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‘No Script At All’

A Study of Cultural Context and Audience Perceptions of
Authenticity in Reality Television

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ABSTRACT

Terrace House, a reality programme co-produced by Netflix-Fuji Television, has been positively received by media critics and viewers alike since its global distribution in 2015. This dissertation explores how the audience approaches authenticity in reality television, examining how they draw upon their cultural context in their assessment of realism. Through a quantitative survey and depth interviews with Terrace House viewers, this research builds upon encoding/decoding theory (S Hall, 1980) and authenticity studies in audience literature (Ang, 1984; A Hall, 2003; Hill, 2005), adopting the globalisation and hybridity perspective in assessing viewers' judgment of authenticity within reality television.

The findings from this study demonstrate that cultural context plays a part in determining viewers' notions of authenticity, as they draw upon their own experiences as a marker of 'real life'. Thematic analysis of the research data suggests that cultural empathy is mediated by the text itself, but the extent to which it communicates cultural knowledge is limited. Viewers' perception of authenticity is framed within the site of reality television, and audiences display a clear distinction between empirical and emotional realism (Ang, 1985) in their viewing of reality television.

1. INTRODUCTION

The extent of production interference in reality television is often debated by fans (Sender, 2012), but discussions are highly subjective, given the fluid and varying expectations of authenticity and realism (Hill, 2005). These two topics have also been discussed extensively within reality television and audience research (Ang, 1985; A Hall, 2003). As an avid reality television viewer myself, I have engaged in many of these remote debates as well, and I have often wondered what governs these expectations of reality for my fellow viewers. Personally, I indulge in reality television not solely for entertainment, but also to watch social interactions between diverse individuals and to imagine myself in their situations, envisioning how I would react.

In reading about encoding/decoding theory (S Hall, 1980) and the *Nationwide* audience study (Morley, 1980; 1992), I was particularly interested in why they considered viewers of foreign cultures to be excluded from 'reading' media texts. As a 'foreign' viewer of many Western reality television shows, I never considered my perspective towards these shows to be gravely different from my American forum peers. This encouraged my pursuit of understanding how cultural context plays a role in viewers' judgment of authenticity in reality television. Thus, I embarked on this study, which utilises a survey and interviews with *Terrace House's* international audience to uncover trends in viewers' perspectives of authenticity on the show, and how these trends are related to their cultural knowledge and context.

In discussions with fellow *Terrace House* fans, 'cultural differences' has often been mentioned, especially in relation to behaviour that viewers find difficult to explain, and by viewers with self-confessed limited knowledge of Japanese culture. Building on encoding/decoding theory, I approach the audience perspective towards authenticity, exploring the text-reader relationships that form in viewers' consumption of reality television. This study sets up a comparison of two research groups - one foreign to Japanese culture, and one which considers itself privy to Japanese cultural norms. In doing so, I hope to provide greater nuance in the discussion of how viewers utilise their cultural knowledge and context in negotiating the complexity of realism.

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My research centres on two subjects: authenticity and culture, and I hope to use *Terrace House* as an avenue to explore how these two subjects intertwine in reality television. In particular, I am interested to know what authenticity means within the context of reality television. I believe that the findings from this study will be useful within audience literature, especially in its focus on a non-Western media text, providing a departure from the norm in reality television research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The 'audience' in media research has been examined and framed in various ways across the decades of audience research (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). The term itself does not fully reflect the "increasingly diverse and complex reality" of viewers (McQuail, 1997: 1). In this study, the term 'audiences' acknowledges that viewers are not a homogenous collective, but audiences as a whole construct a social system intersected by class, gender, and nationality, among others (Fiske, 1987). Here, I focus on how audiences' personal and cultural contexts impact their perception of authenticity, specifically within reality television shows.

The idea of authenticity is complex - connotations of the word range from how 'genuine' a subject is, to how 'faithful' it is in its representation of the subject, or whether it is verified by an authority on the subject, as well as whether it is 'true' to what the subject stands for (Van Leeuwen, 2001). I assert that authenticity is contextualised in sociocultural production; and this paper looks to unpack how audiences consider 'authenticity' within the frame of reality television. The genre has been extensively discussed within audience studies, given the variety of shows that fall under 'reality television', and its tendency to blur the lines between fact and fiction on the pretext of being 'real'. Hence, I explore the reality genre as a site where the negotiation of authenticity takes place (Allen and Mendick, 2012).

2.1 Audience Reception Studies

Text-reader relationships: Effects theory, uses and gratifications, encoding/decoding theory

The trajectory of audience research has largely outlined the shift from the effects of the media on the passive masses to visualising the 'active' audience as critical and interpretative individuals (Livingstone, 1991; Barker, 2006). It can be broadly divided into three theoretical blocs: effects tradition, uses and gratifications theory, and encoding/decoding (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998).

Effects tradition studies framed audiences as subjects on whom the media exerted its power on - passive, faceless individuals who accepted these messages without reflexive consideration (McQuail, 1997). However, this view was challenged by the notion that contemporary audiences do not simply function as a collective mass, but consist of "complex and interacting social groups and individuals" (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998: 5). Similarly, the messages embedded in media texts are not one-dimensional but differentiated and multi-dimensional (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). The effects tradition portrayed audiences as naive and behaviourist, and this view proved to be unsustainable. The uses and gratifications theory shifted away from passive audiences, placing audiences in a more 'active' role, ascribing social agency to individuals in the formation of attitudes and behaviour (Katz et al, 1974).

However, the uses and gratifications approach is also limited, due to its reliance on self-reporting of individual motives, its neglect of media texts and their meanings, as well as its inherent functionalist structure (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). While the effects tradition was criticised for overemphasising the functions of the media on a mass level, the uses and gratifications theory was limited in its prioritisation of individuals and their drives. These two approaches characterised the audience as "essentially individualistic or society-wide level" (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998), and failed to address the complexity of social groups and interactions.

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Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding theory (1980), while not without its flaws, looked to conceptualise text-audience relations by examining the cultural and ideological functions of media texts (Barker, 2006).

Encoding/decoding theory suggested a non-linear communication of texts between the 'encoder' (media) and the 'decoder' (audience member), and conceptualised the idea of dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings of media texts, with viewers stratified based on sociocultural categories such as class and ethnicity (S Hall, 1980). As suggested by Livingstone (1998: 28-29), "people's understandings of their world constitutes their reality" - viewers draw upon experiences for context. Hall's model provide an avenue to explore audiences and their sociocultural context, structuring the view of audiences' consumption of media texts as a process of negotiation that involves both the text and the active reader, providing a more rigorous approach for audience research as compared to the effects tradition and uses and gratifications theory. Crucially, this model straddles the extremes of conceptualising audiences as either a collective mass or differentiated individuals, placing emphasis on social groupings.

2.1.1 Expanding on encoding/decoding theory

One of the most notable applications of the encoding/decoding theory was Morley's *Nationwide* study (1980), which uncovered how audiences' interpretations were structured according to their socioeconomic status (Livingstone, 1991). The *Nationwide* study found that Hall had "overemphasised the role of class in producing different readings and underestimated the variety of determinants of readings" (Fiske, 1987). However, Morley also stated that encoding/decoding theory did not take on a class-deterministic approach, but instead was of the view that text readings indicated "which structural position might function to set parameters to the acquisition of cultural codes, the availability (or otherwise) of which might then pattern the decoding process" (Morley, 1992: 11). Further, it is highlighted that the notion of 'preferred readings' was to avoid the extremes of texts having either a fixed meaning or complete ambiguity (Morley, 1992).

Morley's study asserted that the lack of cultural knowledge exclude audiences from the consumption and negotiation of the media text (Morley, 1992). My research follows up on

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Hall's encoding/decoding theoretical frame and Morley's claim regarding cultural knowledge. While this study has chosen not to prioritise class, gender or other social structures, I argue that greater cultural empathy in the present society makes it possible for audiences of different cultural backgrounds to embrace and negotiate texts that they would conventionally consider 'foreign'.

2.1.2 Critiquing audience research

Audience research has not been without its critics, despite the development of theoretical models around audience activity. Crucially, it has been criticised for its weakness in generalisations and applicability to widespread conceptualisation (Barker, 2006). However, it has provided depth and specificity in research, and I argue that audience research does not necessarily have to cater towards understanding a majority, and although idea of an 'audience' is should be negotiated on a wider level than has often been approached in existing literature.

Morley later acknowledged that the *Nationwide* research demonstrated that audience readings of media texts were not just structured by class, but rather preoccupied with "how decodings are influenced and structured by social position, in an overdetermined manner, across a range of dimensions" (Morley, 2006: 108). The encoding/decoding model and its suggestion of 'preferred meanings' have also been criticised, and it has been suggested that it might be more viable to consider "structures of preference in the text that seek to prefer some meanings and close others off" (Fiske, 1987). Fiske's suggestion does not denounce Hall's model, but suggests that there may be more room for negotiation than proposed.

These audience activity models have gaps to be filled, but they have enabled useful conceptualising of viewers' behaviour, and provided opportunities to further negotiate the interactions between texts and readers. However, it needs to be noted that there is a significant Western influence in audience literature, and this research seeks to negotiate a non-Western text through *Terrace House*.

2.2 Reality Television, Viewers and Their Notions of Authenticity

2.2.1 The genre of reality television

Television is recognised as a medium by which meaning is communicated (Fiske, 1987), and in particular, the reality television genre is a “non-fictional presentation of actual events occurring in the empirical world as experienced by amateur participants” (Deery, 2015: 31). The genre in itself creates an expectation for viewers (Livingstone, 1991), and “attempts to structure some order into the wide range of texts and meanings that circulate in our culture for the convenience of both producers and audiences” (Fiske, 1987: 109).

The reality genre determines how audiences approach texts under it, and guides the interpretations that they have of relevant shows (Livingstone, 1991). Reality television is viewed to focus on regular people in their usual environments (Lundy, Ruth and Park, 2008), and functions as a site where ‘ordinary people’ establish their intimate and authentic selves with audiences (Allen and Mendick, 2012). It purports “to represent social reality” (Stiernstedt and Jakobsson, 2017: 697), in the formation of social class and identity.

However, the reality television literature has tended to focus on Western programmes such as *Big Brother*, *Survivor*, and a myriad of self-improvement shows (Deery, 2015), which is likely to be related to the United States being viewed as the main media exporter of the world (Straubhaar, 2002). However, these Western perspectives may not necessarily account for how viewers interact with non-Western television programming, and the acknowledgement of ‘drama’ being associated with reality television (Deery, 2015) may not necessarily be translated to non-Western forms of reality television. As such, this study on *Terrace House* looks to provide an alternative perspective on how globalised culture interacts with viewers’ notions of authenticity in reality television.

2.2.2 Viewers’ definitions and expectations of reality television

In general, viewers have been found to define reality television as programming that emphasises ‘real people’ as themselves, rather than the performance of a character from script (A Hall, 2009), and one which “presents real experiences” (Deery, 2015: 31). Audiences acknowledge that the notion of authenticity in reality television is complex, and their

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judgment of this authenticity is dependent on several factors, such as the methods of filming, whether participants are seen to be putting on an act, and how participants' behaviour compare to their own (Hill, 2005; Lewis, 2004). How individuals and their behaviour, stories, and thought processes are presented onscreen determine how 'authentic' audiences view the show to be.

Concurrently, the manner in which authenticity is negotiated in reality television is also related to the construction of viewers' self-identities - self-definition is constructed in relation to the participants on the show (Rose and Wood, 2005). Reality television, in its general focus on ordinary people in their own skin, is a rich site for negotiating the meaning of authenticity for viewers (Allen and Mendick, 2012).

However, the expectations for the 'authentic' differs - it can be true to the essence of the original, a representation of the original, or a factual reproduction of the subject (Van Leeuwen, 2001). With regards to reality television, audiences acknowledge that the primary purpose of the media product is for entertainment, which affects the expectations that they have of reality shows (A Hall, 2009). Nonetheless, it retains its appeal because of its non-fictional nature, and how it blurs the lines "between real life and representation" (Deery, 2015: 26).

2.2.3 Realism in media texts

Ien Ang's *Dallas* study suggested that audiences utilise emotional realism - "a 'structure of feeling'" (Ang, 1985: 45), rather than empirical realism - factual reality - to determine the realism of television characters. Whether an event is considered to be realistic, thus, is less dependent on whether it happened in real life, than whether the viewer felt that it happened. Viewers tend to talk about the 'reality' of reality television with regards to how ordinary people behave on-camera (Hill, 2005). 'Emotional realness' is viewed to be crucial to the authenticity of reality television (Sender, 2012) - how participants express themselves on the show is central to shaping the reality experience for the viewer.

The realism that governs viewers' judgment of authenticity also differs between their judgment of everyday events and media subjects. The realism of media texts is generally

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judged based on plausibility, typicality, factuality, emotional involvement, narrative consistency, and perceptual persuasiveness (A Hall, 2003). How realistic a media subject is viewed to be is not just determined by its form, but also the meaning it conveys - "the essence of realism is that it reproduces reality in such a form as to make it easily understandable" (Fiske, 1987: 24), and how 'real' a media text is interpreted to be by viewers is thus determined by how genuine its meaning is to the audience.

Further, it is suggested that the 'authenticity' of a media text is also not absolute, but is relative to social norms (Van Leeuwen, 2001). Through the viewing process, the audience is seen to be socialised into the context of the product in itself. In this study, we look at how viewers become accustomed to certain stylistic 'characteristics' of *Terrace House*, and how aspects of the show are viewed to be more authentic as they watch the show.

2.3 Globalisation, Hybridity and Relocating the Cultural Gaze

2.3.1 Cultural knowledge beyond geographical boundaries

There are four key models of cultural globalisation - cultural imperialism, cultural flows or networks, reception theory, and cultural policy strategies (Crane, 2002). Cultural imperialism is often associated with the homogenisation of culture, with larger Western institutions dominating weaker players in global society; cultural flows asserts that the influence of Western global cultures are integrated with the growth of regional cultures within the global systems; reception theory highlights multi-directional flows that allow audiences to have highly differentiated responses to global cultural products and can contribute to the resistance of globalisation; while cultural policy strategies are generally used to frame national cultures and the preservation of the 'local' culture (Crane, 2002).

In this study, we focus on globalisation as the "increasing interactivity and exchange and the collapse of the barriers of distance and ideology which have previously served to frustrate the triumph of universal capitalist order" (Athique, 2016: 14), looking at the globalising process and its impact on the sharing of cultural thought beyond geographical boundaries, through the increased cross-cultural interactions in global society. Contrary to cultural

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imperialism claims, globalisation does not necessarily mean homogenisation of global society. In rejecting these homogenisation claims, I argue that imperialism theory is more of a Western projection on their perceived 'other', even though the flow of cultural discourse is not characterised by domination by one party (Barker, 1999).

Rather, this study embraces multi-directional cultural flows, with mutual influence of Western cultural ideals and other global cultural materials. Jenkins, Ford and Green (2013) argue that with greater technology development in the last couple of decades, the spreadability of media has increased the opportunity for cultural material interactions, allowing for different influences to varied degrees. Notably, cultural globalisation has allowed individuals to negotiate the meanings of culture that are not local to their geographical origins or location (Barker, 1999). Global cultural exchanges that are made possible through media forms enable participants to negotiate cultural values and meanings further, thus enhancing the cultural flows and the spread of globalisation.

2.3.2 Hybridity of culture

Hybridity is "a communicative practice constitutive of, and constituted by, sociopolitical and economic arrangements" (Kraidy, 2002: 317). With globalising forces and the shifts in cultural knowledge, the hybridity perspective suggests that there is no real independent cultural identity today, and rather, cultural identities are better defined and positioned in relation to the world system. The uneven, multidirectional flows of power has allowed for intercultural communication, which are continuously negotiated and adjusted in relation to each other. Crucially, hybridity displaces the dichotomy of Western vs the 'other' (Iwabuchi, 2002b), lending itself to a more nuanced discussion of cultural knowledge.

The concept has been criticised for failing to reflect social realities, but it has strengths in problematising boundaries of time and cultures (Pieterse, 2001). It emphasises the subversion of the hierarchical relationship between the center powers and peripheral players (Pieterse, 2006), which interrelates with the cultural flows approach. In highlighting the nuance of difference, it "prevents the absorption of all difference into a hegemonic plane of sameness and homogeneity" (Ang, 2003: 141), and this stratification of cultural difference is key to understanding how the complexities of authenticity is negotiated by a global audience. It

recognises differences within the subject, and addresses connections by recognising affiliations and repetitions between cultural materials.

2.3.3 Japanese Context

Japanese culture plays a key role in this study, and in particular the image that Japan conjures up in the minds of a global audience. Japan has been associated with the image of a "faceless economic superpower" (Iwabuchi, 2002b: 256), and the image of a country has a strong impact on the impressions that are associated with its culture. A specific social imaginary is "formulated, represented, and reproduced" (Valaskivi, 2013: 486) through the circulation of the nation's image, and in Japan's case, it has communicated a specific, non-Western image to the rest of the world. The 'Cool Japan' campaign harnessed the aims of the Japanese government, national and transnational fan perspectives, media aspirations, and the interests of artists and producers, suggesting a self-awareness of Japanese style which espoused key Japanese values such as empathy and spirituality (Valaskivi, 2013).

Japan has utilised its pop culture as a form of 'soft power' in international diplomacy, facilitating the understanding of Japan and its intercultural exchange (Stevens, 2010; Iwabuchi, 2015). Its media products have allowed Japan to choose how it communicates its culture and society to the rest of the world, although the depth of this understanding that emerges may be solely superficial (Iwabuchi, 2015).

Iwabuchi (2002a) describes Japanese exports as 'culturally odourless', products which are not necessarily imbued with stereotypical Japanese cultural features. In fact, some of the most successful Japanese exports are associated more with technological developments, and cultural products that have garnered widespread popularity are those that straddle the boundaries between Japanese-ness and Western qualities (Iwabuchi, 2002a). As such, they do not necessarily reflect Japanese culture accurately, but maintain "the whiff of Japanese cool" (McGray, 2002: 46). This 'cool' is a fusion of elements from transnational cultures, coming together to form a culturally universal and thereby accessible Japan (McGray, 2002). However, the uniqueness of Japan's culture is in its balancing of its core culture alongside elements from foreign sources (McGray, 2002).

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The concepts *tatemae* and *honne*, which mean “an individual’s explicitly stated principle, objective or promise” and “what that individual is really going to do, or wants to do” (Goodman and Refsing, 1992: 3) respectively, have also been prevalent in discussions of Japanese culture. This dichotomy of a private and public self, also contributes to the perceived authenticity on television screens, and will be discussed further in relation to viewers’ notions of the authentic in reality television in this study.

2.3.4 Re-melting the global gaze

Considering globalisation and hybridisation forces, it is argued that the flows of global communications foster “a set of relativities around which we make sense of the world” (Athique, 2016: 11). Identity is not fixed, nor are cultures isolated, but how cultural texts are perceived are shaped by viewers’ own experiences and contexts. Athique argues that the “reception of ‘universal’ texts is subject to the cultural accents, social conditions and widely perceived geocultural relationships that predominate in the location where reception takes place (2016: 111). Relating to Ang’s *Dallas* study, where she found that readers of media texts have to be familiar with “specific codes and conventions” (Ang, 1985: 27) to comprehend the meanings of texts, it is suggested that the consumption of media texts are judged to be authentic based on what viewers know to be ‘true’ in their own experiences and context, and what they would do in similar situations.

Harnessing the concepts of cultural flows, culture is approached as a cumulative force (Athique, 2016), combining cross-cultural interactions from varied participants, encouraged by media technologies. The global integration of media markets and international collaborations foster a multidirectional flow of culture and unique characteristics (Iwabuchi, 2002a), encouraging the creation of transnational, universally appealing media products such as *Terrace House*. The global gaze at present, thus, is no longer as Western-influenced as the literature has dwelled upon in the past, and here, I adopt a global gaze that suggests that media products are interpreted with understanding drawn from our individual context, and this global gaze is not simply a reflection of the Western opinion. Instead, globalising forces have created an arena for greater cultural empathy among the international audience.

2.4 Conceptual Framework and Research Objectives

2.4.1 Framework

This study draws upon Hall's encoding/decoding theory (1980) as the base of audience research, looking at how texts are interpreted by audiences of different cultural backgrounds, and how it impacts their judgment of authenticity in reality television. I argue that Hall's model lacks globalisation context, neglecting the multidirectional flows of culture that impact the ways in which a text can be read. The influences of cultural empathy shape the understandings that audiences have in their viewing of reality television. Adopting the hybridity perspective, audiences' interpretations are relative (Iwabuchi, 2002b), rather than absolute as suggested by encoding/decoding theory (S Hall, 1980).

Bounding my discussion within the Japanese cultural context, as opposed to the Western perspective which has dominated audience literature, this study seeks to explore how viewers approach the notion of authenticity in reality television. Crucially, this study is interested in whether their cultural context still plays a key role in how they read media texts as suggested by Morley (1980; 1992), or whether globalising forces have redefined the role of cultural context from an absolute to a determinant of positioning (Athique, 2016).

2.4.2 Research question (RQ) and sub-questions (RSQ)

RQ: How do viewers draw upon their cultural context in assessing authenticity in reality television?

RSQ1: What does authenticity mean in the context of reality television?

RSQ2: Is cultural knowledge universal among an international audience?

RSQ3: Can cultural knowledge be communicated through media texts?

2.4.3 Why Terrace House?

Terrace House (2012-present) is produced by Fuji Television in Japan, and was brought to a global audience following a partnership with Netflix, Inc. and East Entertainment in 2015 (Netflix, 2017). It has been chosen as an appropriate case study because it has drawn international viewers despite its niche positioning as a distinctively Japanese show which makes keen references to Japanese pop culture, providing a rich field of study of how people of different cultural contexts approach the authenticity of the show.

2.4.4 Relevance to field of audience research

This study explores the genre of reality television, which has generally focussed on Western reality programming (Deery, 2015). I seek greater nuance to the assertions made by the encoding/decoding model (S Hall, 1980) beyond the 'dominant', 'negotiated' and 'opposing' readings, following the shift from meanings embedded in text to the meanings that are constructed in the process of reading. Tying in globalisation and hybridity concepts, I explore how audiences today approach foreign media texts in comparison to Morley's *Nationwide* study (1980, 1992). I believe that unifying the fields of globalisation and audience research is important given the cross-cultural consumption of media in our global society, which has been made more accessible through global distribution and cross-cultural media interest, among other factors.

3. METHODOLOGY

A two-step method was employed to address the RQ: 'How do individuals draw upon their cultural context in assessing authenticity in reality television?'. A quantitative survey was first conducted with Terrace House audiences, followed by interviews with viewers recruited from the survey responses. A combined research method was chosen as the survey was intended to inform the design of the qualitative interviews, as was similarly conducted by Barker and Mathijs (2012) in their research. Combining the data from both methods was seen to be a way to gain broader context for interpretation (Morse, 2012).

3.1 Quantitative Survey

3.1.1 Rationale and purposes of method

A survey was chosen to garner some breadth and generalisation in this research. Audience studies have often been criticised for the lack of generalisability and applicability (Barker, 2006), and this study attempts to address that. Quantitative survey method produces data based on real-world observations, and the breadth of coverage leads to more generalisable data (Kelley, Clark, Brown and Sitzia, 2003). Further, it provides insight into unknown beliefs of the survey respondents (Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2014). However, quantitative surveys can lack depth in responses (Kelley et al, 2003), and this lack of depth was addressed by partnering it with qualitative interviewing.

The survey was conducted to “provide statistical estimates of the characteristics” (Fowler, 2014: 8) of viewers, understand what viewers felt was authentic and inauthentic about the show, and how audiences' views of *Terrace House* relate to their expectations of the reality television genre.

3.1.2 Data collection and sampling

The survey was conducted on an online platform (Qualtrics) over a period of ten days, drawing 365 respondents. Respondents were recruited opportunistically via social media platforms - *Terrace House* interest groups on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram hashtags, *Terrace House* and Japan-related subreddits - and word of mouth. Opportunistic recruitment was conducted in order to recruit as many respondents as possible, with the belief that the design of the questions would allow for patterning and clustering to be established with enough respondents (Barker and Mathijs, 2012).

Sampling bias is present (Fowler, 2014; Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2014), as the survey respondents may be different from the overall population of *Terrace House* viewers. Respondents are likely to be more invested in the show than average television viewers. As with any survey, there is the possibility of sampling error, which exists when only some of the sample frame are surveyed (Dillman, Smyth and Christian, 2014). Internet samples are unlikely to be a good representation of the general population, although it is useful for

accessing people with a notable internet presence (De Vaus, 2002). This study focusses on engaged global viewers of *Terrace House*, and as such, an internet survey was the most effective way of reaching out to international viewers.

3.1.3 Survey design

The survey utilises both open and closed questions. Questions were written as unambiguous as possible to communicate consistently to all respondents (Fowler, 2014). In designing these questions, definitions of reality television were drawn from literature on the subject. Closed questions are more conducive for obtaining reliable answers and consistent interpretation of data (Fowler, 2014), which is why most of the questions were designed with fixed responses. However, open questions were also incorporated to understand more extensive opinions of respondents (Fowler, 2014). Demographic questions were placed at the end of the survey as focus on the survey was not on their demographic representability but individual opinions (Barker and Mathijs, 2012).

3.1.4 Method of analysis

Descriptives were utilised in the analysis of the survey data, to estimate parameters of the research (Kelley et al, 2003), such as the level of influence of the commentary panel on viewers' opinions of *Terrace House* events. Further statistical analysis was not conducted as the focus of this research was on respondents' depth opinions towards authenticity in *Terrace House*.

3.2 Qualitative Interviews

3.2.1 Rationale and purposes of method

Qualitative interviewing was chosen as the main method of research as it provides the researcher with deeper insight into the respondents' understanding of the specific subject (Schröder, Drotner, Kline, Murray, 2003), cultivating meaning through a "neutral means of extracting information" (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008: 140). It fosters "access to the meanings people attribute to their experiences and social worlds" (Miller and Glassner, 2008: 126), extracting interviewees' self-reflexive views of *Terrace House*.

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Individual interviews were preferred to focus groups, as I wanted to understand specific individuals' experiences, which might be obscured in a group setting (Schröder et al, 2003). Individual interviews allow for greater depth of questioning and eliminates group pressure (Beitin, 2012). Through these interviews, I sought to minimise bias and error, focussing on extracting reportable knowledge from interviewees without influencing the results (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008). Interviews were conducted over Skype video calls due to geographical constraints.

Focus groups are valuable in encouraging collective negotiation of meaning of the subject, which simulates social interactions and meaning production (Schröder et al, 2003). However, despite its suitability for studying group norms and social understandings, the focus of my research - judgment of authenticity - is not always socially produced, and the benefits of group interviews may not be fully realised. Rather, individual interviews allow for more detailed questioning about personal experiences and values (Johnson and Rowlands, 2012).

3.2.2 Pilot interviewing

Pilot interviews were conducted with three interviewees, selected from the survey response pool, to test the meaningfulness of the interview guide, and respondents were asked to comment on the questions and nature of interview to help refine the interview process.

3.2.3 Data collection, sampling and recruitment

Interviews (45-60 minutes) were conducted with 2 groups of 9 interviewees - one group comprised of individuals who were either ethnically Japanese or had lived in Japan for more than 6 months; the other group encompassed respondents who had never lived in Japan for an extended period. 6 months of residency in Japan was judged to be a fair amount of time to be familiar with the country's cultural norms.

Two groups were set up to compare viewers familiar with Japanese culture and those who are not, to understand if and how cultural knowledge plays a role in determining how authentic *Terrace House* is to viewers. This cross-cultural comparison explores the assumption that the lack of cultural knowledge excludes viewers from understanding media texts (Morley, 1992). I note that 'culture' is inherently non-comparable (Livingstone, 2003), but the

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focus of this comparison is not on the cultural differences, but how their cultural exposure impacts their opinions of *Terrace House*.

Interviewees aged 18 and up were selected from the survey response pool - 93 of 365 respondents indicated a willingness to be interviewed. Interviewees were selected based on their compatibility with my research groups. For the non-Japanese group, interviewees selected are of Western descent - born either in the United States, United Kingdom or Australia, for research consistency. The Japanese group was also selected with the prerequisite of fluent, work-proficient Japanese.

I noted that interviewees would differ in knowledge and self-reflexivity (Johnson and Rowlands, 2012), which would affect the quality of data extracted. Thus, interviewees were selected based on qualitative rather than statistical diversity, looking for interviewees who were exposed to *Terrace House* and had extensive opinions on the show, which was a main reason for recruiting voluntary interviewees as they would be committed to talking about it at length.

3.2.4 Interview guide

A semi-structured interview guide was employed, branching out from the central research question, to theory questions and specific open-ended interview questions (Wengraf, 2001). Questions were revised following the pilot interviews for clarity and coherence. This interview guide type is appropriate given the interviewer's familiarity with the topic but inability to predict all the possible responses drawn (Morse, 2012). The guide and was formulated based on the survey responses in relation to the RSQs.

The interview guide has several prepared discussion topics, but is sufficiently open for the researcher to improvise in a deliberate and theory-supported manner (Wengraf, 2001). The interviewer encouraged interviewees to elaborate on their experiences, inviting them to share their thoughts rather than eliciting a specific response (Barker and Mathijs, 2012; Holstein and Gubrium, 2008). Specifically, in discussing the notion of 'authenticity' in reality television, the researcher avoided defining 'authenticity', but sought to extract their opinions

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by posing it as a question to extract their views. Questions were phrased in a simple and straightforward manner where possible, to reduce their ambiguity to interviewees.

In discussing the authenticity of *Terrace House*, the researcher was careful to let the interviewees define what 'authenticity' meant, using simple words such as 'real', 'natural', and 'genuine', in the interview guide to refer to the authenticity of the show.

3.2.5 Method of analysis

Interviews were recorded and transcribed from the audio recordings and the interviewer's notes. Transcripts were coded and analysed thematically.

Thematic analysis was chosen over other methods such as narrative analysis and content analysis, as it allows for thematic patterns to emerge from the data (Ezzy, 2002), enabling the "structuring and depiction of these themes" (Attride-Stirling, 2001: 387). I sought to focus on patterns that emerged from the data collected rather than project prior knowledge on the data, which would be more suited to content analysis, which is based on predetermined frames.

Thematic analysis is not completely independent of theory, but it provides a flexible method of determining the thematic patterns from the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It encourages "a sensitive, insightful and rich exploration of a text's overt structures and underlying patterns" (Attride-Stirling, 2001: 386), fostering the depth of analysis desired in this study.

3.2.6 Extraction of themes

Four themes emerged from the coding of interviewee responses - socialisation of authenticity, influence of the media text, reliance on individual experiences in judging authenticity and the balance between empirical and emotional authenticity, formed out of 12 sub-themes. Themes were collated through the processes of preliminary coding, identifying themes, building thematic networks, describing and exploring thematic networks, consolidating thematic networks, and interpretation of patterns (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Themes were consolidated not solely based on their prevalence, but also based on their relevance to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The emergent themes are latent

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- development of themes were based on the interpreted data, but the analysis of these themes are grounded in theory (Braun and Clarke, 2006). For example, the contrast of empirical and emotional authenticity is rooted in pre-existing audience literature (Ang, 1985).

3.3 Ethics and Reflexivity

Prior to participation in this study, respondents' ages were verified, consent was obtained and they were notified of the research aims and data protection policy. All personal information disclosed by respondents were kept separate from the processed data, names were anonymised and respondents are referred to by initials for the discussion in this study, for interviewees' protection (Johnson and Rowlands, 2012).

Survey respondents were recruited from various social media platforms using my personal user accounts, which helped to build trust within communities which I was already an active part of. As a viewer of *Terrace House*, the topics discussed are issues that I am personally invested in. Aware that the types of questions asked would directly impact the data collected, interview questions were designed based on survey responses rather than my own thoughts on *Terrace House*, and I tried to maintain a neutral voice (Miller and Glassner, 2008), while encouraging discussion by asking follow-up questions. I avoided designing leading questions and instead utilised open-ended questions in interviews, providing as many responses as possible in the survey form. This was seen as a way of extracting information without contaminating it with my own opinions (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008).

3.4 Limitations and Areas for Improvement

The small sample size of this study limits its representativeness of *Terrace House* viewers, and it cannot fully account for the nuanced and complex experiences of audience viewing. Further, this study does not claim to represent all Japanese and non-Japanese viewers' perspectives and knowledge. Thematic analysis focusses on patterns that emerge from the data, but is unable to provide greater depth of language and textual meaning (Nowell, Norris, White and Moules, 2017). Also, it may not fully articulate the depth of opinions

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provided by the respondents, focussing on the patterns rather than the meanings in individual responses.

For future research, it would be useful to recruit respondents from general reality television and television viewer platforms beyond active fans of the show, to expand the sample frame beyond engaged *Terrace House* viewers. This would provide a more generalised idea of *Terrace House* viewers, however, highly engaged audiences are similarly relevant to casual viewers, as all viewers form emotional attachments to texts (Barker, 2006). It would also be beneficial to compare the demographics of the response sample to a general sample of reality television viewers to understand if the results could be generalised.

The interviewing method limits the assessment of whether respondents' actions are true to their beliefs, tending to privilege respondents' experiences and perspectives without questioning their rationale sufficiently (Silverman, 2008). A good way to avoid this could have been to conduct focus group interviews which could foster greater insight into interviewees' thought processes. However, the set-up adopted in this research provides an introduction to the possible hybridity of opinions across interviewees of different cultural backgrounds

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter focusses on the interview findings in combination with the survey results, arranged according to the four themes that have emerged during thematic analysis. These themes are discussed in relation to the research question: 'How do viewers draw upon their cultural context in assessing authenticity in reality television?' and its supporting questions, drawing comparisons between the two research groups of differing cultural context. Hereafter, the group comprising of Japanese residents and ethnic Japanese are referred to as the 'Japanese group', while the other group is referred to as the 'non-Japanese group'.

4.1 Contrasting emotional and empirical realism

Audience literature has looked at the difference between viewers' capacities for emotional and empirical realism (Ang, 1985), comparing the parameters that audiences hold for what

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they view on television and what they view of real life. The contrast in what viewers consider to be empirically and emotionally realistic in the context of reality television emerged as a key theme in the interview data, and will be discussed in relation to the existing literature.

4.1.1 Expectations of the reality genre

The broad genre of reality television was earlier described to focus on ordinary people in their everyday situations (Lundy, Ruth and Park, 2008). Reality television is defined not by its "content or theme", but "by the notion that the behaviour of the cast members is unscripted" (A Hall, 2009: 516) - with a focus on the genuineness of behaviour and expression rather than representation of factual truth. These expectations and judgment of the accuracy of reality reproduction are constructed by viewers' exposure to the genre, which is described as a 'reality contract' (Jones, 2003: 402).

These expectations were similarly communicated by survey respondents as shown by their response to the question "What do you think makes a show 'reality television'?", selecting responses based on definitions drawn from reality television literature (Deery, 2015).

Interview respondents distinguished reality television from real life, citing reality programming as a representation but not a true reflection of real life. Interviewees from both groups acknowledged the unnatural frame of reality television, describing it as 'manufactured' and 'directed', but recognised that the behaviour of programme participants were not necessarily scripted.

RC: I think what makes reality television real would be the people being themselves, not playing a character, not following a script. They are just being themselves, actually naturally the way they would normally be in that situation, however manufactured the situation might be.

Their responses demonstrate a common understanding of reality television in different cultural contexts, and an awareness that reality television is not a wholesome representation of actual happenings, rather, it is a manufactured reality. Nonetheless, there is a

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consideration that the behaviour of the individuals on the show are genuine, in terms of their actions and behaviour.

4.1.2 Intentions of reality television: entertainment before truth

Interviewees communicated an understanding that reality television is intended primarily for entertainment, utilising 'real life' as a medium to draw audiences, rather than have the portrayal of real life be its main goal. This understanding corresponds with their expectation that reality programming is edited, as an unedited reality would be 'boring' and 'unentertaining'. Hence, their judgment of the authenticity in reality television is made with the pre-existing notion that an edited reality is 'authentic' to reality television programming.

Both groups demonstrated a clear understanding of the distinction between real life and reality television, and articulated a specific 'reality' that exists within the frame of the entertainment prerogative of *Terrace House* and reality television in general. However, this acceptance did not preclude the portrayal of factual events, as interviewees expressed their expectations for real events on the show, as well as the genuine behavioural reactions elicited by 'manufactured' situations.

Ang's *Dallas* study highlighted that empirical realism can have problematic repercussions, due to the assumption that "a text can be a direct, immediate reproduction or reflection of an 'outside world'" (Ang, 1985: 37). However, in practice, media texts like *Terrace House* do not solely reflect the lives of the housemates, but is also socially produced and constructs its own version of the real, a reality which is better interpreted within an emotional frame. What makes up the 'real' in reality television is shaped by the context of reality programming, which offers a more wholesome approach to authenticity than expecting it to be a replication of real life.

4.1.3 Considering the real in reality television

Interviewees indicated that reality television is expected to reflect real life to some extent, but maintain the expectation that reality television cannot be completely realistic due to its entertainment purposes. The unpredictability of programme narratives and shifting focus

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between the characters contributed to the sense of unscripted reality as well, as the meandering storylines were considered to be a reflection of real life. Most respondents stated that there were certain housemates that came across as more natural than others, and how they distinguish between 'natural' and 'fake' participants also indicate how they decide what is authentic or not in reality television.

WB: Some characters feel very stiff, like you can't feel their true emotions. And while there are those who show emotion, not all of them are real.

While the display of emotion has often been a marker of authentic behaviour in reality television (Sender, 2012), there are distinctions to be made between artificial and natural emotions. The extent to which emotions are decided to be 'real' or not is dependent on several factors, such as real-life experience and comparison to the member's behaviour in other situations, which also reflects the viewers' socialised understanding of what is 'authentic' in reality television.

Interviewees were aware that their perceptions of the authenticity in reality television are shaped by the editing of the show. They acknowledged that narratives portrayed in the programme are purposefully crafted to drive a specific storyline. Viewers identify growth and closure in participants' story arcs, and the resolution of housemates' goals demonstrate that reality television has specific narratives - events are shown to the viewers to contribute to a determined storyline. Narrative design also comes with necessary inclusion and exclusion of other events that would provide a more wholesome understanding of the individual character, but the nature of editing allows the producers greater control of the narrative that they want to forward.

JK: There are things on Terrace House that they don't show us. Like Hikaru, he was always this cocky, arrogant guy, and they show you his awful side... like how he rejected Misaki. But he can't be that awful in real life, because he's always hanging out with the other ex-housemates... it's on Instagram... Maybe they just wanted to emphasise his bad points, so they showed the worst bits of him.

Though viewers have a clear understanding of what would be genuine in the real world, these expectations are not wholly applied to their viewing of reality television. Rather, in

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their judgment of authenticity, they rely on the behaviour and emotions of the participants as more crucial markers of realism than empirical reality. Emotional truth, distinguishing between 'real' and 'fake' feelings, and non-performance are key markers of authenticity for viewers (Sender, 2012). These distinctions are similar across both groups of interviewees, suggesting that cultural context takes a backseat in the differentiation of empirical and emotional realism, and forwarding that there is a universality in the expectations for the authentic within the frame of reality programming.

4.2 Reliance on own experiences in judging the 'real'

Viewers often rely on their own sense of 'real life' to judge the authenticity of behaviour on reality television, drawing comparisons between their own experiences and knowledge of what is realistic to determine if what they see on reality programmes are authentic or not.

4.2.1 Individual experiences as a marker for authenticity

Interviewees' description of what they believe to be real are often drawn from their own experiences - their view of authenticity is dictated by what they know to be true for them. Their knowledge is often an amalgamation of what they have experienced personally and what they know to be contextually accurate, such as how the non-Japanese group attributed their knowledge of Japanese culture to be what they have learnt through international media (McGray, 2002) and personal interactions with Japanese people. Hence, the non-Japanese group defers to Japan's international image, which may not be a true reflection of Japanese culture.

In comparing their own experiences of communal living to *Terrace House*, interviewees described events which they have similar experiences to as 'realistic', while there was more uncertainty in their judgment of events that they have no personal experience of. CD described the disagreements about housemates about cleanliness as 'very realistic', but

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expressed reservations over the likelihood that disagreements would be resolved with a house meeting, as she had never had a house meeting with her housemates.

Viewers rely on their understandings of the world as their basis for reality (Livingstone, 1998). This was demonstrated by interviewees from both groups, who inevitably rely on their individual understanding of reality, which have been mediated and communicated through their personal experiences of everyday life and cultural environments.

4.2.2 Identifying with participants' behaviour

The consideration of authenticity is often made in relation to self-identity. Interviewees expressed the tendency to identify more closely with participants who were shown to have similar experiences to their own. The authenticity of reality television is often built on mutual understanding between the programming and the viewer, and to the viewer, "realism depends on notions of suffering, raw experience and personal struggles as emblems of the real" (Biressi and Nunn, 2005: 36).

Interviewees suggested that the most realistic aspects of *Terrace House* were housemates going through changes and growth, situations that they could relate to from their past experiences, substantiating the view that the ability to connect with the media text builds rapport and confidence in the authenticity of the show. Relating to mutual experiences helps to account for why participants with non-entertainment, regular jobs such as students were described as the most 'realistic' or 'natural' in their behaviour. However, it does not necessarily make what they do not relate to less real.

JM: The characters that I see elements of myself in are definitely the ones that I care about the most, I feel more attached to them, and... I think they're probably more believable. Personally, I find it easier to relate to the male housemates, they have a very easy-going, bro culture about the house, which reminds me of university life. But one of the most genuine housemates to me, was Hansan, even though I'm nothing like him. I think he's the idealised version of myself, if I was trying to go to Harvard and could throw wisdom out at people. But obviously I'm a far cry from that.

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JM's statement demonstrates that although spontaneous connections form between the viewer and participants whom one identifies with, there are also other avenues for rapport to be established with less familiar participants. As such, this study suggests a positive identification with relatable behaviour, but it is difficult to draw conclusions on the converse as the lack of cultural familiarity does not necessarily prevent a non-Japanese viewer from deciding if the participants are authentic in their behaviour.

4.2.3 Understanding participants' motivations for on-screen behaviour

Viewers were sensitive to the fact that reality show participants were being 'filmed' and 'watched', which resulted in different behaviour from their usual off-screen selves (Hill, 2005). Several respondents in both groups suggested that the presence of cameras and the fact that *Terrace House* was broadcast while it was being filmed had an explicit influence on how participants conducted themselves onscreen - they expected participants to want to portray their 'best sides' to be liked by audiences.

Between the two interview groups, the non-Japanese interviewees tended to focus on whether certain housemates seemed to be playing to stereotypes, while the Japanese interviewees such as KY tended to expect that the participants would behave more formally on television than they would in a natural, off-screen situation.

KY: For Japanese people, they have a face for the public, and a face for indoors... tatamae and honne. You kind of see that on Terrace House, they are definitely showing their public persona, they're a lot more formal in the way they speak, and they sound very careful in their choice of words. But it does get a bit more casual over time as they get to know each other, so maybe they become used to being on TV.

KY elaborated on the Japanese public and private personas, *tatamae* and *honne* (Goodman and Refsing, 1992), a notion which wasn't mentioned specifically by other interviewees but described in their responses. This distinction of a public image among the Japanese group which wasn't identified by the non-Japanese group also suggests that the acknowledgement of the *tatamae* and *honne* is one which may not be communicated as part of Japan's international image and therefore inaccessible to the non-Japanese group.

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Respondents suggested that there is an expectation for on-screen behaviour to not be completely coherent, with unpredictability and inconsistencies being more realistic and “three-dimensional” than the portrayal of a specific archetype. This communicated the view that authenticity of participants’ behaviour lies in their imperfection and human flaws, which manifest in inconsistency, and this judgment of authenticity is one which is culturally universal - regardless of their knowledge of Japanese culture, expecting realistic behaviour to be non-stereotypical is congruent with the notion that expectations of reality are built upon their knowledge of real-life experiences.

4.2.4 Contrasting Western and Japanese reality programmes

Interviewees and survey respondents tended to distinguish *Terrace House* from Western reality programming, basing their expectations of reality television on the heightened drama that is commonly associated with Western reality television. The universal familiarity with Western reality programming suggests a coherence with the notion of cultural globalisation and non-geographical limitations in negotiating media culture (Barker, 1999). Concurrently, there is a common expectation among all interviewees that the Japanese-ness of *Terrace House* is associated with a milder, calmer production that is closer to daily life than the dramatised products of Western reality television, as communicated by WB.

WB: There's something comforting and natural about Terrace House... in that it doesn't have all the extremes drama of American reality TV? There are episodes where they just show them doing their groceries, and cooking, without anything really happening. If it was an American show, they'd probably have a disagreement about what to cook, but Terrace House is different.

This contrast in expectations suggests that greater nuance is needed in discussing *Terrace House* in relation to existing Western-focussed literature. However, the research findings also suggest that there are clear distinctions made between Japanese and Western reality television, testifying to the strength of the projected Japanese social image - one of cultural sophistication. In response to RSQ2, it also suggests that cultural knowledge, and being able to distinguish between Western and Japanese cultures, is largely universal.

4.3 Socialisation of authenticity over time

4.3.1 Adjusting perceptions of authenticity: a universal process

Research findings suggested that the perception of authenticity and how media texts are interpreted by viewers may be a universal process. Both respondent groups approached reality television as a cultural product which is not completely factual nor an entirely genuine representation of real life, but a product that retains value in its portrayal of real human individuals in their living experiences. The notion of 'authenticity' and 'genuine' elements of reality television by audiences shifts continually over time, according to the growing knowledge of viewers, courtesy of external knowledge and the media text in itself.

Non-Japanese respondents highlighted that 'weird' elements of the show, such as the way members introduced themselves to each other and the presence of a panel, did not seem unusual when they watched later seasons of the show.

CD: The questions that they ask each other when they first meet are definitely rushed along... I don't think you ask people you've just met what their dating 'type' is, you don't usually focus so much on their romantic interests right from the start. It seemed more awkward in earlier seasons, but I think now (fourth season) the housemates know what are the questions they're expected to ask.

Both interview groups demonstrated that the notion of authenticity can be socialised by the media text in itself, shaping what is the 'norm' and appropriate expectations of the show. Several respondents described situations where they did not believe to be a reflection of their own experiences, but they considered these situations to be authentic, citing it as a 'Terrace House thing'. The categorisation of situations under a specific, text-related context suggests that the text in itself socialises viewers' expectations for the show.

Survey results indicated that more than 76% of sampled viewers felt that their opinion of the authenticity of *Terrace House* had changed either across episodes, seasons, or both. Interviewees attributed this change in opinion to "getting used" to the quirks of the show, and discussion of the show with other viewers. This indicates that the perceived authenticity of a media text is not fixed nor rigid, rather, it adjusts according to the viewers' expectations (A Hall, 2003).

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Respondents discussed the way members would call for house meetings to resolve conflict. Although none of the interviewees had experienced house meetings on similar scale, almost all of them expected house meetings to be called every time there seemed to be a conflict brewing on the show. As such, it can be seen that there is a specific authenticity that is considered within the context of reality television. However, it also needs to be considered that audiences' assessment of realism and authenticity may not be complete - they may be judging authenticity based on a superficial conceptualisation of 'realism' rather than the full range of conceptualisations that can influence their evaluation (A Hall, 2003), although the method of depth interviews have sought to mediate this research limitation by encouraging viewers to think about the various ways in which they think about the authenticity of *Terrace House*.

4.3.2 Mediating the authenticity of cultural products

Terrace House's distinctive position as a Japanese cultural media product provided a rich area of discussion in terms of how foreign cultural products are approached. The non-Japanese group of interviewees were largely unfamiliar with the nuances of Japanese culture, basing their view of Japanese culture on their superficial interactions with more universal aspects of the culture such as food and popular media.

Their limited knowledge of Japanese culture suggested that their opinions of Japanese culture, and their expectations for the housemates in *Terrace House* were based on a watered-down version of Japan, one which has been made 'palatable' for foreign tastebuds, focussing on the allure of the 'foreign' Japanese culture rather than the specificities and uniqueness of Japanese culture which remains inaccessible for foreigners due to language and normative barriers (McGray, 2002; Iwabuchi, 2002b). For example, JM noted that most of his knowledge of Japan was through media products such as video games and anime.

This limited understanding led to the non-Japanese group of interviewees overlooking several cultural aspects of *Terrace House* in their discussion. Several of the Japanese interviewees talked about a scene where a half-Japanese housemate forgot to take off his shoes upon entering the house, expressing their scepticism about the realism of the scene. In particular, JK articulated his belief that the producers had staged the scene.

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JK: I thought it was weird that he would have forgotten to take off his shoes. There's a shoe rack there, there are house slippers at the door, and every Japanese and half-Japanese person I know, and most Asian people, actually, take off their shoes when they enter their homes. To me, it felt like the producers wanted to play up his American side, to emphasise that he's Hawaiian, and a foreigner.

In contrast, none of the non-Japanese interviewees thought the scene was out of the ordinary, and most of them thought it was an amusing scene. This demonstrates that cultural knowledge has some impact on how viewers assess the authenticity in the show, with greater depth of cultural information enabling more critical approaches towards the show as compared to a less-informed viewer, who may approach the text more from an entertainment perspective. While globalisation has enabled greater empathy and understanding of foreign cultures in general, it can be argued that the nuances of culture are not easily communicated through cross-cultural interactions, and in response to RSQ2, cultural knowledge is not entirely universal.

4.3.3 Creating the 'normal'

Interviewees articulated a 'normal' situated within the context of *Terrace House* and reality television programming, where certain behaviour and actions were considered to be appropriate and true to the situation. However, there was a clear distinction between the *Terrace House* 'normal' and real-life 'normal'. Interviewees in both groups described situations such as house meetings and dates, both of which are frequent staples of *Terrace House* life, as realistic within the frame of the show, but not situations that were realistic in their everyday life experiences, as AG explained.

AG: Most of the housemates are fairly outgoing, or they have specific things that they are trying to achieve, there are a lot of artists, entertainers, athletes... and I think they tend to be a bit different from the rest of the population. So... I think their regular lives are probably very different from mine, even though we're all living in Tokyo.

Hence, the responses gathered support the view that expectations of the authentic are largely universal across viewers from different cultural contexts. The realism of *Terrace House* is positioned in relation to viewers' own experiences (A Hall, 2003), but is not judged on the

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same standards. The meaning of authenticity, however, is subject to greater variation. The notion of authenticity is socially constructed, and its relative positioning shifts with the global interactions and cultural exchanges (Athique, 2016). What is considered 'authentic' and 'normal' in *Terrace House* is shaped by the cultural exchanges within the context of which the show is viewed, situated within viewers' experiences and their knowledge of Japanese culture. As such, viewers' expectations of *Terrace House* normal are shaped by their viewing of the text in itself, and is defined within the frames of reality television programming rather than the benchmarks of real life.

4.4 Influence of the media text

The commentary panel on *Terrace House* was acknowledged to be a strong influence of opinion by survey respondents (74%) and interviewees both. Comprising of 6 Japanese entertainers, the panel contributes their views on the show during the discussion scenes filmed in a studio. The panel is considered a crucial element of *Terrace House* as a media text, and the show's appeal to the audience.

4.4.1 The panel: contextualising norms and shaping opinions

Across both research groups, interviewees acknowledged the influence of the commentary in shaping their views of the show as well as the participants. Crucially, the panel was viewed as an 'authority' and serves as a marker for viewers to weigh their opinions against. While the non-Japanese group referred to the panel explicitly as a bastion of the Japanese cultural perspective, the Japanese group acknowledged its influence in more universal aspects, such as highlighting subtle, cultural non-specific behaviour.

Viewers were conscious of how the panel analysed housemates' actions and were reflexive about the impact that these observations had on their own opinions. Interviewees from the non-Japanese group expressed a reliance on the commentary panel to provide specific cultural context about events on the show, guiding their judgments of how 'Japanese' the participants' behaviours were.

HC: When Arman held Arisa's hand on their date, it didn't really stand out to me because as an American, it seemed like a natural thing to do. But when they cut to

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the panel, they had such a strong reaction about it, it made me realise that it's a significant gesture that isn't done casually. I do like that they kind of help me put situations into context... For me, what they think is a representation of Japanese thinking, but I also wouldn't know the difference (between that and reality).

HC demonstrates that non-Japanese viewers' reliance on the panel for cultural context is also due to the lack of alternative sources. Non-Japanese viewers' dependence on the media text, for contextualisation of Japanese culture suggests that there is a 'dominant' reading (S Hall, 1980) that viewers expect from the text. Here, the panel's opinion is seen as the dominant reading, one which viewers presume to be the preferred reading. Viewers' acknowledgment of the influence and their altered opinions could be viewed as the 'negotiated' reading, while their failure to recognise the cultural differences without the panel's influence is categorised as the 'oppositional' reading. The media text in itself plays a crucial role in providing context and opportunity for different readings of the text, and supports encoding/decoding theory's assumptions about cultural differences and the impact on text reading.

However, considering the hybridity perspective, it might be more accurate to address these disparities in reading *Terrace House* in a relative manner (Iwabuchi, 2002b), rather than the rigid 'dominant, negotiated and oppositional' readings proposed by encoding/decoding theory. Adopting a relative view to these readings takes into consideration the cultural empathy mediated in our globalised society, and does not demand a strict categorisation of audiences. Although there is a clear deference among viewers towards the 'Japanese perspective', the varied extents to which viewers react to the Japanese 'authority' would be better represented on a spectrum, eschewing the rigid structure of categorisation which would position viewers as the 'other' in contrast to the Japanese central authority.

4.4.2 Cultural significance embedded in the text

Interviewees demonstrated recognition of the cultural narrative within *Terrace House*. Respondents from both groups highlighted that *Terrace House* is specifically a Japanese reality show, and its cultural positioning also has implications on the type of authenticity that is judged of it. This distinction leads viewers to define the authenticity of the show within their knowledge of Japanese culture - ie. what they believe to be genuine within the

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context of Japanese culture. The cultural elements of the media text thus shapes the very definitions of what can be genuine.

Interviewees of the non-Japanese group such as AW attributed their uncertainty of events on the show to "cultural differences", acknowledging that understanding some of *Terrace House* hinges on the knowledge of Japanese culture.

AW: The panel discussions have a lot of Japanese culture references which... now that I watch it more I think I filter out or ignore, most of the time I don't get the references because I'm not aware of these pop culture trends in Japan. I don't think most of the international audience gets it at all.

Their responses indicated that their limited understanding of Japanese culture, such as the idol industry, constrained their negotiation of the cultural specificities of the show. This emphasises *Terrace House's* positioning as a distinctively Japanese text which does not necessarily explain itself to an uninitiated audience. The image that Japanese pop culture projects to the international world is not the same image that its own locals perceive, due to "the barriers of language and culture" (Gray, 2002: 52) made difficult for foreigners to penetrate. Nonetheless, the image it projects is one that retains appeal to foreigners, and similarly, the inability to access some of the cultural significance of *Terrace House* does not deter viewers from their enjoyment of the show. However, this inaccessibility limits their judgment of authenticity of the show, demonstrating the audience's continued reliance on media texts to negotiate the meaning it conveys - readers and texts are continually integrated in interpretation.

The influence that *Terrace House* as a media text has on viewer interpretations signifies the critical role that the text has in the negotiation of meaning - rather than being completely open to interpretation, the embedded cultural distinctions influence what viewers glean from it. Televisual codes which are seemingly universal and natural are culture-specific (S Hall, 1980), and this specificity shapes the nature in which texts are decoded by audiences. Thus, cultural information determines the assessment of authenticity in reality television.

Nonetheless, the acknowledgement of their gaps in knowledge also accounts for their awareness of these cultural disparities, cultural empathy which is communicated by global

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interactions. However, it is crucial to note that cultural knowledge is not stagnant (Athique, 2016), and these televisual codes are continually negotiated with the aid of the media text. This flexibility in viewers' understandings thus advances that cultural knowledge is communicated and negotiated through media texts (RSQ3), and suggests that the cultural context that viewers draw upon in their judgment of authenticity is one that is constantly growing and adjusting to their enhanced cultural understanding.

4.5 Implications, Limitations and Further Research

This study has attempted to take on an alternative perspective towards researching reality television, approaching a non-Western text and seeking to understand how cultural context impacts viewers' consideration of reality programming. By conducting a comparison of Japanese and non-Japanese viewers, I have found that there is some universality in audiences' expectations of authenticity and reality programming.

The results of this study suggest that the claim that the cultural context excludes viewers from reading media texts (S Hall, 1980; Morley, 1980) should be approached with greater nuance. Cultural context has clear implications on how texts are read, but the meanings of texts are similarly mediated by the content of the text. Within our modern environment, readers have greater cultural empathy and access to unfamiliar texts, but the extent to which the meanings of these texts are negotiated are constricted by the depth of cultural knowledge.

As mentioned earlier, these findings are limited within the scope of sampled *Terrace House* viewers - a sample of dedicated viewers which are not fully representative of all reality television audiences. I am keen to note that it is difficult to compare the depth of culture (Livingstone, 2003), and propose that further research is conducted to understand how cultural knowledge is acquired to better inform future studies.

Further expansion of the sample group, as well as greater depth into cultural knowledge and its impact on viewer perspectives would enhance the representability and impact of this study. In addition, a comparison study could be conducted alongside audiences of a Western

reality TV show to examine how viewers' perspectives differ between Western and Japanese reality television.

5. CONCLUSION

Drawing upon encoding/decoding theory (S Hall, 1980) and audience research on realism (Ang, 1985; Sender, 2012), I have attempted to explore the meaning of authenticity within reality television through a comparison of international viewers. My findings suggest that reality television mediates its own sense of authenticity, and defines the notion of authenticity within its specific context. Elements of the media text communicates the expectations that viewers become accustomed to, expectations which do not discriminate across cultural context. Specifically, in response to RSQ3, the results suggest that cultural knowledge can be communicated through media texts, but the extent to which new cultural knowledge is mediated is unknown. I argue that existing cultural stereotypes held by viewers are reinforced by media texts - cultural stereotypes which are made possible with global and cross-cultural interactions, but new cultural knowledge cannot be definitively imparted through reality programming.

This study demonstrates that there are aspects of cultural knowledge that are not universal. Japanese viewers have shown greater nuance in mediating their experiences of *Terrace House*, demonstrating that while there is considerable cultural empathy and understanding on the part of international audiences, the cultural knowledge they have access to is limited to what has been projected as part of Japan's international image, and is often diluted in the global transmission process.

Overall, cultural and individual context play a key role in how viewers assess authenticity in reality television. The basis for authenticity is formed by what viewers know to be true to real life, they make comparisons to their own experiences in judging this 'authenticity'. However, their considerations are also clearly situated within the context of reality television, and viewers demonstrate a distinction between emotional and empirical realism,

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acknowledging that behaviour and actions can be real amidst a manufactured backdrop of reality programming.

Like many of the individuals I spoke to over the course of this study, there is a recognition that 'reality television' is a misnomer - in watching these shows, it is not necessarily a factual realism that is expected, nor sought after, but the 'reality' comes embedded in entertainment. It is, rather, the opportunity to make connections with the individuals on the show, knowing that they are real human individuals, rather than a caricature created by another person, a probable combination of the many other persons that he or she has met over the course of their life. It matters less, that the show is accurate, that it shows a life we could lead ourselves, rather, despite audiences' cultural background or exposure to the Japanese 'way of life', it is about how real these people can be to us, and that in itself is where the authenticity reveals itself.

In conclusion, this research has found that viewers approach authenticity in reality television differently from how they treat real life - their considerations of the real are socialised within the specific frame of reality programming. The meaning of authenticity is fluid across viewers of different cultural backgrounds, and their lived experiences shape their perspectives of the real. Crucially, this study argues that the lack of cultural context does not exclude viewers from 'reading' and understanding media texts. Cultural unfamiliarity can be mediated by the text in itself, and greater cultural empathy across an international audience is also demonstrated by the findings of this research. Thus, I assert that viewers' cultural context influence their approach towards authenticity in reality television, but the notion of authenticity is fluid and continually shifting with audiences' cultural knowledge.

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APPENDIX A: BACKGROUND INFORMATION OF TERRACE

HOUSE

Terrace House has had four seasons - Boys x Girls Next Door (BGND, 2012-2014), Boys & Girls in the City (BGITC, 2015-2016), Aloha State (AS, 2016-2017) and Opening New Doors (OND, 2017-). The first season was solely produced and broadcast by Fuji Television, while the later three seasons have been co-produced with Netflix and broadcast internationally. The show is filmed entirely in Japanese, but are subtitled in various languages, including English and Spanish.

The Japanese reality television show has garnered international interest from media outlets (The Guardian, 2018; The Telegraph, 2017; The Verge, 2017) due to its peaceful and slow-paced format, eschewing the stereotypes of overly-dramatised reality television. While BGND, BGITC and OND are set in Japan (Shonan, Tokyo and Karuizawa respectively), the third season was filmed in Hawaii, and has drawn criticism for its deviation from the Japanese focus of the other seasons.

Terrace House centres on the lives of six attractive strangers, three boys and three girls, who become housemates in a lavish house, providing the viewer with aesthetic and entertainment pleasure. Plot narratives include the careers and professional pursuits of the housemates, which vary from medical school, architecture, professional surfing, to modelling, as well as the romantic interests that spark between the housemates. It largely focusses on the everyday lives of the housemates, portraying them at work and their home interactions over dinners and in common spaces, without seemingly instigating drama. The show has often been praised for its high production value, drawing comparisons to a drama rather than candid camera reality television.

One of the unique aspects of Terrace House in comparison to Western reality TV shows is the presence of a panel, which has 3-4 studio segments in each episode, each lasting around 3-5 minutes. The panel comprises of 6 entertainers, 5 of whom have been mainstays throughout all four seasons. They discuss the events and interactions that take place on the show, providing comparisons to Japanese culture and everyday life, offering their own judgment, criticism and praise alike, of the behaviour of housemates. In addition, the show prides itself on its unscripted style, with one of the panel members stating in the opening of each episode that 'there is no script at all'. The only production interferences which is explicitly stated in the show are the provision of the house, as well as two cars.

This study focusses on the first Netflix-Fuji season, BGITC, which was filmed in Tokyo, and the catalyst for Terrace House's international fame. Three of the key events discussed in this study are outlined as below.

Tap interrogating everyone about their hopes and dreams

A professional tap dancer, Tap, brings up the topic of professional pursuits and goals during his birthday dinner, and ends up interrogating one of his fellow housemates, Mizuki, a

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barista and administrative staff, about her lack of future plans. His harsh 'attacks' drew flak from viewers and the panel alike.

The 'meat incident'

Five of the housemates ate the wagyu beef which one of the housemates, Uchi, had received from his client as a gift, without his permission or knowledge. His anger and disappointment was compounded by the fact that one of the guilty housemates was his then-girlfriend, and the disagreement that ensued was resolved over a house meeting. The scene is often regarded as Terrace House's most iconic conflict, a rare sight in the show that often shuns clashes.

Riko and Hayato's relationship reveal

The relationship reveal of Riko, an 18-year-old idol who was crowned the 'cutest schoolgirl in Japan', and Hayato, a 29-year-old chef, was controversial for two main reasons: they were sneaking around behind the cameras and the 11-year age gap. They had concealed their dating due to her idol career, which would be affected by her romantic pursuits. It was revealed over a house meeting, and Hayato drew much criticism from fans for his 'creepy' manipulation of a teenager.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW TOPIC GUIDE (SEMI-STRUCTURED)

- Informed Consent: what the study is about, voluntary participation, what participation involves
- Confidentiality of information - names to be anonymised, referred to in study by initials
- Questions?

Icebreakers

- Self-introduction? Where did you grow up and where have you lived?
- Knowledge of Japan? Visited Japan? In what capacity?
- Comparison of Japanese culture to home culture (if applicable)

Interviewee and Reality Television (RTV)

- Do you watch RTV?
 - What type of RTV are you familiar with?
- General impression of RTV?
 - Scripted? Genuine?
 - What do you think of the people who participate in RTV?
- What makes RTV feel real, if at all?
 - refer to survey results: genuine emotions, relating to participants

Interviewee and Terrace House

- How did you know about Terrace House? What did you know about it before watching it?
 - Which seasons have you watched?
 - Which do you enjoy most?
- What did you expect from the show?
 - Did it meet your expectations?
- Similar to other shows?
 - How are they similar?

Theory Q: What does 'authenticity' mean to you in the context of Terrace House?

- What do you think about the 'no script at all' claim?
 - Agree/Disagree? Why?
- Linking to what they think makes RTV feel real, how does Terrace House reflect this?
 - If it does not reflect, is Terrace House authentic to them?
- Do you think Terrace House is an accurate representation of life in Japan/Hawaii?
- What makes Terrace House realistic to you? Or not?

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- Ability to relate to members?
 - Certain members you identify better with than others? Why?
- Display of emotions?

Theory Q: Does production interference impact your view of 'authenticity' in the show?

- Do you think that producers influence the show?
 - How do they influence?
 - Are these interventions necessary?
 - How do they affect the viewing experience?
 - What is your stand towards these interventions?
- Thoughts on the commentary panel?
 - Role that they play?
 - Has it affected your view of the show? How?
- Has your opinion of the show changed across seasons or episodes?
 - How has it changed?
 - What is the reason for these changes?
- discussion of memorable events
 - meat incident between Uchi and housemates
 - Riko and Hayato's relationship reveal

Closing

- Has Terrace House affected your daily life in any way?
- Have you thought about how Terrace House compares to your personal experiences?
- Do you discuss the show with other people?
 - How do their views affect your own, if at all?

APPENDIX C: CODING FRAME & THEMES

Transcripts were first coded according to the list of pre-set codes. The coding frame was further refined by adding the emergent codes, which were found to be recurring across most of the interviews. The coded sections of the transcripts were then categorised into the local themes and further stratified into the four global themes as discussed in the findings section.

Coding Frame

Pre-set codes

- Motivations
 - Reasons
 - Why they expect things to be a certain way
 - Justifications
 - Why they think events have occurred
- Behaviour
 - What they have done
 - Reference to external situations
 - What would they do
- Activities
 - Interactions with other viewers
 - Participatory actions - following members on social media
- Practices
 - Mindsets
 - Strategies
- Feelings
 - Emotional states
- Interpretations
 - Significance and impact of show content
 - How strongly do they believe the events?
 - What guides the events in Terrace House?
- Reflexivity
 - Do they take events at face value?
 - Do they question what the text says?

Emergent codes

- Relationship with show participants

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- How do they perceive the participants?
- Why do they think participants behave a certain way?
- Repetitions
 - What do they reinforce in their statements? Why?

Local themes

1. Expectations of the reality genre
 1. What is communicated by the idea of 'reality television'?
 2. What do audiences expect to see within the genre?
2. Intentions of reality television
 1. What are the motivations behind reality TV production?
 2. Why do people watch reality television?
3. Considerations of the real in reality television
 1. What aspects of reality television are genuine? Which are not?
 2. Why do certain elements feel more real than others?
 3. How does this idea of 'real' emerge? In comparison to?
4. Role of the panel
 1. What role does the panel play in the viewing experience?
 2. Does the panel affect the viewer? How does the panel impact the viewer?
5. Cultural undertones of the text
 1. Is the text universally accessible (culturally)?
 2. How are these cultural undertones communicated? Implicitly or explicitly?
6. Shifting perceptions of authenticity
 1. Is the perception of authenticity fixed?
 2. How does it fluctuate?
7. Mediating the authenticity of cultural products
 1. How do viewers deal with the authentication of cultural differences? Who do they rely on?
 2. What makes cultural products authentic?
8. Creating the 'normal'
 1. What governs their idea of 'normal'? In real life and reality television? Is there a difference?
 2. How is this 'normal' created?
9. Individual experiences as a marker for authenticity
 1. How do viewers compare what they watch with what they've experienced themselves?
 2. Why do they compare their experiences?
10. Identifying with participants' behaviour
 1. What do viewers identify with in participants' behaviour?
 2. How do they identify with these behaviour - things they have done before, seen, know?
11. Understanding participants' motivations for on-screen behaviour
 1. What makes them agree that something is acceptable behaviour?
12. Contrasting Western and Japanese reality programmes

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1. How do their expectations differ across Western and Japanese programming?
2. Why do they have different expectations?

Collated Global and Sub-themes:

1. Empirical vs Emotional Realism
 1. Expectations of the reality genre
 2. Intentions of reality television
 3. Considerations of the real in reality television
2. Influence of the media text
 1. Contextual and influential role of the panel
 2. Cultural significance in the text
3. Socialisation of authenticity over time
 1. Adjusting perceptions of authenticity
 2. Mediating the authenticity of cultural products
 3. Creating the 'normal'
4. Reliance on own experiences over time
 1. Individual experiences as a marker for authenticity
 2. Identifying with participants' behaviour
 3. Understanding participants' motivations for on-screen behaviour
 4. Contrasting Western and Japanese reality programmes

6. APPENDIX D: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

#	Name (Anonymised)	Age Range	Sex	Nationality	Exposure to Japanese culture (Y/N), details	Interview details
1	Philip West	25-34	M	British	N (3 months university exchange programme in Japan)	Skype, 12 April 2018
2	Samuel Schull	55 and up	M	American	N	Skype, 12 April 2018
3	Sara Saito	35-44	F	American	N (Fourth gen Japanese, never been to Japan)	Skype, 12 April 2018
4	Andrew Zane	25-34	M	American	Y (lived in Japan for 5 years)	Skype, 13 April 2018
5	Juri Hayato	18-24	F	Japanese	Y	Skype, 14 April 2018
6	Hannah Cohen	25-34	F	American	N	Skype, 14 April 2018

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#	Name (Anonymised)	Age Range	Sex	Nationality	Exposure to Japanese culture (Y/N), details	Interview details
7	Wendy Bass	25-34	F	American	Y (lived in Japan for 2.5 years, half-Japanese)	Skype, 15 April 2018
8	Athena Wong	35-44	F	American	N	Skype, 16 April 2018
9	Alan Green	25-34	M	American	Y (living in Japan for more than a year)	Skype, 16 April 2018
10	Riley Chase	25-34	F	British	Y (lived in Japan for a year)	Skype, 18 April 2018
11	Teresa Low	18-24	F	American	N	Skype, 19 April 2018
12	Cheryl Darcy	25-34	F	Australian	Y (living in Japan for more than 3 years)	Skype, 20 April 2018
13	Lauren Brand	25-34	F	Australian	Y (living in Japan for more than 2 years)	Skype, 25 April 2018
14	Alejandro García	25-34	M	American	N	Skype, 3 May 2018
15	Jon Marshall	25-34	M	British	N	Skype, 3 May 2018
16	Jek Kitayama	18-24	M	Japanese	Y	Skype, 5 May 2018
17	Lily Vasko	35-44	F	American	N	Skype, 16 May 2018
18	Kai Yamasato	18-24	M	American	Y (2nd generation Japanese)	Skype, 27 May 2018

*Note: Y for Japanese group, N for non-Japanese group; all Skype interviews conducted with video, audio recorded only