

Chapter 4: Reality TV Analysis: From Authenticity to Affect

This chapter reviews existing studies on reality TV in Western and Chinese scholarship, concerning the role of affect and emotion in media texts, as well as their effect on audience acceptance and appropriation of reality TV shows. The proliferation of reality programming in the global television landscape has generated increasing scholarly interest in recent years. But relatively speaking, the role of affect and emotion has not drawn much attention; media scholars are more concerned with the narrative, media industry, genres, and sociopolitical implications of reality TV (e.g. Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Murray & Ouellette, 2009; Kraidy & Sender, 2011). While the intense performance of emotions in media texts on reality TV has been recognized and discussed, scholars have mainly focused on criticizing the production and manipulation of human emotions for certain economic and cultural purposes, and the terms affect and emotion are often seen as self-evident, leading to a lack of theorization. The affective responses of audiences have primarily been discussed in a general sense, or replaced by other terms such as desire and pleasure within the approach of media psychology. With the “affective turn” renewing interest in affect, research on different ways of rethinking how affect and emotion function in reality TV texts and their audiences began to appear. The final part of this chapter will focus on the growing research inspired by the affective turn, and summarize the above literature on my research.

4.1 The politics of emotional performance on reality TV

Media scholars have addressed intense emotional performances in reality TV texts. According to Ellis (2009), reality TV has given new visibility and prominence to emotions that were previously maintained in the private sphere. Kri-

ijnen and Tan (2009) also confirmed that the typical reality TV show provides its audience a near permanent emotional display. Statistics show that “every scene featured emotion portrayed in images or apparent from dialogue” (p. 459). Besides, the scope of emotional expressions of the participants “varied widely from helpless loneliness to intentional forms of aggression”, far beyond what media critics envisioned. They then assert that reality TV actually “constitutes an emotional laboratory providing its audience with a vast array of situations in which they can observe participants, identify with them emotionally, and access their feelings and inner life” (p. 468). In this way reality TV enables its viewers to develop “moral-emotional repertoires” through which they imagine alternative outcomes in terms of emotions or reflect on moral decisions and choices (Krijnen, 2011).

These emotional performances are construed as significant ways to generate a sense of reality. Mast (2016) stated that the claim to realness of reality TV is inherently entangled with the “appeal to the experiential – or, the credibility of emotions, confessions, articulations of the intimate – and to the transparent – or the sincerity of (self-)reflexivity” (p. 914). Such an idea is based on traditional thinking that our belief of authenticity is largely affected by emotions (cf. Frida & Mesquita, 2000). Citing from Ang’s (2003) concept of “emotional realism”, Mast extended this thinking and used it to explain the experience of watching reality TV. When analyzing the viewer appreciation of *Dallas*, Ang (2003) found that rather than a sense of empiricist realism or classical realism,

the realism experience of the *Dallas* fans...is situated at the emotional level: what is recognized as real is not *knowledge* of the world, but a subjective experience of the world: a ‘structure of feeling’. It is emotions which count in a structure of feeling. Hence emotions form the point of impact for a recognition of a certain type of structure of feeling in *Dallas* (p. 45, italic from original).

In a similar way, emotion is the key to understanding the hybrid viewing experience of reality TV. Kilborn (2003) pointed out that while viewers are fully aware the nature of managed artificiality of the medium, they are also at once immediately implicated in “flesh and blood” social relations (p. 52). This peculiar relationship between reality TV and viewer is described by Jones (2003) in the term “reality contract” – audiences appear to be able to suspend their disbelief and actively negotiate mediated reality with their “personalized reality contracts” (p. 404). They are often engaged in “a sophisticated, dynamic

and, so it could be argued, strategic shifting to-and-fro deconstructive and reconstructive positions” (Mast, 2016, p. 914). The emotional performances of the participants, then offered significant evidence for viewers to identify how true they are being to their “real selves” (Hill, 2005). According to Kavka (2014), it is in the mutual reciprocity between the appeal of real and emotions that affective responses serve as proof that participants on screen are their “true selves”, and the fact that people on screen are real in turn verifies viewers’ affective responses.

Researchers have criticized the manipulation of “emotional realism”, or the exhibition of “heartfelt” feelings of reality TV as a reproduction of the cultural industry. For this, Grindstaff (2002) applied the term “money shot”, which originally refers to the shot of male ejaculation in a pornographic film, now to describe the culminating moment on daytime talk shows. This shot shows participants’ emotions as unexpected and uncontrollable, often confirmed by tears or other bodily signs of true feelings. Grindstaff (2002) made convincing arguments about how reality producers heavily rely on participants’ performance of the “money shot”; these shots not only anchor an episode, but are rehashed and replayed in episodes, promos, and recaps throughout the show. With the circulation of money shots in new media platforms, Grindstaff and Murray (2015) argued that the “money shot” has experienced a branding process, attached “to a variety of popular media and consumer products” and promoted to “branded affect” (p. 111). For them, the production of branded affect is central to reality TV’s industrial mode of “ordinary celebrity” production. On this basis, Arcy (2018) extended the term to “digital money shot” to describe the normalization and intensification of emotional performances in convergent TV and new media sites.

Other scholars have criticized the exaggerated display of emotions on reality TV as reproducing identity inequalities in terms of gender, race and class. The show *The Bachelor* is particularly noticed in gender studies, perhaps for the reason that the emotional climaxes in the show are closely tied with the women contestants’ aspirations and identities. As Gray (2009) pointed out, every week, the show climaxes with a “rose ceremony”, “resulting in a 10-minute showpiece full of, first expectant and, then, joyous or crushed reaction shots” (p. 264). Drawing from Grindstaff’s (2002) distinction between a “soft-core” and a “hard-core” money shot – the “soft-core” money shot is confessional, “feminine” and “based on heartache or joy rather than conflict and anger (the basis for the “hard-core” money shot)” (p. 26), Dubrofsky (2009) found that excessive emotional outpouring in *The Bachelor* can be equated to the hard-core

“money shot”, which is represented in the show as a problematic inability for women to contain intense bodily responses. Consequently, those who provide the shot are considered unstable, unsuitable, and dangerous, and always eliminated afterwards.

Kristyn Gorton's (2009) analysis of reality TV shows such as *Wife Swap* is more theorized. Her understanding of affect and emotion is more influenced by feminist theories dating back to the 1980s, and focus on specific concerns “such as ‘the personal is the political’, ‘language as affect’, and ‘shame’” (p. 68). By doing this she aims to encourage a rethinking of the specific ways discrete emotions work to elicit actions, shaping subjectivities and relationships. One interesting finding in Gorton's work is that emotions in reality TV often function as pedagogic tools for the viewers to learn how to tackle intimate relationships, and obscure differences of class, gender, and race. As she analyzes,

Using devices such as the video diary and the staging of final meetings between the participants, these programmes use emotion as a tool to suggest that differences of class, race, sexuality, and gender can easily be overcome through the emotional medium of a ‘good cry’. Indeed, *Wife Swap* fashions emotional responses as a way of overcoming differences between the participants and between viewers and participants (Gorton, 2009, p. 100–01).

The emotional representations of other social identities such as race and class have also been explored. For instance, Dubrofsky (2009) found that the emotional performances in *The Bachelor* are also raced, that “women of color are never cast as viable romantic partners (unless they are ‘whitened’)” (p. 356). Lovelock (2017) explored the potential effect of emotional displays on the construction of sexual minority identities (focusing on *Big Brother* UK). He argued that while the emotionally intimate representations of certain gay and transgender subjects may signal an era of “tolerance” and “acceptance” for LGBT people, “a kind of queer emotional suffering” is commercialized and worked to reify heteronormativity (p. 452). In research that examined the reality show *The Luxury Trap*, Hirdman (2016) analyzed how classed otherness is constructed by the repetitive operation of shaming. She argued that class and shame are intrinsically linked together in the mediated affect spectacle, “giving body and form to the un-named, to that which drives us towards affective judgements and to the un-making of subjects” (p. 294).

The confessional and therapeutic mode of emotional performance, and its effects on making sense of the self and society have also attracted the atten-

tion of scholars. As Aslama and Pantti (2006) claimed, reality TV reinvented the confessional monologue that offers opportunities for ordinary people to disclose their feelings. Such emotional and psychological narratives are at the core of reality TV. They continued to suggest that reality TV has transformed “from a mass medium to a first-person medium addressing masses of individuals” (p. 180). Ironically, it has been said that the obsession with emotion and authenticity is a way of dealing with experiences of insecurity in late modernity (Giddens, 1991). However, drawing from Dovey (2000), the first-person medium commodifies this universal desire and recreates an individualized society. Meštrović’s (1997) statement of a “postemotional society” has often been revived to describe the intensification of individual emotions and its negative social impacts (e.g. Aslama & Pantti, 2006; Bonsu et al., 2010; Collins, 2014); Meštrović worried that our emotional capacity has been continuously impaired by the repeated experiences of vicarious, mediated and often highly intensified emotions, and is now hardly able to experience genuinely felt emotions in real, self-experienced and idiosyncratic events.

As a whole, research focusing on emotion performances in reality TV texts has recognized the intensity of emotions and critically analyzed the situations and ways in which these emotions are manipulated by capital and power, particularly in relation to the contexts of consumerism, identity politics, and neoliberalism. But it can be argued that such research in general lacks a theorization of affect and emotion. Affect in this field is less investigated; sometimes it is used interchangeably with emotion, on other occasions it is used to describe physiological and bodily responses. Critical analyses based on feminist theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, and critical race theory often view emotion as objects of specific discourses and narratives, as phenomena of social linguistic construction. The emphasis is on how the affective dimensions of social life is interpellated by the market, power and ideology, hence, the questioning of emotion is mainly performed under the framework of subject identities and differences divided by sexuality, race, ethnicity, gender, and class.

4.2 Negotiations of emotion display rules in (Chinese) reality TV

With the circulation and adaptation of global reality TV formats in different cultures and regions, scholars have noticed the influence of both global and local elements on emotional display in this process. As noted by Waisbord

(2004), the trend of reality TV is geared by the global “format franchising” model of contemporary television (p. 360). With the facilitation of transnational television companies and international distribution networks, reality programs turned themselves into a global palette of available formats that could be adapted into different markets around the world (cf. Moran, 2009, 2013). As mentioned in Chapter 2, the proliferation of reality TV shows in China is also closely linked to changes in this global TV programming models, beginning with the introduction of the popular format *Survivor*. The hybrid nature of Chinese reality TV and its controversial context have attracted academic attention and become an ideal object of analysis for exploring the tension between globalization and localization.

Theoretically, it is argued that, instead of considering the global and the local as antithetical, it would be better to think of them as reciprocally constitutive, as suggested by the concepts “glocalization” (Robertson, 1992) and “hybridization” (Pieterse, 1994, 2004). According to Moran (2009), TV format

refers to a method of practising television whereby a kind of unspecific, universal or de-nationalized program template or recipe is developed, which in turn can be customized and domesticated for reception and consumption by specific audiences in local or national contexts. (p. 115–116).

Hence, the format of reality TV is simultaneously global and national in its nature. Reality formats are very “open” and easy to localize (Waisbord, 2004), and it is essential for TV content to connect to the norms, values, beliefs and all other sociocultural elements of a local audience in order to gain success. Keane (2004) suggested that format adaptations “are influenced by specific structures of feeling” (p. 14). It is neither the process of homogenization nor of heterogenization, rather a mixture of both, yet in ways that “cannot neglect power issues inherent to global communication dynamics” (Kraidy & Murphy, 2008, p. 351).

Under this framework, empirically, scholars have mainly focused on the management of emotion “display rules” during the adaptation of TV formats. The term “display rules” (Hochschild, 1983) which is originally used to describe how workers learn to manage their emotions to meet organizational expectations in workplaces (for example a stewardess is expected to have a “modest but friendly smile”), is applied in this field to explain how emotions are managed in transnational reality TV formats, in order to maintain a global appeal while producing a local version that may be more applicable for domestic media industry and acceptable for local audiences. For instance, van Keulen and

Krijnen (2014) compared the Australian version of *Farmer Wants a Wife* with the Dutch version, and found that due to cultural and media systemic differences, while the Australian version has a strong focus on sensation, conflict and emotion that aims at “addressing the viewer on the basis of fantasies and ‘guilty pleasures’”, the Dutch version has a more docu-dramatic elaboration that “deals with everyday life and issues the viewer can relate to” (p. 286). Campaiola-Veen (2012) explored the hybridization process of *Nouvelle Star*, the French version of *American Idol*; at first the global format is transformed by traits of distinctive French identity, “intellectualism and musical taste” (p. 89), but there is a return of a global economics model that emphasizes popularity and emotions. She concluded that although on the surface the hybridization process may seem like an endless contest between aesthetics and affect, both are in fact absorbed by the global commodity scheme of mass production and distribution. Focusing on the production aspect, Sūna (2018) explained how reality TV producers negotiate between allegedly universal emotions and local emotional display rules, “which are bound to a market logic or commodification” (p. 9). She claimed that the sense of belonging is specifically addressed to create cultural proximity to the viewers.

In a similar vein, media scholars have examined the localization of emotion display rules embedded in Western reality formats in the Chinese context. For example, Wu (2016) found that Chinese television producers sacrificed an important formula that made reality TV prevalent around the world when producing the lifestyle reality show *Exchanging Spaces* (*Jiaohuan kongjian* 交换空间) – presenting anxiety and desire. Instead, they turned almost simultaneously to positive reality shows that are infused with “positive energies” such as “family feeling”, “brotherly love”, and “happiness”, in order to call for a return of socialist core values. Drawing on another reality show, *China’s Next Top Model* (*Dingji chaomo* 顶级超模), Wei (2014) explored localization strategies for the meaning of emotional performances. He observed that, on the one hand, Chinese producers emulated those emotional displays that do not violate local cultural values and ideologies that emphasize social harmony. On the other hand, for other emotional performances that unabashedly conflict with such ideals, producers applied textual framing strategies to subtly revise their meanings, including:

- (i) defining what caused the feelings that led to the emotional display as culturally appropriate, (ii) portraying the emotional display as not reflecting

the performers' true feelings and (iii) ensuring that the performers' feelings are resolved within the show's narrative in an appropriate manner. (p. 216).

Zhang Yuanchen (2018) and Sheng Qu (2018) both analyzed the singing competition show *The Voice of China* (*Zhongguo haoshengyin* 中国好声音), and discussed how the attempt to achieve socialist inclusion is reflected in “dream-fulfillment” discourses. Zhang (2018) applied Paul Ekman's (1972) neurocultural theory of emotion to reveal the impacts of Chinese collectivist culture on both elicitors of emotion, display rules of emotion and the consequences of emotion arousal in the show. As she pointed out, this is primarily realized by bringing the protagonists into relationships of family, group, and country (p. 44); and regulating them through family values, group harmony, and social commitment (p. 46). In this context, Sheng Qu (2018) located the emotional displays in the show in the tension between market forces and ideological requirements. Under the pressure of audience rating competition, the producers constructed a melodramatic narrative to highlight emotional expressions. Oftentimes the show was even transformed into a “crying game” as many contestants emotionally solicited votes from judges, live and television viewers (cited from Xiao, 2006, p. 64). The show also deliberately managed the performance of dream stories. A neoliberal theatre style inundated with burning ambition for “music dreams” was abandoned, instead, dream stories were interpreted as a realization of professionalism in the name of “real music, true strength and genuine emotion” that satisfies the Party-state cultural and moral will (Qu, 2018, p. 139). It is essentially “an art of balancing” for local producers to pursue ideological filtration and reconstruction (Zhang, 2015, p. 121).

In related articles published in Chinese, it is noticeable that Chinese scholars primarily stand with the Party-state, act as “counsellors” to the television industry, and apply themselves to developing strategies to guide and govern the industry. They focus on advising on how to successfully slough off inharmonious emotional displays that are considered as facilitating Western ideologies. As Chris Shei (2013) noted, “in the case of China, culture and politics work together to rule out the possibilities and standardisation of global media” (p. 43). For example, Xue Xiang (2019) proposed that it is necessary to guarantee a positive value orientation of the emotional conflicts displayed. He pointed out that reality shows should not only resonate with, but also enlighten and offer compassionate care to the audience, to inspire them to “rethink the true meaning of life, and realize self-reflection...” (p. 112). In a

recent study, Yan Qing (2020) observed the emergence of *kuqing* (苦情, bitter emotion) culture in media spectacles and especially in reality shows. He especially emphasized the function of *kuqing* as a motivator of sympathy and as “an artistic promotion” for entertainment programmes. Thus, he concluded with a suggestion for the reality TV producers, it is necessary to reduce focus on sensational competitive games, but to pay more attention to the expression of everyday emotions with more social ethics, and create a new observable space for everyday life; only in this way can the shows become healthy and positive (p. 59). However the effects of ideological guidance may not turn out as assumed. Liu and Chang’s (2016) analysis found that though TV producers have shifted their concepts of reality shows from purely sensational enjoyment to an effective way to rebuild value systems, practically, the implanted positive emotional scenes have inevitably been dispelled and decomposed by the entertaining nature of reality TV. Even worse, the positive values embedded may lose their attractiveness when over-emphasized and belabored in a didactic and stiff way.

4.3 Emotional labor and affective capitalism

4.3.1 Affective economics as a new television marketing model

In addition to studying emotional performances in reality TV texts, scholars have also focused on the transmedia circulation of specific emotional scenes and the emotional labor generated by audience participation. In *Convergence culture* (2006a), Henry Jenkins assumed the business model of reality TV as an “affective economics” – a new configuration of marketing theory that seeks to profit from human emotions (p. 62). Its logic is to encourage companies to transform their brands into what one industry insider calls “lovemarks” and to blur the line between entertainment content and brand messages. In ultra-competitive market like television, brands have to work hard to get customers’ attention, and building an emotional relationship with a customer through a variety of “psycho-techniques” may be the surest means of expanding consumer loyalty (p. 63). Beverley Skeggs (2010) also claimed, “by manipulating affect, reality television engages the audience in ‘feeling’ about the things that matter to them” (p. 49). Jenkins (2009) cited *American Idol* as a quintessential example of affective economics and describes its strategy of “the empowerment of consumers” through “experience-based, access driven marketing” (p.

349–350). He is quite optimistic about the collective intelligence of fans, whom he views as “textual poachers” – “active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings” (Jenkins, 1992, p. 24). He then argues that it is not the media but the audience who truly controls emotional capital, viewers can either invest their emotions in a certain program or brand, or withdraw and transfer them at any time, perhaps even using emotion as a resource to build their own brand community that in turn affects television producers.

Chinese media scholars have applied the concept of “affective economics” to analyze the new television industry trends in China, since the phenomenal success of the second season of *Super Girl* in 2005, which Yang (2014) argued “ushered in a whole new era of reality television, showcasing the genre’s ability to captivate the hearts and minds of the whole nation” (p. 520). She pointed out that the affectively engaging format of *Super Girl* is what makes the show simultaneously the most commercial and the most democratic reality show in China:

On one hand, the paid voting system, while it enhances the pleasure and stakes of fan participation, constitutes a form of economic exploitation of fan emotion and fan labor. On the other hand, fans also exploit the genuine voting opportunity to create a vibrant civic space where they can form new alliances, perform fan activism, and articulate alternative values and visions. (p. 518).

Here, emotions are owned by the audience, or more accurately, by fans, and are considered to be the main source of fan empowerment. Many Chinese intellectuals view the wide audience voting of reality TV as an alternative form of political participation, and they value the democratic potential contained therein. Such an optimistic perspective comes from their expectation of new media technologies and the action of fan communities. As Meng (2009) stated, *Super Girl*, for the first time in history, allowed Chinese audiences to enjoy the enfranchisement to pick their favorite candidates; with the help of new media and their convergence, fan communities have formed, eliciting both online and offline discussions, and actively campaigning for their favorite contestants. In particular, such participation is based on an equipotentiality, rejecting a model of hierarchy. As Jenkins (2006b) affirms, “fan culture is dialogic rather than disruptive, affective more than ideological, and collaborative rather than confrontational” (p. 150). In this sense, Jingsi Wu (2011) proposed that *Super Girl* not only brings Chinese audiences a refreshing entertainment experience, but also it has tremendous political implications for

taking “a provocative and revolutionary step” that invites wide audience voting (p. 53).

4.3.2 Emotional labor in late capitalism

Emotion works as more than a new commercial strategy for marketers to manage and manipulate audiences. As Mark Andrejevic critically stated in his book *Infoglut* (2013), Jenkins’s approach lacks a theorization of affect. Since strategies of mobilizing emotional engagement have been around for a long time, the newness of this discourse seems to hinge more on the enhanced ability of audiences to actively participate through the use of convergent technology. Thus what Jenkins mainly focuses on is not the role of emotion but the affordances of interactive media technologies that create the trends of a “participatory culture” and “collective intelligence” in the television industry.

Focusing more on the role of emotion, recently, other scholars have articulated the marketization of emotion, feeling, and intimate life in reality TV with concepts such as emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983/2003); affective labor (developed from autonomist Marxist scholars such as Hardt & Negri, 2004); emotional capitalism (Illouz, 2007) and affective economy (Skeggs, 2010; Skeggs & Wood, 2008). These concepts articulate the evolution of reality TV with the structural changes and transformations in the society. According to Skeggs (2010), it represents an era when “capital extends its lines of flight into new spaces, creating new markets by harnessing affect and intervening in intimate, emotional and domestic relationships” (p. 30). In such an affect or attention economy, there is an ongoing “real subsumption” of the social reproduction of biological and everyday life into capitalist value production and exchange (Hardt & Negri, 2000). Emotions come to serve as an exploitable resource; as Massumi (2002) puts it, “affect is real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late capitalist system, as infrastructural as a factory” (p. 45).

The once private spaces (such as the home) and activities related to privacy (care, help, and nurturing) are now visualized and staged by reality TV for public entertainment (Nikunen, 2019). As Hearn (2010) also claimed, reality TV is a significant site of both material and ideological production: what the on-air participants do are not only acts of performance but also an affective form of “immaterial labour”. While such activities may not count as traditional wage-earning labour and are not easily recognized as “work”, they can still be tamed and contribute to the production of a commodity that generates worth and value. Andrejevic (2011) thereby argued that reality TV pro-

vides a new model for rethinking shifts in the mode of labor and exploitation in the “social factory”, “not just in terms of profits and surplus value, but also in terms of alienation or estrangement” (p. 28). This is a process of “economic subjectification”, according to Kiersey (2014), the choice made by reality TV that consciously utilizes capacities of affective labor suggests the reinvestment of subjects “in an emotionally and financially oppressive mode of capitalist valorisation” (p. 359).

Much of the research in this area has situated discussion on the circulation of women’s emotions as a form of labor on diverse media platforms, especially on how women’s lives and experiences become commodified through affective capitalism. In their seminal work on reality TV as a technology of affect, Skeggs and Wood (2008; Wood et al. 2009) explored the valorization of intimate relationships through the visualization of women’s domestic and emotional labour (on reality shows such as *Wife Swap*).

Women across the board can now see a great deal of their labour made visible and public. Yet the format of ‘reality’ television – where transformation is one of the main dramatic mechanisms – means that just like in the 1950s their labour is usually found wanting, in need of expert advice, guidance and improvement...As domestic and emotional labour develops through the new affective economy...it also becomes further subject to governance and scrutiny, attached to the wellbeing of the nation and new forms of exploitation. (p. 147).

Hearn (2016) also argued that the *Real Housewives* franchise specifically launches the affective labor and value creation in gendered or “housewifized” ways, which “recall the appropriation and denigration of the value of women’s work by systems of capitalist expansion in the 16th and 17th centuries” (p. 10). On this basis Psarras (2020) developed the concept “emotional camping”, which married the concepts emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) and camping (Sontag, 1964), to describe “the self-branding identity work of successful Housewives” across platforms (p. 3). She observed that the characteristics of these successful women are: a dedication to Bravo, an inclination to present as a walking GIF, and perceived authenticity (ibid). The work of emotional camping reveals that while emotional labor may take new forms in new mediums, the goal remains the same – to serve capitalist expansion and to satisfy the institutions where such work is conducted.

Affective capitalism in the context of reality TV also refers to the capitalization of “immaterial aspects of (voluntary) labour or participatory activities

of maintenance, caretaking, supporting, and sharing in digital environments” (Nikunen, 2016, p. 167). Such a perspective is less optimistic about the audience’s power than affective economics studies and fan studies, and more focused on the new forms of capitalist appropriation and exploitation with new tools and technologies, such as big data, algorithmic culture and datafication. Terranova (2000) argues that the digital economy has made the audience work as a form of “free labor” that constitutes a fundamental moment in the creation of value in late capitalist societies. Voluntary activities on the Internet including work such as writing/reading/managing and participating in mailing lists/Web sites/chatlines are acting out desires for affective and cultural production “that are pleurably embraced and at the same time often shamelessly exploited” (p. 37). It can be seen that with the affective technologies of reality TV, audiences’ affective responses have been turned into participation, quantified online presence, and voluntary donations, following the logic of affective capitalism. The result, as Andrejevic observed, is the merging of two forms of audience participation: “the effort viewers put into making the show interesting to themselves and the effort they devote to taking on the role of production assistants and attempting to provide feedback to writers and producers” (2008, p. 26).

4.4 The role of emotions in the audience experience

Reality TV’s emotional appeal to audiences has also attracted the scrutiny of empirical psychology. Research in this area is mainly carried out under the theoretical framework of media psychology. Based on the expectation that reality TV is a genre of entertainment and designed to facilitate viewer enjoyment, the notion of enjoyment has drawn scholarly attention. Nabi et al. (2006) related cognitive assessments and emotional reactions to the concept of enjoyment, and found that in general, happiness, relief, parasocial relationships, voyeurism, surprise, and social comparison positively related to enjoyment whereas negative outcomes, anger, and self-awareness negatively related to enjoyment (p. 442). In another research exploring the factors that contribute to the enjoyment of nine reality sub-genres, Tsay-Vogel and Krakowiak (2017) found that hidden camera, docusoap, and game shows were rated as significantly more enjoyable, whereas court shows were reported as the least enjoyable (p. 354). Furthermore, the impact of appeal factors on viewers’ enjoyment varies across sub-genres, for example, whereas love and watching

others increased enjoyment of dating/romance, makeover/lifestyle, docusoap, and sitcom subgenres, the appeal of love diminished enjoyment of law enforcement and court shows (p. 357–58).

However, on the premise that reality TV requires “real people” to expose their private matters and intimate experiences, several studies critique reality TV for serving as a guilty pleasure (e.g. Pozner, 2010; Stevenson, 2019), and viewers are drawn to participants who are trapped in a “circuit of voyeurism and exhibitionism” (Andrejevic, 2004, p. 180). A study conducted by Tal-Or and Hershman-Shitrit (2015) verified that the more media characters disclose their inner feelings and thoughts as the show progresses, the more attractive they are to viewers. The ambiguous space between authenticity and constructiveness may invite voyeuristic enjoyment. However, extent research on the relationship between the tendency to use media for voyeuristic purposes and the consumption of reality programs has revealed inconclusive results. For example, Nabi et al. (2006) suggest that though voyeurism appears to be a key distinguishing gratification between reality and fictional programming, it is not always a predictor of reality television enjoyment. In a similar study, Papacharissi and Mendelson (2007) identified that only those viewers who do not go out very often (low mobility) and have only a few social relations watch reality TV out of voyeurism and companionship.

Such inconsistencies in the findings, Baruh (2010) argues, is at least partly due to a lack of an agreed upon conceptualization and hence measurement of voyeurism. In this situation, Baruh (2010) made a distinction between “trait voyeurism” (*voyeuristic uses of television*) and pathological voyeurism (*sexually motivated uses of television*, p. 207). He claimed that recent studies are mostly focused on the former, in which “the common voyeur will seek sanctioned and less risky means through which the desire to take a peek at what should normatively not be accessible can be satisfied” (p. 204). He then reported that there exists a positive relationship between trait voyeurism and the consumption of reality programming.

Apart from voyeurism, empirical researchers also explored other social motives and psychological aspects of viewers which have an influence on television exposure, primarily based on the theoretical basis of uses and gratifications (U&G). For example, in a survey for reality TV viewers, Papacharissi and Mendelson (2007) found that reality TV satisfies three motives of the audience: reality entertainment, relaxation, and habitually passing time, wherein entertainment and passing time are the most salient motives that were mentioned frequently. In a survey of college students’ consumption patterns in

regard to reality TV, Lundy, Ruth, and Park (2008) found that while participants were embarrassed or hesitant to disclose the actual amount of reality programs that they watch, perhaps due to social stigma, they continue to watch because of entertainment, an escape from reality and living vicariously through others. Moreover, Reiss and Wiltz (2004) found status to be the most significant motive for watching reality TV, namely, reality TV gives psychological significance to viewers' perceptions of superiority. They also found that reality TV viewers are more motivated by vengeance than are non-viewers (p. 373–74). In a recent study, Hershman and Cohen (2018) tested the role of humiliation as a motive, but found that enjoyment of viewing reality TV is not related to humiliation but rather to a positive assessment of participating in reality shows. This finding indirectly supported the idea that empathy but not voyeuristic desire is why people enjoy these shows.

In sum, media psychology understands emotion as the key to the appeal of reality TV. From the above audience studies conducted based on U&G, researchers have already noticed emotion as a significant dimension among diverse gratifications. Emotion acts not only as the outcome of entertainment product consumption, but also as the driving force for the audience to make certain viewing choices. It is also noticeable that researchers take more interest in the audience experience as a whole; the term emotion is often mixed up with other terms such as enjoyment, voyeuristic desire, and pleasure, to be viewed as a part of motivation or satisfaction of TV viewing. There is an increasing agreement that reality TV offers its audience a host of affective, cognitive, and behavioral experiences, which are not just associated with pleasure or fun, but also include strong feelings of elevation and perceptions of the program as moving and thought-provoking, as a form of meaningful entertainment (Tsay-Vogel & Krakowiak, 2016).

4.5 The affective turn in reality TV analysis

After years of exploration, the significance of emotion and affect in reality TV has been fully confirmed. Whereas earlier, inheriting the critical academic tradition on television, media scholars criticized reality TV as “trash TV” or “dumbing down” (Dovey, 2000) that hardly provided diverse affectivity. But developed in tandem with the genre itself, academic scholarship has experienced significant expansion. As I have shown, this includes a careful scrutiny of the work of emotion and affect on reality programming, the way

they circulate in culturally diverse contexts, and their effects on audience media exposure. Affect is a mark of reality TV, and the diversity and power of affect and emotion in reality TV far exceeds what scholars once presumed.

In the last part of this chapter, I will review the recent affect studies on reality TV, focusing on the new ways developed to understand embodied audience practices around reality TV shows (e.g. Skeggs & Wood, 2012; Kavka, 2014; Lünenborg & Maier, 2019). These studies differ from the tradition of both textual-cultural studies and psychological analysis on emotion and affect. As a part of the recent “turn to affect and emotion in media studies” (Lünenborg & Maier, 2018), fresh angles on reality TV have emerged that build on different affect theories (as elaborated in Chapter 3). In these studies, affect is less connected with the individual’s psychological state, but more with practices that are fundamentally social, connected with meaning-making processes, and have the potential for change.

Among them, Misha Kavka is one of the first theorists interested in the “affective power” of reality TV. In the book *Reality Television, Affect and Intimacy: Reality Matters* (2008), she considers affect more for “the *productive* aspect of the sensing body, out of which arise specific emotions, objects, judgments – and even antecedents, *ex post facto*” (p. 30, italics in original). For her, affect constitutes a meeting point or “cusp between the individual and the collective psyche” (p. xi), wherein its nature is “taken as dynamic – transportable, transmittable, and mobile” (p. 31). Kavka claims that by placing these ideas together, “objects of emotion” can be taken as “materially sensible” as these emotions are of significance to the audience (2008, p. 33). “The screen is a join,” she writes, “that *amplifies* affect and *connects* real people on one side with real people...on the other side” (p. 37, italics in original).

This angle on affect allows her analysis of reality TV to move “beyond the semiotics of representation to the affect of presentation” (2008, p. 7). Using case studies of reality TV formats that “link affect to intimacy” instead of having a “high degree of sensation/alism” (p. xi), Kavka particularly considers the power of reality TV in creating intimacy across space and time. Reality TV “pursues intimacy (emotional closeness) through immediacy (temporal closeness), coupling the proximity of the ‘here’ with the urgency of the ‘now’” (Kavka & West, 2004, p. 137). This is a process set in motion by the potential of the medium:

The actuality strengthens the effect of immediacy; immediacy strengthens the effect of social community; and the community creates a sense of in-

timacy with performers...This conjunction of immediacy, actuality and intimacy is dependent on a temporal framework which must be worked into the technical and rhetorical fabric of reality TV programmes. (Kavka, 2008, p. 19).

In addition, she considers reality TV in its affective capability of establishing a social space somewhere between the private sphere and the public. By connecting with feminist philosophers such as Carol Gilligan and Iris Young, she aims to include affectivity in the conception of the public. The way in which reality TV overlaps in the public and private spheres is not like “bringing private persons into realms of public discourse” as described by Habermas, but on the contrary, “television brings the public sphere into private spaces, binding public discourse to the interested, invested *Intimsphäre* (for Habermas, the intimate space of the conjugal family)” (Kavka, 2008, p. 50). This is achievable by affects’s ability to create connectivity between off-screen viewers, audience, onscreen protagonists, and “imagined communities” (Anderson, 1991) of viewers. She goes on to suggest that “In this way, the private extends the public, giving it capaciousness through our mediated intimacy with people we have never met, but who are ‘out there’” (Kavka, 2008, p. 77).

Nikunen (2016, 2019) focused on suffering in humanitarian reality TV, and the emotional responses and moral engagement it may invoke. Her work is based on Sara Ahmed’s (2004) idea of an “affective economy”, which offers a new approach to investigate what emotion does, and how it creates “others” by “working through signs and on bodies to materialise the surfaces and boundaries that are lived as worlds” (p. 191). Ahmed’s idea of emotions is highly recommended in the field of affect studies, though she herself insists on the word emotion rather than affect, “the word affect didn’t have that kind of everyday resonance”, she stated (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014, p. 97). For Nikunen (2016), by tracing the sticky signs deconstructed and re-constructed through the narrative of the show *Go Back to Where You Came From*, she describes how the show produces the feelings of being a refugee, and “evokes emotions from disgust to compassion and galvanizes this emotional sentiment towards action and donations” (p. 277).

Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood’s book *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience and Value* (2012) primarily focuses on the affective and cognitive responses and reactions to reality TV programs in the UK. They consider affect as “a force in the social relations between audiences and television”, and “as the feelings that produce an effect” (p. 5). Combining textual analysis, the “text-in-action” method, and individual and focus group interviews, they not

only trace how research participants source their responses from different platforms, but also their responses to the materiality of the television object. Unlike most audience research that rely on accounts of the audience's cognitive reflexive, the "text-in-action" method attempts to bypass the inevitable filtering of audience responses in interviews, by drawing attention to significant reactive moments. The emphasis is on situating television viewing in a communicative framework "established through performative and ritual *acts*", in order "not only to think about television as texts and representations but also to think of their interactive potential" (p. 124, italics in original).

With a close combination of these methods and their work on the social production of class, they show how reality TV has affected the dominant order (framed by gender, class, motherhood, and work), in a different way from Foucaultian governmentality. By introducing a theory of value, they argue that "it is value that is the most significant element in making affect count" (p. 228). Affect circulates and distributes between the text and the audience, and engages both the participants and audiences in "extended circuits of value". In this way their emotional investments are extracted for value and ultimately contribute to a wider production of "a mediated economy of personhood" (p. 9). They elaborate on this, noting that:

the model of person value that we propose can be accruing, defending and relational and is based on connecting to others not just, or even for, social or (moral) cultural capital, but for affective reasons, for connection beyond self-interest – for love, care and connection. (p. 10)

While they agree with Eva Illouz (2007) that capital subsumes the performance of intimacy, they still maintain that some affects are beyond subsumption and exist in a space beyond exchange. These affects call upon a set of intensities by which viewers "could sometimes circumvent potential ideological messages of governance" (p. 228). Elsewhere Skeggs (2010) stated that it is exactly affect that can disrupt the mechanism of exchange. Reality TV acts as a cultural technology that is pedagogical and experimental with regard to the emotional practices of viewers; "as viewers adjudicate the value of performed relationships they may also learn...that unfair exchange is also accompanied by exchanges that we want, that may or may not seem fair" (p. 48). Thus, she refers to a process of economic exchange that is a composite of the relationship between affect, evaluation and socio-economy.

The affective strategy of shaming, humiliating, or ridiculing lower-class people in reality TV has received particular academic attention, probably be-

cause reality TV (primarily makeover shows), compared with other televisual genres, often presents class differences and conflicts for dramatic development, climax and closure (Skeggs & Wood, 2012). Scholars have demonstrated that through the “middle-class gaze” (Lyle, 2008) and in a strongly situational, ritualized way (Hájek et al., 2021), lower-class participants are constructed as excessive, reckless, parasitic, or repulsive, incapable of conforming to middle-class norms, lifestyles and cultural tastes; they are publicly ridiculed, shamed, humiliated, or at least embarrassed, through camera angles, editing, and comments from other participants and the narrator (Eriksson, 2015, 2016; Stiernstedt & Jakobsson, 2017; Reifová, 2020; Reifová & Hájek, 2021). In this (problematic) production mode of reality TV, the exposure of class divisions does not point to social structural inequality but to the realms of psychology and morality, perfect for later interventions through the cultivation of neoliberal subjectivization and the dissemination of neoliberal values such as consumption, competition, and self-transformation (Couldry, 2008; Ouellette & Hay, 2008; Redden, 2018). These scholars see reality TV as a form of neoliberal governmentality and a technology of the self, in which social inequalities and injustices are magically erased, forming part of the neoliberal “theatre of cruelty” (Giroux, 2008, as cited in Barton & Davis, 2018).

In these studies, shame provides a productive lens to explore socio-economic and cultural boundaries, including perceptions of who “we” are and who “they” between different classes are established and foregrounding questions concerning the often dispersive, distributed operations and formative workings of “biopolitics” and neoliberalism (Foucault, 2010). As Reifová (2020) states, “by enabling and endorsing reciprocal judgements of the participants’ lifestyles, RTV discourse engages—under the guise of mere television entertainment—in ‘doing class’” (p. 2). In this way, reality TV invites viewers to enter into a process of “othering,” learning to distance themselves from the humiliating and negative constructions of “national objects” and “wasted humans,” as well as to convince themselves that they are dignified social beings (Tyler, 2013).

Marsha Cassidy focuses on the audience aspect, especially audience’s responses to onscreen bodies. Her book *Television and the Embodied Viewer: Affect and Meaning in the Digital Age* (2020) builds a bio-cultural approach combining the humanities’ philosophical and cultural account of affect, and the neurobiological empirical account of the brain and body. But rather than the term affect, which she thinks is “so unsettled”, she prefers to use the terms *sensation* and *bodily feeling*, and merely maintains affect “interchangeably in this

narrower denotation, retaining its distinction from emotion and accentuating its multisensory nature” (p. 7). By focusing on the representation of female dwarfism on the reality show *Little Women: LA*, she shows that reality TV has potentials to provoke a somatic union with dwarf women by offering a bodily encounter with their everyday lives, particularly through depictions of “their unique mobility, sexual expression, and experience of childbearing” (p. 11). But she also argues that such an explicit bodily representation risks charges of “enfreakment” as in freak shows (p. 75). From her point of view, the emphasis on the body is far from equivalent to thinking viewers as the slaves of some pre-reflective automatic sensory circuits, but offers an opportunity to reveal how bodily responses work in tandem with complex human emotion and reason, and how they are fundamentally shaped by politics, culture, and history.

Aside from Cassidy, some scholars are also thinking about the bodily appeal of reality TV in the viewers, with the help of new perspectives inspired by affect theories. Hirdman (2011) pointed out that the emotional plot in many reality shows has combined elements from melodramas with the display of highlighted physical reactions (often accompanied by fluids) as in hard porn, which illustrate what she identifies as a media trend “towards a conceptualization of bodily emotionalism” (p. 21). Smit (2013) pays particular attention to the staging of the “human body in visceral, affecting detail” (p. 92) in reality TV formats that are designed to evoke gut responses in the audience. Similar to Cassidy, she is also interested in the “relationship television fosters between bodies on either side of the screen” (Smit, 2010, p. 6). Based on Caldwell’s concept of “televisuality”, Smit coins the term “tele-affectivity” to identify an aesthetic tendency in reality TV that combines “exhibitionism and a drive for intimate access to the body” – as “a branding of intimacy” (p. 97). With this term she suggested that “television theory needs to be more sensitive to the ways in which the medium appeals to the embodied, affective responses of viewers” (2010, p. 195). By combining the study of affects with the pragmatic tradition drawing from the semiotics of Charles Peirce, Andacht (2012) argues for “the index appeal of reality television” (p. 38), wherein the visual effects of reality TV can be understood as a quasi-tactile lure through indexical signs that engage the audience affectively and viscerally. In a similar vein, Oksanen (2014) also applies Peirce’s semiotics to analyze the affective material of the reality TV show *Celebrity Rehab*. He claims that instead of offering information about treatment and the dangers of drugs, dramatic affective contents including displayed emotions, bodies, and bodily parts become the primary

material of the show. In this sense, the power or the constant appeal of reality TV not only comes from its narrative and discourse, but also, and more primarily, from its affective affordances as visual images.

The book *Affektive Medienpraktiken: Emotionen, Körper, Zugehörigkeiten im Reality TV* (*Affective Media Practices: Emotions, Bodies, Affiliations in Reality TV*) from Lünenborg, Maier, Töpfer and Sūna (2021) offers a systematic and holistic analysis of the emotional repertoires produced and distributed by the reality TV format *Germany's Next Topmodel*. Their work is also grounded on a relational concept of affect, that considers affect as relational intensities between human bodies and media technology, and emotions as “central building blocks of social order that are culturally shaped” (p. 48). They particularly use the concept “emotional repertoire” to denote the dynamic process in which emotions are established and expressed on various levels of the body, discourse and practices by individuals and collectives within specific social-cultural contexts (p. 32). With the help of practice theory, they view reality TV formats as affective media practices, and develop an empirically feasible method for emotional audience research – a combination of textual television analysis and video analysis with situational maps (Lünenborg & Maier, 2019). As a consequence, the patterns of affective relations formed between media texts, viewers, and the material contexts of media use can be revealed.

In summary, with the renewed interest on affect and emotion provoked by the affective turn, new perspectives on the affective effects of reality TV formats have emerged. In these studies affect and emotion are not taken as static, inert phenomena that are waiting to be constructed and determined, but have the dynamic and fluid capacity to affect other bodies (both human and non-human). With emphasis on the affective capacity of reality formats, these studies have opened up new windows to consider how reality TV *matters*, how reality TV works on viewer affect that is beyond ideology, discourse and meaning, along with the effects it creates in articulation with power relations and in the current sociopolitical conjuncture. This is also where I start my analysis of affect in Chinese reality TV.

While many of the empirical studies have applied affect theories in audience research, my analysis focuses on the media text itself. The fact is that we cannot expect to understand the affective responses of the audiences without developing a more thorough evaluation of how media create sense and meaning-making mechanisms through particularized narrative, discursive and material arrangements. Based on this, I argue that as a cultural product which focuses on emotional performance, changes and transformations,

modifications of subjectivities, and in-between or becomings, reality TV programs cannot be viewed merely as a representation of social complexity, or simply an attribute that affects the audience's acceptance; but as a mediated sphere where affect actualizes and makes a difference. Moreover, it is obvious that theoretical reflections and empirical analysis have so far been based primarily on Western academic traditions and have focused on Western reality shows; the overall analysis of Chinese reality TV has been focused more on observations and descriptions of the phenomena, yet theory building still seems thin. How, then, does affect work in the totally different media context of China? Through a close observation of Chinese reality TV, my research hopes to address this gap and contribute to theoretical reflections on relational affect and emotion.