, motivating my decision to gather first hand material exploring this I believe this is a necessary and lacking segment of research that will complement the work of Deng, Jenkins and the other key scholars whose work I have referenced here.

## 2.5   Produce 101 China and Fan Culture

The reality show that created a new model of talent reality show in China, *Produce 101 China*, was first broadcast on Tencent Video in 2018 and received 220 million views, which made it the number one online reality show on the platform (Zhang, 2018, p46). This programme consists of the participation of 101 girl contestants in the show, and the selection

of 11 participants to form an idol group through training, performance, and examination to debut. In contrast to traditional survival shows, the main decision makers of this reality show are the audience instead of the judges. Deng (2019) argues that for a idol reality show, the fans are the main consumers of the idols and have a great deal of control over them, which gives the audience a strong sense of satisfaction and achievement (2019, p112). This innovative model has caused a change in the identity of the audience, while at the same time attracting many fanatical fan groups (Chen, 2019).

Compared to the old way of chasing idols, fans have started to "create" idols rather than just "watch" them. In broader terms, this signifies that audiences have transformed from passive receivers of information to active participants in the show. *Produce 101 China* refers to the viewers as the "universal producers", which increases the status of the viewers themselves and increases their importance and participation (Guo, 2018, p75). Viewers are not just "watchers" of the show, but "producers" who create and cultivate the idols. This is an efficient way to maximise the power of fans in this reality show and demonstrates the motivations of the show's producers. According to Deng (2019), she argues that the audience can determine the destiny of the contestants on the show (2019, p112). The popularity of the participants in the show and the rankings are controlled by the audiences. The method of voting also plays an influential part in *Produce 101 China*. This is reflected in the fact that each user of the digital platform can only vote once for the same person per day. The support of more users is therefore required to achieve a higher ranking. Furthermore, during the competition, fans also have the right to choose songs for the contestants to perform that the audience subjectively deems appropriate for them (Guo, 2018, p75). In addition, fan practice, as a dominant part of fan culture, is accomplished through the organisation of fan groups (Deng, 2019, p112). Fans spontaneously organise themselves into fan clubs, the leading

organisations of fan groups that communicate and post updates on social platforms. The members of the fan clubs each have their own role to play, with the aim of voting for their idols in greater numbers in unity. Based on the scholar Wang (2014), he found that fans are enthusiastic about gaining a sense of belonging by participating in activities and expressing their feelings and ideas. He also suggests that this is a voluntary "clustering behaviour" within fan culture (Wang, 2014). Therefore, fan practices are an integral part of the development of fan culture and the idol industry, a genre that is inextricably tied to online media and online communities. Based on the above arguments, this study needs to consider more on fan practice behaviour, which would help address the research questions and expand the current scope of existing research.

With the transformation of media and the development of new media, Deng (2019) indicates that fans have achieved a sense of identity on the internet and have created their own unique language and fan cultures (2019, p112). In particular, fans will engage in heated discussions with other viewers on the Internet platform when watching the reality shows. On the one hand, fans are able to share their views freely on video platforms. For example, the Danmaku is a type of comment that can be displayed over a video in real time. As a new way of communicating online, Danmaku effectively promotes the active participation of viewers in the programme. Danmaku language not only improves the fun of communication, but also satisfies viewers' need for emotional expression (Li, 2018, p145). It is an effective way for viewers to find empathy in other fans' speeches, which attracts more audiences to follow and participate in fan culture, feeling a sense of direct community and even ownership over the content.

On the other hand, the unique language and symbols created collectively by fans can become a hot topic of popular discussion. This is evident in the case of one contestant in *Produce 101 China*, Naomi Wang, who has different exaggerated makeup from other contestants. But she states beauty should not be limited (Produce 101 China, 2018). Through her attitude, her fans created more interesting and inspirational phrases on the social media platform. The passionate discussion from fans led to Naomi Wang becoming a hot trend several times, which attracted the attention of many people and communities. There was even a news release from BBC calling Naomi Wang a Chinese version of Beyoncé (Deng, 2019, p112), showing the collective ability of fan groups to affect media narratives globally. Her confidence and unique style have attracted much discussion and reflection which is one of the most influential points to watch in *Produce 101 China*. Consequently, it is evident that with the rapid development of fan culture, fans have escaped the marginality of the subculture and have caused a significant influence on culture and society that cannot be ignored (Deng, 2019, p112).

To sum up, this thorough review of the perspectives of these scholars on fan culture is a very effective background to achieving my research objectives. However, questions about the purpose and ways in which viewers engage with reality television and fan culture in the new media environment remain unanswered and there is room for elaboration. The reasons and ways that cause audiences to be more actively involved in online reality shows compared to previous reality shows are questions that need to be addressed in this study.

# 3  Methodology

## 3.1  Introduction

The research focus of this essay is to understand the involvement and the role played by audiences in reality shows, especially in the case of the talent reality show *Produce 101 China* (2018). There are two primary strands to this research, forming interconnected research aims. For the first this research would like to study the audience's identity construction and participation in the reality show, *Produce 101 China*. For the second, this research study is interested in the role and importance of social media platforms in this online reality show. Reflecting on the findings from both these strands, this study questions the adaptability and engagement of fan culture in the media industry by comparing different audiences' understandings of *Produce 101 China*. The main research question of this study is therefore as follows:

> **RQ: Based on *Produce 101 China*, why and how do audiences get involved in reality shows and fan culture?**

There are two additional research sub-questions each connecting the main question from a different perspective. Those are:

> **RQ1: What is the motivation for audiences to participate in fan culture?**
>
> **RQ2: How do audiences use social media platforms to participate in *Produce 101 China*?**

This chapter will initially focus on the methodological design of the study and the relevant theoretical content, as well as providing a detailed description around the reasons for the

selection of the sample. Moreover, the participant selection process is also worthy of study and analysis. In addition, this chapter will cover the ethical considerations of the chosen research methods and the limitations of my approach.

## 3.2 Research Focus and Design

As mentioned in the Literature Review, both participatory culture and the online medium play an important role in reality shows. In order to address the research question 'audience engagement on the reality show *Produce 101 China*', this study takes *Produce 101 China* as a case study to analyse and achieve the research objectives. *Produce 101 China* was chosen as a case study to focus on because it is the most broadcasted and influential online talent reality show among all of China's variety shows in the new media era (Zhang, 2018, p46). As China's first audience-participation idol show, *Produce 101 China* has played an irreplaceable role in the development of talent shows in the new media context. This was concretely demonstrated by over 15 billion reads and 100 million comments on social media platforms (Zhao, 2018). Almost 60 million people even watched the *Produce 101 China* finale live online, which had never been reached by any variety show until 2018 in China (Zhao, 2018).

According to Creswell (2018), research methods should be inclusive of steps such as hypothesis, data collection, analysis and interpretation (2018, p29). He (2018) proposes that quantitative methods are an objective theoretical approach to obtaining data by measuring and observing the relationships between variables and hypotheses (Creswell, 2018, p30). In this study, however, I decided to use qualitative methods as my primary research methodology, in the form of an open interview and answers in a textual format (Creswell, 2018, p29). My decision has been informed by Creswell's argument (2018) that qualitative research refers to research methods that explore and understand human values and social

meanings (2018, p30). In contrast to quantitative research methods that protect against bias, Creswell (2018) claims that this is a research method that focuses more on personal meaning and the importance of analysis (2018, p30). In order to answer why and how viewers engage with reality show *Produce 101 China* and to answer how viewers feel while watching it, an understanding of people and society will be fundamental to answer the nuanced questions in this research study. Thus, based on the research questions (RQ1, RQ2) of this study, I take qualitative research as most suitable to the core of the discourse and its objectives. Qualitative research is a highly relevant method to answer questions around audience engagement in a reality show and to consider the significance of social media in my research questions.

## 3.3   Interviews

This study is going to use semi-structured interviews as a method to accomplish the research objective. According to this study, the aim is to answer the question of how viewers engaged with the reality show *Produce 101 China* and how they used the internet platform to participate. To answer this, it is necessary to understand not only the habits and daily lives of the audiences who follow the show, but also how they feel when watching the reality show *Produce 101 China*. Thus, in contrast to the hypothetical conjecture and objective understanding ascertained by quantitative research methods (Brennen, 2017, p18), quantitative research methods are far more suitable to the research objectives.

In addition, there are further justifications for why interviews will be the most appropriate among qualitative research methods for answering my specific research questions. First of all, interviews are a focused and purposeful in-depth conversation taking place between two or more people (Brennen, 2017, p32). The reason this study used interviews as the primary

research method was that they were more likely to produce fresh, in-depth answers than questionnaires. Questionnaires and surveys are a more generalised research method, through which it is hard to generate new answers and establish shared ideas. To answer the research question "how the audience engages in programmes and social media platforms" (RQ1, RQ2), it was essential to describe it in terms of relevant experiences and contexts, rather than just selecting from pre-set answers. Furthermore, according to Brennen (2017), qualitative research is not about measurement and experimentation, but about finding meaning and value in the research question (2017, p18). In other words, different from quantitative research methods, qualitative research methods such as interviews focus more on the research process and critical analysis (Brennen, 2017, p18).

I chose semi-structured interviews because they are more flexible in the sense that the interviewer can ask a combination of pre-determined and unexpected questions during the interview. It is possible that the knowledge and points that the participants gave were not expected from the interview questions. This means that ad-hoc questioning can help to address unanticipated ideas and thus get more answers to the research questions. In addition, the semi-structured interview is more focused on the emotions and feelings of the participants than the structured interview which aims at factual information (Brennen, 2017, p32). the fans of the contestants of this reality show are the main interviewees because the audience of *Produce 101 China* consists mainly of the contestants' fans. Therefore, the main sample for this study is the fan group that follows *Produce 101 China* and plays the role of the participants, who are also active on the internet. Since *Produce 101 China* was released on a digital platform, the main way to promote information and notifications was via Weibo - a Chinese social media platform. This was therefore the optimal way to find participants for interviews, as I was directly accessing the fan base of the reality show *Produce 101 China.*

To find this sample group, I searched for *Produce 101 China* on Weibo, found the show's official account and selected the *Produce 101 China* group chat it published, which is the official online fanbase. The members of this fan group are all important players who follow *Produce 101 China* and participate in the fan culture. In particular, I found and contacted 6 fans in this fan group chat who expressed their willingness to be interviewed and complete the study. All 6 participants were fully aware of the rules and fan culture of the show *Produce 101 China* and became fans of the show's contestants. They are all audiences who had been engaged with the show since its release, and had all voted for the reality show's contestants and followed them on social media platforms. Besides, they have access to instant information from social media, while participating in the programme and discussing it. What's more, one of them is a member of the fan organisation and she is responsible for organising and spreading the latest and most helpful information. During her time as a viewer of *Produce 101 China*, she has also provided a lot of help to other fans. It should be mentioned that her influence on social media platforms is greater than other fans. This also shows that she is one of the representative figures of her idol's fan base, in other words, her ideas can represent the ideas of a larger body of fans.

The design of the interview questions also plays an important role in the research methodology. The interview questions were designed in two parts, which answered two separate research questions. The first part was designed around the interviewees' feelings about their experiences in *Produce 101 China*, with the aim of reflecting the participants' self-perceptions and ideologies in the show. The second part focused on the patterns of their social media use during their participation in reality TV shows and was designed to unpack the importance and visibility of Internet platforms in *Produce 101 China*. Indeed, the

interviews for this study were guided by the designed interview questions list (Appendix A), rather than strictly following them, which gave a free stage for interviewees to explain their deep thinking of experience related to the research questions. Due to the participants all being based outside of the UK and the pandemic of COVID-19, this study conducted online video interviews with 6 interviewees. I chose WeChat and Zoom to do the calls, with each interview designed to last around 30 minutes. The audio of the interview content was recorded and used as data for qualitative research to support subsequent discussion and analysis.

## 3.4 Ethics and Risks

According to Brennen (2017), there is a potential risk of sensitivity between interviewers and interviewees in relation to personal information (2017, p35). In particular, my research is based on the analysis of the audience of an internet reality show and the source of the interviewer is a Weibo fan group. There is therefore an obvious ethical issue related to my research question in terms of the privacy and anonymity of users' information on social platforms. It is an ethical responsibility of the interviewer to protect the physical and emotional safety of the interviewee (Brennen, 2017, p35). Before being interviewed, the participant will be asked to sign an information consent form (included in Appendix B), which is the one that contains the purpose of the research, data use, anonymity and recording rights. This form gives the participant the right to withdraw from participation in the study at any time without reason. Also, the data of the interviewees after withdrawal would be deleted. What's more, the interview data was recorded by means of audio recordings, which is required to be transcribed into computer text files and exist in digital format (Hansen and Machin, 2018, p264). Relevant data during the course of the study is stored at the University of Leeds and may be viewed by regulatory bodies. In addition, neither the interviewee's real

information nor private social platform information will be studied. Brennen believes that protecting each participant's information is an essential part of the research (2017, p35). In this study, participants' personal information and social media activities were kept anonymous. All participants agreed to be anonymised because they did not want to expose their data to social platforms, especially Weibo, due to security concerns. I have therefore taken to anonymising participant information, in particular by replacing their names with Respondent A, B... in the quotation. Furthermore, I have set the age of the participant to be no younger than 18 years old.

## 3.5 Limitations of Research

Despite the clear benefits of assuming this qualitative research approach, there are methodological and structural limitations to this research study. In particular, due to the consequences of COVID-19, in-person face-to-face interviews have become harder and harder and participants had to be interviewed online. This limited the interviewees to those with independent electronic communication devices. What's more, the case study I chose for my research was around *Produce 101 China*, however this was a show that was broadcast in 2018, so memories will not be totally fresh. There is an obvious limitation that the interviewees are likely to suffer from memory bias and express answers that they are not prepared for, which could affect the authenticity of the answers. Additionally, I chose 6 fans of *Produce 101 China* as interviewees, all of whom had relevant experiences of fan culture. These 6 participants provided their feelings about their experience and challenge in the show as well as knowledge from different backgrounds, which contributed to the in-depth analysis and discussion of the study. Nevertheless, there is a limitation in that I only selected 6 human participants for the study analysis rather than a large number of people.

# 4 Findings and Discussion

## 4.1 Emotional Satisfaction and Self-Projection of Fans

Interactive variety reality shows have increased audience engagement and changed the way viewers participate in reality TV shows. *Produce 101 China*, one of the most influential shows in the interactive variety show industry in China, created a powerful emotional connection between the audience and the contestants that perhaps had never been seen to this degree before, based on the incredible statistics of viewership and deep participation. As mentioned in the Literature Review, Deng (2019) argues that talent reality shows are a way to make audiences empathise with idols (2019, p112). According to my findings, due to *Produce 101 China*'s emphasis on fan engagement, the interviewees all had a strong and firm emotional investment in the contestants and idols they supported in this reality show. Emotional investment also represents the value of a fan's company, which could take the form of expenditure of time, money and technology. Indeed, it is clear to see that being offered the space for emotional expression and subsequently developing a dependency on this was a very important reason or motivation causing viewers to get involved in *Produce 101 China*. Interviewee B, a fan who has been supporting her idol for four years, said, "I've been supporting my idol for so long that she is already part of my life." She has been watching the show since the first episode of *Produce 101 China* and has gone from being a viewer to a "producer" who votes for her idol,

> It puts me in a good mood to see her perform. […]. To help her reach a higher ranking, I even paid for more votes[...]. In the two months, I've been involved in the show and spent more time on her every day than I have on myself (Respondent B).

This quotation directly offers a response to the first research question, establishing that one of the reasons that audiences participate in *Produce 101 China* and fan culture is to express their

emotions through their actions to their idols, which then leads to feelings of pleasure related to their own emotions. In the case of Respondent B, she proudly admits to spending more time on her idol than herself, demonstrating the extent of fans' commitment. According to Fiske (2014), fandom is a culture of self-selection, which is a way to bring people intense pleasure and happiness through production and creation (2014, p30). From analysing the above responses, it becomes clear that there is an important new development where fans would support their idols financially when they are involved in the reality show. Fans can be considered as consumers, which is similar to the relationship between fans and media as consumers and producers, as mentioned in the literature study. Web 2.0 companies, such as video platforms, promote and increase popularity based on consumer contributions (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010, p29). Fans support their idols by spending money, which also helps them to gain emotional satisfaction. By extension, I would argue that the transformation from audience to consumer brings a sense of security to the identity of the fan.

Similarly, respondent D, who is a member of one of the fan groups for the *Produce 101 China* contestants, said, "My emotions for my idol are not only love, but also responsibility, and there is no way I can leave." D has taken on the role of opinion leader in many fan events, especially during the *Produce 101 China* competition period. In other words, the success of respondent D's idol during the competition is dependent on her organisation and guidance of the fans. Moreover, as a result of these actions, respondent D's private account has gained over 10,000 followers.

> On one hand, I think we can help each other. It shows in a way I helped her vote to get high rank, while her efforts and spirits inspire me to study and work hard. On the other hand, I am the leader of her supporter of her. […]. The amounts of followers I have on Weibo does not allow me to leave the fan culture at any time, which would affect the normal development of the fan community (Respondent D).

The above quotes show how audiences' self-projection onto their idols is also one of the main reasons or motives for their participation in the *Produce 101 China*. The theory of "projection" suggests that projection is a protective mechanism in the mind of the people who finds in others' ideas or desires that fit his or her own (Freud, 1936). This is evident in the way Respondent D describes themselves and their idol as mutually dependent, and involved in a mutually beneficial relationship. The fact that D can no longer imagine ceasing their role as a fan demonstrates the level to which fandom influences every aspect of a devoted fan's life - in many ways becoming their life, or at the very least transforming and shaping it. While it is clear that fandom has a huge impact, there is no one type of fan. Instead of the ideas and actions of different contestants in *Produce 101 China* attract different types of people. Supporting this finding is the theory of Zhang and Dai (2019, p65) who believe that fans are attracted to certain characteristics in their idols, whether they are strengths or weaknesses. For instance, Chaoyue Yang, a contestant on *Produce 101 China*, is not a good singer or dancer, but she is strong enough to deal with this problem. The fact that Chaoyue Yang doesn't give up when she meets difficulties is the most prized characteristics of her, and this is what her fans recognise and project onto themselves. This is reflected in the value fans place on character, as well as in their love for and identification with their idols. In other words, the realisation of fans' self-value and imaginative projection achieves the idol's value recognition (Huang and Gong, 2018). The answers of Interviewee A fully supported this analysis, and she was attracted to Chaoyue Yang from *Produce 101 China* because of her honesty and strong personality.

> When I first noticed her, it was a pity that she didn't have a smart talent for dancing. But over time I realised how strong and brave she was, […]. I have to say that I see myself through her (Respondent A).

The point that has to be mentioned is that fans do not only follow their idols because they are attracted by the quality, but also because they make this quality their ideal goal. Furthermore,

fans prefer to transfer their emotions to their idols, comforting and encouraging them through their successes and challenges (Zhang and Dai, 2019, p65). As the central theme of *Produce 101 China* is "Turning the tide against the wind, living in the sun", it means not to be afraid to face difficulties and never give up in order to achieve success. Two respondents said that when they were watching the contestants chase their dreams on the show made them think of themselves who did not have the courage and opportunity to realise their dreams. This is further proof of the theory that fans will relate the growth of their idols to their own real life and gain strong empathy (Zhang and Dai, 2019, p65), as seen in the three quotes below:

> I see confidence, bravery and a spirit of defiance in her. She was given the opportunity to be on stage through her courage, while I was held back by many factors and was afraid to fulfil my dreams. [...]. She is the person I want to be (Respondent B).

> I have seen the process and the results of her efforts. The improvement in her grades reminded me of my school life and I felt the energy and motivation in her (Respondent C).

Moreover, this empathy, which is the emotion generated towards others, can help people to absorb their low emotions (Ma, 2018, p71). Ma (2018) claims that when audiences watch the talent reality show, idols can help them forget about difficulties and anxiety for a while. *Produce 101 China* could therefore be considered for more than a reality show, but actually a medium that can give viewers psychological safety and protection. This makes it a third space that separates reality and illusion (Huang, 2011). This space is an effective way to relieve mental and psychological damage, and fans gain a sense of happiness by expressing their emotions in relation to it, and with others. Respondent D had a similar experience.

> We (she and her Idol) are supporting each other. The support of her fans gives her confidence, and her performances in turn heal my mental health issues. To be honest, I suffered from depression before becoming a fan of hers and she helped me escape from my dark days. (Respondent D).

Nevertheless, it is important to note here that the impact of emotional projection is not only positive, but also negative. At least four respondents reported that the main difficulty they face in fan culture is negative comments made by outsiders about their idols. Negative comments about idols have a very serious impact on fans due to their empathic mentality towards them, and are a natural extension of self-projection. It shows the strength and authenticity of this empathetic effect that online criticism of their idol can have such genuine, negative impacts on fans. Interviewee B experienced a very serious difficulty of this nature that even made her leave the fan culture for a month.

> I still can't forget that day when every social media platform was full of criticism and insults to her. […]. Even now, these comments still manage to affect my mood, and even my life (Respondent B).

Quotes such as these from Respondent B support the statements explored in the Literature Review that fan culture has enabled fans to develop from passive followers to active participants and creators of culture. Through this development, fans have become more interested in active self-expression and unique personalities. Tao (2005) argues that cultural development has awakened an active mindset in people who prefer to make themselves participants or major players in popular culture. As outlined in the Literature Review, collective fan participation leads to the activation of a broader fan culture (Delwiche, 2012, p42). Thus, it is clear to see that self-projection and self-expression are key motivations for audiences to actively engage with *Produce 101 China* and fan culture, and they lead to greater empathetic involvement with their idol - with both positive and negative consequences for the individual fan

When questioned about this, all the interviewees involved in fan culture admitted that this emotional need and the satisfaction they gained from it was the main motivation for their involvement in *Produce 101 China* and fan culture. My analysis of the qualitative data

gathered therefore, clearly found that the fans' self-projection of their idols was the main factor in their engagement and fascination with *Produce 101 China*. What is more, the extent of their fellow audiences' emotional engagement was one of the stimuli that led them as individuals to actively participate in *Produce 101 China* and fan culture. They achieved a sense of belonging through their participation, which was fostered and encouraged by the online format of the show and its cunning setup of audience-led voting. This form of participatory companionship in *Produce 101 China* satisfies the fans' psychology of emotional projection, a phenomenon which as I examined in the Literature Review can be traced back to Big Brother and the start of reality TV, and brings the interaction between idols and fans closer towards mutual dependence.

## 4.2   Construction of Fans' Identities in *Produce 101 China*

Identity is considered in sociology as an individual's confirmation of self-identity, including both individual and group identity (Zhang, 2018). This is especially relevant in the digital media era, in which people have gained the right to freely determine their own identity and role (Yi, 2002). Some scholars argue that in fact, the development of internet technology has helped people to construct their ideal identities (Zhang, 2018). I would argue that this definitely applies to *Produce 101 China,* which according to the information from my respondents, played an essential role in their own and other viewers' identity construction, with a primarily online context and remit of influence.

> Different from other reality shows, this is the first time that I, as an audience member, have the right to change the content of the show. I could feel that I had an identity in this show and was not just an ordinary viewer. (Respondent F).

In addition, fans are not only giving their emotions to their idols, but they also desire to find an idealised self-construction in them (Zhang, 2018, p47). Similar to emotional projection

that was noted before, fans desire to find similarities in the characteristics of the people they follow. This could be elaborated even further, to the extent that theorists such as Zhang (2018, p47) have suggested that fans aspire to substitute their idols into their own identity constructions.

> My parents always thought my hobbies and makeup were weird. I found myself from My idol, who was not accepted by the audiences at first in *Produce 101 China*. When the audience changed their minds about her, I also found confidence in myself (Respondent B).

She later mentioned that *Produce 101 China* has brought together different types of contestants into one show, which has helped different types of fans to find the idealised 'identity' they aspire to be. It was a creative way for people to feel communication between media texts and themselves for the first time and to actively engage with fan culture (Hill, 2007, p151).

According to Astrologer (2021), a person's sense of social identity is derived from the group to which he or she belongs. He argues that a unified identity is a communal form for those who participate in a group (Astrologer, 2021). It is expressed in the fact that people from one group are able to stick together and that other groups are considered to be different. People in groups, such as the fans of the *Produce 101 China* contestants, will consider themselves as a group and their similarities will set them apart from fans of the other contestants. Smutradontri and Gadavanij (2020) claim that fans use their identity to do something to differentiate themselves from the general audience as a way of finding identity and existence (2020, p3). In particular, fans look for a sense of group identity with a core of 'exclusivity'. Fans produce symbols and texts and spread them within fan communities in order to create a specific fan culture (Fiske, 2014, p38). This is shown by the fact that fans always create

symbols or words that only their own group can understand, developing exclusive languages that reward regular participation and can even become a barrier to entry.

> The colour to represent my group is blue because my idol's name means "fish" and we are her "sea". Every fan community has its own symbol of meaning (Respondent C).

Fan groups can also be thought of as 'imagined communities', which means that they share a common language and an identity (Zhang, 2018, p48). They find the sense of safety in an 'exclusive' space that only they understand. Moreover, they construct an identity from in-group and out-group members (Zhou, 2014). This is a cyclical, self-reinforcing process through which social identity helps fans to gain a sense of belonging in the fan culture, which leads to their more active and regular participation in *Produce 101 China* and greatens the impact of fan culture. This is a very effective way for fans to get a sense of identity, by connecting with people who support the same idol and finding a fan community to join (Zhang, 2018). According to Hill (2017), the fan group identity has a stronger sense of belonging and internal wholeness than the fan self-identity (2017, p152). As new media develops, fans as representatives of subcultures gradually develop into a 'grouping'. Some scholars believe that the same emotional experiences among fans can contribute to the social identity of fan groups (Zhang, 2018; Astrologer, 2021). Respondent D supported this by saying that fans on the internet are closely connected through social media platforms. It is not only the relationship between idols and fans, but the relationship between fans makes them actively get involved in fan culture, for which social media is crucial:

> We often help each other. [...]. Although they have never met in person, whenever I ask a question in the fan group, someone always answers and helps me (Respondent D).

Returning to the idea of participatory culture as mentioned in the Literature Review, fan culture is a product of collective intelligence. Fans are not only the recipients but also the

producers of knowledge, which promotes reliability and trust among fans. Thus, the social identity of the fan base also comes from having friends with the same motivation and taking part in this creative production. Fans are not only involved in *Produce 101 China* because they are given the status of "supporters", but also because they are socially accepted under the identity of "fans". The development of new media has opened up the direction of communication for *Produce 101 China* and has also promoted the creativity of people (Zhang, 2018, p48). This development has satisfied the demand for fans to participate in the culture, which has resulted in an upward trend in the number of fan groups. This is a reflection of the show Produce 101 China finding innovative ways, through its choice of platform and the structure of the program, to involve fans more actively and place them at the centre of the show's development. The development of such a show is in many ways a culmination of the theories around reality TV audiences and collective participation, brought together in an emotionally effective way.

Another source to support this interpretation is the existence and analysis of fan text, which is an important aspect within fan participation in fan culture. As mentioned in the Literature Review, due to the development of the Internet, fans are now able to produce many ideas in accessible online media texts. Fan text can therefore be considered a creative product of fan culture. By definition, it is the production of texts by fans about the object of the fan community. Internet pop words and meme pictures are one of most popular media languages in *Produce 101 China*. It creates and changes the meaning of the original words and sentences into a new form of consumable media, which has a great power of communication and influence on society (Fei, 2016). Fans in order to find more people to help their idols vote in *Produce 101 China*, for which one method is popularising fan text and content like memes that spread the influence and celebrity of their idol. This is another way that people express

emotions and ideas, by participating in the production and communication of fan texts as a form of "collective behaviour" (Wang, 2014). By actively interacting with the fan text in the group, fans are trying to gain a sense of identity and prove their belonging to the group.

> In order to get the audience to accept Naomi Wang, I made many humorous and entertaining meme pictures with my friend who also likes her. These pictures vary in style, but they all say, "Vote for Naomi Wang" (Respondent B).
>
> After becoming a fan, I have written fan fiction. It can also be considered fan behaviour, I guess. My fiction attracted lots of fans reading and comments (Respondent F).

It is obvious that fans express their emotions in fan texts, and the production and spreading of these fan images also represent different identities in fan culture. Fans also get attention through the production of fan texts, such as fan fiction. This makes fans feel confident and proud of their identity within the group. According to Thomas (2006), fan fiction is a space for fans to self-identify and construct their identity. In this way, fans can imagine and decide on the roles played by their idols with the use of virtual reality, such as fiction. It has to be admitted that fans are therefore not passive acceptors of media content, but they are freely and actively creating the meaning of their own existence in fan culture.

Therefore, the majority of participants achieve identity construction while participating in *Produce 101 China*, which prompts them to actively engage in fan culture. These two processes are inextricably tied together and reinforce one another. The construction of the audience's identity has helped them become closer to the media in question, as in the case of *Produce 101 China*, which is a great platform with a lot of scope to help viewers achieve an identity.

### *4.3* **Social Media and Audience Participation in *Produce 101 China***

In this era of big data, digital media takes part in every aspect of people's lives. As noted in the Literature Review, traditional TV channels are facing a huge challenge as new media are successfully trying to get closer to people and establish emotional connections between them and their content. This has been done excellently by *Produce 101 China, which* was released on a video platform rather than TV and had interactive voting sessions online. Different from voting for performances in person, all participants said the online voting method reduced the distance between the audience and the media. One respondent, as a first-time viewer of an online reality show, said, "To be honest, the voting format and rules were what drew me to *Produce 101 China*" (Respondent E). This sense of immediacy and being able to see the impact of one's actions on a show, i.e. through direct voting, was captured by the show. In addition, social media platforms and digital technology have promoted communication between viewers. *Produce 101 China* not only asks viewers to vote, but also to actively interact in the comments. In particular, the danmaku, previously noted as a new form of online communication, allows users to post moving comments into the video when it is playing. This is a novel and exciting chance for the audience to communicate with others while watching a video.

> I particularly enjoyed communicating with other viewers through danmaku when I was watching *Produce 101 China*. Sometimes I don't even find this show as interesting and engaging as I do when I turn the danmaku off (Respondent A).

The objective of this act of interacting on an online video platform is to get viewers more actively involved in reality television. Moreover, reality TV shows not only want to promote viewer engagement, but also would ideally like to convert their target audience into fans (Kresnicka, 2016). Since the majority of young people are active on social media platforms such as Weibo, *Produce 101 China* also posted its video content on Weibo as a way to promote audience access from the Weibo platform. Consequently, not only online video

platforms, but also social media platforms were influenced by *Produce 101 China*, which motivated audiences to actively and participate in fan culture (Smutradontri and Gadavanij , 2020, p2).

> I got involved in *Produce 101 China* because I saw some of its videos on Weibo. My curiosity prompted me to download the Tencent video platform and watch the full video (Respondent C).

Furthermore, social platforms allow information to be received and shared in real time and can be viewed at any time on mobile devices such as mobile phones. The social media platform, Weibo, is normally the first platform for the release of information about *Produce 101 China*, and audiences can follow the latest notifications from Weibo. Fans often use Weibo to keep up to date with the progress of their idols' rankings and eliminations. The social media platforms are updated to satisfy the needs of the audience on the show's progress and also provide more closeness between the show and the audience.

> When I got involved in *Produce 101 China*, I started following its account on the official Weibo account. I saw different information every day, not only the content of the show, but also short videos that have not been released before. I was happy to see my idols in this extra information (Respondent C).

In other words, the Reality TV show has created many new formats of programming through social media platforms. In contrast to traditional reality shows that will only be watched at a set time each week, *Produce 101 China* has created a weekly viewing schedule that includes new video content for each day. On the one hand, *Produce 101 China*'s existence in the minds of viewers has risen and it exists outside of the show's official episodes. On the other hand, such a diverse format and a large amount of video content improves the intimacy of the show with the audiences (Zhao, 2021).

> My motivation for following *Produce 101 China* was browsing through the Weibo feed for information about the contestants and the rules for the competition. One of the contestants' looks particularly caught my eye and I started to watch it (Respondent C).

My friend shared *Produce 101 China* with me through WeChat and encouraged me to follow the show (Respondent B).

Fan groups have also started to post and communicate on social media. The leading groups of the fan community, which spontaneously formed support groups, went to communicate and post and exchange information on Weibo and WeChat. In agreement with the Literature Review's argument, fans achieve their goals by organising fans activities, playing on their new shared identity. Respondent B indicated that the information posted by fan organisations on Weibo would attract her more to communicate. Moreover, fans use social media, such as Weibo and TikTok, to post comments and the content can be considered as a product of fan texts (Hill, 2013). Fan texts include not only fan fiction, but also fan clips, innovative songs and more. Respondent D said that as a member of the fanbase, these fan productions are more inspiring to fans and encourage fans to match their enthusiasm. More than that, many fans get involved in fan activities and many websites in different countries give fans the appropriate platform for fan production, such as the Chinese website Lofter. These online platforms are the most convenient way to satisfy the quest of fans.

I organised the production of a song in support of my idol. [...]. This song helped to expand the *Produce 101 China* fan base (Respondent D).

These fan productions encourage fans to find partners with similar interests on social platforms and realise the value of engaging with fan culture (Ma and Chen, 2015). This can be seen in the real-time nature of social platforms promoting audiences' engagement with online reality shows, especially *Produce 101 China*. According to Jenkin's argument of 'participatory culture' (2006, p7), media content has an impact on fan engagement via internet platforms. *Produce 101 China* has not only set up voting channels on video platforms, but also other forms of voting rankings on Weibo. These lists increase the

interaction between fans and the reality show, and the discussion and spread of *Produce 101 China*, which is considered an effective way to engage audiences with *Produce 101 China*.

In contrast, most respondents mentioned that the freedom of people to communicate on social platforms influenced the spread of negative information. In particular, these messages were not confirmed but spread rapidly. Respondent C said that experiencing it was even the reason why he wanted to quit participating in fan culture.

> My idol had news spread on Weibo and other social media platforms that affected her badly during the *Produce 101 China* competition period. Even though it was eventually proven to be false, it had a huge impact on my idol's ranking (Respondent C).

As a result, social media platforms have helped fans increase their behaviours and helped expand their fan base. Additionally, fans become a more acceptable identity within the internet platform (Booth and Kelly, 2013). According to Hall's (2005) process of encoding and decoding, fans are not only able to communicate the meaning of media texts, but also have the ability to redefine and create them (Smutradontri and Gadavanij, 2020, p4). In particular, *Produce 101 China* uses social media platforms to increase user discussion and promote audience engagement with this reality show.

# 5   Conclusion

This study has discussed how audiences participate in *Produce 101 China,* the development of fan culture and fans' reasons for engagement. The aim of this study was to find motivations for engaging with fan culture and the way they use social media to get involved in *Produce 101 China*. With the rapid development of online technology, the medium for reality shows has changed from traditional television sets to online platforms. This research

has connected this factual context with new data and analysis showing how new media technology provided technical support for *Produce 101 China*, which the show successfully used to create spaces for audiences to emotionally engage with contests, construct new identities in relation to idols and express all of this through ever-increasing engagement in fan culture, a fast-growing phenomenon.

To construct my research framework, I drew on and cited literature on the reality TV show Big Brother, online reality shows and fan culture. I held semi-structured interviews with 7 fans who follow *Produce 101 China*. According to my findings, I argue that the motivations of audiences' active participation in *Produce 101 China* are mainly due to the change in the format of the shows as a result of the development of new media. These program format changes are likely to promote fans' emotional projection and identity construction in the virtual online space. Finally, I found that the majority of fans' participation in reality shows and fan culture in the Internet era is a reflection of their desire for identity-creation, in both individual and collective senses, and emotional recognition. This can be seen in how closely fans identify with their idols, and how strong ties and feelings are within each fan group. It is this interaction between social networks as facilitators and reality shows that create these new communities that people have come to rely on.

## 5.1  Summary of Findings

In response to my first research question (RQ1),my analysis shows that viewers become emotionally satisfied in relation to the contestants when they participate in *Produce 101 China*. This emotional satisfaction was further found to be reflected in emotional engagement and expression. By investing time and money in their idols, fans produce a strong sense of happiness (Fiske, 2014, p30). These investments are the fans' emotional expressions towards

their idols. Beyond satisfaction, *Produce 101 China* can impact fans to the extent of becoming emotionally dependent. Secondly, this study suggests that audiences' self-projection of their idols is one of their motivations for participating in fan culture. Respondents indicated that fans can find characteristics in their supporters that match their own ideas. The projection of these qualities helps fans to achieve a sense of self-worth. In addition, fans are motivated by empathy, which is the transfer of emotions, and participation in fan culture can provide an escape from reality, while becoming a new reality. This finding helps to confirm that interactive reality TV shows have promoted communication between viewers and the media.

Leading on from this, the ability to construct the audience's identity in *Produce 101 China* is the core reason and motivation for their active participation. Fans' desire to get confirmation of self-identity and social identity is met by the show and the endless opportunities for engagement. Some of the respondents said that *Produce 101 China* gave the audience control in a new way, which raised the audience's identity as producers and increased their importance in a meaningful way. Moreover, fans are eager to gain a sense of belonging in the group and to establish themselves among their peers by the creation of fan texts and other contributions perceived as valuable by the group and even their idol. Research has shown that the production of specific language and symbols helps fans to achieve a social identity. More broadly, the construction and identification of these identities drives fans to actively participate in fan culture and the production of special vocabularies and ways of engaging can solidify these identities and become a form of enacting them.

The methods of enacting identities leads to the answering of research question 2 (RQ2), for which the aim of the research was to understand the impact of social media on online reality

TV shows and the way fans use social media to engage with fan culture. My findings reveal the real-time and creative nature of social media. The release of *Produce 101 China* on digital platforms increased viewer engagement, turning viewers into participants and creators. The variety of video formats and content has encouraged fans to be involved, with the show taking on a hybrid form of different media, with social media at the core. This can be seen in the way that fans used social platforms to create fan texts as a way to engage with fan culture, even growing individual followings as respected individuals within fan groups. I can therefore conclude on the basis of my qualitative research and its grounding in contextual theory, that in the case of Produce 101 China, the interrelation between the online format of the show and its expanded, fan-led development across social media platforms, constitutes a dependent relationship that has important implications for our future consumption of media and the construction of our online identities.

## 5.2   Limitations and Future Research

Nevertheless, these active participation in fan culture and online reality shows in the internet age also show the limitations of the current media culture. Some participants expressed that social platforms are not absolutely free and that the increased spread of fan culture has had many negative effects. The blind following of teenagers, the potential for misinformation and the frequency of personal attacks or attacks on others' fan groups have a serious impact on society and all online participants.

For future research, it is essential to closely study the beneficial and harmful effects of social media platforms on fans in more nuance. For my chosen case study, *Produce 101 China,* in spite of its innovative position, it has not had an exclusively positive impact on audiences, even if it has managed to engage them in groundbreaking ways. It is therefore not just the

audiences, but also the economic, political and educational factors that have influenced

*Produce 101 China* that are worthy of being studied and their future implications looked at in

more detail.

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# 7   Appendices

## Appendix A: Interview Schedule

1. Can you explain how you got involved in this Produce 101 (first involvement, role within the reality show and main responsibilities that entails)?

2. What do you do when you are watching this reality show?

    - Are you a fan of the contestants in this talent show (Produce 101)?
    - How to be a fan of the show?
    - Please describe what you do as a supporter fan (main activities, aims, values)?
    - What's the different feeling when you become a fan from the audience?

3. What is your motivation to participate in this fan culture? Does it benefit your life?

4. What have you achieved on a spiritual and material level after getting involved in this reality show?

5. Have you ever wanted to stop participating on the show? Can you explain the reason?

6. What's the most serious conflict you experienced in fan culture? Give some examples of the conflicts you met.

    - Please describe what you do when you meet difficulties?

7. Compared to other reality shows or soaps, do you feel that *Produce 101 China* audience engagement increases? In what specific ways?

8. What do you think is the reason why talent reality shows are so popular? Does it have an impact on other TV programmes?

9. Do you think that participation in this show is a culture in itself? Can you tell me what you think?

10. How do you think the development of fan culture has affected people? (Contemporary youth, audiences and media producers)

11. What is the difference between an online reality show and transitional reality TV show?

12. What role do social platforms play when you watch a reality show? Did it help you to get involved in *Produce 101 China*?

13. What is your routine when you use social media? What are the advantages and difficulties you have met?

14.  What impact do you think digital platforms have had on interactive programming? (audience/capital/media producers)

## Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

| Consent to take part in 'Assessing the engagement of reality show audience: an analysis of audience responses in fan culture to *Produce 101 China*'. | Add your initials next to the statement if you agree |
|---|---|
| I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated April 2, 2022 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project. | |
| I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.<br>Insert contact number here of lead researcher: +4407594801187<br>If withdraw from the study, the data already provided will be deleted. | |
| I understand that members of the research team may have access to my responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research.<br>I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential. | |
| I understand that the data collected from me may be stored and used in relevant future research in an anonymised form or I understand that the data I provide may be archived at Communication and Media. | |
| I understand that relevant sections of the data collected during the study, may be looked at by individuals from the University of Leeds or from regulatory authorities where it is relevant to my taking part in this research. | |
| I agree to take part in the above research project and will inform the lead researcher should my contact details change. | |

| | |
|---|---|
| Name of participant | |
| Participant's signature | |
| Date | |
| Name of lead researcher | Siting Zhang |
| Signature | 张思婷 |
| Date* | |

**Appendix C: Interview Participants**

| Respondent Reference | Gender | Age |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Respondent A | Female | 20 |
| Respondent B | Female | 20 |
| Respondent C | Female | 21 |
| Respondent D | Female | 25 |
| Respondent E | Male | 24 |
| Respondent F | Male | 21 |