Participation as Pleasure: Participatory Culture of Online Audiences in Reality Television *'Sing! China'*

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Abstract

In the Information Era, audience participation has gradually become an important activity in the media field, including reality television. Under the present convergence of media and culture, it is also valuable to review the audiences themselves and their participation in regional contexts. This study adopts case study method using online observation of audiences in two Chinese social media platforms (Sina Weibo and Baidu Tieba), exploring the online audiences' participation in *'Sing! China'* and the participatory culture they formed during this process. Through this analysis, participation can be regarded as a sort of pleasure for online audiences, where the meanings of television programs can be creatively processed and utilized for daily entertainment or communication. To some extent, audiences' interpretations of media texts are complicated, rather than being limited to mere acceptance or outright rejection as suggested by traditional models. Sometimes, audiences know the existence of authenticity issues in reality television (including performing authenticity of tutors) and some allow its coexistence within reality shows. In terms of authenticity issues on reality television, there are some audiences that create new cultural products based on their own watching experience and understanding that belongs to a part of popular culture, which is beyond the media content itself or may be different from what the media producers want to convey. Such audiences can also be viewed as media producers or free laborers of media not merely media consumers. All these individuals constitute a sort of participatory culture that circulates in society or exists in mass discourse. Through this study, the researcher attempts to provide a reference from the perspective of the audiences for the field of both academia and the media industry.

Keywords: online audiences, participation, participatory culture, reality television, *'Sing! China'*

1. Introduction

Television, as a prominent feature of contemporary culture, is a dynamic social and cultural practice rather than merely a channel or program. Rather than solely a series of artifacts, the television program is constituted by audience reception. This depiction involves the discursive contexts that reveal what people think, what they talk about, and what they do. In current culture, online audiences' participation has made their voices about reality television more visible. In fact, it is essential to explore not only what is being watched, but also how audiences respond to it and how they participate. In the current Information Era, it is vital to consider online audiences and their participation in films or television programs that circulate in society.

Among the various types of reality television, singing competition reality shows, which is a popular subgenre, have grown widely popular due to high public accessibility (Barton, 2013; Zhao, 2014). As part of the increasingly globalized culture, these types of television shows have also gained popularity in 21st-century China (Berg, 2011; Xu & Guo, 2018), drawing massive Chinese audiences. Meanwhile, there have been some controversial issues surrounding these television programs, such as common authenticity issues, which is no exception with the case *'Sing! China'*. One of the major Chinese singing competition reality shows, *'Sing! China'*, imported from Holland and relied on its characteristics of styles and patterns, generating extensive comments and disputes related to authenticity and mendacity. However, instead of comprehensively analyzing the content related to the authenticity controversy that the audience

discussed, this study concentrates more on the online audiences' participation, focusing on the participatory culture people formed in this participation process. Rather than discussing audiences' debates about what is seen as authentic or not in the television program, this study explores the response audiences expressed towards such authenticity issues and their participation or engagement during this entire process. In addition, this study also analyzes their relationships with media producers, which is related to these online audiences' roles. Through the audience analysis of the audience in this regional case, this study aims to provide a reference to researchers in academia and practitioners in the media industry.

2. Literature Review

This study examined existing academic research on online audiences and participatory culture. The purpose of this study is to organize accessible research and identify related concepts that have already been put forward by various scholars. Not only does the existing literature in this area form the rational basis for this paper's investigation, but it also provides a deeper understanding of the topic for the readers of this research.

Online Audiences and Participatory Culture

Since the beginning of television, people have been participating in the shows, either as professionals or members of the public (Hill, 2007). As the possibilities to participate have substantially increased with advances in internet technology, there are an enormous number of opportunities for people to engage in dynamic and creative practices in media (Hill, 2007), such as the film and television industry. In this Information Era, the audience online is represented by positive audiences. They not only exhibit the ability to interpret cultural products in ways that reflect their own social situations, but also possess characteristics of fans by translating symbols into creative expressions or producing symbolic products in varying degrees. They not only watch and/or participate in discussing media content and interacting with other viewers on social media platforms, but they also may produce their own creative content or cultural products based on their watching experience.

Fiske (1987) once defined a media text as "the outcome" (p. 303) of its reading and "enjoyment" (p. 110) by an audience. This definition also implies that the reading or decoding of the audiences towards a media product, such as a television program or a film is not always negative, but has a positive possibility. In other words, during the reading of the media products, it is possible that the readers or audiences may experience "pleasure" or acquire "satisfaction" (Athique, 2013; Fiske, 1989; Fiske, 2010; McQuail & Windahl, 2015), whether it is really from the text itself or from the content they create based on that text. For the latter, there are some audiences who will actively transform their negative experiences towards "media text" (McQuail, 1997: p. 19) to positive experiences or construct "some of the pleasures" (Fiske, 1987: p. 14). During such media participation and engagement, audiences create new media content to please themselves to satisfy their psychological need as audiences in order to provide daily entertainment or communication.

Due to special productions and identification, these audiences can be regarded as 'excessive readers' (Fiske, 1992), or 'collaborators' who co-develop or enrich media content. They often pay close attention to the particularity of television narratives (Jenkins, 1992), and gradually become active producers and manipulators of meanings in mass culture. Through this process, these audiences not only assimilate from expressing their thoughts and consuming media products such as television programs or films and express their thoughts; rather, they selectively integrate their experiences and actively create a new popular culture out of those mass-cultural products. They create their own cultural products, which can be seen as an elaborate public version of internal, semiotic productivity. As poachers of popular culture, these online audiences misappropriate popular texts and reinterpret these into 'doing things for me'; thereby, television, becomes a platform through which audiences turn their television experiences into a participatory culture (Couldry, 2011). Such online audiences are active and expressive, and their attitudes and behaviors attract us to focus on the process of cultural participation in the media.

Participatory culture is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, involving many forms of participation and degrees of engagement. In the field of media, Jenkins (1992) emphasized that the participatory culture involves fans and their community. Later Wang (2015) proposed that this concept can be based on ordinary people, particularly with various audiences. Contrasting with the culture conveyed in the original programs, it is a new culture created by the audiences themselves. They transform the experience of watching television into a kind of special text (Jenkins, 1992). These audiences receive cultural products through the media, and then combine their individual interests and social experiences with the content presented by the media. Audiences redefine or reinterpret the program according to their thoughts, and express their opinions to others (certainly they also influence each other through the exchanges of ideas or communication). This process of interaction or engagement with media products through the network constructs a type of participatory culture.

Wang (2015) also mentioned that participatory culture can be regarded as a cultural environment where individuals actively contribute, collaborate, and interact with media and content. To a certain degree, participatory culture signifies

the blurring of boundaries between consumers and producers, allowing users to create and share content rather than passively consuming it. Participatory culture is characterized by openness, universality, collaboration, and democratization of cultural production. This culture inherits the characteristics of the popularity of mass culture – the plebification of grassroots culture as well as the individuation of subculture. It has also increasingly become the embodiment of cyberculture, attracting more people to join nowadays.

In addition, the participatory culture could be divided into two types of such audiences' behaviors. The preliminary type of participatory culture is sharing on different social media platforms. They share their emotions through rich content presentation forms, and diverse channels of communication. Such communication and sharing of thoughts can be deemed as their invisible engagement of time and energy, which is a necessary factor of participatory culture. Building on this idea, the second type involves cultural creation or production. These productions encompass many different types, including texts, pictures, and videos. Although such audiences lack the direct approach of television production, the meanings of their private guesses and unauthorized productions are valuable, and it is worthwhile to study certain issues about the specific program through what they reflect.

In the process of participatory culture, there are two important points involving the role of audiences that need to be mentioned. First, audiences actively master the mass-produced texts that provide the raw materials for their cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions. During the process of participation, audiences become positive participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings instead of simply being normal spectators of popular programs (Jenkins, 1992). Second, as emotional individuals, these audiences also take on the role of free labor, serving for professional media producers. Both are intertwined and act as if they are working together towards creation. Without viewers' interactions and emotional responses, a program may lose its foothold and the meaning of its existence. When people discuss a program online, they increase the meanings of that program, whether for its cultural values, social values, or commercial values (Burgess et al., 2020).

As stated by Terranova (2004: p. 73), this unpaid work becomes a dominant core of digital media. This 'free labor' is an 'important source of value in societies'. They are "simultaneously voluntarily given, enjoyed and exploited", which is not merely exemplified by the phenomenon that they uploading user-generated content on the internet or building "virtual discourse spaces or websites" (Terranova, 2004: p. 74). These also help people further understand the relations of audiences and professional media producers under the present digital context. Andrejevic (2004: p. 6) also noted how reality television "anticipates the exploitation" of "the work of being watched", "a form of production wherein consumers are invited to sell access to their personal lives in a way not dissimilar to that in which they sell their labor power". His argument also revealed two ways in which online viewers' activity serves television producers. One way is by providing feedback, which saves the producers from having to undertake expensive market research. Another way is through personal creation related to program content, which publicizes television programs more or less. This kind of work by online television audiences not only is referred to as unpaid labor, but also is a process of the exploitation of collective intelligence as well as the integration of media and culture.

From these views, the audiences can be viewed as 'creative laborers' and corresponding their investment are 'creative labor' (Hesmondhalgh, 2010). Meanwhile, their attention, emotions, time, and energy can be seen as an invisible commodity. (Relatively, this consumption can be seen as a visible commodity; for example, some audiences would prefer to pay for the relevant tangible media products such as records, souvenirs, clothes with printed relevant logos, etc.) This type of invisible consumer behavior transforms the relationship between television makers and audiences to professional media producers and free laborers (also known as consumers). The producers and advertisers purchase the services of audiences who pay attention to particular communications. Such audiences are the products of mass media and culture, and that their participatory culture is closely related to the commercial interests of the cultural industry. The identity of this kind of audience becomes multiplicity. The boundaries between audiences and programs, or so-called consumers and producers, are quite vague. It is difficult to make an absolute distinction between each side as most of them are actually dual participants in the media (Jenkins, 1992). The increasingly popular participatory culture highlights and enriches the role of audiences.

This intersection of information and society also signifies that scholars need to concentrate on the audiences' reception and participation under the Information Era background, paying more attention to how they think or how they behave. The expansionary coverage of the Internet and the popularity of social media have enabled online users to become the contributors to the participatory culture (Wang, 2015). For media participation, the engagement of online audiences involves watching and discussing a program, interacting with other audiences, producing cultural creations or content such as photographs or videos, and so forth. Participatory culture in the media field can involve participation through various approaches, irrespective of whether as a member of the public or a non-professional organization (such as small self-media), or others. All of these constitute part of the public domain that collectively contribute to the formation of participatory culture in certain contexts. Meanwhile, these highly networked audiences also represent the "new

knowledge culture" (Jenkins, 1992: p. 27) and "a more participatory form of power" that is conducive to a new "more democratic mode" of knowledge production (Jenkins, 1992: p. 29).

3. Methodology

This research utilized a qualitative methodology using case study design collecting data via online observation.

Case study have become a popular choice of researchers for evaluations (Yin, 2011). As an empirical inquiry, this research design involves the investigation of a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context and addresses a situation in which the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not clearly evident (Yin, 1994). The difference between case study and other qualitative methods is that it is open to the use of theory or conceptual categories that guide the research and analysis of data (Meyer, 2001). Ouyang (2004) defined case study as the analysis of typical cases by describing a real phenomenon and its cause, and from this information, figuring out or deducing the general pattern and its particularities.

In this study, a famous Chinese music competition reality show *'Sing! China'* has been selected as the main case for analysis. *'Sing! China'* (which used to be *'The Voice of China'*) is one of the large Chinese singing competition reality shows. Premiered on Zhejiang Satellite Television in 2012, this program is widely popular and has attracted a large audience. Retaining the pattern of the original program (*'The Voice of Holland'*), it has two apparent features that easily prompt authenticity issues: first, there is only one standard or criterion for all contestants. That criterion is their sound, which is met by "blind audition" (that is, tutors listen with their backs to the stage where contestants perform, which implies that they cannot see what participants look like and simply decide by hearing their voices); second, a "double selection" occurs between the tutors and the players (it means that tutors are not the sole holders of the right to choose; those contestants may also designate their tutor).

The major focus of this study is on the audiences' response towards mediated authenticity (Enli, 2015) in this reality television show. Therefore, as an approach suitable for studying social behavior and complicated processes under specific circumstances (Stake, 1995), case study is appropriate for this kind of qualitative research that is based on the observation of human behavior regarding social phenomena. During this process, researchers can focus on the real details of the phenomena.

Nowadays, the internet has become an important site for people to conduct various activities, from communication to interaction. In this environment, online observation is an appropriate way to observe and analyze spectators' attitudes or behaviors. Close and detailed analysis of online data is a worthwhile target of this investigation. Therefore, the online observation approach is suitable for discovering the topic and exploring audience responses regarding the program's authenticity issue(s), including the observation of content generated by social media users. For this study, the researcher mainly observed audiences on two social media platforms that are commonly used in China: Sina Weibo and Baidu Tieba. These social media platforms are also some of the most popular Chinese online communities that let various audiences or fans discuss, communicate and interact, express their attitudes, post content they made related to media products, and so forth. Therefore, they are suitable platforms or spaces for this research to carry out exploration and further observe online audiences' responses in the public sphere.

In this study, online non-participant observation in a covert way in Sina Weibo and Baidu Tieba was employed from July 2024 to December 2024 (six months). This study first searched the topics related to this reality television show within these two platforms, and then observed related discussions or interactions by online users in the discussion areas under relevant topics. Recognizing that humans, as instruments, reflect complex adaptive systems and unique ability to create knowledge within emerging zones of complexity, the researchers serving as research instruments, applied judgement and conducted a careful examination of each observed data. In this period of investigation, this study observed approximately 500 posts and the discussion under them on these two platforms that involve more than 500 social media accounts. Another point that needs to be mentioned is that this research belongs to a single holistic case study (holistic refers to the unit of analysis), because it is concerned with one case – the reality television *'Sing! China'* – as a whole (a whole analyzing subject).

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Participation and Participatory Culture of Online Audiences in 'Sing! China'

In the present context, the audience reception becomes increasingly significant, which is no exception to the audiences' response towards reality television involving authenticity issues. In fact, the debate about what is real and what is not real is one of the major questions in reality television, but importantly, it needs to be realized that this authenticity issue is in the perspectives or the ways of thought of media audiences during their media participation.

For the television case *'Sing! China'* that this study selected, "blind audition" is one of its features. The tutors (who also serve as judges and coaches) have their backs towards the stage and they cannot see the contestants when they are singing.

Only once these tutors have decided to choose the contestant(s) and have pressed their button on their chairs, can they turn around and see the appearance of the contestant(s). Together with these contestants' counter-selection of tutors, the program is full of attractive "highlights" which prompts questions around the competition's fairness.

In China, some reality television highly emphasizes the element of 'show' or entertainment, which can be exemplified by the over-performance of media participants sometimes. This over-performance not only includes the singer(s) or performer(s) inside, but also includes the tutor(s) in it. For *'Sing! China'*, it can also be found that the tutors inside exhibit a rich variety of facial expressions or body language. Many audiences easily discover this type of scene sometimes is exaggeratedly performed on the screen, especially while each singer is singing on the stage. The scenes that are highlighted in the program mainly display tutors' hesitation or remain-undecided status on whether to press the button or not, their excitement after turning around, or similar reactions. Such shots are seemingly a necessary part of the program and can present tutors' complex inner activities, sometimes for feeding the atmosphere of the show.

For this onscreen presentation involving "performing authenticity" (Xie et al., 2021: p. 532), some audiences, rather than merely discussing the truth of what they are seeing about the way real people act in front of television cameras or the secret relationship between contestants and tutors that involves competition fairness, utilize the tutors' exaggerative body language to make their own thoughts and ideas. One example is that viewers extract the essence of these tutors' performance segments, and create spoof memes including static images (Figure 1 to Figure 7) or dynamic images (Figure 8) for mass entertainment or public use in daily communications. Viewers extracted the images from the program, giving new meanings to tutors' expressions or actions. Another instance is that some audiences imitate these performances and create their own self-made videos. As seen in the screenshots (Figure 9), viewers design a similar competition scene and they themselves as actors simulate the tutors' facial expressions and actions.

Figure 1. Audiences' self-made memes

(Annotation: Before turning around, @Na Ying, "I cannot think calmly!")

Figure 2. Audiences' self-made memes

(Annotation: After turning around, @Na Ying, "My team needs someone exactly like you!")

Figure 3. Audiences' self-made memes

(Annotation: Before turning around, @Yang Kun, "Whether I turn around or not ......")

Figure 4. Audiences' self-made memes

(Annotation: After turning around, @Yang Kun, "You know, there are 32 concerts that are waiting for you!")

Figure 5. Audiences' self-made memes
(Annotation: Before turning around, @Wang Feng, "I really feel terrible ......")

Figure 6. Audiences' self-made memes.

(Annotation: After turning around, @Wang Feng, "It's you!")

Figure 1 to Figure 6 show audiences' self-made memes that present tutors' performances before and after they turn around. They put these scenes together and added a sentence with the inner monologue of these tutors that they imagined according to their understanding, perception or interpretation, and are not fully constrained by the status or situation of tutors at that time.

Figure 7. Statistic memes of tutors with audiences' interpretations

Figure 8. Dynamic images of tutors extracted from the program by audiences

The above static figure (Figure 7) and dynamic figure (Figure 8) show tutors' performances on the screen, which also reflects audiences' participation. When audiences string these images together and add new personal understandings (which were based on the tutors' expressions or other body language in that situation), these performances are given new cultural meanings.

Moreover, some audiences imitate these performances in their self-made videos (see screenshots in Figure 9). They design a similar scene and simulate the tutors' actions. From their parodies, it can be observed that instead of directly presenting their doubting or teasing on its authenticity or fairness, such audience indirectly shows the existence of such issues in this program.

Figure 9. Screenshots of a self-made video by audiences

From Figure 9, it can be found that these audiences create a simplified contest environment, vividly simulating tutors' performances on the stage, including their reactions of hesitation, enjoyment, or surprise. These pictures not only display the exaggerated performance of tutors, but they also mirror the attitude of viewers. The audiences' practical online behaviors can be construed as interpreting tutors' performance and appropriating these materials to reconstruct or recreate their own cultural products, which can then also be broadly used by the public.

4.2 Discussion

Many reality television programs are considered unreal by some viewers, partly because of the overacting of non-professional actors or performers in front of cameras Such human performance is seemingly being accepted by audiences gradually. These audiences assume that inauthenticity is a normal phenomenon on the screen, whether involving its participants or the program itself. They consider reality television as entertainment, and know that there are few truthful elements in the media and that what was shown is a staged reality. They conceive the performance of participants on reality television as part of the overall staged nature or effects of the show. These performative issues trigger the attention of and productions by the viewers.

For the authenticity of a reality program, whether the reality program is true or intentional, there is significance of its existence as it has triggered discussion and stimulated the participation of the audience. What matters here is the participation of the audience in the discussion of authenticity issues. As Hill (2014) said, the obsession with authenticity and performance drives the development of reality television and its influence on participatory culture and popular culture. Although viewers might receive this claim with scepticism, this obsession also constitutes an important part of the pleasure derived from viewing such shows. For the audience, the spread of such pictures and videos in private conversations indirectly presents their ridicules to the program itself, but also reflects an exaggerated performance as an interesting addition to everyday communication. Static or dynamic memes are used in public conversations to vividly express feelings. These new cultural products derived from reality programs can catch the attention of users on the Internet; importantly, such memes can be used in normal life by any person whether they have watched or are familiar with this program or not. As a program extension, the new "text" created by these television audiences can, to a certain extent, become a circulated symbol among people for a long time.

The attitudes and behaviors of audiences also reflect their current positive position in the media sphere. They are willing to give the program their attention and actively engage in it, without considering the degree of its authenticity. Compared with "performing authenticity" (Xie et al., 2021: p. 532) presented in the program, the question of whether the program itself is real or what kind of reality it portrays for audiences, is less interesting to viewers than the new cultural products that they can use in their everyday chatting.

To some extent, these audiences transform some form of unpleasurable experience that traditionally may be viewed as resistance decoding, to a sort of pleasure experience that made this media content involving authenticity issues or fairness issues have new meaning, resulting in the integration into popular culture. To some extent, their behavior reveals that they regard the performances of media participants or the fairness of talent shows as part of daily entertainment, which also serves as a means of communication. These behaviors reflect their engagement and thereby create a participatory culture during this process. In this context, the tutors' performances are being conferred a level of entertainment value by viewers. These images are given new meanings and are circulated in public conversation, which is outside the content scope that the program conveyed and has great cultural significance. On the stage of *'Sing! China'*, no matter which type of authenticity is reflected, the engagement of the audience in discussions about authenticity is valuable. Their participation involves intellectual labor and contribution, which gives great value to the topic of authenticity in reality television (and even to other types of television). It is the participation of audiences and the participatory culture they formed that empowered the new meaning of reality television (Yao, 2017) and made its value far beyond the contents it offered originally.

Audiences transform their watching behaviors into active participatory and creative behaviors (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2022). Their identity has evolved from that of the ordinary viewers to the creators. They are similar to normal viewers, yet they are also quite different, because they belong to the category of 'excessive reader', the extremely engaged audiences. They do not merely identify the existence of authenticity issues in the program, but they also produce their creations, which can be exemplified by the above-mentioned fact that they create memes based on these tutors' pictures or GIFs, or perform and shoot new video that mimic tutors' performances in the program. As Jenkins mentioned (1992), the participatory culture that online audiences formed not only presented in their interpretative behaviors such as comments, but also their 'appropriation and reconstruction'. For this television case, *'Sing! China'* displays how these audiences appropriate mediated materials and reconstruct their self-created cultural products. In addition, they not only have social values, but also economic values. Their way of participating not only indirectly disseminates the program, but it also can boost commercial benefits for both themselves (through audiences' attention or click rate) and programs (through invisible promotion).

Audiences as Consumers and Producers

In fact, there is a particular relationship between the audiences and the program, which has more general implications for the construction of selfness, the validation of personal experience, and the development of public opinion (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994). Audiences and media programs are not just simply the relationship of consumers and producers at present. Audiences or viewers can also be considered as the producers or free labor of the program, because they pour their time, energy, and emotion into it. Audiences play a fundamental role in the making of a program. They pay visible efforts (e.g., money, related products, etc.) or invisible efforts (e.g., time, energy, attention, etc.) to their program of choice. From the perspective of consumption, the "unpaid work" (Terranova, 2004: p. 73) by audiences or viewers indicates their identity in the media: a type of free labor or emotional labor. In a consumer society, the audience derives pleasure from media entertainment activities, and consuming media products. Meanwhile, the audiences serve as the media producers or the emotional commodity (labor commodity). For example, they create media-related products such as self-made videos for other audiences or online users to consume as well. To some extent, both media audiences and media producers are active media participants. Reality television is connected to the public, the audiences/viewers, the participants, the producers, and their practices. They are essentially interwoven and co-exist together, and they co-create or collectively construct the meanings of the television program.

5. Conclusion

Currently, since people have experienced a changing and challenging media environment, the communicative process between media programs and audiences is quite complex. This complex structure calls for gradual attention to audience reception and participation towards media products, whether for researchers or media practitioners. Online audiences have come to play a vital role in media and cultural studies, it is also a trait of participatory culture in the media. In the process of engagement, these audiences devote themselves to invisible and visible work. Together, with the creations they produce, audiences are collectively constituting a type of participatory culture, which can circulate in the entire society as well. In the case of this research, their invisible participation is not limited to posting their comments online; moreover, they made pictures or videos based on their understanding and posted them on social media platforms. These cultural products also reflect the pleasure experience of audiences during their media participation. Rather than directly pointing out the inauthenticity or unfairness that may exist in singing competition shows, they tend to create a new popular culture, and transform a resistance response to a pleasurable experience. To some extent, they negotiated the authenticity issue or fairness issue itself, and they discovered a new way to balance their relationship with media producers more harmoniously. That is, instead of disputing whether it is authentic in reality television or to what extent it shows authenticity to people (or specifically, for instance, whether the tutors' hesitation is true or how real they show their inner thoughts to people), it is more comfortable to dissolve these 'media-relevant doubting' through a new

innovative way. Sometimes, these displays can have positive effects. Not only do the audiences receive pleasures, satisfaction, or benefits during this process, but the media products can be promoted in a broader scope, and all of these can collectively constitute a type of culture that can circulate in society. It is also the audiences' engagement as a sort of unpaid work that gives meaning to programs, whether through the investment of their time (time-sharing), emotion, attention, or consumption, which also becomes a fundamental condition of the existence of a program and advances its promotion. This process as a part of the social phenomenon helps us to understand the "realities" or "realism" (Fiske, 2010: p. 21; Lin, 2022: p. 2) in reality television meanwhile establishing a new understanding of the relationship between audiences and programs – that is free/emotional labor (as both consumers and producers) and professional media producers.

Through the discussion and the analysis of the data, this study revealed that the online audiences' media participation can also be viewed as a pleasure of these audiences, and together with the creations they produced, collectively form the participatory culture. It also reflects the integration of media culture and popular culture in the current Internet context. These discoveries can give reference to other similar programs, which are beneficial to devote to the development and prosperity of the media industry in the future. In the meantime, admittedly, this study still has several limitations. First, this study is not broad enough and does not incorporate and analyze other television programs. Furthermore, relevant examination of participatory activities did not include all the possible behaviors that might be engaged in by the audiences of singing competition reality shows. Therefore, in future research, more regional cases of singing competition reality shows and a more comprehensive examination of online audiences' discourse and/or behaviour towards such types of television programs can also be considered for study in a broader cultural context.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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No additional data are available.

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