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JOANNA DOONA (ED.) WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM
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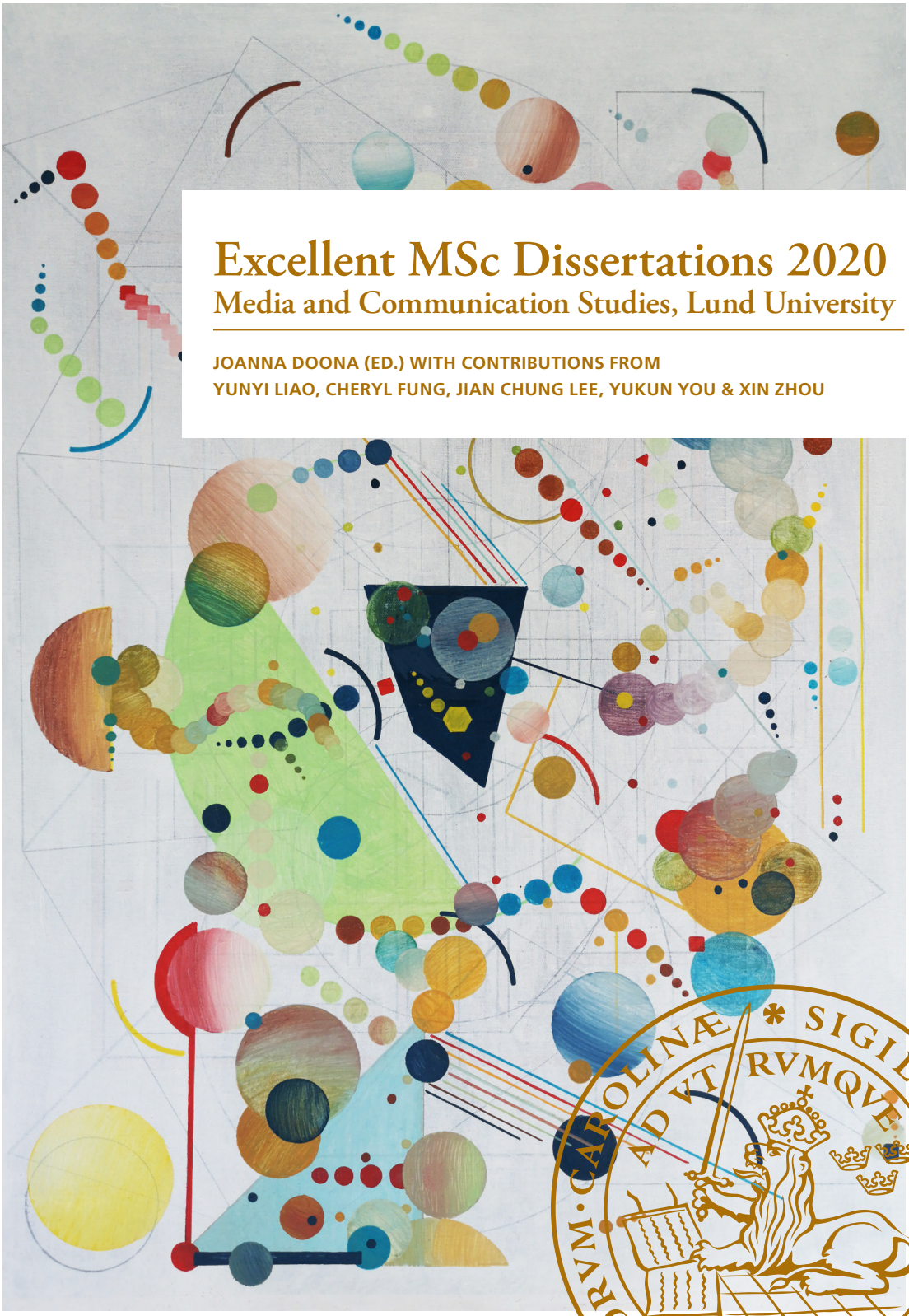

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Introduction

Joanna Doona

This edited volume, *Excellent MSc Dissertations 2020*, is the fifth in the series that brings together postgraduate dissertations written by students pursuing MSc degrees in Media and communication studies at Lund University, Sweden. In this edition, five students who graduated in June of 2020 showcase their outstanding contributions to the field.

In this two-year international master programme in Media and communication studies, students are trained to develop their ability to ask and answer critical questions. This focus on critical approaches to contemporary social, political and cultural issues in media and communication encourages students to follow their curiosity, and contribute by exploring and examining taken-for-granted assumptions about how media works, and what it does. In doing so, they engage with key issues, theories and problems in media engagement, democracy and cultural citizenship, media industries and creativity, gender, health and society, audiences, popular culture and everyday life. Tackling national and transnational media environments, students emphasise theorising and researching media, society and culture using real world case studies and diverse theoretical, conceptual and empirical tools.

The importance of media engagement – to us personally, to groups and organisations and to our general sense of belonging, as well as to the social, political and cultural development we face – is clearly illustrated through the issues explored in this collection. This volume is made to demonstrate what such exploration and examination can lead to, in order to inspire future students and media scholars: in everything from their original research design and use of multiple methods, to the critically based, theory-guided analysis of qualitative empirical data, as well as to the important issues they highlight. Its contributions

emphasise how a wide range of media are important to us in so many different ways – be they cultural, political, personal or somewhere in their cross section.

By studying media engagement in different forms and regions of the world: through issues like nationalism in animated films and their audiences, the creation and spread of protest art, affective news engagement, health gamification, and virtual celebrity, they challenge us to think further and more critically about what it means to engage with, in and through media in different contexts. Media engagement provides people with common and affectively charged cultural symbols manifesting nationalism, political issues or fandom; as well as a means of mobilisation, entertainment, self-management, interaction and remembering. These studies challenge us to consider how complex those issues are. Teaching us about state sanctioned nationalism versus nationalism 'from below,' the political and social significance of protest art, the emotional complexity of contemporary news engagement as performance, the many facets of the commercialisation and digitalisation of sleep, and the meaning of virtual celebrity, this book provides ample food for thought.

Digital technology plays an important role here, not only as a provider of novel ways of finding and gathering empirical materials, but more importantly, as it pertains to new patterns of content diffusion, tools and solutions to everyday issues, and ways of bonding for citizens and audiences alike. Impacting power structures, democratic concerns and cultural consumption, digital media engagement is important to all of the investigated areas of this book. It has helped the development of animation and its fandom expressions. It has aided the imperative circulation and archiving of political protests and news, both on- and offline. It allows for inventive market-optimised 'solutions,' as in health focussed app technology and news circulation, and it is clearly imperative to the existence of virtual celebrity. As these studies show, the consequences of such technical development are not straightforward nor isolated from other forms of cultural input, societal developments or power flows. This in turn illustrates the utmost importance of this MSc programme's motto – from friend of the programme, professor and media scholar John Corner: 'assume less, investigate more' (2011:87). Understanding subjective constructions and experiences as well as the context of specific regional cultures matters to studies of engagement, as illustrated by the chapters in this collection.

In the coming chapter two, Yunyi Liao studies the construction of nationalism in communities engaged in what has been called 'the rise of Chinese animation.' Exposing the value of contextualising approaches, Liao investigates audience engagement in the unprecedentedly successful Chinese film *Ne Zha* (2019) – without losing sight of the film itself, or the way in which it was marketed. She shows how affective nationalistic discourse is prevalent among audiences, connected to a wider nationalistic ACGN subculture (animation, comics, games, novels). Audiences and fans actively promote Chinese animation on- and offline, using practices such as commenting in social media or inviting – 'amwaying' – friends to the cinema; thereby playing an important role in the creation and diffusion of such nationalism. By scrutinizing what she calls forms, rationales and hidden power mechanisms in engagement with the film, Liao addresses everyday nationalism within the context of the film itself and its promotion, allowing for the emphasis of audiences' constructions of nationalism 'from below.' In doing so, everyday practices are put to the fore and connected to nationalistic ideology, showing how fandom in entertainment can amount to civic engagement. As such, Liao's work additionally illustrates how nationalism can be studied in, as well as through culture.

This theme of everyday engagement practices is carried into the following chapter. Here, Cheryl W. L. Fung explores protest art – 'the theatre of protest' – which invites citizens to participate. In a careful and detailed analysis based on protest posters as well as interviews with protesters during the 2019 Hong Kong anti-extradition law protests, Fung exposes how the creation, spread, interpretation and archiving of such art plays a significant role in the formation of the movement, and engagement of individuals. Art in the form of posters, graffiti and statues are used to form networks, communicate internally and externally; spread both on and offline, on social media as well as throughout the city on so-called Lennon walls (referring to the 1980 Prague wall for John Lennon, which became a symbol of peace and love locally and globally). Through this theatre of protest, the performance of various cultural practices carried out by the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement expressed democratic ideals, helped sustain various forms of protest, and reminded non-protesters of the ongoing demonstrations in the context of their everyday routines. The research highlights how important the posters are to the communication and connectivity of movements such as this one, and how art can be and often is a key aspect of political mobilisation.

The next chapter similarly addresses the engagement of citizens, although here focus is on news engagement among Swedish audiences. Inspired by the so-called affective turn in media and cultural studies, Jian Chung Lee's chapter addresses contemporary citizens' everyday saturation in news content, and the affective practices they develop to handle it. Rather than considering news engagement a purely rational endeavour, Lee stresses the role of emotions and affect alongside the rational. Through in-depth interviews, the ever-changing nature of these affective news practices are exposed and situated within everyday life. The research shows how key cognitive, affective and emotional aspects figure into performing the role of the engaged news audience. Audience members' civic, social and professional identities impact how such performances are conceived, informing how often and with how much scepticism they engage. Their previous experiences also play into this, pertaining especially to how consistently engaged they are, and how reflexive they are in their criticism of the news. Hence, they ways audiences engage with news is a result of constantly ongoing negotiations of these affective performances.

The final two chapters bring us back into cultural engagement, although in very different ways, and not without political dimensions. Yukun You studies the gamification of sleep, through a case study of a Chinese sleep app and interviews with its users. Here, the close relationship between sleep, digital media and devices is explored. The chapter shows how apps like *SleepTown*, which gamifies sleep specifically in terms of keeping to a healthy sleep schedule, impacts sleep practices and everyday routines. Making the point that in relation to sleep, media can be both helpful and harmful, You manages to approach the topic from a critical yet sensitive perspective. Through a focus on everyday agency and its promotion by digital media use, coupled with an understanding of the cultural meaning of sleep – including contemporary trends of policing, managing and commercialising it – the study stresses how sleep has become not 'just' biological, inactive and private, but digital, active and public. The gamification of sleep means users act, achieve goals and are surveilled when sleeping; which affects not only sleep routines but exposes power struggles between app designers and users, between users, and between individuals and the broader social structures they find themselves in.

Finally, Xin Zhou's chapter keeps us in the digital Chinese context, yet shifts our focus back to fandom, where we started. Zhou studies audience engagement and the textual characteristics of a so-called VTuber – a virtual YouTuber consisting

of a 3D animated character voiced by human actors – in the quest of understanding this growing phenomenon. Stressing the importance of YouTube and platforms like it as spaces where users find information, entertainment and connection, the chapter approaches the study of celebrity-audience relationships by drawing on studies of micro and virtual celebrity and influencers especially; empirically focussing on the virtual VTuber Kizuna AI as text, as well as on online comments from fans and audiences. The chapter highlights how this new combination of human and machine brings new experiences to audiences, pushing the boundary of what is real and imagined. As in the previous chapter, this study balances the perspective of an active and powerful audience with that of what commercial business interests might mean in the context of digital media. Here, audiences are active consumers whose attention and engagement is key to the co-creation of virtual celebrities; exposing the role of hidden labour among voice actors, and how some fans' place their loyalties with them, while others focus on the virtual totality of Kizuna AI. In different ways, the chapters illustrate how engagement within regional contexts is specific and must be studied as such, even though it is clear that such engagement also connects audiences across the world, through transnational or global media, issues and culture.

The five chapters that make up this book were all originally presented, evaluated and defended as part of the final thesis exams in May of 2020, in which they were awarded top grades. In the autumn of 2020, the authors edited their texts for publication in the series Förtjänstfulla examensarbeten i medie- och kommunikationsvetenskap (FEA), launched in 2008 to showcase and reward high quality student research. They were chosen because they include outstanding theoretical framing and analytical thinking, as well as methodological and empirical meticulousness. With this book we wish to inspire future students writing dissertations, so that they can continue to contribute to debates on media, culture and communication – inside and outside academic spaces. Specifically, we are urged to consider the role of digital media in every which way: in our everyday life, as citizens, fellow protesters and fans. And we are urged to do so in a critically balanced manner, keeping both eyes open to the forces and practices of 'ordinary people,' audiences and publics, as well as to the powers, interests and logics of media and cultural industries and governments. Despite the unprecedented circumstances brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic, impacting everyone in our programme including students and staff across the world – we have been reminded of the fact that studies of media engagement bring about a powerful

understanding of the human condition as both situated and universal. Whether in monumental events, commanding fan experiences or ordinary everyday performance, media engagement is complex and important; helping us to pose questions, think critically and understand ourselves and the times we live in.

Lund, January 2021

The Myth of ACGN Nationalism in China: Animation, audiences and nationalism

Yunyi Liao

The Prevalence of ACGN Nationalism

The reception of Chinese animation is surrounded by nationalism (Bai 2015; Li & Liu 2020). Affective discourses, such as 'the rise of Chinese animation' (*guoman jueqi*), are prevalent in audiences' engagement with high-quality domestic animation. The common title given to different animations is 'Chinese/domestic animation' (*guoman*), rather than the stateless phrase 'animation'. An 'imagined community' is built through audiences' engagement with Chinese animation (Anderson 1983).

Previous studies have referred to it as 'ACGN nationalism' (*erciyuan minzu zhuyi*) (Bai 2015).[1] It relates to the national sensibilities constructed spontaneously in the individuals' engagement with the ACGN subculture, an abbreviation of animation, comics, games and novels (ibid.; Ding 2016). Audiences and fans, who self-identify as 'tap-water' (*zilaishui*), play a significant role in shaping and spreading nationalistic comments online in order to promote domestic-made

[1] Some studies translate it as 'two-dimensional nationalism' with the signification of the two-dimensional space of these types of subculture (Wang 2019). However, this thesis uses the term 'ACGN nationalism' due to its neutral attribute.

animated films.[2] ACGN nationalism is considered an evolving form of nationalism in digital China, highlighting a strong sense of nationhood embodied in the ACGN subculture throughout the online environment (Lin 2016). Merit is found in spotlighting and conceptualising ACGN nationalism in previous studies; however, existing research have simply touched the surface of this phenomenon and there is a lack of studies systematically investigating its forms, rationales, and hidden power mechanisms.

This thesis therefore aims to address gaps concerning the forms, rationales and hidden power mechanisms in the analysis of ACGN nationalism, through an audience study. It uses *Ne Zha* (2019) as a paradigmatic case in the examination of Chinese animated films (Flyvbjerg 2001), due to its strong national sensibilities in its response and its top-ranking box office status within domestic animated films. The audience study is loosely guided by the 'everyday nationalism' analytical framework proposed by Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008). This thesis also includes an analysis of nationalistic ideology from the production and promotion of *Ne Zha*. This serves as contextual knowledge for the audience study, and more importantly, it avoids the neglect of studying nationalism from above through an examination of nationalism from below (Knott 2015).

Based on this, the present thesis proposes three research questions as follows:

> RQ1: How is nationalistic ideology embedded in the production and promotion of *Ne Zha*?
>
> RQ2: How is ACGN nationalism constructed in audience engagement with *Ne Zha*, both online and offline, and what is the relationship between online and offline ACGN nationalism?
>
> RQ3: Why does ACGN nationalism appear in the reception of *Ne Zha* and how does it enable the understanding of power mechanisms hidden behind ACGN nationalism in China?

[2] In Jiang and Huangs' research on Chinese animated films, the newborn term 'tap-water' refers to those who are willing to spontaneously promote the animation they like on social media for free (2017).

(Re)Defining Nationalism

Benedict Anderson's seminal book *Imagined Communities* (1983) creates a crucial foundation for the exploration of nationalism studies. The nation is defined as an 'imagined community', in which individuals may not know most of the members within the community but 'in the minds of each lives the image of their communion' (Anderson 1983:6). Nationalism is a way of imagining the nation, in which collective identities are highlighted.

Previous studies adopt a normative distinction between 'nationalism' and 'patriotism': patriotism refers to positive sentiments and a loyal attachment to a group, and is therefore perceived as benign; while nationalism refers to extreme and exclusive sentiments against outgroups, and is often considered malign (Schneider 2018). However, scholars problematise such a sharp distinction as it omits the similar psychological mechanisms hidden behind these two terms. For example, Schneider notices that patriotism and nationalism are usually interchangeable in China: 'patriotic sentiments can become the seed for nationalist movement' because they share similar underlying psychological mechanisms in terms of group loyalty (2018:40). Gustafsson (2014) argues that the separation between patriotism and nationalism fails to recognise the unfixed meaning of patriotism. He therefore raises a question: 'If a wide array of actions, ranging from benign to malign, can be legitimised in the name of patriotism, is patriotism then so distinct from nationalism?' (2014:3). Michael Billig also perceives the parallel psychological dynamics and highlights the problem in the distinction of the two concepts, because 'even the most extreme of nationalists will claim the patriotic motivation for themselves' (1995:57).

These ideas create a need for this study to (re)define nationalism. Chen (2005) proposes that we should see 'nationalism' as an analytical term rather than in its conventionalised derogatory sense. This is also what this thesis argues for its theoretical grounding. Instead of simply dividing positive and negative tones in studying nationalism, this thesis argues that it is more crucial to consider nationalism as a theoretical term for the investigation of the motivations and power issues hidden behind the 'imagined community'.

Academic literature on Chinese nationalism has long been scrutinised in two dimensions: nationalism from above and nationalism from below (Chen 2005; Fang & Repnikova 2018; Zhang, Liu & Wen 2018). Some scholars notice that

nationalism in China was primarily a top-down construction monopolised by the Chinese government before the 1990s (Chen 2005; Zhang et al. 2018). The late 1990s noticed an evolution: popular nationalism, as nationalism from below, emerged (Zhang et al. 2018). Individuals spontaneously expressed their national sensibilities in international disputes beyond the state's control, and this happened particularly on the Internet (Wang 2016; Zhang et al. 2018). Recent studies highlight the dynamics between top-down and bottom-up nationalism in contemporary China, suggesting that national sensibilities are constructed through an innovative interplay between different stakeholders:

> Chinese nationalism has been promoted and to no small degree designed by elite actors, most notably political leaders, as part of their nation building and nation-maintenance efforts. However, citizens rework, reinterpret, and redeploy the building blocks of this nationalism in their everyday personal quests for meaning and security, leading to highly diverse and idiosyncratic discourses of the Chinese nation that are not under anyone's full control (Schneider 2018:56).

This provides theoretical support for studying nationalism from different dimensions, and further justification for this thesis to investigate ACGN nationalism from below, along with the nationalistic ideology from above.

Researching ACGN Nationalism in China

Chinese scholar Bai (2015) initially coined the term 'ACGN nationalism' (*erciyuan minzu zhuyi*), in his study of the social function of adult-oriented animated film *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015). The term 'ACGN nationalism' refers to an imagined community built in the reception of ACGN (Bai 2015:53). This can be seen in the way audiences spontaneously promote the film in the digital environment, based on their national identities, ultimately helping the animated film achieve high box-office status.

After Bai (2015), subsequent studies by Li and Liu (2020) and Lin (2016) argue that 'ACGN nationalism' is one of the various types of nationalism in digital China, highlighting the evolution of nationalism in the digital era. These studies demonstrate that there is a close relationship between ACGN nationalism and the online environment. Indeed, Zhang et al. (2018) observe that nationalism in

China has been on the rise recently, especially among digital communities. Similarly, Schneider notes that in China 'nationalism today is shared through digital information and communication technologies (ICTs). It is adopted, filtered, transformed, enhanced and accelerated through digital network' (2018:3). From these perspectives, taking a closer look at ACGN nationalism contributes to the existing studies of nationalism in the online environment. However, there is also a need to investigate the offline environment. As Schneider points out, 'nationalism in digital spheres interacts in complicated ways with nationalism "on the ground", challenging simple dichotomies of online versus offline politics' (2018:3). This motivates the thesis to explore both online and offline environments in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of ACGN nationalism.

The emergence of ACGN nationalism in China signifies that the 'wall' between subculture and dominant culture is broken (Bai 2015; Li 2017). As previous studies show, ACGN is a foreign product coming from Japan, and developed as a youth subculture in China (He 2019; Lin 2016). It is favoured by youth who have both economic and cultural capital (He 2019). They have their own 'internal culture, identity, and discourse system' where people outside this subculture would not be able to understand their 'codes' (Feng 2017:47). Nevertheless, ACGN nationalism reflects a contradictory situation. Again, subculture and dominant culture are integrated: ACGN as subculture, joins with nationalism, as dominant culture. This generates a newborn type of nationalism, and more importantly, reveals the power of nationalism in contemporary China, which is strong enough to break the 'wall' between subculture and dominant culture (Wang 2019).

Of note, ACGN nationalism is considered different from more traditional aspects of youth subculture, such as 'refusal' (Hebdige 1979) or 'resistance' (Clarke et al. 2017). It is, instead, harmonious to dominant culture. Liang (2019:70) argues that 'from solo to ensemble, the ACGN subculture eventually appeared in front of the public, through the stages of margin, replenishment, and reverse feeding'. ACGN nationalism therefore can be viewed as a reverse cultural feeding from subculture to dominant culture. *Ne Zha* is a good example to understand this reverse cultural feeding: through animation it reinforces national identity and constructs nationalism.

Everyday Nationalism as a Guide

This study draws upon theories from 'everyday nationalism' studies, a subfield within nationalism studies (Knott 2015), and uses them as a guide to support the main analysis of ACGN nationalism. 'Everyday nationalism focuses, in particular, on the agency of ordinary people, as opposed to elites, as the co-constituents, participants and consumers of national symbols, rituals and identities', is how Knott (2015:1) defines everyday nationalism in her review of the existing literature within this field. This stresses the active role of ordinary people in constructing nationalism, rather than that of elites or institutions, which is consistent with the main focus of this thesis.

This contrasts with Michael Billig's theory of 'banal nationalism' (1995), which refers to the mindlessly ideological method of shaping nationhood. An example from Billig is a flag hanging unnoticed in the street, in public. It highlights the 'forgotten reminding' of the nation, and stresses the construction of national identity during this unnoticed remembering (Billig 1995:38). Different from the focus of 'everyday nationalism', which is nationalism from below, Billig's (1995) idea of 'banal nationalism' is considered a top-down nationalism which 'hold[s] onto a rather state-centric conception of nationhood' (Antonsich 2016:24). This encourages this thesis to bear in mind the relationships between these two types of nationalism, particularly in the study of the nationalistic ideology from above and whether it contributes to the rationales of ACGN nationalism.

In order to understand how ordinary people act as 'active participants in the quotidian production and reproduction of the nation', Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008:538) develop an analytical framework. They propose four modalities: talking, choosing, performing and consuming the nation. 'Talking' suggests looking at how the nation is constructed through discourses in daily talk; 'choosing' aims to investigate how individuals make national choices by making it physically outstanding; 'performing' considers how people create national bonding through ritual performances; and 'consuming' focuses on national sensibilities embedded in mundane consumption habits (ibid.:537f). This analytical framework involves both discursive and practical modalities, which allows for a nuanced understanding of domestic audiences' national sensibilities constructed in various ways, during their engagement with *Ne Zha*.

Previous studies on everyday nationalism predominantly concentrate on the offline setting, which causes a lack of research in the online environment. It leads to a gap within the methodological choices of this field. Nevertheless, the online environment is one of the key centres of this thesis, requiring a comparable method in digital data collection. This provides a critical reflection of the existing studies of 'everyday nationalism': more focus should be put on the digital environment, in which nationalism has become more and more prominent (Schneider 2018; Zhang et al. 2018).

Although the theoretical framework of 'everyday nationalism' offers valuable guidance for this study, there is criticism of the concept that this study needs to recognise, and try to avoid. It is argued that everyday nationalism mainly focuses on human agency, neglecting institutional restrictions from above (Malešević 2013, cited in Knott 2015). As the investigation of nationalistic ideology is also a part of this study's focus, although not the main concern, there is no need to worry about the lack of involvement of nationalism from above. There are also doubts in relation to its causal generalisation, due to its focus being too descriptive (Smith 2008, cited in Knott 2015). In this thesis, part of the goal is to understand the rationales and the hidden power mechanisms behind ACGN nationalism, which drives the study to move beyond descriptive representation. It therefore avoids being too micro-analytical and contextual. Another line of criticism concerns viewing ordinary people as a homogeneous group rather than various individuals (Smith 2010, cited in Knott 2015). In order to avoid that, this study will account for different individuals' demographics, such as gender, city, etc.

Audience Studies

Hall's (1980) theories of encoding/decoding introduces the field of audience research, which calls attention to a read of the reception of *Ne Zha*. This encourages the subsequent concept of active audiences (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998; Jin 2011; Jenkins, Ford & Green 2013; Livingstone 1998), in which audiences no longer are seen as passively receiving media content. This creates a fertile base from which later researchers can investigate the sense-making activities in the audience's active interpretation and engagement with the meaning structure of media.

Engagement is a key concept guiding this thesis to investigate audiences' national sensibilities. Hill's (2019) concept of engagement provides rich insights into the exploration of the viewer's subjective state and how this builds the relationships between the viewer themselves, the animated film and the nation. Engagement is also a slippery concept and as a result Hill (2019:61f) argues for a 'spectrum of engagement': 'There is a spectrum that includes affective, emotional and critical modes, switching between positive and negative engagement, to disengagement'. Positive engagement means the emotional identification and sympathetic response generated in the engagement process, while negative engagement refers to the emotional dis-identification and unsympathetic response produced in the engagement practice. These two emotional modes of engagement usually emerge in tandem (Hill 2019). Disengagement, on the other hand, refers to the cessation of engagement, which either appears suddenly, or gradually. A spectrum of engagement, according to Hill (2019:55), 'captures the multidimensionality of engagement', highlighting the complexity of the concept of 'engagement'. It is also worth investigating how affective, emotional and critical modes of engagement are interwoven to construct national sensibility in the audience's engagement with *Ne Zha*.

The audience study conducted by Jiang and Huang (2017) regarding *Monkey King: Hero is Back*, focuses on Chinese audiences' and fans' engagement as valuable contributions in the popularisation of this animated film, which provides empirical knowledge for the thesis to further examine ACGN nationalism in the reception of *Ne Zha*. They observe that a newborn group, self-identified as 'tap-water' (*zi lai shui*), emerged due to this animated film. Members in the group were described as Internet mercenaries willing to spontaneously promote the animation on social media for free. 'Amway' (*an li*) was also a recent term, used as an analogy to the brand Amway, referring to the eager promotion of the animated film (ibid.).

These 'tap-water' individuals also contribute to the improvement of the box office of the animated film. This can be found in 'posting long positive reviews on social media', or 'watching the film three times to better its box-office performance', or even 'paying for her friends and relatives to invite them to the cinema who otherwise wouldn't come at their own expense', etc. (Jiang & Huang 2017:133f). Although nationalism is not mentioned in their research, Jiang and Huang's study gives support to this thesis' exploration of nationalism in both online and offline environments, in which the audience's engagement takes place.

The concept of 'consumer nationalism' can be helpful in the investigation of ACGN nationalism in relation to the audience's consumption practices. It focuses on the close relationships between consumers' national identities and their consumption choices: consumers accept or refuse products from their country or foreign countries, based on their nationalistic beliefs (Castelló & Mihelj 2017; Gerth 2003; Wang 2005).

Fans also play a significant role in the reception of Chinese animated films. According to Jenkins (1992), fans apply active interpretation in their re-reading practices of media products. This thesis therefore needs to look closely at fans' and engaged audiences' interpretations of Ne Zha, and how these interpretations further help to construct nationalism. 'Fans actively shaping a sense of self through the object of fandom', as Sandvoss (2005:157) notes. This idea provides an understanding of how one's object of fandom shares a close affinity with one's identity. Interestingly, when one's fannish object becomes the nation, national identity is produced. This leads to dual identities – fan identity and national identity, which encourages this thesis to account for this within its audience study.

Reviewing Chinese Animated Films

Animated films in China were produced by individual animators prior to the foundation of the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Chen 2018). The Wan brothers (Wan Laiming, Wan Guchan, Wan Chaochen and Wan Dihuan), who are considered 'the fathers of Chinese animation', created the first animated short called *Uproar in an Art Studio* (1926), influenced by Western animated films (Chen 2018:95; Xiao & Pillgrab 2012). From 1931 to 1941, their animated films were thematically patriotic. A lot of works by the Wan brothers indicate that animated films were presented patriotically during wartime; however, they were in essence propaganda, and promoted extreme nationalism, with strong anti-Japanese and anti-Western sentiments.

The establishment of the PRC in 1949 meant that animated films entered the era of planned economy. Animators also came up with a new title 'fine arts films' for animation in socialist China, to replace the borrowed Western term 'cartoon' (Xiao & Pillgrab 2012). In 1956, the Chinese animated film *Why the Crow is Black* (1955) was mistaken as Soviet animation at the Venice International Film

Festival, which motivated domestic animators to develop a Chinese style of animation (Chen 2018; Du 2016a; Lent & Xu 2017). *Proud of the General* (1956) followed the director Te Wei's official statement of a 'road to the national style' *(road to minzu style)* (Xiao & Pillgrab 2012:3). Nationalistic interests were embedded to differentiate it from Western styles, which helped it become the first animated film with a strong and unique Chinese approach.

Afterwards, the first state-owned animation studio 'Shanghai Animation Film Studio' (or Shanghai Fine Art Film Studio) was established (Du 2016a). It focused on 'creating China's national spirit by resorting to traditional ink and wash painting, cut-paper, origami, landscape painting and puppet theatre in film-making' (Guo & Li 2017:117), and also 'adapting stories from China's literature, folklore and proverbs' (Xiao & Pillgrab 2012:3). The Shanghai Animation Film Studio witnessed Chinese animation's first 'golden age' during 1957-1964 (Lent & Xu 2017). However, this was destroyed by the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), during which the studio had to shut down and only a limited number of animated films were produced (Du 2016b; Giesen 2014).

Animation in socialist China (1949-1976) created a unique style of Chineseness. This was continued during the post-Cultural Revolution period, in which Chinese animation witnessed its second 'golden age'. One example is the animated film *Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King* (1979) produced by the Shanghai Animation Film Studio. It was adapted from the Chinese mythology 'The Investiture of the Gods', and was considered authentically Chinese, especially in 'inviting Zhang Ding as character designer, absorbing traditional Door Gods and mural painting that was highly adorning and colourful in style, and using Peking opera and stringed-instrument music' (Lent & Xu 2017:175). However, this second 'golden age' soon faded due to the transformation from planned economy to market economy.

At the end of the 1980s China shifted to a market-oriented economy, which had a large influence on the Chinese animation industry (Giesen 2014). The state-owned animation studios had undergone a talent drain, due to the lure of higher wages from foreign studios in Southern China (Lent & Xu 2017; Zhao 2019). A number of young animators had no patience or enthusiasm for artistic animation. Constant imports of foreign animation caused a lack of both quantity and quality in the domestic animation industry, which was characterised by low-level animated TV programmes or pure copies of Western animation (Guo & Li 2017;

Xiao & Pillgrab 2012). Artistic animated films, which were previously called 'fine arts films' (*mei shu pian*), almost disappeared.

In order to control the power of foreign animation and promote Chinese animation, the government issued statements and introduced policies to support the domestic animation industry in the 2000s (Lent & Xu 2017). This provides a glimpse into how top-down nationalism was implanted to support Chinese animation. It is also worth mentioning that animated films during this period were considered child-oriented.

With the help of governmental policies, the use of advanced technology, the ingenuity of the producers and the influence of foreign animation, the animation industry in China, particularly in terms of animated films, has flourished in recent years (Jiang & Huang 2017; Lent & Xu 2017). Jiang and Huang (2017) point out that *Monkey King: Hero is Back* (2015) earned 956 million yuan[3] at the domestic box office, and was considered a milestone of domestic animation as the highest grossing film in the history of Chinese animated films. Their analysis also shows that the success of this animated film was due to several reasons, such as producing high-quality visuals, targeting both adults and children, using a Chinese mythological story familiar to domestic audiences, and inserting sincere attitudes in the production, etc. (Jiang & Huang 2017).

Chinese mythology has been adapted frequently in recent animated films, signifying the hidden nationalistic interests from above. Different from the nationalism of both aesthetics (e.g. traditional ink and wash painting, cut-paper and origami) and stories (e.g. traditional Chinese literature and folklore) in animated films of the planned economy era (Chen 2018), recent animated films focus on using Chinese mythological stories to banally create a Chinese trademark. They act as 'reminders', or 'flaggings', and 'operate mindlessly, rather than mindfully' (Billig 1995:38).

Roland Barthes' (1972) concept of 'myth' can help in understanding the nationalistic ideology constructed in the adaptation of traditional mythological stories in recent animated films. In Barthes' notion, 'myth is a system of communication' and a 'message' (1972:107). He considers that 'myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies

[3] Approximately 122 million Euro (11 November 2020).

them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification' (1972:143). This demonstrates how myths are used in animated films as a communicative tool interacting with domestic audiences. During this 'banal', 'innocent' or 'natural' approach of mythological storytelling or character redesign, audiences' national identities are constructed or reinforced.

Triangulating the Methods

This thesis project adopts a qualitative methodology. As Bazeley notes, qualitative research concentrates on 'observing, describing, interpreting and analysing the way that people experience, act on, or think about themselves and the world around them' (2013:4). This is in accordance with the goal of this thesis, which aims to understand how ordinary people construct a sense of nationhood in their viewing experience of *Ne Zha*, as well as the rationales and hidden power mechanisms. It is guided by a pragmatic philosophy, where '[r]eality for any person is derived directly from their experience' (Bazeley 2013:22).

The Case

The application of a case study is crucial to qualitative research (Bazeley 2013). According to Flyvbjerg, phronetic social science hopes to generate 'concrete, context-dependent knowledge', and a 'case study is especially well-suited to produce this knowledge' (2001:72). Pragmatic philosopher Richard Rorty also considers that 'the way to re-enchant the world […] is to stick to the concrete' (1991:175, quoted in Flyvbjerg 2001:129). Hence, this thesis looks closely at a concrete case, *Ne Zha*, instead of a large number of random examples.

Ne Zha is currently the highest-grossing Chinese animated film, as well as the second highest-grossing film in Chinese film history. It achieved 5.01 billion yuan[4] at the domestic box office, more than five times higher than the second highest-grossing domestic animated film *Monkey King: Hero is Back*. It generated stronger national sensibilities in its reception than ever.[5] From the information of

[4] Approximately 643 million Euro (11 November 2020).

[5] See https://kuaibao.qq.com/s/20191012A0LAUP00?refer=spider

the statistics and the obvious national sensibilities, *Ne Zha* can therefore be seen as an appropriate, concrete case to fulfil the research aim.

Methods and Samples

Multiple methods are applied to different samples, in order to achieve the aim of this thesis. This is also referred to as 'triangulation' in social science, which can help achieve comparable data and enhance data validation (Denzin 1978, cited in Jick 1979). In the study of the nationalistic ideology embedded in the production of *Ne Zha*, Rose's (2016) method of compositional interpretation is applied to investigate the visual and aural representation of Chineseness in the film; and Bordwell and Thompsons' (2012) method of film narrative analysis is employed to examine the Chineseness embedded in the narrative of *Ne Zha*. Both methods emphasise the descriptive modality of what is shown, and are restricted to concerning the social modality of meaning-making (Rose 2016). Therefore, this thesis draws upon Barthes' (1967) idea of semiotics to investigate the hidden social modality.

Secondary sources are also used in the analysis of the promotion of *Ne Zha*. Although the promotion side is not the central focus of this study, there should be salience in this advertising process, which can be inferred from the high box office of the film. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the rationales of ACGN nationalism, sources from the promotion are worth including, as contextual knowledge. This study chooses a celebratory art poster from its online official Weibo account, and the screening information of the film from the offline environment, as contextualisation of the promotion, due to their ubiquity.

The main methods used in this thesis are qualitative text analysis and one-to-one semi-structured interviews. They contribute to the analysis of ACGN nationalism constructed in the audience engagement with *Ne Zha*, online and offline respectively. Although this study is guided by the analytical framework of everyday nationalism, there is a lack of methodological choices in regards to everyday nationalism in an online environment. However, the online environment is an indispensable focus of this study, which therefore requires a corresponding method in digital data analysis.

Qualitative text analysis (Kuckartz 2014) is used to analyse online audiences' comments about *Ne Zha*. The samples of comments are selected from two

websites: Bilibili and Douban, due to the large degree of audience engagement with this animated film on those platforms (equalling a large amount of comments) and the popularity of those platforms among young people.[6] A total of 81 comments have been chosen. The samples chosen from Douban meet the following criteria: including keywords, such as 'nation'/'country' (*guo*) or 'China'/'Chinese' (*zhongguo*), posted from 26th July 2019, when *Ne Zha* was officially released in cinemas. These comments were collected using the filter of 'popularity'. The sample selection on Bilibili follows the same criteria. However, different from Douban, Bilibili is not restricted in presenting all comments, and this requires the thesis project to apply extra strategies in the sampling process. More specifically, one of the every ten relevant comments have been chosen (those including the specified keywords and posted since the particular date as mentioned), with the aim to avoid cherry picking and ensure the data is spread over time.

One-to-one semi-structured interviews are used to study the construction of ACGN nationalism in the reception of *Ne Zha* offline. There were a total of 14 interviews conducted, with eight female participants and six male participants, ranging from 19 to 32 years old. All participants are Chinese mainlanders, ethnically Han, and come from different locations in China. Although previous studies argue that 'demographics do a poor job of predicting nationalism' (Woods & Dickson 2017:179), this study still includes the basic demographic information of the interviewees, in order to provide a comprehensive vision for the analysis. Most of the interviewees were recruited through snowball sampling. In order to avoid potential biases, the study recruited participants from different friends or networks. Hence the interviewees are from a variety of backgrounds, such as different cities (from both the North and South of China) and positions (from students to those working for the government or for private enterprises).

The interview guide was shaped after a pilot study with six people. This was due to the difficulty of studying nationalism in everyday settings – as 'much talk is simply non-national' (Fox & Miller-Idriss 2008:557). The pilot revealed that ordinary people's expressions offline were less national than those in the online

[6] Bilibili is famous for its ACGN attributes, and self-claims a 'cultural community for the Chinese youth' on their online introduction. More details can be found on their website https://www.bilibili.com/blackboard/aboutUs.html. Douban is a Chinese website famous for ratings and reviews for films, television programmes, books, music, etc.

environment. This is particularly found in the affective comments of 'the rise of Chinese animation' online, which are absent in the pilot study offline. Therefore, the interview guide combined a 'wait-and-listen' approach wherein nationhood is naturally captured by avoiding nationally framed questions (ibid.), and, a relatively active approach, asking the interviewees to reflect upon 'the nation' explicitly (Fox & Van Ginderachter 2018). All interviews were conducted through voice calls on WeChat, due to the availability of the app for, and the willingness of, all participants.[7] The interviews were recorded, transcribed into text (in Chinese), and afterwards, coded both deductively and inductively (Kuckartz 2014). Each transcript was coded line by line, and coloured spidergrams were applied to help to form different categories and sub-categories. A final coloured coding scheme was created, and all descriptive codes were assigned to different categories.

Ethics

There are ethical concerns in conducting the research both online and offline. To be more specific, numbers are assigned to each online commentator, instead of showing their usernames. The original comments are translated into, and shown in, English. This is not only for the purpose of keeping a consistent language system within this thesis, but also, most importantly, to minimise the risk of traceability. In terms of the one-to-one semi-structured interviews, written informed consent was obtained from the participants to ensure that they were informed and secure (Byrne 2012). Pseudonyms are given to the interviewees in order to guarantee anonymity (Markham & Buchanan 2012).[8] Empirical materials provided by the participants, such as their user profiles or posts on social media platforms, are used only with their informed consent, although possible identifiable information is removed to ensure confidentiality.

[7] WeChat is one of the most popular social media apps in China, which allows texts, voice messages, voice and video calls, tweets, etc.

[8] There was an exception: one participant desired to use her/his real name instead. This participant was reminded that the use of her/his real name might lead to identification.

The Nationalistic Ideology embedded in *Ne Zha*

Top-down nationalism is found in both production and promotion of *Ne Zha*: in the use of the myth of Ne Zha and the representation of Chineseness, and in different promotional approaches applied to this animated film. Through discovering this the thesis provides the contextualisation for subsequent analyses on the construction of ACGN nationalism in the reception. It also ensures that the study of nationalism from below does not neglect the institutional power from above (Knott 2015).

The Myth of Ne Zha: Original and Adaptation

The nationalistic ideology implanted in *Ne Zha* can first be found in the use of a popular Chinese myth. Similar to the 1979 version of 'Ne Zha' – *Ne Zha Conquers the Dragon King*, the 2019 version is adapted from the classic Chinese mythology 'The Investiture of the Gods'. In this classic mythological story, Ne Zha is represented as a liberal, rebellious child hero, famous for his three heads and six arms (Wu 2014). He shows his rebelliousness by fighting against both the Dragon King and his father, Li Jing, who are connoted as signs of feudalism and patriarchy respectively (ibid.). Ne Zha, a mythological character, is deeply rooted in Chinese people's minds, as a symbol of braveness and rebellion. Hence, *Ne Zha*'s application of traditional Chinese mythology reflects the nationalistic ideology of the production team.

The theme of the new adaptation *Ne Zha* is the breaking of stereotypes and fighting against destiny; which also partly embodies nationalistic ideology. According to Yu Yang, the director of *Ne Zha*, there are two reasons for proposing this theme: first, his personal experience of suffering from prejudice, after shifting his major from medicine to animation (Yang 2019a); second, the stereotype Chinese animation faces in the domestic market:

> A lot of companies took the outsourced work from us. They were willing to produce the film without earning money, because they really agreed with the theme of the film, which was to break the stereotypes and change the destiny – to break the audience's stereotypes of Chinese animation (Yang 2019b).

The account of the director shows that nationalistic ideology is also buried in the consideration of the theme of *Ne Zha*, in the hope of changing the stereotypical status of Chinese animation. It is worth noting that this nationalistic motivation is implicit, making the choice of the theme in *Ne Zha* seem natural. This is in accordance with what Barthes observes: 'Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent' (1972:143). Supported by this nationalistic motivation, the production team invests a lot of passion in making this animated film, despite not having any expectation of making a profit. The 'myth' of nationalism from above, therefore, rises from the thematic choice of this animated film.

The Representation of Traditional and Modern Nationalistic Cultures in *Ne Zha*

There are three pillars in Chinese religious philosophies: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. They are embedded in *Ne Zha* through character design and interpersonal relationships, with the main focus on Confucianism and Taoism. For example, 'filial piety' (*xiao*), one of the Confucian virtues (Guo 2004), is represented in the child characters Ne Zha and Ao Bing. To be more specific, Ne Zha tears apart the amulet of life exchange, which his dad Li Jing requests from a god for giving away his life in order to save Ne Zha. He ties up his parents so they cannot stop him from leaving, and kneels down to kowtow to them, as a farewell. During this the Confucian 'filial piety' is anchored in Ne Zha's behaviours, including keeling down as well as kowtowing to his parents and protecting their lives. The same virtue can be found in the character Ao Bing, but represented in a different way. In this new adapted version, Ao Bing shoulders the heavy mission from his father, which requires him to help his clan get rid of the sea purgatory. He shows his filial obedience to his father, the Dragon King, for which he even fights against his only friend Ne Zha. Another Confucian virtue, 'loyalty' (*zhong*), is represented in the character Li Jing, who is not only Ne Zha's father but also the commander-in-chief of the town. He shows his faithfulness to the nation and his responsibilities to the people in the town.

In addition, 'harmony' (*he*), a significant trait in both the Taoist and Confucian philosophies (Guo 2004; Zhang 2014), is foun3d in the interpersonal relationship between Ne Zha and his parents, and between Ne Zha and Ao Bing. Compared to the original work, which emphasises the tense relationship between Ne Zha

and his father (Cui 2001), this new adaptation highlights the harmonious relationship between Ne Zha and his parents. From the perspective of cultural nationalism, promoting traditional cultures and virtues in popular culture helps to maintain national spirits and reconstruct national identity (Guo 2004). Of note, 'harmony' is not only a traditional Chinese virtue, but also used as one of the core values of socialism in the contemporary Chinese context (Zhang 2014). Therefore, the 'harmony' trait represented in this new adaptation can be read as advocating nationalistic virtue and building national identity in contemporary China.

Similarly, the relationship between Ne Zha and Ao Bing is not strained as shown in the original work. Although Ne Zha is born as a demon pill (evil) and Ao Bing as a spirit pearl (good) in the new adaptation, 'harmony' is represented by their friendship. This can be understood through Confucian philosophy, in which the two oppositional segments can co-exist calmly:

> In the eyes of Confucians, the world is dualistic, but they do not look upon the two component elements as hostile and incompatible. Rather, opposites merge into a unified harmony and co-exist peacefully in mutual interdependence as a harmonious organism, as in the case with *yin* and *yang* (Guo 2004:79).

The features of *yin* and *yang*, in relation to masculinity, are worth explaining. Fang (2007) observes that there are two types of Chinese masculinity nourished by the Confucian elements *yin* and *yang*: they are respectively soft masculinity and rigid masculinity. Ao Bing, who is gentle and modest, stands for the Confucian *yin* masculinity (soft), while Ne Zha, who is energetic and rugged, represents the Confucian *yang* masculinity (rigid).

Gender issues are also embedded in family roles. Ne Zha's father Li Jing signifies a traditional Chinese father, who is taciturn and reserved. He shows his deep love to Ne Zha through actions rather than words. Ne Zha's mother Lady Yin, on the other hand, signifies a modern Chinese mother, who cares for and even spoils her child. It is noteworthy that Lady Yin is the only female main character in the film. However, she is represented as strong and independent, and can be considered a sign of a career woman, rather than the traditional mother who would stay at home to look after their husband and children. The character Lady Yin therefore signifies the rising consciousness of feminism in contemporary China. These

traditional and modern gender elements represented in family roles reflect nationalistic ideology and may further construct national identity.

The animated film highlights identifiable family relations in Chinese society. For example, the typical family value of regarding children as the hope of the whole family in China, is represented through the heavy responsibility Ao Bing takes up from his father and his clan. In addition, Ne Zha is always left alone at home because his parents are busy working. This connotes the issue of 'left-behind children' in Chinese society. As Barthes (1972:107) notes, 'myth is a system of communication'. Through the mythical representation of family relations, *Ne Zha* communicates nationalistic reality with its domestic audiences.

Chineseness is not only embedded in the abstract concepts mentioned above, but also represented through concrete features, such as visual and aural elements. For example, Ne Zha's red belly band is an example of typical Chinese clothing, in the past usually worn by women and children. The logo of the lotus on his red belly band, is a type of flower well known in China. This, in Billig's (1995) words, further 'flags' Chineseness banally, despite this shot only lasting a few seconds. Additionally, the activity of shuttlecock kicking is repeatedly shown in the film. This seemingly natural and familiar folk game to most Chinese people, serves as a banal reproduction of nationhood and a 'forgotten reminder' reinforcing national identity (Billig 1995). Similar visual elements acting as nationalistic signs can be found in architecture (e.g. traditional tile-roofed houses, special door holders, Buddhist towers and temples), religious items (e.g. Taoist incantations, amulets), and even some supporting characters (the Barrier Beasts are a reference to the bronze statue cultural relic in the Sanxingdui Museum). There is, to some extent, barely 'expressive content' of nationalistic elements (Rose 2016), because everything appears 'natural'.

Nationalistic ideology is also embedded in aural elements, such as the background music, Peking opera, and even the speech. More specifically, the background music in *Ne Zha* mostly uses traditional Chinese musical instruments, including Suona, Erhu, Sheng, Bamboo flute, Zheng, etc. There are even scenes of a band performance, showing the details of these Chinese musical instruments beyond the auditory sensation, to emphasise these banal nationalistic signs. A short piece of Peking opera is also played when Ne Zha first meets Ao Bing. These seemingly innocuous acoustics help to once again 'flag' the nationhood (Billig 1995). In addition, Chineseness is embodied in the speech in *Ne Zha*. For example, Ne

Zha's master Taiyi Zhenren has a thick Sichuan accent, because in the original work he is from Sichuan province. A lot of internet buzzwords are used in the dialogue, such as 'young master' (*xiao ye*), 'lad' (*xiao gege*), 'streaking' (*luoben*), 'wuss' (*song*), etc. Doggerel appears frequently in *Ne Zha*'s dialogue. As Guo (2004:92) points out, 'language is a component of national identity'. Different types of speech mentioned above can therefore be considered nationalistic elements communicated via auditory sensation. In short, both visual and aural elements reveal the banality of nationalism from above, begging the question whether domestic audiences engage, or ignore, these 'natural' items in the subsequent analyses.

The Promotion of *Ne Zha*: Nationalising Animated Films

The promotion process, into which efforts are put by both the production company and the state, serves as another birthplace for nourishing nationalistic ideology. For example, one of the most popular Chinese social media platforms, Weibo, was used frequently by the production team from July to October 2019, during *Ne Zha*'s release in cinemas. Every time the film hit one hundred million yuan in the domestic market, an art poster created by the director was posted on its official Weibo account. A promotional slogan, the number at the box office as well as an accurate time, a comic spin-off, the grading from different websites and the film title, are the common elements shown in the art poster.[9] Here, it is worth noting that nationalistic ideology is embedded in the promotional slogan. This can be found in some slogans involving the nation, such as 'a new box-office record for Chinese animated films', 'the top grossing animated film in Chinese film history', and 'the second highest grossing film in Chinese film history'. Nationhood is continually 'flagged' in these celebratory moments, serving to build the link between the genre of animated films and the nation. This reminder may further encourage the audience to improve *Ne Zha*'s box office in cinemas.

Additionally, nationalistic ideology of the state is hidden behind the scale and the period of the cinema screening schedule of *Ne Zha*. According to the box-office statistics on August 6th 2019, *Ne Zha* accounted for 47.84 % of the screening schedule, while other foreign animated films and a domestic child-oriented animated film only accounted for a fairly small amount of screening opportunities

[9] See an example of the art posters in https://www.weibo.com/6217939256/I7dTv4RVw

on the same day.[10] Given that screen culture in China – films and television programmes – are under state control (Voci & Hui 2018), the high exposure of *Ne Zha* can be read as nationalistic ideology of the state, serving to promote adult-oriented, high-quality domestic animated films to as many audiences as possible. This is more obvious in the period of the screening schedule of *Ne Zha*. It was extended twice in domestic cinemas, which helped the genre of animated film to gain the second highest grossing record in Chinese film history.[11] This further reveals that the theme of changing the 'destiny' of Chinese animation in *Ne Zha*, is not simply the production team's effort. It gains stronger, mysterious power from the state. Therefore, it is these two types of power (the production and the state) that join together to construct nationalism from above.

It is also worth pointing out that nationalistic ideology is not only uncovered in the promotion of *Ne Zha*, but also in the promotion of forthcoming domestic animated films, or, the genre of Chinese animated films. In the end of *Ne Zha*, the post-credits scene shows two future domestic animated films: *Ne Zha 2* and *Jiang Ziya.* The accompanying subtitle 'The Series of Chinese Mythology made by Coloroom' also signifies the intention of producing a cinematic universe of Chinese Mythology, similar to the Marvel cinematic universe in the west. As Barthes (1972:107) notes, 'myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message'. Chineseness is 'flagged' in the utterance of this subtitle, compared to the stateless title of 'Marvel cinematic universe' in the western context. The nationalistic ideology hidden behind the post-credits scene, in this sense, creates the new myth: the genre of animated film in China has become 'nationalised'. In other words, the nation is centrally positioned in Chinese animated films. Nationalism from above may further serve as a crucial factor in reproducing a sense of nationhood in the reception of this animated film.

[10] See https://www.sohu.com/a/331806991_100193305

[11] See https://www.sohu.com/a/341406988_260616

Forms of ACGN Nationalism

The study of nationalistic ideology in the previous section provides a picture of nationalism from above. This section, however, shifts the focus to the audience, as ordinary people, and their active participation in reproducing the nation online and offline, during their engagement with *Ne Zha*.

Online ACGN Nationalism

Loosely oriented by the 'everyday nationalism' analytical framework proposed by Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008), this section examines the ways audiences comment and perform on digital platforms, in which their sense of Chineseness is discursively and practically constituted.

'The Rise of Chinese Animation' – Commenting the Nation

According to Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008:539), ordinary people are 'active producers – and not just passive consumers – of national discourse'. In other words, the nation is invoked through one's conscious expression in everyday life and there is no exception to this in the digital era. Schneider's (2018) study of nationalism in digital China shows that internet users shape an imagined community through commenting online. Hence, instead of 'talking the nation' (Fox & Miller-Idriss 2008), 'commenting the nation' is more appropriate in presenting ordinary people's discursive construction of the nation in the digital environment. This is also consistent with the situation that ACGN nationalism is initially found in the digital environment, and the shared 'internal culture, identity, and discourse system' within the ACGN group in the digital environment (Feng 2017:47).

There are various ways Chinese audiences build a sense of nationhood in their comments on *Ne Zha*. This can firstly be found in the way that audiences actively link *Ne Zha* to Chinese animation. For example:

> The gap of my favourite, and the best, the most satisfying 3D computer-generated Chinese animated film, has finally been made up by *Ne Zha*. This is wonderful, amazing, and exciting! (Commentator 77)

> Who would have thought that the wild kid Ne Zha can carry the banner of summer films this year? The visual, characterisation and storytelling are all remarkable. But the internet buzzwords as well as the parodies are too grounded and a bit awkward, which lower the film. Overall, it is actually an amazing work of Chinese animated films. (Commentator 72)

National sensibilities are shaped in these audiences' engagement with *Ne Zha*, through commenting 'Chinese'. More specifically, the former commentator shows a strong sense of positive emotional engagement with this domestic animated film, which can be considered to help create a feeling of national pride. The latter commentator, differently, reflects a spectrum of engagement, shifting back and forth between positive and negative engagement (Hill 2019). From 'remarkable', to 'awkward' and 'lower', and finally to 'amazing', the latter commentator constructs nationalism in her/his negotiation process with *Ne Zha*.

Secondly, apart from building a link between *Ne Zha* and Chinese animation, nationhood is found in the way that audiences simply comment 'Chinese animation', without mentioning 'Ne Zha':

> This is really the best and most conscientious Chinese animated film I've ever seen! (Commentator 9)

> Hot-blooded. Adolescent Delusions. Exhilarating. The special effects are badass! The imagination is badass! This is the Chinese animation that we can truly be proud of. (Commentator 81)

> The rise of Chinese animation! (Commentator 29)

> The conscientious Chinese animation! (Commentator 21)

> Hope Chinese animation becomes better and better! (Commentator 6)

These examples make nationhood a salient attribute: the former type of commentators embodies national pride in substituting 'Ne Zha' with 'Chinese animation', and the latter type of commentators activates national sensibilities by

strongly expressing their positive emotions towards 'Chinese animation'. Both these types of expressions manifest the agency of the domestic audience in their engagement with *Ne Zha*, showing that nationhood can be 'creatively and self-consciously deployed and manipulated by ordinary people' (Fox & Miller-Idriss 2008:539).

One thing to note is that 'the rise of Chinese animation' is a popular discourse, not only seen in *Ne Zha* but also commonly found in previous Chinese animation (Bai 2015). Here, a sense of nationhood is shaped in the way of phrasing animation as 'Chinese animation'. The word 'rise' in Chinese denotes the status of 'emerging suddenly to a towering position', or relates to 'the emergence of a power'.[12] According to Foucault (1978:101), 'discourse transmits and produces power'. His idea of 'power-knowledge relations' further helps explain how nationalism is constructed in this brief comment (Foucault 1977). It is Foucault's viewpoint that 'there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations' (1977:27). That is to say, discourse generates power, and power is closely linked to knowledge (Foucault 1977; 1978). In this sense, 'The rise of Chinese animation!', with the help of the exclamation point in emphasising the tone, can therefore be seen as a short but affective discourse in generating knowledge – the knowledge of a strong nation, namely China. A sense of strong national pride and national identity is embedded in the articulation. Through this, nationalism is constituted.

There is also development of this expression:

> The modelling and rendering is great – better than that in previous 3D Chinese animation. The storytelling is exhilarating and adolescents delusional (in a positive way). Cool! Chinese animation does sit-up again. Looking forward to *Jiang Ziya*. (Commentator 2)

'Sit-up' is a recent buzzword symbolising something that goes up and down iteratively.[13] By commenting 'Chinese animation does sit-up again', the audience actively and creatively constructs the nation in her/his positive engagement with *Ne Zha*. National sensibility is embedded in the use of Internet buzzwords. This

[12] See https://www.zdic.net/hans/%E5%B4%9B%E8%B5%B7

[13] See https://jikipedia.com/definition/221674526

highlights the characteristics of ACGN nationalism, which is an evolving form of nationalism in digital China, and emphasises that nationalism has the intrinsic value to the ACGN subculture.

Extra Mark(s) because it is Chinese-made – Performing the Nation

Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008: 538) observe that 'the production of national sensibilities [is] through the ritual enactment of symbol'. That is to say, nationalism can be constructed through ordinary people's ritual performance. This is found in domestic audiences' engagement with *Ne Zha* in the digital environment, mainly by rating it with extra mark(s):

> Conventionally give an extra mark because it is Chinese-made. (Commentator 52)

> One extra star for supporting Chinese animators. (Commentator 68)

De Certeau's (1984) theory of 'tactics' helps to understand this performance. He differentiates 'tactics' from 'strategies': a strategy is made and imposed by power systems or institutions, whilst a tactic is used and manipulated by ordinary people in their everyday life. In this sense, giving *Ne Zha* extra grade(s) online can be seen as a daily tactic employed by domestic audiences to improve its reputation and influence due to its 'Chinese-made' attribute. 'People build their worlds and identities […] by using different tactics' (Manovich 2009:322). National identity is without exception. The tactical rating performance online can be seen as a way audiences build national identities, through which their sense of 'Chineseness' is practically constituted.

Offline ACGN Nationalism

There is also a need to include the offline setting, because both the online and offline environments play an important role in individuals' lives. This section therefore continues to explore the ways nationalism is constructed on the ground in the audience's everyday life. Drawing on Fox and Miller-Idriss' (2008) analytical framework of 'everyday nationalism', this section investigates how domestic viewers actively produce national affinities through consumption, performance and daily talk.

Watch it Twice because it is Chinese-made – Consuming the Nation

Nations can be considered as products (Fox & Miller-Idriss 2008). Individuals constitute national sensibilities through daily consumption practices. Audiences present various consumption behaviours, in which their sense of nationhood is shaped. This can initially be found in watching *Ne Zha* in the cinema:

> I watched it in the cinema, firstly because it is Chinese-made. If it is a foreign film, I wouldn't go to the cinema to watch it. (Sheng, 20-year-old, male, video dubber)

> I know some Chinese animation teams are working very hard and putting a lot of efforts in their works. So every time when there is a new Chinese animated film released, I will definitely go to the cinema to watch it. Every time! *Ne Zha* is no exception. (Lin, 21-year-old, female, operator)

> I watched the pre-screening [of *Ne Zha*] in the cinema with my friend. I think fans or people who are concerned about Chinese animation, may go to watch the pre-screening in the cinema. (Ou, 22-year-old, female, student)

Interviewee Sheng provides an understanding of consumer nationalism, which is seen in his acceptance to watch a domestic film and a rejection to watch a foreign film in the cinema, based on his nationality (Wang 2005). As Fox and Miller-Idriss note:

> [T]hrough shopping […] ordinary people make a national world visible to themselves and, potentially, those around them. The consumption of these national artefacts defines, demonstrates, and affirms the consumer's national affinities. It marks the products – and the people who consume them – nationally (2008:551).

Through watching *Ne Zha* in the cinema, Sheng not only consumes nationally marked goods but also intangibly reinforces his national identity.

Lin and Ou identify themselves as fans of Chinese animation. Dual identities – fan identity and national identity – are blended in their engagement with *Ne Zha*. Edensor (2002:vii) observes that 'national identity is […] enmeshed in the embodied, material ways in which we live'. Both Lin's and Ou's viewing experience of *Ne Zha* in the cinema, therefore, reveals how audiences' national identities are materialised through the purchase of a cinema ticket.

In addition, re-watching *Ne Zha* in the cinema is another tactical practice that domestic audiences employ:

> I watched it twice. Some of my friends have watched it four or five times at maximum. The first time I watched it I missed some details – I realised it when I read the film reviews. This is why I re-watched *Ne Zha*. Another reason is because I wanted to contribute to its box office. Because it is Chinese-made, and is also a conscientious work. (Si, 28-year-old, female, finance)

> The second time I watched it was partly because I wanted to 'amway' my friends, partly because I wanted to watch again, and partly because I wanted to support Chinese animation. I thought it was worth it. (Wan, 24-year-old, female, teacher)

These interviewees clearly show how a sense of nationhood is consciously produced in their own consumption practices, or in guiding their friends' consumption practices. This can also be understood in the viewpoint of Fox and Miller-Idriss (2008:551): 'consumers don't simply buy national commodities; they constitute national sensibilities, embody national pride, negotiate national meanings, thus making nationhood a salient feature of their everyday lives'. Interviewee Si also realises the box-office-celebrating poster created by the director on Weibo, and reflects upon this encouraging her to re-watch *Ne Zha* in the cinema. This provides a glimpse of how 'a system of communication', namely 'myth', as Barthes (1972:107) articulates, is created between the nationalistic ideology and ordinary people.

It is Fox and Miller-Idriss' notion that 'consumption doesn't only occur only at the cash register', and 'media that are national in scope, content and/or format can also contribute to the activation and reinforcement of national sensitivities' (2008:551). Thus, re-watching *Ne Zha* at home is also a way of shaping nationhood:

> The second time I watched it I was with my family when we were at home. I thought it was a good Chinese animation and I wanted the elders in my family to also watch Chinese animation. I hoped that they could give up their prejudice towards Chinese animation and could stop considering that animation is only for kids. They were reluctant in the beginning because they still can't accept the genre of animation, but they liked it in the end as they eventually found it funny. (Dong, 25-year-old, male, product manager)

Through deliberately creating the in-house media 'togetherness' (Livingstone 2005), Dong, and his family, who would never consume Chinese animation on their own, construct national affinities in their daily life.

Profile Photo, Post, and Group – Performing the Nation

The audiences' daily performances also help shape a sense of nationhood. For example, both Dong and Si use Ne Zha as their profile photos on WeChat, after they watched this animated film in the cinema. Although there is no flag, Ne Zha is still a traditional Chinese mythological character who carries a symbolic attachment to the nation. Therefore, using Ne Zha as their profile photos can be seen as a daily performance which embodies national sensibility, pride and identity.

Lin, differently, updated a post on WeChat after watching *Ne Zha*, in which she wrote: 'Hope everyone can support Chinese animation. The 11th year I've been rooting for Chinese animation'. Her dual identities are represented along with a strong sense of belonging and responsibility. This can also be seen, even visibly, in Ou's performance, as she created an online community-based group called 'the rise of Chinese animation'. She explains:

> I binge-watched a lot of Chinese animation last summer, and found that they were very good works. I wanted to discuss with someone [on a particular social media platform], but I couldn't find a group for this. I saw the enthusiasm of the production teams, which inspired me a lot. I would like to cheer for them – to act as 'tap water' and help 'amway' [their works]. *Ne Zha* was released during that time, and achieved a really high reputation online. This reinforced my idea of creating a group about Chinese animation [on a particular social media platform]. I thought that there must be people who like to watch Chinese animation, and it should be a lot of people. It was just about missing a place for this. Then I'll do it, I thought. (Ou, 22-year-old, female, student)

Ou's dual identities encouraged her to perform fan labour, or 'tap-water' in her self-identified words, creating a virtual imagined community in which like-minded audiences are included. The fannish object is, essentially, the nation. In this sense, Ou's performance of building the online community-based group, not only represents 'Fandom-Is-a-Way-of-Life' (Busse & Gray 2011:431), but also manifests that nationalism is a way of life. Notably, although the performances

above are described by the offline interviewees, they are closely connected to the digital environment.

'We Have a Rich Cultural Heritage in Our Chinese Culture' – Talking the Nation

Different from ACGN nationalism in the digital environment, there is no utterance of 'the rise of Chinese animation' emerging spontaneously in the offline audiences' talk. Although most individuals agree with this expression, they present different understandings. For example, some people consider Chinese animation to be 'rising', instead of having 'already risen':

> To me it is rising instead of having already risen. If we say 'it has risen' it feels like it has reached its peak. But I'm sure it will be better in the future. I hope it can 'rise' forever. (Nian, 22-year-old, female, student)

> I think it is rising, because there are not many representative works. (Wan, 24-year-old, female, teacher)

> It is rising – there is a long way to go, especially compared to a lot of Japanese animation companies which have already achieved a mature industrial chain. (Ou, 22-year-old, female, student)

It is interesting to see that even Ou, who created the online group of 'the rise of Chinese animation', considers that Chinese animation is 'rising'. This also adds the value of the use of 'triangulation' in studying the offline setting in this research; otherwise, it may bring biases in simply studying the online environment.

It is also noticeable that there is a strong sense of 'we' in the interviewees' talk:

> It has always been said that special effects in China are not as good as those in America. But I have seen progress in our special effects when I watched *Ne Zha*. Also when I knew that we were going to have our 'Legend of Deification', just like America's 'Marvel Series', I was really excited! Really excited! I thought this was really cool because every character within it is worth watching. (Wan, 24-year-old, female, teacher)

> Chinese animation has its own characteristics, which is its advantage. It uses our own culture [to tell a story], such as 'Classic of Mountains and Seas'.[14] This is not found in Japanese and American animation. (Ou, 22-year-old, female, student)

These accounts show that a sense of nationhood is built through a distinction of 'we' (China) and 'they' (Japan and America). This can be understood in Schneider's opinion, that 'there can never be an in-group sentiment without some kind of out-group attribution' (2018:40). Through shaping a strong sense of 'we' and making a distinction between 'we' and 'they', these interviewees embody national pride and construct nationalism in their talk.

The Relationships between Online and Offline ACGN Nationalism

With the guide of Fox and Miller-Idriss' (2008) analytical framework, the study has shown the salience of the nation in domestic audiences' talk, performance and consumption practices of *Ne Zha*, both online and offline. More importantly, there is a close relationship shared between ACGN nationalis3m online and offline.

Online affective and positive comments, such as 'the rise of Chinese animation', and the digital practice of giving higher ratings, help enhance *Ne Zha*'s reputation. These reinforce domestic audiences' national identities, activate their national pride, and turn into motivation for them to constitute nationalism on the ground. This can be found in the fan labour of creating the online group; the written post on WeChat using the phrase 'Chinese animation' instead of 'Ne Zha'; the application of Ne Zha as profile photo to help promote the film; and the re-watching of *Ne Zha* in cinemas, etc. Some of these national practices offline, in turn, can convert into national symbols online, which may further expand their influence to individuals offline, in a cyclic process. In this sense, the thesis argues that online and offline ACGN nationalism work closely to integrate and make nationhood a salient attribute in ordinary people's everyday lives.

[14] 'Classic of Mountains and Seas' is a Chinese ancient text regarding mythological geography.

Rationales of ACGN Nationalism

As Antonsich (2016) points out, previous studies focus on asking questions such as 'what', 'when' and 'how' is nationhood. However, it is crucial to propose the question of 'why', in order to avoid staying at the descriptive level (Knott 2015). There are several reasons this thesis argues for 'why' ACGN nationalism appears in the reception of *Ne Zha*. Firstly, the outstanding production of *Ne Zha* has been recognised by domestic audiences, which can be seen as a crucial reason for ACGN nationalism. This can be found in the previously mentioned praise for the special effects, the storytelling and the characterisation. Notably, there are a number of female viewers who especially adore the character Ao Bing[15] or actively make character pairing:

> I like Ao Bing, simply because he is handsome [laughing], and he has a lovely voice. (Ke, 27-year-old, female, animation practitioner)

> When Ao Bing appeared, those girls sitting behind me in the cinema were like, 'Ahhhhh'. I'm actually a CP fan, I remember I unconsciously showed my 'aunt's smile' when I was watching the film in the cinema.[16] It is very obvious that these two people [Ne Zha and Ao Bing] are made as CP – one is fire and the other is ice. Their colours are also matching – red and blue. (Si, 28-year-old, female, finance)

Both Ke and Si have watched *Ne Zha* more than once. This shows that the characterisation of *Ne Zha* may serve as an indirect incentive for the constitution of nationalism, which works through female audiences' affective engagement with the male character Ao Bing.

Secondly, the spirit of craftsmanship of the production team of *Ne Zha* has been admired by audiences. For example:

> After watching the film I also had a search online, and knew that Director Yang paid a lot of attention to the special effects. There is a story of the designer who

[15] See the second image of Ao Bing in https://www.weibo.com/6217939256/HCQQGtMrc

[16] The terms 'CP' and 'aunt's smile' are both common Chinese Internet slang. 'CP' is the abbreviation of 'character pairing' or 'couple', and 'aunt's smile' refers to older women's smile when they see young men they like. See https://jikipedia.com/definition/797190697 and https://jikipedia.com/definition/1029535421

> had quit the company and joined another, but was still found to cooperate with *Ne Zha*'s production team in the end.[17] It shows how rigid Director Yang is, and he really pays attention to the details of the film. (Dong, 25-year-old, product manager)
>
> You never thought that they would study the hometown of Taiyi Zhenren and then give him a voiceover with a Sichuan accent. (Cen, 32-year-old, Internet operator)

Thirdly, nationalistic ideology from above also plays an important role in the construction of nationalism in domestic audiences' engagement with *Ne Zha*. This is initially seen in the audiences' interaction to its promotion. For example, the influence of the Weibo celebration poster on the mentioned viewer's re-watching experience in the cinema; and the impact of the post-credit scenes, related to the production of a cinematic universe of Chinese Mythology, on the constitution of the audiences' excitement and expectation of national culture. However, there is no data in relation to the extended screening schedule of *Ne Zha*. Audiences show their re-watch experience in cinemas within one or two weeks of the release of the film. This further reveals their strong national sensibilities, which are embedded in these speedy consumption practices.

Nationalistic ideology embedded in the adaptation of the myth of 'Ne Zha', and in the representation in *Ne Zha*, also serves as a mythical communication system in reinforcing national identity and constructing a sense of nationhood (Barthes 1972). For example, audiences strengthen their national identities in reading the mythological character of Ne Zha:

> Ne Zha and Sun Wukong are two of the most rebellious characters in China. People like them, because they reflect the yearning of Chinese people in their sub-consciousness – the subversion of destiny and rules, which most people cannot get rid of in their lifetime. (Commentator 74)

Or in perceiving family roles and relations, and gender issues:

> Li Jing is a traditional Chinese father – he is strict, not good at expressing himself, but he loves his son […] Lady Yin is very cool! She is a career woman – very strong.

[17] This is because the designer could not stand the strict requirements of the director.

> She's just like a heroine in some contemporary novels, or an independent women today. (Nian, 22-year-old, female, student)

> My mother is similar to Lady Yin, and my situation is exactly the same as that of Ne Zha. I am the only child in my family. My parents both need to go to work and they always leave me at home. (Feng, 19-year-old, male, student)

Through the interpretations of a 'Chinese father', the Chinese relations between father and son, the self-identified 'left-behind children' issue and the awareness of feminism in contemporary China, these audiences reinforce their national identities and negotiate national meanings, which can further help construct nationalism.

Visual and aural elements also act as nationalistic signs in shaping a sense of nationhood:

> Ne Zha's red belly band […] Are there other countries that wear belly bands? I think it's only China. (Nian, 22-year-old, female, student)

> The traditional folk game of shuttlecock kicking has gained a new life through the new medium of animation. I personally think that this is a rare but good example of spreading Chinese culture in recent years. (Commentator 73)

> The soundtrack is amazing!! It is full of Chinese characteristics. I really love that part with Suona. (Commentator 7)

In their active readings of Ne Zha's red belly band, the shuttlecock kicking and the musical instrument, these audiences build a communal bond between themselves and the nation. One thing to mention is that the role of visual and aural symbols are not as salient as that of narrative elements, in the construction of national identities. There is not much relevant data found in the online comments, and this is even pessimistic in the interviews conducted offline. There is a need to actively ask the interviewees to reflect upon the 'Chineseness' embedded in the visual and aural representation, in the offline setting, in which the 'wait-and-listen' approach is inactive (Fox & Miller-Idriss 2008). Dong (25-year-old, male, product manager) reflects on this in his interview: 'Maybe this is because I'm Chinese – I don't pay attention to them'. That is to say, the 'Chineseness' is internalised due to the domestic audience's strong national identity, which is discussed in detail in the next paragraph.

Fourthly, it is the audience's strong internal national identity which turns into a series of discursive and practical constructions of nationhood, both online and offline. Extra quotes are added to demonstrate this:

> Personally, I am more tolerant of Chinese animation. It is surely that it cannot be compared with some foreign animation in terms of production. However, being Chinese, I will definitely support Chinese animation. (Ou, 22-year-old, female, student)

> Even though sometimes Hollywood animation can have rubbish stories, there is still a visible gap between our production and theirs. But I still support Chinese-made. I didn't watch *Frozen* again although it is an epic. (Ke, 27-year-old, female, animation practitioner)

Ke also recalls that she has watched *Ne Zha* in the cinema three times. As it is shown in these interviewees' accounts, national identity is a crucial reason for the emergence of ACGN nationalism among the audience. The thesis will further unveil the 'myth' of the audience hidden behind ACGN nationalism in *Ne Zha*.

Power Mechanisms behind ACGN Nationalism

The 20 to 30 year-old age group constitutes the largest proportion (53.54 %) of those watching *Ne Zha* in the cinema (Peng & Shi 2019). This age group is those who were born in the 90s; they are considered the core audience of ACGN in China (Ding 2016; Li 2017). In order to uncover the power of this youth group, this thesis looks closely at different aspects related to their conditions, including economic, cultural and social facets.

It is worth starting with an interviewee's quote:

> Now the young generation accepts animation more easily than the old generation, because it is the stuff that our generation likes. The young generation has their economic foundation and their own discursive power, which is also an important reason for the opinion 'the rise of Chinese animation' […] Also, we, the young generation, are the active ones on the Internet. We use our own way and our own strength to promote the film and attract more audiences. (Dong, 25-year-old, male, product manager)

Economically, people born in the 90s and participate in ACGN in China have a high family income, providing spending power for ACGN products (iResearch 2019). This youth group differs from those born in the 70s and the 80s, as they are more willing to pay for their favourite Internet/virtual products. This is labelled 'consumerism of people born in the 90s' by Feng (2017:48). In the case of *Ne Zha*, the re-watching experience of domestic audiences in the cinema manifests the consumption capacity and willingness of this youth group. He (2019) notices that young people participating in ACGN have both economic and cultural capital, and live mainly in the city, rather than the countryside. This uncovers the hidden social hierarchy related to the ACGN subculture, in which its in-group members are rich, urban citizens.

The environments this youth group lived or are living in, are also crucial to examine from a cultural and social perspective. People born in the 90s spent most of their childhood consuming domestic and Japanese animation (iResearch 2005). Watching animation has become a habit in the audience's everyday life, as one interviewee says:

> I've been watching animation since I was a child. It is one of my habits. To me animation is definitely more attractive than real people – it is an attractive art form because it is utopian. (Meng, 23-year-old, female, student)

Through expressions such as 'one of my habits', 'more attractive', and 'utopian', Meng shows how animation is a unique and important genre for her in her lifetime. This, as well as interviewee Dong's opinion mentioned earlier ('it is the stuff that our generation likes'), discloses a close relationship between people born in the 90s and the genre of animation. This explains where the power of this youth group partly comes from – it is 'their genre' that they pay more attention to.

The digital environment this youth group is living in today also provides them an opportunity to construct and spread their power. Feng notes that those born in the 90s are growing up in the Internet era, and 'their world views, lifestyles, their ways of making friends, and ways of communication are highly influenced by the Internet' (2017:48). Li and Liu (2020) consider how the Internet is actively used by this group in expressing their opinions, such as loving their nation, as a new way of emotional sustenance. These opinions reveal that people born in the 90s are taking a discursively dominant role in the digital environment. The short but affective expression of 'the rise of Chinese animation' can be seen as an example

of the discursive power this youth group wields online in their construction of nationalism within the ACGN subculture.

The analysis of the core audience of *Ne Zha* and their power in terms of economic, cultural and social facets, helps uncover the 'myth' of this youth group who embeds nationalism in their engagement with this animated film. However, there is a gender issue which needs to be foregrounded, missing in previous studies of ACGN nationalism. As it is discussed, young female audiences or fans show their affective engagement with the characterisation, such as Ao Bing and his ambiguous relationship with Ne Zha, more than their male counterparts. Henry Jenkins' (1992) studies on female media fans and their interpretative practices on male characters, namely 'slash', provide an understanding of the power and subversion of female fans in popular culture. Jenkins suggests that fan studies should avoid falling into 'the trap of dealing with fandom as if it were gender-neutral', and we should 'develop a more complex picture of how gender operates within fandom' (2014:102). McRobbie and Garbers' (1991) study on girls and subcultures reveals a previous absence of the exploration of female members in youth subculture, and they notice how females play different roles compared to males. These perspectives provide inspiration to highlight gender in the analysis of ACGN nationalism. It is crucial to investigate how young female audiences or fans merge their object of fandom with nationalism in their engagement with ACGN. The power of the young female audiences or fans in *Ne Zha* can be viewed as an example of foregrounding the gender issue within ACGN nationalism, while detailed future research is welcome.

The investigation of people born in the 90s unveils the power of the youth in the reception of *Ne Zha*; however, it is important to also note the power of youth in its production. The data from iResearch (2015) shows that those born in the 80s make the largest contribution to the production of Chinese animation. This youth group was influenced deeply by Japanese animation during their childhood, and because of this some people started their businesses relating to ACGN when they grew up (iResearch 2015). They put a lot of effort into producing and promoting high quality ACGN works.[18] The director of *Ne Zha*, Yang, is an example of this, showing a spirit of craftsmanship in the production of this animated film in order

[18] There are of course other generations which contributed to the production of Chinese animation, however, those who were born in the 80s are found to account for the majority of the production field.

to 'break the stereotypes and change the destiny […] of Chinese animation' (Yang 2019b). During this the nationalistic ideology – 'changing the destiny of Chinese animation' – has therefore been embedded into this animated film, by those involved in production. Hence, this thesis argues that there are in fact three types of power which constitute the mechanisms hidden behind ACGN nationalism: power from those born in the 80s (production), the 90s (audiences), and from the state.

Towards the End

This study has explored different forms and rationales of ACGN nationalism in the Chinese context, and has further revealed the power mechanisms hidden behind this evolving form of nationalism in digital China. It has been argued that there are three sources of power which constitute the mechanisms hidden behind the 'myth' of ACGN nationalism: power from those born in the 80s (production), the 90s (audiences), and from the state.

How is nationalistic ideology embedded in the production and promotion of *Ne Zha*?

This thesis has uncovered nationalism from above through a detailed exploration of nationalistic ideology implanted in the production and promotion of *Ne Zha*. To be more precise, the 'myth' of nationalism from above arises from the adaptation of the mythological story of *Ne Zha*, which is used as a national sign to build an 'imagined community' within domestic audiences (Anderson 1983; Barthes 1972). The seemingly natural thematic choice of this new adaptation, breaking stereotypes and fighting against destiny, also reveals how nationalism from above purifies the genuine hope of changing the stereotypical situation of Chinese animation.

It was found that nationalistic ideology is embedded in the representation of traditional and modern 'Chineseness' in *Ne Zha*. Firstly, the Confucian and Taoist philosophies and the core value of socialism, are immersed in the representation of character designs as well as interpersonal relationships. Secondly, 'Chineseness' is embedded in the representation of family roles as well as relations,

and gender issues, in *Ne Zha*. This is discovered through the family and gender roles of Ne Zha's parents, a traditional reserved father and a contemporary style caring mother. It is also uncovered through family relations, in the typical family value of viewing children as the hope of the family, and the connoted 'left-behind children' issue in China. Additionally, the consciousness of feminism in the contemporary Chinese context is also represented through the only female main character Lady Yin.

Thirdly, beyond the focus of the narrative, this thesis has also unveiled nationalistic ideology embedded in the visual and aural elements of *Ne Zha*. All of these visual and aural elements serve as a 'forgotten reminder' in reproducing a sense of nationhood (Billig 1995). Notably, nothing is expressed explicitly; instead, it is the seemingly natural and innocent elements that help to 'flag' the nation through different sensations (ibid.).

Apart from the study of the production, this thesis has investigated the promotion of *Ne Zha*, uncovering nationalistic ideology from both the production team and the state. For example, the promotional slogan on the art posters on the production team's Weibo account, can be seen as a means of building an 'imagined community' in a celebratory moment (Anderson 1983). Besides from the power of the production team, this study has also revealed the more mysterious power from the state, hidden behind the screening schedule of *Ne Zha* in cinemas. Further, this thesis has unveiled a new myth – the genre of Chinese animated film has become 'nationalised'. This has been found in the post-credits scene presenting the intention of producing a cinematic universe of Chinese Mythology at the end of *Ne Zha*.

How is ACGN nationalism constructed in the audience's engagement with *Ne Zha*, both online and offline, and what is the relationship between online and offline ACGN nationalism?

This thesis has initially examined ACGN nationalism in the digital environment, from which audiences' national sensibilities are thought to emerge (Bai 2015). The focus has been put on how the nation is discursively and practically constructed by audiences. More precisely, this thesis has unveiled the various ways in which individuals reproduce the nation in their online comments on *Ne Zha*. This has been observed in the active connection they built between 'Ne Zha' and

'Chinese animation', or through direct interaction with 'Chinese animation', without mentioning 'Ne Zha'. This study has also analysed the widely-circulated discourse 'the rise of Chinese animation', as well as unveiled how power is produced through the use of this short but affective expression in building and spreading nationalism in the online environment. In addition, this thesis has exposed audiences' national sensibilities hidden behind the performance of giving higher ratings to *Ne Zha*.

There is no affective expression, such as 'the rise of Chinese animation', found in the offline setting. However, audiences' nationalism is constructed through a strong sense of 'we' in daily talk. This, notably, has added the value of the use of 'triangulation' in this study, which otherwise could have brought biases in simply studying the online environment. Daily consumption practices have been found to be a salient trait in offline ACGN nationalism. For example, by watching *Ne Zha* in cinemas, re-watching it in cinemas, or 'amwaying' friends to watch it in cinemas. Domestic viewers materialise their national identities through the purchase of a film ticket, which helps construct their nationalism. Additionally, consumption occurs beyond money trading (Fox & Miller-Idriss 2008). Having an in-house viewing experience of *Ne Zha* with the elders of the family, can also be considered consuming national content and reinforcing national identity. Most importantly, national sensibilities are built within the whole family rather than simply in the family member acting as the introducer.

This thesis has also uncovered how audiences and fans act as active agents in performing the nation, during their engagement with *Ne Zha*. This has been observed in the use of the character Ne Zha, who carries a symbolic attachment to the nation, as a profile photo on WeChat. This has also been noticed in the fans' posts regarding the support of Chinese animation, and the fan labour of creating the online group 'the rise of Chinese animation'. Just as 'Fandom-Is-a-Way-of-Life' (Busse & Gray 2011:431), nationalism is also a way of life, manipulated by ordinary people.

Although these practices are performed and discussed offline, they are eventually transformed into online nationalistic marks. ACGN nationalism starts with the online affective comments and rating practices, progresses to influence offline fan labour, fan posts and photo appropriation, and these in turn, convert into online nationalistic symbols. This has revealed the interrelationship between the online and offline forms of ACGN nationalism, which can only be studied in tandem.

Hence, this thesis argues that online and offline ACGN nationalism work together to reproduce a salient nationhood in the individual's everyday life. This thesis hopes to add a suggestion to existing studies of everyday nationalism, which is, to also consider ordinary people's national sensibilities produced in the digital environment. The simple focus of the offline setting is not compatible with the digitally mediatised world of today.

Why does ACGN nationalism appear in the reception of *Ne Zha*, and how does it enable the understanding of the power mechanisms hidden behind ACGN nationalism in China?

This thesis has argued that there are four key points in shaping ACGN nationalism in the reception of *Ne Zha*. Firstly, the high-quality production of *Ne Zha* is a crucial reason for the emergence of ACGN nationalism. Notably, this thesis has also revealed the power of the characterisation of Ao Bing. Female audiences show their affective engagement with this male character, and their active interpretation of the character pairing between Ao Bing and Ne Zha. These female audiences also manifest that they have watched this animated film more than once. This illustrates that the power of the characterisation in *Ne Zha* may indirectly support the construction of nationalism, particularly among female audiences.

Secondly, the spirit of craftsmanship of the production team of *Ne Zha*, recognised by domestic audiences, helps to construct nationalism in the audiences' engagement with the animated film. Thirdly, this thesis has uncovered the role of the nationalistic ideology in building a sense of 'Chineseness' in the reception of *Ne Zha*, through the promotion and production of this film. More specifically, the study shows that audiences' re-watching experience in cinemas is influenced by the celebratory art poster on *Ne Zha*'s Weibo account. There is also a strong sense of nationhood generated by the post-credit scenes in *Ne Zha*, which signifies that the genre of Chinese animated films has become 'nationalised'. However, there was no relationship between these occurrences and the extended screening schedule of *Ne Zha*.

Audiences construct a sense of nationhood in their engagement with the nationally-marked character Ne Zha, in this new adapted animation. The representation of family roles and relations, and gender issues, plays an important

role of strengthening viewers' national identities. Besides these, visual and aural elements serve as a mythical communication system in constructing a sense of nationhood in audiences' engagement (Barthes 1972). Notably, this thesis has revealed that the role of visual and aural elements is not as noticeable as that of narrative units, in reproducing the nation in the reception of *Ne Zha*. This has helped to disclose the strong national identity of domestic audiences in their internalisation of 'Chineseness'.

Fourthly, it is argued that the domestic viewer's national identity plays a significant role in the construction of nationalism both in speech and in practices. It has been considered a key rationale for the appearance of ACGN nationalism, and the analysis of its hidden power mechanisms. It was found that those born in the 90s, namely the 20 to 30 year-old age group, accounted for the largest proportion of the viewing experience of *Ne Zha* in cinemas. Both their economic and cultural capital allows them to pay for their favourite and virtual products more freely. This was revealed in domestic audiences' willingness and ability to consume by re-watching *Ne Zha* in cinemas.

From a cultural and social perspective, the living environment of the past and the contemporary digital environment, were exposed as supportive factors in constituting the power of people born in the 90s. Growing up with the genre of animation, this youth group has cultivated their habit of watching animation in their everyday lives. They share a close affinity with this genre, which is why they are willing to pay more attention to it. This was seen in the interviewee Meng's account (23-year-old, female, student), in which she described her special feeling towards this 'utopian' genre and that watching it has become her 'habit'. The power of this youth group is also highly influenced by the digital environment they are currently living in, which allows them to freely and actively have their voices heard. Online ACGN nationalism can be considered a new way of wielding this discursive power by those born in the 90s. The comment of 'the rise of Chinese animation' illustrates how power is embedded in this short but affective discourse, constructing and spreading nationalism.

The gender issues of this youth group have also been uncovered. This has provided insight into how young female audiences and fans integrate their object of fandom into nationalistic consumption. It has also revealed the power of these young female audiences and fans in their contribution to ACGN nationalism. There is

an opportunity for future research to highlight gender in the analysis of ACGN nationalism, which has not been a focus of previous studies.

Although the thesis has disclosed the salient power of people born in the 90s in constituting ACGN nationalism in the reception of *Ne Zha*, it has also revealed the power of those born in the 80s, as another youth group, in their key contribution to the production of Chinese animation. Of note, this group of people, deriving from the production side, is seen as constructing nationalism from above. In this sense, this study has argued that it is the power of those born in the 80s, those born in the 90s, as well as the state, that together construct the power mechanisms hidden behind the 'myth' of ACGN nationalism.

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Canvas of dissent

A Study of Visuals and their Significance in Group Formations and Communications During the 2019 Hong Kong Anti-ELAB Movement

Cheryl W. L. Fung

Theatre of protests

Protests in contemporary society are not static, but dynamic. Networks, digital media and communications are crucial for organising movements and engaging individuals. Esherick and Wasserstrom (1990) claim that the public nature of social movements is that they take place at a 'street theatre', where citizens are invited to join (Veg 2016:683). This street theatre involves performances of different cultural practices carried out by participants. Textual materials like slogans can be seen as expressions of claims and a part of the performance of the democratic nature of the movement (ibid.:682), and so can visual materials. In the summer of 2019, protesters in Hong Kong who are against a proposed extradition bill have turned the city into an enormous street theatre. Protest arts including posters, graffiti, and statues which were seen everywhere in the city: on walls in pedestrian tunnels, fences and grounds on footbridges, bus stops, entrances of metro stations … are all covered with paintings and posters created by protesters. Protest posters have integrated into citizens' everyday life, regardless of whether they are protesters. This thesis presents key findings that emphasise the significant role of protest posters in communicating messages, creating connectivity between protesters, and ultimately, in-group formations during the movement.

About the Anti-ELAB Movement

The Anti-Extradition Bill (Anti-ELAB) movement has been taking place in Hong Kong since June 2019. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government announced the amendment of the Fugitive Offenders Ordinance and the Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Ordinance on February 12, 2019 (Lee, Yuen, Tang & Cheng 2019:1). Small-scale protests were organised, however, the government made no plan on withdrawing the proposed extradition bill, allowing Hong Kong citizens to be extradited to mainland China. A few months later, two million people took to the streets to protest. From early June onwards, massive protests were organised to urge for the withdrawal of the bill. After several strikes and violent clashes between protesters and police, the government finally announced that the bill would be withdrawn in September. Despite the fact that the bill is no longer an immediate threat, the protests have developed into a citywide movement seeking independent inquiry to investigate police abuse of power, and political reforms (ibid.).

Big and small group formations were observed during the movement. In the eyes of the general public, people who participate in demonstrations and protests all belong to the group of 'protesters'. However, the formation of smaller groups actually allows for more effective discussions and executions of plans, as each of them tend to focus on a particular tactic or a particular channel of distribution. There are groups of 'frontline fighters', who are actively interacting with and fighting against the police during violent clashes between the two. There are also groups of 'protest poster fighters', who are actively creating and distributing posters that combine information and protest values with visual elements.

In this largest movement in Hong Kong history, protesters engage in a variety of activities in addition to mass marching and protesting, in order to make alliances with others. In particular, they realise it is important to ensure effective communication of information, which is beneficial for expanding the protester population and sustaining the group. This has given rise to a wave of poster production, in which local professional and amateur artists have created thousands of protest posters that serve different kinds of purposes. Numerous 'protest poster groups' on social media platforms and popular forums were established in June, dedicated to the distribution of protest images in the form of posters and digital images to the mass audience online and offline. This thesis focuses on the importance of the posters in group formations and communications, specifically

how they facilitate effective spread of messages and affective bonding between protesters.

Research Questions

The main research question this thesis answers is: *What roles do protest posters play in group formations and communications in the Anti-ELAB movement?* This will be analysed by answering the following sub-questions:

- What do protesters communicate through the posters?
- How does the way of distribution facilitate effective spread of information?
- How do visuals create connectivity between individuals?

Group formation in social movements

To study social movements, it is helpful to understand their formations. Castells (2007:238) argues that if a majority of people disagree with the values and norms of the state, preserved in the law and regulations, the system will change eventually. Social movements often aim at changing values and interests institutionalized in the society (ibid.:249). As Gamson (1992) states, the perception of injustice is an important element in the formation of movements. For instance, the misrepresentations of minorities or dissenting voices in mainstream media is an example of content-related injustice (Milan 2013:50f). The formation of the Anti-ELAB movement is an example that illustrates the notions of Castells (2007) and Gamson (1992). Hong Kongers who oppose the increasing intrusions of Hong Kong affairs by China were aware that the amended extradition bill could be a potential threat to their basic rights and freedom of speech. They are worried that their interests won't be valued if the Hong Kong government allows extradition to China, possibly leading to suppression of criticism of the Chinese Communist Party and the central government of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

As Dahlgren (2009:121) notes, it is difficult to feel empowerment if one is alone. In order to enhance the sense of empowerment, one has to belong to a group or a 'political community'. Political communities evolve with changing circumstances,

with new members joining and old members leaving (ibid.). As members build their commitment to the community, they also become loyal to the values and procedures of democracy. Developing a high degree of solidarity within the community means that a sense of 'us' against 'them' is established, according to Dahlgren (ibid.:122). And in response to an external threat, self-defensive networks emerge out of necessity (Milan 2013:153).

Latour (2005:27) argues that the actor-network theory (ANT) suggests that there is no group but only group formation in society. However, group formations are difficult to see as they are only visible when there is a crisis. In Latour's words, there will be an outrage of millions of contradictory voices about what a group is when there is a sign of crisis (ibid.:31). He points out that 'for every group to be defined, a list of anti-groups is set up as well', people that belong to the same group will act against their anti-groups, in order to protect the group from crises (ibid.:32).

Jasper (2014:92) mentions that previously engaged activists usually convince others to join by packaging their ideas, images and morals in striking shocks, or take advantage of shocks created by others. He elaborates the idea by mentioning that individuals have moral intuition about right or wrong, and therefore when a person experiences something that is very upsetting, what he calls a 'moral shock', they will be motivated to get involved (ibid.:96f). Demonstrating moral shock allows an image to gain attention within a short period of time. While an emotional state of shock can paralyse individuals, it can also develop into anger and drive people to action (ibid.:98). Latour (2005:32) stresses that there is no group without some kind of recruiting officers. This notion is in parallel with Jasper's (2014:96ff) argument that recruiters often tell stories about cruelty and oppression to engage new members, often shown in images. 'Moral batteries', is what open people up to their initial recruitment into a social movement, as people are fearful and angry about the negative situations that threaten them, but are hopeful for positive solutions saving them (ibid.:106). Jasper (2014:100) suggests that one of the most effective moral shocks in social movements is when police arrest, beat, and kill peaceful protesters. After all, moral shock is effectively used for recruitment because it gives people a sense of urgency (Warren 2010). As Jasper (2014:105) argues, although a sense of threat might paralyse us, more often only vigorous actions can relieve the tension created when we are threatened. People tend to have a better feeling when they act against a threat, which basically

means doing anything to the best of their abilities, even if the action is dangerous. In other words, being active makes people feel better.

Conflicts Occurring During Group Formations

Anti-groups are considered the biggest source of information from the perspectives of scholars. The distinction of the anti-groups from the dominant group is shown through their actions and expressions, as groups are not silent things (Latour 2005:31). In terms of in-group conflicts, if we take a look at the Anti-ELAB movement, we can see that the relationship between radical and moderate protesters is conflictual by nature, although their existence in a social movement aren't mutually exclusive (Lee 2019:1). When radicals try to achieve their goals by more disruptive and violent tactics, moderates who prefer non-violent tactics might not agree with their doings. However, Lee (2009) highlights how a sense of solidarity has played a crucial role in sustaining movements, allowing them to develop dynamically. This can be explained by Latour's (2005:33) idea that various features of group formations will support the group boundary to 'hold against the contradictory pressures of all the competing and anti-groups that threaten to dissolve it'.

Given that people seem to like those who agree with them and feel more comfortable with those who like them back, clusters of like-minded people emerge eventually (ibid.), which might results in separations and reformations of groups. For those that remain as a group, *trust* is a key element to achieve maintenance. Dahlgren (2009:121) notes that the dimension of trust is immensely important to construct a community-based identity. It plays an important role in achieving democracy, in terms of creating bonds and networks (ibid.:112f). Conflicts of interest can result from mistrust in social relationships. To establish a strong bond within the group, trust between groups members has to be enhanced.

The network society: digital networking and connective actions

Social media facilitates connective actions by allowing information sharing and making online event coordination possible as multifunction networking platforms (Bennett & Segerberg 2012:753). The large capacity of technologies develops a strong digital networking mechanism enabling online and offline planning, which enhances the levels of transparency and trust between individuals. Technology platforms and applications are replacing traditional political organizations to some extent (ibid.:742), and online communication has been regarded 'the liberation from the body and the unlimited freedom to join and leave virtual groups' (Bakardjieva & Feenberg 2002:184; also see Turkle 1995; Stone 1996).

Aligning with previous discussions, Milan describes some communication technologies as 'liberation technology,' referring to technologies that enable citizens to 'report news, expose wrongdoings, express opinions, mobilize protests, monitor elections and scrutinize governments' (2013:40). Although she emphasizes that social media's ability to promote democracy is yet to be agreed upon, the Internet is definitely the main platform for action, recruitment and identification for activist networking (ibid.:41). Highfield (2016:3) also acknowledges that social media supports a broad range of political actions and functions in different contexts. Specifically, he argues that 'the personal and the political are not mutually exclusive, and separating the two is both impossible and impractical' (ibid.:15). Suggesting that the personal and the political are closely interlinked, Highfield believes that social media brings about the further personalisation of politics. The discussion of politics on social media is dynamic, it can be 'explicit and implicit, affective and personal, and reflect many practices, communities and issues' (ibid.:30). In general, all social media platforms can be used by activists to support political actions, as long as the users make use of the conventions and affordances of the platforms to create content and connect with others (ibid.:60). Highfield (2016:103) further emphasises the concept of connective action when discussing the interlinkage between social media and everyday politics. He refers to Bennett and Segerberg (2003), where connective action 'extends notions of collective action within protests and activism, as individuals form groups to campaign for change'. Highfield adds that, 'within connective actions, such political engagement is also personalised and digitally mediated, as social media and other digital technologies offer additional means for organization, information and mobilization' (2016:103). As organising agents,

social media has been used to demonstrate against governments or regimes, in terms of providing information and bringing visibility to participants (ibid.:104).

Visuals in social movements

Doerr, Mattoni and Teune (2015:1) suggest that visual elements have never been at the core of scholarly interest when it comes to social movement studies. While previous studies focus on textual sources, one should not ignore that visual elements including 'clothing and bodily gestures, images and symbols, posters and videos' are important forms of representations of a movement (ibid.). Visual texts serve as 'rich materials to answer central research questions in social movement studies and visuals are a crucial medium for protesters to communicate and represent complex messages (ibid.:7f). In media studies, images have been proven effective in attracting media attention and mainstreaming social movement claims (Doerr et al. 2015:9; Delicath & DeLuca 2003). Rovisco argues that this kind of new social movement tactic, which shifted the focus of the civil rights agenda to a much more publicly visible struggle, attracts wide public attention (2017:351). This explains how non-violent mass participatory direct-action protest has become the leading edge of a movement's demand for social and political change in today's society (ibid.). To conclude the above discussions, it is undeniable that in general, visual representations of protest constitute a key concern of social movements (Doerr 2010:9; Ryan 1991).

Visuals is a key element in the concept of performance in social movements. Goffman defines performance as 'all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants' (1959:26). Applying the notion of performance on social movement studies, it is noticeable that there are different practices and visual codes employed by protesters. For instance, some wear badges at marches to demonstrate dissent (Doerr et al. 2015:3; Alexander 2011; Tilly 2008). This kind of performance shows solidarity between participants and represents the movements as well (Doerr et al. 2015:5; Linke 1988; Lahusen 1996; Goodnow 2006). Moreover, images are often used in social movements to shape emotions, from shame and anger to irony and pride, or to ridicule opponents and picture them as cruel and violent (Doerr et al. 2015:5; Halfmann & Young 2010; Mattoni 2007; Mattoni & Doerr 2007; Howell 2012; Streetby 2013). As Jasper (2014:104) claims, villains always grab our attention because negative emotions catch our attention more immediately and urgently than positive emotions do.

The Functions of Symbols and Colours in Social Movements

According to Doerr et al. (2015:5), colours and symbols that 'emerge as signifiers of political struggles lead to a more general perspective on visual aspects of social movements'.

Goodnow explains how symbols are created to condense and act as representations in social movements: they are effective at performing four rhetoric functions, including *explanation*, *awareness*, *identification* and *sanction* (2009:171). However, Goodnow emphasises that although not all symbols will fulfil all functions, a symbol will always carry some meaning for the group (2009:172).

Messages of a symbol can also be conveyed through the use of colour. Rose (2016:136) suggests that different colours associate different symbolic meanings to an object. For instance, the light grey used by the Apple can be associated with cool and elegant designs. However, Stuart, Evans and Nixon (2013:11) argue that colours and objects have no meanings in themselves, until we fixate them so firmly that they become natural and inevitable. Following the Umbrella Movement in 2014, yellow has become a symbolic colour for pro-democracy protesters. During the Anti-ELAB movement, protesters also call themselves 'yellow-ribbons' and identify opponents as 'blue-ribbons'. Colours of the movement can also be displayed in dress codes (Goodnow 2009:174). Constructionists consider clothes as signifiers, which 'correlates particular kinds or combinations of clothing with certain concepts' (Stuart et al. 2013:22). In particular, the colour of clothing can be used to convey certain symbolic meanings (Rose 2016:199). Given that different colours correlate with different concepts, or 'say' different things, it is therefore important for researchers to actively read and interpret the meaning of the colour that people wear.

Circulation of Protest Images

Technological developments have allowed for the process of producing and distributing images in efficient ways with lower costs, giving more attention to visual aspects of political processes (Doerr et al. 2015:2). In the digitalised and globalised world, images travel across different places and undergo various processes of meaning adaption (ibid.:10). When a simple message is attached to an image, it becomes the most powerful message (Castells 2007:242). Social

media platforms like Facebook are designed to promote specific forms of sharing behaviour online, specifically among young people (Wahl-Jorgensen 2018:79). The action of sharing allows the marking of existence as well. Cumiskey and Hjorth (2017) argue that by sharing images, social identity is broadcast to others. Also, different forms of individual and public participation are intertwined with each other through personalized communication on social media platforms, which generates a sense of intimacy and closeness (Hjorth & Cumiskey 2018:114ff; Cumiskey & Hjorth 2017:15).

Images and Traumatic Memory

As photographs 'concretize memory in an accessible way and become aides in facilitating the recall of events', they are the 'primary markers' of memory (Ibrahim 2009:108). This explains why visual media is fundamental for the recreation of memory (ibid.:95; Lennon & Foley 1999:47). In the digitalised world, the constant visual presence of electronic media create 'new memory' (Hoskins 2001), circulated and renewed through the digital screen cultures (Ibrahim 2009:96). Visual culture also serves a function as a memory archive, in which electronic technologies have allowed this culture to be integrated into people's contemporary consciousness in their everyday lives, thrusting the visual to become an arena where 'images work through both individual imagination and collective-meaning making' (ibid.:94). The occurrence of a traumatic event will often lead to public discussions especially when images illustrate the event to a larger audience (ibid.). It is also a natural response for humans to capture and preserve images of a traumatic event, as Zelizer explains, 'the act of bearing witness as a process that enables people to take responsibility for what they see where the personal act of "seeing" can be transformed into a collective act of dealing with trauma' (1990:107ff).

Throughout the Hong Kong movement, there were many police-protester clashes in several residential districts. Many peaceful protesters and district residents have experienced physical violence and verbal abuse from the police even if they were just chanting slogans or passing by the scene (Lee 2019:7). These events were often broadcast live by television stations and online media platforms, allowing millions of Hong Kong citizens to witness 'the real-time unfolding' of the violent events; including the most shocking incidents such as the July 21 Yuen Long

attack[19] and the August 31 Prince Edward station incident[20] (ibid.:8). These witnesses later recreated the scenes with a large number of posters illustrating the events and the major participants. Echoing back to the notion of 'moral shock' suggested by Jasper (2014:100), these posters facilitate recruitment and are key mobilising tools for activists, since a large crowd were involved in a morally shocking event.

Archiving of the Protest Images

The archive of organisations and information of every movement are crucial for tracing the complex histories of societies, however, there are often struggles in archiving participants' activities during a movement (Ramamurthy 2006:12). Therefore, volunteers or organizations often end up being responsible for archiving, while many of them usually only have limited financial resources (ibid.). Although Ramamurthy stresses that people engaged in the heat of the moment tend to ignore the importance of movement archive (ibid.), Hong Kong protesters seem to realise that archival sources are necessary for the circulation of protest images. For example, *Collaction,* an online crowdsourcing community that allows social entrepreneurs to share innovation projects, has created an 'Anti-extradition Movement Poster Gallery'. As of May 5, 2020, the total number of posters uploaded to Collaction exceeds 34,100. This gallery was built by the Collaction team together with 1,323 volunteers (as of 5 May 2020). There are also a number of Facebook pages and Instagram accounts dedicated to the circulation and sharing of protest posters.

Methodological Approach

Human activity is a complex object to study, as it can have different meanings at different times (Flyvbjerg 2001:30ff; Bourdieu 1977), hence studying from

[19] On 21st of July, thugs with sticks and metal bars attacked civilians, including journalists and a pro-democracy lawmaker, at a train station and on the train. Police were filmed by photojournalists speaking to the thugs, patting one on the shoulder, while refusing to send any help to the station immediately (*The New York Times* 2019).

[20] On 31st of August, riot police stormed the Prince Edward station and indiscriminately attacked passengers with baton and pepper spray. Many passengers were left cowering and bleeding (*Hong Kong Free Press* 2019).

different perspectives is important to understand a phenomenon. Flyvbjerg (2001:66) also puts an emphasis on the power of example. He claims that 'context-dependent knowledge and experience is at the very heart of expert activity' and 'such knowledge and expertise also lies at the centre of the case study as a research and teaching method' (ibid.:71). Given that this research topic involves the study of human affairs, which only produce context-dependent knowledge (ibid.), it can be assumed that researching it with a case study will produce knowledge to understand the importance of visuals in a social movement and in-group formations in this particular context.

As qualitative research enables flexible theoretical concepts and analytical procedures when there are multiple empirical materials (Jensen 2013:236), a mixed qualitative method, which includes both qualitative in-depth interviews and critical visual analysis, has been used for this research. Applying qualitative methods in triangulation has been widely used in social sciences studies as it has multiple strengths. Besides allowing the researchers to be more confident of their results, Jick (1979:608f) also suggests that triangulation helps to uncover the 'deviant or off-quadrant dimension of a phenomenon', which enriches the explanation of the research problem. Previous studies on this topic also underline how empirical studies that combine visual and textual analysis are effective in exploring 'the role of images and texts as a source or constraint for social movements' organising, outreach, and fostering the diffusion of new ideas' (Doerr et al. 2015; Doerr 2010). Therefore, participants' experiences and interpretations should be analysed together with the critical interpretations of the researcher in this case study.

Location of research

The empirical materials were planned to be collected in Hong Kong, as the city and the protests were the inspiration of this research. A visit to Hong Kong was conducted in December 2019, when constant mass protests were still taking place. Observations were performed at site visits to the Lennon walls of different districts, mainly involving taking field notes and pictures. A second visit to Hong Kong was scheduled for March 2020, in order to conduct the face-to-face interviews with the respondents. However, due to COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions, the empirical materials were sourced from nine interviews over Skype with respondents located in Hong Kong.

Design and sampling

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth responses from group members, and the meanings they hold towards the research topic (Sturges & Hanrahan 2004:110). An interview guide was developed according to the interests of the study, creating a basic structure. The questions were constructed based on three major categories: *social movement, networked society* and *visuals.* While the guide has drawn the primary structure of the interviews, some degree of flexibility remained to encourage respondents to provide narratives that were more detailed and spontaneous (Brickmann 2014:1008). Respondents were recruited using the snowball sampling method, which ensures that the participants share the characteristics related to the research interest (Biernacki & Waldorf 1981:141). Individuals from my personal network were asked to introduce other individuals from their networks, who have participated in creating or distributing images and were interested to be part of this research. Due to travel restrictions and geographical dispersion, interviews were conducted online through Skype. Skype offers researchers a novel method to conduct individual synchronous online interviews that are comparable to onsite interviews, as it greatly supports interactive communication (Janghorban et al. 2014:1; Deakin & Wakefield 2014).

In terms of the visual analysis, the sample population is huge, making it hard to avoid personal bias while ensuring the quality of the sampled images. Therefore, it was decided that the images would be sampled from the interviews. Prior to the interviews, respondents were asked to prepare two posters that are particularly impressive and meaningful to them. The images were discussed during the interviews, and then later analysed by me using iconology. Iconology makes it possible to integrate textual and visual analysis. The context of the images provided by the respondent serves as a point of departure when the visual analysis takes place. A total number of 18 images were sampled from the interviews. Basic coding was carried out on all 18 images. This coding served the function to identify potential images that could provide more context for the textual analysis. As sampling of qualitative studies often involve two or more steps, and qualitative sampling should be driven by the research purpose (Jensen 2012:268), the sample size was narrowed down to ten images after eliminating images that were outside the scope of this study.

Analysing the data

To interpret the interviews through analysis, categorising data into different themes is believed to be an effective way to make sense of the data (Seale et al. 2004:367). The interviews were transcribed before coding occurred. As the core structure of the literature review had been completed at that time, concepts derived from previous studies guided the direction of coding to a small extent at the early stage. Seale et al. (ibid.:371) highlight that it is useful to begin with deductive coding for a general idea, followed by inductive coding to obtain further details in the data. Five themes were established while similar categories were either combined or eliminated. The thematic structure provided a point of departure for the main analysis, which integrated the findings from the visual analysis into that from the interviews.

For the critical visual analysis, iconology was chosen to interpret the sampled images. 'Iconology is both a method and an approach to studying the content and meanings of visuals', according to Müller (2011:283). It is a three-step method of visual interpretation devised by Erwin Panofsky, suggesting there are three different layers of meaning. At the primary level, the image can be interpreted based on their everyday life, in which no inside knowledge is required. At the secondary level, one has to bring 'existing literary, artistic and cultural knowledge' into play (ibid.:25), allowing for interpretation of the images with their knowledge of the conventions. Shin (1990:19) describes this as a process of discovering meaning that requires greater participation of the self. Finally, the third level of analysis reveals the underlying 'basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion' (Howells & Negreiros 2019:25). To understand the highest level of meaning, one have to combine cultural or historical knowledge to the analysis in order to identify the *disguised symbolism* in the image, which are everyday things that 'have a double life by having both a realistic and symbolic existence' (ibid.:19). This level requires a more intensive study and interpretation of symbolic values (Shin 1990:19). Different from semiology, in which the active self is absent, iconology indicates the participation role of the self in acquiring meaning from external phenomena, making it essential to keep in mind that the meanings are being understood by a self (Shin 1990:18f).

Iconology aims at studying 'logos' and 'icons' (Müller 2011:288; Mitchell 1987:1), which often appears in the samples of this case study. Movement icons were created and adopted by creators, indicating that Panofsky's way of

interpreting images is crucial to unlock meanings in the manner of this particular kind of protest images, in the form of posters. Analysing the protest images using iconology allows us to differentiate interpretations of individuals from a different culture from that of a protester. This can shed light upon the cultural attitudes and assumptions embedded in the images and hence the influences of protest arts.

Reflections on methods

Although Skype interviews provide flexibility for both the interviewer and interviewee, some individuals are less committed to participate since it is not a physical meeting. Online interviews may not be as promising as face-to-face interviews even though the technological affordances of these platforms aim at bridging the gaps between on-site and online meetings. It is also common that people are not completely honest with what they think, or mean what they say (Jensen 2012:270), making it important for me to try to tease out the meanings and implications of the interviewees' words. Further analysis of the visual materials can serve to reconcile opposing perspectives and bridge the gaps between uncertainties. Moreover, triangulation has indeed allowed me to uncover unseen contextual factors while combining the two sets of data and to be sure about the results.

Regarding ethical concerns, all interviewees signed a form informing their consent on participating in the research before any interview took place. In addition to the basic information of the research, the consent form ensures interviewees' anonymity, which hopefully removes their restrictions to express themselves more freely.

The unmasking of threats and moral shock

According to Latour (2015), people are grouped together by the common threat they are facing. Threats detected by the protesters in this movement involve concerns about Hong Kong's autonomy, which has been endangered by the introduction of the extradition bill and Beijing's increasing intervention in Hong Kong. The extradition bill is considered a lethal threat by the protesters, since it brings power to the government to send suspected criminals to the mainland:

> I believe that once the government successfully implemented this law, the supposed existence of independence of executive, legislation and judiciary in Hong Kong will be withdrawn, this would allow the minority-picked [Chief] Executive to manipulate even the fourth pillar, the media, to their favour. (Interview 7)

Under the framework of 'One country, two systems', Hong Kong enjoys a high degree of autonomy, in which mainland China's criminal and civil laws are not applicable to Hong Kong (Chen 2004:631). Therefore, many are aware of the potential risk that their lawful rights and freedom will be lost, if Beijing has the authority to extradite citizens from Hong Kong. Specifically, protesters are concerned that the PRC government may exploit this bill to send political activists to the mainland, if they protest against the Chinese Communist Party. As the movement evolves, protesters have also realised the inability of the Hong Kong government in protecting citizens' rights, and many have criticised the government's role in suppressing the protests. In fact, the reaction and suppression from the government have further brought fear and anger to protesters. These emotions serve the function of 'moral batteries' (Jasper 2014:106), which encourages them to act for positive outcomes while carrying negative emotions. Some respondents describe their transformation from being inactive in political activities to becoming active protesters as an 'awakening', particularly after witnessing the indiscriminate police violence and losing trust in the authority.

Initial groups are not always activists (Jasper 2014: 93); the interviews show that some protesters who have been actively participating in the Anti-ELAB movement were not even interested in politics at all. Very often, people are more likely to start engaging if they know someone who is already taking in the movement (Jasper 2014:94; Snow et al. 1980). This is because when we participate, we want to communicate with someone familiar. At the same time, as new recruits, the young protesters in this movement usually have to adopt skills and tactics to protest:

> During the movement, I found a Lennon wall nearby, set up by an alumna from my secondary school. Every day, I spent some time observing how they set up this wall. (Interview 4)

This indicates that one's interests in politics is not the main driving force for engaging in a social movement. Instead, protesters participating in the Anti-ELAB movement are recruited for different reasons. And among them, 'moral shock'

appears to be the most powerful motivation to step out from their comfort zones and participate in protests. Generally, the moral shocks include police brutality and suicide cases in the movement, triggering people's negative emotions, such as anger and fear:

> The bullet doesn't have to go through our bodies, but we can empathise with what our sisters and brothers are suffering. (Interview 3)

As Jasper notes, potential threats are like 'a boost of adrenaline and cortisol', which he calls the power of negative thinking (2014:104f). Unpleasant experiences, especially of those who sacrificed themselves for their ideals, are something extraordinary that others should admire (ibid.). In mid-June 2019, there were multiple reported suicide cases involving protesters who had been expressing their political demands:

> The whole society was involved in a despair mood. It is the first case in Hong Kong that protesters would kill themselves to fight for democracy, which quite shocked me at that moment. Then I was aware of the seriousness of the impact if this bill was passed. (Interview 4)

Figure 1. Protest poster illustrating the first protester to commit suicide in the movement. Source: Collaction (2020)

> […] posters that speak of him always hit me hard, and they always remind me of the feeling I had that night when I heard the news. (Interview 8)

To understand how posters work with moral shock, we begin by interpreting the poster at the first level of analysis, in which we will look at the fact evidence on the image. In figure 1, we see a man in a yellow raincoat standing behind a fence, with a facemask and goggles on. The banner he is displaying says 'NO EXTRADITION TO CHINA' and 'MAKE LOVE No Shoot!' The expression evidence is complicated to see here, as the man's face is not shown. However, from the black background and the slogan on the banner, we are able to assume that the atmosphere that this poster indicates is far from colourful and fun. At the second level, the iconological investigation starts by applying knowledge about the protest history. From the banner and the outfit of the man, we can assume he is Leung, the first protester to commit suicide in the movement. This poster shows the moment before he jumps off a building in central Hong Kong. The context of this image is about a protester trying to convince the police to stop firing at protesters; however he failed to receive any meaningful response from the authority after putting himself in danger for hours. At the deepest level of analysis, this picture brings a moral shock to the audience, by showing how the government ignores her people's demands and lives. The real-life incident has been one of the most influential events throughout the movement, as no one has ever sacrificed their life in Hong Kong protest history before. Images that relate to Leung still make an impact on many protesters, triggering their negative emotions and motivating them to protest on behalf of the dead.

Self-defensive Connective Actions on Social Media

Protesters demonstrate several self-defensive connective actions as many of them share a strong sense of protecting their lawful rights. In the connective logic, public actions or contributing to a common good is 'an act of personal expression and recognition or self-validation achieved by sharing ideas and actions in trusted relationships' (Bennett & Segerberg 2012:752). Many protesters were self-motivated to share protest information on networking sites. The departure point of sharing is to inform international audiences with accurate information, including personalised ideas, plans and resources:

> I believe in the power of social media, I hope that by sharing some posts on Facebook and Twitter, or stories on Instagram, I can share what I find of importance to my friends or acquaintances or even strangers to let them know about the truth. (Interview 7)

The self-defensive connective actions are not limited to demonstrations and information sharing, but have also integrated into the protesters' daily lives and consumption. As Dahlgren mentions, political interventions into consumption has become a common strategy in social movements (2009:194). There are many discussions about ethical consumerism, in which consumer choices are related to lifestyles, modes of expression, and cultural practices (Arnesson 2018:18; Harvey 2005:42). In particular, Arnesson argues that 'consumer practices become important not only for how we see ourselves and others, but also for how we view society and its institutions, responsibilities, and scope' (ibid.). It is worth noting that there have been examples of political campaigns organised around consumption in Europe and the United States (ibid.:20; Lewis & Potter 2011). Protesters in Hong Kong have also taken a similar approach, in which they consider daily consumption as a way to demonstrate their political activism. In fact, the protesters have been trying to take this to the next level – establishing their own economic circle.

Figure 2 serves a function of encouragement for protesters to boycott the 'blue shops' – who oppose the movement. At the first level of analysis, we can only identify a frog closing its eyes and looking disgusted. The character also looks like he is trying to avoid the words and logos next to him. However, by applying Internet culture knowledge, we can identify it as the popular meme icon, Pepe the Frog. The character has been widely adopted in the designs of posters in the movement, due to its highly reproducible and heterogeneous features. Shaped by the Hong Kong protesters as an alliance, on many protest images he is often disguised as different characters, including protesters, students and journalists. It is important to clarify that, although the character has been labelled an alt-right icon representing White supremacy in some cultures, he has become an icon of resistance in the context of the Hong Kong movement (Victor 2019).

Figure 2. Protest poster showing a list of blue shops and the reasons of boycotting.
Source: Collaction (2020)

Therefore, if we put this knowledge into play when interpreting Figure 2, we can immediately realise that Pepe the Frog represents the protesters and their attitudes. Next to the character are names and logos of a list of restaurants that oppose the movement, along with the reasons for protesters to boycott. In addition to remixing the character with Canadian singer Drake's Hotline Bling meme, which demonstrates how Pepe is not interested in these restaurants, the poster also explicitly expresses that these restaurants 'suck' and remind the audience to make sure they do not support them. The disguised meaning of this image can be interpreted at the third level of analysis. Boycotting is particularly effective to protect a group from an economic perspective. The 'yellow economic circle' has been regarded the economic arm by a majority of protesters. Protesters believe that it is important to sustain the group economically when they noticed this is a way to help protesters keep participating in the movement, as many 'yellow business' owners tend to support protesters financially through providing free meals and gear; while Chinese-funded companies are potentially supporting the suppression of the movement through financial means:

> It becomes a lifestyle in which you incorporate the movement into your life, not only fighting against something during weekends but changing your lifestyle. You will boycott blue shops when you are dining out, you will avoid buying 'made in China' stuff. (Interview 9)

To spread the idea of supporting the 'yellow business circle' and help people distinguish between blue and yellow shops, protesters create posters and stickers and distribute them online and to the yellow shops. There are dedicated Instagram accounts and mobile apps which constantly update the list of yellow and blue businesses. They have gained great popularity among protesters who are also active social media users. For instance, the Instagram account @yellow_ribbon_catering indicates and updates restaurants protesters should support and has over 233,000 followers as of May 2020.

The formations of groups and anti-groups

It is fundamental to learn about the participants when we are studying a group and its formation. As mentioned, a movement might begin with a small group of activists, but it usually ends up with a larger group of members with different backgrounds and experiences. There are many pro-democracy protests around the world that involved active participation of students, including the 1989 democracy movement in Beijing, the April 1960 student revolution in South Korea (Chang 2015:4), and the massive student-led protests in Chile in 2006 and 2011 (Cummings 2015:49). Similarly, the Anti-ELAB protests has a youthful profile (Lee et al. 2019:12). However, young university students are also accompanied by others:

> The protesters consist of people from all walks of life, I have seen many children, even toddlers, as well as elderly. Whereas for their occupation, I believe many of them are students, secondary and university [students]. In fact, I think people of all occupations participate. (Interview 1)

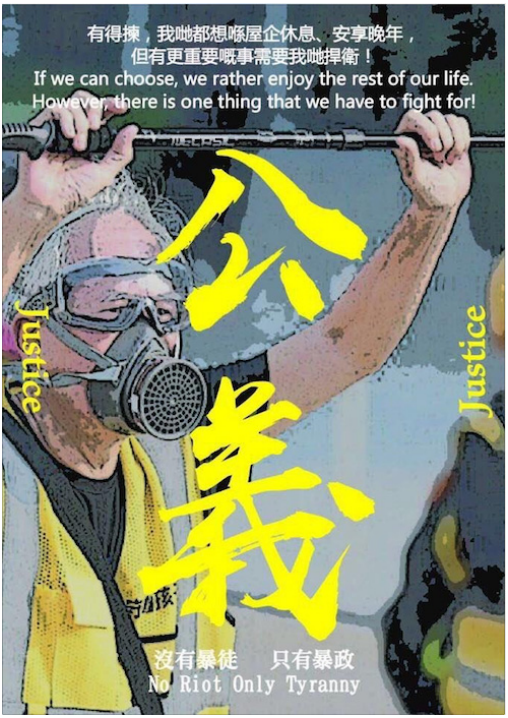

Figure 3. Protest poster showing an elderly man holding a walking stick against the police. Source: Collaction (2020)

The many elderly protesters have been respected and praised by young protesters. Figure 3 shows an elderly man with goggles and a gas mask, holding up a walking stick. Big yellow fonts are used for the word 'Justice' and the two Chinese characters. It is clear that there is a double focus in this image: the man and the Cantonese phrase '**公義**' (Justice). When we proceed to the secondary level of analysis and apply political knowledge, we are able to recognise this man from his uniform as a member of the group 'Protect the Children'. This group is formed by elderly people who appear at the frontline in protests and place themselves in-between police and young protesters to avoid physical clashes between the two, as shown on this image.

In terms of the use of colours, we can identify yellow as the salient colour. As mentioned, yellow represents the protesters in this context, hence we can assume the author is trying to convey that justice is an important value for protesters to uphold. This leads us to the third level of analysis, which requires a deep

familiarity with both visual and written texts of the culture (Rose 2016:200). The intrinsic meaning of Figure 3 can be interpreted as: protesters should keep in mind that it is not effortless to uphold the rights and values, it requires the collective effort of individuals across different ages, occupations, and backgrounds. It also reminds the audience of how some elderly people, who could have lived a stable retired life, have to go out in the streets in order to protect the young people of Hong Kong. The vulnerability shown in the image may function as a catalyst that motivates people who have higher ability to join the protesters.

Groups

The analysis of the interviews reveals that we can understand different groups in the movement by capturing them in three categories: public groups, private groups, and anti-groups. Public groups refer to those that are open for everyone to join, whereas private groups refer to those that are only open to people with certain roles and connections. Those who position themselves in opposition to the groups of protesters are identified as anti-groups. According to the respondents, they include the government, the police force, and the anti-movement protesters. These groups are mentioned frequently as respondents tend to have experienced contact with them during the movement. Public and private groups have different communication purposes, in which the former usually provides general information about the protests while the latter usually are for radical protesters to exchange private information and discuss action plans:

> LIHKG [a local online forum] and Telegram are more for radicals, frontline protesters and Lennon walls groups for moderates. [There are] more private groups here. Discussing what to do, what to bring, where to build a Lennon wall, something like that. Before any events, people will discuss how to gather more Hong Kongers to join. (Interview 2)

> As I know, there are several groups in which some art and posters are posted regularly. All of these arts are open sourced, and let everyone feel free to use them. […] All details of each protest were posted on LIHKG or Golden Forum. (Interview 4)

The idea of different groups can also be expressed in visual forms. Protesters create posters to illustrate their own groups as well as the anti-groups. Figure 4 is an example of how posters ridicule opponents. At the primary level, we can see there

are two scenes. The one on top shows a woman sitting in a nice room, ignoring the clashes outside the window while men in uniform are beating people with shields and batons. The one at the bottom shows a woman crying and spreading her hands in front of the same group of men. Applying cultural knowledge at the secondary level, we can identify the woman on top as Carrie Lam, the Chief Executive of Hong Kong, from her unique costume and facial features. While the woman at the bottom is Luk, an unarmed mother who confronted armed riot police for firing tear gas at students during a protest,

Figure 4. 慈母與暴徒 (A loving mother and a rioter). 2019.
Source: Instagram @cusonlo

which went viral online. When analysing images, it is also crucial to notice the things that are absent (Howells & Negreiros 2019:15). As the video of Luk went viral online, many people were aware that Luk got pepper-sprayed moments after she confronted police. With this in mind, audiences are likely to generate higher level of empathy as there is a strong comparison of the power between the two. Ironically, Lam and Luk are captioned as a 'loving mother' and a 'rioter' respectively, as a reference to Lam's quotes in an local television station

interview[21]. It is apparent that the author uses some degree of sarcasm and direct comparison to illustrate the two mothers, one being their enemy and one being their supporter. The symbolic value of this image can be interpreted as the leader and authority defending themselves by swearing that 'black is white' when suggesting that protesters are rioters, who vigorously harm people and destroy the city, while forcefully suppressing protesters in various ways themselves.

Sustaining the group and the concept of brotherhood

The term '手足' in Cantonese literally means hands and feet, which gives a metonymic meaning of 'brotherhood, comrades and intimate friends' (Li 2013). One of the key movement concepts that is embraced by the protesters is that they are all 'hands and feet' of each other. This concept is outstanding especially when looking at the relationship between members, constantly mentioned by respondents:

> I think the phrase 'hands and feet' is really a perfect description, it's like a brotherhood between protesters. […] I know if something happened to me, they will be a witness and try their best to help me. (Interview 1)

Some believe that they have nothing to lose as long as they are fighting together with their brothers and sisters for justice, and the common belief that together they can make a change to the unjust system unifies them. Despite the fact that they come from all kinds of societal backgrounds, and take different roles in the movement, the one thing that many of them mention to have in common is their hope to protect and safeguard Hong Kong's democracy. Sharing the same goal definitely strengthened the bond among members. They show their support and worry for each other explicitly through both words and actions:

> I cried so many times for this, reading the news overnight, not sleeping … so worried for people whom we saw seriously hurt on live broadcast even though I don't know them at all. That's the connection we have between protesters, we might not know each other, but we care and worry. (Interview 2)

[21] A special interview with TVB news on 12 June 2019.

The Significance of 'Black Bloc'

The significant degree of solidarity can also be shown in the protesters' dress code. Black bloc has become a symbol of the protesters, where the basics include a black shirt, black pants, black shoes and a black backpack. Others might also put on black facemasks, protection sleeves, caps etc. As mentioned, clothing is one of the crucial forms of movements' representation (Doerr et al. 2015:1) – the protesters have adopted this dress code to demonstrate various aspects of solidarity in the movement:

> I feel so warm and a sense a belonging when I saw many people wearing black in the public transport, it's like we are all in this together. (Interview 1)

Indeed, the dress code provides a physical way for members to demonstrate their identity and speak on behalf of them in a sense. Protesters can immediately identify if a person is in the group based on their choice of clothing, giving them some degree of comfort, affirmation and encouragement. However, the dress code does more than that. For many protesters, adopting to the dress code is a way to protect themselves from potential threats, especially for radical protesters. As the movement developed, and protesters carried out more disruptive actions in order to urge the government to respond to the demands, some protesters suggested that everyone should engage in the black bloc tactic. With similar clothing it becomes harder for police to identify them and make arrests. The solidarity between radicals and moderates provides the foundation of the actions to cover each other in dangerous situations, particularly when facing arrests. Although this kind of solidarity can get stronger or weaker as the protests evolve (Lee 2019:13), it certainly plays a key role in sustaining the movement and mobilising protesters.

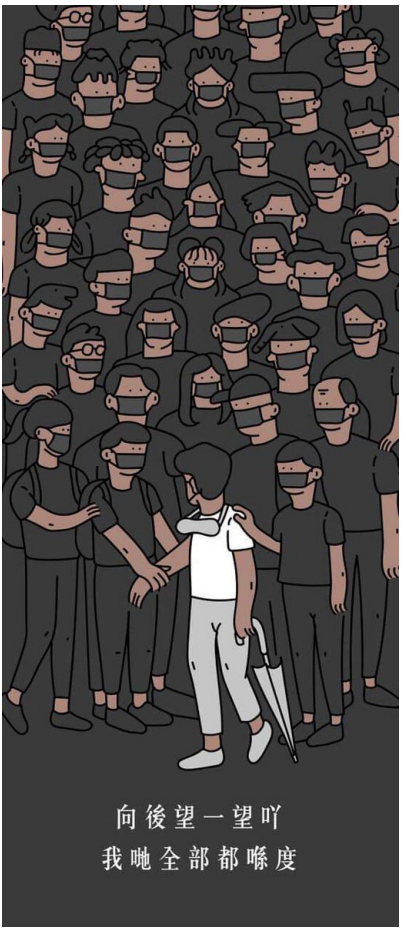

Figure 5. 'Take a look at your back, we are all standing behind you'.
Source: Collaction (2020)

The significance of black bloc and the solidarity this dress code suggests is also often shown on protest posters. In Figure 5, the image is dominated by a large group of people wearing black shirts and face masks. They are putting their hands on the shoulders of each other. There is a man standing in front of the crowd in white clothing, which makes him stand out. We can see these people are wearing face masks and the one up front is holding an umbrella; at the first level of iconological analysis, we can only identify these as ordinary objects that are used to protect a person from virus transmission and rain respectively. However, the

symbolic meaning of these objects can be interpreted differently at the secondary level. Umbrellas are shields against physical attacks during clashes, symbolising resistance against power. Disguised symbolism takes place here, where the umbrella may seem ordinary for people who are not familiar with the protest culture, but carries emblematic significance for those who know this culture.

Black bloc and the umbrella are both important attributes of this movement, which enables us to identify all of them as protesters. We can assume that the reason the particular protester is dressed differently is to bring out the loneliness he is experiencing. The intrinsic meaning of this image is relatively expressive. For protester who are feeling upset or alone, they should not forget that there is always a big group of people walking on the same path as them, and they will provide support 'from behind'. As the caption says, 'Take a look at your back, we are all standing behind you'. Created soon after the first protester suicide case, this poster visualises that no one is alone in this movement and protesters are supporting each other under any circumstances.

Protest images as a recruitment tool

> My boyfriend doesn't want me to stay in the frontline […] but I still want to contribute. (Interview 3)

As mentioned previously, protesters believe there are many different roles that make important contributions to the movement. Among them, creators and distributors of protest posters are considered significant to the spread of information, ideas, and values. Due to experiences and technical restrictions, it might not be possible for everyone to become a creator, as it requires specific skills in graphic design. However, everyone can become a poster distributor within their on- and offline networks. Therefore, many protesters who want to contribute to the movement in a significant yet peaceful way have decided to start distributing and sharing protest posters in their communities.

We can understand the distribution as either online or offline. Most of the posters are un-authored and copyright free, shared to protester groups on different social media platforms for free downloads and sharing. The main ambition of the creators is to spread the posters as far and fast as possible. The easiest way to achieve this is to make them available in different popular groups and platforms,

and allow protesters to download and repost them with their own social media accounts:

> I will post my work or the works that I got from the Telegram groups onto my Instagram stories for people to read. […] I realised that Instagram story is very limited, it is only distributed to an echo chamber. (Interview 3)

Here, Instagram stories is being referred to as an echo chamber where political orientation is reinforced, as the audience of an ordinary person's Instagram account is likely to be fixed. Colleoni, Rozza and Arvidsson (2014:319) suggests an 'echo chamber' effect is created when individuals only share information to those who share a similar political orientation, creating a homogenous group to affiliate with each other. As a result, the information is not effectively spread to other groups and individuals, making it a significant change in influencing bystanders or those in the anti-groups. However, distributing posters on social media platforms can effectively reach people on the other side of the world:

> For my Instagram, I have friends from different countries … Vietnam, Germany and Taiwan. I can share it [the poster] and I change the language to English, so I can let them know what is happening in Hong Kong. (Interview 5)

Bennett and Segerberg mention that in the network mode, 'political demands and grievances are often shared in very personalised accounts that travel over social networking platforms' (2012:742). Protesters are able to add personalised contents that target a specific group and engage them:

> I have been sharing posters from other platforms after adding translation and designing some posters by myself. […] nearly all posters are in Chinese content, foreigners might not be able to read the details, I started creating the posters in English to allow more foreigners to understand the situation in Hong Kong. (Interview 8)

Although foreigners are unlikely to become important players in this local movement, it is reaffirming to win them over as this reassures that the protesters are on the side of justice (Jasper 2014:156). Online distribution of posters provides a means to recruit potential members who are not in the same geographic location, as these individuals are still able to learn about the latest schedules and important events by reading information on the posters. This breaks the

geographic limitation and allows more people to participate remotely with different kinds of involvement. While some protesters focus on online distribution, some believe that offline distribution is crucial to reach individuals who are not familiar with social media. Especially for those aged 65 or older, who make up a significant percentage of the city's population:

> I don't think online [distribution] has to be done by me, there are many people doing online stuff now. […] I think if people who are already inside the yellow [camp], they have their access to the protest arts if they want to get it. (Interview 3)

> In my observation, some adults and elderly really stand there and look at the posters, because they don't know how to use the Internet, and of course they don't know about LIHKG. (Interview 5)

Similar to online distribution, there are also many ways to distribute protest images offline. Protesters usually download the posters from different sources and have them printed in bulk. Handing them out on streets or at the protests are some examples of offline distribution. However, Lennon walls in different districts, bus terminals, pedestrian tunnels, footbridges, train stations, are the main distribution outlets. As there are countless Lennon walls all over Hong Kong and new posters are created every day, it requires a lot of effort and time for protesters to distribute them. Subgroups were therefore derived from bigger protester groups and dedicated to the distribution of protest posters. These groups might be formed through the existing networks of protesters and they work closely with each other in order to reach more people located in different places:

> I found a Lennon wall nearby, which was set up by an alumnus from my secondary school. […] We will print out lots of posters first, and drop them off at each wall, where protesters will help us to paste them on the wall. […] It is much more efficient than going to each wall one by one, and doing it alone. (Interview 4)

Main Roles of Posters

In general, the respondents identify three major roles of protest posters. Firstly, to provide reliable and accurate information with the support of visual elements, as protesters assume that audiences tend to believe in things that are shown through images. In that sense, the audience become witnesses of the events, which can possibly encourage them to take actions against injustice. Secondly, to effectively

spread core values and slogans of the movement. Slogans have been considered 'the expression of well-defined claims and "performance" of the democratic nature' of social movements in Hong Kong, since the Umbrella Movement (Veg 2016:679). In the Anti-ELAB movement, slogans have also been used to stress the importance of solidarity (Lee 2019:8). Besides chanting these slogans at protests, protesters visualise them on posters to leave a stronger impression. Thirdly, to tell the stories that cannot be covered in mass media. There were politically sensitive incidents and attacks not covered on TV news, the major channel for elderly people to get information about the protests. It has been criticised by protesters that certain TV channels are projecting their political bias when reporting news related to the movement. In a specific case, criticism about how TVB news is actively trying to frame deaths and injuries of protesters in a different way. Protest posters are therefore utilised to illustrate the details of these events, in order to fill the information gap for elderly citizens, who are interested in knowing these stories from another perspective.

Target audience and contents

> I think different people are attracted to different kinds of protest art. (Interview 3)

Creators express that besides protesters, they also want to use the posters to influence people from the opposite camp or bystanders, as art is an essential tool for protesters to communicate ideas to the outside (Wong 2015; Veg 2016:691). The content of the posters have different focus targeting different groups: some are more informative and some are more emotional. By applying knowledge about social media advertising in this poster campaign, it can be assumed that both rational and emotional appeals are positively related to the expression of empathy towards protesters (Lee & Hong 2016:364). The informative is crucial to 'encompass rational appeal as it assists individuals to make an informed judgement', whereas an emotional appeal allows message senders to persuade individuals with lower motivation and ability (ibid.). Moreover, to accurately deliver the specific message to specific target audiences, different design styles were adopted. For instance, remixes with popular culture and meme icons are common:

One interesting icon is Pepe. We have associated Pepe as an ambassador of the movement, Pepe may look weak, yet rebellious, a relevant symbolism of us Hong Kongers who fight for our right despite the risk of being arrested and imprisoned. (Interview 7)

Figure 6. Hong Kong Pepe protests in Parliament, 2019, Pepelangelo.

Interpreting Figure 6 at the first level of analysis, we can identify around 30 characters in something that looks like a conference room. We can distinguish two groups based on their standing positions and characteristics. One is on stage, trying to hide their faces behind the umbrellas, the other is capturing the moment with cameras. Moving onto the second level of analysis, three significant protest attributes are present: yellow helmets, umbrellas and black bloc. The characters on the image are different individuals represented by Pepe the Frog, a significant icon of the movement. Based on the attributes wore by them, it is clear that the group on stage portrays the protesters while the other portrays the press.

Interpreting based on protest knowledge, allows for the recognition of an important event that took place on the establishment day of the Hong Kong SAR: the storming of the Legislative Council. This image recreates the moment when the protesters were breaking into the building and spraying words with black paint in the Chamber. The protester-Pepes are covering their faces to protect their identities in front of cameras that are live broadcasting to the world. For the intrinsic meaning, we have to be able to recognise who the author of this painting is. It was created by a professional Russian artist, Pepelangelo. Therefore, it is not only an illustration of a historical moment of protesters storming an important government building in Hong Kong, but it also shows a connection between protesters and international artists through the shaping of Pepe as an icon in the movement.

The power of visuals

'Without affect, information lacks meaning' (Joffe 2008:89; Zajonc 1998). The affective nature of visual materials is the most salient distinction between visual and textual messages, in which the 'emotive impact' is the main drive for one to make judgements and decisions (Joffe 2008:84ff). Joffe calls this the emotive power of visual materials (2008). Interestingly, the 'power' of visuals are mentioned many times by the respondents. In the following section, we will explore the different qualities of visuals and their 'power'.

Allowing Different Interpretations

> A picture allows the audience to read or imagine on their own about what each part of the picture represent, so when looked at as a whole there would be millions of combos and possibilities to individuals' imagination or social context. This is the power of art. (Interview 7)

Visual content creates a larger space of different interpretations than words do. A few respondents have underlined that people might have different feelings towards the same visual information. From their perspective texts are more fixed, in a sense they control how the audience is interpreting something. Visual content, on the other hand, can be expanded based on imagination and knowledge.

Batman is an icon who fights against evil and crime in the infamous Gotham city. And [on Figure 7] he is throwing a petrol bomb, a commonly used tool by protestors against the brutal police, who protects only the minority. And behind Batman's effort is fighting for a future which is young, a future that is full of hope. (Interview 7)

Figure 7. The future is young. 2019. DC Comics

Figure 7 is a poster designed by DC Comics (2019) to promote a new Batman comic. At face value, audiences may see this as a poster showing a black figure about to throw a Molotov cocktail. The secondary meaning is revealed if we recognise the character on the image as Batman, by applying our popular culture knowledge. It can be seen as a poster promoting the publishing of the popular comic. However, when we move on to the third level of meaning, the image can be seen as a the graphic novel giant DC supporting the Hong Kong protesters, since Molotov cocktails, black clothes and 'young' are regarded as attributes of the

Hong Kong protests. The design includes these distinctive attributes, which to some extent encourages young people to fight for their future. This can been considered as a parody of the Hong Kong protests, in which Batman represents the young protesters, and tries to defeat the villains in the comic. Interestingly, not only the outfit of Batman synchronises with that of the Hong Kong protesters, but also their goals and determinations. As a matter of fact, the intrinsic meaning of the poster has offended many fans in the mainland. They demanded the comic company take the poster down as it reflects the company's support of the protesters and the movement.

Breaking Down Complex Messages

Written texts with detailed descriptions are definitely helpful to understanding the complexities of a certain action. However, reading a lengthy text could be time consuming:

> In my experience, visual forms are very direct and irritating. Usually it does not require the audiences to go through a process of thinking. […] Especially for cruel things, I think words cannot describe, but a picture can. […] A photo can tell a story. (Interview 4)

The idea illustrated by the respondent is simple and direct: an image can tell a whole story. With protests almost every day, there are countless stories and information that the protesters would like to deliver to the public. Berger (2008) proposes that images provide an unravelled insight into the past, which function as a 'direct testimony' about the world, and thus 'images are more precise and richer than literature' (Howells & Negreiros 2019:88). Howells and Negreiros (2019:89) state that social and political ideas and assumptions are embedded within visual texts. Visual texts allow us to grasp the important points within a shorter period of time:

> Sometimes people have to read too much a day, and don't really want to read more text information. Time spent on visual is less than on text. We can get the idea behind, straight and direct. (Interview 2)

Fig. 8 is a poster that shows possible ways for individuals to maximise their contributions and votes in the 2020 Legislative election. The squares illustrate the maximum number of votes that one can have while the bubbles illustrates

individuals of different occupations, including students, retirees, professionals, non-professionals and employers.

> […] there are a lot of words, but they are distributed in different shapes, so you do not have to read a paragraph in order to know what you have to do. […] This is very straightforward, if you are in a certain role, then do this or do that. Direct instructions, this is simple. (Interview 3)

The respondents understand that visual texts have the affordance of summarising complicated messages in a more fun and dynamic way. They claim to comprehend complicated information or ideas carried by the image without having to process lots of written words, which generally requires more time. The respondents also emphasise that visuals are more effective in engaging individuals too lazy to read, so that they can easily catch their attention.

Figure 8. 'If I am a … what can I do for the 2020 Legislative Council election?'
Source: Collaction (2020)

Connecting and Reconnecting People

From the respondents' experience, protest art has connected them with other individuals in two different ways.

> Whenever I saw people having this artwork [fig. 9] printed on their phone cases, or a sticker of it on their backpack, I know immediately they are our 'hands and feet'. (Interview 1)

Figure 9 can be read vertically as Hong Kong '香港' and horizontally as '加油', which means 'keep it up' in Cantonese. This image has become the most important and popular movement symbol. It functions as an identification that allows protesters to bond with each other, and there is a lot of protest merchandise that integrates this symbol into the design. As Goodnow (2006:174) states, wearing or displaying movement symbols 'fulfils a vital function in creating identification among campaign members', while increasing membership and creating cohesion among groups. Accordingly, the respondent expresses that she can immediately identify passer-by as fellow protesters if they are wearing the symbol. In other words, the symbol differentiates protesters from ordinary people, and also shows the group has internal cohesion through shared symbolic means (Goodnow 2006:174).

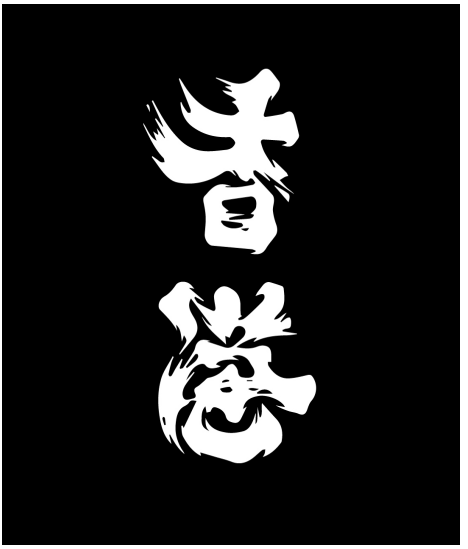

Figure 9. 'Hong Kong/ Keep it up'.
Source: Collaction (2020)

In addition to connecting participants with strangers, the sharing of protest posters online can also result in reconnecting people. Several respondents have experienced reconnection with old friends through sharing posters on their social media:

> […] sharing posters is a kind of expression that those who share the same as you will comment on, then you may have a chance to talk and share and find someone walking together on the same path. […] You may have a chance to talk to someone you had not been talking to for a long time. (Interview 9)

Images are a kind of organisational resource, connecting 'formerly unlinked people', especially in the contemporary media environment that 'facilitates such connections through computer-mediated social networks' (Doerr et al. 2015:11; also see Jasper & Poulsen 1995; Bennett & Segerberg 2013). For many individuals, their online networks usually consist of people who they are currently close with, or no longer close with. The interactions between an individual and these two groups of people are certainly different, as one tends to interact more with current relationships. It is interesting to note that, during the Anti-ELAB movement, there seems to have been many reconnections between protesters and old friends. Protest posters usually carry explicit meanings that support the movement, serving as identification of protesters and supporters of the movement. Like-minded individuals sharing common interests and beliefs tend to establish a connection, with the affordances of social media platforms that allow materials to be shared widely (Highfield 2016). In this context, some protesters are able to re-establish a connection with a friend who they are no longer close with, by recognising each other's political stance on social media. When reconnecting, interactions might include leaving encouraging messages.

Recalling Traumatic Memories and Triggering Emotions

> Whenever I saw those kinds of posters, they caused pain, which cannot be eased even though the event happened a few months ago. Especially when the posters are mentioning the incidents which caused deaths, they will recall my sadness. (Interview 8)

While real stories eventually become a past, creators commodify them through visuals (Ibrahim 2009:96). Many posters are designed to illustrate traumatic events, which usually involve injuries and deaths. To motivate audiences through the affordances of image's affective nature, the posters display the cruelty explicitly. This approach has an enormous effect on recreating memory and 'spaces of commemoration', as visuals often emphasises simulations, replications and virtual experiences (Ibrahim 2009:95; Lennon & Foley 1999:47). The audience is likely to be encouraged to take steps to tackle problems, especially

those who have witnessed the event. Witnessing traumatic events again through images allows the audience to experience it for a second time, to some extent. As for those who did not experience the events themselves, they are able to get a visualised idea about the event details.

> This poster [fig. 10] impressed me as it portrays the whole story on 7.21 night. It reminds everyone of the nightmare that they have had. The two policemen turned around and walked away is the highlighted part that reflects the truth and describes how hopeless and insane it is to those survivors in the MTR station that night. The words on the posters help to report the issue precisely with description and date which enable those who don't know to know more. (Interview 9)

The idea can be explained with the example of Figure 10. At the primary level, a lot of men in white are attacking and chasing other people, including a woman and a man in black. Other people are trying to escape while a man in the corner is injured. Regardless of the chaotic situation, two men in blue uniforms are slowly walking away from the scene. Beside the visual text, there are also a few numbers and captions. At the secondary level, one can identify the location as a Hong Kong train station, based on the exit signs and ticket gates. Taking cultural and linguistic knowledge into account, we recognise the men in white as the thugs who attacked civilians at Yuen Long Station on July 21. The men in blue uniforms are the two policemen who walked away from the scene without helping the victims.

Figure 10. Protest poster showing the 7.21 attack at Yuen Long Station.
Source: Collaction (2020)

The numbers are statistical data, such as the number of injuries, attacks, and the time it took for the police to arrive. The author describes the incident as a 'humanitarian disaster', strongly criticising the police's indulgence towards the attackers. The attack is recreated in detail in the image and we can clearly identify the doings of the attackers, passengers and police. Colours are used to highlight key figures and individuals, pointing to the fact that it was an indiscriminate attack: everyone in the station was attacked, including women.

On the third level, this image reflects the desperation of Hong Kongers when they realise the police are not dependable in such situations. The framing of the attack as a humanitarian disaster acts as a moral shock, and visualising the details recalls the audience's memories about the traumatic event. This triggers people's emotions and motivates them to take actions by themselves, as they can no longer depend on authorities.

> People's memory can fade in a short time. The visuals refresh people's memory and connect people with pain, so it is quite powerful because until now people are still grieving the death of Tsz-lok[22], so if we do not have this kind of artwork, people might not remember … that many people have died already. (Interview 9)

Stimulating participants' emotions through the specific affordances of these protest posters can positively affect individual participation in organised actions (Milan 2013:62). The reason creators remind people of the same event repeatedly can be understood as encouragement, which supports them to keep fighting for their demands. Dahlgren (2009:83f) points out that engagement in politics always involves some kind of passion, and motivation without affect would be hard to comprehend. Protesters who share posters on social media expect to trigger the actions of their friends:

> Of course I have expectations of them. For example, I want them to share too. When I share with my friends, you share with your friends, and your friends share with their friends, and so on. Go to the protests if you haven't already. If you are still supporting blue shops, you should stop that and go to yellow shops instead. I want them to have actions, but not just knowing. (Interview 5)

However, the distributors understand that individuals have their own limitations and participate in different roles. They do not expect their audience to put in as much effort and time as them, but they do hope that their audience is able to recognise things they can contribute to from the posters, and try to work on those things within their capabilities:

> I believe not everyone has the courage or can be a frontline fighter, not everyone can be a protest art creator or distributor as well. But I hope that after reading our posters, people will find that there is more that they can do. […] We are human, we have limitations […] but it is important to know what you can do to contribute. (Interview 3)

[22] University student Chow Tsz-lok died after falling during a protest, as police carried out a dispersion operation.

Conclusions

The general research focus of this thesis is to examine the roles of visuals and their significance in group formations and communications during the Anti-ELAB movement. Although combining the studies of visual and protest culture has not been a popular research interest, the Hong Kong Anti-ELAB movement provides a perfect stage for this study approach, due to the strong presence of visual elements. Different from any movement in Hong Kong's history, the cultural aspects of the movement has been highly valued by participants. The several thousands of protest images also construct a rich database for this empirical research. Based on previous studies that examined the relationship between visuals and the empowerment of movements, the aim of the present research is to examine the role of visuals through establishing a theoretical engagement with protest images, specifically with posters created by protesters. According to Burr (2015:4), culture determines the specific way that people commonly understand the world and the concepts they use. Therefore, analysing this specific case allows me to use my cultural knowledge to my advantage. It has allowed me to achieve the main objective of this research, which is to take a different cultural approach to investigate the roles of visuals with the support of developed concepts and theories. Considering the dynamic nature of visuals and movements, I analysed the case with mixed qualitative methods. The findings illustrate the significant roles of protest posters in bridging communicational, informational, and geographical gaps between protesters and movement supporters.

My point of departure is to examine the roles of protest posters in group formations and communications in the movement, hence it is necessary to learn about the different groups that make up the movement. According to the analysis of the interviews, movement groups can be categorised as public groups, private groups, and anti-groups. Communications in a private group usually requires a higher level of security: group members are likely to employ platforms that ensure end-to-end encryption and protect the conversations from surveillance. For public groups, a lot of the activity takes place on popular social media platforms, as the number of active users there is usually higher. Public groups are commonly used as channels to share digital resources, such as images and videos. Specifically, a lot of online groups on social media platforms are dedicated to the sharing of protest posters. Unlike the above two groups, anti-groups are formed by individuals who

position themselves in opposition to the protesters. Interestingly, the analysis identified that anti-groups are often portrayed by protesters on images and posters. This brings us to the discussion of the findings on what protesters communicate through the posters.

In line with the argument of Doerr et al. (2015:5), both interview and visual analyses show traces of protest posters being used as a tool to ridicule anti-groups, including the police, government officials and government supporters. They often appear as cruel, dangerous, and unsympathetic on the posters. By reference to the study of Ibrahim (2009), the recreation of traumatic events through images invites audiences to be witnesses to some extent, which triggers sorrow and anger, especially for those who have experienced the events. The analysed data also shows that posters are actively communicating emotions to the audience, and they are frequently negative. However, these triggered emotions would often demonstrate what Jasper (2014:104) calls 'the power of negative thinking'. A key finding from the interviews indicate that these emotions and moral shocks obtained from the posters are very often the motivations for people to act against injustice, which frequently involves participations in the movement. This finding provides a strong basis for my argument, that one of the important roles of protest posters is to serve as a recruitment tool in the Anti-ELAB movement.

Based on the interest in how visuals perform in enhancing the sustainability of the groups, I analysed the empirical materials focusing on significant concepts illustrated by the posters and interpreted by the viewer. Analysis of the interviews shows that the high degree of solidarity is built on the common experiences, goals and determinations. The visual analysis shows that this is taken into consideration by creators in the designing process. Very often, protesters are portrayed in connection with black bloc, a dress code significantly adopted in the Anti-ELAB movement. Black bloc functions as a tool for identification and protection, which allows for identification amongst protesters while covering their identities during a protest. It is possible to draw a general conclusion that protest posters play a significant role in creating connectivity between individuals, and between individuals and businesses within the group. However, the findings also nuance this conclusion by identifying that this kind of connectivity brought by posters can be either a positive or negative experience, depending on the political stance of the individuals.

Although the findings have illustrated the different affordances of the posters, it is important to discuss how distribution contributes to the effective spread of information and values. The main sources for distributors to collect and download posters from the creators are the 'protest posters groups' on social media platforms. However, the analysis suggests that we can understand the different ways of distribution by categorising them as either online or offline distribution. Distributing the posters online has a notable effect in reaching foreign potential supporters, as it eliminates the geographical restrictions. Communication and support from overseas audiences can provide protesters with both moral and practical support. Another advantage of online distribution is that it reaches a large audience, as there are large number of users on different social media platforms.

Further, the analysis also identifies a key contribution regarding the distributing of posters at offline sites, particularly at Lennon Walls. Specifically, offline distribution allows young protesters to communicate to elderly people, with accurate and reliable information that might not be covered in mass media. Many of the interviewed protesters criticise the credibility and political bias of certain newspapers and news channels. A significant thought among the respondents is that the main source of protest information for elderly people is mass media channels, and the particular way of framing that these channels apply, which could possibly negatively influence older audience's opinions towards the movement. Given that the scale of Lennon Walls in the city is massive, posters that are distributed at offline sites have a higher possibility to reach people who are not familiar with the Internet, particularly elderly people. Concluding the above findings regarding distributions of posters, arguably the multiple channels and outlets facilitate the effective spread of the posters, as well as the delivery of important protest values and information.

The main research objective of the thesis is to claim the active roles of posters in group formations and communications. Therefore, it is crucial to present findings in accordance with the influences of visuals. In comparison to written texts, contents presented in a visual form allow audiences to expand the picture relying on one's imagination and knowledge. In the context of this movement and with these actors, posters allow for complex messages, such as election procedures, to be simplified as ideas and concepts that can be better understood. According to

the analysis, breaking down complex ideas is believed to be an effective approach to encourage people to register and vote.

The thesis combined findings from qualitative interviews and critical visual analysis. These findings indicate that the posters emphasise different cultural perspectives, including the culture of Hong Kong and the protest culture. One of the biggest limitations for me carrying out the analysis is to narrow down the themes, as the data obtained from both interviews and visual materials is extremely rich, all worthy of discussion. My ambition to understand the influences of visuals in this particular context has guided me in a clear direction throughout the research. It is fascinating to see the results indicate a general recognition of the importance of protest posters, especially in how they motivate individuals and their actions. Consider this very impressive quote from one of the creators, which unfortunately couldn't be included in the analysis:

> People are realising how influential the protest arts is. […] Even our Chief Executive or some government officials said that they believe we are well-trained and well-paid because of the high quality of the protest art. […] I would say other than the frontline fighters, protest art fighters are as important as them. This is why the authority is targeting [at] protest art, they are arresting us or trying to take us down. (Interview 3)

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Parameters and performances of news engagement: a case study of Swedish audiences

Jian Chung Lee

Introduction

News has become so embedded in everyday life – blaring through car stereos, blinking on bus monitors, buzzing with phone notifications – that there is rarely a moment when people are not an audience to it (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998:68). As the media saturates people's lives, how they choose to engage with news becomes performative. It is demonstrative of how they see themselves as news audiences: informed versus ignorant, critical versus gullible. How they engage with new is as much a performance for an imagined audiences as it is for a real one (ibid.:92).

Why bother? In short, to perform is to *feel* like an informed and critical news audience. There is a bodily feeling – an affect – that comes with such engagement (Burkitt 2014:11). Basic emotions, such as happiness or anger, cannot describe this feeling; but it *is* there, unconscious and in the 'background' (Burkitt 2014:11; Wetherell 2012:3, 12). It is the feeling that they have caught up with the news because they regularly receive phone notifications about it, or the feeling that they have the bigger picture because they looked at multiple sources. Audiences associate or '[pattern] together' these affects with how they engage with news, making them affective practices through which they can *feel* whether they have kept up or been critical enough of it (Wetherell 2012:14).

Sometimes, it can be a lot to take in. Across 38 countries, the Reuters Digital News Report found that 28 percent of respondents found news to be tiring and 32 percent avoided it (Newman 2019: 26f). The surplus of news wears them out and makes them less likely to analyze it (Park 2019:1; Newman 2019:26f). When engaging with news feels like a chore, a farce, a *pain*, audiences rethink their performances. It is not enough that news is simply available for people to pay attention to. It has to be embedded in a meaningful and compelling way in their day-to-day lives (Swart, Peters & Broersma 2017:912). This is because how audiences engage with news is a 'powerful subjective experience' (Hill & Dahlgren 2020:3). It happens within different contexts, following different motivations, through different modalities and more. It continuously changes.

This thesis situates news engagement within those lived experiences; and looks at how cognitive, affective and emotional engagement plays into their performance as part of a news audience. As such, it follows the 'affective turn' in journalism and media studies, turning away from positivist assumptions about rationality toward an investigation of affectivity and emotionality in news (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019; Kotisova 2019). Therefore, this thesis asks the following research questions:

1. How can Peter Dahlgren and Annette Hill's *parameters of media engagement* model be applied to news engagement?
2. In what ways do affect and performance shape news engagement?

This thesis finds that audiences' civic, social and professional identities inform how responsible they feel about engaging with news, both in keeping up and being critical of it. Audiences' previous experiences with news also impacts how willing they are to sustain their engagement with it and how reflexive they are about received representational claims. However, there is no way for audiences to be fully informed all the time and, no matter how many sources they check, all they can achieve is a fragmented, selective account of what is being represented in the news. There is certainly a cognitive element to feeling informed and critical enough about the news, but part of that 'feeling' is affective and emotional too. The modalities of such news engagement, then, is part of an ongoing negotiation between audiences and their performance of news engagement.

Literature review

Before this thesis tackles news engagement, it needs to address academic and industry assumptions about the phenomenon. Firstly, commercialization is not solely to blame for the eroding democratic function of journalism. Secondly, traditional Anglo-American definitions of journalism that dichotomize rationality and emotionality is not in line with how audiences actually experience news. This thesis then elaborates upon definitions of factuality, trust and credibility and relates them to how audiences check and follow the news.

This section then details how academic and industry research has previously approached news audiences and engagement; and argues for a contextual approach that considers the dynamism and multidimensionality of this phenomenon. It concludes with a look back at how other researches have related affect to the news.

Blaming the money and emotion

Sweden has both public and private news organizations, much like other Scandinavian countries (Westlund & Weibull 2013:158); yet the latter has been the subject of criticism because it needs to turn a profit. There is certainly a need to frame mainstream commercial news within its corporate infrastructure; which, since the 1980s, has impressed the 'instrumental rationality of the market' upon it (Phelan 2014:3, 9). Yet to conclude that such interests diminishes journalistic institutions' independence and democratic function is overly-simplistic.

It is never *just neoliberalism* that is at fault for what is wrong in journalism, as it is 'socially embedded' and present among complementary and antagonistic forces (Peck 2014:145). To suggest otherwise would be to assume that audiences are simply passive recipients to the effects of media messaging, one that regurgitates neoliberal logic. Neoliberalism should instead be an '*occasion* for explanation' rather than a substitute for it. It is through a 'context of context' (ibid.:142, 153, emphasis in original) where news engagement receives its due complexity.

This bears repeating what has long been established as the purpose of journalism. For a democracy to thrive, its citizens have to be informed and connected; and, for them to be informed and connected, they can turn to the news (McNair

2000:1). News allows citizens to participate in the public sphere, the communicative space where people come together to discuss 'what [is] practically necessary for the interest of all' (Habermas 1989:83). Swedes certainly recognize this democratic function of news given its history with public service broadcasting (Djerf-Pierre and Weibull 2013:316) and a political tradition where 'government institutions are generally trusted' (Weibull 2013:37). The institutionalization of objectivity and impartiality in how news is reported, among other values, has contributed to how they understand journalism in relation to themselves as audiences and the political and societal institutions that are the subject of their coverage (ibid.:309ff).

But this responsibility invites scrutiny. News media often gets blamed for the deterioration of the public sphere, which contributes toward 'a crisis of civic culture and engagement' (Dahlgren in Schrøder & Phillips 2007:891). Fingers not only point to the commercialization of news but also its tabloidization, adversarialism and oversimplification (McNair 2000:1f; Örnebring & Jönsson 2004:283). The assumption is that news is meant to be rational and based on reason, that it should be objective and impartial (McNair 2000:10; Allan 2004:71). The public sphere is, after all, where citizens put aside their personal interests and emotions to discuss what is best for everyone (Habermas in Zou 2018:5). Emotion takes away from detail, scrutiny and context; and 'popular' journalism provokes 'emotions over understanding' (Pantti 2010:170). It is associated with commercial interests appealing to what audiences want in order to drum up more clicks, more views, more profits.

The rational-critical distinction in academic and industry research, thus, turns a blind eye to emotionality and subjectivity, but that does not mean journalism is entirely without either (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019:2). Emotion is part of how journalists get their message across to audiences, inviting them to affectively engage through language, style, narrative structure and affecting quotes (Zou 2018:8). They 'outsource' emotion by using what sources say or their anecdotes to dramatize abstract and complicated issues[23] (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019:2). There is also subjectivity in how journalists decide what current events and issues to

[23] Media professionals have certainly come to recognize this themselves and have since been transparent about how it 'is used and with what intentions' (Pantti 2010:177); and some have even institutionalized emotion and 'personal journalistic discourses' in reporting (Kotisova 2019:3f).

include in the news agenda, and what information or sources to add to their stories (O'Neill & Harcup 2009).

The experience of political life is messy and agonistic (Wahl-Jorgensen 2019:2) and, as such, one cannot keep rationality and emotionality apart when studying news engagement. It needs contextualization, and it has to start with the audience. There is a measure of subjectivity, after all, in how they choose to maintain their cognitive and affective engagement, as what they read, watch or listen to is considered against an 'existing scheme of knowledge and feeling' (Corner 2011:91). This can certainly lead to a lot of variance in how they might interpret the news; yet, at the same time, an analysis of news engagement cannot discount 'how our social development and position encourage us to read' and feel about it (ibid.:3). Furthermore, emotionality does not make audiences any less likely to draw upon their political knowledge or make informed decisions (Richardson, Parry & Corner: 2013:175) and, in fact, it allows people to engage and identify with issues rather than undermine rational debate (Wahl-Jorgensen 2016:17).

Rather than do away with subjectivity and emotionality, journalists – and scholars, too – should consider how they facilitate participation in the emotional public sphere. News mediates 'public expression, reflection and deliberation' in relation to issues that are in the public interest, and audiences can articulate these emotions in their everyday lives and private relationships as a part of such an emotional public sphere (Lunt & Stenner 2005:77; Richards 2010:302f). Such research is important as audiences develop increasingly intimate relationships with technology (Beckett & Deuze 2016), making it harder to stay away from the news.

Factuality, trust and credibility

If sorting through the surplus of information online is just as much a personal value as it is a public one (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal 2018:67), part of being a news audience then is picking out what is factual and relevant. Broadly speaking, what makes news factual is that it has facts and informs audiences about the world (Hill 2007:3). Factuality refers to how audiences perceive what they read, watch or listen to as being based in reality, which they do by reflecting upon 'factual experiences, imagination [and] values' (Corner & Pels in Hill 2007:3). However, factuality is not based on whether it is a one-to-one representation of a real-life referent but how it appears 'authentic' and 'true to life' (ibid.: 3, 109). How

audiences come to perceive the news as being factual is subjective, a process which could include what they already know about the referent but also the generic forms they associate with professional journalism.

Such forms do not indicate the actuality of what is being reported in the news but, rather, the professional values of that particular news organization. Therefore, working through the factuality of news also involves trust that these organizations will present factual information. Audiences need to perceive them as having the 'ability,' 'benevolence' and 'integrity' to deliver upon that trust, which is to say that they will be capable and deliberate in delivering quality information (Fletcher & Park 2017:1283). Despite this expectation, there is not an absolute certainty that such organizations will deliver on that outcome (Kohring & Matthes 2007:238). Audiences cede control over to news organizations but also reduce the complexities of an 'open future,' such as doing away with the fuss of working through the factuality of emerging events and issues in an information-saturated digital age (ibid.).

As such, this thesis approaches audiences as being aware that what is represented in the news is a journalistic construction. They may not totally trust these representations, but they continue to engage with news organizations with the understanding that what they put out may be biased, incomplete or even incorrect. This, in turn, informs what news practices they choose to take up.

Narrowing news audiences down

There is a 'newsroom-centricity' to journalism studies, which has contributed to extensive research on how news is produced but has largely missed out on how it is situated within audiences' everyday lives (Wahl-Jorgensen, in Meijer & Kormelink 2014:666). If there has been any consideration of audiences, it mostly focused on news use in terms of reach, as measured through circulation numbers and ratings; and exposure, as documented through survey responses (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzch 2020). However, these measures are much too narrow as they limit what is observable about engagement and ignores the subjectivity and dynamism of the phenomenon.

Industry and academic research have had to rethink audiences as the digitalization of the news industry has shown them to be increasingly autonomous and fragmented (Meijer 2020:391). Where traditional broadcasting once approached

audiences as simply passive recipients, they could now pick and choose from the 'extraordinary abundance' of audiovisual content (Helberger 2015:326). The introduction of online platforms in the late 1990s changed how audiences found news. They did not have to visit the front page of online news sites to look for articles and videos, as they could use search engines to find and access what was relevant to them (van Dijck et al. 2018:53). News aggregators and social networking sites also allowed them to circumvent the front page by providing direct links to individual stories (ibid.). Furthermore, participants of this study said digitalization removed restrictions on when, where and how much it cost to engage with news. It gave them access to more sources than they had growing up, when their families might have only gotten one or two newspapers and/or watched the evening news on television.

News organizations also organized production and distribution around these platforms, which has contributed to even more narrow measures of reception (van Dijck et al. 2018:53ff, 67). They started to depend on quantified user demand to track circulation online (Carr, in van Dijck et al. 2018:53), using click-through rates, shares, reactions and other metrics to determine how well articles, videos and other content were performing on Google or Facebook (Columbia Journalism Review 2019; Reuters Institute 2019). The problem with relying on platform definitions of engagement began to sink in for publishers after a change in Facebook's algorithm in 2018 de-emphasized news content and resulted in declining web traffic to their proprietary websites; and the platform overestimated the amount of video views by as much as 60 to 80 percent (Columbia Journalism Review 2019; Moore 2016). That is, in defining engagement, platforms were also defining its terms.

On the academic side of things, research continued to look into either online news use, as measured through analyses of web analytics and clicking behavior; or news exposure, as analyzed through interviews or focus groups (Swart et al. 2017:1343). Yet how audiences perceive their use or the importance of news does not always match up with how they actually engage with it (ibid.). For instance, online news audiences reportedly preferred physical newspapers yet there has been a decline in circulation numbers in the U.S. (Chyi & Chadha 2012:432).

Such measures do not contextualize news engagement within audiences' everyday lives or consider how the social, cultural or experiential relates to their 'sense-making practices' (Bengtsson & Johansson 2020:4). All they can really say is that

audiences had 'encountered the content' without really explaining what it took for them to get there and what happens long after they do so (Ksiazek, Peer & Lessard 2016:505; Hill & Dahlgren 2020:3). To draw conclusions or to take action based on these measures while ignoring the larger context of engagement is to, as they say, mow the lawn while the house is on fire.

Opening up engagement

These approaches have shown how tricky it can be to define engagement, how it varies between disciplines and has come to include 'virtually every post-exposure dimension of audience behavior' (Napoli, in Kümpel 2019:166). It is certainly complex but, rather than take on the whole megillah, research often narrowly focuses on facets of the phenomenon, such as 'attentive *reading*' (Kümpel 2019:166, emphasis in original) or interactivity (Ksiazek et al. 2016:504).

Academic research often takes a uses-and-gratifications approach to audience engagement with news, whereby engagement fulfills a psychological need to find information, socialize or be entertained (Kormelink & Costera Meijer 2015; Ksiazek et al. 2016:504). However, such an approach generalizes participants at the 'individualistic or society-wide level' and media as something that has an effect on them (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998). Effects research is problematic because audiences respond to messages in different ways based on their past experiences and social configurations (Bolin 2017; Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998). News engagement calls forth different – sometimes, simultaneous – identities and, as such, audiences cannot be said to be just one thing or another during such a phenomenon (Hill & Dahlgren 2020:27). This was certainly reflected in the empirical data, as participants identified as citizens, teachers, students and professionals among other things while engaging with news.

Researchers should certainly avoid overemphasizing reception at risk of 'unwarranted assumptions about "influence" and the passivity of audiences' (Corner 2011:92). Such studies are often isolated to intense moments of engagement rather than considered within the larger context of the media encounter. To this point, it is better to 'assume less and investigate more' when examining the relationship between media and subjectivity; as engagement is, after all, an inquiry into experience, cultural resources and the challenges that come with it (ibid.).

Therefore, this thesis adopts Hill and Dahlgren's *parameters of media engagement* model to map this phenomenon across six variables: the *contexts*, *motivations*, *modalities*, *forms*, *intensities* and *consequences* of how audiences engage with news (2020:15). In considering these six parameters in relation to one another, it avoids drawing conclusions based on a limited set of observable behaviors and situates engagement within the lived experiences of audiences. It does not only account for the moment in which they engage with news but the trajectories toward and beyond engagement, which could include the dissemination or remaking of information (Ksiazek et al. 2016:504). As such, engagement is not anchored in a particular time or space (Hill & Dahlgren, 2020:3), as it matters when, where and with whom audiences engage (or disengage) with news.

Engaging with news as an affective practice

News engagement is not often associated with the affective but, in studying how it coalesces with the cognitive, there can be an understanding of '*how socially meaningful relationships register in our body-minds and, at some level of awareness, are felt*' (Burkitt 2014:14, emphasis in original). Affect can be difficult to articulate because it is an unconscious, 'background' feeling that cannot simply be described using basic emotions, such as happiness or anger (ibid.:11; Wetherell 2012:3, 12). Affect is always present, but it ebbs and flows (Wetherell 2012:12). It emerges through 'patterns of relationship,' including how people perceive others or their surroundings; and can unconsciously color certain actions in particular situations (ibid.:6).

Wetherell's concept of 'affective practices' is conducive here in understanding how bodily reactions are associated or 'patterned together' with thoughts, feelings, relationships and other components within everyday life (2012:14). Such patterning brings the affective and cognitive together, the latter of which is subject to personal biographies as well as social factors, cultural norms and ideological perspectives (Burkitt 2014:19f; Zou 2018:4). As such, affect and emotion operates at both the individual and social level (Burkitt 2014:19f). These patterns are made and remade, 'interacting and recursive,' and can come together in habitual or 'distinct [ways] of doing things' (ibid.). However, this is not to suggest that people are at the whims of these unconscious affects. 'Practice' refers to both the activity and its repetition (ibid.:23). In recognition of how 'the past, and what has been done before, constrains the present and the future,' the different

possibilities – or 'could be otherwise' qualities – can come to color affect (ibid.). Furthermore, personal identities and social configurations are multiple, unstable and dynamic; and, as such, affect is similarly multifaceted (Burkitt 2014:19f).

Digital technologies have also brought about hybrid spaces that blur 'public and private, civic and consumption-based, collective and personal narratives' (Papacharissi in Zou 2018:3). Unlike the Habermasian public sphere, the conversations happening in these private or solo spheres are rarely just detached and rational but affective and emotional too (Zou 2018:3; Dahlgren 2013:63). It creates and maintains 'affective feedback loops that generate and reproduce affective patterns of relating to others,' encouraging routines of sharing or commenting or linking out to such content (Papacharissi in Zou 2018:5).

A phronetic approach to news audiences

This thesis adopts a qualitative approach so it can give news audiences a voice (Hermes 2012:198; Hill 2015:20) and bring about 'well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanation of processes in identifiable local contexts' (Miles & Huberman in Bazeley 2013:4). This was of particular importance given that media engagement is subjective and multifaceted; and, as such, the themes within the findings needed to inform the conceptualization of the phenomenon.

A phronetic approach gets at the 'value rationality' of news engagement, in that it considers the variable and contextual values that are the basis for praxis (Flyvbjerg 2001:57). However, values – that is, 'things that are [perceived to be] good or bad' – are relative and based upon experience (ibid.:60). This approach questions such societal values and interests toward 'social commentary and social action' (ibid.) and, to this end, challenges the rationalist understanding of how audiences engage with news, situating the phenomenon within their lived experiences.

Despite the emphasis on subjective values, a phronetic approach does not give in to foundationalism or relativism (Flyvbjerg 2001:131). For instance, this thesis questions the basis upon which measures of attention and interaction can stand in as an explanation for engagement and, instead, argues that the parameters of this phenomenon deserve further exploration. At the same time, it does not resign to the assumption that how audiences engage with news is so idiosyncratic that it

is impossible to discern any patterns between them. It is in examining the shared attitudes within social and historical contexts that keeps this thesis from sliding into relativism (ibid.:130).

Indeed, a phronetic approach has to consider the situational ethics of participants' daily news practices (Flyvbjerg 2001:134ff). To put it differently, the decision to engage with news is not based solely on what it can do for participants but how it is situated within their everyday lives. Furthermore, in a cross-media news environment, such media practices and experiences are relational (Schrøder 2011:6). Participants' previous experiences with media, whether intentional or not, leaves impressions that color how they choose, make sense of and possibly participate in and through them (ibid.).

A social constructionist approach is adopted to critically examine the 'taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world and ourselves' (Burr 2015:2). To put it another way, the conditions for how people check and follow the news may not be based upon material referents. They could be historically and culturally-specific constructions, maintained through the social process of communication (ibid.:3ff). The perception that journalism, as an institution, has utility and authority is maintained insofar as people continue to recognize and act upon its rules and functions (Couldry & Hepp 2017:26). For instance, social, cultural and historical circumstances in Swedish broadcasting partly informs the relationship between journalism and its audience – say, as an educator or a check upon public institutions – and this relationship continues so long as each stakeholder recognizes its resource and adopts its practices (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull 2013:309).

Design of the research

This study started with exploratory interviews conducted from December 2019 to January 2020 with four Swedes and a Dane residing in the regions of Skåne or Småland in southern Sweden. The exploratory interviews and literature informed the preliminary interview guide, which was then tested and revised over two pilot interviews conducted in February 2020.

Given the different societal and institutional impact on how early participants engaged with news, this thesis chose to contextualize the phenomenon using the *parameters of media engagement* model (Hill & Dahlgren 2020:3). This informed

the questions in the pilot and final interview guide, split up between the categories of *news forms and modalities*; *news in context*; *news intensities and consequences*; *news motivations*; and *other* questions. Some of these categories paired parameters together, given how closely certain questions addressed both of them. This spoke to how these parameters are related to each other in one way or another.

All in all, thirteen qualitative interviews were conducted between February 18 and March 28, 2020, with Swedes, between the ages of 22 and 33, residing in the Skåne and Småland regions. These interviews used follow-up questions to clarify or build up participants' answers toward a more nuanced and thematic account of their media engagement (Rapley 2007:18). For instance, some participants were coaxed away from speculating upon why other people checked and followed the news and, instead, were encouraged to focus on their own engagement.

Sampling for the research

Bolin's writings on media generations informed the decision to examine news engagement among participants who grew up during distinct changes in news provisioning – and, by extension, reception – from the 1980s onwards (2017:22, 35). He suggested that age cohorts are located in a particular time and space that has its own historical and social circumstances; and this informs their generational experiences (ibid.:40). Bolin adds that media factors into the social formation of generations, specifically in their appropriation of media and their unique experiences with mediatization (ibid.:42). The diffusion of technology and changes in the provision of news in Sweden could then be said to inform the mutual bonds of that particular generation (Westlund & Weibull 2013:148). Given the affordances, stresses and distractions of the digital age, how participants engaged with news was more likely contingent upon them working through its forms, practices, motivations and consequences.

As such, the sample was narrowed down to Swedes between 20 and 40 years of age, as this potential generation would have had similar media experiences during their formative years (Bolin 2017:22, 35). Those born during and following the 1980s would have grown up with, one, personal digital and mobile devices and, two, the dissolution of the public service monopoly on broadcast television in Sweden (ibid.:34). The diffusion of technology and the changes within the news

industry were societal events and processes that informed these generations' mutual bonds (Westlund & Weibull 2013:148).

Sampling was further narrowed down to the variability of social processes rather than just socio-demographics, as this offers a 'more direct and deeper analysis of the observed characteristics' (Gobo 2006:411ff). Specifically, the sample was split between seven participants who said they had a high intensity of news engagement and six participants who said they had a low intensity. This followed what Corner called the *stages of engagement*, which he uses to refer to the continuum between short-form and sustained, embedded engagement (Corner 2011:91; Hill & Dahlgren 2020:20). Given the similarities in news provisioning during their formative years, the only difference between participants would be the intensity of their engagement rather than contrasting national or historical contexts.

Participants were sought out by asking personal contacts and interviewees from the exploratory phase if they knew anyone who matched the sampling criteria. A snowballing method was adopted in that interviewees were asked about whether they knew anyone with a similar or different perspective who could be interviewed as a part of this study (Patton 2015:298). They were considered 'well-situated people' given that they were the subjects of the study (ibid.). A total of 13 participants were interviewed before there was a saturation of themes in analysis.

Conducting research during a pandemic

The initial five interviews from February 18 to March 13, 2020 were conducted in person; and the subsequent eight interviews from March 16 to 28, 2020, were conducted over video call. The decision to conduct interviews over video call was made as a preventative measure against the spread and health risk of the COVID-19/coronavirus pandemic (World Health Organization 2020).

Video calls allowed for remote observations of participants, but there were limitations to how much could be observed. For example, participants had to switch between the front and back cameras of their mobile devices so they could show what they were doing on their computers; but this led to them being out of view. Furthermore, given that these remote interviews were conducted in the researcher's home, his companion animal occasionally interrupted the

conversation[24]. That being said, there were no longer any geographic limitations to conducting interviews, such that the sample could be expanded to include a participant in the Småland region.

The COVID-19 pandemic also changed the context in which participants engaged with news as some of them went from a low to high intensity of engagement because they wanted to stay informed about how it was developing or, simply, they had more time on their hands (Ron, 27, technician). This informed some of the follow-up questions during interviews, such as 'what do you think about the coverage of the coronavirus?' and the subsequent analysis of their responses.

Ethics of the research

A consent form was distributed to participants before the start of every in-person interview; and dictated to them before every phone or video call interview. It was needed to ensure that participants were informed about what the study was about and the consequences of being involved in it (Christians 2005:144). Specifically, they were informed that they will not be identified by their legal names but that other general information about them, such as their age, stated gender and city of residence, would be disclosed in the study.

There was a need for consent in order to safeguard the privacy of participants against unwanted or potentially damaging exposure (ibid.:145). They might refer to controversial political, social or even personal issues during the interview and, as such, they needed assurance that their responses would not find their way back to them.

Furthermore, caution was exercised when discussing news events that might be traumatic for participants. This included the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic over the course of the thesis; the 2017 terrorist attack on Drottninggatan pedestrian street in Stockholm; the 2011 terrorist attacks in Utøya, Norway; and the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack in the U.S. This is not to say the researcher avoided asking about these events altogether. He only asked questions

[24] The researcher lived in a studio apartment and could not hide from his cat.

as a follow-up to earlier responses related to such events and, even then, made a concerted effort not to push them for answers if it might cause them harm.

Analyzing for the research

The empirical material for analysis included interview transcriptions and field notes on participants' body language and use of mobile devices and computers to check the news. Interview transcripts were read at least three times over to heighten theoretical sensitivity and a thematic coding scheme was used to home in on 'what a phenomenon, event or social interaction "looks like" to the individual,' given the social constructionist approach (Seale 2018:367f). It also adopted an iterative zig-zag approach, in that early analysis of the empirical material informed further gathering of data (ibid.:369). For example, participants were more likely to give detailed answers to abstract questions if they started by answering more descriptive ones.

The empirical material was coded both deductively, whereby the use of academic and non-academic literature informed the development of some themes ahead of analysis; and inductively, which allowed for detailed exploration of themes through the empirical material (Seale 2018:368). For example, categories and subcategories such as *perception of representations in news* and *factuality* were based upon the literature (Hendriks, Duus & Ercan 2016:1102; Schrøder 2015:62). These were expanded upon through in vivo codes informed by terms and phrases drawn directly from the interviews, such as *fitting news into everyday life* and *setting boundaries to engagement* (Seale 2018:372).

To make sure interpretation was representative of the object of study (Cornish 2014:81), this study established inter-coder reliability by reviewing coding and categorization with thesis supervisor Annette Hill. There are certainly many ways of drawing categories from the data, depending upon the 'purposes, perspectives, experiences, and knowledge' of the researcher doing so (Bazeley 2013:150). Having Hill look through these codes, categories and themes prevented the research from 'making unjustifiable leaps of the imagination' (Cornish et al. 2014:81).

Reflections on the research

It should be disclosed that the researcher previously studied journalism, and worked as a journalist for seven years in the U.S.[25] This meant that there was a need to acknowledge personal and cultural assumptions, given the differences in industry and academic approaches to news engagement and the different national contexts (Hammersley 2013:53). Media engagement is, after all, subjective and, in recognition of its plurality and contradictions, such studies need to 'assume less and investigate more' (Corner 2011:87). After all, qualitative interviews are a collaborative process between researcher and participants (Rapley 2007:15). Rather than impose a particular interpretation upon their experiences and emotions, the researcher simply followed the conversation in order to achieve the 'thick description' needed to get at participant's subjective and lived experiences (ibid.:15, 21). As such, this study could be said to 'give voice to groups of audience members,' which is what defines audience studies (Hermes 2012:198).

The performances and affective patterns of news engagement

This thesis asks how can Peter Dahlgren and Annette Hill's parameters of media engagement model be applied to news engagement and in what ways do affect and performance shape news engagement? To answer these research questions, it adopts the parameters of media engagement model to contextualize the phenomenon, given that it is dynamic and multidimensional (Hill & Dahlgren 2020:3) and that affect is mutable yet embedded in everyday life (Hill 2019:57).

The three themes that came up in the empirical material and subsequent analytical coding included *keeping up* and *being critical of news* and *the feeling of engaging with it*. This informed the sites of analysis: the *responsibilities* and *performance of being informed and critical*; and *how the feeling of engagement shaped news audiences*. How responsible participants felt about either staying informed or being critical of the news depended on what they considered to be their civic, social or professional obligations in doing so, and this was entirely subjective to each of

[25] The researcher also has experience with web and social media analytics.

them. There can be no tangible outcomes to keeping up or scrutinizing the news, because there is no way for them to be caught up on *all* news or find a *completely* factual and objective account of what is being reported. As such, acting upon these responsibilities is performative, as participants can only achieve a subjective feeling that they have done enough to stay informed and be critical.

The responsibilities of keeping up and being critical of news

Participants often talked about engaging with news in relation to how responsible they felt about *keeping up* and *being critical* of it. They *kept up with news* to stay informed about current events and issues, which they understood to be a condition of their civic, professional or social identities. They were *critical of news* so they could feel confident about having done enough to gather and vet information. This is not to say that every participant felt fully responsible for doing either, but that they negotiate these obligations as they engage with such content.

Subjectivity

The responsibilities of keeping up and being critical of news was related to what each participant considered to be her or his obligation as, say, a citizen, activist, student among other identities. Leslie, a 25-year-old Helsingborg teacher, said it was her 'responsibility as a democratic citizen' to stay informed about current events and issues; and to 'practice that muscle' of being critical of news sources. She not only scrutinized news – and, in fact, source criticism is part of the curriculum she taught her students – but regularly listened to news podcasts, such as *Ekot*, every morning and set up push notifications on her phone to feel up to date.

> As I learned more and more about how fragile the democratic system is as well, I think we really need to care for it; and I think we need to learn to make constructive decisions based on what we think is true. (Leslie, 25, Helsingborg teacher)

In this statement, Leslie identified herself with the collective *we* that had to participate in the political sphere, as mediated through news; but also set herself apart from an implied *them* that made ignorant, ineffectual decisions. She and other Swedes needed to 'care' for democracy; it could regress if they did not give it attention. Taking care of democracy required them to make informed and

factual decisions about the direction of the country, which can only be achieved by keeping up with what the news has to report on current events and issues. The responsibilities of keeping up and being critical of news informed how some participants saw themselves as news audiences, an identity that is constructed through 'the relation to the Other, the relation to what it is not' (Gay & Hall 1996:4). Continuing to fulfill these responsibilities distinguished them from the ill-informed and the reactionary, making them feel as if they were better citizens, activists, students and so on.

At the same time, what was involved in *keeping up* and *being critical of the news* differed between participants. 33-year-old Lund teacher Chris recognized the function of news in being able to 'develop properly' and 'be a democratic citizen,' yet limited his engagement to simply reading the headlines in the *SVT Nyheter* mobile application. His 'brain gets tired' from what he considered to be negativity and polarization in the news, which he argued could lead to others relying on their emotions rather than their critical thinking when engaging with it:

> The root of philosophy is to think for yourself and to temper yourself against not being ruled by emotions but be ruled by your rationality. And I think that's kind of the root, one of the big roots of why things are crazy in the world. It's because people just go by emotions, and they don't use their rationality. (Chris, 33, Lund teacher)

It is not just Chris' identity as either a citizen or a rationalist or even a news reader that informed his experience of engaging with news, but his memories of having 'overdosed from too much news' and negativity. As such, he had to and would likely continue to negotiate just how responsible he is for either keeping informed or being critical of the news. At the very root of this decision is whether Chris can continue to fulfill these responsibilities while maintaining an affect that he considered fitting.

How Leslie and Chris engaged with news is illustrative of the *stages of engagement*, which can be charted along a continuum between circumstantial *exposure* and more purposeful *engagement* (Corner 2011:91). How Chris sporadically checked the *SVT Nyheter* mobile application was an example of short-form engagement (Hill & Dahlgren 2020:20), as it is through this brief and intense mode that he is able to feel informed about current events and issues without being overwhelmed by it. How Leslie regularly checked the news and set up notifications for herself is

an example of long-form engagement (ibid.:21), as this sustained and embedded mode made her 'not feel in the dark' and 'more secure in [her] actions' as a citizen and teacher. This came to define their experience of keeping up and being critical of the news, as experience is the 'emotional lessons derived from the "lived reality" of subjectivity' (ibid.:9).

Factuality

Participants were critical of news if they recognized the 'constructed character of [its representations]' (Andrejevic 2013:33) or, to put it simply, that what was reported in the news may be a partial or altered representation of its real-life referent. Generally, they accepted that factuality, objectivity and completeness were not always stable categories when engaging with news. For instance, 27-year-old Lund university student Andy said that his experience working as a political communicator has made him aware that information is not always neutral. He noticed this in how some news organizations would repeat the talking points of a press release to the benefit of the political or commercial organization that sent them.

> I didn't think that news came from a place but that's maybe the thing I've realized: that news always comes from someone, that news journalist will very rarely have good scoops anymore like those good-old fashioned things. (Andy, 27, Lund university student)

Andy recognized the constructed character of representation in such press releases, specifically in how they may contradict reality to portray their stakeholders favorably; and how it is reported given what he considered to be lacking follow-up about such claims. This informed his understanding that what is covered in the news is always to the benefit of another person or group with a vested interest and, therefore, cannot be fully objective or comprehensive.

Most of the participants engaged with different news sources with the understanding that what is being reported is conditional and that it is up to them to build out a (subjectively) bigger picture or not. They often talked about how news represented an event or issue in terms of whether it was factual, objective or complete. This was not always based upon what they knew of the referent but what they recognize as the generic forms of fact-based, unbiased journalism.

They recognized the constructed character of news in whether it appeared to be factual, that is to say, that its content had facts and informed them about the world (Hill 2007:109). Ron, a 26-year-old Malmö technician, said his previous experiences with misinformation and badly-sourced stories made him wary of the news. He brought up a debunked article on Facebook, which reported that dolphins had returned to Venice, Italy, after a decline in human activity because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Upon looking for more information, Ron could not find any primary sources supporting this claim. He may not completely distrust the news, but he is more cautious about it being misleading or taken out of context.

> I've also learned that, just because you read [different] examples of how it happened or different numbers of death, that doesn't mean 'Oh, how could I know what's true?' What that tells me is, 'Oh, we don't really know yet. It's more speculation,' so I might not take this to the grave. (Ron, 26, Malmö technician)

How participants determined factuality was not always based on real-life referents – Ron was certainly not skimming Venetian canals for dolphins – but their subjective 'criterion of truth' (Hill 2007:3, 109). They could only recognize news as being 'authentic' and 'true to life' (ibid.) by identifying its generic forms, including how it is sourced and framed.

Another instance of this was 25-year-old Kalmar political clerk Ben who was frustrated over how *SVT Nyheter* had conflated the severity of COVID-19 in Sweden with China through the Facebook Story feature. It had used a photograph of two nurses administering a flu shot in Sweden next to one of a 'casket on wheels' being taken out of a Chinese hospital. At the time of the interview, there had been no reported deaths related to COVID-19 in Sweden. Ben, thus, worked through the referential integrity of *SVT Nyheter's* presentation by, one, reflecting upon what he knew about the pandemic; and, two, how the pairing of these two photographs implied the situation is comparable to China. The photographs and report, by themselves, were not misleading; but it was how it was presented together which led to Ben's assessment that is was inaccurate.

Participants were also aware of the constructed character of representation whenever they perceived the news as taking sides or exaggerating an event or issue. Most of them recognized that the news could not be entirely objective but generally brought up objectivity when talking about tabloid media organizations,

such as *Aftonbladet* or *Expressen*. Perd, a 25-year-old Malmö journalist, said they regularly exaggerated certain details and used sensational headlines so that audiences would click through to their stories. Despite this, he did not consider such organizations to be any less factual for adopting practices that make events or issues appear 'bigger than maybe it is':

> As long as I know that, I would say it's fine because I know that it's a bit twisted – maybe some things – but I know that the center of it is still factual, and I trust the reporter to have done a good job with it. (Perd, 25, Malmö journalist)

Perd expressed that he was confident about working out what was factual and what was exaggerated in 'evening news.' He recognized its generic forms, whether that be its emotionally-charged language or its 'twisted' presentation. Despite this, Perd said it had no bearing on how much he trusted the journalists reporting on the event or issue. He was aware of what it took to get attention online – no doubt informed by his own professional experience as a journalist[26] – and that there were no ulterior motives to how such content was presented beyond getting audiences to click on it.

On the other hand, Tom suggested that objectivity could be its own contrivance. The 27-year-old Malmö freelance photographer went to *SVT Nyheter* for 'baseline,' unbiased information; but said the public service organization, in wanting to remain 'neutral,' may avoid reporting on certain events or issues. As such, he visited – and even put money toward – the news organization *ETC* because their niche is to report on stories that might be pertinent to their left-leaning target demographic.

> If you see how they report on, like, [President Jair] Bolsonaro in Brazil, state media would be, like, 'here's the new president. He likes this and this and he's going to do this and this and la-dee-la-dee-da.' And *ETC* would bring up everything, like, the stuff he said in the past and what he's trying to do and why this is bad for everyone. (Tom, 27, Malmö freelance photographer)

In engaging with *SVT Nyheter* and *ETC,* Tom recognized how the values that informed either news organization could lead to blind spots in their coverage. He

[26] It should be clarified here that Perd does not work for a news organization he or other participants considered to be 'evening news'.

attempted to address these shortcomings by reading both and comparing them, thus feeling as if he has a more comprehensive understanding of current events and issues. Therefore, the juxtaposition between *SVT Nyheter* and *ETC* is performative, as it was what he subjectively thought was needed to get at the bigger picture.

Participants also recognized the constructed character of representation in news when they noticed a news story is incomplete or developing. They may decide to fill in the blanks if they thought something was missing in a report about an event or issue, such as 23-year-old Lund university student April turning to other news sources if she considered it to be lacking in context. Looking up additional information could also be a reflex among participants, as they have grown up with multiple news sources being immediately accessible to them online. Even if content is hidden behind a paywall, participants were familiar enough with the affordances of search engines to look up what other news sources are saying about a particular event or issue. Perd said he often looks up additional information across multiple news outlets to get an accurate, 'broader picture':

> It's impossible for every outlet to get every detail of it, so you check multiple sources, multiple outlets about a certain story if there are different details of it in another outlet, just to see that they correspond with each other. If two or three or four news outlets say the same then it's probably right. (Perd, 25, Malmö journalist)

If participants recognized that what is being represented in the news can not be absolutely factual, objective or complete, then keeping up with news and being critical of it cannot have tangible outcomes. There is no magic number to how many articles, videos or audio recordings they need to consume to be fully informed, because there will always be more to read, watch or listen to. Participants could find and compare more sources; but they would only achieve a fragmented and selective representation rather than a complete and objective one.

The question, then, is why participants would maintain their intensity of engagement with news if it did not make that much of a difference. The answer is that such engagement is performative, in that how participants checked and followed the news is meant to achieve a subjective feeling of being an informed and critical news audience. That is to say, it is just as much about *feeling* informed and critical as it is about *being* informed and critical. If there was no sure way of

being either, how participants engaged with news was based upon what they subjectively thought was needed to fully keep up with and scrutinize it.

The performances of an informed and critical news audience

Participants adopted different strategies both for how they kept up with news and how they scrutinized it in order to maintain their performances as an informed and critical audience, even if there was no one around to witness it. This is related to the proposition that everything in the world needs to be constituted as an event 'made to perform for those watching or gazing and that people, too, conduct themselves as if they are the object of attention for a real or imagined audience (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998:78, 88). How participants perceived the intensity of their engagement played into their performance. To wit, their performance was based upon whether they had sustained their engagement for what they considered – or, rather, felt – to be enough. They realized their parts by either fitting news into their daily routines; depending on other people to narrow down the news agenda for them; or setting boundaries to their engagement.

They found a place for news in their daily routines by either checking it periodically, setting up notifications or putting it on in the background. Participants often checked the news to take a break from their moment-to-moment activities or to fill time in between them. Tom (27, Malmö freelance photographer) routinely visited *SVT Nyheter* and *ETC* as he started and ended work; or whenever he had downtime. Participants, such as Leslie (25, Helsingborg teacher) and Jerry (27, Lund university student), said they also brought up the news on their phones whenever they took public transportation.

Several participants set their mobile devices up to notify them about news. For example, Leslie (25, Helsingborg teacher) relied on the *SVT Nyheter*, *CNN* and *Omni*[27] news applications to inform her about current events and issues. Such notifications used to stress her out, but she ultimately felt safe being 'in the know' through them. Leslie brought up the example of the U.S. assassination of Iranian general Qasem Suleimani in January 2020. She was concerned that the two

[27] *Omni* is an application that aggregates news from different sources.

nuclear powers could go to war, and relied on her notifications to stay informed about how the situation was developing.

Other participants put the news on in the background as they went about their daily activities. For instance, Tom (27, Malmö freelance photographer) listens to news on the radio as he goes about his morning routine because he does not 'like it being totally quiet when [he wakes] up.' Ben (25, Kalmar political clerk) also listened to the news as he went about different household tasks so 'half his brain is connected to it over a few hours' and he can 'mentally scroll down' through the biggest stories of the day. Not all participants shared this practice. Andy (27, Lund university student) had to give his full attention to news because he 'wouldn't be able to actually take in the things that [he's] listening to if [he] is doing something else.'

A number of participants also depended on other people to set the news agenda for them, which included professional journalists and those within their social, professional or online circles. For example, Tom (27, Malmö freelance photographer) said it was 'comfortable' to watch television news go through the most important stories of the day, as he considered it to be more well-rounded than if he were to look for articles and videos on his own. He cannot skip ahead to what interests him the most and, as such, has to take in the entirety of the news broadcast. Similarly, Perd (25, Malmö journalist) set time aside on the weekends to go through several physical newspapers, not only because it featured what the editorial staff considered to be their best content that week but also so he could keep up with what is being covered and discussed among right-leaning news organizations. Otherwise, most of what he read during the rest of the week was 'left-leaning.' It could be said that Tom and Perd cede some control over to news organizations so it was less complex to find what was relevant and important to their development as citizens (Kohring & Matthes 2007:238; van Dijck et al. 2018:67).

A few participants, such as Chris (33, Lund teacher) and Ron (26, Malmö technician), depended on their friends to inform them about important events or issues they should read up on. Chris said he does not have a 'big need' to regularly check the news because of this; and Ron said he is not concerned about missing out because he is confident he 'will eventually hear about it.' Chris and Ron's trust in what their friends tell them is an example of private or solo spheres, a space for 'networked yet privatised mode of sociality' (Dahlgren 2013:63). This was, in

itself, a means of control over the surplus of information, whereby they can *imagine* their friends having similar 'practices, dispositions, tastes, and horizons of expectations' when it comes to how they look for and scrutinize news (ibid.; Taylor 2013:23). However, there were participants who were wary of just getting the news from their friends and family. Ben (25, Kalmar political clerk) said he was often around people who had the same views as him and, as such, was concerned that the news they shared would be biased toward that political orientation. As such, he would not be able to discover different points of view, which he considered his civic and occupational responsibility.

A few participants managed the stress of keeping up with news essentially by setting boundaries to their engagement. This might appear contrary to staying informed about what is going on around them, but some of them maintained the intensity in which they engaged with news by occasionally stepping back from it or narrowing down what they read, watched or listened to. Those who were frustrated or overwhelmed when they checked the news occasionally took a break from it, which most commonly happened with difficult events or issues. For instance, Jerry (27, Lund university student) said he had to take longer breaks from news coverage about the COVID-19 pandemic, but only in response to him spending more time reading about it:

> I've thought about how I engage with media, actually, at the moment; and I usually read a lot during one day, maybe different sources in different media and then I feel overwhelmed, so I sort of distance myself and I'm maybe not reading so much for two or three days. (Jerry, 27, Lund university student)

Playing the part of a critical news audience depended on whether they could demonstrate their media literacy skills, even if they are the only people around to notice them. This is not to say that such critical skills are inconsequential when evaluating news, as established in the example of Ron (26, Malmö technician) comparing both secondary and primary sources to determine whether a news story is trustworthy. Rather, in recognition of the constructed character of representation in news, the best participants can do is to achieve a subjective feeling that they have fully vetted the information before them.

Most participants achieved scale by searching and comparing information across multiple news sources, which made them feel as if they had a more comprehensive and objective understanding of the reported event or issue. For instance, April

(23, Lund university student) compared how different sources portrayed or interpreted the same event or issue so she could be 'objective' and 'hear [more than] one side of a story.' This was not always consistent among all participants. Looking across multiple news sources required active engagement and, as Andy (27, Lund university student) described it, people might not 'have the energy or the time' to do so. Several of them also narrowed down what they read, watched or listened to, as previously established, so that news engagement was more manageable.

Some of the ways in which they assessed news was to determine if it was sensational; had misrepresented an event or issue; or was lacking in transparency, either in how journalists had reported on the event or issue or whether there might be a commercial or political motivation behind it. They considered news to be sensational if it exaggerates an event or issue to get audiences to read, watch or listen. Leslie (25, Helsingborg teacher) related such content to a 'genre of clickbait,' which often left out important details in their headlines so audiences would have to click through to find out more about it. She said a 'true news article' would include the most important details in their headlines rather than withhold it so audiences will click through. That said, some participants did not consider sensational and factual news to be mutually exclusive. They said a story could play up certain details or frame it in an emotional way but still, as Perd (25, Malmö journalist) claimed, have a factual 'center.'

Participants also considered the style of news when considering whether it was sensational or not. Ben (25, Kalmar political clerk) said there was a 'degree of seriousness' that came with the 'basic' presentation of news, such as a color scheme that limits itself to black fonts against a white background or visuals that depict 'normal, everyday and, perhaps, pedestrian' occurrences. This was in contrast to what Andy (27, Lund university student) and April (23, Lund university student) identified as the use of large, bold and colorful fonts used to draw attention; and what Ron (26, Malmö technician) and Tom (27, Malmö freelance photographer) described as photographs that are meant to be alarmist or suggest an emotional character.

Several of them assessed whether a news story had misrepresented an event or issue, often by identifying how closely it stuck to the facts of something that had actually happened. It bears repeating here that past experiences with news and misinformation informed these assessments; and, as such, what participants came

to understand as factual and objective journalism was entirely subjective. For instance, Ron was suspicious of a Facebook post that had promoted a story about the Russian government releasing 500 lions to scare Moscow residents into self-isolating during the COVID-19 pandemic because – besides being laughable and 'crazy' – he has previously seen users 'post things or articles that are just horse shit.'

Therefore, participants engaged in *genre work* when being critical of news, drawing upon the generic material they have previously collected on it to assess what they are seeing in front of them (Hill 2007:89). That is to say, they considered what they have seen previously, interpreted what they were reading, watching or listening to and determined how it related to their sense of what news is (ibid.)

Participants also worked through the news with other people, often by reflecting on it together or debating it. Some of them compared their concerns and opinions against those that came up in the comments section of news websites and social networking sites, including Ron (26, Malmö technician) and Tom (27, Malmö freelance photographer). Ron said it was 'comfortable' to find other users who agreed with him because he did not want to be the 'only one being scared of something,' specifically in relation to news coverage about the pandemic. He also looked through the comments section to see if there were any similar reactions whenever he thought an article or video was 'being outrageous or being shocking.' Similarly, Tom said it was 'empowering' to find other people who agreed with him or shared his reaction but, more often than not, found it entertaining to see 'people hating on people' in comical or poorly-worded comments.

Generally, participants avoided the comments sections of news websites and social networking sites because, according to Ben (25, Kalmar political clerk), there are 'a lot of misunderstandings' and people who 'want to misunderstand like that.' That is to say, he believed other people were likely to argue or antagonize one another rather than have a constructive discussion. However, he distinguished between the comments sections for national news sources and his local *Barometern*, as he believed trolls and bots were not as concerned with the limited reach of the Kalmar publication. The latter was also different because its comments section was mostly made up of people who knew one another in the city.

> While Kalmar is a big town, it's not really that big so people kind of know each other, so they can't be awfully rude to each other, which I think keeps it somewhat clean most cases and is especially the handful of people that really engage in it, like commenting on different articles. (Ben, 25, Kalmar political clerk)

Ben trusted the comments section of *Barometern* to be more constructive because of how he imagined himself in relation to the other people participating in the conversation (Taylor 2013:23). Its 'images, stories and legends' – in this case, his experience reading and interacting with such comments – informed his social imagination which, in turn, legitimized certain practices and placed expectations upon him if he were to comment (ibid.:23f). He has affectively oriented himself to the particular mood of the conversation, such that he knows to conduct himself in a communal and 'clean' manner (though he also has a professional obligation to conduct himself well online).

Participants emphasized the importance of having a comfortable environment where they trusted other people to discuss the news on the same terms as them. For Jerry (27, Lund university student), this was the difference between sharing and discussing news on Facebook and in a closed environment through the messaging application Telegram. Facebook had transformed from a platform 'for quite close friends' to one that included acquaintances and colleagues, such that Jerry felt he had to be 'more anonymous' and, as such, did not share any news. However, Jerry felt that he could have a constructive discussion about long-form journalism in *The New Yorker* and *The Guardian* with his two friends on Telegram, even though they are of different political orientations.

> I don't know how productive those sort of discussions are, relating to the comments sections; and that's what I really feel, in this Telegram group, that it's partly meaningful because I sort of can see the arguments from the other political positions represented by the other two people in the group. But it's also a chance for me to sort of try to formulate arguments and to, like, test and analyze and so on in this very comfortable and closed setting where we know each other really well. (Jerry, 27, Lund university student)

Jerry described how it was more 'comfortable' and 'meaningful' to discuss news within the closed setting of Telegram. He was more uncertain about whether doing so on Facebook would be as 'productive' because he is not as familiar with the other users participating in the conversation. How Jerry engaged with news,

then, is another example of the solo sphere. The expectations that he has of his friends and the expectations they have of him are more explicit on Telegram, even if they were of different political orientations. As such, he was better able to manage the affect of engaging with news, where it would otherwise be uncertain in the torrent of news and opinions on Facebook.

The feeling of engaging with news

The responsibilities and performances of being an informed and critical news audience were both constitutive of how participants felt when engaging with news. The technical term for this feeling is affect which, in terms of engagement, refers to the mood of a particular media experience (Hill & Dahlgren 2020:17f). This is not to divorce affective from cognitive engagement (ibid.). As this section will establish, how participants chose to keep up and be critical of news were 'affective practices,' whereby they associated or 'patterned together' certain bodily reactions with their continued engagement (Wetherell 2012:14).

Participants were wary of the news if they were critical of the constructed character of its representations. Generally, they were concerned about whether a news story might be used to manipulate them, either to capture their attention or influence their opinions; or whether it was comprehensive enough to fulfill their subjective obligations. For example, Ron (26, Malmö technician) was skeptical about news stories that might be speculative, giving the example of *Aftonbladet* basing claims of 'worst case scenarios' and unfavorable trends on small-scale research studies.

> Sometimes, *Aftonbladet*, in digging into something one scientist said, they can blow that up to this big, big article, where there are just scientists going out with high-powered hypotheses [...] If one of them has these worst-case scenarios, then it's great for them to push that and they will get so many clicks. (Ron, 26, Malmö technician)

Ben (25, Kalmar political clerk) said it was his civic and occupational responsibility to diversify his news sources but was sad that there were 'few newspapers with a serious angle that have different political opinions' in Sweden. He was able to find publications that scrutinized issues salient among those of different political affiliations than him. However, they only superficially addressed issues important to those of his own political orientation. For instance, Ben

described *ETC* as constantly nagging its audience about how 'it's the global capitalism that is the major problem' but not getting into any specifics.

Participants were also more wary of news depending on where they received it. Donna (25, unemployed Malmö woman) visited news websites to 'learn about things' and, as such, was more inclined to focus on and scrutinize what is being reported. She suggested there was a dominant point of view in mainstream Swedish news that was 'taboo' to oppose, given that it was the same as their target demographic. There were 'implied enemies' in how such news organizations covered international events and issues, and this made her wary of whether their reporting might lack nuance or be reductive. Donna brought up how Swedish news organizations have covered U.S. President Donald Trump as an example:

> 'Cause Sweden hates Trump so much, you get very quickly, like, 'Oh, it's his fault,' which I'm not saying it isn't but it's kind of implied that that's what you're supposed to say so that kind of stops the debate right there. (Donna, 25, unemployed Malmö woman)

This was different from how she engaged with news on Facebook, where she only glanced at what her friends had posted and was more likely to trust it because of their shared political orientation. Therefore, her participation had the low affective intensity associated with the solo sphere (Dahlgren 2013:63). She may not consider Facebook a setting that is conducive for either a critical or focused engagement with news; but acknowledged that her fleeting engagement with her friends' post still informed what she knew about current events and issues. As a consequence, Donna may bring up something she read or watched on Facebook in conversation because of the relative certainty that such content had been filtered through her friends and was, therefore, trustworthy.

How obligated participants felt about having an opinion or picking a side when engaging with news depended on their subjectivities. Taking a stance was a means through which some participants could feel secure in their political identities, such as Tom (27, Malmö freelance photographer) who sought out reporting that was politically aligned with him so that he could 'confront people that have what [he] would recognize as bad ideas or bad views.' Similarly, Donna (25, unemployed Malmö woman) said having an opinion has more to do with 'self image.' She dated the practice back to when she and her friends were teenagers looking for news that supported their 'super left wing, super liberal' opinions so they could

set themselves apart from those of opposing political orientations. Identities, after all, are 'more the product of marking of difference and exclusion' rather than something that is naturally occurring (Hall & Gay 1996:4); and participants' political identities – and certainly their identities as part of an audience too – are continuously being shaped and reshaped as they engage with news.

Several of them stressed how important it was for them to come to their own conclusions, which made them wary of news organizations that appeared to foist a particular point of view upon them. Furthermore, Chris (33, Lund teacher) said it can be 'tiring' and 'polarizing' to always form an opinion. He attributed this to the divisiveness of punditry on social networking sites, where users form identities around the combative opinions that 'trickle down' from Twitter or blogging personalities. He has attempted to avoid being too emotionally invested in one side or the other, but said it was difficult when the very same pundits appear on televised debate programs and his friends would ask him about his opinions about it. As a consequence, Chris felt he needed to take a position on most events and issues; and was 'supposed to be upset about things:'

> [It is] a time of turmoil that we live in, morally, in Sweden with the Sweden Democrats, about immigration issues and feminist issues and political issues and there's a lot of polarization today, and you're either on side A or side B and you have to choose. (Chris, 33, Lund teacher)

In this statement, Chris suggested several issues that demanded his emotional investment whenever it appeared in the news. This often meant that he had to take up the affective orientation of being 'upset' about what one side or the other did rather than, in his own words, tempering himself against 'being ruled by emotions.' Being caught up in the rhetoric of taking sides feeds off such emotions, and doing so may come at the cost of self-reflexivity. To put it simply, Chris felt that he was being put on the spot, that he had to take a stand before putting in any thought. Therefore, he could not perform the responsibility of being critical of news.

How emotionally vulnerable participants felt when they engaged with news also depended on their subjectivities. For instance, Chris described himself as a formerly active environmental activist and vegan with a 'big conscience.' However, he has had to become more 'stoic' – that is, emotionally detached – when catching up on the news because 'he is just tired of being angry and upset

about everything.' Chris has tried to 'make [his] world smaller' in the last several years by limiting his engagement with news.

> I want to save the world and do my part in that way but then I moved away from that, at least in the sense I'm not doing it 100 percent but 50 percent. I have this issue of trying to take all of the world's problems onto me and so, to be able to handle all the problems, I can't take in all that. (Chris, 33, Lund teacher)

In this statement, Chris referred back to this activist identity in wanting to do right by the world and that it was something he was able to accomplish by engaging with news. He has had to weigh this responsibility against taking in 'all of the world's problems,' which he described as being exhausting and upsetting. What Chris had done then was to establish the boundaries of his affective engagement with news.

Several participants also felt secure in keeping up with news, often in relation to an ongoing event or issue that has a direct impact on their lives. For instance, April (23, Lund university student), who did not purposefully check and follow the news, also said that it offered 'a sense of coming together in a time of crisis.' She brought up the example of watching a television news report about the 2017 terrorist attack on the Drottninggatan pedestrian street in Stockholm with other students, which gave them a 'sense of connection that you might not get from any internet.'

Situating news engagement within the lived experiences of audiences rarely brings about anything so binary as circulation or subscription numbers, shares or reactions and so on; but that is where its strength lies. News engagement is more than just the moment when audiences encounter a news story and, as such, needs contextualization. How they come to think and *feel* through news does not happen in a vacuum, as it occurs at the intersection of social, political and cultural circumstances.

Conclusion

Engagement is a multidimensional and 'powerful subjective experience' (Hill & Dahlgren 2020:3); and, as such, this phenomenon needed to be situated within its complementary and competing contingencies. It all contributes toward how

audiences choose to keep up and scrutinize news; and what it feels like to do so. Thus, it was necessary for this research to tap into the subjective in order to understand how audiences negotiate the performances of engagement – how much is too much or too little – and how it is related to the mutable but embedded affect of news within their everyday lives (Hill 2019:57).

A social constructionist approach was adopted in studying this phenomenon because what audiences considered to be the parameters of engaging with news is subjective to each of them and relational to the socially and institutionally acceptable ways of doing so. A consequence of digitalization is that audiences are just as responsible for sorting through a surplus of information as an editorial staff (van Dijck et al. 2018:57); and their identities and experiences of engaging with news would inform how they selected and scrutinized it. Therefore, what it takes to be an informed and critical news audience is partly a social construction.

In mapping these parameters, it was unmistakable that how audiences chose to check and follow the news was not just a rational determination of what was worthwhile (Schrøder 2014:63) but also an affective one. The feeling of responsibility that came with either keeping up or being critical of the news was often in contention with the stresses of actually engaging with it. Therefore, they continuously negotiated between how they should perform as informed and critical news audiences and whether or not it feels right. To better illustrate this, this concluding section will reflect upon the key findings and how they relate to the two research questions:

How can Peter Dahlgren and Annette Hill's *parameters of media engagement* model be applied to news engagement?

This thesis mapped the six parameters of media engagement in relation to one another, which included its *contexts*, *motivations*, *modalities*, *forms*, *intensities* and *consequences* (Hill & Dahlgren 2020:3f). In doing so, it could make out the similarities and differences between them.

Contexts and motivations

This thesis contextualized how audiences engaged with news by looking back at, one, the changing relationship between journalists and audiences and, two, how digital and mobile technologies have shaped the way they receive, search and

scrutinize such content. Participants acknowledged that they kept up with current affairs and issues out of civic, professional and/or social obligations. They generally recognized that news is meant to contribute to informed decision-making in democratic society, a commonly-held opinion among Swedes that has been attributed to its history with public service broadcasting (Hill 2007:145). Indeed, most participants said they regularly kept up with Sveriges Television (SVT) and Sveriges Radio (SR) because they considered them to be reliable, factual and objective news sources. They did not always share the same opinions of for-profit news organizations, however, as commercial interest might contribute toward frivolity, sensationalism or adversarialism.

Furthermore, the introduction of digital and mobile technologies in Sweden during their formative years shaped how they received and sought news (Westlund & Weibull 2013:150) and whether they recognized the 'constructed character of [its representations]' (Andrejevic 2013:33). Participants could access multiple news sources because they were not limited to any time, place or price. They could rely on search engines to look up information without having to go through a news organization's main website; and use social networking sites to share it with their friends, family and acquaintances (van Dijck et al. 2018:53). At the same time, they gained a 'practice-based awareness' about the 'constructed character or representation' online through the participatory character of such platforms (Andrejevic 2013:33). That is to say, their experiences with such technologies informed their understanding that they could not trust everything they read, watched or listened to on the internet. This also meant they had to be wary of news, as there was a chance it may not be factual, objective or even complete.

Modalities and forms

How participants assessed whether news appeared credible or objective was not based on what they knew of the actual event or issue but what they recognized as its generic forms, which included its style, language and what was included in the editorial agenda. For instance, most participants associated objective news organizations with their simple, 'down to earth' presentation and formal, unemotional language in headlines and reporting. Some of them also brought up articles, listicles and videos they considered to be frivolous; and how they were evidence of a news organizations' low credibility.

The responsibilities of keeping up with news and scrutinizing it motivated participants' engagement with such content. Their civic, professional and/or social obligations informed how responsible they felt about doing so, though this was subjective to each of them. What participants identified as while engaging with news informed these obligations, such as a citizen fulfilling her democratic responsibility (Leslie, 25, Helsingborg teacher) or an activist wanting to do her part for the environment (April, 23, Lund university student).

Intensities and consequences

Participants sustained the intensity of their engagement by embedding news within their everyday lives, such as putting it on in the background as they went about household tasks (Ben, 25, Kalmar political clerk) or regularly watching it on television as a part of their evening routines (Ron, 26, Malmö technician). Other participants settled for fleeting engagement, such as choosing to just scan the headlines (Chris, 33, teacher). There were a few participants who chose to scrutinize the news by comparing news reports on the same event or issue; whereas others chose to rely on a handful of professional journalists to tell them what they needed to know.

The intensity of these engagements exemplified what each participant thought they needed to do as an informed and critical news audience. However, a key point of this thesis is that, no matter how much or how little participants checked and followed the news, there could not be any tangible outcomes to their engagement. That is to say, they could not possibly keep up with all news because there will always be more, and all they can achieve in being critical will still be a fragmented and selective representation of what is being reported on. Therefore, all they can accomplish is a subjective feeling of having done *enough* to keep up and be critical of news. This will be detailed as the conclusion turns to the second question on the performance and affect of how participants chose to engage with news.

The consequences of such engagement is that participants felt satisfied that they had fulfilled their responsibilities in keeping up and being critical of news, and secure in knowing what was going on in the world around them. At the same time, participants felt they had to, one, be wary at all times; two, be ready to form an opinion; and, three, be emotionally open to whatever event or issue that is being represented in the news. What defined their engagement then is how they

negotiated their identities as part of a news audience against the stresses of keeping up and being critical of the news.

In what ways do affect and performance shape news engagement?

Participants performed their engagement with news according to what they thought they needed to do as an informed and critical news audience. They performed the part of an informed news audience through the intensity of their engagement, such as making news a part of their daily routines through push notifications (Perd, 25, journalist). They also proved themselves to be critical news audiences by demonstrating their media literacy, which included the practices of comparing multiple news sources, working through the factuality and generic forms of news and reflecting upon it with other people.

These performances need to be contextualized within two contemporary developments: the experience of being a diffused audience and the participatory affordances of the digital age. To wit, the embeddedness of media in everyday life has turned people into a diffused audience, whereby they are 'an audience all the time' (Abercrombie & Longhurst 1998:68). A consequence of media constituting everyday life is that everything becomes a performance – even 'formerly innocent events' – such that people themselves become performers (ibid.:72f). As such, how participants chose to engage with news was not just practical but performative, for a real or imagined audience (ibid.:92). Furthermore, how they engaged with news is also a process of individualization, through which they pair individual actions with particular 'lifestyle elements' (Bennett & Segerberg 2011:771). Therefore, such actions become demonstrative of their identity, such as how sustaining engagement with news is an expression of their identity as an informed news audience.

Furthermore, participants started with practices they associated with being an informed and critical news audience; but it is in their continued repetition that they became patterned together with certain affects (Wetherell 2012:14). Therefore, there was an affective character to how they engaged with news, that told them whether they had done enough to keep up or be critical of news, such as the feeling of scale in checking multiple news sources, or certainty when demonstrating media literacy. Therefore, affect allowed participants to experience 'embodied meaning making' when they engaged with news (ibid.:4).

But how participants chose to engage with news was a negotiation of its competing and complementary affects, complicating what it meant for audiences to stay informed and be critical. The ways in which participants resolved this was to narrow down their engagement and, in doing so, make the stresses of engaging with news more manageable. For instance, some participants limited how much news they read, watched or listened to as a means to not feel overwhelmed by how much news is available (Chris, 33, Lund teacher) or relied on news organizations they trusted to simply tell them what they needed to know (Anne, 25, unemployed Lund woman).

There is a need to 'assume less and investigate more,' to use Corner's words (2011:87), when looking into the subjective phenomenon of media engagement. This thesis contributes to the ongoing conversation about news audiences by, firstly, arguing against narrow, often value-laden definitions of engagement and, instead, contextualizing the phenomenon within their lived experiences. Secondly, it makes the case that how they engage with news is not simply a means to an end – that end being information – but a cognitive and affective experience that is constitutive of their performance as an informed and critical audience. Such an approach to news audiences may not share the simple instrumentality of putting user demand to numbers; but, if academic and industry research is to take them seriously, there is a need to knock down these crumbling assumptions about engagement and rebuild it from the audience up. The task of fostering audience loyalty and retention on proprietary websites and mobile applications can no longer rely on 'treating audiences not as individuals, but as a number' (Columbia Journalism Review 2019). How they can begin to take audiences seriously is to, really, do what journalists have always done: watch how audiences *act* and listen to how they *feel*.

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The gamification of sleep

A case study on user engagement with *SleepTown* in everyday(night) life

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Introduction

There is a close relationship between sleep and media. Electronic and digital media play a vital role in people's sleep practices. On the one hand, media can function as a sleep aid. For example, online sleep-related information offers laypeople a resource to improve sleep so as to empower the general public (Dement and Vaughan 2000). On the other hand, media can be inhibitors of sleep. For instance, digital media devices in the bedroom increase people's media use and produce negative effects on sleep patterns such as delayed bedtime, shorter sleep duration, longer sleep latency and increased daytime fatigue (Exelmans and Van den Bulck 2019). Therefore sleep is not just a gift but also a problem for many people, resulting from the pervasiveness of digital and mobile media. When it comes to roles in sleep-related matters, media can be 'advocate or critic', 'sponsor or saboteur' at the same time (Williams 2005:154).

Sleep is both a biological necessity and a concept endowed with meaning and practices in a social context that can change depending on historical, social and cultural factors (Williams, Meadows and Arber 2011: 294). In the digital age, an interesting shift in sleep habits is occurring with the boom in self-regulating devices and mobile apps. Sleep is not only mediatized, medicalized and commodified (Williams 2005) but digitalized (Lupton 2018) and gamified (Ilhan,

Sener and Hacihabibog 2016). The gamified technology has created a shift from sleep as only biological, inactive and private to possibly digital, active and public, as the game allows users to act, achieve goals and be surveilled by others in the virtual space when sleeping. The shift not only affects users' sleep routine including how to sleep and when to sleep, but implies power struggles between app designers and media users, users and users, between individuals and broader social structure.

Sleep, constructed as a site for self-enhancement and gaming, enacted well in both physical and digital space, can indicate the knowledge scope of body and health, which is deeply shaped by technologies and the need for entertainment. Scholars have done relevant research in the fields of game and gamification (Walz and Deterding 2014), health and digital technology (Lupton 2016; 2018), sleep tracking in the domestic sphere (Kelly, Strecker and Bianchi 2012) and in the digital age (Williams, Coveney and Meadows 2015). Yet, existing studies tend to focus on gamification and digital health separately or generally, leaving the specific gamification of sleep based on digital media overlooked. There is a need for a social science view on gamified sleep in the digital age, because sleep practice is now not just a biological necessity but also an important reflection of the deeply mediatized social world (Couldry and Hepp 2017). Media and communication studies have much to contribute to an understanding of sleep, now and in the future, shedding new light on the social dimensions of sleep. The thesis will produce new knowledge on the gamification of sleep among Chinese app users and contribute to the intersectional study of gamification and digital health.

Building a *SleepTown*

To better understand gamified sleep via mobile apps, it is helpful to conduct a concrete case study on an app with game features. Hence, I choose to focus on a sleep app called *SleepTown (睡眠小镇)*, created by *Seekrtech (时刻科技)*[28], adopting unique and attractive game elements to help users regulate their sleep-wake cycles and get rid of mobile distractions, in order to *build healthy sleep*

[28] *Seekrtech* is a Taiwanese technology company (https://seekrtech.com/en/), famous for apps *Forest* (a productivity app that helps users put down phones and stay focused) and *SleepTown*.

habits[29]. *SleepTown* is a commercial product. To download and use all the functions of the app[30], users pay 12 Chinese *yuan*[31].

According to the Apple App Store, the basic rule of *SleepTown* is simple and fun: set bedtime and wake-up goals, go to bed, and get up in time to construct *buildings* (Figure 1) and create your own *Town* (Figure 2). If the goal is achieved consistently, the player will have chances to construct *rare buildings* (Figure 3), unlock *Achievements*, get coins to expand blocks and buy decorations, etc. Yet, the building under construction will *collapse* if you fail, that is, you destroy the building if you use the phone during sleep time or wake up too late. The function of *Circle* also allows users to form a 'sleep group' and build a *Wonder* together, by following the same sleep-wake pattern. Further, there are in-app settings or tools (e.g. *Strict Mode*, *Bedtime Reminder*, *Ambient Sound*) that help users put down phones and prepare for sleep.

Figure 1. Normal building

Figure 2. The Big Town

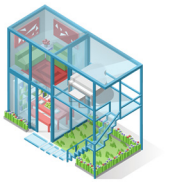


Figure 3. Rare building

There are five functions of *SleepTown*: beating phone addiction, maintaining a regular sleep schedule, collecting sleep statistics, building communities, and entertainment. Hence, *SleepTown* combines features of productivity apps (manage time), health apps (regulate sleep), and digital games (have fun). However, different objectives of productivity apps and games can lead to contrary

[29] See more official information about *SleepTown*: https://SleepTown.seekrtech.com

[30] Android users can download the app and use the basic function of the app for free. If they want to get coins and tickets, unlock *Achievements*, build a *Circle* etc, they have to pay. IOS users are not offered such a choice. They pay for it when downloading the app. (All interviewees have paid for the app.)

[31] According to the Apple App Store of different regions, the price is equal to 25 Swedish kronor, 2.29 Euros, and 1.99 US dollars.

effects on people's media use. Productivity apps often limit users' phone use while games require people's phone use, and are often criticized for being 'addictive'. It seems contradictory that *SleepTown* encourages users to put down their phone on the one hand, and endorses its service based on digital devices on the other hand.

Moreover, users may also have conflicting thoughts and experiences of digital media (over)use (Syvertsen 2020:9). Their personal stories can tell us not only something about individual practices and tactics dealing with different functions of an app, but also something about living in a media-saturated society. Thus it is important to listen to the real users' voices. This requires an audience study, to get closer to users' engagement with the app and to find out how users understand their app use in everyday(night) life.

Aim and research questions

I aim to explore the gamification of sleep at a micro level by looking into the app *SleepTown* and users' everyday life practices. In particular, I want to look into the game mechanism of *SleepTown* and how it works to regulate users' sleep. By conducting qualitative interviews with users, I want to understand their engagement with the app and their perceptions about sleep regulation and smartphone use, revealing the power relations between the human and non-human objects in the process of 'doing' sleep. By investigating the gamification techniques and users' mediatized everyday/night sleep-related practices, light can be shed on what meanings are ascribed to sleep in a digital age.

The research questions are:

1. How does *SleepTown* adopt gamification as a strategy to regulate people's sleep?
2. In what ways do users engage with *SleepTown*, and understand their sleeping/gaming experiences in everyday(night) life?
3. How is the meaning of sleep shaped by *SleepTown* and the users' practices?

Reviewing sleep and gamification

In this section, I will review concepts or theories regarding sleep, gamification, media engagement and agency.

Sleep as a problem

Sleep is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be reduced to a single biological, psychological or social domain (Williams 2005; Williams et al. 2011; Crossley 2004). Scholars have shed light on the socially constructed aspect of sleep. Williams (2005) argues that sleep is a complex practice that shows 'a high degree of socio-cultural plasticity or variability' (ibid.: 3). Not only social and cultural factors but material, symbolic, corporeal and aesthetic criteria affect ways of 'doing sleep' (Taylor 1993). Also, the sleeping world is not isolated but depends on and interacts with the waking world. Sleep is negotiated through a network where actual and virtual social circles intersect and influence each other (Crossley 2004). To understand sleep, we should look into people's lives and social networks in which sleep is embodied and embedded (ibid.).

The medicalisation of sleep and healthism

The term medicalization describes the process by which non-medical problems become defined and treated as medical (Conrad 2007). Certain behaviors or common life processes such as eating and sleeping have been medicalized. Critics suggest that (over)medicalization transforms every aspect of everyday life into pathologies, narrowing the range of acceptable behaviors (ibid.:7). Institutions or people who have the authority to define certain behaviors and persons play significant roles in the medicalization of society. Corporations, media, and even individual consumers become important advocates for medicalization and healthism, boosting the sleep market and the commodification of sleep.

Healthism describes the phenomenon wherein well-being is primarily defined and achieved by personal health care, and a modification of lifestyle (Crawford 1980). As a growing number of behaviors and social phenomena are judged by the standard of 'health', health is generalized as the struggle for well-being in every aspect. In the healthist utopian imagination, health is the essential value and everything can be problematized and medicalized in the name of health.

Healthism is an ideology that emphasizes lifestyle choices and individual responsibility for health. Both causes and solutions are situated at the individual level. People benefit from and are hurt by highlighted individual responsibility. On the one hand, self-responsibility indicates a reclaim of personal power, delegitimizing medical authorities and empowering lay people to be active subjects (Crawford 1980:377). On the other hand, the focus on individual responsibility weakens the social effort to improve health and well-being (ibid.:368). Social constraints that limit personal choices are overlooked.

The notion of 'sleep hygiene' (Dement and Vaughan 2000) is useful to understand the impact of healthism on sleep habits. The principles and practice of sleep hygiene focus on behavioral elements, requiring people to be responsible for teaching themselves about sleep (ibid.:15). Keeping a regular sleep pattern is one of the most important behaviors for healthy sleep (ibid.). People are encouraged to plan their lives including sleeping, in the name of well-being. New forms of governmentality and surveillance are produced 'in the name of health, happiness and the wisdom and virtue of a well-slept life' (Williams 2005:154).

The commodification of sleep

People' attention to health and obsession with self-care contributes to the commercialization and consumption of sleep. Sleep is now big business, as a great number of products and services are sold and consumed in the name of (good) sleep (Williams 2005:165). The pursuit of productivity in a fast-paced society not only leads to sleep problems (e.g. sleep deprivation, insomnia), but also plays an essential role in self-management of sleep-wellness. In other words, capitalism disrupts and guarantees people's sleep at the same time. Capitalism makes profits from people's wakefulness and sleep (ibid.:160): When people are awake, their surplus value can be exploited by overworking. When people are ready to sleep, they are convinced to pay for sleep-optimizing products or services, ensuring the next-day productivity. People are thus laborers as well as consumers in the day/night circle. To some extent, sleep is no longer a biological necessity that everyone consumes, but a new commodity that neoliberal capitalism sells back to people (Urquhart 2018). Only those who can afford and want to purchase the commodity will be granted good sleep.

Existing literature pays more attention to consumers' waking life, but some scholars identify sleep as a form of consumption and analyze the relationship

between sleep and consumers. Valtonen and Moisander (2012:436) argue that 'sleep-as-consumption' is constructed as a particular mode of being. Through commodification, sleep is transformed to a marketable entity with economic value (ibid.:438). 'Great sleep' is a fantasy created by consumer culture in which new kinds of fun and feelings are produced by consumers' desires. Sleepers as consumers are encouraged to maximize their attempts to sleep well and wake up energized (ibid.:436). 'Great sleep' is not recognized as an illusion but a culturally acceptable behavior and attractive experience that consumers can achieve by purchasing specific products or services. Discursive and practical knowledge regarding sleep is also produced and spread in and out of the media and the market, shaping peoples' understanding and practice of sleep.

The digitalisation of sleep and mobile apps

Due to mobile digital developments (m-Health), people can track sleep, share data with professionals and others, participate in online groups, collect and make use of relevant information to optimize their sleep (Lupton 2014). There is a new important digital dimension and dynamic to the debates in the form of new technologies to monitor or 'm-app' (as in mobile-app) the 'sleep of ourselves' in everynight/day life (Williams et al. 2015). Anyone who wants to take their phone to bed can monitor their sleep (ibid.). Some apps targeting patients suffering from sleep disorders focus on the scientific management of the problem, delivering cognitive behavioral therapy and arranging meetings with clinicians. Some apps target people with less severe sleep problems, helping them generate data about sleep patterns. Some apps like *SleepTown* targeting phone addicts do not collect much data but urge users to put down their phone and go to bed early.

The genre of health apps plays a vital role in contemporary care and health practice, contributing to the notions of health, illness and embodiment (Lupton 2014). Mobile apps are digital technologies and 'sociocultural products located within pre-established circuits of discourse and meaning' (ibid.:610). Political values of healthism are given to self-tracking apps, championing behavioral conventions and individual responsibility for self-care. Apps are considered to assume certain kinds of capabilities, desires and embodiments, but also construct and configure them (ibid.). They can produce new practices and knowledge about the self and body, and reshape the relationship between technology, health and culture.

Gamification as a solution

In general, gamification means the use of game design elements in non-game contexts (Deterding, Khaled, Nacke and Dixon 2011:9). In practice, gamification is defined as the process of using game thinking and game mechanics to solve problems and engage users (Zichermann 2011). Due to the development of digital technology and infrastructure, gamification is now commonly used in self-tracking products and services to advance users' involvement (Raessens 2014).

Some game theorists place great value on gamification. McGonigal (2011) regards gamification as a vital solution to social problems. She identifies four types of rewards (satisfying work, experience/hope of being successful, social connections, and meanings) that people can get through gaming, corresponding to human needs related to happiness and well-being. She thus calls for the construction of alternative realities by which people can live in and interact with the world in new, more 'gameful' ways (ibid.:112). However, some scholars stay critical to the capitalist goal of wealth accumulation behind gamification. Bogost (2014) argues that gamification is merely a consulting style that irresponsible consultants use to deal with customers' problems. It offers the simplest and fastest route to get things done and make profits (ibid.:68). Gamification can also be seen as a mechanism that serves the post-Fordist economy based on consumption, leisure and flexibility (Rey 2014). Fun, as a 'carrot dangled before the highly programmed masses' (ibid.:280), renders post-Fordist subjects as 'dupes' that are easily fooled and exploited. Some scholars admit there might be both benefits and risks. Sicart (2014) argues that playing a good life, supported by computer technologies, is a way of living a good life, but not every game design is 'a conduit of a good life' (ibid.:226). A good life is constructed based on expression and reflection through action. We should constantly act and reflect on ourselves to develop our best self.

Gamification and governmentality

Gamification makes it possible to motivate intended behavior effectively in a pleasant way. In the process of self-optimization, a new mode of governmentality appears and functions effectively through the designed options and gameful setting, to regulate people's behavior. Foucauldian theories are helpful to understand the discursive construction of sleep-related reality. Foucault invented the term 'governmentality' combining 'government' with 'rationality' (Foucault, Senellart and Davidson 2007). He defines government as 'the conduct of

conduct', that is, 'a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons' (Foucault, Burchell, Gordon and Miller 1991:2). Government is an activity involving not only relations concerned with political sovereignty and relations between communities and social institutions, but also interpersonal relations and relations between self and self (ibid.). Foucault uses 'art of government' to explain the 'rationality of government'. Rationality is thus a system of thinking about the nature of the practice of government (who governs whom or what, and in what ways). It indicates that there must be pre-defined rules that people can act on and thus individual behaviors can be managed or controlled. Yet, people can alter the direction of the conduct of the governed. Hence, government is an art that requires people's knowledge and skills of administration and management. Deleuze (1992) extends Foucault's analysis of governmentality further. It is important to think about how governmentality is enacted when social control is automated by technology and individuals are reduced to malleable 'dividuals' formed by data (ibid.). Operation nowadays is not only disciplined through surveillance and normalization but controlled by consumption and desire (Whitson 2014:343).

Inspired by Foucault, Schrape (2014) argues that gamification techniques represent an emerging new mode of governmentality based on digital infrastructure and technology. Gamification, as a method to regulate people and society, constructs the subject as a free player in a limited rule-space. In this sense, gamification practices Foucault's idea of 'neoliberal governmentality' to the extreme. In particular, Schrape argues that gamification belongs to the category of 'positive feedback' (ibid.:30). Game elements such as points and badges are positive feedback, while punishment and deterrence are negative feedback techniques. Although he identifies the effective regulation of behavior via positive feedback, he fails to take gamified negative feedback such as virtual punishment (e.g. visual representation of failure, dropped ranking, being kicked out from a community) into account. Gamification can adopt both positive and negative feedback techniques.

The concept of 'libertarian paternalism' (Thaler and Sunstein 2008) is also helpful to understand the relationship between freedom and regulation. Libertarian paternalism means that subjects are allowed to choose options freely, but the options are designed in a way that they will decide in an intended way (ibid.). In a gamified setting, rules or limitations of the game mechanism can be hidden or

well-justified, fostering the player's illusion of freedom. People are not forced to play the game, but once they play they have to obey the rules.

Gamification and surveillance

The prevalence of gamification indicates the power of 'soft' persuasion regarding people's behaviors. The carrot beats the stick at the expense of total surveillance (Schrape 2014:21). Gamification makes the process of self-surveillance more fun and less medical. Self-tracking, as a product of the ever-quantifying society, introduces self-surveillance in terms of health. Self-trackers gain a sense of control as well as pleasure when using gamified tracking products or services. They are motivated to enjoy features such as rendering everyday lives into metrics and images, checking visualization of the data, comparing metrics with others or with previous data, sharing these data on social media etc. (ibid.). Uploading intimate details of one's life to social media indicates that gamification of the quantified self breaks down oppositions between the private and public space (Whitson 2014:349). The relationship between the public and the private is significantly altered by digital surveillance.

Mutual surveillance can constitute a part of game mechanisms. Andrejevic (2005) uses the word 'interveillance' to refer to surveillance conducted by peer-to-peer monitoring. For example, social media is one vital place to exercise interveillance. Three forms of routinized social monitoring and self-expression are integrated in social media platforms: watching and judging networked Others, watching Others watching oneself, and watching one's own data double – the hypermediated Self (Christensen and Jansson 2015:1480). Social media in this sense are institutions that are 'panoptic' and 'synoptic' at the same time (Lupton 2018:23): you are able to observe others while others can gaze at you as well. The combined model of 'panopticon' (Foucault 1975; Bentham 1843) and 'synopticon' (Mathiesen 1997) can be adopted by self-tracking apps as a way to empower and limit users' behavior.

Engaging sleep in everyday life

The notion of media engagement is helpful to explore app users' feelings and thoughts. Corner (2011) argues that engagement varies in intensity, depending on cognitive and affective work by audiences. The affective work is connected with one's subjectivity and feelings, while the cognitive work is related to critical

appreciation and genre knowledge, storytelling, aesthetics and style (Hill 2017:6). Extending Corner's idea, Hill's (2017) spectrum of engagement 'captures the dynamic movement across the cognitive and affective work of audiences, highlighting the different positions and intensities of engagement' (ibid.:7). The spectrum includes affective and critical modes, and audiences can switch between positive and negative engagement, to disengagement (ibid.:8). For example, when people scrutinize their intimate physiological states through technologies, some may feel empowered while others may feel burdened. When people's feeling of 'being forced' beats the fun, they may disengage with the app temporarily or permanently.

Productivity and digital detox

As *SleepTown* helps users improve productivity in the daytime by managing their sleep at night, it shares similar traits with productivity apps. Gregg's (2018) ideas about productivity apps are useful to understand what meanings are attached to them, and how they affect people's work. Thanks to productivity apps, methods of time management such as taking notes and arranging tasks are transformed into an embodied and daily practice (ibid.). An 'aesthetics of activity' is generated by productivity apps (ibid.:82). Software can employ minimalist design such as unique color schemes and clutter-free interfaces, to invoke the value and pleasure when people reach the goal. Nevertheless, productivity apps can enable 'too much activity' (ibid.:85), as users continuously express creativity in efficient management tasks. Productivity apps emphasize that 'process trumps content' (ibid.:86), and are often promoted for their capabilities - 'synchronicity, smart, and seamless' (ibid.), leaving the material realities of work that require action overlooked.

The pursuit of productivity makes people reflect on how they allocate time for media use. Syvertsen's (2020) explanation of digital detox is useful when analyzing people's resistance to media and technology. Digital detox means a 'periodic disconnection from social or online media, or strategies to reduce digital media involvement' (Syvertsen and Enli 2019). In a world with ever-increasing information, the emphasis of digital detox shifts from improving media to improving the user (Syvertsen 2020). Besides fighting addiction, there are three dominant motives for digital detox: presence, productivity and privacy (ibid.). Detoxers want to reclaim the authenticity of presence and here-ness by enjoying missing out. They also commonly talk about the loss of productivity and

concentration, and procrastination due to digital overuse. The concern about the use, sale, and misuse of personal data is another impetus for people limiting and resisting digital media. Digital detox is not just a trend based on economic, political and cultural contexts at a macro level, but 'a deeply personal thing told in a thousand micro-stories' (ibid.:9). Hence it is vital to explore different reasons people have for detoxing, and variations in how they choose to talk about it in their lives.

Human and non-human agency

As users have to obey rules once they use the app, they are often considered less powerful than the producers who structure the rules. Yet, users are not passive but active agents. De Certeau (1984) uses the concepts of 'strategy' and 'tactic' to explain different practices of the powerful and the non-powerful respectively. Strategies are only available to subjects of 'will and power' (ibid.:xix). A strategy defines a 'proper' place as 'the basis for generating relations with an exterior distinct from it, while tactics only 'insinuates itself into the other's place fragmentarily' (ibid.). Strategies can produce political, economic and scientific rationality, offering a schematic ordering of social reality. However, people's everyday practices can be tactical, resisting and disrupting the ordering constructed by strategies. As Lupton argues, technologies are domesticated in everyday life, and human actors are able to use digital technologies in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways (2018:107). Thus the meaning and usage of apps are not fixed but rather open to change and contestation (ibid.).

According to Actor-Network Theory (ANT), technological objects should be given equal status to humans. The actor-network approach describes the enactment of materially and discursively heterogeneous relations that produce and reshuffle all types of actors (Law 2007:1). If there is a thing as 'the social', it is made up of networks that consist of heterogeneous assemblages (Inglis and Thorpe 2019:250). 'Actants' in networks are human and non-human (ibid.). According to Latour, actants refer to things that have the potential to 'modify a state of affairs by making a difference' (2005:71). Humans, animals, technologies, and other non-humans all have agency – the ability to 'act' (Bueger and Stockbruegger 2016:8). Every medium or technology has characteristics, constituting their own 'affordances' (Gibson 1967) that enable and limit specific actions (Couldry and Hepp 2017).

Digital technologies as participants in the user-technology assemblage shape our practice and understanding of sleep, health, self-care, embodiment and selfhood. Mobile apps have the power to construct and configure the capabilities and desires that are attached to them, and also can resist and disrupt them. The networks, made of discursive and material things and relations between them, are fragile and open to change (Inglis and Thorpe 2019:250). Both human and non-human technical actants modify and disrupt the configurations of app use. On the one hand, human makers and users have agency to decide how to design and use the app. On the other hand, technological affordances delimit the scope within which apps can be created, developed, and used (Lupton 2014).

Qualitative research on *SleepTown*

This thesis is built upon a social constructionist approach. Social constructionism argues that our common ways of understanding the world are not from the nature of the world, but are constructed between people, both past and present, through their daily interactions (Burr 2015). In particular, people's knowledge about and practice of 'doing' sleep are socially constructed within the context of ongoing processes of medicalization, commercialization, mediatization and digitalization (Williams 2005; Lupton 2018). Gamification also contributes to the meaning-making process of sleep. Digital media technologies play a vital role in constructing the social world. Analyzing both the mediated construction and the material presence of media (Couldry and Hepp 2017:88) is essential, if we strive to understand how and why people's perception and practice of sleep shift in the digital age.

Inspired by ANT, I will pay attention to both human actors and non-human actants in the network (Latour 2005). In the case of *SleepTown*, users, software, smartphones and technologies are important factors that can develop or disrupt the associations. Consequently, when analyzing how *SleepTown* affects people's understanding and practice of sleep, not only the content carried by the app but the materiality of digital devices and technologies will be taken into consideration. However, since the main focus of this thesis is user engagement, analysis of human agency will be emphasized.

Case study research is useful to produce contextual knowledge (Flyvbjerg 2001). Instead of staying on an abstract theoretical level, case studies help researchers develop a more nuanced view of reality (ibid.:72). To some degree, *SleepTown* is an extreme case with rich and unusual content regarding sleep and gamification, as it amplifies gamification to influence users' sleep behaviors. It doesn't treat game techniques as a less important part of the app design as other health apps, sparing no effort in forming its unique gameful characteristic. In *SleepTown*, sleep-wake cycle setting and game mechanism are deeply interwoven with one another. The boundary between health apps and digital games is blurred, because the strong game design pushes *SleepTown* further into a serious town-building game (Xu 2017).

Doing qualitative interviews

Qualitative in-depth interview is a useful research method for accessing individuals' attitudes and values (Byrne 2018:220). I planned to interview ten Chinese *SleepTown* users, aging from 16[32] to 30, sleeping alone[33], who have used *SleepTown* for more than three weeks (more than four times a week). People in their teens or twenties, especially students, are the main targets, constituting the majority of potential interviewees. Basic information about the interviewees, the duration and frequency of usage was collected in advance. To look into the app's influence on people's life comprehensively, I included people still using the app as well as people no longer using it. In addition, I didn't intend to keep a balance of gender but tried to recruit male and female users. On the one hand, following a social constructionist perspective on gender, I would like to group patterns of behavior rather than to presume two dichotomies in each category (Lorber 1993:571), and on the other hand, I admit that people's motivations and experiences of using *SleepTown* can differ due to gender norms. Gender will be elaborated briefly in the footnotes of the analysis.

[32] I didn't find any specific ethics of interviewing minors (under 18 years old) in China. According to The *Act concerning the Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans* (2003) in Sweden, children between 15 and 18, who have adequate information about the research project to undertake activities freely and with awareness of possible adverse consequences, can consent without parent's authorization.

[33] I chose users who sleep alone to exclude the variation of intimate relations and better investigate the app function.

I combined the snowball approach with volunteer sampling to recruit interviewees. Snowball sampling helped me identify the salient characteristics of users within a network (Seale 2018:167), while volunteer sampling helped me find different users who may have 'particularly unusual or interesting insights to deliver' (ibid.). As a result, I recruited 13 interviewees aging from 17[34] to 26, consisting of two males and eleven females. The interviews were conducted in Chinese, through online video or audio calls on *WeChat(微信)*[35]. Considering ethics of qualitative research (Brennen 2012), a brief research introduction and consent form were given to interviewees before beginning.

Semi-structured interviews allow interviewees to speak 'in their own voices and with their own language' (Byrne 2018:221). Questions were designed as open-ended and flexible, following six themes: *Context*, *App*, *Sleep*, *Gamification*, *Detox and productivity*, and *Engagement*. After piloting with a female user, the interview guide was improved by restructuring overlapping questions. Luckily, all interviewees showed a strong interest in participating and offered rich data for analysis. The twelve following interviews ranged from 50 to 90 minutes, were recorded by phone and manually transcribed.

Analyzing the data

Thematic coding is a useful way of analyzing data, as it reduces the volume of original data and turns it into patterns that are easier to ascribe meaning to (Rivas 2018). The research analysis went through three stages, from open coding, to category development, and theme formation (ibid.). A mixture of inductive and deductive approaches was adopted: open coding and categorizing inductively allowed me to be immersed in the empirical data and generate my understanding in detail, while the deductive approach was helpful to conceptualize data interpretation to more general theoretical ideas. I also studied literature on sleep, gamification, and surveillance before coding, in order to get a sense of 'theoretical sensitivity' (ibid.:431).

[34] The two 17-year-old interviewees volunteered to participate in the interview. They were fully informed about the research aims, and signed the consent form in advance. During the interview, they understood the questions well and gave rich information about their app use.

[35] *WeChat* is a Chinese multi-purpose messaging and social media app with over 1 billion users (Wikipedia).

Through thematic coding, descriptive codes, sub categories, categories and themes were produced. As all completed transcripts were saved in separate Word documents, I read them thoroughly and started open coding, highlighting some quotes and making side notes. To get initial codes down and trace the original text conveniently, all codes were converted into an Excel sheet and marked with twelve different colors representing the interviewees. Next, a spider diagram was drawn to organize thoughts (ibid.:374). Codes in different colors indicating the same (sub)category were put into the same block. Finally, a deductive approach was applied when it came to categories and themes. To create a dialogue between findings and theoretical concepts, I went back and forth between the empirical material and literature. Concepts inspired by the literature were critically applied to five final themes: *Game mechanism*, *Technological affordances*, *Sleep routine*, *Daily practices*, and *User engagement*.

Critical reflections

First, I want to reflect on the process of recruitment. When I realized that I couldn't recruit enough respondents through snowball sampling, I used volunteer sampling by making a post in the *Super Topic(超级话题)*[36] page of *SleepTown*, on Chinese social media *Weibo(微博)*[37]. There are risks and benefits of online recruitment. On one hand, the people I contacted there belong to the 'active' group that engages with *SleepTown* and social media. 'Invisible' users who do not leave digital footprints were excluded from the sample (Seale 2018:167). On the other hand, I successfully found nine interviewees with 'interesting insights' (ibid.). Having more active users allowed me to generate richer data from their app use and online practice. Their close relationships with digital media inspired me to explore the connection between their experiences in the physical world and the virtual world.

Second, I want to reflect on the non-face-to-face way of interviewing. Due to the special circumstances of COVID-19, I chose to conduct interviews through video

[36] *Super Topics* are interest-based content community pages created and edited by *Weibo* users. Online sub-groups are thus created and developed, separate from the main *Weibo* space. These *Weibo Super Groups* are similar to the 'mega-threads' or 'subreddits' on *Reddit*.

[37] *Weibo (Sina Weibo*) is a Chinese microblogging website, similar to *Twitter*. *Weibo* is one of the biggest social media platforms in China, with over 445 million monthly active users (Wikipedia).

calls. However, many Chinese netizens, who are used to being anonymous or using pseudonyms online, preferred not showing their face to a stranger, and hesitated to participate in video interviews. Thus four interviewees recruited online were interviewed through audio calls. In this case, the quality of Internet connection matters. Non-verbal cues and body language are difficult to monitor through long-distance encounters (Byrne 2018). Hence, I always checked Internet connection and prepared warm-up questions. During the interviews, I sometimes repeated or concluded interviewees' answers, to make sure there were no missing points or misunderstandings. At the end of each interview I asked respondents to send me screenshots of what they had mentioned or any relevant materials they want to share. The supplements vividly illustrated what they meant and helped me understand their sleep and online practice.

Lastly, I want to reflect on my position in the research. To be more familiar with app features and understand interviewees' experiences, I started to use the app more than four times a week from February 2020. Though I didn't use autoethnography, the one and half month's immersion allowed me to deeply explore the app and get practical tips about collecting constructions and exploiting the 'backdoor'. I also went through the official webpages and users' comments to get a broader picture. Not only the literature and online information but my app use helped me structure the interview guide, and offered visuals[38] in the analysis. Though I focused on the interviewees' practices rather than my experience, it was impossible to avoid bias completely, so I stayed aware of the subjectivity of interpretation by being reflective of the overall process (Altheide and Schneider 2013). Despite the fact that there is no 'one, true meaning' of the scripts (Hall 1997:9), I strived to think critically and justify my understanding in detail through concrete examples to make the interpretation more convincing.

[38] In this chapter, figures without referring to interviewees were from the official website or the author's app.

Constructing a *SleepTown* in everyday(night) life

In this section, I will discuss the game mechanism of *SleepTown*, how it functions, in what ways users engage with it, and the meaning shift of sleep in a digital age.

Gamification and sleep regulation

First, I will explore how the feedback mechanism and surveillance mechanism attract users and regulate their sleep. Inspired by ANT, I will then discuss how sleep regulation is enabled and limited by the agency of digital technology.

Feedback mechanism

Giving continuous and prompt feedback is one of the fundamental principles of gamification design (Matallaoui, Hanner and Zarnekow 2017). Users' engagement with the feedback mechanism involves affective and cognitive work (Corner 2011:91ff), mixing positive and negative emotions and critical appreciation regarding functionality and aesthetics (Hill 2017:8). Some users value the positive feedback and confirm the effectiveness of rewards for constant sleep regulation. Others pay more attention to the negative feedback including the damage to buildings, and strive to avoid negative emotions triggered by punishment.

SleepTown helps users feel rewarded for making their best effort for sleep. The building is not only a reward for regular sleep but a surprise that motivates users to wake up every morning. In most cases, the building is randomly allocated[39]. As Interviewee *K* said, *'SleepTown* makes sleeping a chance to surprise yourself. [...] The building is a reward or proof of your regulated sleep last night'. People are satisfied when they get an outcome as positive feedback confirming their efforts.

Thanks to gamification, sleep is transformed into a fun and entertaining experience. The conduct of sleep is guided by pleasure and desire rather than coercion (Deleuze 1992). People desire buildings for all kinds of reasons[40]. Some

[39] Unless they spend coins specifying a building constructed previously. (The allocation of buildings may not be random as there could be algorithms anlayzing users' information and deciding what the next reward will be).

[40] Users' desire for buildings can be constructed based on gender norms. Tiny and well-designed buildings are seen as more attractive to girls. Some female interviewees regard *SleepTown* as a girl-targeted app and thought boys 'do not care about cute buildings' (Interviewee *P*) or 'sleep

enjoy the sudden rush of pleasure when an unexpected building shows up. Some regard collecting a powerful drive, as they are eager to collect all types of rewards and complete the mission. For others, a visually attractive building is compelling for purely aesthetic reasons.

> I liked the cinema, the villa with a pool, and the building like a four-sided courtyard (Figure 4). They depict my **dream architecture**. (Interviewee *Q*)

Figure 4. The dream architecture (Interviewee Q)

How the game looks is an incredibly vital aspect of aesthetics, directly affecting a player's experience (Schell 2008). Users' positive engagement confirms the visual value and attractiveness of well-designed buildings. Although some users recognize that they are treated by virtual symbols programmed by computer code, their happiness is real and not ruined by this fact. As Interviewee *W* said, 'the buildings are just data', but she 'was happy to construct a building and post screenshots of it on *Moments(朋友圈)*[41] of *WeChat*'. Though the sense of happiness only lasts a few seconds or minutes and disappears quickly, the

and apps' (Interviewee *M*) as girls do. They tend to 'only recommend SleepTown to girls' (Interviewee *P*) or '*discuss the app use with female users*' (Interviewee *M*).

[41] *Moments* is a social-networking function of *Wechat*. It is known as 'Friends' Circle' in Chinese. It allows users to share and get access to the accepted *WeChat* friend's information (pictures, short videos, music, links, etc.), creating a private communication circle.

buildings do bring users pleasure and satisfaction, motivating them to follow the sleep schedule consistently.

All types of constructed buildings are displayed in *Buildex* (Figure 5) – the display of collection. It shows how many buildings the user has collected, and motivates the user to continue sleeping regularly to unlock more unknown buildings. Before collecting all the buildings, users are greatly driven by curiosity and ambition, holding expectations for the next surprise when falling asleep. When users gather all types of constructions, their sense of satisfaction and achievement reaches the highest level. They can share their happiness with friends and families, and strangers online. As Interviewee *Y* demonstrated, 'I was so excited when unlocking all the buildings, and posted the screenshots of them on *Weibo*'.

Figure 5. The interface of Buildex

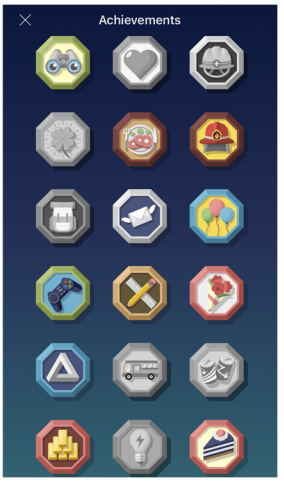


Figure 6. The interface of Achievements

Badges belong to the *Achievements* (Figure 6). Badges motivate, track, and visualize users' progress. They are special rewards for specific acts. In general, some achievements are unlocked by making individual efforts to regulate sleep, while others are randomly given depending on the building you have constructed. For example, you can get a *7 in a row* when reaching the goal seven days in a row. Yet, badges like *School Day* or *Enjoy your meal* will only be unlocked if the user randomly constructs a school or a restaurant.

Badges are more scarce rewards than buildings, as the system offers fewer badges and badges only show up under limited circumstances. Both time and fortune are needed to unlock *Achievements*. To some degree, the badge becomes a loyalty reward that symbolizes users' efforts (Zichermann and Cunningham 2011). Compared to new and inactive users, regular and active users who interact with the app frequently will have more chances to be rewarded.

The Big Town, a space for users to appreciate and manage rewards, is a mixture of regulation and freedom. Users' conduct of sleep is discursively shaped by the neoliberal mode of governmentality (Foucault et al. 1991): even though people are limited by the pre-defined rules and buildings they get, *The Big Town* allows for exercising freedom and autonomy. Users can design the Town freely as long as the system allows them.

> The **random surprise** given by the system and your own **subjective choices** coexist. Although you are not allowed to choose which building to get, you can arrange them freely in your Town. (Interviewee *K*)

Play is about freedom but the purpose of gamification is control (Rey 2014). *SleepTown* offers people a chance to get sleep done and enjoy it. Gamification works as a form of soft power that produces willing subjects (Foucault 1975) and self-motivated consumers (Rey 2014). Users feel more engaged and are willing to be self-responsible. In *The Big Town*, the user is the master, called *Mayor*. *Mayors* are able to 'drag' their houses to their town and arrange them, buy blocks or decorations, remove destroyed buildings, etc. The title of mayor grants them honor while taking care of their Town becomes a part of a self-responsibility-building project. Users are continuously urged to bridle phone addiction and govern themselves.

Although there are no citizens in the Town, responsible mayors feel they should design the Town as 'appropriate' as in real life. The Town is often divided into different functional districts such as 'industrial zones' (Figure 7) and 'residential neighborhood'. Creative users also give special names to the areas dominated by the same type of buildings:

> '**College Town**' is the district full of schools. '**Disneyland**' is the area full of fairgrounds. Districts dominated by banks or cinemas are called '**Financial Center**' or '**Universal Studios**'. (Interviewee *W*)

Figure 7. The industrial zone (Interviewee W)

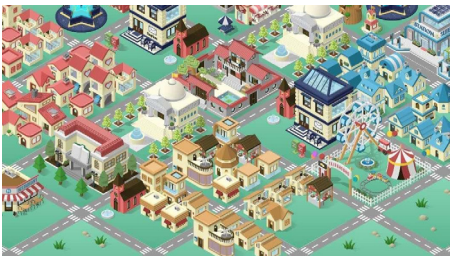
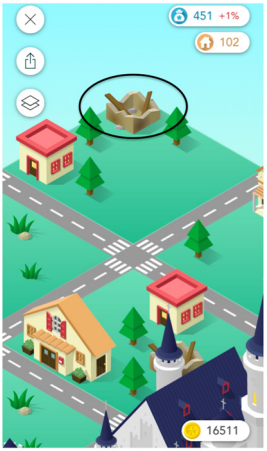


Figure 8. Districts divided by color (Interviewee Q)

The Big Town satisfies users' need for self-expression, showing that they are unique and distinguishable from others. Though buildings in the Town are 'fake', people connect virtual buildings with landscapes in real life. Some users also pay attention to building color. They put together buildings in the same color and categorize areas into red, yellow and blue districts (Figure 8). The visually organized arrangements can give them 'a sense of order and fulfillment' (Interviewee *Q*).

Failure and punishment

Negative feedback techniques in the gamified setting are different from those in the social context. Compared to punishment for crimes in the physical space, punishment in a virtual game gives users less pressure and more encouragement. In *Sleep Town*, the punishment for individual users mainly points to the destroyed building and following negative emotions.



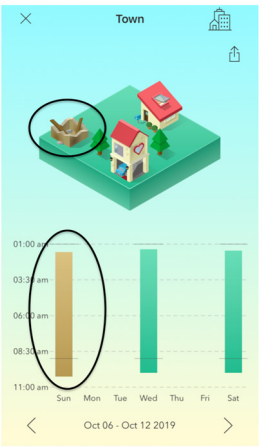


Figure 9. The destroyed building in The Big Town

Figure 10. The destroyed building in weekly data

The destroyed building embodies and visualizes the sleeper's 'failure' (Figure 9, 10). Not only the ruined house but also the sense of guilt disturbs users. After waking up, they often blame themselves and regret what they did last night. To avoid undesired results and keep the app useful, users stay alert to the failure and negative emotions:

> I think the destroyed buildings are very **ugly**. [...] I was not rich in the beginning. [...] It was **not pleasant** to spend 100 coins removing a ruined house, so I always remind myself to not destroy the building. (Interviewee *F)*

Though failures exist in the gameful environment, risks or punishment are not very severe. Negative feedback, as a subtle form of disciplinary power, mainly highlights behaviors that should be improved or changed. The destroyed buildings can be removed using coins. Negative emotions such as disappointment disappear quickly, as 'it's not worthwhile to ruin your day because of an app' (Interviewee *L*).

Although destroyed buildings don't matter much, users who fail do reflect on themselves and remind themselves to follow the sleep schedule next time. Users can clearly decipher what they need to do so as to make progress and avoid failure (Whitson 2014). In fact, the negative feedback mechanism embodies a political style of governmentality – libertarian paternalism (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). Users feel free to make their own decisions while failure is designed as a bad

option. Their own judgment guides them to make 'wise' decisions and be better off in such conditions. People's behavior is thus regulated in the intended way. The role of self-tracking media is extended beyond the record of sleep matters to complete cases of 'manipulation in the name of entertainment' (Williams 2005:156).

In *SleepTown*, gamification is adopted as a technology of government, a type of disciplinary power (Foucault 1975). It shapes users' conduct in the hope of producing certain desired effects and averting certain undesired events (Whitson 2014: 341). People are encouraged to participate voluntarily in self-optimization and self-care. The performance metrics and feedback are majorly positive and focused on rewards, progress, achievement, and engagement instead of underlining deficiencies. People are motivated by a sense of guilt and regret caused by failure, and learn from bad experiences. Self-reflection is prioritized as a route to self-improvement. Users can reach a sense of mastery when processing towards goals.

Mutual surveillance

Before the *Circle* was released, awards and punishment were designed to target individual users, to help them surveil themselves. After the *Circle* is introduced, mutual surveillance becomes an effective way to help users regulate sleep, as more and more friends or families as well as strangers are connected in 'sleep groups', following the same sleep schedule and building a fancy *Wonder* together.

There is new positive and negative feedback generated by the *Circle*. Building a *Wonder* with others is the most salient characteristic of a *Circle*. Many users are attracted by this unique feature and spontaneously monitor their sleep. Participants in the *Circle* will be punished by both the system and peers. Those who break the group rules or social norms may be hurt by others' complaints and/or be kicked out.

The *Wonder* (Figure 11) is the most visually attractive reward in a *Circle*. Different from personal buildings, group *Wonders* are 'bigger and more impressive' (Interviewee *X*). To construct a *Wonder*, the user has to join a *Circle* and contribute. Members in the same *Circle* are able to check other members' contribution and weekly performance. The interface of a *Circle* (Figure 12) consists of a visual of the *Wonder* and the leaderboard.

Figure 11. Wonders in The Big Town

Figure 12. The interface of Circle (Interviewee Y)

The *Circle* aims to help members achieve regular sleep, by exposing them to peer pressure and a sense of responsibility. Users can be motivated to employ defensive or protective tactics such as performing to influence others' perceptions of their image:

> You need to consider your **image** in front of friends. I will strive to **keep it up**. [...] You actually have to **perform** when using the app. If my friends in the Circle see me contribute to the Wonder everyday, they will see me as a **self-disciplined** person. (Interviewee *F*)

People's identity is constructed through their behaviors as well as others' eyes. From a Foucauldian perspective, the *Circle* combines two models of surveillance – 'panopticon' (Foucault 1975) and 'synopticon' (Mathiesen 1997) in the viewer society. Everyone in the *Circle* can check one another's status and contribution. Every user disciplines, and is disciplined by, others. The disciplinary power is naturalized by the game rules and internalized by group members who voluntarily optimize themselves. Since maintaining a regular sleep schedule is normalized as the socially accepted behavior and so-called 'healthy sleep habit', people who break the rule and do not keep to regular sleep are 'unhealthy' and 'irresponsible'. As most people have the desire to fit in and do not want to become others' 'burden', they are motivated to make a contribution to the group outcome. In

some occasions, sleep is no longer an individual necessity, but a kind of teamwork based on cooperation:

> We exclusively **focused on *Circle*** and didn't care about personal buildings or Town. [...] Most of us work in Shanghai. Our **ambition** was to 'construct Lujiazui(陆家嘴)'. We named it Lujiazui because it is the well-known glitzy commercial district in Shanghai. (Interviewee *R*)

When people pay attention to *Circle* and *Wonder*, they not only check the status but also give meaning to the goal and outcome. For example, Interviewee *R* formed a *Circle* with her close friends. The metaphor of *Lujiazui* denotes the big goal the group wanted to achieve and their ambition to conquer sleep problems. Borrowing the name of a well-known place in the physical world to label a virtual group also indicates the close connection between the virtual and physical world. Building a *Wonder* is not just about regulating sleep, but embodies a group project highlighting unity and productivity.

As everyone in the *Circle* is the governed and the governor, members – especially the host of a *Circle* – are empowered to monitor and discipline others' behavior. According to the official principle, hosts have the authority to kick out members who have not contributed to the *Wonder* for over three days. In practice, some hosts strictly follow the three-day rule, while some loosely execute the rule by 'purifying' the *Circle* every ten days. Others ignore the rule, not caring about the speed of construction. Although rules are flexible depending on different communities and hosts, members are more or less pressured by a sense of responsibility and obligation. When the host or members ignore social expectations for their behaviors, confusion, embarrassment and conflict may occur. Non-host members may feel powerless and angry about the host's irresponsibility:

> I **quit** the *Circle* as I felt **exhausted** when the host didn't care about the constructing process or member management. [...] Some members like me slept regularly but others just **exploited** our contribution and shared our outcome. [...] I prefer a strict host. The rule is like a **mutual consent**. I **dislike** people who violate rules in both the virtual and physical world. (Interviewee *K*)

Alignments forged by the *Circle* are unstable and can be disrupted if members ignore or violate the rules. The surveillance mechanism may not work for

particular groups or users, as the pressure members feel varies in degree. For instance, the disciplinary power of surveillance can be reduced when involving close friends. As Interviewee *R* said, she felt relaxed to reveal the authentic inner self to close friends: 'If someone does not contribute to the *Wonder*, others will not make any complaint.' She 'cannot form a *Circle* with acquaintances or strangers' as she will be 'sorry and embarrassed about the little contribution'. For her, getting along with close friends means taking off the mask and revealing the uninhibited self. *Circle* in this case may not function as it intends. Yet, for others who are disciplined by their friends' gaze, conforming to the ideal of self-discipline plays a vital part in their social interactions. Hence *Circle* can be a stage where authenticity and performance encounter and play off. Members' daily contribution to the *Wonder* is a self-conscious performance of the authentic self, or an intentionally produced action.

Technological affordances

The meaning and materiality of technology are equally important when understanding how technologies are integrated into everyday life (Silverstone and Hirsch 1992). When exploring how people's sleep is regulated through *SleepTown*, not only the 'content dimension' but also the 'object dimension' of the app should be discussed (Silverstone 2006). Due to the simple format and location on mobile devices, apps are easily downloaded and carried collecting, updating and sharing health information (Lupton 2014). The prevalence of *SleepTown* is also based on the pervasiveness of mobile technology that makes smartphones habitual in our daily life. Due to its special characteristics (tiny, mobile, smart), smartphones can build an intimate relationship with users, becoming a good carrier for sleep-tracking services.

Every medium has an affordance (Gibson 1967), offering the possibility for specific actions as part of its usability (Couldry and Hepp 2017:89). In the case of *SleepTown*, the affordances of smartphones, including the operating systems and installed applications, delimit users' app use. The operating systems (Android and IOS) are designed by different corporations and have different interfaces and equipped applications. Although *SleepTown* is available to both system users, there are differences in the app settings. For instance, the setting of *Strict Mode* is only available to IOS users. When turning off the *Strict Mode*, leaving the app during sleep won't affect building constructions. Therefore iPhone users can choose to

'turn off the Strict Mode, playing on the phone and building a house at the same time' (Interviewee *L*). The power of regulation becomes weaker since the game mechanism rather than the monitoring mechanism weighs more heavily. The developers of *SleepTown* created this difference due to IOS system limitations. Nevertheless, Android users are not offered such an alternative. Their mode is always strict, which means their buildings will be destroyed when they leave the app. Hence for IOS players who only want to collect buildings instead of regulate sleep, turning off the *Strict Mode* is the most convenient way. Android players have to seek other tactics to construct buildings without following this game rule.

The affordances of technology produce possibilities and set the limits of specific actions. The human-non-human assemblages consist of different actants that are fragile and open to change (Lupton 2016). Failures and adjustments are inevitable in such networks (ibid.). For example, the storage of smartphones is one important factor when people consider installing a new app. People may refuse to download *SleepTown* if they are 'low on storage' (Interviewee *X*). Battery drain problems can occur when constructing a building. The building can collapse 'if the phone didn't connect to a Wi-Fi network' (Interviewee *X*). Sometimes technical bugs such as 'the disorder of *The Big Town*' (Interviewee *P*) just appears without any reasons and aren't fixed quickly. If users cannot check buildings, design and decorate their Towns, they may lose interest in the app. Hence, the app, smartphones, operating systems, and the server, have the agency to modify people's app use. When technical actants don't play the role that designers or users assign to them, the constructed network can be easily dismantled.

SleepTown in everynight(day) life

In this part, I will discuss how *SleepTown* as a multipurpose tool influences users' sleep routines and daily practices.

Sleep routine

People's sleep time, pre- and post-sleep routine and rituals constitute parts of the active 'doing' and 'undoing' of sleep (Williams 2005: 77). By using *SleepTown*, people make self-conscious efforts to achieve better sleep before bed, during

sleeping, and after waking up. The empirical finding shows that *SleepTown* regulates users' sleep time rather than sleep quality, and affects their pre-sleep rituals.

Sleep time

Out of various reasons[42], users focus on different sleeping periods when using *SleepTown*. Some users aim to go to bed and get up early, to 'feel vitalized' and 'have more time to arrange daily schedules' (Interviewee *X*). Some only want to avoid staying up late. As Interviewee *R* said, the app affects her bedtime only, as she has to 'get up early anyway and commute'. Some night owls like Interviewee *F* doesn't mind staying up, but simply wants to 'fix the schedule' to avoid 'living in different time zones every day'.

Although *SleepTown* helps users regulate their 'biological clock' regarding sleep, it doesn't mention sleep quality. This echoes the common deficiency of productivity apps: avoiding discussing the content and limit of work being done (Gregg 2018:79). Once you start to use *SleepTown*, the default is that your sleep problem can be cured by a mobile app. In other words, *SleepTown* only works for people whose sleep is disturbed by phone addiction or minor problems that can be easily solved by personal effort. Serious sleep disorder or insomnia caused by broader context factors (e.g. overwork, unemployment, poverty) that cannot be changed by individuals are ignored. For example, several interviewees stated that their biggest sleep problem is 'being habituated to staying up'. They do not suffer from dyssomnia in a 'medical' sense, but are just obsessed with scrolling through social media, watching videos, or chatting with friends at night. *SleepTown* doesn't get to the root of sleep problems or phone addiction. It only reminds people of the importance of a regular sleep and helps them ensure bedtime, wakeup time, and sleep duration.

[42] Users' motivations for regulating sleep time can be 'gendered'. During the interviews, a few female users rather than males underlined the biological function of sleep and its effects on body and appearance. Girls felt threatened by 'pimples and poor skin quality' (Interviewee *K, Y, F*), 'hair loss' (Interviewee *P*), 'sore eyes' (Interviewee *Y*), and 'heart discomfort' (Interviewee *K, F*), and thus were motivated to avoid staying up and have a regular sleep, to 'stay healthy, young and pretty' (Interviewee *M*). Only one male expressed his concern about 'memory loss' due to 'short deep sleep' (Interviewee *X*). Compared to males, females can be more obsessive with the consumption of 'beauty sleep', and are more disciplined and disadvantaged in a patriarchal society (Williams 2005). It is worthwhile to explore how users' engagement with sleep-regulating apps reveals the gendered politics of sleep in further studies.

Pre-sleep rituals

SleepTown has a direct impact on people's sleeping time, and also affects their pre-sleep rituals. Pre-sleep rituals are dimensions of body-techniques and habits, helping people get into the preparatory phases of sleep (Williams 2005:77). The natural stimulus of fatigue is always associated with darkness, quietness, and a particular mode of preparation (Schwartz 1970:491). *SleepTown* in this case is not just a monitor for regular sleep but also a reminder for sleep preparation. For example, *SleepTown* reminds users to put down their smartphones and urges them to do particular activities to prepare for sleep:

> After clicking the 'sleep' button, I keep some time before bed [...] for **reading books** or **practicing meditation**. [...] Clicking the sleep button performs a ritual. It turns on my sleeping mode, and I start to prepare my mind for sleeping. (Interviewee *M*)

> I start to **stop working and disconnect** with the outside world, **brushing my teeth on the balcony**, **reading books or watching films**. It's my own time. [...] I feel strong happiness during this pre-sleep period. (Interviewee *P*)

Users' bedtime may not be accurately regulated by *SleepTown*. Rather, the app gives them a hint and gentle push: it helps users go to bed early and sleep more regularly, by limiting their phone use at night. Making the phone fall asleep earlier and starting to construct a building reminds users to disconnect with phones and start growing sleepy. They do physical activities or mindfulness practices intentionally, to avoid digital distraction and get physical and/or mental preparation for sleep. Sleep is thus mediated by body techniques that bring it under people's partial control (Williams 2005; Crossley 2004). Pre-sleep rituals in a set precise manner become effective techniques helping users establish a sense of order and security.

The human right to enough sleep can be strategically legitimized and protected by *SleepTown*. *SleepTown* offers users an opportunity to focus on themselves, purifying their sleeping environment and their own minds. As Interviewee *P* demonstrated, constructing the building 'offers a good excuse for not replying to others' messages at night'. It allows the user to create a clear boundary between work and sleep, between the public and private. This excuse empowers her to be 'more assertive and less guilty' when ignoring others' messages. From the media

perspective, *SleepTown* is also a useful tool for people to limit smartphone addiction, achieving 'phone detox' or a 'phone break':

> The app **limits** the 'obligatory communication'. I can **avoid** external stimuli, regardless of messages or news or posts. [...] I also need to **disengage** with unconscious habitual entertaining activities like scrolling through *Weibo*. (Interviewee *P*)

People are reminded to explore the joy of missing out, instead of drowning in the fear of missing out or endless entertainment (Syvertsen 2020). The abstention from digital media use for a defined period is always praised as achieving a healthy sleep hygiene (Dement and Vaughan 2000). In this sense, *SleepTown* works as a tool to block phone distractions and the unimportant neediness of others. It helps users specify the boundary between work, study and rest, between external communication and internal reflection. Users have a chance to self-reflect, get more self-knowledge, and enrich their lives before sleep. They have more time to focus on personal issues, listen to inner voices, and gain control and satisfaction.

Daily practices

Users' engagement with *SleepTown* affects not only their sleep but also their daily activities, as the app can be gradually incorporated within daily customs and rhythms.

Entertainment

Playing on *SleepTown* can be integrated with people's daily entertainment. For example, people use bites of time for bites of joy. They make use of breaks in the daytime to design and decorate their Towns, check the construction process of the *Wonder* and *Circle* members' status, share new buildings with friends and compete with each other, etc. In particular, users who are interested in planning Towns spend more time imagining and inventing the design:

> People have their own thoughts for city planning. [...] Now my town is an industrial town based on a big factory. I plan to promote **city transformation** by collecting more entertainment facilities such as fairgrounds and cinemas. (Interviewee *D*)

SleepTown not only gamifies sleep but boosts users' creativity and imagination. It helps players rethink and reinvent the way we design cities, and allows them to actualize dream towns. Active users also can develop new ideas about the app design. For instance, they want to add more 'lively' elements to the Town and send feedbacks to producers:

> As time went by, I recognized that the Town looks **strange** in some aspects. You had a few buildings and facilities in the Town, but there were **no people, cars, or weather**. It was so strange. Some users expressed similar ideas online. Hence I collected our thoughts and sent an email to the **producers**. They replied to me two days later and said it's a good idea and they would sent it to the **technical department** for their references. (Interview *X*)

Interviewee *X* devoted himself to collecting buildings and planning a personal Town, but also showed dissatisfaction to the existing Town setting and made critical suggestions. To make his advice more convincing, he also communicated with other users. The communication between users and producers indicates that users play a vital role in the human-non-human assemblage of technology innovation. Users' feedback can shape the next generation of products. They are not only adapters but co-producers and social sharpers of technology.

In addition to in-app gaming, *SleepTown* users are inspired to enjoy entertaining activities through online platforms. There is a close relationship between *SleepTown* and social media and video-sharing websites. For example, some users record their city-planning process, edit the video and post it on social media or video websites. Some are also inspired to use their creativity, building connections between *SleepTown* and other games:

> I **recorded** the screen when using *SleepTown* and **edited** it. I don't think my time is wasted. Rather, it is a pastime for me. (Interviewee *M*)

I constructed three *SleepTown*-style buildings (Figure 13, 14) in ***Minecraft***[43]. The constructing processes were recorded and posted on ***Bilibili*** *(哔哩哔哩)*[44]. (Interviewee *Q*)

Figure 13. The original building in SleepTown (Interviewee Q)

Figure 14. The user-made SleepTown-style building in Minecraft (Interviewee Q)

The user-constructed linkage between apps, games, and media platforms, enables users to use their imagination and creativity to engage in what they like. As Interviewee *Q* has 'an interest in architecture', the 3D game world of *Minecraft* allows him to 'actually construct the building step by step'. Although he cannot change the building design in *SleepTown*, he is empowered to reinvent the building outlook and enhance the interior design in *Minecraft*.

In some occasions, users' needs for entertainment and social networking are mixed. For instance, Interviewee *M* enjoys making lifestyle Vlogs and uploading them to the video website - *Bilibili*. She started to record her usage of *SleepTown* and share them with others because she 'wanted to find someone to form a *Circle*'. Finally she 'recruited six members through Bilibili'. Hence, sharing *SleepTown*-related videos online is not just a means of self-entertainment, but also a way to

[43] *Minecraft* is a sandbox video game which allows players to explore a blocky, procedurally-generated 3D world. Players can discover and extract raw materials, craft tools, build structures or earthworks (Wikipedia).

[44] *Bilibili* is a Chinese video sharing website themed around animation, comic and game (ACG) (Wikipedia). Users can upload and watch fan-made videos, and add barrage subtitles (弹幕) to the videos.

expand the sleep *Circle* and the social circle. Stronger social connectivity can be developed through users' active engagement with *SleepTown*.

Social network

SleepTown can help friends or strangers connect with each other. As *SleepTown* is not equipped with instant messaging technology, people cannot talk to each other in the *Circle*. To create or expand a *Circle*, external communication channels such as online platforms and face-to-face talk are needed. Users can post adverts on social media platforms to recruit members, or build a *Circle* with existing friends. Thus the app contributes to users' network:

> It's interesting to build a *Wonder* together. For example, you can **meet** different people in the *Super Topic* of *SleepTown* on *Weibo*. Sometimes we **follow** each other on *Weibo*. To some degree, you can **expand** your social circle. (Interviewee *L*)

SleepTown allows strangers to create communities and share private sleep information with one another. For example, *Super Topic* of *SleepTown* on *Weibo* gives strangers a chance to break the ice. Users do not feel burdened to share relevant information or interesting experiences but enjoy the sense of solidarity, belonging and fitting in. They can freely post screenshots of their triumphant moments and recruitment advertisements on the page, and react to others' posts. The governmentality boosted by gamification is productive, enabling people to 'act upon action' (Rose 1999:4). Different forms of intimacy and communities are created and developed in and out of *SleepTown*, shaping people's sleep routine and daily practices. In addition, people's online networking can contribute to their daily entertainment. When hosts recruit members via social media, they may be easily attracted or distracted by news, images, and videos on the platform for relaxation.

For people who know each other, *Circle* offers a platform to unite and have fun. For example, Interviewee *R* was invited by her close friends to join the *Circle* built upon offline friendships. *Circle* and *Wonder* became a part of their daily topics. People's daily opportunities to actively connect with people they care about can be ensured in this way (McGonigal 2011). People can use *SleepTown* and relevant communication channels to keep in touch. As Interviewee *D* showed, she and her friends 'created a group chat', 'sharing screenshots of newly collected buildings' and 'trash talking'. In this sense, users not only build a 'sleep group' in *SleepTown*,

but also start a group chat outside the app sharing their using experiences and daily life. In-app connectivity extends into other digital communication and offline life.

Consumption

Inspired by *SleepTown*, users can become increasingly obsessed with the fantasy of 'great sleep' and the consumption of health (Valtonen and Moisander 2012). For instance, some users think the disciplinary power of *SleepTown* isn't strong enough, so they consume other sleep-tracking products or services to monitor and optimize their sleep patterns more comprehensively:

> I also bought a **watch** to track sleep. [...] It shows your **deep and light sleep**. [...] I was so worried about my short deep sleep and thus paid more attention to sleep. (Interviewee *X*)

> My new **bracelet** records my sleep quality more **accurately**. I usually check the data every Sunday and write a sleep diary comparing weekly data. (Interviewee *M*)

As demonstrated before, the tracking function of *SleepTown* is simple, only recording two time points and sleep duration. This disadvantage can be overcome if users are equipped with more 'technical' devices or products such as wearable self-tracking devices that collect data and analyze sleep patterns from various perspectives. People's input, performances and output can be readily measured, quantified and represented by scientific metrics and graphs of data (Lupton 2016). Users can gain more self-knowledge, through technological 'exosenses' that extend bodily sensory capabilities (ibid.:146). Despite the fact that many users do not know the inner mechanism of smart devices, they believe and make sense of the collected data, ideas and norms about quantification, contributing to the reflexive self-monitoring practices.

Besides self-tracking devices, users also consume other alternatives to improve their sleep. Some users listen to 'slow-tempo relaxing music' (Interviewee *F*) or use 'earplugs' (Interviewee *X*) to create the right conditions for healthy and restful sleep, and fall asleep quickly. Some purchase 'steam eye masks' (Interviewee *I*) and 'fragrances' (Interviewee *M*) to relax their senses, bodies and minds. In addition to techniques related to human sensory systems, supplements like 'Melatonin' (Interviewee *D*) are also helpful for people who suffer from insomnia to regulate sleep-wake cycle.

Every personal gain from *SleepTown* justifies users' consumption and motivates them to consume more products in the name of 'great sleep', health and well-being. The normalization of 'sleep-as-consumption' pushes people to integrate themselves into consumer society (Valtonen and Moisander 2012). Though 'great sleep' is an illusion created by enterprises and consumerism, consumers can actively purchase tracking products aiming for not only 'sleep hygiene' but also an enjoyable and socially responsible experience.

Conformity, negotiation, and resistance

In this section, I will discuss users' conformity and resistance to the app, and how they perceive and negotiate their relationships with digital media technologies in everyday life.

Regulating sleep

To improve health and increase social perks, people submit to monitoring willingly (Whitson 2014), which means conforming to the game rules set by *SleepTown*. Several users appreciate that *SleepTown* gamifies mundane sleep and turns it into a fun experience, but clarify that the gameful elements are just 'added value' to the core function of sleep regulation – 'constructing buildings is secondary to the need to keep a regular sleep schedule' (Interviewee *R*). Obviously, with an app called *SleepTown*, 'sleep' comes first.

Some users strictly follow sleeping instructions regarding how and when to sleep, becoming loyal followers of the game. Not only their bedtime, sleep duration, and wake-up time but also pre- and post-sleep rituals are effectively regulated and somewhat fixed by the app:

> I set the bedtime goal as **11:20pm** and wakeup goal as **6:30am**. I usually wash up around **8:30pm** and then watch some news. At **9:30pm**, I click the 'sleep' button[45] in SleepTown, put down the phone, and sack out. I set an alarm on my phone for **6:26am**. I will wake up a few minutes before the wakeup goal and then click the 'wake up' button. [...] The healthy sleep helps me stay awake and energetic in the

[45] In *SleepTown*, users are allowed to click on the 'sleep' button or 'wake up' button two hours before their bedtime goal or wakeup goal, which means they can make use of the flexible time to prepare for sleeping or get ready for their daily routine.

> daytime. I won't feel sleepy when **reading** or **running** in the morning. (Interviewee *X*)

The sleep-regulating function of *SleepTown* reflects ways to achieve self-care. *SleepTown* gives people a clear instruction about how to build a healthy sleep habit, and people regularly 'subject themselves to a thorough examination of their conscience and keep themselves under constant control' (Whitson 2014:344). Users can get a sense of control over the 'messiness and unpredictability of their fleshly body' (Lupton 2016:158). The game mechanism also amplifies peoples' pleasure and constructs an illusion of freedom. Users are less dismayed by the pervasive manipulation or do not see it as a problem. They see themselves as powerful *Mayor*s of *The Big Town*, active agents with autonomy. They voluntarily conform to the neoliberal logic of governmentality and discipline themselves to be ideal healthy citizens.

Managing functions

Although the game rules are fixed by app designers, users are allowed to decide how to use the app to regulate sleep and what to use the app for. As illustrated before, some users prefer to form a *Circle* with others rather than sleep 'alone'. They prefer to be disciplined by others' gaze, feeling more motivated for self-regulation when threatened by the sense of guilt and shame in a community. Some also want to maintain or expand their social network through a *Circle*. Nonetheless, some feel burdened to cooperate with others and prefer to not use *Circle*. As Interviewee *P* explained, 'it is bothering when getting along with others, no matter sleep or study. You somewhat have to wait for your company.' For her, self-surveillance is more 'convenient' and 'efficient' than mutual surveillance.

Some users also make their own use of *SleepTown* to monitor sleep and develop extended functions of it. For example, people are supposed to click on the 'sleep' button when they are on the bed and ready to fall asleep. Yet, the button can be used as an alarm of 'sleep preparation' in practice, warning users that 'it's time to say goodbye to your phone':

> I **don't follow** the app to go to bed. However, if my phone doesn't rest, I am not sure when I will fall asleep. [...] To some extent, the start of building-construction **reminds me to sleep**. It reminds me to **stop interacting** with the outside world. I don't have to reply to any messages. (Interviewee *P*)

Users can optimize their sleep in various ways and make their own choices of how to use the app. They can keep a regular sleep pattern without strictly following the determined bedtime and wake-up goals. For them, healthy sleep is achieved through critically engaging with the app and adapting its functions to their own life. As Interviewee *F* clarified, 'SleepTown is simply one means of regulation. How it functions depends on one's agency'. Hence, users always negotiate their relationships with *SleepTown* in everyday(night) life. To create or develop a suitable sleep routine, useful elements of the app are taken into account while non-useful or distracting functions are ignored. The definition and practical application of useful game elements depend on individuals' needs and affordances of technology.

Playing a game

App producers are somewhat powerful rule makers who build the app framework and design game rules. The strategies they have produced define a specific space in which users' sleep can be monitored and regulated (De Certeau 1984:xix). However, users can create tactics to negotiate with, or even resist and disrupt the ordering constructed by strategies. For example, users who fail to regulate their sleep through *SleepTown*, may question and resist the disciplinary power. They can ignore the sleep-regulating function of the app and reduce the app into a pure collecting game[46] or town-building game:

> After **failing** to reach the goal several times, I **gave it up**. [...] I don't think the app works for me because I just want to **collect buildings**. (Interviewee *L*)

Players can develop various tactics to cheat the game mechanism, circumvent sleep regulation and collect buildings. First, it is common for sleepers to 'slack off', by putting down the smartphone and playing with other digital media such as laptops, iPads, or another phone. As Interviewee *F* confessed, she could 'let the phone construct a building and meanwhile binge-watch TV shows, browse the forum and make posts via the laptop'. Second, as mentioned before, the setting of *Strict Mode* provides IOS users with an official 'back door' that allows them to collect buildings without following the sleep schedule. Neither people's phone use nor sleep routine is disciplined. Third, Android users who are not 'officially'

[46] 'Collecting games' refer to games that encourage players to collect characters, cards, weapons, animals, buildings etc.

granted a 'back door' find other ways to 'loaf' such as 'closing SleepTown running in the background' (Interviewee *Y* and *I*). After closing it tacitly, Interviewee *Y* could construct buildings and use entertaining apps like *NetEase Cloud Music(网易云音乐)*[47] and *Weibo*.

Users' resistance to the disciplinary power is visibly performed through opt-out. There is also invisible resistance to gamification techniques in people's minds. Some users question the result of gamified sleep regulation. People are doing sleep in the same way every day, but their focus gradually shifts from health to entertainment. As Interviewee *Q* reflected, 'building a virtual house becomes the pursuit, while sleeping is simply a path to play'. Strictly speaking, sleeping becomes a part of daily entertainment. This could be a deficiency of *SleepTown* and a flaw of the application of gamification in a commercial discourse (Schrape 2014). Only people's behaviors are targeted while their attitudes towards regular sleep and health matter less, as long as their behavior stays 'correct'.

Taking or losing control

It is common for people use *SleepTown* to talk about achieving a sense of control over the body or life, and all interviewees state the difficulty to regulate sleep without external assistance. Some point out the weakness of inner willpower. Others underline the inevitability of external stimuli. Hence, when they conform to the ideal of the optimized person, they can get reassurance and an enhanced sense of self-knowledge and self-management.

However users can hold different opinions about the way to achieve sleep regulation – through a mobile app. Some users feel ambivalent, as they accept and problematize their dependence on technology. As Interviewee *F* clarified, 'I become more dependent on the app and smartphones. Although I accepted to be regulated by *SleepTown*, I hope I won't rely on it too much and get rid of it eventually'. Human willpower is valued more, while replying on technological interventions can become a sign of weakness or inability. Yet, some take technological assistance for granted. Some argue that their 'actual screen time is reduced' (Interviewee *P*). For them, the benefits of digital media technology outweigh the risks:

[47] *NetEase Cloud Music* is a freemium music streaming service owned by a Chinese tech corporation NetEase, Inc.

> Integrating technology into our life is a **social process**. It's **good** to see technology helps us **reach goals** that we cannot achieve by ourselves. (Interviewee *P*)

> The smartphone is a **multifunctional** tool. You can use it for communication or **self-control**. What matters is **how to use it**. [...] The app is **effective** as long as you can regulate sleep and don't be addicted to your phone. (Interviewee *R*)

Users admire the integration of digital media technology and human dependence on technology. They don't blindly praise the benefits of digital media, but believe in human agency in handling challenges and making new sense of technology. Users trust their own capabilities to use the app in a proper way, thus living compatibly with digital technology. In this sense, users are not losing control but taking control of their daily practice. They can choose to use the app to effectively regulate sleep or opt out whenever they want.

Digital use can be both liberating and damaging. *SleepTown* can be a touchstone of ones' ability for self-control: the app doesn't help users master self-discipline, but examines their determination to succeed. Only those who believe in the app's functionality and integrate it into their own routine can regulate their behavior effectively and become more self-disciplined. They give away partial control to the app in order to gain control over their behavior (Svensson 2019). Other users may struggle to find a lasting balance: they cannot completely prevent phone addiction at night on the one hand, but are attracted by the game mechanism and don't want to abandon the app on the other hand. Users who finally stop struggling will become either 'self-discipliners' or 'players', or 'non-users'.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have used *SleepTown* as the entrance to ask questions about the interaction between gamification strategy and sleep regulation. Following the statement that *SleepTown* affects people's sleep routine and daily practices, I have asked how users engage with *SleepTown* and understand their sleeping/gaming experiences, exploring the meaning shift of sleep caused by an app and user engagement.

Regulating sleep in a gameful environment

SleepTown adopts gamification as a strategy to effectively regulate users' sleep. There are two game mechanisms in the app – the feedback mechanism and the surveillance mechanism. The feedback mechanism includes positive and negative feedback techniques (Schrape 2014). Positive feedback techniques consist of rewards including visually attractive buildings, badges, and a self-designed Town, while negative feedback mainly entails destroyed buildings, as a visualized failure. The surveillance mechanism connects individuals' self-surveillance with mutual surveillance within a group. The *Circle* encourages users to form a 'sleep group' in which members are allowed to discipline others as well as themselves.

Users' engagement with the game mechanism of *SleepTown* is mixed, including affective and cognitive work. Positive feedback techniques lead to positive emotions including surprise, happiness, satisfaction, a sense of control and achievement. Negative emotions triggered by punishment consist of guilt, regret, disappointment, and sadness. In particular, people under mutual surveillance feel added excitement when reaching common goals and receiving big rewards for cooperation. Their feelings of dissatisfaction, guilt and shame are also amplified when they recognize how they or others do not fulfill the duties in the group. Users also show critical appreciation of the functionality and aesthetics. They not only confirm the value of the sleep-regulating function and game elements, but point out details of the aesthetic design and game system that can be improved, and make further suggestions.

When people regulate sleep through *SleepTown*, both human agency and non-human agency function. The app and smartphones are active actants that modify their relationship with users and help translate the meaning of sleep and game. *SleepTown* can help users achieve certain goals, and prevent them from doing certain things. On the one hand, smartphones and digital media technology make the app possible to function and attract people's attention. The application of gamification techniques is based on the material devices and technology. On the other hand, affordances of technology delimit the scope of app use. *SleepTown* may function differently on different devices with different operating systems. Only some users have access to specific app settings. Technical problems of apps or smartphones are also unavoidable, leading to confusion, disappointment and tension.

'Doing' sleep in everyday life

As *SleepTown* combines characteristics of self-tracking apps, productivity apps and digital games, the app can be used as a multipurpose tool in everyday(night) life. Users' engagement thus varies in form and intensity. Some loyal users regard *SleepTown* as a sleep-regulating app, so they tend to follow the game rules strictly to build healthy sleep habits. Some normal users pause when they get tired of self-optimization, and return when they want to avoid irregular sleep again. Some see *SleepTown* as a productivity app that helps them disconnect with distracting media and manage pre-sleep activities. Some treat *SleepTown* as a purely city-building game or collecting game. They develop different tactics to circumvent the sleep regulation and simply have fun. There are also users who opt out when they realize the app doesn't fulfill their needs for sleep regulation or entertainment.

Users commonly mention a positive physical and mental state after sleeping regularly, but hold different opinions about sleep regulation through technology. Some feel ambivalent about using phones to control phone use. They are skeptical about the disciplinary power of digital media technologies. Some users question the result of sleep regulation through a gameful commercial app. *SleepTown* only motivates intended behavior in a pleasant way without appealing to the mind or reason. Users without a strong claim for sleep regulation may forget their aims and get lost in the game easily.

Not only users' sleep routine but their daily practices are affected by their engagement with *SleepTown*. First, *SleepTown* helps users develop pastime activities online. Users' creativity and imagination are boosted when they are inspired to connect *SleepTown* with online platforms and digital games. Second, *SleepTown* can maintain and expand users' social circle. The relationships between intimate friends or family can be strengthened when *SleepTown* becomes a new common discussion topic. *SleepTown* also motivates strangers to interact with each other, band together and pursue a common goal. Third, users may become more obsessive about consuming sleep and health. They are encouraged to spend money and time-consuming sleep and health. Consuming sleep-related products and services is constructed as a major way to fulfill biological needs and social expectations for the ideal citizen.

Making sense of sleep in a digital age

Not only sleeping practice but the understanding of sleep is technologically mediatized by *SleepTown* and shaped by users' engagement. The meaning of sleep is shifted from biological to mediatized and commercial, from inactive to active, from boring to entertaining, from unproductive to productive, from physical to virtual, and from private to public.

SleepTown has transformed sleep from a universal biological necessity to an individualized entertaining experience. *SleepTown* follows the traditional game logic but uses it in an opposite way. Instead of encouraging players to actively interact with the interface by actions like clicking and scrolling, the construction of buildings is only activated by the player's inactive state. People are allowed to sleep and play a game at the same time – being 'inactive' in the physical world and being 'active' in the virtual world. Sleep also becomes a game in which people compete with themselves and strive to be better selves every day. Time is lost and will never renew in the real world, but there is always a second chance for *SleepTown* users to restart, achieve goals and get rewards. Hence, sleep is gamified as an attractive experience associated with pleasure and control instead of boredom and passivity.

Sleep is also transformed into a task requiring high productivity and efficiency. People expect the outcome of completing the 'sleep task', as they aim to feel vitalized and study or work efficiently in the daytime. Sleep is not simply rest, but a preparation for being productive the next day. Getting sleep done (quickly) gives people a sense of security and hope in their messy lives. If possible, some people want to sacrifice sleep time for doing more 'meaningful' and 'productive' work. In such cases people find a proper excuse for the 'unavoidable' sleep deprivation in the fast paced society and convince themselves to adapt to it.

Sleep is materialized by the virtual buildings based on program code in *SleepTown*. People not only *feel* the vitalized state, but *see* the representation of it and *share* it with others through social media. Sleep becomes something that can be conducted offline and online. Private information and sleeping data can be spread among friends and strangers. Sleep is not merely aligned with disconnection and secrecy but rather with connection and publicity. Furthermore, when sleeping is no longer about one person but a group of people in the same *Circle*, a networked rather than an atomized or individualized notion of sleep is needed. Sleep, taking

place at the interaction of a number of social circles, in part becomes collective action and requires collaboration and team spirit. Both friends and strangers are invited to cultivate sleeping as a gameful way to enhance social connectivity.

This thesis, as an in-depth study of a concrete case, has focused on the app of *SleepTown* and its users' practices, giving insight into the concern about how gamification serves as a mode of governmentality and a surveillance apparatus in the digital era. Yet, *SleepTown* is not merely an example of gamification of sleep, but also provides clues for how gamification and surveillance could be reconsidered and developed. Capitalism has expanded the proportion of social life that is open to surveillance. Future mass surveillance can be less manipulative but more subtle and entertaining due to the prevalence of gamification techniques. *SleepTown* gives us a warning about the rise of 'surveillance capitalism' (Zuboff 2019). It is technology corporations that have the power to track and analyze our moment-to-moment existence, from waking to sleeping. Every aspect of our lives can be predicted, shaped, gamified and monetized. Hence, there is a need to explore the production side in further studies. For instance, conducting production interviews with software developers and marketers would be helpful to understand the norms and discourses articulated and promoted by tech companies. If we understand the data extraction and predictive power of corporations better, we may be more prepared for a continuously surveilled future.

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Empirical images

Figure 1, 3 are images downloaded from the official website of *SleepTown* https://sleeptown.seekrtech.com

Figure 4, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14 are images offered by the interviewees

Figure 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11 are screenshots of the author's app

Virtual YouTuber Kizuna AI:

Co-creating human-non-human interaction and celebrity-audience relationships

Xin Zhou

Introduction

With the rise of YouTube, individuals get the opportunity to become petty producers who make, upload and share self-generated media texts within their own YouTube channels (Van Dijck 2013:113f). Currently, YouTube may serve as users' source of information, entertainment and connection, as they can associate, inspire and motivate each other within this huge networking platform (Edosomwan, Prakasan, Kouame, Watson & Seymour 2011:83). By virtue of their innovative and impressive creations, some YouTubers gain numerous views and subscriptions, which eventually turns them into microcelebrities, influencers or internet celebrities with their own fan base (e.g. Marwick 2016; Jerslev 2016; Abidin 2018).

YouTubers or narrators in YouTube videos used to be mainly human beings. However, in 2016, a 'virtual YouTuber' or 'VTuber' trend began, where virtual characters and avatars took the lead in videos and live streaming. The VTuber form usually consists of a 3D virtual model featuring an adorable virtual character who is usually female, and a voice model who provides voice performance and sometimes body movements to the character. Although VTubers are doing quite similar things as their human counterparts, such as video games, daily vlogs, reaction videos and livestreaming, this new combination of human and machine is bringing novel experiences to audiences and pushing further the boundary between the real and the imagined (Michel 2018).

A huge industry also came into being with this VTuber wave. According to Tokyo-based data research company User Local, the number of VTubers topped 4,000 in 2018 (Nagata 2018). VTubers are extending their existence outside of YouTube videos into advertisements, TV programs, games and other diverse media. For instance, Tokyo Metropolitan Television Broadcasting Corporation once had a special production called VIRTUAL BUZZ TALK, specifically designed for virtual YouTubers. VTubers are also extending their presence to other social media and video platforms. For example, in China where YouTube is not available, many VTubers choose local video sharing platforms such as bilibili[48] and acfun[49].

Originating from an interactive social media platform, VTubers see the importance of audience attention, interaction and contribution to their existence. Audiences as consumers, are indispensable in helping define and shape this new form, and co-creating its meaning and symbolic power with producers and institutions (Hill & Turnbull 2017). Moreover, the issue of hidden labour represented by voice models is evident in the VTuber genre, as many of the human voice models are devoted in delivering lively performances to and building connections with audiences, while audiences are often loyal to the VTubers, not necessarily to the human beings behind them. This thesis focuses on Kizuna AI, one of the pathfinders of virtual YouTubers, for more reliable information about the broader class and the VTuber industry which contains abundant information regarding media production, hidden labour and audience power (Flyvbjerg 2001:66).

Kizuna AI and the voice model incident

Self-titled (probably) the world's first virtual YouTuber, Kizuna AI has popularized the VTuber style and the term virtual YouTuber since her debut in 2016, despite that there was earlier use of CG avatars in YouTube vlogs[50]. Nowadays, she is one of the top VTuber celebrities, with a large worldwide fan

[48] https://www.bilibili.com/

[49] https://www.acfun.cn/

[50] YouTuber Ami Yamato started uploading her vlog featuring a virtual character in 2011 https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdDpQ461uxNA3odAnpuigAg

base of more than 4 million subscriptions on YouTube and more than 1 million followers on bilibili (Kizuna AI's official distribution channel in China).

Her surname Kizuna means connection and bond in Japanese, while her given name AI represents love and is a clever reference to her self-description as an artificial intelligence system. This claim is not a factual truth but a branding label utilized to add to the virtual YouTuber's uniqueness and attractiveness, as Kizuna AI is equally dependent on voice model's performances as other VTubers. Under this AI claim, the voice model has remained anonymous for more than three years, hidden across various social media as the producing company chooses not to disclose much information about the production team or process[51].

Nonetheless, the issue of hidden labour started to trigger people's attention in the summer of 2019 in the so-called voice model incident where the production company launched a program to duplicate Kizuna AI by recruiting three more voice models (one speaks Chinese and two speak Japanese) and trying to get rid of the original one. A lot of fans got very angry and started their resistance by asking people to unsubscribe from her channel if you loved her. They refused to recognize the new voice models as Kizuna AI and named them no.2, no.3 and no.4[52]. After several months of push and pull between audiences and producers, the company has now given the Kizuna AI performed by different voice models separate nicknames and identification details such as hairpins of different colours, so that they are not using exactly the same 3D model as they did at the beginning. This incident further exposed the interrelations between capital, labour, creative value and audience in popular culture.

Aim and research questions

Abidin (2018:15f) has defined internet celebrity as 'all media formats (people, products, icons, figures, etc.) that attain prominence and popularity native to the internet'. The primary aim of this thesis is to investigate Kizuna AI as a specific

[51] Original voice model Nozomi Kasuga remained unstated for three years until the company's statement on April 24, 2020, to officially acknowledge her existence. https://twitter.com/aichan_nel/status/1253660164961361925

[52] As no.4 speaks another language, wears different clothes and has her own bilibili channel separate from Kizuna AI's Aichannel, more dissatisfaction was expressed toward no.2 and no.3 by Chinese audiences.

and emerging type of virtual internet celebrity to see what her definition, meaning and value is, to her production company, voice models and audiences, and how those different sides negotiate and balance each other.

In this research, this aim is split into three parts, each looking at a different aspect of Kizuna AI. The first aspect focuses primarily on her videos and examines how she defines herself both visually and verbally, and how she performs and invites social interaction to build connection with the viewers as a celebrity longing for support. In turn, the second part aims at inspecting audiences' individual and collective reaction to her performances and characterizations from the videos, with a specific emphasis on China's media landscape. As the aforementioned voice model incident has complicated the targets audiences are engaging with, this examination from the audience side also expands to the reactions to voice models. The third aspect is more abstract, focusing on Kizuna AI's whole commercialization and consumption process, which integrates issues of labour, capital and socio-cultural values. Here audiences are viewed as consumers and Kizuna AI as a digital media commodity, with the aim to explore their interrelations in a new media context. These three aspects of the research aim are covered and answered through the following research questions:

- How is Kizuna AI defined and portrayed in her videos? And how does she perform and invite interaction from the audiences?
- How do audiences engage with Kizuna AI and each other on bilibili.com? And how do they recognize and engage with voice models?
- How is Kizuna AI commercialized and consumed as a digital commodity?

As the thesis aims to apply and extend the notion of internet celebrity to a virtual existence, it is contributing to both media and celebrity studies. By exploring the conflicting meaning making practices and power dynamics around Kizuna AI, the study is displaying the novelty brought up by a virtual YouTuber's non-humanness and adding to the existing knowledge of virtual internet celebrity as an emerging cultural category.

Identifying 'online' celebrity

Celebrity is seen to be inextricably bound up with the emergence, development and extension of contemporary media over the last two centuries (Williamson 2016:2; Marshall 2016:15). Nowadays media communication is changing with the arrival of internet and digital technology that has led to expansion of media outlets, increasing access to information and easier approach to content production for the public. Celebrity also evolves with drastic changes in the ubiquitous celebrity culture where celebrity is no longer solely connected to mass and broadcast media, but is situated in a more complex media landscape with a widespread increase in commercialization (Williamson 2016:160; Marwick 2016:333). More recently, media technologies and interactive platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube have made it possible for both famous and ordinary people to 'generate vast quantities of personal media, manipulate and distribute this content widely, and reach out to (real or imagined) audiences' (Marwick 2016:333).

Microcelebrity – The start of study on online celebrity

Camgirls (2008), written by Global studies scholar Theresa Senft, is the first academic book on celebrity on the internet (Abidin 2018:xix). The author documented her ethnographic study on a generation of 'young American women who acquired internet fame by broadcasting their personal lives via webcams in their bedrooms' (ibid.). Senft (2008:25) called this new kind of celebrity pursuit 'microcelebrity' where users gather popularity through their online performance with the help of digital media technologies and networking platforms. Compared with traditional celebrities or stars, microcelebrities are usually known only to a niche audience; a narrower but deeper popularity built on the feelings of connection and intimacy of the interactive relations with audiences (Senft 2008, cited in Abidin 2018:11f).

Alice Marwick (2013) further developed the concept of microcelebrity, through her study on Silicon Valley tech entrepreneurs who used social media for networking and business purposes in the early 2000s (ibid.). She stressed the significance of authentic and interactive feelings in a microcelebrity's creation of

his/her persona to produce content or strategically appeal to online audiences regardless of their size or state (2013:114).

Since then, studies on microcelebrity started to thrive and vary across internet users all over the world. Scholars theorize and research microcelebrity as labour (Duffy 2016; Abidin 2016; Lana 2019), branding (Booth & Matic 2011), linguistic practice (Page 2012), and activism (Aziz 2019; Brown & Phifer 2019). Their lens of assessing microcelebrity are also shifting and evolving. Apart from the focus on certain groups of people or particular practices, studies are also investigating community norms (Garcia-Rapp & Roca-Cuberes 2017), and affordances and algorithms of platforms (Gibbs, Meese, Arnold, Nansen & Carter 2015).

From influencer to internet celebrity

Diverse internet celebrity innovations have been inaugurated by this 'era of the most commercialized form of microcelebrity' (Abidin 2018:13). 'Influencers' came into existence among the ramifications as 'a full-time vocational job' of being a microcelebrity (ibid.). Abidin (ibid.:71f) refers to influencers as 'vocational, sustained, and highly branded social media stars' and 'a practice focused on social media-based, multimedia, fame on the internet', distinguishing it from the influencer/mediator in business research. Being a critical form of online celebrity, influencers are able to appeal to, engage with and sustain a considerable following across their social media networks by amplifying attractive messages through personalized content production (ibid.).

Abidin (2018) provides a general definition of the rapidly expanding and transforming internet celebrity as 'all media formats (people, products, icons, figures, etc.) that attain prominence and popularity native to the internet' with possible 'spillover effects and afterlives' involving 'cross-border flows outside of the internet' (ibid.:15f), wherein aforementioned influencers are a specific form of internet celebrity (ibid.:97). She points out that internet celebrity has higher visibility than microcelebrity and that the role of the audience is more significant in producing an internet celebrity (ibid.:15f). As 'a product of performance and perception', internet celebrity can be created when deliberately performed by a subject, or may come into being when unknowingly perceived by an audience (ibid.:19). Drawing on French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1986:241ff) notion

of 'capital' which explains 'how society comes to exercise judgments in taste, express aesthetic dispositions, and assign status and distinction towards different social behaviours', Abidin (2018) further proposed four distinctive qualities of internet celebrities: exclusivity, exoticism, exceptionalism and everydayness; which connect respectively to economic capital, cultural capital, technical capital and social capital (ibid.).

Virtual character as internet celebrity

Aforementioned discussions on internet celebrity centre on human beings, however, a transgressing category of celebrity where virtual characters take the lead is also emerging with the advent of internet and social media and the development of technology. Based on Abidin's (2018) definition of internet celebrity, we might temporarily call it 'virtual internet celebrity' where different yet overlapping subcategories such as virtual idol, virtual influencer and VTuber exist with similar virtual character traits and distinctive features such as pop singer, cultural icon[53], Instagrammer, vlogger and gamer.

Hatsune Miku might be one of the most studied virtual idols. She first appeared in 2007 as the visual identity of a vocal synthesizer software product of Japanese company Crypton Future Media (Guga 2015:37). Thanks to the internet and enormous fan activities, she is then spread widely across the globe, gaining a sizeable fan base both domestically and internationally (Ishita 2016:151). She is not human but can sing, dance, perform in commercials, live concepts and world tours through a hologram projection (Zaborowski 2016:112). According to Guga (2015), her success lies in the fact that her visual model is open to the public and ready for 'further improvements, adjustments, and revisualizations according to one's own needs, desires, preferences, and ideas' (2015:40). Fans as prosumers are not disturbed by Miku's virtual body but instead fill it with various identities and identification (Guga 2015:39). To them, Miku is a 'real entity' whose lack of a physical body can actually 'enhance the emotional engagements on offer during the audiencehood' (Zaborowski 2016:112).

[53] 'Lil Miquela, whose persona as a Brazilian-American influencer was carefully constructed to draw from the creativity and cultural capital of Black and Latino youth online' (Marwick 2019:166).

Another famous virtual internet celebrity Lil Miquela or Miquela Sousa, is called 'virtual influencer' by Marwick (2019:161) and 'fake influencer' by Hubble (2018:20). She is not a person, but the creation of Los Angeles company Brud (Marwick 2019:161). In her case, the producing agency is building on a plot inspired by cyberpunk films where Miquela is 'the self-aware android rebelling against her creators (with a feminist and racially aware twist)' (ibid.:162). Her social media presence is as economically driven as a human influencer's is and demonstrates the more widely available 'potential to convert social capital to economic capital' because of her virtual traits (ibid.). With more than two million followers[54], her Instagram account @lilmiquela is an ongoing media flow with updates about her 'life' of flexing with luxury and designer brands, producing music, mingling with other (virtual and human) influencers and celebrities, going to supermarkets and being in a relationship (ibid.:161).

Researching Kizuna AI

A few researchers have studied Kizuna AI or VTuber from social, cultural and media perspectives within specific regions in Asia (Cho 2019; Korenaga 2019; Puspitaningrum & Prasetio 2019; Guo 2019). The present thesis focuses mainly on Kizuna AI in a Chinese context to add to the knowledge of traits that are unique in a VTuber and the mutually enforcing power from the producers and audiences in the VTuber industry, through multi-method design covering both the production and reception side. The specific locality of the thesis contributes to existing knowledge on Kizuna AI's global media representation and reception because of the region-specific language, platforms and media consumption habits. The dissertation's inclusion of a virtual character as the main focus extends the concepts in its theoretical framework to a wider realm of human-machine co-existence and brings in virtuality and non-humanness into the discussion to add to those concepts' existing applicability.

[54] https://www.instagram.com/lilmiquela/

Contextualizing Kizuna AI

Originating from Japan, Kizuna AI bears obvious aesthetic styles rooted in kawaii culture in Japan. Kawaii[55] culture and aesthetics are considered 'a peculiarity of contemporary Japan', which appears in media representations and materializes across products, creative industries and juvenile trends (Pellitteri 2018:94). In contemporary Japanese, kawaii derives from the noun kawaisa which means sweetness or nicety, and now obtains 'relatively agreed-upon range of meanings that go from "cute" to "sweet", from "tender" to "childish", from "innocent" and "gentle" to "honest" and "soft", and from "small" to "lovely"' (Lieber Milo 2017, cited in Pellitteri 2018:96). Kawaii culture and aesthetics have been studied as a contemporary phenomenon related to youth subculture and particularly female teenagers (Kinsella 1995, cited in Pellitteri 2018:96).

Under the name of YouTuber, Kizuna AI's ways of producing and publicizing her self-presentations are intimately bound up with the YouTube platform on which she became famous, since it decides the length, frame, format of her videos, impacting the way she developed into a celebrity (ibid.:164). According to Van Dijck (2013:117f, 121), YouTube bears the myth of being 'an unmediated gateway to the professional media world of stars and fame' where amateur performers are introduced and known to the public, and musicians or artists supported by big labels or brands acquire enough followers before they show up in mainstream media. Kizuna AI's development path is no different. Supported by a professional company instead of an amateur individual, she has gained quite plenty of followers and attention on YouTube before having transmedia presence in commercials, mobile games and television programs.

Bilibili.com is Kizuna AI's official platform in China. It is an integrated Chinese video platform, containing plenty of user-generated content covering different genres such as anime, movies, music and dancing (Zhang 2020:20f). This interactive video platform is also a place where many users mobilize and manoeuvre around contents on platforms not available in China. It enjoys rapid increase in popularity, especially among young internet users: 78 % of bilibili users are between 18 and 35 (Bilibili.com 2019). The platform is originally 'a video-sharing site for Japanese ACG (animations, comics, and games) content'

[55] Kawaii is often translated to 'cute' in English. Since Kawaii covers more meanings than just 'cute', the thesis will use the original word kawaii instead of its English translation.

(Zhang 2020:20f). This root in ACG culture makes bilibili users enjoy the sharing and partaking of insider knowledge (Ito 2012:xxii). As is evident in Kizuna AI's video comments, fans who comment on Kizuna AI's videos often refer to other ACG characters or VTubers and play with commonly accepted features among each other to indicate and consolidate their identity as insiders.

Theoretical framework

Realizing the significance of audiences and fans and their practices in co-creating virtual YouTubers as a media form and cultural category, I'm integrating approaches from celebrity, media audience and fan studies in this thesis to examine the complexities and disputes within this cultural phenomenon and add to the understanding of virtual internet celebrity in existing academic research.

From para-social to multi-social interaction

Para-social relations put forward by psychologists Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl (1956) is one of the most studied celebrity-audience relationships (Abidin 2018:8). They called the 'seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer' in mass communication a para-social relationship (Horton and Wohl 1956:215). Within this relationship, the performers in television or radio tailor their performances based on the assumption of audience response and often face the audiences while utilizing talking styles and tactics such as direct address, to deliver the feeling of being involved in a personal and private conversation (ibid.:215). Audiences in turn voluntarily and independently decide their 'answering role' to this 'illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer' where effective reciprocity is actually absent (ibid.). Horton and Wohl named this whole style of conversational give and take 'para-social interaction' (1956:215).

With the advent of new media platforms, communication space and technology, it's necessary to contextualize the 'one-sided' and 'nondialectical' idea of para-social interaction between media persona and audiences within the new media setting (ibid.; Marshall 2010:43; Hills 2016:464). Horton and Wohl's idea of para-social interaction as characteristically 'controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development' (1956:215) is gradually being extended to the new context of social media (Marshall 2010:44). Nowadays celebrities are required by the openness and interactivity of media platforms to perform emotional labour and build intensified connection to their fans rather than

establish a cultural notion that the celebrity is distant from and opposite to the fans (Marwick & boyd 2011, cited in Hills 2016:474). Click, Lee and Holladay (2013) interpret social media's impact on para-social relations from a fan perspective and state that social media are expanding the possible interactivity between celebrity and fans, pushing the imaginary relationship to a new, immediate and more real form (2013:376f).

Matt Hills further proposes a concept of multi-social relation upon the original para-social interaction theory (2016). He argues that within contemporary media culture, para-social relationships between celebrity and fans are no longer binary but are multiply performed, experienced and participated within the community of digital fandom (Hills 2016:472, 479). It becomes multi-social where fans exhibit, share and discuss the para-social interactions instead of fantasizing alone about the dyadic communication between the celebrity and him/herself (ibid.:479). Situated in a digital social media environment, Kizuna AI is extending the theory of para-social interaction to a new context where para-social and multi-social interaction co-exist in the celebrity-audience relation. This co-existence serves as the guideline of the thesis to investigate the construction of intimacy and interaction between a virtual nonhuman celebrity and her human followers.

Push-pull dynamic and spectrum of engagement

The concept of push-pull dynamics is an integral approach to theorize and analyse both production practices and audience engagement (Hill 2019:4). Producers and audiences are mutually enforcing each other in the push and pull relation (ibid.). There can be a push from the production side to allure audiences into contents through distribution or branding strategies, and audiences can also be pulled into the specific storytelling, characterization or narratives of media contents (Hill 2016:754f; 2019:4). Meanwhile, restless audiences, users and consumers are also able to push back through fan activities, disengagement practices or informal viewing (Hill 2019).

Media engagement is another analytical lens to explore the connectedness between production practices and audience research (ibid.:6). It unveils how audiences actually interact with a variety of media by formal or informal means, and helps researchers discover more about audiences' multi-faceted ways to get involved in popular culture (ibid.:6). Hill's idea of a spectrum of engagement (2017) is a multi-layered framework to apprehend the multidimensionality and dynamics of

audience engagement while displaying its different positions and intensities (2017:1, 7). It delineates the integral and multiform traits of engagement and stresses the diversified ways of experiencing digital media production (Hill 2017:7; 2019:6). A spectrum includes emotional and critical modes where people switch and shift between positive and negative engagement, or disengagement (Hill 2017:8; 2019:7).

One could further observe that the soft power of audiences highlighted by Hill's (2017, 2019) research on drama and reality TV also appears or even amplifies with the arise of internet and social media as audiences gain agency in archiving, scheduling and sharing media contents that used to be strictly controlled by producers such as broadcasting companies. Using the push-pull dynamic and spectrum of engagement unveils the power of audiences and provide useful criteria to supplement the research on audiences, which hasn't received as much attention as the celebrity side in para-social interaction theory. The spectrum of engagement is a comprehensive approach to examine audiences' affective reaction to and critical consideration of things happening around Kizuna AI regarding her definition, values and meanings.

Fans, anti-fans and non-fans

Fandom is defined by Sandvoss (2005:8) as 'the regular, emotionally involved consumption of a given popular narrative or text in the form of books, television shows, films or music as well as popular texts in a broader sense such as sports teams and popular icons and stars ranging from athletes and musicians to actors'. The fans who practice it are usually associated with emotional input or 'affect' (Grossberg 1992, cited in Sandvoss 2005:6). Despite that they are the most prominent and dominant among a celebrity's followers, fans are not the only group of audiences within the complex celebrity-audience relationship. Opposite but potentially powerful reactions like indifference and hate also exist in other kinds of celebrity followers such as anti-fans and non-fans[56] (Gray 2003; 2005). Gray defines anti-fans as 'those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel (2003:70)'

[56] Gray's research largely focused on television audiences who are viewers, but many of his findings are also applicable to internet celebrities and their audiences.

and refers to non-fans as 'viewers or readers who do view or read a text, but not with any intense involvement' (ibid.:74).

One way to investigate dynamic audiencehood involving the fan, the non-fan, and the anti-fan is through examination of audience engagement with media text and para-texts (Gray 2003:72). Closer examination of such textual like and dislike could illuminate the existing ideas of text, industry and consumption (Gray 2005:841). One useful approach for media texts and para-texts is to 'hypothesize that all texts have moral, rational-realist, and aesthetic dimensions' (ibid.:844). In positive engagement, fans can merge all the dimensions and absorb them as one (ibid.). At the same time, anti-fandom may prove the three dimensions' potential incompatibility with each other, when the consumer is reluctant or incapable of engaging with a text from all the levels (ibid.).

Adopting the notion of fan, anti-fan and non-fan echoes with the dynamics existing within Kizuna AI's audiences. Studying the discussions and interrelations between them provides a means to better explain and understand how the talk and exchange feeds back into the text and impacts its meanings and contents (Gray 2003:78). Acknowledging their differences in level of engagement and proximity towards various fan objects and texts under the same name Kizuna AI helps illustrate the personalization and contestation regarding meanings and textual consumption within this specific virtual internet celebrity category.

Celebrity, commodity and value

There is an inextricable connection between celebrity and capital in the modern age (Horkheimer & Adorno 1999, cited in Senft 2008:25). Celebrities grow mainly for economic reasons and can be considered a predominant way to sell media commodities (Williamson 2016:13, 21f). This relates to what Marxists consider commodity fetishism, as 'a system of production in which relationships between human beings take on the appearance of relationships between things and in which the products of one's labour no longer belong to the producer' (ibid.:160).

Apart from fundamental economic logics, capitalism is also dependent on specific cultural meanings (ibid.:13). Celebrity as a sign of commodity form for financial benefits simultaneously addresses the desires and cultural values besides the logic of the economic (ibid.:21). As a part of the hierarchy system and structure, celebrities undoubtedly facilitate the domination of media institutions, offer

idealized images of the famous to promote consumerism and neoliberalism, and sometimes even exclude or marginalize those who don't fit in certain value systems and ideologies (ibid.:26). However, their humanity can never be fully contained by presenting themselves in the commodity form (ibid.:26, 163). Human and commodity forms permeate and interpenetrate each other in celebrity culture (Williamson 2016). This thesis brings a virtual character into the discussion and adds to the understanding of a more complex format integrating human beings as labour, capitalists and consumers, and virtual and nonhuman character as celebrity and commodity.

Social constructionism and multi-method design

This thesis departs from social constructionism as it tries to take 'a critical stance toward the taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world', to critically inspect how the new cultural category virtual YouTuber is understood and practiced by different individuals and institutions in China (Burr 2015:2). Guided by a social constructionist's perspective where people construct knowledge and understanding of the world between them through daily interactions in the course of social life; viewing knowledge constitution as a product of 'the social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other' (ibid.:4f), the research emphasises para-social and multi-social interactions among Kizuna AI, audiences, voice models and production company to see how they engage and negotiate the meaning of a virtual YouTuber.

Emphasis on social meaning and texts in social constructionism often logically leads to the use of qualitative methods as the research tools (ibid.:28). Combining the fact that interpretive approaches can be more precise than quantitative approaches in understanding communication, the thesis adopts a qualitative and interpretive approach to investigate the para-social and multi-social communication and meaning making practices between virtual internet celebrity and her fans and audiences (Kuckartz 2014:32). Kizuna AI's bilibili channel is one of the main places where Chinese audiences and fans are pulled into her storytelling and characterization, and push back through comments, fan creation and collective practices, so I made it my main foothold. As analysis of symbolic forms such as language are essential to social constructionist research methods, I've combined two qualitative methods on different symbolic forms: semiological

analysis of the video contents and qualitative text analysis of video comments (Burr 2015; Rose 2016; Kuckartz 2014).

The semiological analysis here mainly covers the visual elements and spoken text (captions) as it is often the text that provides 'anchorage' which allows audiences to pin down the meaning of a visual demonstration (Barthes 1977:38ff; Storey 2015:129). This combination of both visual and verbal messages ensures a more holistic and accurate interpretation of Kizuna AI's videos and the cultural repertoire the producers are trying to add to. Rooted in Grounded Theory, qualitative text analysis has enabled me to verify my hypotheses and assumptions of Kizuna AI's audience engagement and disclose unexpected findings and patterns that are 'lurking within' the comment area (Legewie & Schervier-Legewie 2004:51, cited in Kuckartz 2014:22).

Conducting the research

Kizuna AI's channel included more than 1,200 videos of various genres (as of February 2020). I started my sampling with an exploratory categorization of all her videos. I first took down the details (including likes, replies, forwards, video length, etc.) of her latest 150 videos (as of Feb 24, 2020) and came up with five categories based on the style of the videos: ASMR[57], daily (storyline performance[58]), game, music and reaction. Within this process, I found the voice model incident had caused a lot of conflict, discussion and even collective activism within the comment area regarding the virtual internet celebrity Kizuna AI, the production company and different voice models. Therefore, I picked the most commented videos both before and after the voice model change in June 2019 from each category, to observe potential changes or shifts in audiences' engagement with Kizuna AI. Those videos have the largest potential to showcase the formation of para-social interaction between audiences and Kizuna AI and the multi-social relations established among audiences and fans. During the investigation of the remaining 1,100 videos, two more categories emerged: real

[57] Autonomous sensory meridian response. I include videos focusing more on auditory effects than visual performances under this category.

[58] As Kizuna AI is a virtual character, all the videos featuring her daily life are well-planned and scripted stories that are different from other YouTubers' somewhat documentary style in daily videos/vlogs.

world interaction with human, and livestreaming. The 14 most commented videos were then selected as the main sample[59].

Semiological analysis covered the visual elements and captions of all 14 videos. Before officially gathering data, I chose the most popular video on Kizuna AI's channel as my pilot to test if my multi-method design could allow me to generate analysable and fit-for-purpose data (Bazeley 2013:55). The pilot helped me finalized my coding scheme which integrates Rose's suggestion on conducting a semiological analysis (Rose 2016:132); Hansen and Machin's ideas on semiotics (2013); Gillian Dyer's checklist for exploring what signs of humans might symbolise (Dyer 1982:96ff, cited in Rose 2016:115); and Halliday's (1985) notion of speech acts for more systematic inspection of spoken text in the videos. I followed the scheme first to examine each video individually and then went through all the results to come up with analytical categories centring on two focuses: Kizuna AI's characterization and self-definition, and her performed interaction with imaginary fans and audiences to invite and ask them for support and engagement.

For the qualitative text analysis, the most popular comments and all the replies to those comments were first checked to ensure the depth of the empirical data. Based on the 'saturation' rule, I stopped collecting data when I saw 'no new properties of the pattern emerge' (Glaser 2001:191, cited in Charmaz 2006:113). In order not to leave out important messages in comments which were not that highly ranked, I also looked at the top 50 comments (without the replies) of each video to ensure the width of the data. The numbers of comments and replies collected for each video vary from 114 to 809. As the examination of audiences is guided by concepts around media engagement, the whole coding process is inspired and thematically led by the model of spectrum of engagement (Hill 2017; 2019). Within this framework, I started by inductively reading and interpreting the texts during open coding of the first three videos' comments based on my research questions, and then formed them into preliminary analytical categories that are not entirely descriptive but are part of a deeper analysis and higher level of abstraction (Kuckartz 2014:41). After connecting these categories back to the engagement model, I went back to the comments of the remaining eleven videos

[59] See reference for video details.

and coded them according to the existing categories, while constantly adding new categories and making adjustments to fit for the purpose of the research.

While collecting data, researchers should be aware of the influence on the subjects of the research (Flick 2007:73). The comment areas under videos on bilibili.com is a public and open online space. Remaining an academic 'lurker', I didn't identify my presence to the bilibili users and focused more on the textual output, patterns and the dynamics within Kizuna AI's audiences instead of individual demographics (Gray 2005:847). I've anonymized all the commentators in the research and chose not to give them fake names or use their bilibili alias as I don't have a reliable way to get their demographic information[60] and nicknames alone don't reflect much.

The appeal of Kizuna AI

The analysis is divided into three parts to cover the three key sides: producers, audiences and voice models who are co-creating the human-non-human experience within Kizuna AI's case. The first section focuses on the appeal producers constructed in Kizuna AI to pull audiences into her characterisations and performances in the videos. The second part turns to audiences' reaction to her appeal in the videos and shows the dynamics within Kizuna AI's audience group where people engage emotionally, critically and morally with her with various intensities and proximities. The third part examines Kizuna AI as a form of digital commodity and brings in the discussion of capital, labour, capitalism and socio-cultural values in cultural production.

Virtuality and Japanese visual heritage

Pixel vixen, the style of '3-D computer-generated images (CGI) of digital women who are young, slim, fair skinned, wide eyed, and often scantily clad' (Matrix 2006:8), and kawaii aesthetics, 'the peculiar expression of cuteness-related

[60] It's possible to click into a bilibili user's public homepage and find more information such as gender. However, plenty of users chose not to disclose their gender on their pages, and the disclosure could potentially be fake.

aesthetics in Japan' (Pellitteri 2018:94) are two major attributes in Kizuna AI's visual design.

Pixel vixens come from cyber culture where gender acts as part of the social programming process which is intentionally encoded instead of naturally being there (Matrix 2006:120). At first sight, Kizuna AI denotes a 3-D computer-generated model in the shape of a human being with healthy skin, nice body proportion and an extremely symmetrical face. Moreover, her virtual body is displayed with evident features of a young woman: long and shiny hair over the shoulder, a pair of bright eyes on a smooth face without any wrinkles and a shapely body covered under her delicate outfit. All those features are connoting her similarity to human beings instead of a machine, and connection to femininity.

Besides recognizing Kizuna AI's continuous self-statements such as 'It's me. Kawaii!' the kawaii aesthetics should also be explored in connection to the concept of shōjo (literally young woman) in Kizuna AI's case. Here, shōjo refers to 'a character type, which may appear in entertaining graphic narratives, non-narrative games, or branding campaigns' as the cute adolescent girl' (Berndt 2019:1). Kizuna AI has said in her livestreaming video that she looks like she is 16 years old, and concluded audiences' comments on her characteristics with 'I'm kawaii in general; by default, I'm a perfect bishōjo (literally beautiful young woman)'. She often has a sweet smile, speaks energetically and reacts actively to whatever she sees: a game, artwork or feedback from audiences, connoting a sense of vitality and curiosity that is common in young humans.

Her clothing also displays a common type of kawaii fashion, 'a style that is deliberately designed to make the wearer appear childlike and demure' (Monden 2019:211f). Her clothes are mainly white and pink dotted with only a small amount of black, and she is always wearing a conspicuous heart-shaped hairpin in the same kind of pink colour, to connote a general sense of purity and gentleness[61]. In music videos when Kizuna AI is portrayed a little differently as a singer, her ensemble integrates more colours and ornaments to connote a sense of distinctive vitality in young females, while also keeping consistent with the major character appearance by practices such as sticking to the same kind of hairpin style[62].

[61] https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1ox411S7Q7

[62] https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1cb411s7U4

An exotic and exceptional AI YouTuber

Apart from the character's visual manifestation, Kizuna AI is further portrayed as an exotic and exceptional internet celebrity by claiming herself as an AI, a machine different from human beings, and defining herself to be (probably) the world's first virtual YouTuber, a brand-new production format to allure the audience (Abidin 2018:22f, 28f). Kizuna AI follows the same pattern as other pixel vixens, virtual idols and influencers who make their non-human charm stand out through their character design (Matrix 2006:113f; Lam 2016:1114; Marwick 2019:162). Facing audiences who have 'identity category' as human beings, she puts forward the nonhuman self-definition as an AI in her very first several videos and follows this AI formula to develop a consistent and standardized performing pattern as an 'appropriate production format' (Horton and Wohl 1956:217). She says 'I'm different from you humans' and 'I'm a super AI' regularly in her videos, stressing her non-human aging of being three years old (based on an AI assumption). Her performance gradually turns her given name AI (which means love in Japanese) into a careful play around this tasteful AI attribute which 'piques the interest of audiences who hold contrasting or different forms of cultural capital' (Abidin 2018:22). All of this connotes the exotic non-human quality of Kizuna AI, different from the aforementioned similarity to human beings or human qualities in her visual design.

The technical capital of 'knowledge and mobilization of digital technologies to access information, achieve social mobility, and ensure social inclusivity' (ibid.:28f) is evident in Kizuna AI's virtual existence. This feature enables her to be an internet celebrity exceptional enough to stand out under the attention economy of the internet (ibid.). Self-titled 'probably the world's first virtual YouTuber'[63], Kizuna AI brings about strong interactivity and even sociability based on the digital technology utilized during the deliberately concealed production process. During interviews[64], Kizuna AI can act like a professional human host who asks prepared questions with further extension into impromptu speeches, except the fact that she is two-dimensional inside a large monitor, integrating opposite connotations of human quality and non-human quality.

[63] https://www.bilibili.com/video/av17814976

[64] See https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1w441167Wt as an example

During livestreaming[65], audiences and fans are able to see her answering and reacting to comments that are not prepared in advance, and get a sense of liveness and opportunity to participate in this extraordinary and exceptional experience of communicating instantly with a virtual celebrity.

The virtuality-reality interrelation and an intension to bridge the gap between human and nonhuman are also embedded in Kizuna AI's videos. For instance, in her music video 'AIAIAI'[66], she sings and dances on a screen with human companions who treat her in the same way as they treat other human performers. The human dancers keep the same close distance with each other as well as Kizuna AI, and actively interact with her through movements such as clapping with her, delivering the connotative meaning that there is not much difference between Kizuna AI and human dancers; they can connect well in the real world. Moreover, the final scene of the video goes back to Kizuna AI's virtual world and displays human beings on a screen to indicate Kizuna AI's separation from human beings as a virtual existence in another world.

Performing intimacy

Constructing a sense of intimacy in the performances has long been the key for traditional media celebrities who prompt a sense of connection through their extraordinary personas, established and spread through mass media (Horton and Wohl 1956:218; Rojek 2001, cited in Marwick 2016:333). This cultivation of intimacy is also extended to social media and the internet where microcelebrities use strategic intimacy to appeal to followers and build their fame through the interactive relations with the audiences (Senft 2008; Marwick 2013; 2016). Similar to her human counterparts, constructing a sense of intimacy remains one of the most prominent approaches for Kizuna AI to invite (para-)social interactions from audiences.

She maintains the characteristics to duplicate conversations styles and gestures in an informal face-to-face gathering (Horton & Wohl 1956:217). Throughout the majority of the videos, Kizuna AI tries to keep constant and direct eye contacts with the imagined audiences in the way human beings do in regular conversations. Medium shots and close shots are most frequently used to present Kizuna AI from

[65] See https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV11W411p73F as an example

[66] https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1cb411s7U4

the waist up or shoulder up, showing in detail her facial expressions and body movement to construct a feeling of closeness in her audiences and connote the intimate social relation between the celebrity and the viewer. The settings in some of her videos also help amply the connotation of intimacy. For instance, one ASMR video displays Kizuna AI in her pink pyjamas conducting daily chitchats with her non-specified boyfriend in a tender and supportive tone[67]. This scenario only happens in very intimate relationships.

Fantasy and imagination instead of obligation or responsibility are what stimulate an audience to remain involved in the para-social relation (Horton and Wohl 1956:215). Thanks to her lack of a 'real life', private or truly independent of her fans (Black 2012:224f), audiences get the chance to assign the attributes they like to their beloved virtual YouTuber without worrying about the discrepancy between their imagination and Kizuna AI's real life identity as 'no part of her exists outside flows of … digital texts' (ibid.:225). In Kizuna AI's decontextualized videos, one sometimes has to rely on imagination to fully enjoy specific plots and themes. In the aforementioned girlfriend role-play ASMR video[68], nothing but a still image of Kizuna AI wearing pyjamas has been provided without any specification of the time, place or participant of the conversation. Audiences have to give full play to their imagination in unveiling and defining the scenario with the scattered messages provided by Kizuna AI to fully engage with her sentences starting with 'you'. In another video when Kizuna AI is supposed to reach the audience's ears[69], she comes closer to the camera lens and only leaves her elbow visible for the audiences. This openness pushes those audiences who want to engage naturally into the voluntary imagination of picturing how Kizuna AI is helping them with the ear treatment in their own way. All such voluntary imagination and fantasy further extends the intimacy constructed from Kizuna AI's up-close visible performances, and turns Kizuna AI into a more personal existence within an audience's imagination.

[67] https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1hE411R7xL

[68] https://www.bilibili.com/video/av69390978

[69] https://www.bilibili.com/video/av11949555

Authenticity in real-time relation

Authenticity is another key construct social media can create in online celebrity-fan interactions (Click 2013:366). According to Ellcessor (2012), 'illusions of liveness and interactivity in online media are crucial to experiencing online celebrity as uncontrolled, ongoing, immediate, and "real"' (2012:52, cited in Hills 2016:474). Kizuna AI's showcase of unedited and imperfect performance or even mistakes is one kind of the uncontrolled expressions to generate a sense of liveness and authenticity. During one livestreaming, she tried three times to finally successfully pronounce 'kyaripamyupamyu', and reflected that 'as it's livestreaming, this cannot be edited. I usually cut this (kind of content) off … please forget it haha'[70]. Consideration of such performances of making mistakes and displaying a 'raw' Kizuna AI without editing as authentic also connotes the human quality in Kizuna AI, for she is not portrayed as a flawless machine.

Time has also been fully utilized in Kizuna AI's videos to construct a real-time experience for audiences. The most important real-time experience happens during livestreaming when audiences and Kizuna AI are co-existing within the same time realm and viewers have real time experience with Kizuna AI both within the virtual space and outside in real life. The real-time interactions enabled by Kizuna AI's spontaneous responses to live comments further enhance this experience. The videos also do well in leaving blank space, to allow voluntary contribution from the audience to fill it up. For example, in the girlfriend ASMR video, Kizuna AI initiated a conversation around the day's work. After she asked 'What happened? Please tell me no matter how trivial it is', there was complete silence lasting for a couple of seconds for audiences to put forward their answers before she replied with 'ah … I see'. All the waiting and absence of words are pulling audiences into the illusion of co-existing with Kizuna AI and having real-time feedback from her.

Engaging with Kizuna AI on bilibili.com

The audience of Kizuna AI is far from monolithic (Gray 2003:68). The most active are fans who engage intensely with everything around Kizuna AI, both affectively and cognitively (Hill 2017; 2019) and can shift to the opposite of

[70] https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1q4411Z7FE

fandom and become anti-fans when they dislike certain media text and choose to treat them morally before aesthetically (Gray 2005). Aside from enthusiastic fans and anti-fans, there are also normal viewers as non-fans who sometimes call themselves 'passers-by' and just watch Kizuna AI's videos randomly as they please. This part unfolds the different levels and modes of engagement from the diverse audience group and their practices on bilibili.com, with primary reference to fans and anti-fans to unveil how their (potential or real) participation as consumers are enhancing the proximity of producers and audiences (Zaborowski 2016:124).

Building an affective space on imagination and fantasy

Audiences and fans don't only experience Kizuna AI as digital 'algorithms and abstract symbols'; they reengage her with 'personality and imagination' (Morse 1998:5, cited in Matrix 2006:106). They take the 'voluntary and independent answering role' to Kizuna AI's invitation to establish para-social relations in this affective space where they develop connection to the virtual YouTuber and retain control over the content of their own participation (Horton and Wohl 1956:219).

Affection is one of the most frequently expressed emotions toward Kizuna AI. In this 'imaginary social relationship' fans show 'attachments to this virtual media persona that is … in many ways … parallel to actual social relationships with real … "friends" and "lovers"' (Caughey 1984:23, 40, cited in Hills 2016:468). One fan felt the feeling of losing a good friend, and another got a feeling of breaking up when they both decided to unsubscribe from Kizuna AI's channel. Apart from directly saying 'I love you Aichan!'[71], fans left comments such as 'Ah, I'm in love', 'the "good night" really moved my heart' under her videos to showcase their fondness toward her. Some fans declared 'I'm going to die if I can't have Kizuna AI' and 'VTubers are now part of my life' to acknowledge Kizuna AI and VTuber's significance to their life.

Fans also sense the feeling of connection in Kizuna AI's videos. One audience member described Kizuna AI as 'a symbol of the industry who has created the trend of VTubers, and more importantly, the source of bonding which connects Kizuners (the nickname for Kizuna AI's fans) all over the world'. Moreover, the connection and bonding not only stays within celebrity and fans, but can extend

[71] Chan (ちゃん) is a suffix in Japanese, expressing that the speaker finds a person endearing. Aichan was the nickname for Kizuna AI before the voice model change, and now it often refers to the presence of the first voice model.

to Kizuna AI and humankind. Here is what one audience member passionately wrote under Kizuna AI's music video 'AIAIAI':

> During 0:42-0:49 of the music video, dancers and Aichan have synchronous body movements. Dancers hide behind the screen while Aichan appears from the edge of it, making people have an association that 'dancers become Aichan'. It is a symbol, an enlightenment – ordinary people can also use Aichan's way to communicate with the world … Recalling Aichan's progress of the past two years…I do feel she is changing the world in a silent and soft way. For Kizuna AI, the [AI] part feels like an eye-catching headline, but [love] does exist when she continually carries on her activities for two years with the dream of bonding with humankind…I will always respect Kizuna AI.

S/he first detected a symbolic connection between Kizuna AI and human dancers in the way they are portrayed based on the video's aesthetic text, and then turned to very affective interpretation and intense engagement of both the media content and Kizuna AI's overall performance. The fan alienated Kizuna AI from all mankind, and situated the virtual celebrity on a quite high level where her video can be 'enlightening', she can enjoy 'respect' from fans and she is building connection with human beings out of 'love'.

As the values of involvement and intimacy are stressed in the videos, audiences are getting companionship and encouragement from the para-social relations with Kizuna AI. They can easily distinguish Kizuna AI's voice because it has accompanied them for plenty of nights. Meanwhile, her existence can offer emotional support to help sooth audiences' difficulties in real life. One audience member shared his/her encounter with Kizuna AI in 2017 in the comment area of her first video[72]:

> I was in my 11th grade in 2017 and was too cool to have friends (I actually had friends, but only a few). Under growing studying pressure, I found Aichan at my loneliest time and felt like having one more interesting friend. I couldn't really play or relax due to the ever-growing pressure and would feel guilty for playing video games even occasionally. But I felt relieved every time I watched her videos, and could obtain an unrestricted kind of happiness…I've always found Aichan lively

[72] https://www.bilibili.com/video/av9800170

> and full of energy. She is even driving me who is often in low spirits to treat life in a pink light.

To him/her, Kizuna AI's videos and the moment s/he was watching them served as escapism from an overwhelming real life. It's possible to predict that his/her consumption of Kizuna AI and her videos was based on a 'lack' of adequate close friends or a positive attitude (Baudrillard 1968; It. trans. 2004:255, cited in Pellitteri 2018:100). But more importantly, the person's interaction with Kizuna AI didn't stop to imagination but continues in reality (Horton & Wohl 1956:222). The experience and engagement with Kizuna AI's fascinating personality and the constructed intimacy were actually changing this audience member's life, offering reassurance in a hard time and calling out positivity at the end.

Customizing Kizuna AI's character postulation

The majority of fans have realized that Kizuna AI is not the artificial intelligence she claims to be. Nonetheless, the loyal audiences 'accept the gambit offered' by completing Kizuna AI's performance through 'enactment' of their role and in this way participate in the para-social and multi-social interactions (Horton & Wohl 1956:219f). They play with her AI characteristic individually, and further enlarge it to something more than just the moments of video watching through fan discussions in the reciprocal communication enabled by the possibilities of social media (Hills 2016:472; Gray 2003:76). For instance, one audience member mimicked Kizuna AI's tone and wrote 'I'm artificial intelligence; I never blush', while others called the word '**ちゅめて**' that Kizuna AI made up in the lyric of her song, a kind of AI language.

After being pulled into the video content and character design, fans and audiences are also pushing back to further develop and customize the characteristics settled by the production side. Despite Kizuna AI's recurring claim of 'I'm a super AI', fans are calling her 'Artificial Idiot' for her less intelligent performance in her videos, such as bad gaming skills and calculating ability. They said 'the God gave her an exquisite face and a perfect figure, but took away her IQ' and more frequently, they combined her Artificial Idiot feature with video contents. For example, they named Kizuna AI's interview with Alan Walker[73] 'renowned music

[73] https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1w441167Wt

producer Alan Walker's journey to lower his intelligence'. However, it's worth noting that this artificial idiot customization is more a distinctive trait than a negative accusation, as fans have been clarifying themselves that they are not really calling her stupid when they say artificial idiot. They've been showing considerable appreciation to this characteristic in video comments such as 'I love you so much, artificial idiot Kizuna AI' and 'I think I fell in love with an artificial idiot'. The normally offensive word 'idiot' has been shifted to a distinctive endearment widely accepted and utilized among knowing fans. 'Artificial idiot' could even be viewed as a sign, which constitutes part of the insider knowledge of Kizuna AI and the VTuber industry. Those who know it and are able to engage with it will oftentimes automatically obtain a fan identity in others' eyes and consequently a closer distance to the virtual YouTuber.

Recognizing and acknowledging the voice model

Realizing that Kizuna AI as an artificial intelligence system is just a marketing strategy, audiences have long recognized the existence of voice models. There were not a lot of discussions and interactions around this voice model before the voice model incident, as one audience member pointed out 'in the past when there was no risk of displacement, people didn't care about the voice model'. Nonetheless plenty of debates and negotiations over her were initiated after fans realized the possibility of a voice change and started to reflect on who they were really loyal to.

Plenty of fans have been recognizing voice model Nozomi's contribution in developing Kizuna AI into an attractive virtual celebrity. They started with introducing and acknowledging the existence of this original voice model, writing out her name and explaining explicitly she was the original voice performer. According to them, the voice model has a bigger responsibility than just reading out the script lines word by word. To some audiences, all of Kizuna AI's attractive features are added by the girl named Nozomi who earnestly brings happiness to them. They acknowledged the efforts she had paid since Kizuna AI's debut and stated that 'the approximately 1 million subscriptions of AIChannel on bilibili.com are enabled by Nozomi'.

At the same time, they expressed their opinions on the interrelation between Kizuna AI and Nozomi. To many fans, Kizuna AI's voice model and her appearance constitute Kizuna AI. They consider voice performing an occupation

that ensouls a character, and in Kizuna AI's case, the voice model Nozomi is the soul of Kizuna AI – more important than her visual identification. Here is an example of a fan's reflection on the distinctiveness of VTubers and the voice model's core value:

> In essence, *seiyū* only performs a character's voice and vocaloid's charm comes more from diverse derivatives or re-creation. However, VTuber is different. We cannot say VTuber is equal to voice model, but the conveyance of Aichan's loveliness is actually the expressions of voice model's pleasure, anger, sorrow and joy. She is the core of Aichan, and the most inseparable part.

Recognizing Nozomi as the key to Kizuna AI, some fans refused to recognise no.2, no.3 and no.4 as Kizuna AI and considered Nozomi's version irreplaceable, as one fan clearly stated: 'it's not that we only like Nozomi; it's because only Nozomi can be Kizuna AI'. Some fans also took the voice change incident as an opportunity to think about what they were really into, and plenty of them found they were actually more loyal to the voice model. One said 'Before I thought I liked Kizuna AI, but now I realize I like Nozomi' while another reflected 'I will continue to be a fan of Kizuna AI if Nozomi is still here. But if Nozomi is rejected, Kizuna AI will be dead to me'. To those fans, the visual manifestation and style of Kizuna AI alone isn't that important and meaningful without the voice model, and the original voice model Nozomi is the one actually bonding with them.

Pushing back through moral practices

New voice models no.2 and no.3 debuted in Kizuna AI's channel in June 2019 without any previous official announcement. At first, they often performed together with the original AI while using exactly the same virtual appearance and saying the same greeting: 'Hi, I'm Kizuna AI'[74]. The dissent and denial of the company and the two new voice models finally broke out in August 2019 when two insulting videos were uploaded on Kizuna AI's YouTube channel. One video[75] referred implicitly to the original voice model, and said bullying words: 'Can't you do something about that stupid tone of yours?', 'aren't you a bit puffed up about being a teensy bit popular', and 'don't be so full of yourself because you

[74] https://www.bilibili.com/video/av62650008

[75] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QpwQMrNy8D4&t=3s

are cute'. The other video[76] displayed Kizuna AI's Ahegao (orgasm face) several times and called it a grimace, which the audience deemed very inappropriate for an innocent and adorable character who was even once a travelling ambassador for Japan National Tourism Organization.

Both Chinese and foreign fans were angry at those two videos for destroying Kizuna AI's image, defaming the original voice model and making audiences uncomfortable. Since then, dislikes and anti-fandom towards the new voice models no.2 and no.3 emerged in Kizuna AI's video channels on bilibili.com. It should be noted that the majority of those anti-fans still liked the original voice model and her version of Kizuna AI, engaging passionately with the few videos featuring her. However, for no.2 and no.3's performance of Kizuna AI, the same character Kizuna AI became the object of dislike. Under Kizuna AI's name, one can find sophisticated media engagement where a fan can switch between like and dislike towards different objects and texts, making it hard to nail down a person's fan identity: s/he can be a fan of Kizuna AI and Nozomi while at the same time be an anti-fan of voice models no.2 and no.3.

Dislike toward a text can be as strong as the admiration or other affective emotions, producing equally powerful practices and influence (Gray 2005:841). Anti-fans driven by this dislike are as well motivated and mobilized as fans (ibid.:842). Even though the aforementioned two insulting videos were not translated and uploaded on Kizuna AI's bilibili channel, Chinese fans (and anti-fans) mobilized to informally find and watch the videos, and managed to upload them on bilibili.com[77]. Additionally, they wrote articles, made videos and left comments to discuss the oppression and marginalization of the original voice model based on the evidence they gained formally or informally from various sources. Voice model Nozomi's Twitter account was one most frequently used information sources. Fans and anti-fans referred to her post and combined it with other traces to construct a version of text that they felt was accurate enough for them to go against (ibid.:71). Here is an example of how a Nozomi fan commented to justify their practices:

[76] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lAqFiE2fugQ

[77] One example of the user-uploaded video

https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV14t411T7tg?from=search&seid=514031774443047593

> Are you not seeing all the inside stories that have been dug out recently, the original team that has been fired and Nozomi's tweets? We are not surmising a dark event all because we haven't seen old AI in videos for a while. A8[78] said she was busy and tired, but she turned out to be doing home workout, going to comic convention and playing with fish. It's precisely because we care about what old AI is doing, we know all these…

One can detect the rationale the fan put forward to explain the company's marginalization of Nozomi and predict the abundant time spent on collecting and reading relevant media texts – actually writing out this long comment to discuss why a given text has made fans like her/him angry (ibid.:840). From the tone, a reader is likely to have the feeling that the author must feel close to Nozomi, as they paid so much attention to the whole thing, caring in the way of treating an intimate and important friend and defended firmly the intention to help her.

After determining the excuse for their anti-fandom, Nozomi's supporters started to engage with Kizuna AI, especially her videos with no.2 and no.3, as a moral text (Gray 2003:71; 2005). They stayed in the text's moral dimension and refused to interact further with its aesthetics or rationality (Gray 2005:844, 847). Here is one illustrative comment under voice model no.2's ASMR video[79]:

> This voice is really nice. I might support you if you changed the visual image. But since you are using the visuals of Aichan, no matter how fabulous your voice is, I'm going to scold you.

The audience member chose to consider no.2 as a moral text whose morality s/he didn't approve of and thus 'infringed on their enjoyment and ability to revel in the aesthetic' of her voice performance (ibid.:844). Feeling compelled to consume the moral dimension first, the anti-fan turned his/her back on a text s/he would otherwise treat with plenty of enthusiasm and applause, and deem it not worthy of further interpretation or compliment (ibid.:844, 850, 852). Following this idea, there was also deliberate disengagement with videos featuring voice model no.2 and no.3 while giving full attention to videos featuring Nozomi, for instance, only watching and giving likes to Nozomi's videos.

[78] Kizuna AI's producing company Activ8

[79] https://www.bilibili.com/video/av69390978

As is illuminated above, Kizuna AI's fans 'use texts to perform and construct their identities' and actively enjoy this participatory engagement with the text both individually and collectively (ibid.:854). When they turn into anti-fans, this ability continues, and anti-fans' campaigns, groups or communities can be as organized as their fan counterparts (Gray 2003:71). The greatest and most successful collective campaign was a disengagement activity initiated by those against the producing company's attitude toward Kizuna AI and her voice models. The initiators asked all kinds of audiences: fans, non-fans and anti-fans to unsubscribe from Kizuna AI's official bilibili channel as a resistance to the decisions of the production company Activ8 (A8), to let them know their stance. 'Unsubscribe the channel if you love her' and 'please unsubscribe until old AI is back' were the most frequently used slogans to ask people not to stop fighting until A8 officially compromises.

Around the initial call for unsubscribing practices, fans and anti-fans also mobilized across different media platforms to realize their disengagement plan. They formed different kinds of groups outside bilibili.com and included links to them in the videos' comments. Some groups were informational and aimed at updating new fans or non-fans who wanted to follow the development of Kizuna AI's voice model incident. Some communities aimed at recruiting members into original Kizuna AI's protection group, or 'United Front' as they called it, to support the original voice model Nozomi, and others were places for Activ8's objectors to organize collective resistance to the company's decisions.

Their collective activity not only stayed within the Chinese platform but was extended to a global scope. Within discussions on the Chinese platform about what could be the best way to rescue Kizuna AI, participants were referring to the practices of overseas fans on YouTube, especially Japanese fans who are local consumers of Kizuna AI. They called on Chinese fans to also unsubscribe from Kizuna AI's YouTube channels: 'If you have subscribed aic (A.I.Channel) and aig (A.I.Games) on YouTube, please unsubscribe. Whether it's useful or not, at least we show our position through actions', and tried to make those international social media an additional space of communication. One fan reflected and suggested that 'if only bilibili responds to it, while YouTube stays fine, A8 will possibility leave it as bilibili only represents China's domestic fans; (we) should call upon old AI's fans on YouTube to act together and let A8 see our power'. Another fan asked Kizuna AI fans to mobilize to Twitter to explain the incident

to Japanese audiences and make them understand that their action was for the benefit of Kizuna AI's fans all over the world.

With the idea that the unintelligent AI is disappearing, and only we can save her, Kizuna AI's fans turned their group chats, videos, articles, comments and both domestic and global social media platforms into moral spaces that according to them were not for profit or interest, but for impartiality and justice. Guided by morality and responsibility, they considered this incident relevant to the future development of the whole VTuber industry, for if A8 is able to take advantage of old AI, who is at the top of VTuber industry, the company will dare to take advantage of anyone.

Displaying consumer confidence and expectations

Primarily, the resistance advocates wanted to explain the situation to all new comers and let the original voice model have a voice. They referred to previous oppression cases in other VTuber projects such as Game Club Project and hololive and stated that things will only get better when audiences speak up, and if fans compromise, it means anyone can be the voice model, and the company will have stronger control over voice models. They had faith in the power of public opinions and believed that as long as they work hard, they should be able to bring old AI back.

It's also quite clear that they recognized their importance to the company and industry which 'are waking up to the commercial need to actively listen and respond to' the reception side (Jenkins 2013:192, cited in Guga 2015:40). They believed A8 doesn't dare to run counter to so many fans of old AI, for if audiences don't take it, A8 won't be able to make money. The ability to consume empowers audiences, especially the passionate fans who often spend more money and time than the passers-by, and gives them confidence in rejecting the disliked texts and asking for what they want from the production.

Behind the aforementioned dislike toward new voice models and moral practices against the producing company, there are always people's expectations of ideal forms of a media text and the morality or aesthetics it holds, as well as negative examples to be avoided and amended (Gray 2003:73). Their expectation is also related to the values reflected in media consumption, use and meaning in the VTuber genre (ibid.: 2005:841). The complex fandom and anti-fandom within Kizuna AI's case reflects audiences' expectation of respect for themselves and the

creators represented by the voice model, which can be illustrated by the following two comments:

> It's okay even if you want to change voice model, but please announce in advance (like Kurosaki Rin), and don't do it secretly. Whether it's multiple identity configuration (HimeHina), soul changing (Kurosaki Rin) or different characters within the same channel (Eilene family)…all of these can be done fair and square, but A8 executed it in the most disgusting way.

> The incident is in essence a great disrespect for content creation and audiences' emotions……Even if we want Aichan to upgrade her personality, we do hope that each of her is an independent and full existence. It shouldn't be that the portrait image is an empty shell and the voice models are … its plug-ins. Within ACG creation, even if you are only treating it as a portrait image instead of a 'living presence' and are finding voice performers on this condition, you should know it's self-defeating to attempt to change the (already existing) setting and direction of a virtual work.

Through the first fan's reference to and comparison with other VTubers' strategies for coping with voice model changes or having multiple voice models, one can easily find an explicit demand from the fan to be treated in a more respectful way by the producing company, and to at least have adequate notice before anything happens. The second fan further showed his/her wish for the creative value behind the hidden labour to be prioritized and recognized. S/he wanted each individual personality (no.2, 3 or 4) to be fully shaped and engaged, and hoped that they could all contribute to Kizuna AI as a virtual work, developing the visual portrait more than an image to a living existence integrating the personalities from the human voice models.

Culture as contestation

The constitution of solidarity is prominent in the multi-social relations among fan communities in the case of this virtual internet celebrity, yet people's ideas are not necessarily unified (Hills 2016:472, 479). As Zaborowski (2019:107) has stated, 'the online fan discussions concerning which character traits were understood to epitomize the performer could result in disagreements, and as in most fandoms, it could get ugly'. Conflicting understandings are evident within different shades of fan experiences and imaginative representations of Kizuna AI (Matrix 2006:8). Similar to vocaloid fans, VTuber audiences' negotiation around

Kizuna AI's characteristics, identity and meaning is also a multidimensional and interactive process beyond individual interpretations (Zaborowski 2019:107). Take the artificial idiot name for example: plenty of fans and audiences are enjoying the conversations and playacting around this endearing characteristic, but others dislike the excessive use of this essentially vulgar nickname. The name objectors consider those who follow the trend to contribute to an overwhelming presence of 'artificial idiot' and 'lowering intelligence' in the comment area annoying and disgusting.

When it comes to the voice model incident and multiple AI configuration, one can see predominant support for the original voice model and objection towards others. However, the other voice models have their own fans and audiences, especially no.4, who speaks Chinese and started her own bilibili channel at the end of 2019. Acceptance of those three newer voice models is also evident. To some audiences, 'they (all four Kizuna AI) are complete when they are together' and there is nothing wrong with the other three. Moreover, not everyone likes the idea of viewing Kizuna AI and Nozomi as one. To some audiences, 'Kizuna AI is Kizuna AI, and Nozomi is Nozomi'. As one fan has commented, 'What I love is Kizuna AI. She is both the old AI and new AI. I don't like equating Seiyū's (voice performer) behaviour with Kizuna AI's behaviour. That will make me feel as if I insulted Kizuna AI.'

There were also dissenting voices regarding the collective moral practices. Some questioned the intention and credibility of the anti-activity by arguing:

> You disapprove just because A8's decisions didn't meet your expectations. Do you really care about what Kizuna AI no.1 is doing? You haven't seen her live streaming for a while, so you think she is hidden by the company. Making your own logic workable doesn't mean this is the case.

Some were against the way others demonstrated their attitude: 'many people enjoyed swearing in the comment area; they are not really putting forward requests to the operating company'. While others categorized the practices as fans' common support of their idol and further commented 'this kind of worship makes it easy for people to become fanatical and blind'.

It should be noted that the enthusiasm from fans and anti-fans, especially those who are named 'extreme fans' does at times take up a lot of space and resources on various social media platforms. As mentioned above, devoted fans and anti-

fans not only experienced the texts morally by themselves, but additionally 'encouraged an avoidance of the aesthetic text in others too' (Gray 2005:848). Therefore, in Kizuna AI's bilibili channel, it's very easy to find 'overloaded expectations of the text' that can predetermine and restrict other viewer's ability of understanding and experiencing it (Barker et al. 2001:35, cited in Gray 2005:844). One can find complaints from non-fan audiences who just hoped to freely enjoy the aesthetics of Kizuna AI's videos, but were compelled by others to experience the morality first. Moreover, one is likely to be attacked for not complying with the moral standard set by some extremists, as fans of no.4 have commented: 'many old AI fans were named spammers, and many passer-by fans were forced to take sides', and 'nobody really cared about the videos, they only cared about the sides others take'.

The disputes between audiences and fans echo the push-pull dynamic between audiences and production company, which has been unfolded throughout the thesis, and further verify culture as contestation. In the earlier analysis, that the producers are pulling audiences into the exotic and exceptional characterization and storytelling of Kizuna AI as a virtual celebrity, integrating both human and non-human qualities (Hill 2016:754f; 2019:4). In audience engagement, different kinds of Chinese audiences are actively pushing back on the characterization or identity configuration given by the producers through individual and collective fan practices and disengagement activities. Meanwhile they mobilize informally to websites not available in the country to resist certain distribution strategies of the operating side (Hill 2016:755; 2019:4). The production company and different types of fans have contrasting definitions of who and what Kizuna AI is. The VTuber category is as 'unstable, open to contestation by different groups, dynamically related to other contexts, stabilised via institutions (including business institutions)' as other cultural categories (Highmore 2016:19f). Kizuna AI's characteristics and meaning are dynamic and are constantly being negotiated and balanced between producers and audiences, and among audiences.

Kizuna AI as a digital commodity

Williamson's (2016:21f) argument that 'the growth of celebrity has occurred primarily for economic reasons' also works in the case of virtual internet celebrity Kizuna AI. When the production company is creating her media presence, more

emphasis can be found on economic value than creative value, as one audience member commented: 'Kizuna AI is a money-making commodity for the company'. The company's commercialization decisions, for instance the abrupt change of voice model, reflect the coexisting and interpenetrating 'creative activity and exploitation within the context of the emerging online economy' (Andrejevic 2008:25, cited in Hesmondhalgh 2019:335). Those decisions also mirror the extreme inequalities and injustices that are apparent in contemporary capitalist societies (Hesmondhalgh 2019:10).

Commodifying labour, performance and the virtual YouTuber

In the commercialization process, the virtual internet celebrity is a commodity in multiple senses. First, the hidden labour represented by the voice models, who had long remained unstated and been forbidden to have any public presence related to the virtual character, is a commodity. The labour is bought from the performer and controlled by capital (Williamson 2016:12). Hidden labour also doesn't possess the products of their labour as they do not really have much control in the production process (ibid.). Both their labour and the products of their labour belong to the capitalist, not them (ibid.). The outputs of the voice model's labour such as the songs, videos, interviews and live performances are in this sense commodities tailored for consumption. Moreover, Kizuna AI, the character and internet celebrity which can be viewed as the final product constructed by voice model's labour and the outputs of her labour, is a commodity.

'Sellability' is deemed the basic value of cultural production rather than the sharing, circulating or participating of human creativity and meaning creation (ibid.:160). In the digital age when consumption is not confined to tangible materials, such ability is extended to the capability of attracting people's attention and alluring them to consume intangible (media) contents. The strategy for establishing attractiveness in Kizuna AI is similar to the 'double dialectic of empathy and defamiliarization, human and non-human experientiality' that can be applied to non-human narrators in literary work (Bernaerts, Caracciolo, Herman & Vervaeck 2014:69). It connects closely to the human and non-human connotations that have been unveiled at the beginning of the analysis.

By commodifying nonhumanness and virtuality, Kizuna AI deliberately distances herself from the audiences, using her identity as an artificial intelligence and

virtual character to make audiences and fans defamiliarize with her stories, even though she possesses a young female human being's body and face. Audiences can choose to acknowledge the otherness or exoticism of Kizuna AI as a nonhuman narrator, and in this way have a chance to rethink 'some of their assumptions and expectations about human life and consciousness' to achieve a kind of 'non-human experientiality' (ibid.). At the same time, her human-like behaviour and YouTuber positioning to perform and invite social interactions enable audiences to empathize and project human experience onto the AI system that is not 'conventionally expected to have that kind of mental perspective (ibid.).

Kizuna AI is therefore both unnatural and familiar, inaccessible and approachable. The attention and popularity drawn by such existence has made her extremely 'sellable' in the attention economy of internet culture. For instance, she has guzzu (goods) available on Comic Market[80], live concerts, offline fan meetings and transmedia presence in various advertisements. In this case, it's possible to further consider her fame and popularity as a kind of commodity that could be utilized by advertisers and brands.

Participating in digital capitalism

Kizuna AI's commodification process echoes with Matrix's idea of pixel vixens as 'technosirens' who can draw both male and female users into the participation of digital capitalism (Matrix 2006:8). Such participation involves more than tangible materials or digital media contents when the fundamentally economic 'value in capitalism … is also reliant on specific cultural meanings' (Williamson 2016:13). The commodification and consumption of Kizuna AI is 'enculturating' (Matrix 2006:8). A 'high-tech cultural imaginary' that advocates a 'well-connected, mobile, and flexible digital lifestyle' is constantly being built through the consumption and commodification of Kizuna AI (ibid.:120). What usually existed and happened between human and human, for instance friendship and intimacy, is now possible in the interaction between digital data (non-human existence) and any person, anytime, anywhere. This possibility further blurs the boundary between the real and the imagined, the human and the non-human.

[80] Japan's largest indoor public gathering and exhibition of self-published publications (doujinshis) centered around manga, anime, video games, and other related genres https://www.comiket.co.jp/info-a/WhatIsEng201401.pdf

Upon this new kind of human-non-human interaction, this virtual internet celebrity is further promoting and publicizing the 'values of digital capitalism': virtuality, sociality and interactivity, all available and achievable through consumption (ibid.:107). As a hollow and virtual body 'containing and reflecting ideas, desires, and creative forces of every single one of us' (Guga 2015:38), Kizuna AI's lack of a real-world existence is giving her audiences bigger agency than a human internet celebrity who obtains a more real identity in private life. Audiences, especially fans, are empowered to generate different meanings upon her and her performances thanks to the arbitrariness of a virtual identity and personalize their engagement and making Kizuna AI personal.

One can get companionship and sociality by simply watching her videos and interacting with her on the internet. If a fan wants to have deeper interactivity with or more access to Kizuna AI, s/he can buy her material or virtual fan goods: such as physical figures or digital albums, tickets to live performances to experience her on the spot, watch performances live on YouTube, and repeatedly engage with those diverse forms of fan objects. One can even get a deeper sense of connection to Kizuna AI, simply by spending more (time or money) and consuming those virtual or material commodities more frequently. As a cultural and digital commodity, Kizuna AI endorses consumption as a way to construct the fluid identity or remake the self to a more idealized status (Marshall 2014; Williamson 2016:162). As a virtual internet celebrity, she now becomes a resource for audiences to construct and deepen their human identity through the co-creation of human-non-human interaction (Hills 2002:166, cited in Hills 2016:467).

Conclusion: co-creating Kizuna AI

The thesis centered on the primary aim of situating Kizuna AI as an extension of Abidin (2018)'s definition of internet celebrity, and examined her diverse and competing definitions, meanings and values to the producing company, voice models and audiences; who are constantly negotiating with and enforcing each other from three aspects: the production, the audience and the generic form as a whole.

How is Kizuna AI defined and portrayed in her videos? And how does she perform and invite interaction from the audiences?

Kizuna AI's portrayal consists of characteristics from the pixel vixen in cyber culture, and kawaii aesthetics in Japanese culture. At first sight, she is a 3-D computer-generated model in the shape of a human being whose virtual body displays evident features of a young and adorable woman, connoting human quality and femininity. The cuteness in her clothing, appearance, expressions and speaking tone echoes with the concept of shōjo and kawaii that are distinctive in Japan.

In her videos, she defines herself as artificial intelligence, deliberately distancing and alienating herself from human beings. Developing upon this connoted non-human trait, she expands the descriptions and self-claims regarding her AI identity, such as the non-human aging and super calculating ability throughout her video contents, further enhancing herself as an exotic existence. Claiming to be (probably) the world's first virtual YouTuber, Kizuna AI also displays exceptional human-non-human interactions within her video contents, interviews and livestreaming, showcasing a possibility to blur reality and virtuality while building herself into an internet celebrity.

Constructing intimacy and showcasing authenticity are the two main approaches for Kizuna AI to perform and invite interactions from her imagined audiences. Most of the time, Kizuna AI keeps direct eye contact and stays up close and personal to audiences in her videos. Frequently used medium and close shots indicate the close distance, connoting an illusion of physical proximity. Decontextualized settings offer a sense of openness and arbitrariness for audiences to voluntarily imagine and assign whatever intimate scenarios they want to the para-social interactions implied by the videos.

Time is fully utilized in Kizuna AI's case, to display authenticity. Her immediate expressions, gestures and body movements to contents displayed in the videos, spontaneous responses to live comments and imperfect performances or even mistakes during live streaming are all showing authenticity and contributing to audiences' real time experience and real time relationship with Kizuna AI in both the virtual space and real life. This real time relation could further be interpreted as an indicator of real relations with and involvement in the virtual internet celebrity.

How do audiences engage with Kizuna AI and each other on bilibili.com? And how do they recognize and engage with voice models?

The thesis shows that Kizuna AI's audiences are far from monolithic (Gray 2003:68). The most active are fans, who emotionally, critically and morally react to everything around Kizuna AI and can shift to become anti-fans when dissatisfactory media contents appear. Aside from the passionate fans and anti-fans, there are also viewers who are non-fans or, in their words, 'passers-by' who watch Kizuna AI's videos randomly and participate in fan practices as they wish. Having different levels and modes of engagement, the fans, anti-fans and non-fans constitute Kizuna AI's diverse audiences on bilibili.com.

From the bilibili comments, emotional engagement is the most prominent mode of engagement in audiences' reaction to Kizuna AI's invitations in her videos. In the imaginary para-social relationship with Kizuna AI, audiences, especially fans, show affection and meaning-making practices that in many ways are 'parallel to actual social relationships with real … "friends," and "lovers"' (Caughey 1984:23, 40, cited in Hills 2016:468). They make the video channel an affective space where engagement with Kizuna AI can provide connection to other fans, bonding with this virtual internet celebrity and emotional support such as encouragement and companionship that actually affects real life.

Audiences also draw on cognitive thinking while interacting with Kizuna AI on bilibili.com, and further develop her invitations or claims in the videos to customize the character's postulation and help co-create the human-non-human interaction. Realizing Kizuna AI's claim of being artificial intelligence is a fictional branding label, the majority of fans still 'accept the gambit offered' and develop the new nickname 'Artificial Idiot' based on her AI claim and the not very intelligent performance across her media production. This customized name becomes a distinctive sign of endearment between Kizuna AI and fans, and is enlarged to 'something more than just the moment(s) of viewing' through people's interaction with each other in the multi-social media talk (Gray 2003:76). Moreover, fans are actively playing with customizations like this on bilibili.com to showcase and consolidate their insider identity as knowing fans.

The push-pull dynamics (Hill 2016; 2019) and contestation between producers and audiences became more evident when the voice model incident happened and two insulting videos were released on YouTube. Since then voice models had

never been officially acknowledged by the company, or allowed to make public their connection to Kizuna AI on their personal social media, this became another key focus of audience engagement on bilibili.com. The majority of positive engagement is with the original voice model Nozomi Kasuga, who was recognized by plenty of fans as the soul of Kizuna AI, deemed more important and meaningful than the character's visual identification. Negative engagement is mostly around the new voice models no.2, no.3 and the producing company Activ 8 (A8), and the dislike further develops into anti-fandom of the new voice models in some loyal supporters of Nozomi. In their engagement with the videos, they treat the virtual internet celebrity and her new voice models as moral texts, which first should satisfy their moral standard before being further reacted to, or interpreted on an aesthetic or rational-realistic level. No.2 and no.3's performances were rejected, causing disengagement due to lacking moral quality compared to the prerequisite.

Deliberate disengagement with Kizuna AI's video channels also appears out of love for Kizuna AI and the original voice model, as a way of resisting the production company's practices. From the qualitative text analysis of bilibili comments, one can see fans and anti-fans mobilize across domestic and international social media platforms to carry out various individual and collective activities, such as forming community and publicizing information to call for attention from both domestic and foreign audiences, fans and non-fans to the collective disengagement initiative. They turn those communication places into moral spaces where they can support the right of the original voice model, protect their beloved virtual internet celebrity and realize fairness and justice.

The thesis argues that behind audiences' pushback to producer decisions, there is a sense of confidence about their power as consumers. They have recognized their importance in the attention economy of the VTuber industry and are actively utilizing it to make their voice heard to content providers who rely much on them for money-making. Additionally, there also lies audiences' expectation of this specific generic form in their reactions to the voice model incident. What they are expecting or demanding from the production company is more respect for audience emotions and the creative value generated by the invisible voice models to ensoul virtual characters in media production.

Audiences' engagement with each other on bilibili.com is not always positive and cohesive. Disputes and contestations are also evident between audiences when

various kinds of fandom co-exist under Kizuna AI's name, with distinctive views on the same object. Aside from fans and supporters of original voice model Nozomi, there are fans of voice model no.2 and no.3 who hold contradictory stances against the aforementioned disengagement practices, and are passionately engaging with their own fan objects. Some audiences are just fond of Kizuna AI's visuals and draw a very clear line to demarcate voice models from Kizuna AI. There are also non-fan audiences who are 'passers-by' and only want to enjoy the aesthetics of the videos randomly instead of being compelled to judging the morality of a media text.

The push-pull dynamic (Hill 2016; 2019) between audiences and producers echoes with such disputes and proves culture as contestation. Audiences are pulled into the characterisation and appeal of Kizuna AI constructed by the producers in the videos, while they also actively push back through individual and collective fan practices toward dissatisfactory media contents and production decisions. All the dynamics and contestations within Kizuna AI's case illustrate the fluid quality of VTuber as a cultural category. It is a genre where a virtual internet celebrity's definition, characteristics and meaning are in flux, constantly negotiated and balanced between not only audiences and producers, but also between audience members.

How is Kizuna AI commercialized and consumed as a digital commodity?

Judging from the whole format, Kizuna AI cannot escape the commercialization and commodification process which interweaves labour, capital and product; and primarily aims at an internet celebrity's economic value. Hidden labour represented by voice models, the performances generated from their work, and Kizuna AI who is the final product of this production are all commodities. Kizuna AI bears a distinctive kind of 'sellability' (Williamson 2016:160) of the digital time where attention and popularity enabled by the time and labour audiences spend on the interactive celebrity can further be commodified and benefit brand owners or advertisers.

The highlight on human-non-human interaction is the main strategy for Kizuna AI to produce her 'sellability' as a digital commodity (ibid.). As an assumed non-human narrator within her media production, she intentionally distances herself

by stressing her virtual and AI traits, and makes audiences defamiliarize with her presence and stories to trigger 'non-human experientiality'. However simultaneously, she is looking, behaving and talking like a human being to invite audiences to empathize and project their human experientiality back on her. She constructs an exotic yet familiar existence by pulling audiences into the consumption of her media contents.

By commodifying and consuming Kizuna AI as a digital product, audiences and producers are also building and promoting an enculturating high-tech cultural imaginary, where what used to be available only within human beings can be extended to the realm of human and machine. It is pushing the boundary between the real and the imagined, the human and the non-human by advocating a sense of virtuality, sociality and interactivity. Under such imaginary, audiences are empowered to adopt well-connected, mobile and flexible ways to generate different meanings and personalize engagement with the virtual internet celebrity, thanks to her virtuality and the lack of a self in reality. In their personalization of engagement, realized through purchasing and consuming goods and services of Kizuna AI, audiences are further drawn into digital capitalism where they need to remake, construct and deepen their self-identities based on consumption.

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Excellent MSc Dissertations 2020

This edited volume, *Excellent MSc Dissertations 2020*, is the fifth in the series that collects postgraduate dissertations written by students who undertook the MSc degree in Media and communication studies at Lund University in Sweden, and graduated in June 2020. The five chapters in this volume represent work originally presented and evaluated as part of the final thesis exams in May of 2020, in which they were awarded top grades. During the autumn of 2020 they were revised and edited for publication in the series *Förtjänstfulla examensarbeten i medie- och kommunikationsvetenskap* (FEA), launched by Media and communication studies at Lund University in 2008, in order to bring attention to and reward student research of a particularly high quality.

With this publication, we hope to inspire future students who are writing dissertations, as well as contribute to debates inside and outside of academia regarding media, society and culture. In particular, the chapters in this book urge us to critically reflect on what it means to engage with, in and through different media, in different contexts. Through studies of nationalism 'from below,' the significance of protest art, affective news engagement practices, the digitalisation of sleep, and virtual celebrity; the chapters emphasise the force of media engagement to provide people with common cultural symbols, manifesting nationalism, political issues or fandom; as well a means of mobilisation, entertainment, self-management, interaction and remembering. The issues brought up makes us reflect on how media fits into, makes up and helps structure our lives and our societies.

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