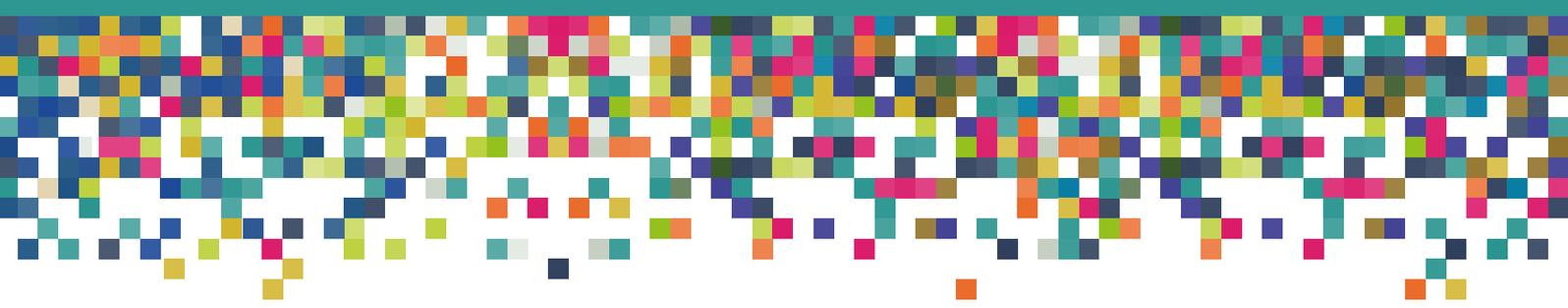




Media and
Communications

Media@LSE Working Paper Series

Editors: Bart Cammaerts, Nick Anstead and Richard Stupart



Live Streaming and its Audiences in China

Making sense of authenticity

QISI ZHANG



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ABSTRACT

Live streaming is a new medium with great popularity in China. By integrating interpersonal communication with mass broadcasting modes, it attracts great attention, and yet leaves many research blanks to be filled in for media scholars.

The aim of this dissertation is to further audience research on live streaming into reception studies, and particularly to understand how audiences perceive authenticity in live-streams within Chinese contexts. Because rare studies can be drawn in the realm, the study widely draws research repertoires from Encoding/decoding model, media practice approach and Para-social Interaction (PSI) theory, with a wide look into various media genres. Twelve in-depth interviews are conducted in the fieldwork, and the data are processed through thematic analysis. The findings demonstrate that, guided by a general genre contract, audiences' meaning construction of authenticity is highly fluid and sophisticated. It is juxtaposed with various modes and intentions in viewing practices. Audiences are found to evaluate authenticity versus performances in live-streams, in both participatory interaction and Para-social interaction process. Particularly, I suggest that lived experience and cues in synchronous interactions are consciously used by audiences to evaluate streamers in PSI.

1 INTRODUCTION

Live streaming is highly popular in China. CNNIC (2016, August 3) reveals that by June 2016, there had been 0.32 billion audiences of live-streams in China, constituting 45.8% of Chinese online users. The new medium is unique, in that it integrates “high-fidelity” video streaming and “low-fidelity” commenting channels (called “danmu” in China) (Hamilton et al., 2014: 1315). Figure 1 shows a typical game streaming via personal computer: the streamer broadcasts gameplay through a video with a small window showing himself. Audiences communicate with the streamer and co-audiences by texting in danmu, which is floating on the screen. The streamer may respond to some comments via broadcast audio. A specific stimulus may activate a waterfall of messages in danmu (the right in Figure 1). Figure 2 exhibits a singing stream via smartphone: the streamer is the focus. She can read danmu texted by audiences, and may respond to them (e.g. sing a song as requested by audiences). Generally, streamers are paid proportionally according to how many virtual presents that they receive, while the most popular streamers are offered paid contract by streaming platforms.



Figure 1 A game stream on Douyu.com via personal computer. The left screen displays the streamer and his gameplay, while audiences text in commenting channel on the right. The texts are floating on the screen (called “danmu”), and sometimes cover the screen with a waterfall of messages as displayed on the right screen.



Figure 2 A singing stream on Douyu.com via smartphone. The left picture displays in full screen the streamer and lyrics of the song in a Karaoke style. The right picture is in half-screened, in which audiences may comment in the text channel.

I am interested in audiences of live-streams. After reviewing audience studies on live streaming, I discover that Uses and Gratifications theory dominates audience research in the realm, while a fear of its negative effects on audiences is observed among Chinese scholars. Following a theoretical overview of audience research, I aim to further the research into Encoding/decoding and a media practice approach, to counter untested assumptions of audiences in current studies. I am eager to understand how audiences make making of live-streams, especially within Chinese contexts. However, it is a large project. Thus in the study, I focus on audiences' meaning-making of authenticity in live streaming, after tracing its importance to audiences both in cultural studies and in live-streams. I aim to launch the investigations on how audiences perceive authenticity of live-streams in China.

Based on twelve in-depth interviews, I firstly reveal three main aspects of generic characteristics (interaction, streaming content, and streaming manifestation) of live streaming, which constitute a basic contract between streamer and audiences. The three dimensions cover markers of authenticity that are studied in media research. Secondly, my analysis unveils three dimensions of how audiences approach authenticity in live-streams. By locating them into viewing practices with various modes and intentions, I argue that authenticity is fluid and complex for audiences, rather than linear or clear-cut as assumed by existing research. Thirdly, I distinguish participatory interaction and Para-social Interaction (Horton and Whol, 1956) in live-streams according to the data, and argue that both are utilised by audiences to engage with authenticity versus performances in live-streams. The findings of synchronous interaction provide theoretical feedbacks to conceptualisation of PSI theory.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

The inherent problem of the concept "audience" is that it cannot capture "an increasingly diverse and complex reality" of the people (McQuail, 1997: 1). Yet, the notion remains ambiguous with different assumptions and contexts. In the past few years, the notion "audience" is argued to be dead, or at least out-dated (Rosen, 2006) with the advent of digital media and increasingly popular "user" (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006: 27). However, by reviewing the history of mediation, Livingstone and Das (2013) discover continuities and returns among changes in media history. The distinction of new media lies in "addressing niche audiences by comparison with the mass media it follows, but this is far from novel in the longer history of communication" (Livingstone and Das, 2013: 11). Nevertheless, the concept of audience is situated in changing social contexts and inherent ambiguity, but past research repertoires can still be useful to study audiences in digital media (Livingstone, 2004).

Before moving forward, I firstly address the concept of "audience" in relation to "user", which is widely used in new media studies. Compared to "audience", the notion "user" seems to naturally signify activity and diversity of people's engaging modes in(with) new media (Livingstone, 2005: 18). However, "user" is critiqued for it undefinably links activity with new media, which renders passive practices imperceptible (Carpentier et al., 2014: 5). The critique

echoes Bird's finding that most users remain viewers without participation in co-production (Bird, 2011: 504). Considering the conceptual complexity, Carpentier et al. (2014: 6) propose that a broad definition of audience can be used to accommodate the active/passive dichotomy in research. In order to capture complexities and rich practices of audiences of live streaming, I follow Carpentier et al.'s conceptualisation to incorporate as many audience practices (listening, watching or interacting) as possible.

2.1 Audience Research: From Linear Model to Encoding/decoding

Early media studies were dominated by media effects approach, "a model of communication as a linear process of transmission of 'messages'" (McQuail, 1997: 89). Effects research was based on "one way, one-step" communication passage in which messages flowed to the masses (Scannell, 2007: 86). Assuming audiences as passive masses, the approach intends to persuade audiences into internalising the messages in a direct manner (McQuail, 1997: 338). Research on mass audience aims to apply media into politics, advertising and monopoly (McQuail, 1997: 13). Though there were later minor departures from oversimplified assumption on audiences by proposing "social influence" (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998), the model is under fierce attack for it essentially renders social life as useless "noise" (McQuail, 1997: 89), rather than as social ground for mediation.

Later in 1950s, Katz and Lazarsfeld coin Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory by studying on social environments and interpersonal relationships, as well as their influence on media consumption (Scannell, 2007: 87). It develops the originality in two aspects. Firstly, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955: 138) argue that interpersonal relationship plays an important role in forming audience's tastes, attitudes and media consumption. Secondly, the undifferentiated "masses" are conceived as active individuals (Scannell, 2007: 89), who purposely use media to satisfy personal needs based on specific media attributes (Katz et al., 1973). The second aspect marks a great departure from early linear model, in that research orientation is directed to what audience actively do with media (Blumberg and Katz, 1974). Applied to explaining media use, U&G approach identifies various needs and expectations, such as civic responsibility, information searching and social engagement (Katz et al., 1973; Levy, 1979). Nowadays, the approach remains useful by constantly modifying its theoretical and methodological repertoires to embrace new media (Shao, 2009; Smock et al., 2011; Ruggiero, 2000).

Though audience agency is embraced by U&G research, the role of meaning and its interaction with audience are nevertheless absent. Hall's (1980) model Encoding/decoding marks a research shift towards meaning construction. Hall (1980: 51) conceives communication process as "the articulation of linked but distinctive moments- production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction". The model proposes that meanings are encoded into messages in media production, but are decoded in three positions- hegemonic, negotiated and oppositional position. The decoding is contextualised in specific cultural and social

backgrounds. Encoding/decoding invokes abundant empirical studies in audience research, and is proved fertile to study decoding in relation to class (Morley, 1992), globalisation (Liebes and Katz, 1990) and gender issues (Mankekar, 1999).

Encoding/decoding is attached great value for it implies a communication circuit, in which meaning construction is at centre of the process. Furthermore, the model seeks to explain different interpretations in association with socio-economic contexts. It thus avoids fallacy of overemphasising on individual differences committed by U&G approach (Morley, 1992: 74). With the model, audience theorists investigate on decoding frameworks by putting individuals in groups according to class, gender and other social characteristics. A later shift in research is that theorists locate meaning in the interaction between texts and audiences: texts offer boundaries of interpretations (Allen, 1985: 75-80), while audiences generate readings in contextualised media practices (Livingstone, 1990). So far, a practice approach towards media is proposed, which situates media consumption in mundane routines and everyday contexts to unveil its social significance to mediation and meaning construction (Couldry, 2010: 38). The approach is theoretically consistent with “ordinariness of culture” (Williams, 1958) and the text-reader interaction. And more importantly, it effectively avoids the perspective of media centrality and strong effects in people’s lives (Couldry, 2012: x).

2.2 A Review of Audience Research on Live Streaming

Following a brief overview of main approaches in audience research, I review existing studies on live-streams, and proposes necessity of furthering research into Encoding/decoding and media practice approach.

A fundamental assumption of current studies is that, audiences actively engage into streaming programmes. In China, most research employs U&G theory to investigate on audience of live-streams. One main need that live streaming gratifies is entertainment (Wang¹, 2017; Zhou, 2016; Xu, 2016), which is generated by “liveness” and subsequently a sense of engagement into an imagined continuum with others (Zhao, 2016: 30). The second most identified need is sociality (Wang³, 2017; Ni, 2016), referring to building intimate relationships with streamers or other audiences through interactions (Yan, 2016: 53). The third prominent need is identity construction. Streamer’s values, thoughts or interests may echo audiences’ feelings, and cultivate identification among audiences (Xu, 2016), and activates reflections on themselves (Yuan and Sun, 2016). Several studies also suggest that audiences may attain a sense of self-fulfilment, by giving virtual gifts to streamers and gaining acknowledgement¹ in streaming

¹ Audiences can spend money on virtual gifts for streamer. Generally, those who buy expensive gifts are acknowledged in two ways: their names will appear on streaming screen; secondly, streamer will interrupt streaming and briefly appreciate their gifts.

(Xu, 2016; Zhao, 2016; Zhou, 2016). Besides the three prominent needs, information acquisition (Wang1, 2017) and voyeur of private lives (Yuan and Sun, 2016) are also mentioned.

Out of Chinese contexts, research often concerns communication modes, such as streamer's switch among performance frame (Karhulahti, 2016), and chatting among audiences in co-viewing (Weisz et al., 2007). Audience research is rare in the realm. I review three main studies, and they share theoretical roots in U&G approach. Hamilton et al. (2014) identify e-game learning and sociability as motivations to watch streaming. Interestingly, they discuss stream community, where audiences interact and identify with the streamer while interacting with other audiences. Two communication dyads are implied in live streaming: streamer-audience interaction and interactions among audiences (Hamilton et al., 2014: 1320). Sjöblom and Hamari (2016) identify five gratifications using quantitative analysis: affective (entertainment), cognitive (information acquisition), social integrative (sociality) and tension release are positively related with streaming use, while personal integrative (confidence and status enhancement) displays negative correlations. Smith et al. (2013) similarly suggest that entertainment, knowledge acquisition and affecting streaming content are incentives to spectate live streaming.

By locating current studies into theoretical overview of audience research, I propose three problems of these studies. Firstly, I argue that the essential problem of current research lies in untested assumption of audience interactivity. They assume that audiences will actively interact with streamers in consumption. The logic that follows is to exploit gratifications behind these activities as the review presents. As critiqued by Livingstone (2004: 6), new media research over-celebrates audience activity, just as early media research prejudicially disparages audience passivity before reception studies. Studies in the review are subjected to the critique: the basic assumption takes audience interactivity for granted and neglects its fluidity embedded in divergent contexts (McQuail, 1997). Or at least, most scholars are not willing to investigate on complexity of the issue. Are audiences fully engaged in viewing all the time? Are they constantly commenting and interacting in "danmu"? If not, what is exactly the "interaction" and what is the meaning of such "interaction"?

Secondly, a common fear of negative media effects is observed in studies within Chinese contexts. For example, Cheng (2016) warns that driven by commercial benefits, streamers utilise low taste (e.g. innuendo) to draw eyes. Wan and Bie (2016) argue that live streaming results in blurring boundary between work and leisure, and between adulthood and childhood. As the result, audiences are critiqued to gradually lose critical judgements on live-streams (Wan and Bie, 2016: 65; Pang and Wang, 2017). Subsequently, the "gatekeeper" role of government is suggested to be necessary (Ni, 2016; Wang3 2017). The passive view on audience is not self-contradicted with over-celebration of interactive viewing modes. Rather, it reflects a passive view on audience reflexivity and active decodings in consumption. Are there any resistant or negotiated positions (e.g. to counter low taste generated by

commerciality)? The question can be further investigated within Encoding/decoding theory, which is exactly this dissertation aims to explore.

The third restriction is the dominance of U&G theory in current studies. Though it is useful to explore incentives behind media uses, it over-relies on personal differences to explain viewing practices (Morley, 1992: 74). However, as I have reviewed, media use is located into specific social and cultural contexts. The practice approach is helpful to counter excessive individuality in U&G research, by exploring media practices and audience meaning-making in mundane lives (Couldry, 2010). An insightful example is DeNora's (2000) research on music in everyday lives. She argues that music organizes social lives by redefining time and space, affects audience's moods in different situations, and cultivates social interactions among audiences. It is through mundane practices that music is used for self- and group-identity construction (2000: 16).

Research on listening modes provide inspiration for me to study divergent viewing practices contextualised in mundane lives. Truax (2001) identifies three modes according to listener's attention: "listening in search" (focused listening), "background listening" (insignificant sound that is ignored), and "listening-in-readiness" (partly response to the sound). Tuuri and Eerola (2012) propose 12 modes, which is categorised into three groups (experiential, denotative and reflexive). They inspiringly distinguish listening intentionality from attention level. Kassabian (2013: 9) further argues that meaning-making may occur in less attentive listening modes contextualised in daily activities. In this study, I am not ambitious to exhaust audience viewing modes as Tuuri and Eerola (2012) study on listening modes. Instead, I start to direct attention to viewing modes and practices with new empirical findings on live streaming: How are they situated in audience mundane contexts to construct meaning? Are there any variances of meaning in different viewing practices?

2.3 Framing Authenticity in Media Studies

The concept of authenticity is highly evaluative (Van Leeuwen, 2001), any attempt to capture its full meaning in a single definition encounters problems. In media discourse study, Van Leeuwen (2001: 392-393) defines authenticity in four facets: (1) a genuine object rather than an imitation; (2) a faithful and close reconstruction of the genuine object; (3) an object authorised by the original authority; (4) being true to the essence of something (the inner "self" of a person or an artist's distinction in style). The definition illustrates that one main research interest in authenticity is to trace its sources or characteristics. In this vein, another important research is Enli's (2015) conceptualisation of mediated authenticity. Seven main markers of mediated authenticity are theorised (2015: 136-137): predictability ("a consistent use of genre features"); spontaneity (little scripted); immediacy (liveness and togetherness); confessions; ordinariness; ambivalence (unnoticed revealing of truth); imperfection. The two studies have overlaps in conceptualising authenticity: the lack of complete manipulation; interrelated spontaneity and liveness; or disclosure of true personality.

In her study, Ang (1985) enriches the notion by coining the term “emotional realism” beyond markers of empirical realism that theorists have exploited. She argues that at the denotative level, the fictional world in *Dallas* (the background, wealth and plot) is distant from the real world, thus leading to denial of empirical realism. However, at the connotative level, the series offer “symbolic representations of more general living experiences” (Ang, 1985: 44). Subsequently, authenticity is structured at the emotional level- “a subjective experience of the world: a ‘structure of feeling’” (Ang, 1985: 44). The emotional investment consequently facilitates perception of authenticity among audiences.

Van Leeuwen further adds to complexity of the concept. He (2001: 395) suggests that authenticity is not an “all or none matter”, but authentic in some respects while inauthentic in others. Besides, authenticity is theorised in meaning construction deeply rooted in specific modality, with accorded social norms and modality cues (2001: 395). Van Leeuwen’s argument closely echoes empirical findings in reality television genre. As revealed by Hill (2005), audiences critically assess between claimed reality and performance of participants in factual TV programme, based on their social relations, imaginations and personal experiences. Rose and Wood (2005) approach “authenticity” in a rather sophisticated sense. They propose three different but interconnected paradoxes in constructing authenticity: situation (negotiation between self-relevant tasks and programme fantasy settings), identification (compromise between everyman nature and extraordinary traits of participants) and production (balance between spontaneous narrative and manipulated production). Rose and Wood (2005: 294) inspiringly challenge the linearity of authentic markers, in that satisfying authenticity is not naturally obtained from diminishing manipulation or increasing ordinariness, but from a sophisticated blend of fantastic elements and indexical elements relevant to audiences’ lived experiences.

Another significant theme is the binary of commerciality/authenticity. Commodified mass culture is critiqued as “inauthentic”, because it is mechanically produced (Barker, 2003) and destroys unique “aura” of the genuine art object (Benjamin, 1969: 229). In this vein, mass media are often critiqued as capitalist instrument to distort reality (Baudrillard, 1983). In contrast, Piccirillo (1986: 343) argues that authenticity (called “aura”) is experiential rather than ontological: aura emerges from aesthetic experience, which requires co-presence of the art object and perceivers. Similarly, Scannell (2001: 409) argues that televisual experience is authentic because it actively constructs the media event for audiences to experience. Piccirillo and Scannell challenge the binary by distinguishing inauthenticity from commerciality.

Paradoxically, Banet-Weiser (2012) complicates commerciality/authenticity binary by blurring the boundary between authenticity and commerciality. In a world that is highly penetrated by brand cultures, authenticity is conceptualised as a relationship, branded as “authentic”, between individuals and commodity culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012: 14). The authenticity of subjects (artists) completes value solely through commercial exchange, thus linking authenticity closely with commodity fetishism (Middleton, 2006: 242). Similarly, Tolson (2010:

286) suggests that on YouTube, vloggers' authenticity can be easily appropriated by a promotional discourse of consumer economy. The distinction is analytically complex in research. In the study, I comply with Banet-Weiser's cautious suggestion to investigate beyond the binary and to construct the discourse "with competing power relations and individual production and practices" (2012: 13), because it acknowledges possibilities of both authentic self-resistance and commercialisation hegemony.

By reviewing authenticity in media studies, the section identifies main definitions of authenticity and attempts to capture its complexity in meaning construction: the paradox between fantasy and authenticity, the blend of media contexts with indexical elements in lived experience, and the fluctuating boundary between authenticity and commerciality. These research repertoires are relevant to my research, because they locate authenticity in a context to exploit new meaning constructions in communication enabled by live streaming.

2.3.1 The Importance of Authenticity

I attempt to trace the importance of authenticity in British Cultural Studies. Early Cultural Studies attempted to seek authenticity in folk culture (Barker, 2003: 49), to elucidate values of political struggles in popular culture. Taking early rock music as an example, folk authenticity was considered as "the tropes of feeling and true expression" in performance (Weisethaunet and Lindberg, 2010: 470). Therefore, authenticity was significant to convey a particular political attitude and social oppression of a group of people, who shared the same class/belief and were constructed as a community. Later, the commitment to community identity was gradually replaced with the desire to represent "the self" in rock music (Frith, 1981: 164). This new version of authenticity evaluated to what extent a representation captured the inner world of a subject (Weisethaunet and Lindberg, 2010: 471). Rock musicians continued to construct a community "in terms of taste and sensitivity" (Frith, 1981: 164), which shared a particular sensation of enjoyment in the music. In this vein, authenticity is attached importance to imprint representations with personal traits and experience of a subject.

Then, why is identity politics of authenticity important to audiences? Giddens (1991: 53) conceptualises self-identity as an on-going project, in which self-reflexivity constructs who we are. Situated in specific social and cultural contexts, people constantly draw on cultural resources to nourish the self (Barker, 2003: 222). Generally, media representations are significant cultural resources that contributes to self-construction (Silverstone, 2007: 9). Back to authenticity, Weisethaunet and Lindberg (2010: 477) suggest that authenticity is perceived when the performer resonates with who one really is, in that "... we confer with authenticity is integral to our own hopes of one day being recognized as authentic" (Zanes, 1999: 62). On the one hand, audiences may identify with the values and make personal commitment to them (Erikson, 1995) to build the self. On the other, they may identify themselves as participants of certain imagined community (Weisethaunet and Lindberg, 2010: 478), be it a community of ideology or interest. The following figure attempts to visualise the identity politics of authenticity in Encoding/decoding model:

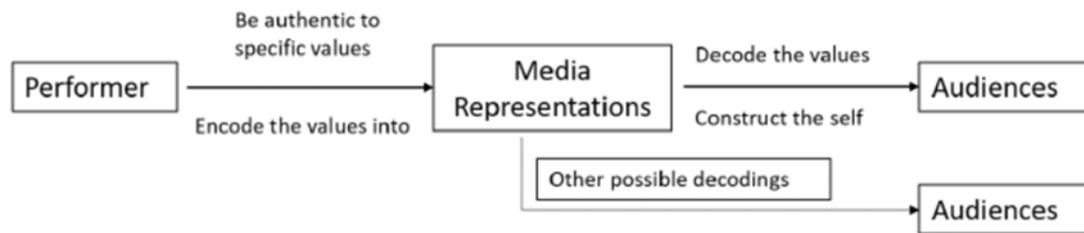


Figure 3 Visualising the identity politics of authenticity.

I have traced cultural significance of authenticity: it is imprinted in media representations and is constructed as self-commitment to specific values (Erikson, 1995). The values, including authenticity, may be internalised and committed by audiences (consciously or unconsciously) in identity construction.

2.4 Authenticity in Live Streaming

Why authenticity matters in live streaming? Identity construction is mentioned by Hamilton et al. (2014), that audiences may identify with the streamer's attitudes and values, and form a stream community. For example, they (2014: 1319) find that "calm, collected and respectful" streamer will have a stream community who share the traits. Again, his finding demonstrates that authentic values of streamer is relevant to audiences' meaning and identity construction. However, my interest is rather in the meaning construction process of authenticity, a phase before it nourishes the identity work. Studies on reality TV lends inspirations to my research. According to Hill (2007: 96), evaluation of authenticity is central to critical audiencing experience in reality TV, thus contributing to self-identity construction. In relevance to audiences, authenticity versus performance assessment is found at the centre of their interpretative work. Thus, the importance of authenticity is well established in audiences' evaluation process.

By drawing an analogy between live streaming and factual TV genre, I aim to justify that research repertoires in reality TV can be utilised to study audiences' perception of authenticity in live-streams. Corner (2002: 260) argues that "documentary as diversion" ("lightness" of topic/or treatment) profoundly shapes factual TV genre in negotiation between truth claims and entertaining elements. In this vein, Hill (2007: 89) frames reality TV genre in a space where audiences evaluate between performances and authenticity in participants' behaviours and emotions. Similar generic characteristics are established in studies on live streaming. On the one hand, "documentary as diversion" is observed. The first-person media accounts shape live streaming as a snoopy view on personal lives for entertainment, which is structured by documentary diversion (Corner, 2002: 260). On the other, live streaming gives off many truth claims through its affordances. For example, the streamer(s) on the screen, who is mostly

ordinary (Zhao, 2016: 29; Wang2, 2017), echo with claims of ordinary participants in reality TV. "Liveness" enables immediate broadcasting and spontaneous interactions without pre-mediations (Yan, 2016: 52). Most importantly, streamers cannot escape from audiences' evaluation on their authenticity (Xu, 2016). Thus through the analogy, the importance of authenticity is theorised to be located in the evaluation on authenticity versus performances.

However, most existing studies stagnate in ostensible description of authentic markers of live streaming: less pre-mediation, immediacy and interactions as reviewed. Authenticity is simply appropriated as entertainment and appealing points in U&G research (Ni, 2016). There are a few inspirational attempts: for example, Tang et al. (2016: 4777) approach personal brand versus authenticity in live-streams. Yet in the realm, the concept of authenticity has been oversimplified. Although authenticity is highly desired by audiences (Ni, 2016), there remain blind spots in audiences' meaning construction: What types of authenticity are perceived in mundane practices of audiences? How do audiences, if they do, assess authenticity and performance in live streaming?

2.5 Para-social Interaction

Horton and Whol (1956: 215) conceptualise the term Para-social Interaction (referred as PSI) as a "simulacrum of conversational give and take" between media figures and audiences. Through some strategies (e.g. blending with home and studio audiences), media figures seem to address audiences personally. As the result, audiences produce a form of interaction as though in real social encounters. However, Horton and Whol (1956: 215) consider PSI as illusionary, in that it is "one-sided, non-dialectical, controlled by the performer and not susceptible of mutual development". Since it was proposed, the notion has been well established and widely used in media studies (Giles, 2002). The notion is particularly favoured by U&G theorists to investigate functions of PSI in predicting media uses (McQuail, Blumler and Brown, 1972; Rosengren and Windahl, 1972). In the research tradition, most studies bring scale measurement of PSI, in which many variables are taken into the quantitative research (Rubin, Perse and Powell, 1985; Rubin and Perse, 1987). One variable, authenticity (referred to as perceived realism), is found to be highly correlated with higher measures of PSI (Rubin et al., 1985; Rubin and Perse, 1987; Rubin and McHugh, 1987).

Though PSI is often used in U&G research, it originally acknowledges various decodings of audiences in media consumption. According to Horton and Whol (1956: 219-220), audiences can "be voluntary and independent" to respond to the intimacy initiated by media figures. Therefore, it is also helpful to understand meaning construction process of audiences in social contexts. What I find especially useful is Klimmt, Hartmann and Schramm's (2011) research, which coins PSI as a process-based model. In the model, PSI is approached as three sub-processes: cognitions, emotions and behaviours. It helps to deconstruct the sophisticated

meaning-making as cognitive information processing (which is relevant to my study) and emotional perception.

Beyond mass media, repertoires in PSI research are also utilised in new media research. For example, Stever and Lawson (2013) draw the notion to explicate relationship between celebrities and fans on Twitter, in relevance to celebrities' priority in initiating online interactions. Hartmann (2008) argues that PSI theory can be adopted in computer mediated communication by introducing "perceived distance" and "perceived authenticity". In this study, PSI is adopted to explicate audience's perception of authenticity in live-streams. Empirical findings subsequently provide feedback to revisit the theory.

3 METHODOLOGY

My research question is how audiences perceive authenticity of live streaming in China. To address the question, sub-questions are followed: How are generic characteristics of live streaming relevant to understanding authenticity? How are audiences' viewing practices located in mundane activities? Within everyday practices, how is authenticity in live-streams understood by audiences? I am not ambitious to exhaust all possible answers of these questions, but to unveil audience thoughts and cultural meanings embedded in their viewing practices. In this section, I discuss the rationale for my methodological approach in the study. The methodology has received ethical approval of my academic supervisor.

3.1 In-depth Interview

The research focuses on the audiences of live-streams, particularly on how they interpret and make meaning of authenticity in practices. Thus for the research, I cannot merely conduct data analysis of audience behaviours (e.g. counting daily active users), but look deeply into attitudes and meanings beneath viewing practices. As argued by Warren (2002: 83), qualitative interviewing is useful to study "the meaning of respondents' experience and life worlds". Following Nationwide study of Morley (1992), the approach, based on Encoding/decoding, has been utilised and developed by many studies (Ang, 1985; Bird, 2003; Hill, 2005). The ethnographic approach enables researcher to understand thoughts and motivations inside audiences (Berger, 2011: 116), thus countering the untested assumptions on audiences as reviewed. Besides the methodological value, interviewing is cherished for it helps to reveal unexploited social practices (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995). The value is pertinent to the dissertation because there remains a blank of qualitative research on audiences in live-streams. Additionally, because audiences often watch live streaming privately, in-depth interview is most suitable to approach audiences' viewing practices.

3.2 Sampling and Recruitment

My sampling strategy is based on industrial report on audiences. iResearch (2016, December 29) reveals that, 65.3% of streaming audiences are male in China. 75% of streaming audiences are aged under 35 years, who have high education and income level. There is the highest streaming audience penetration in Beijing. My sampling strategy follows these findings of participants' demographics. I conduct all the interviews in Beijing partly because of the high audience penetration there. In addition, sampling in Beijing to some extent counters bias generated by geographical and cultural differences, because Beijing is highly diversified with people from all over China.

I tried two recruiting strategies for the fieldwork. Firstly, I attempted to recruit respondents by finding audiences in live-streams and inviting further contact. However, it is difficult in practice to build a stable relationship with audiences, because most viewing is occasional. Therefore, I fail to attain further contacts with any potential respondent. The second strategy is snowballing through personal introductions (Warren, 2002: 87). Snowballing proves to be the most effective and feasible method for the research: respondents employed via friends invest much trust and attention into the research. However, it is not without its problem. The method is often subjected to critique on homogeneity and bias of recruiting samples via strong ties (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981: 160). For example, they may share interests on specific meta-genres of live-streams. Within my feasibility, I tried to counter the weakness using two solutions: firstly, the respondents are employed through weak ties- they are not my acquaintances before the interviews; secondly, I utilise filtering questions to add diversity of the respondents, to control gender according to demographics report, and to balance meta-genres viewed by them. The demographics of all participants are listed:

Name	Live Streaming Viewed	Gender	Age	Position
WTQ	Game + Anime Voice Artists	Female	23	Post-graduate student
ZXY	Singing (traditional Chinese songs)	Female	25	Working
LQ	Game +Talent show	Female	23	Post-graduate student
CXY	Web celebrity	Female	22	Undergraduate student
DZX	Pet	Female	19	Undergraduate student
PK	Game	Male	24	Working
ZK	Game + Singing	Male	24	Investment analyst
SL	Game + Singing	Male	28	Doctor
WL	Storytelling and chatting	Male	26	Salesperson
CH	Game	Male	20	Undergraduate student
YXX	Game + Talent show	Male	23	Graduate student
WS	Chess	Male	23	Post-graduate student

Figure 4 Demographics of Interviewing Participants.

3.3 Interview Topic Guide

The interview topic guide is semi-structured (see Appendix 1). On the one hand, several question are theory-driven (Flick, 2009: 157). For example, I draw from research of Hamilton

et al. (2014) the distinction between streamer-audience interaction and interaction among audiences, to investigate how they are related to authenticity perceived by audiences. On the other, semi-structure of the topic guide allows new findings and concepts to emerge from empirical work, because rare research has investigated how audiences construct meanings within live-streams.

The topic guide is based on Krueger's (1998) route of question, which starts from easy opening questions, to main questions on perception of authenticity, and ends a question category with asking how respondents assign significance on the issue. The questioning route proves to be useful not only to start a relaxing conversation with participants, but to help them answer questions after recalling easy questions. In order to decrease ambiguity and difficulty, I try to make wording of the questions as casual as possible (in Chinese).

A potential problem in the topic guide is how to introduce discussions on authenticity. I introduce the issue of authenticity at end of the fourth section. It is intended to approach authenticity smoothly after respondents recall their viewing practices, think of comparison between traditional media and live-streams, and recall the streaming contents. However, introducing authenticity into discussions nevertheless seems abrupt to some respondents because they have never thought of the question consciously. I attempt to counter the problem in a flexible sense: introduction of authenticity will be easy if participants have mentioned it in the first three sections; if it is not mentioned, I start the topic with "there are people claiming that live streaming is authentic", and invite any thoughts from the respondent based on their own definition of authenticity.

3.4 Ethical Considerations and Reflexivity of Researcher

Before interviewing, I explain the research aim, data protection policy and audio-taping before obtaining respondents' consent (see Appendix 2). To reduce risk of revealing privacy, all respondents are fully informed that they may refuse answering questions that make them uncomfortable. During the whole fieldwork, personal information of all respondents is processed by myself, and is separated from transcribing and data analysis. Anonymisation is well planned and executed in representing the dissertation.

Ten of the twelve interviews are conducted face-to-face, while the rest are merely available via video calling. Judging from their expressions, I can make necessary clarifications if they display any confusion. All interviews are in Chinese, and often last 30 minutes individually. My reflexivity is demonstrated both in forehand preparations and during interviewing. In preparations, I view various types of live streaming before interviewing, in order to interact smoothly with respondents. Even though I share cultural background with Chinese audiences, there are many sub-cultural symbols in live streaming, which are rather diverse in different meta-genres. It is necessary to briefly understand general types of streaming programme. During interviewing, to counter the power imbalance between researcher and respondent

(Berger, 1998: 58), I emphasise that I am to learn from their practices and all answers are valued for the research. I am open to new terms and practices that I have not encountered. In this way, I try to conceive dialog-like conversations (Bird, 2003: 12), which are rewarded with great richness in my data. When I encounter new practices or ambiguous thoughts of respondents, I follow Arksey and Knight's (1999: 97) suggestions to probe specific examples and further illustrations.

3.5 Analytical Strategy

I conduct thematic analysis to interpret the data. The analytical strategy is in accordance with my research question on audiences' meaning construction of authenticity, which cannot be approached via discourse analysis, content analysis or genre analysis. Through thematic analysis, I expect themes to emerge from empirical data, which are then categorised into groups (Flick, 2009: 323). The themes are both theory-driven and data-driven: some themes are deducted from current research and my observations in live streaming, while enough space is left for new elements generated by the data. The flexibility of the analytical strategy is especially valued in the dissertation.

To put it into practice, my analysis is guided by Attride-Stirling's (2001) six analysing phases: starting with preliminary coding, then categorising themes, building networks between themes, further exploiting thematic networks within texts, and final interpretation of thematic patterns. The data are categorised into four themes, including viewing practices, real-time interaction, genre and sub-genre, and authenticity. They are followed with subordinate phrases or words (see Appendix 3). The coding frame is accordingly a mix of inductive codes and deductive ones. For instance, the distinction between empirical authenticity and emotional realism is drawn from existing research (Ang, 1985). Meanwhile, many codes within viewing practices and real-time interactions are deducted from interviewing data and a pilot research so as to give voices to the audiences.

3.6 Limitations and Suggestions

As I have argued, the research is not ambitious to exhaust every practice within various streaming meta-genres. It is not feasible for me to reach the goal. Because the issue has not been exploited in live streaming through Encoding/decoding, I start the research to unveil important themes of authenticity perceived by audiences. Data saturation is finally reached, which means that I probably grab the general themes within several most viewed streaming meta-genres. However, the research may nevertheless be challenged on its representativeness. There are so many different meta-genres in relation to stardom, fandom and particular interest communities. Meaning-construction around authenticity can be exploited further in various

realms in a more detailed manner. The methodology in this study cannot accommodate exhaustive qualitative findings of the issue.

The second restriction is that, interviewing relies on audiences' conscious thinking of questions that are raised to them. However, as my research has revealed, watching live streaming is often a private and partly-attended practice for many audiences. They themselves may not fully understand or express the inner process of meaning-making. Therefore, I suggest that ethnographic observations can be added in future research to further understand viewing behaviours (e.g. when they are drawn attention to the screen or how they respond to streamers on the screen). It may help to unveil sub-processes beneath unconscious viewing practices.

4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

In the section, I discuss the main findings of the qualitative data in three sub-sections: generic characteristics of live-streams, the complexity and fluidity of authenticity, real-time interaction.

4.1 Generic Perception of Live Streaming

Why does genre work matter? From relativist perspective, genre is conceptualised as a framework/relationship between producers and interpreters of texts (Chandler, 1997: 5). Genre specifies a contract "to be negotiated between the texts and the reader", which can build expectations for each side of the communication (Livingstone, 1994: 252-253). Locating genre analysis in audience research, Hill (2007: 89) argues that the core of genre work lies in "the double role of audience as viewer and interpreter", in which audiences exploit the messages and continually reflect on themselves. Thus in this dissertation, generic knowledge is argued to shape audiences' general understanding of live-streams, which is relevant to perception of authenticity. By suggesting "general", I do not restrain diverse decodings of audiences as informed by Hall's model.

Though there have been generic explorations in new media research (Livingstone, 2004: 7; Manovich, 2000), I have few studies to refer to because genre work remains unexploited in live streaming. In this section, I do not aim to conduct a systematic genre analysis, which is far beyond my research focus. Through interviewing, my initial purpose is to unveil what generic makers are perceived by audiences, thus guiding further exploitation on authenticity. Based on thematic analysis, three generic themes are identified: interaction, content, manifestation.

The most mentioned generic marker is "interaction", synchronous interaction. It can be categorised into two types. Typically, a streamer interacts with viewers by responding to audiences' messages through the broadcast audio (Hamilton et al., 2014). One respondent WL (26, salesperson), replies that "...live streaming programme is different, when many audiences

ask the same question in 'danmu', the streamer is generally supposed to answer it". According to participants, sometimes the streamer will perform activities in response to audience's requests (e.g. sing a song requested by the viewers). The second type is interaction among audiences. According to YXX (23, graduate student), "when watching TV, we sit alone individually in home... but in live-stream we can interact with other viewers... it feels like a social group, feels like watching with others while chatting." His recognition of a community is also identified by Hamilton et al. (2014: 1319), in which audiences may be friend-like through interactions (such as greeting and Q&A). Synchronicity creates the sense of "placelessness", and makes people under the same time-space continuum where message exchange is personal, immediate and joyful (Baym, 2010: 8).

Secondly, manifestation is widely mentioned in interviewing. According to interviewees, the following generic manifestations are mentioned: "less scripted" (CXY, 22, undergraduate), "natural and spontaneous talks with no preparations" (WL), "ordinary person who is talented" (ZXY, 25, working), "no possibility of editing" (PK, 24, working), "more of a personal thing instead of a think tank behind" (ZK, 24, investment analyst), "into their personal lives" (LQ, 23, postgraduate), "anytime and anywhere with a smartphone" (WS, 23, postgraduate). These characteristics cover most descriptive findings of current research that I have reviewed (Xu, 2016; Zhao, 2016; Wang3, 2017; Yan, 2016). More importantly, the data are obtained from the audiences, thus validating the characteristics with audience reception. Interestingly, the interviewees perceive most markers (spontaneity, ordinariness, imperfection and personal confessions) of mediated authenticity (Enli, 2012).

The third generic theme is streaming content. Compared with traditional media programmes, topics in streaming programmes are "diverse" (WS) and "close to everyday life... and hardly drama-like" (DZX, 19, undergraduate), in which singing, eating, chatting or even sleeping can be streamed. In this concern, live streaming projects "ordinary"² life experiences on screen. As streamers hold high degree of freedom to select what to stream, there emerge various innovative programmes (e.g. electronic game streaming). DZX demonstrates that, "I have preference for specific content (pet dogs) ... these are very rare in general reality TV shows". However, interviewees are fully aware of relatively low quality of streaming contents, "currently streaming programmes are generally vulgar... besides sexual innuendo, generally they are not as fantastic (formulated) as reality TV shows" (PK).

So far, a midway summary is made that generic characteristics perceived by audiences are in accordance with markers of authenticity. Compared to many mass media programmes, live streaming tends to afford generic expectations of authenticity for audiences. Genre work may guide audiences' meaning-making on a shared coding frame. However, audiences can actively

² When speaking of "ordinariness" here, it denotes that the activities in live-streams take place in mundane lives. This is rare in traditional media programmes (e.g. reality TV). Later discussion reveals that streams of such activities have its fantastic elements (e.g. attractive voices or high gameplay techniques) beyond mundane lives.

interact within or transcend beyond the frame (Chandler, 1997: 8). Therefore, the meaning of authenticity remains to be exploited in viewing practices and daily routines.

4.2 Authenticity: Complexity and Fluidity

In the section, I aim to answer one core question: what types of authenticity are perceived by audiences in live-streams. Instead of scratching on audience thoughts or feelings, I locate their meaning construction into mundane viewing practices, which is enabled by rich data generated from dialog-like interviews.

The qualitative data demonstrate that, the concept of authenticity has high fluidity and is much more complicated in audience meaning construction than existing research has assumed. It resonates with Alice Hall's (2003: 629) finding that audiences may understand authenticity (called "realism" in the study) in more than one way. In my analysis, three prominent aspects are discernible in participants' comments: empirical authenticity, emotional realism and the authenticity/commerciality binary.

Empirical authenticity is somewhat captured by Hall's (2003: 633) finding of factuality, which denotes that the media texts precisely represent a "real-world event or person". For WS, chess streaming is authentic if "the streamers are playing chess (rather than utilising analysis software behind the streaming stage) ... there is no point of using software because it isn't streamer's real competitiveness". For ZXY, real singing of the streamer matters much, "I hope they can really sing when streaming (rather than playing prepared demos), otherwise what's the meaning of live streaming?". According to most participants, empirical authenticity is perceived when the streamer's techniques or talents are truly displayed without utilising external assistance. Afforded by synchronicity of live streaming, streamer and audiences share the same "now". Because "there is no possibility of editing" (CH, 20, undergraduate), it tends to be an accurate representation of the streamer. Such authenticity is important, as explained by YXX, because credibility of messages relies predominantly on the streamer. He cites that two deceptive streamers, who pretend to play while interacting with audiences, are actually using stunt doubles, which causes great credibility crisis among audiences. The break-down of authenticity contract re-negotiates perception of authenticity (Enli, 2012), as demonstrated by YXX that "inauthenticity is actually very common in live streaming".

Emotional realism is also observed in participants' understanding. According to Ang (1985), the notion emphasises that, audiences consider emotion presented by characters as "authentic" when they conceive texts as real. In the study, emotional structures play an important role in participants' perception of authenticity. WTQ (23, postgraduate), having a mania for anime culture, follows a stream of an anime voice artist. She perceives him as authentic, for "I don't care who he really is... when he puts on an anime image, he is indeed the character, a prince or a spy. I love the way he performs (the images)". For WTQ, it is the emotion/image that is projected into performing that matters. Another respondent, CXY,

mentions that “In streaming, they display daily lives to you. They are plain, kind and humorous... I feel so close to my idol...”. By saying “close”, live streaming is constructed as a live meet-and-greet with her idol. For CXY, it is the imagined proximity to her idol- to approach personal lives, emotions and real personalities in the streaming continuum- that makes the streamer authentic.

Commerciality is referred to by participants to contrast with authenticity, which to some extent reflects the authenticity/commerciality duality held by Benjamin (1969). According to LQ, “if the female streamer belongs to a commercialised streamer agency, she’s more like an actor. I think that’s inauthentic”. Her comment resonates with WS, “I think most talent streams, like singing and dancing, are more or less inauthentic. They have prepared things... to draw more audiences, and make a living on that”. When talking about commerciality in pet dog stream, DZX cites a counter-example, “I heard that he tied the dog with thin string to make poses. He does not care about it as we fans do... He is abusing the dog to make money by faking poses... that is not authentic at all”. Tang et al. (2016) illustrate that many streamers use live streaming to build a personal brand and gain income. Most participants are fully aware of the fact. The degree of commerciality, according to some participants, is indispensable to understand authenticity as counterpoint to authenticity.

However, authenticity is not a dichotomous matter (Van Leeuwen, 2001; Hall, 2003). Analysis of the data demonstrates that the notion displays high fluidity and complexity with juxtaposition of the three aspects. For example, participants recognise both empirical authenticity and emotional realism in different meta-genres, suggesting that audiences may not exclude one types of authenticity from another. For some participants, authenticity is a branding strategy to gain popularity, in that the boundary between commerciality and authenticity is never clear-cut (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Similarly, Rose and Wood (2005: 286) argue that audiences nostalgically seek authenticity among inauthenticity inherent in postmodernism. Again it is argued that, authenticity perceived by live streaming audiences is not linear or straightforward as assumed by existing studies. In order to further understand the complicated meaning-making process, authenticity needs to be located into the participants’ contextualised mundane activities.

4.3 Viewing Practices and Authenticity

In this section, I use three profiles to illustrate the complex viewing practices. The examples shed light on how meaning of authenticity is embedded in contextualised viewing modes and mundane lives.

4.3.1 WTQ

WTQ, 23 years old, moves to Beijing to start her first year of master’s degree. Her life is loaded with readings and research plan. She hardly makes new friends, partly because her fellows are

busy like her. Live streaming is her companion in the self-arranged time after class. As a fan of anime voice actors, she follows them in streaming, most of whom are males. The streamers often sing songs (accompanied by playing the instrument) or chat with audiences. She also follows them on social media to get informed of upcoming live-streams, for which she will arrange time. Mostly, she is “listening to” their voices without watching the screen, while coping with her readings and research. Yet the background listening may change to a highly attentive and interactive frame: “I will give some (virtual) gifts, or praise him in danmu when he sings fantastically”. In such streaming, she cares much about emotions and personas that are conveyed in the streamer’s voices, which is recognised as emotional realism.

Having a mania for Dota2, WTQ often watches Dota2 streams because she “can learn gaming techniques”. According to herself, she pays “more attention (than to voice actor streams)” to game streaming, which is aligned with her learning goal. It makes sense why she attaches great importance to real techniques of gaming streamers, “I like them because they play well... otherwise why I don’t watch others who really play well”. Besides learning, she considers interaction with co-viewers as an important element, “you know, an indoorsy girl like me can hardly find someone to gossip about games...in streaming, if you have different playing, you can say it, then there are agreements or disagreements. It’s interesting...”. The interaction-driven pleasure further anchors perception of authenticity into a live time-space continuum, in which she is connected to others in communication while the streamer is playing now and here for them.

4.3.2 SL

SL, a 28-year-old man, is a doctor serving in a suburban medical institution in Beijing. Responsible for others’ life, he is highly dedicated to work under high pressure. Strictly organised around working hours, he takes a rest in lunchtime and evening when live-streams often occupy the leisure. For him, watching live-streams is mainly entertainment-driven to release his nerves. Accordingly, streaming gives way when something interrupts the leisure (e.g. message from a friend). He follows some game streamers because “they have high technique and are humorous”, which mainly adds pleasure of the viewing. He finds it inauthentic if the streamer is not playing by himself. But highly pleasure-oriented, he considers such (in)authenticity unimportant: “I personally accept that... I like it because the result (fantastic techniques) that is presented... no matter real or fake, I don’t care”.

SL used to be an amateur singer, “... not that professional (laugh). Now I just don’t have time for that.” He follows singing streamers out of a nostalgia for the hobby. Singing streams claim more attention from him, though he is unaware of the fact. Evidence shows that besides singing, he is attentive to background in the streaming and streamer’s looks, because “I’m not merely listening. (I also) need visual enjoyment”. In such streaming, authentic voice matters greatly to him, “...it sounds fake when voice is tuned too much, like echoing around... music requires

highly authentic voice". He doesn't often interact with the streamer. Yet, communicating with co-viewers is important, because "it's like many music enthusiasts are discussing... I have an understanding of the song, and others have theirs... it feels like sharing thoughts with them... it isn't lonely to have others listening together". The sense of connection to other audiences creates a feeling of "togetherness" in a shared time-space continuum, which further anchors perception of authenticity "now and here".

4.3.3 WL

WL is a 26-year-old salesperson who works for his own family store. He is busy coping with customers in work. Highly entertainment-oriented, he watches chatting streams four to five times a week before sleeping. For him, the chatting streams mostly requires listening while he's reading novels or news via another smartphone. "Watching all the time is boring". A changing frame of attention may happen when he "... can feel that 'haha point' (joke) is coming then turn to the streamer, because his facial expression and posture add to its fun".

When speaking of authenticity, he acknowledges that, "the streamer is totally different from what they are like in reality... I'm a salesperson you know, I'm fully aware of their preparations for what to say... they act hard to gain popularity and make money on that". Authenticity, as deduced from his comments, means no performance for gaining commercial benefits and spontaneous talk without preparations. Performance, according to him, is inevitable in chatting streams "as they have to be happy even when they're not, otherwise they lose the viewers". So he considers authenticity unimportant in these streams, whereas amusement matters greatly. However, he notes that personal feelings beneath acting can be leaked during streaming and thus be captured: "if he (the streamer) is angry today, he may formulate stories about fighting; when he is happy, background and plots of his stories are happy... They may be releasing their true emotions".

4.3.4 Discussion

The selected three profiles display rich viewing practices, which cover representative viewing modes of the twelve participants. In the practices emerge three prominent modes in terms of attention: background listening, attentive viewing without interaction, and interactive viewing (while interacting with the streamer or/and co-viewers). It is suggested that streamer may transit from play frame (completion) to interview frame when they respond to comments in chat channel (Recktenwald, 2017; Karhulahti, 2017). My data shed light on transition among frames in audiences: both WL and WTQ transit into a more attentive mode when certain stimuli occur (in relevance to highlight of live-streams).

In addition, I analytically separate intentionality (called "modes" by them) from attention as suggested by Turri and Eerola (2012). It is useful to analyse the meaning construction in less

attentive modes. Concerning intentionality, watching live-streams may be talent-driven, in association with learning from the streamer (WTQ). Hamilton et al. (2014) recognise learning intention as a common start point for viewers. For WL and SL, it is mainly entertainment that drives them to watch live streaming, which is particularly relevant to mundane routines after work to release tension. In addition, self-associated interest plays important roles in the viewing practices (both for WTQ and SL). Also for them, interactions among audiences form a “social ritual” (Lee and Andrejevic, 2014) in an interest-based community. Juxtaposing intentionality with attention, it makes sense how chatting streams are organised in WL’s lives even though he usually half-attends to viewing.

As demonstrated by the three profiles, viewing practices of live streaming are juxtaposed with intentionality and attention modes, which is enclosed into routines to organise lived activities. When authenticity is located into routines of practices, the complexity of authenticity can be traced. For WTQ, both empirical authenticity and emotional realism are decoded yet in the two different meta-genres. Without many differences in attention modes, she has specific intentionality for each meta-genre, which is originated from her role both as a lonely student and an anime fan. For SL, empirical authenticity matters more in singing streams than in gaming. Though he mainly seeks entertainment after busy work, he obviously attends more to singing as a nostalgia for his interest which is lost in daily work. As for WL, acting and commerciality are considered to dominate chatting streams based on his sales experience. He thinks that entertainment overweighs authenticity in the programmes, which is supported by participants such as PK and ZK. However, he meanwhile notices that there is leakage of authentic feelings beneath performance.

So far, my data suggest that authenticity is not a linear or fixed concept, yet various meanings of the notion are decoded by audiences, which is related to their daily routines and viewing practices of specific meta-genres. I suggest that, the findings constitute a start rather than a complete answer. Further research may exploit how the meaning of authenticity is related to socio-economic status (such as gender or class) as qualitative data accumulates. A further exploration on meta-genres may shed more light on how audiences generally map authenticity into genre work.

4.4 Assessing Authenticity in Real-time interaction

If authenticity matters to some audiences, how will they assess authenticity? Most participants refer to real-time interaction as a relevant criterion. I have discussed real-time interaction in genre section, which is recognised as the most participatory and unique by participants in the study. According to my data, I complicate the phenomenon by distinguishing para-social interaction (Horton and Whol, 1956) from participatory interaction, and argue that both are utilised to create/destroy a sense of authenticity in live-streams.

4.4.1 Real-time Interaction

I briefly discuss two types of real-time interactions in genre section. It is recalled in a summarised manner: generally, streamer will respond to questions/comment/requests from audiences by talking in the broadcast audio or performing certain activities (e.g. how to play games, or sing a requested song); simultaneously, viewers may interact with co-viewers by chatting, answering questions, following other's comments or even debating in the comment channel. When asked about if they participate in the interaction, surprisingly ten of the twelve interviewees answer "rarely" or "none". The data suggest that most participants are not as interactive as assumed by existing research. The respondents are mostly watching, though most of them clearly state that interaction is important for them to enjoy live streaming. How is the finding related to authenticity? To answer the question, I analytically divide interaction into two types, participatory interaction (when audiences participate in interactions) and para-social interaction (when audiences do not get involved).

4.4.2 Participatory Interaction

In participatory interaction, both sides clearly know the existence of each other, they receive messages from the other side and then make responses. The interaction can be roughly analogised to communication mediated by a video call.

CXY and WS are the only two respondents who state that they participate in interactions, though "not that often" (CXY). According to CXY, she sometimes comments in danmu, and the streamer will respond by talking on her comment. "Interacting (with the streamer) makes live streaming authentic... you cannot meet those beautiful guys (the streamers) in life, but in live streaming you can...". For her, synchronous interaction with the streamers is constructed as a real "meeting" with them. Therefore, the streamer's personal lives and emotions are authenticated by "meeting" the person (emotional realism). Similarly, when WS gets responses to his questions on chess strategy, he describes it as "getting answers from a teacher in the class". For him, the answers authenticate talent of the streamer (empirical authenticity), because "he doesn't only know what's the next step but why it is...chess software doesn't tell why". For both respondents, real-time interaction with streamers ensure or enhance authenticity perceived by them. Yet, interacting with other audiences seems less important to the authentication for the two respondents.

4.4.3 Para-social Interaction

I draw the notion of para-social interaction (Horton and Whol, 1956) here. Horton and Whol (1956) initially argue that media characters pretend to personally address audiences on television, and trigger interactions that resembles those in real social encounters. According to them, the process is unbalanced because there is no possibility for audiences to impact media figures reciprocally. In this study, most interviewees do not directly participate in interactions, but watch live-streams while interactions are going on between streamer and other audiences

or among audiences. Therefore, they are likely to experience PSI rather than the social encounters in a participatory interaction. Theoretically, PSI is later developed in a process-based model to conceptualise the dynamic interaction between media personae and audiences (Klimmt et al., 2011), which includes sub-processes of cognitions (e.g. information processing and evaluation), emotions (e.g. feel mood of the media persona), and behaviour (e.g. smiling back to a smiling persona). In my study, cognitive processing is found especially relevant to the participants, because most of them state that they assess authenticity of the streamer in their minds.

According to Klimmt et al. (2011: 296), one cognitive processing in PSI is activation of life experience. In reality TV genre, audiences are revealed to employ life experience to assess performance of ordinary people in the shows (Hill, 2005: 464). The same mechanism is recognised in live-streams. An example of respondent WTQ is provided. Interestingly, her point is shared by several participants (e.g. ZK and SL) in the study. Their personal experience of playing is used to imagine and assume what the situation might be for the streamer, thus forming a basic assessment rule of authenticity.

Interviewer: How will you see if a streamer is really playing?

WTQ: If he is viewing "danmu" or speaking to audiences, generally his playing is bad (laugh)... well, when I'm playing and something interrupts me, my playing goes wrong...

Interviewer: If they're interacting but still playing well, there may be something wrong?

WTQ: Yeah yeah... possibly...

Another relevant cognitive sub-process is to reconstruct the situations of media persona and make judgements on that (Klimmt et al., 2011: 295-296). In addition to lived experience, expressions, actions or personalities are used to comprehend and evaluate authenticity of the streamer. Two respondents' examples are followed. By reconstructing the situation of the female streamer, YXX notices unreasonable gap between her playing and understanding leaked during interactions, thus forming a sense of inauthenticity. For SL, while watching the streamers interacting, the real emotions and apologies resulted from imperfection authenticate the streamers. Many cues (talking, expressions or behaviours) exposed in real-time interaction is referred to by audiences to comprehend and assess whether the streamer is authentic, which constitutes an on-going process of para-social interaction with the streamers.

Example 1. YXX: That (streamer-audience interactions) means no scripts, and no scripts mean that streamer sometimes exposes true personality during interaction...

Interviewer: any examples?

...

YXX: That woman (a gaming streamer) ... she performs a nice playing in a tricky situation. But she herself doesn't understand it, she seems confused (and stops explaining "her strategy" in the audio) ... That's ridiculous if she's really playing!

...

Example 2. SL: ... (while speaking in the audio) one natural thing is his emotion, for example, if he was raided by enemies (in games), he behaved really nervous, then he made mistakes (in playing).

...

SL: ... each song is different and special. For example, he broke his voice when hitting the high key, and then he would apologise to us. That will increase my sense of authenticity. It is a real person who is singing to me.

In concern with interaction among audiences, many respondents consider it irrelevant to distinguish authenticity from performance. However, some interesting findings emerge according to other participants. ZXY comments that, "actually there's always someone who can clearly identify lip-synching (fake singing) ... then they'll discuss it in 'danmu'". SL agrees that discussions and comments from other audiences are helpful to evaluate authenticity of the streamer. According to him, "they (other audiences) will tell, how they evaluate the streams and explain it to me, then I see it... it's like a joint verification". The finding resonates with Giles' (2002: 297) PSI mode, suggesting that co-viewers may continually impact judgements on the media figure during viewing. The audiences may be impacted by thoughts or evidences in others' interactions through "danmu", thus contributing to their evaluation of authenticity in the process of PSI.

4.4.4 Theoretical Implications

So far, I demonstrate how real-time interaction is relevant to audience perception of authenticity. For audiences who participate in synchronous interactions, the participations locate them in the same interpersonal communication dyad with streamers, thus enhancing their perception of authenticity. For those who often do not participate, evaluation of authenticity tends to take place in PSI with streamers, in which multiple cues during interactions are exposed and are used in the evaluation process. Furthermore, interactions among co-viewers may also make a difference in PSI of assessing authenticity versus performances. Based on the findings, the study provides feedback to theories mainly in two ways.

Firstly, the empirical study enriches research on the relationship between authenticity and PSI. Giles (2002: 291) identifies authenticity as a key element in PSI. Existing research conceptualises authenticity (called “perceived realism”) as a predictor of PSI (Rubin et al., 1985; Rubin and Perse, 1987), in that higher level of perceived authenticity is correlated with enhancement audiences’ PSI with media persona. However, adopting conceptualisation of authenticity as a process (Klimmt et al., 2011), my research argues that PSI is an on-going evaluative process of streamer’s authenticity. Social cues exposed in real-time interactions and lived experiences are involved into reconstructing the situation encountered by the streamer.

Secondly, my findings challenge PSI as a totally nonreciprocal process, in which audience voices cannot affect the media persona. Yet, Horton and Whol (1956) conceptualise the notion in mass media era, when interactive affordance is extremely restricted. However, live streaming entails affordance of synchronous interactions, which is greatly different from traditional mass media. Real-time interaction, to some extent, is a co-production process conducted by audiences and streamers in which they may influence each other reciprocally (e.g. streamer performs a song requested by audiences). It thus bridges the boundary between the media persona and audiences. In the study, though many participants do not directly participate in interactions, they actively utilise synchronous interactions to help evaluate authenticity in PSI. When reciprocal interactions are taken into cognitive processing in PSI, it is unreasonable to insist the nonreciprocal conceptualisation of PSI. At least, audiences are aware that they can “talk back” at any moment as long as they are activated to participate. Therefore, I suggest that further research may start to reveal how exactly real-time interactions reshape PSI in the participatory streaming culture.

5 CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The dissertation is prompted by an interest in audiences of live streaming in China. I aim to move forward audience research on live-streams into reception studies contextualised in mundane media practices, with a specific focus on authenticity in audiences’ meaning construction process. Through in-depth interviews, my research makes audiences’ voices audible, and counter untested assumptions of live-stream audiences (e.g. taken-for-granted interactivity, easily and negatively impacted) in existing studies. Audiences are argued to be active (though not that interactive) in making meaning of authenticity.

Based on the data, three main aspects of generic characteristics are concluded compared with traditional media: interaction, streaming content and manifestations. The generic characteristics are found to closely linked with markers of authenticity. Besides, empirical authenticity, emotional realism and commerciality/authenticity binary are the three dimensions that audiences employ to define authenticity in live-streams. Combining Encoding/decoding with a practice approach, I further argue that the three dimensions are juxtaposed with various modes and intentions in mundane viewing practices. The

contextualised practices thus render authenticity a sophisticated and fluid notion for audiences.

By drawing an analogy between reality TV genre and live streaming, I locate the importance of authenticity into audiences' evaluation on authenticity/performances in live-streams. Informed by interview data, I distinguish between participatory interaction and para-social interaction. I discover that both types of interaction are utilised to (de)construct a feeling of authenticity by audiences. The finding in PSI further recalls new conceptualisation in PSI theory: it modifies authenticity (perceived realism) as an important element in PSI process; and, it suggests revision on the non-reciprocity of PSI between media personas and audiences, in that possibilities of synchronous interaction is taken into account.

Based on limitations in my research, I propose improvements for future research. Firstly, future research is suggested to complement qualitative interviewing with ethnographic observations, in order to unveil meaning-making process that may not be consciously captured by audiences themselves. Secondly, more qualitative data are needed to shed light on the sophisticated interaction between meaning of authenticity, meta-genres and viewing practices. Gender and social class may be promising variables to further the study. Thirdly, it would be interesting for further research to think systematically of the relationship between PSI and synchronous interactions in the participatory culture of live streaming.

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APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW TOPIC GUIDE

1. Basic information about the interviewee

What is your age? What do you do now? Tell me what you would do in your spare time?

2. About the interviewee's viewing experience

Do you watch live streaming? If so, how often do you watch them? How much time on average would you spend on per viewing? Describe a typical occasion when watching live streaming?

Where do you watch them, on mobile apps or on website? What kind of streaming do you often view? When shall you view streaming? Why do you (dis)like that kind of live streaming?

3. Comparing TV programmes with live streaming

Do you think that live streaming is different from TV programmes? In what ways do you think they are different? Which is better? And Why?

4. Format and content of favourite streaming show

-What is your favourite streaming show/your most viewed streaming show. What is the main content about? What is on the streaming screen? Are there any variations in the content? Why do you like that streaming show?

-Do you pay attention to streamer(s)' background on the screen? Is it important to you? Why do you think it is important/unimportant?

-How many people often watch a streaming simultaneously?

-If we speak of authenticity in live streaming, what do you think it refers to?

5. About interactions between viewers and streamer(s)

-Describe the streamer(s) in the show. Do you like him/them? What aspects do you like him/her/them? And why do you like him/her/them?

-Do you think streamer(s) is authentic or real to be self? In what ways do you think he/she/they are real? Why do you think so?

-Do you believe what the streamer(s) said/saw/behaved/played is real in streaming? How do you judge if it is true or not? Is it important to you? Why is it important to you?

-How do you define streamer's interaction with viewers in general? Do the streamer(s) discussed interact with the viewers? In what ways? How often would the streamer(s) interact?

-Do you interact with the streamer(s) discussed? In what ways? How often would you interact? Is it important to you? Why is it important/unimportant?

-Do you think the interaction makes them more authentic? And why?

6. About interactions among viewers

-Do you think there are interactions between viewers? In what ways do you define such interactions?

-Do you interact with other viewers? In what ways? How often? Is it important to you? And why?

-How do you like the interactions between you and other viewers? Do you think such interactions help/stun you in understanding the streaming?

-Through interactions with other viewers, do you feel the streamer is more authentic/real or not? And why?

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ISSN: 1474-1938/1946