Authenticity in Reality Television—The Case of *'Sing! China'*

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ABSTRACT

The issue of onscreen authenticity has become a controversial topic among the public, especially in the Information Era. The reality television phenomenon is global; therefore, it is worth studying the topic of authenticity in reality television in a particular context. We analysed authenticity in reality television through the programme *'Sing! China'*, focusing on which authenticity issues were present and how these issues were depicted. The chosen methodology combined relevant literature and a case study, and the discussion about authenticity in the programme was studied through online audience discourse such as their communications and interactions. The research showed that authenticity in reality television was a type of mediated authenticity by directors. It mainly manifested in two ways: performing authenticity and fabricated authenticity, from the perspective of the performance of participants and the production of programmes respectively. The findings indicated that authenticity in reality television does not fully reflect the truth. This study can not only help us explore manifestations of the truth on the screen, but can also aid in the future development of reality television programmes.

Keywords: Audience, authenticity, media, reality television, *'Sing! China'*

INTRODUCTION

General Issue

Reality television programmes represent a hybridised form of a documentary that is regarded as 'the creative treatment of actuality' (Kerrigan & McIntyre, 2010) or a hybrid project (Kosciesza, 2020) that exhibits characteristics of a documentary.

But reality television distinguishes itself from the documentary genre by its focus on dramatization, emotional effect, and spectacle. As a highly popular genre and a part of entertainment culture, it is characterized by the seemingly improvised and unscripted presentation of real-life situations (Brandt, 2020). It has value as a cultural phenomenon in the sense that it is part of society and media (Hill, 2020). It also incorporates some elements of realism and is produced as a result of demand for commercialism and ratings in the media industry. As a subgenre of reality television, singing competition reality shows have gradually come to dominate reality programmes on television networks around the world, and the mainland Chinese TV programme market is no exception (Xu & Guo, 2018). As part of the increasingly globalised culture, these shows have gained popularity in 21st century China (Berg, 2011). Singing competitions now draw massive Chinese audiences (Barton, 2013; Zhao, 2014).

However, there have been increasingly controversial issues surrounding these programmes, particularly regarding their authenticity. In the production of TV programmes, authenticity issues are controlled to an extent by producers in terms of arranging the sequence of editing and the dialogue of the programme. As such, the issue of realism was the general problem of this study that focused on one of China's major singing competition reality shows: *'Sing! China'*. Premiering on Zhejiang Satellite Television, this programme is

widely viewed and has attracted a large audience. Retaining the pattern of the original programme (*'The Voice of Holland'*), the programme has several obvious features that hint at authenticity issues. First, there is only one standard for all contestants: their sound. Contestants are selected through a process of 'listening blindly' (coaches listen with their backs turned to the stage where contestants perform, ensuring that they make decisions based on contestants' voices alone rather than their appearance). Second, a 'double selection' occurs between coaches and players (contestants are also decision-makers since they can choose their tutor).

By relying on its characteristic style and patterns, the programme generates favourable comments and some disputes related to authenticity and mendacity. For instance, there were debates recently about the performance of programme participants and the production of the programme. To gain insight into the presentation of authenticity in reality television, instead of exploring whether reality television shows generally displayed on the screen are true or false, this study attempted to discover which kind of authenticity existed in it and how such authenticity issues are presented. We not only analysed the content discussed by audiences regarding authenticity controversy, but also concentrated on how audiences expressed themselves, their attitudes, and social participation during this entire process.

Additionally, this programme is a type of competition on the screen, just like a normal competition, which means that it is

necessary to guarantee fairness, openness and justice. From this point, the meaning of authenticity in a reality competition show is essential, for equality of match in particular. Moreover, participants in this programme are based on ordinary people, which creates opportunities for the public to display themselves or even become famous. Some of the audience may be eager to become famous or to witness others' success by participating in such shows (Xu & Guo, 2018). Therefore, if there is some unreal content in the programme (involving contestants' identity or their relationship with tutors and directors), this will lead to unbalanced thoughts in the viewer that make them question competition's salient features of 'listening blindly' and 'double selection'. Hence, compared to other types of reality shows, such competitions give audiences a stronger desire to pursue actuality. This issue was also one of the pivotal points of controversy in the research.

Authenticity in Reality-TV

There is a certain relationship between authenticity and the media. The significance of authenticity is visible when people look at discussions within audiences. Through social media platforms, audiences engage in debate, questioning what is authentic and what is staged in the programme.

Authenticity is a defining characteristic of reality television (Hill, 2007). Reality programmes provide audiences with the promise of real events and experiences through a range of approaches and different modes of production common to television broadcasting practices. Therefore, when discussing actuality in media, spectators usually consider reality programmes to be authentic and closest to the 'real' (Aslama & Pantti, 2012). Bauwel (2012) also argued that a claim of authenticity was essential for a reality programme to convey a semblance of realness to audiences. From this point, many elements should thus be authentic relatively, including the people who appear on the programmes.

Authenticity signifies the truth in media and regard authenticity as a necessary element or a duty for reality television. Actually, with the constant development of the media industry, people are viewing these issues in a new light. Nyre (2016) suggested that authenticity had numerous meanings related to media and presented various interrelated problems, including (in)authenticity of sources, messages, and our perception of the world through media. He discussed the concept of 'mediated authenticity', as defined by Enli (2015), which was regarded as the result of a paradoxical process wherein the negotiation between producers and audiences was essential to the success of the communication. Namely, authenticity (as delivered to audiences through media) is a social construction achieved on the one hand through an interplay between audiences' expectations and preconceptions about what determines a sense of authenticity, and on the other hand media producers' success in conveying content congruent with these notions. Therefore, mediated authenticity relies on the successful implementation of

"authenticity illusions" (Holt, 2016, p. 131), which requires a certain negotiated balance between producers and media audiences.

Reality television makes a unique promise of engagement with reality while simultaneously guaranteeing a secure distance (Allen & Hill, 2004). Such a distance implies the existence of untrue elements (relatively) in media, or namely, full authenticity is difficult to achieve in the domain of media. However, the truth is that such problems do not matter because some audiences are aware of the existence of mediated authenticity; therefore, the authenticity issue depends on the degree of audience acceptance. If both producers and audiences understand that authenticity is constructed, the mediated authenticity can be viewed as a consequence negotiated by media producers and audiences. Authenticity arguments concern the presentation of mediated authenticity in reality television, reflecting the connection between authenticity and media, and more importantly, hinting at the primary focus of audiences and the importance of these audiences' participation.

Besides, this research mainly used the auteur theory as fundamental support. Auteur theory is used to describe the scenario when a director's film reflects the director's creative vision as if they were primary 'author'. In terms of this research, the auteur, as the creator of the programme, has creative thoughts that are distinctively reflected through all kinds of studio interference and collective process. An auteur can use camerawork, staging, and editing to add to their vision, bringing what is shown on television to life and using the programme to express their thoughts and feelings about the subject matter and a world view (Chaudhuri, 2013). The intervention of the creator's subjective mind is inevitable in onscreen artworks. This theory is used to explain the rationality and significance of the director's thoughts in reality television, including the specific presentation. This is also one of the root causes of 'processed' controversial elements shown on the screen. The rationale lies in the existence of mediated authenticity of directors' creation, which combines objective authenticity, subjective authenticity, and artistic authenticity. The importance lies in the fact that it is 'creative treatment of actuality' of director, as the principal source of audiences' fascination that produces the commensurate audiences' interpretation and participation.

Additionally, although some present audiences know that events shown in reality television shows are not necessarily true and have a certain distance from the objective world, some audiences cannot accept this fact it and may judge these elements to be "fake". In reality, these TV programmes represent a sort of mediated authenticity, which is a TV programme form that "makes real records and artistically processes the competitive behaviours carried out following specific rules for the purpose given in advance" (Bu & Chang, 2012, p. 49). Besides, these audiences may be general about the concept of authenticity and not completely classify some elements that are not really "real" on a reality show.

As for the generalisation of this study, as an imported competition reality programmes, the features of this series of programmes are always preserved, regardless of which country's version. Hence, *'Sing! China'* has certain reference value for such type of reality television. From a broader perspective, whether it is an imported reality programme or an original reality programme, authenticity issues are always the focus of this type of programme. As the world's cultural exchanges intensify, audiences in different countries can watch TV programmes all over the world. When they watch other programmes, they can discover similar situations from this regional case. Although the case this study chose was special, the main controversy and theme is similar in other cases and may only differ in specific performances. Viewing this, this study fits well into the larger reality television landscape.

As for the significance of the research, this study offered some ideas for television practitioners in related fields, allowing them to properly master the authenticity issue in the process of programme production. Theoretically, the auteur theory (Truffaut, 1954), with qualitative research analysis, broadens the comprehension of relevant knowledge. Although numerous studies have already been conducted on authenticity in reality television, they mainly focused on famous programmes. As many countries have imported original programmes from other countries, this study attempted to analyse this kind of regional reality television in a global context to promote the development and prosperity of television industry in China and overseas.

METHODS

The methodology of this research involved qualitative approach, including online observation and case study.

Online observation involves observing and monitoring the netizens' online behaviour through internet-based communities. It enables the researcher to gather data across perspectives and time as well as in the phenomenon's natural setting (Patton, 2014); hence, it may "reveal implicit problems and offer important insight into and information about informal aspects of interactions and relations" (Nørskov & Rask, 2011, p. 2). This research monitored the two most active Chinese social media platforms - Weibo and Baidu Tieba - that gather different typical audiences towards a certain topic. By observing and recording online audiences' reviews and discussions of the programme, the researcher can understand audiences' attitudes based on their discourse that are as 'connected speech or writing' and the target object (Harris, 1981), in a more detailed and thorough manner. This process also can involve a relatively large scope of objects and thus made the study more comprehensive.

The case study has become a popular choice for evaluations (Yin, 2011). As an empirical enquiry, such a study 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 evident (Yin, 1994). The difference between the case study and other qualitative methods is that the former is open to the use of theory or conceptual categories that guide the research and analysis of data (Meyer, 2001). Because this research was based on observation of human behaviour and social phenomena, and case study is a method for understanding behaviour under specific circumstances or specific conditions (Stake, 1995), it was appropriate to implement this type of study in our research. During this process, researchers could focus on the real details of the phenomena that existed in *'Sing! China'*.

This research considered authenticity in *'Sing! China'* through the evaluation of the comments and discussions by viewers, fans, and other online users. Researchers looked for certain phrases or sentences in online forum expressing audiences' doubts about a specific topic of the programme. By repeatedly watching a series of episodes of this programme and examining audiences' participatory discourse, researchers found more evidence about authenticity issues and analysed them inductively. This research aimed to discover authenticity in media and culture regionally or even globally. To understand the discourse about authenticity in media and cultural phenomena, online participants' linguistic and other discursive choices and patterns in the context of their activities and interactions were analysed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Authenticity in reality television is still contentious (Allen & Mendick, 2013). It is related to performance and liveness - how audiences judge 'truth' according to how real people act and how scenes are shown on the screen (Piper, 2006). Within reality television, notions of authenticity sit alongside 'performance' and 'artifice', which implies that this issue should be examined from the perspectives of both programme participants and programme production (Rose & Wood, 2005). Through these two aspects, this study presented an analysis of authenticity in *'Sing! China'* based on the audiences' discourse.

What reality television displays is not real because it is not perceived as real by viewers (Nyre, 2016), which is the core debate about authenticity in reality television. In *'Sing! China'*, audiences are not merely watching programmes for entertainment, but are also engaging in a critical viewing of the attitudes and behaviours of the ordinary people featured in the programmes, and commenting on ideas and practices of programme's producers. Furthermore, it seems that spectators do not unanimously express their uncertainty as to the claims to truth made in or by reality television. This lack of unanimity is the entire point of authenticity debates in reality television among audiences.

Authenticity and Participants' Performance: Performing Authenticity

A paradox of reality television is that the more entertaining the reality programme is, the less authentic it appears to its audience. The more a participant is perceived as performing for the cameras,

the less authentic the programme appears. Thus, performance becomes one of the frameworks for judging a reality show's claim to authenticity (Hill, 2005). A moment of authenticity in a performance is a crucial factor of the "reality" relations between producers, participants, and audiences. An authentic identity or moment can be not only the self-conscious performance of the true self but also the produced or exaggerated identity or moment of authenticity by a knowing participant cast by reality television producers. Such genre had utilized common practices in documentary or drama, to grasp audiences' attention through unusual actions of real people or memorable performances by stars (Hill, 2020). Authenticity issue of performance in *'Sing! China'* was mainly analysed through two competitive phases: before singing and during singing. In terms of the dispute's subjects, the controversy mainly happened around contestants, coaches, and their relationship, which involves contestants' identity and the competition's fairness.

Authenticity and Performance before Singing. Performance operates alongside authenticity as a criterion that allows viewers to subjectively respond to creativity within audio-visual representations (Wang, 2016). In *'Sing! China'*, audiences generally watch a short video on contestants' stories behind the stage. These videos are produced by director and like a personal documentary, which encompasses players' dreams, experiences, along with their pre-competition preparation. It presents the backstage to audiences, which somewhat shows the 'real selves' of contestants from another angle. Nevertheless, it is this feature that generated doubt about the identity and experiences of players because sometimes directors intentionally edited and manipulated contestants' stories for attraction, which ran contrary to the authenticity of their emotional stories.

Onscreen performance of non-professional actors, mainly made by show creators, often framed spectators' discussion about the truthfulness of visual evidence in popular factual television. As audiences discussed in 2016 on Weibo:

> Stevens: 'Some contestants participated in other singing competition shows before, but they are disguised as ordinary people who come from grassroots. Ding was the runner-up of 'Song' but he concealed this experience and claimed he was a stall-holder in 'Sing! China'…It is not too hard to discover their performance, so I would not believe other stories about contestants in such programmes'.

Following it, 'Yilin' replied: 'I cannot stand that they are not ordinary people and even pretend to be grassroots'.

As Corner (2002, p. 264) assumed, the performance of contestants has given television audiences the opportunity for "thick judgemental and speculative discourse around participants' motives, actions and likely future behaviour". Additionally,

there have been online debates about the exaggeration of the contestants' emotional experiences. One post within fan community of 'Zou Hongyu' in 2012 on Tieba read: 'After watching Zou's documentary, is there anyone who believes he is a farmer?' Under this posting, 'Li' questioned Zou's identity: 'He is not a poor farmer from a small village as he mentioned; surprisingly, he lives in a big city with lots of money. What embarrassed me most was that he even dressed like a farmer when he sang the song!' Similarly, 'Ouuang3' replied, 'Do you know how the programme responded? They argued that he came from a farming family…how [do they expect him] to convince audiences? These non-professional singers are good at acting indeed'.

Moreover, as some audiences mentioned, 'Deng' specifically said, 'I can still remember the story where Wu wrote a song in memory of her dead father, after which many people began to show sympathy for her. Although I appreciate her and commiserate with her unfortunate experiences as well (if they are true), it cannot compensate for my discomfort with her unnaturally crying on the stage'. 'Kross9' then replied humorously, 'Recently, talent shows [have just become] places where people compare who is the most miserable!'

With many singers' real identities emerging, audiences increasingly doubt their onscreen performances and programme's intention. Authenticity of participants was rooted, on the one hand, in their 'ordinariness', that is, their similarity to their audiences (Bauwel, 2012). On the other

hand, it also stemmed from their willingness to 'be themselves' on TV, to unveil their inner emotions and thinking. It was participants' purportedly ordinary identity and their performances that motivated audiences' distrust. From their discourse in online communities, contestants did not seem to be random choices from the public. Instead, they appeared to have been carefully chosen or planned for. Hence, they tended to act like different versions of themselves on the screen. They recognised players performing as a self that was far removed from the 'real self'.

This type of confusing self-presentation relating to authentic issues might be due to contestants' motivations of becoming famous or by directors' design. The backstage self of participants can be the true self, but also contains another conscious identity they want to show to audiences. Besides, in many cases, participants and their stories may be designed for publicity of the programme. They may not always manage to stay on reality, to make audiences as spectacular and natural as possible in this spectacle (Shestakova, 2020). Such reality show uses (seemingly) real everyday life, presenting physical and spiritual presence of an ordinary person in the unique on-screen context.

Authenticity and Performance during Singing. In *'Sing! China'*, each tutor exhibited a rich variety of facial expressions and body language. Viewers easily recognised when this type of scene was performed on the screen, especially while

each singer sang. Directors mainly displayed coaches' reactions when deciding whether to press the button and their excitement after turning around.

These types of shots reflected their complex inner activities and were cut by directors to amplify the show's atmosphere. It is these types of scenes and editing effects that triggered heated debates about coaches' performances in our observations. Viewers commented about the community of 'the secret of *"Sing! China"*' on Tieba. 'Ethan' said, 'Following scenes will definitely appear each time: Na with ferocious facial expressions, pretending to think seriously; Wang with a smile, frowning slightly and biting his lips; Yang looking pained and hesitating to press the button; [and] Jay lift[ing] his head and look[ing] far into the distance'. Such vivid discourse on how coaches behaved on the screen pointed out the essence of coaches' performance in a humorous way.

Faced with such discussions, the programme replied that the coaches on the stage were real because they did not know which camera was filming them and which scene will air finally. According to the programme's response, these true hesitating shots mirrored the real mental activity of the coaches. Hill (2005) once said that if these programmes represented real selves, people would have to be unaware of the camera's presence, and that situation seldom emerged. Coaches are generally aware of the camera. In this respect, their reaction reflects, to some extent, a sort of performing authenticity in reality television.

'Sing! China' attempts to demonstrate its authenticity as much as possible; however, it is still a performing authenticity for 'show'. Its audiences tend to use 'factuality' to express authenticity, which is, for them, a criterion or marker of truth (Hill, 2007). From their comments, some believed these tutors deliberately pretended to be nervous or excited, as a sort of performance for the show.

In-depth details and speculation about coaches' performance occur in audiences' interpretations. For example, a comment by an audience on Weibo read: 'How well Na performed! There were these scenes when two different contestants sang on the stage in the same episode. She closed her eyes and reached for the button, grasped her hand tightly and performed a hesitant and tangled facial expression (Figures 1 and 2). I have seen this too much'.

From this audience's interpretation of tutor performance, it seemed there was a necessary link for this coach to remain in an undecided status about whether to press the button.

In the interest of catching the attention of audiences and improving audience ratings, many Chinese reality programmes have adopted entertainment and incorporated increasingly performative elements to it. This kind of participants' performance seems to disobey the rule of authenticity in reality television, but such performing authenticity is a part of mediated authenticity. In some circumstances, creators tended to invite relatively professional participants to perform on the screen to get

Figure 1. Close-up shot of Na's facial expression

Figure 2. Close-up shot of Na's facial expression

as what they want to present to audiences. They sometimes want to reflect a sort of reality-TV aesthetics through performances, designing to effectively entertains audiences and create an impression of authenticity (Brandt, 2020).

From another perspective, there appears to be an embarrassing situation in that 'performance' in reality television is gradually destroying the fascination of 'authenticity'. The conflict lies between viewing experiences of audiences and constructed truth in media. Actually, 'performed selves' and 'true selves' really coexist in hybrid formats within the reality

genre (Hill, 2005), which is difficult to distinguish or define. Some audiences may judge the personalized media image (a performance identity) as either accurately projecting an identity or lacking authenticity (Moody, 2020). With the innovation of modern thoughts, some audiences are constantly breaking down or renewing their attitudes towards watching, reacting, and performing (Hill, 2020). Although these audiences would not say they always like or dislike the acting moments or multiple identities all of the time. But through enjoying reality shows, they participated in the discussion about some interesting things.

Viewing these, it is important and necessary to maintain effective communication and continual negotiation between programmes and their audiences. Directors try their best to shape participants' image, whether it is to consider the fairness or effect of the programme or deliberately create heated topics, and audiences can examine it from the perspective of the feature of an entertaining show.

Authenticity and Programme's Production: Fabricated Authenticity

Additionally, for the programme, there were artificial operation and technical manipulation of the production. The feature of 'artifice' has become increasingly obvious nowadays. In the field of television and media studies, according to specific requirements and scripts, programmes often consider the format of 'liveness' and are produced through artificial editing techniques, to highlight particular themes (Allen & Hill, 2004). Improvement of digital manipulation and editing techniques has challenged the credibility of photographic and video discourses (Fetveit, 1999). Under the narrative mode of programmes, episodes are edited or designed by directors to form a natural development of logic and effect. Considering authenticity and the attractiveness of reality television, 'liveness' has become one of the most controversial points about the authenticity of reality television.

Reality television has integrated documentary-like elements, such as the shooting process and its adoption of a multi-camera documentary tracking method. It also is thought of as an attempt by the programme to achieve an authentic, concrete process and specific details in reality formats. In principle, reality television shows can appear as a form of unprocessed narration and can give viewers the impression that they are on the scene. A television programme is always planned or processed by producers to varying degrees, including in the crafting of 'liveness'. This is the controversial point questioned by spectators: What they see onscreen seems to be what the director wants them to see. This representation is highly crafted under the guidance and control of programme-makers. Although the edited programme may have a certain theme, the existence of the fabricated operation cannot be denied. From this point of view, authenticity appears to be distorted through various techniques of montage. How, then, was it manifested in this specific case? And how did audiences treat this type of phenomenon?

Liveness is one inauthentic point in reality television. As a television broadcasting format, liveness overcomes the constrictions of time and space, giving audiences special viewing experiences. In *'Sing! China'*, except final competition, most episodes are pre-recorded broadcasts. Though most of the programmes are typed in one scene, such a form actually increases the possibility of doubt about original intention during post-production.

For example, there were some illogical moments in *'Sing! China'*. When Zhang was singing, the footage showed that Na turned

around first (Figure 3) at 01:15 in the video, after which Yu turned around at 01:35 in the same video. However, Na did not turn around in this shot (Figure 4). Furthermore, the contestant shown was not even the same one, which was clear by his change of outfit and hairstyle (Figure 5). Thus, it follows that this shot is not the live scene at the time; instead, it was taken from past episodes and subsequently edited.

The screen presented the same singer's information, which was one of the programme's goofs. As for why only this scene was edited in the whole programme, perhaps an original recording of this turn-back status was not sufficient to heighten the atmosphere. Director wanted to create a particular effect, paving the way for the subsequent conversation between the coach and this singer. In the later video,

Figure 3. Screenshot of Zhang singing

Figure 4. Screenshot of tutors when Zhang was singing

Figure 5. Screenshot of the contestant's changed clothes

after Zhang had finished singing, the first sentence Yu said was, 'Who could guess he is a man?' Thus, it was no wonder that the director cut this coach's surprising reaction to serve the programme's narration and effects better. The loophole TV editor overlooked aligned with the controversial point about authenticity that audiences questioned.

The editing mainly depends on the purpose of producers or directors, but it is the most creative process in a programme. It serves different topics and corresponding logic, then presents different narrative lines and particular effects for audiences.

Programmes always display what they want to present to audiences, regardless of the purpose.

Taking a similar example, each coach had his or her range of emotions, but through editing, what viewers saw was just the most vivid and representative content. In some episodes of *'Sing! China'*, people found several scenes that the coaches' reflections were repeated, which meant that they might have been cut or edited from or into different programmes.

For instance, Na's hair changed onscreen during the same women's singing act. As shown in the scenes (Figure 6 to 9),

Figure 6. Screenshot of Na's curly hair

Figure 7. Screenshot of Na's straight hair

Figure 8. Screenshot of Na's curly hair

Figure 9. Screenshot of Na's straight hair

sometimes her hair was curly; sometimes it was straight. Thus, the programme had clipped scenes and reconstructed television footage, probably in attempts to create a tense atmosphere through the coach's indecision.

Moreover, some viewers specifically uploaded screenshots from this programme onto Weibo. One wrote: 'I found Na's [that] hairdo changed randomly. How fantastic was it?' Then other users commented, 'Participants are all actors' or 'What else?

Reality shows are originally performed according to the script'. These online discussions showed that audiences thought non-professional actors seemed to act up themselves and give scripted performances, partly because of artificial manufacturing. The format seemed to be designed with a default performance and fabrication angles, which produced negative emotions in many audiences.

There were other situations that different contestants received the same review by the same coach. Some viewers put the two scenes together and compared them

to one another (Figure 10 and 11). Facing two players, Jay behaved in a sufficiently similar manner and generated the suspicion of viewers. This included what he said, his facial expression and other behaviours. Some people posted their opinions on Weibo (Figure 12).

Similarly, in the discussion forum about 'Jay' on Tieba in 2015, there was a relevant and critical voice under this topic. One user, 'Boo' questioned the coaches' similar reactions, "Why do these tutors always have similar facial expressions or behaviours? I know their hesitation or appreciation, but do

Figure 10. Comparison of the evaluation of two contestants' acts: When evaluating both contestants, Jay said each time, 'I tell you' first

Figure 11. Comparison of Jay's reaction and evaluation: Then he said, 'If you come to my team' with similar facial expressions. After that, he mentioned the issue of writing songs for the participant

中国好声音，我家杰伦小公举是有多喜欢给别人写歌啊？答应别人写歌的时候动作表情述都神同步的。🙂

How much does Jay Chou prefer to write songs to others in 'Sing! China'? His behaviours and facial expressions are the same when he promise to write songs to these contestants.

Figure 12. Viewers' comment online: Comparing Jay's reflection to different contestants, viewers did not directly point out that similar reactions revealed inauthenticity; instead, they assessed it in an ironic way

they feel bored or tired? I think it's [because of] the operation [of] the programme. Have they taped these scenes for each tutor ahead and then edited them into a finished programme?' 'Shanzhu' replied, 'They just want to highlight the centrepiece that grasps our eyeballs, a kind of gripping scene. Or, they merely attempt to create situations in which tutors are fighting for contestants'.

Generally, public lack of trust in the actuality of reality television is partly due to programme post-production. As noticed above, some real situations in the live programme might be cut or modified through editing. Each video in the live programme is indeed real, but it may be recombined with several videos, and not correspond to a single same continuous sequence. This means that some scenes are recorded before or later, and then edited into the programme to ensure that the narrative runs smoothly or other objectives are met.

With regards to this example, the programme responded online that this was a technical problem that had appeared during the editing process. From the show's perspective, it could be understood as a part

of authenticity constituted by media, as a sort of fabricated authenticity. According to auteur theory, choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference reflects the director's vision and preoccupations. The programme as a medium for the personal artistic expression of director may manifest itself as the stamp of the maker's personality or perhaps even focus on recurring themes within the body of work.

The reality programme is not an absolute recording of real liveness, but, rather, as an authenticity edited throughout the whole process of programme production. Although each scene is a real shot, it evokes an altogether different impression when deliberately cut and reconstructed together with others, to fulfil the demands of theme narration or the other objectives of creators. Reality television emphasizes personal conflict and dramatic tension (Brandt, 2020), hence actual technical skills and artificial purpose involved will influence the perceived authenticity to a greater or lesser degree.

Authentic mediated public space contained emotional performances of participants and editing by producers to draw out these selves. Competitive reality television gradually became a genre that "invited suspicion" instead of "speculation from viewers" (Hill, 2020, pp. 211-212). Under the context of mediated authenticity, participants consciously played up their personalities or shaped their identities to generate memorable moments or deep impressions; producers consciously cast characters and created situations; and audiences engaged in a social performance where "everyone was talking about it". For such competitive talent shows, the symbiotic relationship (Carter, 2013) between these three of them occurred throughout the whole issue of authenticity of reality television. It is their co-production and cooperation that made the phenomenon of mediated authenticity more clear and understandable.

CONCLUSIONS

The existence of the authenticity issue in contemporary reality television programmes cannot be ignored. In reality television, the 'mediated authenticity' exist and manifest in performing authenticity (from participants) and fabricated authenticity (from the programmes). A kind of high drama and big emotion that participants and producers created in the programme are regarded as a mediated moment, which requires the communication and negotiation between professional media producers and audience.

For programme participants, including contestants and tutors, our findings showed that the controversy surrounding them mostly stemmed from their performances, which were sometimes designed by directors. The 'performed selves' and 'true selves' co-existed in hybrid formats within the reality genre. Performance of individual participants made them become the generator of argument in reality television. They hinted at the character of factuality and show (but not equal to fakeness) of reality television, collectively serving the narration or desired effects of the programme. Accordingly, participants' performances were categorised as performing authenticity. Then, the programme was closely connected to its post-production. Producers might edit real-time scenes and reconstruct them behind the screens. During this process, some conflicts about authenticity might be generated, including an aired episode composed of many scenes from other different episodes.

In specific programmes, these accidents as a distortion of truthfulness or a loss of realism had a certain counterfeit component. However, this type of performing authenticity and fabricated authenticity was not wholly false, because a real component remained. It was dual traits of 'reality' and 'show' that decided the potential for perceived inauthenticity. These disputed points existed in the links or processes that served the show. Mediated authenticity also has its real side, which constitutes part of a reality television show. When such phenomenon is placed on a global scale, 'fakeness' appears to be much more biased. It cannot, however, be allowed to describe or cover all circumstances, especially for

many different cases. Therefore, as with disputes of relevant mediated authenticity, factuality in the reality television show cannot be defined by absolute affirmation and negation, truth and falsehood. For viewers, some of them made empirical judgement or evaluations based on their own experiences and subjectively believed the programme to be fake. In reality, a programme that contains the ingredient of a 'show' does not thereby prove that it is entirely fake. For reality shows, programme directors produce a sort of creative work of actuality according to their viewpoints and purposes. Therefore this phenomenon should be treated dialectically.

This process embodies the features of a reality show: the reality and the show reflect both performing authenticity and fabricated authenticity, together with engagement between producers and audiences. We observed that their interaction and negotiation played a vital role in this process. Only when authenticity illusions had been successfully implemented was mediated authenticity effectively achieved. For programme, although subjective thoughts are unavoidable, directors can guarantee mediated authenticity in some way, controlling human performance and fabrication within a range that is acceptable to the audience. For the audience, they watch and participat in the programme with relative objectivity and inclusive minds. To some extent, both sides need to seek a balance between truth and show.

Although present popular media meant to entertain audiences and satisfy a market,

television media needs to constantly adapt to the change in the period of the new and old media. It should properly treat and balance the elements of authenticity concerning participants' performance and the programmes' production while taking the audience's individual needs as the basis for effective media dissemination and encouragement of audiences' participation. With regards to audiences themselves, because of the changes in the communicative environment, they need to form a type of rationale with tolerance and acceptance and understand reality television from multiple angles. During this communicative process, both of them need to strive for a balanced point, as they depend on each other to produce value and serve one another.

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