

REACTING TO...: Understanding The Motivations, Participatory Culture, and Spectatorship Behind Reaction Videos

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Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science
in
Computer Science & Applications

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April 24, 2025
Blacksburg, Virginia

Keywords: Reaction Videos, Viewers, Reactors, Content Creators, Social Media, YouTube,
TikTok, Instagram

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(ABSTRACT)

Reaction videos (RVs) are surging in popularity, emerging as a distinctive facet of participatory culture on current-day social video-sharing platforms such as YouTube, Tiktok, and Twitch. This study aims to explore not only the motivations and engagement patterns of viewers with RVs, but also the underlying nature of the virality and community-building phenomena that this sub-genre of content fosters. We conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with people who identified as regular consumers of reaction videos to build a better understanding on how viewers discover reaction videos (RQ1), the values that drive motivations in viewing reaction videos (RQ2), and the engagement practices viewers have with reaction videos (RQ3). Our research highlights the variety of original content that RVs utilize, ranging from movie trailers to music releases, and the different engagement strategies viewers rely on in their consumption of RVs. Our findings emphasize the importance of emotional connection with reactors, the search for communal experiences around shared interests, and the role of RVs in content discovery and critique. Drawing from viewers' experiences with reaction videos, our research presents a behind-the-scenes perspective on the intricate landscape of being a spectator and its impact on society's production and consumption of content in today's digital age. We also contribute a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the broader reaction video culture.

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(GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT)

Have you ever listened to a new album, had a particular track stick with you and thought to yourself, “I wonder who else is resonating with this like I am”? So, you proceed to look up reactions to that album with the hopes that someone else is reacting and giving the same amount, if not more, praise to that same track? Perhaps, you felt this way about a movie? TV Show? Don’t worry, you’re not alone. Reaction videos (RVs) are a genre of video in which an individual, known as a reactor, watches and responds to original content (OC), typically expressing their emotions, opinions, and critiques as they engage with the content. Reaction videos are surging in popularity, emerging as a distinctive facet of participatory culture on current-day social video-sharing platforms such as YouTube, Tiktok, and Twitch. This study looks into why so many people enjoy watching these “watch-along”, and sometimes “listen-along”, videos. We wanted to understand what motivations led viewers into tuning in, as well as their participation in reaction video culture. Through 16 semi-structured interviews with people who identified as regular consumers of reaction videos, we were able to provide a more nuanced understanding of viewer engagement with both “reactors” and other viewers, as well as the values that drove their motivations into watching these videos. This research gives us a peek behind the screen as to how we watch and share media in today’s digital world.

Dedication

To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for getting me through not only these past 2 years of my graduate studies, but the past 6 years on this mountain – I wouldn't be here without His grace, mercy, and favor!

To my mother and father who have sacrificed so much of their time and energy in not only providing for me, but also for my siblings. From leaving their home and families behind and immigrating to a foreign land in the hopes that we would prosper more than they ever could – I now stand as the first in my family to receive not only a Bachelor's degree but also a Graduate degree. This is for the Okyere family!

To my siblings, Leonard and Elaine, I dedicate this degree to you both to show you that you can and will make it as long as you put your mind to it, and I'll always be there to support you in all that you desire – Okyere Family Dungeon over everyone!

To my Grandpa Ilostman, this is for you old man, without your constant encouragement and words of wisdom from the moment we met so long ago to now, I wouldn't be where I am today so I thank you gramps!

To my uncles, aunts, and cousins who all have constantly prayed for me and supported me throughout this journey at VT. The constant check-ins during holiday breaks and motivational prayers kept me afloat during the times where I wasn't even sure of my own decision in tackling this degree. I'm grateful for the love and support and cherish all of you!

To my best friend and brother Haisam Saied, I wouldn't be here without you man. From K-12, to VT, you've been one of my biggest support systems and I'm proud to call you my brother for life. You've always remained loyal to me through and through, and kept my spirits up when I was down, and I only hope that I can repay the same favor as you accomplish the next chapter in your life – I love you brudda mane!

To my big bro Jonathan Holloway, man oh man we did it brudda mane! You came in my life during a time of uncertainty and have always pushed for me to be the best Rodney I could be. You've shown me love in the moments that I felt unlovable, taught me lessons that I'll forever carry, and have always kept my best interests at heart. This degree and this journey wouldn't have been possible without you – I love you and will forever be thankful for the relationship that we have!

To JT, my bbf! You single-handedly have brought me back to Earth so many times and have kept me afloat throughout the final year of this degree. From spontaneous visits to consistently checking in on me every morning, from our nightly FaceTime calls to our outings, you've kept my mentals from spiraling so many times and I thank God for bringing you into my life! I love you and I'm grateful for all your prayers, love, and support my love!

To 1703, my bruddas! We did it! Y'all seen me at some of my lowest points and continued to support me throughout it all! From late nights with Bulcha to running it back 24/7 with Kojo and Hassen, you boys provided me a safe space to just be myself and take a breather –
I love you guys!

To 490, my hermanas! If I could put that Timbaland gif in here I would haha! You both have taught me so much in such a short span of time being together, and I'm grateful for all the love and lessons that we've had with one another!

To XCOCK JUAN, man oh man you boys are hilarious, and I'm grateful that our friendships have lasted us from as early as middle school to now – you boys have kept me afloat more than you'll ever know!

Finally, to my past self. You did it man, those late nights, early mornings, prayers, and tears have not been in vain. You said during COVID you were going to do this, and now look at us five years removed and you did exactly what you said you were going to do. In true RKO fashion, hit 'em from outta nowhere!

This is to everyone, with deep heartfelt gratitude!

Acknowledgments

This goes out to the one and only Dr. Sang Won Lee. After my study abroad plans had been shattered by COVID, I immediately started looking for research opportunities and by the grace of God, Professor Sang took me in and blessed me with the opportunity to work under him and the EchoLab. My love for research, and more specifically HCI, has only continued to grow since then and I thank Professor Sang for his guidance and support throughout these past four years. Sang is truly the greatest advisor, and professor, that Virginia Tech has to offer, and as I've told everyone who's asked me about future Ph.D. plans - wherever Sang is that's where I want to be.

I would also like to acknowledge my committee members Dr. Shuo Niu and Dr. Ihudiya Finda Williams for their support and dedication to my research. Without them, this would not have been completed and fleshed out to the extent that it has gotten to.

I would like to acknowledge my former advisors (who I still frequent their offices) Christina Martin and Dr. Karen Eley Sanders for their constant support and love throughout my time at Virginia Tech. They've provided me with immense support when it's come to my mental health and living and I'm eternally grateful to have met them. As I like to call them, shoutout my VT aunties! Finally, I'd like to acknowledge the EchoLab. To all the former members that were there throughout my undergraduate career and to the all the current members, without you I would not have made it through. Our weekly lab meetings, slack conversations, and outings have provided me with so many lasting memories during my time in research and I'm grateful to have met you all. Special shoutouts to Andy, Carlos, Muskan, Soumya, Yuhang, Jaehoon, and Sangwook!

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OC Original Content

RV Reaction Video(s)

OC: This refers to the primary media that reactors respond to in their videos. This can range from music and films to TV shows, anime, and more. The OC forms the basis of the reaction video, as reactors share their thoughts and reactions to it.

RV: This refers to a type of video in which an individual, known as a reactor, watches and responds to OC, typically expressing their emotions, opinions, and critiques as they engage with the content.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Reaction videos, or RV(s), are a popular and fast-growing genre of user-generated content, which can be found on almost any platform, such as YouTube, TikTok, and Twitch, in which an individual, known as a *reactor*, records themselves reacting to various forms of content [4, 6, 12, 18, 28]. The core of these videos lies in the capture of often spontaneous and seemingly genuine reactions, emotions, and thoughts of the reactor as they engage with the content [4, 7, 18, 73].

Today, reaction videos have matured into a cornerstone of Internet media, evolving into a significant genre across various platforms [6]. Content creators across platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and Twitch record or stream their real-time reactions to everything from newly released albums, movie trailers, and video games to current affairs such as political events and award shows. A quick look at YouTube will show titles such as "Dad reacts to..." or thumbnails showcasing a duality between the reactor and the content that they are reacting to (shown in Fig 1.1).

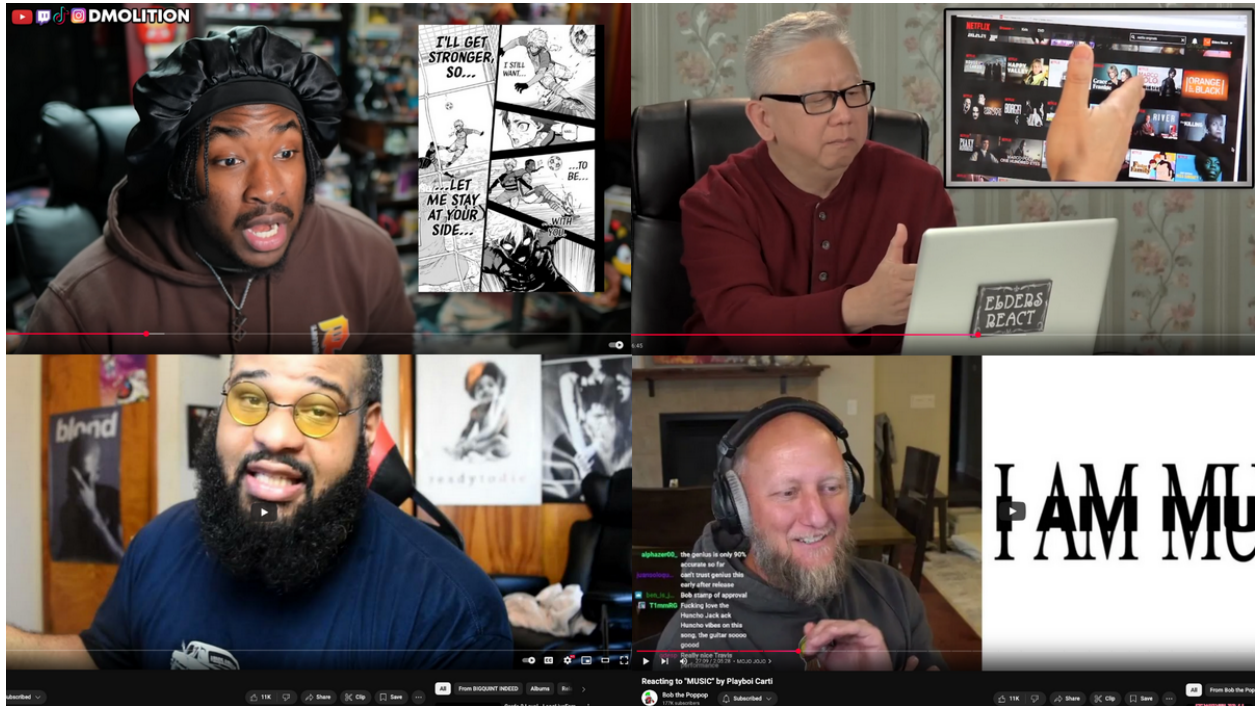


Figure 1.1: A typical reaction video setup showcasing multiple creators responding to various forms of media, including manga panels, streaming platforms, and music. Clockwise from top left: DMolition (YouTube/Twitch/TikTok), Elders React (YouTube series by FBE), Bob the Poppop (YouTube), and BIGQUINT INDEED (YouTube). Screenshots taken from publicly available YouTube videos for illustrative purposes.

Reaction videos reflect a unique form of digital engagement that is rooted in shared emotional resonance, community formation, and participatory culture [22, 28]. They blur the boundary between creator and audience, allowing content consumption to be turned into a more social act. Whether it's joy, outrage, nostalgia, or surprise, the emotional connection between viewer and reactor drives the appeal, and in many cases, audiences come to know and trust certain reactors, treating them as curators, experts, or even friends [22, 60].

1.1 Motivation

The widespread popularity of the reaction video genre highlights deeper questions about the way we experience media in today’s digital age [6, 8, 28, 39]. It remains unclear why audiences are drawn to the act of watching others react. Although not fully understood, this act may reflect more nuanced aspects of our emotional needs, our own sense of community, and the evolving relationship we share with media content.

As media platforms become increasingly saturated with content, viewers are not just looking for another video to watch, but rather they are looking for connection, validation, and a shared emotional experience [8, 22, 28, 60]. Reaction videos show us that viewers are not just passive consumers anymore; viewers – i.e., the ones who react to a video – are the creators of a new type of content.

However, despite the unique appeal of reaction videos, they remain under-explored in academic literature, especially from the perspective of the viewer. While there has been prior work in examining reactors, their digital labor, and their contributions to the culture of reaction videos [22, 44, 48], the viewer role is still limited in understanding. Although efforts have been made in understanding viewer engagement, previous research has mostly focused on specific groups such as the LGBTQ+ community [7], K-Pop fandoms [46], with some studies specifically studying White fans[53] and Black fans [52] participation within the RV culture, and viewer comments left behind on reaction videos in general [28, 76]. Few researchers have explored a comprehensive understanding of viewer motivation and their engagement in the participatory culture of reaction videos.

Grounding our study with Katz et al.’s Uses & Gratifications Theory that has been applied in many of the previous studies mentioned [18, 22, 28], we look to provide a better understanding of the underlying motivations that drive viewers to engage with reaction videos and the

gratifications they derive from their consumption. This study aims to provide qualitative insights on these motivations, focusing on the participatory nature of reaction video culture and the layered relationships it can foster between viewers, reactors, and the original content. In addition, our goal is to understand the emotional needs, sense of community, and viewers' relationship with reaction videos.

1.2 Research Questions and Contribution

To better understand the nuances in viewer motivation as well as their engagement in the ever-evolving culture of reaction videos, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 people who identified as regular consumers of reaction videos. Our aim was to answer the following research questions:

- (RQ1) How do viewers discover reaction videos?
- (RQ2) What are the motivations for watching reaction videos?
- (RQ3) How do viewers engage with reaction videos?

Our goal is to further bridge the existing knowledge gap regarding viewers by centering their voice and examining how reaction videos serve not only as entertainment, but also as social and affective media experiences.

Drawing from viewers' experiences with reaction videos, we expand existing literature with our insights directly from viewers themselves, and contribute to the development of a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of viewers within the broader reaction video culture.

Overall, our study contributes three key insights behind viewers and their experiences with reaction videos:

- First, we identify four distinct pathways that viewers use in their discovery of reaction videos and offer a more detailed understanding of the engagement within these pathways.
- Second, we identify five core motivations that drive viewers in their consumption of reaction videos and provide richer insights into the specific values that lead to these motivations.
- Third, we explore the participatory culture of reaction videos and identify four dimensions of engagement practices in viewer interactions with the videos, reactors, and other viewers.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

2.1 Reaction Videos and their Cultural Significance

2.1.1 What Are Reaction Videos?

Reaction videos are a popular genre of user-generated content, found primarily on platforms like YouTube, in which an individual, known as a *reactor*, records themselves reacting to various forms of content using an online medium [4, 6, 12, 18, 28]. This content could take the form of music videos [27, 46, 48, 52, 53, 70], movies [71], television shows [6, 22, 28, 45], trailers [22], video games [29, 76], books [74], other user-generated content [18] such as vlogging [1, 74], reactions to tragedies [7], and political responses [42], pornography [11, 73], cultural content [4, 49] or even live social events [1, 44]. Essentially, a reaction video could be made for anything that exists. They are meant to capture genuine expressions of thoughts and opinions in response to the content being viewed [4, 28], encompassing both “verbal utterances” and “non-verbal reactions like facial expressions, gestures, posture, tone, pitch, and volume” [1]. The focus is often on the spontaneous and immediate reactions of the reactor [4, 28], who not only records the video but also acts as both an interpreter of the content and a content producer [4, 28]. This basically enables viewers to engage in a form of ‘watching people watching people’ [2, 4, 12, 18, 48, 62].

As Baker et al. found in their evaluation of young people watching edutainment media

through reaction videos [6], reaction videos can range in production from amateur videos - often unscripted and spontaneous - to more professional videos, which might involve scripting and editing [18, 45]. They can serve various purposes including leisurely entertainment [28, 48], community building [44, 46, 52, 53], and even advertisement and marketing [4, 6]. Drawing on Warren-Crow (as mentioned in Rowe and Ye et al.) [62, 76], reaction videos can be understood as a genre that “heavily relies on the perceived authenticity of a highly charged emotional response, typically recorded while the reactor is watching screen media” [73].

Coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976, the term “meme” was introduced to describe “units of cultural transmission or imitation” [59]. He conceptualized memes as cultural analogs to human genes, which are capable of self-replication and subject to evolutionary pressures, and also likened them to cultural phenomena such as melodies, fashion trends, and more [59]. Bliss, and Ghosh and Tripathi found that reaction videos can also be considered as a form of memes.[11, 12, 28]. This concept of reaction videos as memes suggests that reaction videos have the potential to spread and evolve around the Internet, often through imitation and variation [28], aligning with Dawkins’ concept of memes as “cultural elements that spread and evolve through variation, selection, and retention” [28, 59]. Bliss argues that reaction videos are unique and stretch the traditional definition of memes as they may not always directly replicate a known original text or in some cases they are authorless, particularly in cases like strategic content creation [11]. The intertextual nature of reaction videos, in which they frequently reference and build upon existing media and other reactions, also contributes to their memetic spread and transformation [12].

2.1.2 Cultural Relevance, History and Popularity

While the genre itself has gained significant popularity recently, the capturing of reactions is not a new practice. This practice can be traced to earlier roots, such as the widely recognized “Nintendo Sixty-FOOOOOOOOUR” video (shot in 1998, uploaded to YouTube in 2006) which showcases the authentic and intense emotional reaction of siblings receiving a Nintendo 64 as a Christmas present [48, 73].

The appeal of observing genuine reactions/responses has also been around long before the Internet era, with traditional media mediums such as television and radio long capitalizing on people’s reactions [12, 18, 48]. A notable pre-Internet example can be found in the 1947 radio show ‘Candid Microphone’ and its television successor ‘Candid Camera,’ which both highlight the long history of publicizing spontaneous reactions [18, 21, 48]. Correspondingly, and although not explicitly investigated within literature, sportscasters may fall into this realm of reactions in which they provide play-by-play commentary as they react to the immediate events happening during a game. Their reactions and corresponding analysis could be in real time or retroactively on sports networks, further emphasizing the appeal of genuine and knowledgeable critiques of original content.

In 2006, when YouTube was still in its infancy, the platform was dominated by low-resolution webcams, pixelated thumbnails, unregistered hypercams, windows XP Notepads, and Trance’s song “009 Sound System Dreamscape” [2]. This period saw the emergence of what would later become a significant genre, in one of the more unforgettable and infamous Internet rites of passage at the time; which was witnessing someone react to the *Scary Maze Game* - a harmless-looking flash puzzle game that suddenly jump-scared unsuspecting viewers with its terrifying scream and image of a young female zombie [18, 22, 48]. People were not just watching the game; they patiently waited and watched as their friend or family member pro-

gressed through each level, anticipating the moment in which they would accidentally touch a wall, ending their play-through. They would observe the player's face twist in horror as they witnessed the grotesque image and its accompanying shrieking. The act of watching others react to this game quickly became a popular online activity, with people recording and sharing the often humorous or terrified responses of their friends and family [48].

Although the “Nintendo Sixty-FOOOOOOOOUR” video is often cited as an early Internet example of reaction videos [12, 28], the genre gained significant traction around mid-2007 with the viral internet phenomenon and widespread reactions to the trailer for the scat fetish porn film informally known as “2 Girls 1 Cup” or 2G1C [17, 23, 55]. This trailer was considered “foul” and, at the time, violated basic taboos, making it “unwatchable, and yet it had to be watched” [2, 73, 74]. Some sources even declare the 2G1C reactions as the *originator* of the reaction video genre on YouTube [17, 23], although it may have defined its notoriety more so than its initial form. 2G1C sparked a trend in which it was less about viewing the video itself, and more because of the *reactions* it provoked [2, 17, 55]. It was pretty difficult *not* to find endless videos of people dry heaving, covering their eyes, or laughing uncontrollably as more and more people were, unfortunately, exposed to it [17, 55]. Like the Scary Maze Game, the focus was not on the content, but rather on how people responded to the content. Long before “reaction videos” were labeled as such, this phenomenon was already being woven into the social fabric of Internet culture. Regardless, the viral nature of content such as 2G1C had undoubtedly contributed to the early recognition and popularity of reaction videos [17, 55].

By the early 2010s, this phenomenon of reaction videos had evolved into a recognizable and popular format on YouTube, with Fine Brothers Entertainment (FBE), later known as REACT, playing a pivotal role in shaping the genre [18, 48]. Some recognize FBE as having “pioneered the art form as we know it with their signature ‘React’ video series”,

and their channel is considered the “first react channel on YouTube” [48]. FBE created multiple series such as *Kids React*, *Teens React*, and *Elders React*, showcasing how different generations responded to viral media. Unlike the earlier amateur reaction videos on the platform, FBE professionally edited and intentionally crafted these videos to highlight the array of emotions that their reactors expressed [18]. The appeal was undeniable; viewers were finding entertainment not only in the original content but in watching others consume it in real-time.

The cultural relevance of reaction videos is strongly tied to the phenomenon, or act, of “watching people watching people” [2, 45]. This act allows viewers to “vicariously recapture primary experience” [2], experiencing the thrill or shock of the original content through someone else’s reactions without direct exposure [7, 18, 48]. As mentioned earlier, reaction videos can be considered a form of memes, spreading and evolving through online networks through replication and popularity [12, 28, 52, 53]. The ability of users to easily create and share reaction videos aligns with the broader context of participatory culture and “produsage,” where users increasingly become content producers/creators [10, 15].

Although initially overlooked by academic research, the cultural relevance and popularity of reaction videos have led to increased academic attention [12, 18, 22, 28, 48]. Following initial coverage, including Sam Anderson’s 2011 *New York Times* article [2], the genre began to gain more ground in the interest of academia. Carrêlo explicitly states that reaction videos are now considered a “noteworthy genre of YouTube vlogging and one of the most successful types of user-generated content on the platform” [18]. This ever-growing body of academic work has explored the popularity behind reaction videos [18, 28, 73], the content creators or reactors behind reaction videos and their characteristics [45, 48, 52, 53], the generic qualities and defining characteristics that make up reaction videos [18, 22, 52, 53, 73], how they’ve been utilized in different contexts, such as identity formation [49, 52, 53, 70], response videos

and online harassment [42], pornography consumption [11], music reception [48], the studying of emotional responses [18, 28], and adaptation reception [62], and more recently the direct addressing of viewer motivations [18, 28].

However, in popular press, reaction videos are sometimes “maligned as uncreative, insubstantial, and aesthetically valueless” [53]. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a surge in online media consumption, including reaction videos, further highlighting their current cultural relevance [8, 22, 28, 62, 70].

Beyond simple entertainment, reaction videos have been recognized to play a role in community building such as the LGBTQ+ community [7, 44], as well as within fan communities where these videos act as “havens of exchanged knowledge and emotions among fans” [46, 52, 53, 70].

The appeal of reaction videos to attract and engage audiences has also led to their use as tools for marketing, promotion, and branding by corporations with a notable example being found in Arymami’s exploration of reaction videos being used to promote tourism in Indonesia [4].

In general, reaction videos have transitioned from a niche internet phenomena to a culturally relevant and academically studied genre [18]. Its transition reflects the growing impact of the genre on digital culture, media consumption, and online communities, as well as its corresponding academic interest in providing a deeper understanding on this form of user-generated content.

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks for Understanding Media Consumption and Online Behavior

2.2.1 Uses and Gratification Theory

The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) is a mass communications theory that focuses on why individuals actively seek out specific media to satisfy particular needs [38]. Formulated in the 1970s by sociologist Elihu Katz and theorist Jay G. Blumler, UGT states that individuals are active agents who choose media based on their social and psychological origins of needs, rather than passively receiving messages from said media. This, in turn, generates expectations of the mass media, or other sources, and can lead to differential patterns of media exposure, resulting in gratifications [38]. As Ruggiero notes, this perspective has proven to be a “cutting-edge theoretical approach” for understanding new media, including the internet [63].

UGT has been applied to various forms of media, including digital marketing, email [24], and websites [40]. It is particularly well-suited to examine social media platforms like YouTube because of the platform’s high levels of involvement [63], bonding social capital [56], interactivity [40], and brand communication [25]. In the context of social media, brands can provide value or gratification by optimizing their content [47]. Prior research using UGT identified that the main drivers behind social media usage were social, informational, entertainment, and convenience/distraction purposes [5, 36]. Other research utilizing UGT explored motivations for using specific platforms like Instagram [67], Facebook [41, 69], Pinterest [50], Twitter [19, 43], and TikTok [54].

In the context of YouTube, UGT has been utilized in understanding user motivations in viewing and sharing videos, identifying information seeking, entertainment, co-viewing, and

social interaction as key motives [32]. More recent applications of UGT have emphasized the need in expanding the framework to include concepts such as interactivity, demassification, hypertextuality, asynchronicity, and interpersonal communication, especially when examining platforms like YouTube and phenomena like reaction videos [63].

Studies on reaction videos have specifically utilized UGT to understand viewer motivations in consuming them [18, 28]. For example, through the analysis of YouTube comments left on reaction videos, Ghosh and Tripathi concluded that reaction videos have the potential to fulfill multiple gratifications for viewers, including entertainment, relaxation, time-passing, and validation of personal views and feelings [28]. They also found that reaction videos facilitate active participation through discussion and socializing, as well as passive gratifications such as entertainment and relaxation [28]. When looking at the intentionality of viewers in their consumption, Carrêlo's work suggests that viewers actively seek out these videos for specific gratifications [18], and, similarly, Baldowski's examination of LGBTQ+ viewers emotionally connecting and constructing meaning through YouTube reaction videos aligns with UGT's focus on needs and gratifications [7]. This intentionality is further supported by Lundby's exploration of the viewing experience of reaction videos, which suggests that audiences beyond active fandom members also find value in this genre [45]. His research implies that the gratifications derived from reaction videos might extend beyond just social connection within a fandom, potentially encompassing aspects like gaining new perspectives or enjoying the reactor's personality and commentary style [45]. In general, these works highlight how reaction videos can blend emotional, social, communal, and entertainment gratifications [28, 38].

2.2.2 Reception Theory

Reception theory is the application of the literary reader-response theory or reader-oriented criticism that emphasizes the reader's (or viewer's) experience of media texts [45]. It is an emphasis on the transaction between the text and the reader, or viewer in this case, suggesting that meaning is not solely inherent in the text but is created through the interaction with the audience [45]. This perspective recognizes that viewers are not just passive recipients of media but actively contribute to the construction of meaning based on their individual backgrounds, emotions, and knowledge [45]. Different versions of reception theory have existed and have been applied to various studies, varying in the degree to which they emphasize the text versus the audience in meaning-making [9, 45].

For example, Arymami utilizes an audience reception framework situated in cultural studies, viewing YouTubers as active audiences who interpret media through their own cultural experiences [4]. Similarly, Baker et al. highlight that while reactors are aware of being recorded, these videos offer a valuable “inside perspective” into their real-time emotional and physical reactions and engagement with media [6]. This sentiment suggests an active processing of the content [6].

In the context of reaction videos, Lundby applied reception theory to help better understand how viewers experience these videos based on their reception of the format of the reaction video [45]. His study considered the meaning potential of various format aspects and how viewers actually received and interpreted these aspects. He found that factors such as viewers' expectations of the genre, their familiarity with the format, the reacted content, and the reactor, all influenced the viewers' overall viewing experience [45]. This aligns with the core tenets of Reception Theory, emphasizing the active role of the viewer and the influence of the individual context on meaning-making.

Reception theory also considers how audiences' motives and frameworks play a role in shaping their experience of media texts [45]. This theory can be aligned with our previous discussion on UGT, as viewers' needs and desires can influence their active selection in media [7, 18, 28, 38, 39, 45, 46]. Reception theory complements this by exploring how these very needs and desires can shape the viewer's interpretation process upon engagement with a reaction video [45]. For example, a viewer seeking entertainment might focus on the reactor's comedic and over-exaggerated expressions, while another viewer looking for social validation might pay more attention to reactions that mirror their own feelings about the original content.

The viewing experience can be understood as a result of a transaction between the reaction video text and the individual viewer[45]. This means that meaning isn't fixed within the video itself, but rather it is actively created through the interaction between the viewer's unique perspective and the various elements of the video, including the format, the reactor's performance, and the reacted content.

Some of the approaches within reception theory, such as transactional reader-response criticisms, posit that the meaning of a text is a result of the transaction between the text and the reader (or viewer) [35, 45, 61]. Other approaches, like psychological reader-response criticism, focus on the psychological processes of the reader (or viewer) in meaning-making [34, 45].

Overall, understanding the reception of reaction videos involves considering both the meaning potential of the format aspects of the videos and how viewers experience and receive these aspects. This means examining how viewers' familiarity with the reaction video genre, the specific videos, the reactors, the original content, and the themes can influence their reception [45].

2.2.3 Participatory Culture in Online Communities

Henry Jenkins' defines participatory culture as a "culture in which fans and other consumers are invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content" [37]. With the rise of online platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and TikTok, participatory cultures have been developed in which audiences are no longer just passive consumers, but active participants in content creation, interaction, and community building [39, 45, 74]. YouTube's contribution to this shift is exemplified by its affordances for commenting, sharing, liking, disliking, and uploading videos [39, 66]. Reaction videos are a product of this participatory culture, representing a form of user-generated content that thrives on interaction between content creators (reactors) and viewers, as well as among other viewers themselves [4, 18, 39]. Viewers are able to become active participants by commenting on reaction videos, sharing them on other platforms, and even creating their own reaction content [16, 39].

Online communities form around shared interests on platforms like YouTube and Twitch [30, 31], and reaction video genres often foster strong community bonds among viewers and reactors [28]. Oh and Swan specifically discuss reaction videos within K-Pop fan culture as a means for fans to express their interests, affirm their identities (including racial identities), build online communities, and replace live interpersonal community-building experiences [52, 53, 70]. This notion of K-pop fandom engagement with reaction videos is also found in the works of Freeman and Magoncia [27, 46]. McDaniel touches on how creators/reactors within music reaction videos aim to provoke reactions among viewers [48]. Niu et al. and Ghosh and Tripathi discuss how YouTube fosters a sense of community and even parasocial relationships between viewers and creators [28, 51]. These communities can be seen as "third places" that provide environments for social interaction and community maintenance [31].

The earlier mentioned concept of "produsage" describes the blurring of lines between produc-

tion and consumption in online environments, where users are both producers and consumers of content [15]. Reaction videos fit into this concept model, as reactors consume original content and then produce their reactions, which are then later consumed by others who may also participate by commenting or creating their own responses.

Previous research has critically examined participatory culture, noting its potential harmful effects and complicating initial notions of its inherently democratizing nature. For example, Lewis et. al found that platform affordances, such as YouTube's social features, can play a role in shaping online cultures through harassment [42].

The study of online communities on YouTube also draws from research on earlier forms of computer-mediated communication, such as Internet Relay chat or IRC, highlighting similarities and differences in how communities interact [31, 58]. Also, live streaming, a related phenomenon on platforms such Twitch [30], YouTube Live, and TikTok Lives, further exemplifies participatory culture by offering real-time interaction and community building around shared experiences [31].

2.2.4 Additional Relevant Theories

Beyond the previously discussed frameworks of UGT, reception theory, and participatory culture, several other theoretical frameworks have been applied in the study of YouTube, as well as reaction videos:

- In their analysis of politeness strategies in YouTube videos, Gomez and Alcosero utilized Pragmatics, Politeness Theory, and Speech Act theory to analyze the communication and interactional aspects of reaction videos. This included how reactors and viewers convey meaning, manage social relationships, and perform actions through their online discourse [1].

- Ghosh and Tripathi utilized Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis in their examination of YouTube comments to aid them in focusing on aspects like meaning-making, identity negotiation, and relationship building through online discourse [28].
- Niu et. al utilized Weiss' Social-Emotional Loneliness Framework to understand how platforms like YouTube, through content such as reaction videos, might provide social provisions and address feelings of loneliness especially in times of social distancing [51].
- Michalovich et al. utilized Positioning Theory to examine how youth from refugee backgrounds positioned their identity through culturally-centered reaction videos [49].
- Lundby also utilized Kim's Performance Theory in understanding the performativity of reactors in their videos and how their presentation influences the reception experience of viewers [45].
- Raun utilized Micro-Celebrity theory in their exploration of transgender vlogging to understand the strategies and affective labor of micro-celebrites (like popular reactors). This theory explores how individuals on platforms like YouTube cultivate an online persona and build an audience, often blurring the lines between public and private life [57].
- Baldowski utilized Narrative Theory in their analysis of the usage of YouTube to connect emotionally and construct meaning after a tragic event. This theory aided in their understanding of how stories and personal experiences are shared and interpreted within the genre, contributing to emotional connection and meaning-making [7].
- Werner utilized Rhetorical Genre Theory to understand rants, reactions, and other rhetorics utilized within YouTube vlogs. This was used to understand reaction videos as a specific genre within the broader medium of online video sharing and provided

insights into the social currency and action performed through these videos (e.g., persuasion, emotional release, seeking identification) [74].

- Finally, Salte proposed the usage of Digital Gemeinschaft 2.0 to examine the formation and maintenance of online social relationships in the context of for-profit social media platforms. His study highlighted the tension between commercial interests and the creation of online communities, which is relevant to understanding the social dynamics of the reaction video genre [65].

These additional theoretical frameworks offer a valuable lens in the exploration of aspects of reaction video consumption and engagement that might not be fully captured by the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) or Reception Theory alone. Although, not explicitly used for primary data analysis in this study, the incorporation of these perspectives helps us acknowledge previous work and potentially see how it may be used in our discussion when looking back at our results.

2.3 Existing Gaps in Literature and Potential Contribution

While the existing literature review provides a foundational understanding of reaction videos [7, 12, 22, 28, 45, 48], several gaps remain, more specifically the specific motivations and gratifications viewers seek when watching reaction videos.

As mentioned previously, existing research has already deeply explored the role of reactors in shaping the viewer experience and the manners in which they actively interpret and produce content [4, 6]. However, the research that has been done on viewers has primarily focused and identified the various motivations for consuming reaction videos, often through

the lens of Uses and Gratifications Theory [18, 28, 39]. Although UGT has been used to give a base understanding of why viewers watch reaction videos, we aim to contribute an understanding of the specific nuances within these gratifications and their manifestation. For example, "entertainment" is a gratification that has been identified, yet what specific aspects of reaction videos are entertaining? How do viewers pick and choose between reactors? These are questions that still remain after reviewing the literature.

Despite these insights, there is still a need for a deeper understanding of viewer preferences and the intentionality behind their viewing choices across different content genres [28, 45], as well as the cognitive and emotional processes involved in watching reaction videos [6]. Furthermore, there still remains a gap in understanding the impact of participation (commenting, suggesting videos, etc...) on the viewer's reaction video experience, so the participatory culture of reaction videos is an aspect that can be explored further [39]. Ye et al.'s work on danmaku comments in reaction videos highlights this sentiment in viewer participation through their look into affective generation among viewers, influenced by the original content, the reactor's reaction, and other viewers' comments [76]. Finally, the diversity of viewing experiences across different audience segments (fandoms, demographics, prior knowledge) and how the perceived authenticity of reactors shapes viewer engagement are areas that we contribute to in this investigation [22, 45, 73].

By addressing these existing gaps, our research not only provides a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the popular phenomenon of reaction videos, but also a clearer picture on viewer motivations and their participation in reaction video culture.

Chapter 3

Study Design

After reviewing the literature, we can see that although there has been work done in specifically understanding the motivations viewers have in viewing reaction videos, as well as engagement practices they partake in [28], we still lack understanding of the nuances in viewers' motivation and engagement. Therefore, our study was designed to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the motivations and participatory culture behind viewing reactions. Specifically, our goal was to find the *hows* and *whys* behind viewer preferences and engagement in the reaction video culture.

We conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with participants who identified as “regular consumers” of reaction videos to understand their motivations and engagement within the participatory culture of reaction videos. We employed a qualitative approach to understand the overall motivations, characteristics, and engagement practices of viewers of reaction videos. This was used so that we could address our three main research questions.

The study procedure for this paper was reviewed and approved by Virginia Tech's Institutional Review Board.

3.1 Recruitment

We recruited participants through our personal social media accounts, such as Twitter and Instagram, as well as the crowdsourcing platform Prolific. We also advertised the study on Reddit in the r/reactionvideos subreddit, as well as through our personal university GroupMe group chats.

The recruitment of participants through our existing social circles resulted in a sample population that is not fully representative of the broader demographic range of reaction video viewers. This is why we also recruited through Prolific to potentially mitigate the bias within the sample population recruited from our networks. However, Prolific also introduces another bias in that participants recruited from the platform may be more motivated by the compensation for their time.

A total of 32 responses were collectively received from both the Prolific survey (15 responses) and the Google Form survey (17 responses). Of these 32 responses, 27 agreed to participate in the study. After contacting willing participants to schedule interviews, we had 16 participants who followed through and completed the study.

Participants were eligible for the study if they were 18 years or older and identified as regular viewers of reaction videos who also actively enjoyed watching them. Based on the responses to our eligibility surveys, we selectively chose participants to ensure a diverse sample in our interviews. We tried to focus not only on race, age, and gender, but also on their respective platform usages and genres of reaction videos that they frequently watched.

A total of 16 participants were selected and responded to the interview request. Participant demographics included a range of ages, genders, races, and educational backgrounds, ensuring a diverse sample.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to conducting the interviews. Participants were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality, and they were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The participants who followed through and completed the study were compensated for their time with a \$15 dollar Amazon gift card.

3.1.1 Participant Demographics

All of our participants lived in the United States at the time we conducted the interviews. Their ages ranged from 18 to 30 ($M = 22.9$, $SD = 3.1$). Nine of our participants identified as male and seven as female. Most of our participants identified as Black/African-American, and our second-most majority identified as Asian. The complete details of the interviewees are presented in Table 3.1.

Participant ID	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Education	Platform Usage	Genres of RV Watched
P01	Man	Black / African-American	21	Bachelor's	TikTok, YouTube	Sports, Creator-Specific, Music
P02	Woman	Multi-Racial	19	Bachelor's	TikTok, YouTube	Gaming, Experiments
P03	Man	Black / African-American	26	Ph.D.	YouTube	TV Shows, Movies, Creator-Specific
P04	Man	Black / African-American	22	Bachelor's	YouTube	Gaming
P05	Woman	Hispanic	22	Bachelor's	Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube	Beauty, Horror, Creator-Specific
P06	Man	Black / African-American	21	Bachelor's	Twitter, YouTube	Music, Creator-Specific
P07	Woman	Hispanic	22	Bachelor's	YouTube, TikTok	Gaming, Popular Culture
P08	Woman	Black / African-American	23	Bachelor's	YouTube	Music, Anime
P09	Woman	Asian	26	Ph.D.	YouTube	TV Shows, Challenges
P10	Man	Black / African-American	25	Bachelor's	Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube	Comedy, Music
P11	Man	Black / African-American	27	Bachelor's	YouTube	Sports, Comedy, Wildlife
P12	Man	Black / African-American	30	Master's	YouTube, TikTok, Facebook	Tech, Music
P13	Man	Black / African-American	18	Bachelor's	YouTube, TikTok, Instagram	Music, Creator-Specific
P14	Woman	Asian	22	Ph.D.	YouTube, TikTok	Music
P15	Woman	Asian	20	Bachelor's	YouTube, Instagram	Creator-Specific, News-Related, Comedy
P16	Man	Asian	22	Master's	YouTube, TikTok, Instagram	TV Shows

Table 3.1: Participant Table

3.2 Interviews

All of the interviews followed the same starting protocol, in which we first introduced the study and its purposes, asked for consent to record the interviews so we could properly

capture their thoughts, opinions, and ideas accurately, assured them of their anonymity and confidentiality, informed them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty, and finally that they had the right to refuse to answer any question.

This was then followed by priming them with a definition of reaction videos, which we obtained from [Feerrar and Finney](#). The definition is as follows:

“Reaction or ‘react’ videos are a popular genre on video hosting services, such as YouTube, in which an individual or small group analyzes a piece of media, drawing on their personal or specialized knowledge in an informal, often highly emotional way [\[26\]](#).”

Our interviews were conducted either in-person or via Zoom, lasting approximately 25-30 minutes on average. We asked questions regarding (1) their reaction video discovery and viewing habits, (2) their preference for reaction videos, (3) their motivations in watching reaction videos and values received from watching reaction videos, (4) their engagement and interaction practices, and (5) the personal impact reaction videos have had on them and their participation. In our interviews, participants were also asked to share an example of a reaction video that they particularly resonated with currently or simply enjoyed in the past. The questions can be found in [Appendix B](#), and the shared videos can be found in [Appendix D](#).

After the interviews, participants were asked to complete a short demographic survey, which included questions about their age, gender, race and ethnicity, education level, sexual orientation, and occupations.

3.2.1 Pilot Study

Our pilot study consisted of our first three interviews, which took place over a two-week period. As mentioned previously, we followed the same protocol in conducting our interviews. However, our questions at the time had yet to be themed through our coding sessions. We used these interviews as a starting point in gathering data, coding them, and then used that data to form the subsequent main study. Our initial research questions at the time of the pilot study were as follows:

- (RQ1) How do viewers engage with reaction videos?
- (RQ2) What is the motivation for people to watch reaction videos?
- (RQ3) How do viewers interact with other viewers or creators?

At the end of our pilot study, we conducted an initial coding session in which we realized that there was a need to refactor our original research questions and interview questions. The first phase of our study showed us the vastness of data that existed not only in the genre of reaction videos, but also in how viewer engagement differed depending on the content. So, in our aim to generalize our study more and get a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of viewers and their engagement with reaction videos, our research questions evolved as follows:

1. (RQ1) How do viewers discover reaction videos?
2. (RQ2) What are the motivations for watching reaction videos?
3. (RQ3) How do viewers engage with reaction videos?

You can see our original questions and the evolved questions following the pilot study in [Appendix B](#). With these refactorings, we were now better equipped to proceed with the main study.

3.2.2 Main Study

Our final thirteen interviews took place over the next year and a half following the completion of the pilot study. The main study closely resembled the pilot study in terms of structure and methodology - it just now incorporated the revised and refactored interview questions based on the themes that emerged from the pilot study.

For example, we grouped participant responses into specific dimensions, and their respective sub-dimensions, such as "Viewer Discovery and Watching Habits". Examples of questions under this dimension included:

- How do you typically discover new reaction videos? (Context of watching Reaction Videos)
- Can you describe your usual process of watching a reaction video? (Method of Watching Reaction Videos)

The main difference between the pilot and main study phases was in the depth and scope of our data analysis, which was now rapidly expanding due to our growing dataset. Challenges such as dropped interviews and scheduling conflicts extended the duration of our data collection period. Furthermore, as the study progressed in this phase, we made an active effort to diversify our participant sample; however, these efforts were occasionally hindered by the challenges mentioned above.

set the stage for a foundational understanding of the participants' motivations, viewing practices, and engagement with reaction videos. The codes that were developed were initially grouped into fifteen themes:

1. Types of RV (Reaction Videos)
2. Types of Content Watched
3. Viewer Engagement
4. Discovering RVs
5. Methods of Watching Reaction Videos
6. RV Frequency
7. Attributes of Preferred Reactors
8. Viewer Behavior
9. Viewer Motivations
10. Viewer Interest in Creating RV
11. Reactor Behavior
12. Reactor Influence on Viewer
13. Viewer's Platform Preferences
14. Reactor-Viewer Interactions
15. Miscellaneous

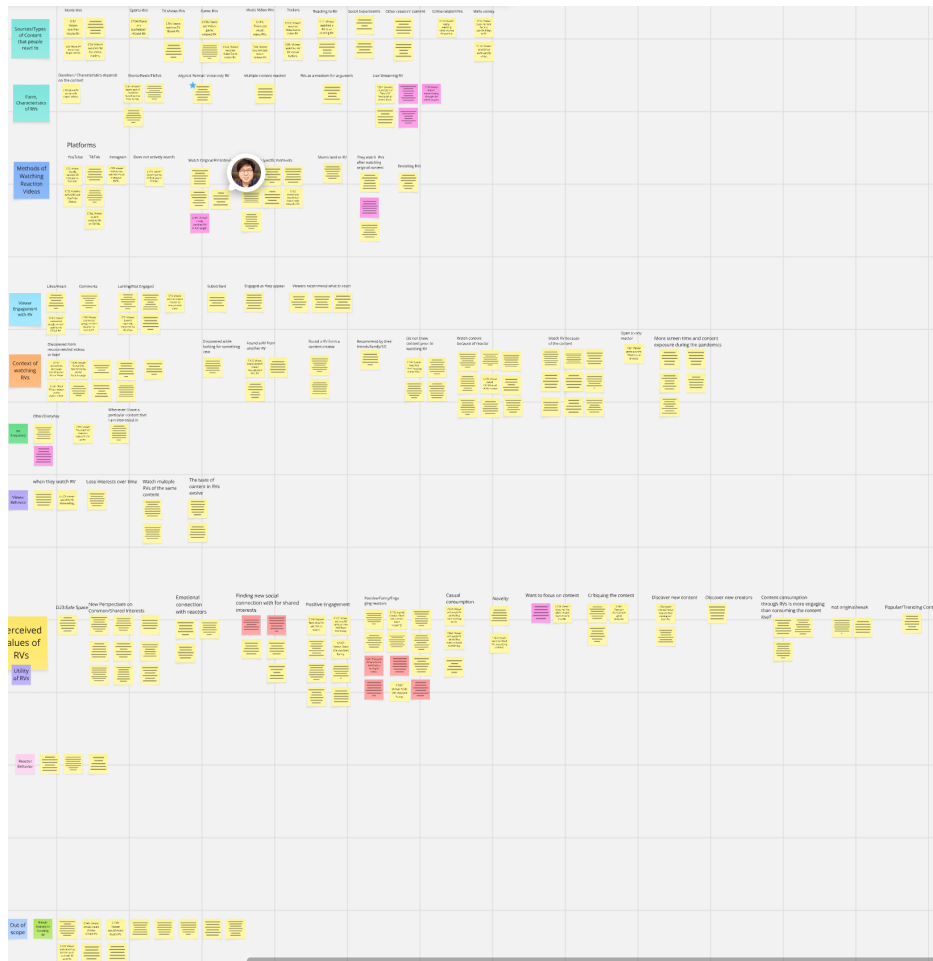


Figure 3.2: Miro Board Post-Axial Coding

Following this initial grouping, we conducted an axial coding session on the above themes, further organizing and refining their respective sub-groups. Based on this structure, the final ten dimensions that emerged were as follows:

1. Sources/Types of Content That People React To
2. Form/Characteristics of RVs
3. Methods of Watching Reaction Videos
4. Viewer Engagement with RV

5. Context of Watching RVs
6. RV Frequency
7. Viewer Behavior
8. Perceived Values of RVs (Utility of RVs)
9. Viewer Timeframe
10. Out of Scope/Misc.

Here is a link to the Miro Board with the final axial coding results: [Axial Coding Board Link](#)

By the end of this initial phase, these ten dimensions consisted of 68 codes respectively.

In our second phase, which was the main study, we iteratively coded the interviews as they were completed. Throughout this process, we identified 16 new codes which gave us a final total of 83 codes.

You can see our final codes in [Appendix C](#).

This iterative process of open coding, axial coding, and selective coding allowed a thorough evaluation of our participants' motivations, preferences, viewing practices, and overall engagement with reaction videos.

Chapter 4

Results

As seen in our table, our participants engage with a wide spectrum of original content (OC), ranging from blockbuster movies, sports, and popular music videos to more niche, or subcultural, genres such as indie films, underground music, anime, and even beauty-related content. We can see the selection of content reflects both the diverse interests of the audience and the role that RVs play in deepening and/or broadening those interests.

It is clear that age also influences both platform and genre preferences as well. Younger participants (ages 18-22) gravitated towards "newer" platforms like TikTok and Snapchat, whereas older participants (ages 24-30) preferred more established platforms like Facebook and Twitter. This pattern seems to mirror broader generational media trends and highlights age-based segmentation in both platform usage and RV discovery.

Before exploring the results, it is important to define key terms that we will use throughout the analysis of reaction video (RV) culture. These terms will help clarify the roles and content involved in the consumption and production of reaction videos:

Glossary:

- **Original Content (OC):** This refers to the primary media that reactors respond to in their videos. This can range from music and films to TV shows, anime, and more. The OC forms the basis of the reaction video, as reactors share their thoughts and reactions to it. In typical reaction video setups, the OC is played through a picture-in-picture

format.

- **Reaction Video(s) (RV):** This refers to a type of video in which an individual, known as a reactor, watches and responds to OC, typically expressing their emotions, opinions, and critiques as they engage with the content.
- **Reactor:** This will be used to describe individuals who create and appear in reaction videos, focusing specifically on their engagement with OC.
- **Viewers:** This will be used to describe those who watch reaction videos. Viewers are an integral part of RV culture, engaging with reactors' content by watching, commenting, and sometimes recommending new videos for reactors to engage with.
- **Content Creator:** This will be used when referring to individuals who produce additional content beyond reaction videos, such as vlogs, live streams, or original productions. (e.g., YouTubers who stream their game and reaction videos as well)

With the glossary defined, we can now go into our work's two major findings. First, we will discuss how viewers discover RVs - which also ties into the type of content that they consume and how they consume RVs. From there, we'll be discussing the values that viewers derive from RVs - and the manners in which they consume RVs.

4.1 RQ1: How do viewers discover reaction videos?

Viewers discover reaction videos (RVs) in a variety of ways. Whether they encounter RVs by actively seeking content, stumble upon algorithmically curated suggestions, or follow recommendations shared by friends and/or family, the RV discovery process often varies and

is constantly evolving. From our analysis, four major pathways emerged around how viewers discover RVs: content-led, creator-led, algorithmically-led, and socially-led.

4.1.1 Content-led Discovery

Some interviewees (e.g., P3, P13) described actively seeking out reaction videos *after* enjoying the original content (OC). In P13's words:

“If it’s something like a movie or an album, I want to form my own opinion on it first. And if I think that they might have something interesting to say, then I’ll watch their video.” - P13

By seeking external responses and commentary, participants enhance their emotional experience. It is as if they are treating the RV like a “mock conversation”, and seeing how others interpret their favorite/”must-see” scenes.

In this case, viewers actively search for RVs that respond to the OC of their interests.

“Yeah, I just go search for reaction videos based on the video I’ve seen before.” - P12

“..if there’s something I really like, sometimes I’ll just search it up and look up reaction videos to that.” - P8

Search-based discovery highlights the proactive role that viewers can play in curating their own RV experiences. By actively seeking out reactions to OC, viewers are either aiming to contextualize their own interpretations or gauging broader opinions within a community of shared interests.

Viewers often approach RVs with varying levels of familiarity with the OC. For many, the decision to watch an RV stems from their prior engagement with the OC, especially when it is a topic or media they are deeply interested in.

“I definitely watch the music videos before watching the reactions. The reaction videos add more layers and values into it.” – P14

However, it does not necessarily mean they only watch RVs after watching OC. Watching RVs can be a way of accessing OC socially.

“...sometimes I’ll see an album reaction before I finish an entire album and then just end up watching the album reaction, where they get to songs where I haven’t heard. So it’s kind of like I’m listening to it with them at the same time.” - P6

“I never watch the original video because the ones that I typically watch, it’s either, I’ve already seen them while it was happening right there and then, or I know what the content is going to be. So I just like to watch them react to that original video.” - P4

These quotes highlight how prior familiarity allows viewers to focus on the reactor's interpretation or insight, which adds new dimensions to their understanding of the OC.

The repeated consumption of RVs for the same OC emerged as a notable behavior among viewers. Participants highlighted the value of watching different reactors interpret the same content, as each reaction offered unique perspectives, humor, or cultural context.

“It’s not like I only watch one YouTuber for Atlanta [a TV show] reviews. If I know there are multiple YouTubers that I trust , and they all do a review of Atlanta, I’ll go watch all their reviews to get different perspectives about it, because some of them will say things that contradict others. It’s like I’m having a conversation with a whole table of people as opposed to just one-on-one. Some of them are just so funny with the way they react and how they relate it to their own experiences... It just makes me happy sometimes.” – P3

This excerpt from P3 shows how comparatively bingeing RVs allows viewers to enjoy diverse interpretations of content, effectively enriching their overall experience.

4.1.2 Creator-led Discovery

Although the primary consumption pathway for RVs looks to be content-led, some participants mentioned that their consumption of RVs was more so fueled by the content creators themselves.

This pathway is followed when existing fans of a content creator/streamer discover that the creator is branching into reaction content.

Multiple participants cited the idea of “staying for the reactor” rather than caring about the media being reacted to. For instance, P1 remarked:

*“I already watched him for gaming, so if he does reaction videos, I’m still down.
It’s mostly about his comedic style.” - P1*

When asked to share videos that interested them, one participant mentioned how, although they weren’t particularly a big fan of the original content’s genre, the reactor themselves led them to watch the RV:

*“I think it’s just her... Like, I’m not really too into fantasy as a genre. So, I
just clicked on this because I knew she would make it funny.” - P5*

Here, we can see how the creator’s personality derives loyalty from the viewer and, by extension, drives the viewer’s consumption. This, in turn, makes reaction videos a natural extension of the creator’s broader brand.

4.1.3 Algorithmic Recommendation

Many viewers discover RVs through platform algorithms, particularly on YouTube and TikTok. All participants mentioned their usage of YouTube, establishing it as the most influential platform in shaping viewer habits and motivations. Platforms like TikTok and Instagram closely followed, indicating their prevalence as well. This suggests that these platforms and their respective recommendation algorithms play a significant role in influencing genre exposure and viewer preferences. Participants frequently mentioned how YouTube’s algorithm

consistently recommends reaction videos based on their prior viewing habits.

“I usually just discover them through my YouTube recommended page or my Instagram.” - P15

“...some of them just pop up on my YouTube channel, probably because YouTube studies everyone. So they kind of know what you want.” - P11

Similarly, TikTok’s “For You” page plays a significant role in surfacing RVs to users, presenting them as part of their curated feed.

‘But from what I understand, I have unintentionally [gotten] reaction videos on my feed, which the more you watch, the more that TikTok senses the idea that, “Oh, you like these videos? We’ll add them more onto your network.” - P7

As P7 describes, TikTok’s algorithm, in particular, demonstrates the power of predictive content delivery. This algorithmic discovery reinforces existing viewing habits by adapting to users’ preferences over time.

Short-form platforms such as YouTube Shorts, TikTok clips, and Instagram Reels frequently serve as a gateway to full-length reaction videos. These videos tend to be much shorter in length compared to their full-length RV counterparts and are powered by their respective platform’s algorithms.

One participant (P2) explained how TikTok "snippets" can be a gateway to full-length videos on YouTube:

"TikTok is maybe like little snippets, whereas YouTube you can watch like the full thing. Sometimes I see it on TikTok, I'll try to find it on YouTube so I can watch the entire thing."

Another participant (P13) likewise noted:

"Usually [I] will find clips online... if it's a new person that I've never seen before, I'll see a clip online [and] if I think it's funny or it interests me, I'll go to their channel and check out the whole video. It usually takes me like a few videos to decide, like, okay, do I really want to subscribe to this channel? Do I want to keep watching this person, or do I just want to tune in every once in a while?" - P13

In these cases, the brevity and immediacy of short-form clips help viewers decide whether to invest in a longer reaction or investigate the original show or video, and in some cases as P13 mentioned a further investment in the content creator themselves.

4.1.4 Social Recommendation

Finally, friends, family and significant others are another key avenue for discovering RVs.

"Usually like my boyfriend, he'll send me certain stuff to those [RV] roleplays because he also does roleplay..." - P2

“...a friend of mine told me the reaction - we were just talking about it like two days ago and she was talking about a particular video she saw on YouTube, [so] I just went, popped on YouTube and just checked all the videos, all reactions [related to it].” - P12

These quotes highlight the social dimension of RV discovery, where viewers rely on recommendations from their personal networks to explore new content. These interactions often create a shared experience, reinforcing social connections through the mutual enjoyment of RVs.

“... I'll sometimes watch these reaction videos with like, my, like my friend or my family and like we all have a group laugh and like that additional commentary brings just this other layer of like comedic aspect like the that the original video might not have...” - P15

Social recommendations seem impactful because they come with a sense of trust. When someone close to a viewer suggests an RV, it often carries implicit validation, which in turn makes the viewer more likely to engage.

This not only introduces viewers to new content but also helps strengthen interpersonal bonds through a shared appreciation of RVs.

4.2 RQ2: What are the motivations for watching reaction videos?

4.2.1 Shared Interests and Emotional Connections (Curiosity, Internal Factors, My Voice/Approval)

Reaction videos (RVs) provide a unique space for viewers to connect emotionally, not just with the content, but also with the reactors and other viewers. Many participants described RVs as a way to relive the emotions of discovering content while feeling validated by shared responses. As P11 puts it:

“... it just tells me that there’s someone out there that feels the same way. There’s someone out there that can relate. And whenever I say exactly how I feel about a video and someone else is like, you know, affirming it... There’s this joy that comes with it that’s [like] okay yeah, you’re like me...” - P11

Another participant highlighted how RVs can help create an emotional bond with reactors:

“...Like it makes me feel more connected to the reactors because they’re just posting videos [out of] love...” - P14

Likewise, P6 speaks about how these connections can be formed with other viewers:

“... if I see a comment that like kind of mimics what I say, [then] I’m not alone in my opinion in a way.” - P6

This shared emotional resonance reinforces the sense of community among viewers centered around the original content, making RVs an immersive form of social entertainment.

4.2.2 Consuming Content Together Makes Me Less Lonely

For many viewers, RVs emulate the experience of watching content with friends or family. The casual and communal nature of RVs is especially appealing to those looking for lighthearted content while relaxing or doing work.

“For example, if I’m listening to a song and I realize Shawn Cee [a YouTuber] reacted to it on stream, I’ll load up the stream or a clip to hear his opinion. Typically, I’ll have it running in the background out of curiosity while I do other work. It feels a bit like having someone around—even if you’re not fully paying attention to them or whatever they’re watching. It’s just nice having that presence in your ear.” - P6

The value that the viewers suggested was in creating somewhat of a pseudo-watch party. For instance, P1 found himself “less lonely” as he consumed RVs late at night:

“I feel like reaction videos, especially with a good creator... it’s weird because you almost feel even more engaged having someone kind of like weirdly watch it with you. It’s like having another voice there. It just makes it seem weirdly less

lonely. I could be in my bed at 2 AM scrolling through TikTok, and I'm on a Kai Cenat [A Streamer] reaction video, and it's almost like he's talking to me while watching. I'm hearing someone's thoughts as they watch, and they're pretty funny." - P1

P9 also shared the same sentiments of being less lonely:

"When I'm home alone, I might not talk much, and the house feels too silent. But when I put on a reaction video, it's like someone is there with me, and I can draw a lot of energy from the reactor. It feels like I'm accompanied—that I'm not alone. It's a form of mental support, I guess." - P9

Likewise, P3 mentioned how this consumption of content alongside the reactor makes the experience much more engaging:

"Sometimes it's better to watch a trailer with the reactors because it just makes it so much more fun. I'll watch the original trailer afterward and then think about it." - P3

The circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic also led to a notable increase in RV viewership, as many turned to this form of content for connection and entertainment during isolation. P3 explicitly credited their engagement with RVs to the pandemic:

"I really got into them during the pandemic. I started watching a bunch of different types of videos on YouTube at the time, and reaction videos were a

part of that. It was nice hearing everybody's opinions because they really got me thinking about the shows. I never usually talk to people about shows, so it was just really nice to hear from people who get it." - P3

P3 added on to this by saying:

*"Reaction videos provided laughter and good times during a very dark period. Most people were watching videos or streaming shows, and reaction videos became a way to have conversations about these things without needing direct interaction."
- P3*

It is safe to say that RVs played a role in both entertaining and comforting viewers to cope with a quiet and lonesome situation (e.g., during the pandemic). The social value of RVs seemed to increase more in this setting, and ultimately, it was the viewers who received this unexpected benefit.

4.2.3 Discovering New Perspectives

Another major value viewers derive from RVs is the ability to see familiar content through fresh perspectives. By watching how others interpret or critique the same material, viewers not only expand their understanding and appreciation, but they also get the opportunity to learn about things that they may have missed out on their first go-around.

"Sometimes it opens up different perspectives for whoever watches it. Or like, for example, I didn't know that on White Ferrari by Frank Ocean, there's a very

small chunk of Kanye vocals right in the middle that just says love. And then somebody pointed that out and I would have never known that, even though I listened to that song constantly, that it even existed in the first place. And I learned from that from a reaction video...” - P6

Likewise, P7 stated:

“...I like to compare my opinions with the reactors opinions. I like to see how they felt about it. Did we feel the same? Did we have the same opinion? Did we reach the same conclusion? How did we feel about the movie in this case? And so I feel like a lot of times though, reactors really can pick out like these important details that I don't necessarily pick out during the movie because I just like to watch for enjoyment. I don't necessarily like to analyze movies because I feel like movie critics do a good job of doing that. But I feel like reactors are able to enjoy and analyze the movies at the same time. And so no matter what I feel like, even if I have watched the content before, I just learned something completely new and different with every reaction video that comes across me.” - P7

RVs also encourage reflection on personal interpretations of original content, providing a shared and safe space for viewers to evaluate and even challenge their own opinions. This process plays a dual role in both fostering a deeper appreciation for the OC, while also building a connection with a community of like-minded individuals.

“...usually those reaction videos will make me feel more in love with the original

content because I find there are some aspects that I've never thought about in the past, or [that] this part is really good. [If] people like it, [then] yeah I should like it a little bit more. [It] gives me kind of a sense [of a] collective kind of feeling like, oh this is a group [feeling], and I like it more. I feel like it actually really [has a] positive impact [on] my experience.” - P14

There was a subset of participants who indicated that they appreciate reactors that explore cultural or political subtext, giving them a broader perspective on the media. For example, P14 was watching a reaction to a particular Chinese TV drama and had this to say:

“...But if there's, you know, like a reaction to it, I think it gives like more context like another layer of meaning of it, like how people react to such arts or like this production and, how people from certain kind of backgrounds reacted to this... I really like the Chinese TV dramas and there's a guy [who does] reaction videos on it, and he's giving many [of] his interpretation of the contents, like how he thinks it's kind of like a... I don't know how to say it. It's mostly about the Qin dynasty, like, really long time ago. And, like, how women are fighting in the palace, like things like that. And he's using his experience in the military to like do metaphors like those women are similar to the ones in [the] military. And [these are] connections that I'd never thought about in the past... The reactors usually bring their own experience or interpretations, and sometimes it adds a lot of things and also makes me sometimes think a lot...” - P14

Collectively, these quotes highlight the value RVs have in influencing viewer's opinions as well as expanding their previous knowledge on original content.

4.2.4 Entertainment and Passive Usage

Aside from emotional and social connections, RVs also serve as a source of “easy” entertainment for passive consumption. Many viewers enjoy RVs, whether as background noise while performing other tasks, as a way to relax, even escape from their daily tasks, or simply as lighthearted, engaging content. As P5 states:

“I guess the main goal is just to be entertained... and I think with other videos I tend to not be focused on the content as much because it feels very scripted. This [reaction videos] just feels different and it catches my attention more and the goal is to like... be in the moment and just watching it and getting my mind off of homework and other stuff that’s going on.” - P5

Similarly, P7 also stated that:

“I like how they can be just a simple way of distracting. I feel like, especially me, who has that routine of getting up, going to work, getting off from work, coming home, doing my nightly routine and going to sleep... I feel that reaction videos tend to kind of put a pause in my life, or they tend to distract me from what I’m doing specifically during that day... It just kind of feels like a sense of comfort and [allows you to] just pause for a minute and breathe” - P7

The purpose of lighthearted, engaging content often affects the way that they play the videos. Some of them mentioned that they just keep it on background and let it play. When asked about the usual environment in which a viewer normally consumes RVs, P4 went into detail and said:

“So typically if I’m having lunch, like in the living room or just in my room somewhere, and I want to pass the time while I eat, I kind of just prop up my phone or computer, pop on YouTube and then kind of just watch as I eat. Recently I’ve kind of just been throwing a YouTube video on while I go to bed - something that’s listenable. And so, I find that... reaction videos that I might have already seen, or I know what they’re going to watch, I just throw that on as like background noise while I go to bed.” - P4

On that same notion of letting RVs auto-play in the background, P6 stated:

“...nowadays I usually just have it in the background, like if I’m listening to a song and I’m like, oh, Shawn Cee reacted to this on stream, I go boot up the stream or one of the stream clips and then hear his opinion on it, because he has a very intellectual way of going about talking about his music... So yeah, usually I end up having it in the background, just like out of curiosity, and I end up doing work. So it’s kind of like you’re with somebody, but you’re also not paying attention to them or whatever they’re watching. But it’s nice to have that in your ear...” - P6

Interestingly enough, a few participants (P12 & P13) mentioned saving/downloading RVs for future playback.

“...I might save it for later and just save it to my playlist just so that when I have some more free time I can really, like dig into the video. I’ll usually like sit down

and just scroll through [my playlist] and see, all right, what looks interesting.

And the first thing I see, I just put it on and then I get to watching.” - P13

By combining accessibility, emotional resonance, and interactive potential, RVs have significant value for their audience, offering both active participation and passive enjoyment.

4.2.5 A New way to discover new content

While the preceding section focused on how viewers *arrive* at reaction videos, our interviews also revealed how RVs themselves can *guide* viewers toward new media and/or experiences. We have identified these outbound pathways to discover new content, and in the following subsection, we describe the various pathways that a viewer may take in their consumption of RVs.

The first case involves viewers discovering original content (OC) through their engagement with RVs. This case highlights the role RVs can play as entry points into previously unexplored media.

“ ... most likely it will probably have been a movie or like a very new show that I was thinking about watching but didn't. But then one of my favorite YouTubers reacts to it and describes it, and I understand and [see that] they seem to like it. [So] I'll [start to] like it, [so] I might go watch the rest of the series at this point, or I'll go watch the movie or something.” - P3

Likewise, if the RV is not appealing enough to the viewer, then they may just sidestep the RV and instead watch the OC directly. As P9 puts it,

“Uh, the first time I see the video is from a reaction video. Sometimes I might get interested by the reaction video and go to search for the original video to watch if I find the content interesting enough. That happens when the reaction/creator is not interesting or it’s not providing any valuable comments based on the original video. So I would just... not watch the reaction video. Instead of that, I watch the original one.” - P9

Another common pathway occurs when viewers transition from viewing one RV to another. This can be driven by an interest in different reactors’ perspectives or reactions to the same original content, or just another RV in general.

“...seeing people’s live reaction over a YouTube video, seeing their reactions and seeing them potentially be interested in trying the game (Tekken 8) out when it comes out, seeing that kind of stuff... kind of like... brings a smile to my face. Because, you know... they’re seeing this new thing that they’ve never seen before, or they just haven’t seen in a while, and then seeing their reaction and as a result of that reaction, maybe they want to give it a try and whatnot. So seeing that kind of [reaction] makes me want to watch more and more videos related to those topics that I like.” - P4

In general, participants often follow these outbound routes, leading to the discovery of new content and/or new reactors. Connecting this to how viewers come across RVs, reaction videos display their value in the circulation of content within the wider digital content landscape. RVs enable viewers to explore, interpret, and share media in rich, community-

oriented ways, both intentionally and unintentionally.

4.3 RQ3: How do viewers engage with reaction videos?

4.3.1 Viewing Frequency

Through our interviews, we learned that the frequency with which viewers watched and engaged with reaction videos differed greatly.

Some participants mentioned that they watched RVs on a daily basis:

“It’s something that I do on a daily basis.” - P10

“Maybe like every day, like if I’m on YouTube, I’m bound to bump into a reaction YouTuber...” - P6

And others mentioned that they consumed RVs infrequently during their weeks:

“I’d say like 1 or 2 a week really.” - P8

“I would say, uh, weekly, maybe once or twice a week. It’s pretty much determined by the algorithm.” - P14

Expanding on P14’s quote, we can again see how algorithmic recommendations play a role in the user’s consumption of RVs.

The frequency in which viewers watch reaction videos can also be tied back to their motivations, as some participants mentioned their frequency was reliant on their interest in a particular topic or a desire for entertainment.

4.3.2 Viewing Patterns

Interviews revealed that many viewers practice non-linear or selective viewing behaviors, skimming to specific segments or only partially consuming entire reaction videos.

Specific Scenes and Highlight-Seeking Behavior

Participants often prefer to focus on what they believe to be key scenes or emotional highlights, rather than watching every second of a reactor's commentary.

For example, P8 would look for "pop-offs" or highly emotional outbursts in her consumption of RVs:

"Yeah, because if I see something I like and they seem like they don't like it, I'll just click on the video, dislike it, and not watch it. If I'm going to watch, they have to be excited about it, praising it, really popping off." - P8

This practice of selective viewing is also shared by P2 who explicitly described how she selectively skips around:

"Sometimes people talk too much, and sometimes I really want to watch the video

and then their opinion. But sometimes they're just talking... so then that's when I'll skip to see their opinion on the video." - P2

Interestingly enough, she also mentioned how she disliked when the reactors *themselves* would skip around:

"One thing that kind of irritates me is when they skip every like 5 seconds." - P2

This example illustrates how viewers prefer to be more in control of their viewing experience, rather than simply watching the reactor.

Additionally, two participants highlighted their usage of YouTube's features in their consumption of RVs:

"Yeah, sometimes I really like YouTube's feature that shows the 'most replayed' parts. I think that's usually the most interesting stuff, so I naturally replay those segments multiple times. For example, there's this song called 'Supernova,' and it repeats 'su-su-su-supernova' many times, which sounds a bit awkward. So in this reaction video, the reactor is specifically making fun of that part, and I find it really entertaining." - P14

"Another thing is that YouTube often has analytics showing the most replayed sections, so I'll sometimes skip directly to those highlighted parts and just watch those." - P15

This further emphasizes how viewers prefer to take control of their own viewing experience using their respective platforms provided utilities and how it influences their overall perception of the content.

Full Immersion vs Partially Re-Watching

Some participants still prefer watching from start to finish—especially for the *first time* they encounter that reactor. However, repeated viewings tend to be more selective:

“Usually, I watch reaction videos all the way through from beginning to end. But if it’s a video I’ve watched before, I might skip through to certain parts I want to see again, or if I know they talk a little bit at the beginning, I’ll skip until they actually start reacting.” - P3

By selectively re-watching only the funniest or most dramatic moments, viewers effectively “scrub” through previously seen content to revisit highlights. In this way, skipping and scrubbing become normal strategies that viewers utilize to tailor their viewing experience. It is a driven focus on personally interesting segments and a discarding of the rest.

4.3.3 A new community you can engage with for similar tastes

From our interviews, we were able to see a unique aspect of RVs, which was the community that forms from them. Many participants noted how RVs provided a space for them to indulge in interests that they did not have the privilege of doing in real life.

For example, P13 discussed how RVs replace certain voids that they have not been able to fill within their own local community:

“Sometimes it feels like people aren’t always in the mood to talk about certain things, especially when I’m back home. There aren’t as many people I share interests with, particularly regarding more obscure music, movies, or TV shows. In [the name of the city redacted for anonymity], where there are many artists and creative people, I can discuss these things easily, knowing they’ll have their own perspective. But when that’s not an option, watching reaction videos provides a similar sense of fulfillment, because it allows me to see someone else’s opinion on topics I wouldn’t normally be able to talk about with the people around me. - P13

P14 shared the same sentiments by saying:

“Seeing something I like and also enjoyed by other people creates a sense of emotional resonance for me, especially when watching K-pop videos, which feel a bit like their own subculture. It helps me find other people who enjoy the same things and gives me a greater sense of community, particularly since most K-pop fans are online. It makes me feel more closely connected. Also, it’s just fun and pretty interesting to see. For me, I especially prefer watching reactions to content I’ve already seen, like music videos, because I’m already familiar with them and want to see how other people react. That’s definitely part of the incentive. - P14

Overall, it seems that reaction videos have the power to digitally bring people together. Viewers are able to find communities of like-minded individuals and safely indulge in their passions.

In the following section, we discuss more on the common forms of engagement that viewers partake in with reaction videos.

Liking Videos

Virtually all interviewees described at least “liking” (thumbs-up/heart) reaction videos they enjoyed. Several saw this as the simplest way to support reactors:

“If I like a video, I’ll like it on YouTube. For TikTok, like snippets and stuff, I’ll probably put laughing emojis...” - P2

For some viewers, their motive for leaving a like is contingent on how much they *really* enjoyed the video:

“I’d say that [the] most engagement I do other than watching the video is, if I really, really like it, I’ll give it a like. But, that’s kind of rare if I [like it] enough to do that. - P5

With this being the simplest form of engagement, it’s no surprise that most viewers are willing to click a button to show their support.

Commenting and Suggesting Content

Commenting was more varied. Some participants (P3, P15) said they were too shy or worried about the reactor responding directly:

“I’m scared they might respond, and I’d be overwhelmed. I prefer just to stay quiet and watch.” - P3

Others felt confident in offering content suggestions, especially if the reactor actively solicited ideas:

“Uh, there was these two guys from my city...they don’t know that I know them...they used to make reaction videos. I kept telling them watch this one K-pop song that I really like and I just commented like on 100 videos in a row, and they finally did it.” - P8

“For YouTube Shorts, I usually don’t comment because the videos are too quick—I don’t really have time to leave comments. But for regular YouTube videos, yes, especially if the creator specifically says something like, ‘leave a comment if there’s something interesting you want me to watch.’ In those cases, I’ll suggest videos, like a ‘Do Not Laugh’ challenge.” - P9

In some cases, participants mentioned engaging with fellow viewers in the comments section:

“I go through the comment section sometimes... I don’t know why, but I know whenever you watch a video and you want to comment and [you see] that there’s this top comment, I just reply to that particular comment.” - P11

“I don’t comment often, mostly because I don’t feel I have much to add to the conversation, especially since I don’t have a platform where others would see it. Sometimes I’ll see comments that are just so egregious that I feel compelled to respond because some opinions make me wonder, ‘why?’ But that’s just my personal preference.” - P6

On the other hand, some participants were more content spectating the comment section:

“When I’m watching something on YouTube, I usually don’t go as far as commenting, especially when there are thousands of comments—it feels like mine would just disappear into the ether, and you can’t really have a meaningful conversation. There are rare exceptions, but generally, I prefer reading comments and seeing the interactions between other users.” - P13

Compared to other modalities of engagement, commenting seems to be the most direct way to not only engage with the reactor, but also fellow viewers. It allows viewers a “sometimes” safe space to share their own thoughts and hear others’ thoughts on the same content.

4.3.4 RVs reflect viewers’ dynamic taste and lives

As mentioned previously, viewers engage in a wide spectrum of RVs, as well as their corresponding original content. In many cases, the OC that viewers choose to consume via RVs is not static; rather, it evolves over time as personal tastes shift and new cultural trends emerge. Here, we dive into how the kinds of RVs that one watches can reflect their tastes or even life events.

Participants described an evolution in their engagement with RVs as they gained more experience with RVs. For example, P1 said:

“I feel like it started off initially with just basketball highlights. From there, it transitioned to more things I was interested in, like people’s reactions to a trailer for a game about to come out. Now I only tune in for specific creators, rather than actively seeking reaction videos.” – P1

This observation (coded D46, ‘The taste of content in RVs evolve’) suggests that early preferences toward more mainstream, easily digestible content can later lead to a desire for more niche commentary as the literacy of viewers’ media grows.

Several respondents linked changes in their RV consumption to changes in their personal circumstances and maturation. P2 reflected on how her viewing habits changed as time progressed:

“When I first started watching them, I watched them very often, like every day, every other day. But now, [I] probably [watch them] every other couple of weeks or something, because I’m so busy doing other things.” – P2

Interestingly enough, P2 also mentioned that as she grew older, she was consuming less RVs:

“I just noticed that [when I was] younger I watched them more compared to when I was older.” – P2

Keeping in line with the dimension of age, P3 had this to say:

“[...] Now, some of the old YouTube videos I used to watch, I don’t watch them anymore. I’m more into this stuff now, and I guess that just goes along with how I’m getting older...my tastes are changing.” - P3

This sentiment suggests that as viewers mature, their choices become more deliberate. Rather than simply following trends, viewers seek RVs that can provide critical commentary and fresh insights, or merely fit their preferences at that very moment.

Viewers also pointed out the significant role of recommendation algorithms in both shaping and strengthening their preferences. As P4 remarked:

“So how how it started for me was, the teens react, kids react and that was like the big thing at the time. So it kind of just showed up on my YouTube algorithm, and then I was like, you know what let me see what this is all about. So I clicked on it one time, and then next thing you know, I get various recommendations of different types of content they react to. And then I just started manually searching up reaction videos geared towards stuff that I like to watch or do. And then next thing you know, half of my algorithm is just reaction videos, whether it’s something they just uploaded or something from like a few years back or whatnot.” - P4

Similarly, P5 shared the same sentiments about her recommendation algorithms on both YouTube and Snapchat:

“I don’t actively go like looking for them. They’re just recommended to me not only on YouTube but on Snapchat - There’s like stories and stuff. It’s just whatever comes up first. So I think the algorithm has learned about me so I don’t have to actively search anything.”

This notion of algorithms “learning” their viewers not only reflects the evolving tastes of the viewer, but also actively reinforces them by continuously curating content that aligns with their current interests.

Lastly, participants highlighted how content creators often capitalize on trending content or events that generate a fear of missing out (FOMO) among viewers. Oftentimes, reaction videos become a focal point of engagement during high-profile media releases.

For instance, one participant explicitly referenced how RVs amplify and shape interest around content from the popular music collective Lyrical Lemonade, noting:

“I feel like some reactors add a level of energy and intrigue to something that wouldn’t have it on its own... When most Lyrical Lemonade videos come out, every reactor is on that. Even though recently I haven’t really liked a lot of their videos... sometimes I’ll see a reaction and people are praising it to the high heavens... it builds hype because it’s like a co-sign in a way... their co-sign says, ‘This is a good thing,’ unless they outwardly pan it—and even then, that’s still good publicity. People still go to it to also say, ‘Yo, this is trash.’ Some people use it to form their opinions as a whole.” - P6

Similarly, RVs can play a role in increasing a viewer’s excitement or curiosity around highly

anticipated films. P7 described how her anticipation for a high-profile movie release not only drew them to watching an RV, but ultimately wanting to watch the movie as well:

“...The new Hunger Games movie, The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes, I feel like a lot of people are talking about this movie just because of its high popularity. So, I thought that this video [RV] was very interesting to watch, because it’s a celebrity who’s very much involved in this movie series, but she’s not directly involved with this movie. So I thought it was a more interesting take of watching her, as she reacts to a different movie from her own series because she is not participating in this movie... [It] makes me have more of an interest of seeing that movie in person when the time comes. - P7

These quotes illustrate not only how RVs can leverage trending content, but also how effective they can be in shaping or even intensifying viewer interest in cultural phenomena.

4.3.5 Low Barrier to Content Creation

Finally, several participants mentioned that creating reaction videos often requires less production effort compared to other types of content. Due to the minimal setup required, it is a genre that allows anyone with an opinion the space and ability to potentially go viral.

Reactors typically only need a camera overlay, microphone, and basic editing to sync their footage with the original content. Interestingly enough, one participant felt that this ease of creation was “weak”:

“I feel like reaction videos...it’s weak content. I’m not going to lie. It’s like you’re almost taking someone else’s content and just adding like a bit of a twist to it. I feel like it’s not very creative, but I do see the appeal.” - P1

However, other participants emphasized that personality and “good” commentary is critical to making up for the “laziness” within the content:

“With reaction videos, you don’t necessarily need much; they just need to show their personality. Like Berleezy (A YouTuber), when he reacts, it’s entertaining and thought-provoking, or Dwayne and Jaz (YouTubers), it’s just entertaining seeing their facial expressions.” - P3

P3 clearly emphasizes personality as the driving force behind RVs rather than extensive production quality. Participants have taken notice of the “saturation” of the genre, so there is a further emphasis on content creators being humorous and authentic with their reactions. Take it from P6 who stated:

“Reaction videos as a whole has just become the normality on YouTube. I feel like every big YouTuber from old doesn’t really put a lot of effort into their stuff anymore, and then [they] just end up reacting to whatever other creative people do... which isn’t necessarily a bad thing, because sometimes they actually add good commentary to it. But also, some of them are just getting lazy because they’re [way] past their prime in a way. It’s kind of an oversaturated lane at the moment. I feel like not a lot of people have the charisma, yet they’re still making reaction videos.” - P6

One participant went as far as calling RVs “harmful” if they have nothing of value to add to the original content:

“I think that in many ways they, they [RVs] can be kind of harmful... there [are] a lot of people that will just kind of put on the video and just of make a crazy face, like when something wild happens and not really have anything interesting to say. But I think when it’s done right it can one, just make for very funny or entertaining videos, and two, it can kind of add a new perspective to this, whatever they might be reacting to in the same way that film critics or music critics [do].” - P13

In general, the value of personality over production seems to be a shared sentiment between viewers. Due to the lower production overhead, many participants see reaction videos as a uniquely personality-driven format that not only invites immediate emotional connection but also fosters productive and/or interesting insights on the original content.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Our study explores the more nuanced participatory culture surrounding reaction videos through their engagements with the content, reactors, and fellow viewers, as well as the driving motivations that viewers exhibit in their engagement with these videos. Whereas a majority of the existing literature in the domain of RVs is centered around creators and their motivations, our study expands upon the more recent, and much fewer, works that have begun to investigate viewers and their role. These newer works have highlighted the need for a deeper investigation into viewer preferences, the participatory nature of reaction videos, and the relationship between viewers and both content creators and fellow viewers, respectively. Our research directly addresses these and other gaps by providing insights into previously underexplored dimensions of RV culture.

Our findings suggest that viewers' engagement with RVs is multifaceted in not only their approach but also in their consumption of the media. From the values derived in their consumption and corresponding consumption pathways, to common participation practices with the content and/or creators, these dimensions not only shape individual viewing experiences, but also highlight the role RVs play within the broader social media ecosystem. This engagement with RVs not only validates but also enriches our understanding of present-day digital participatory cultures.

In the following sections, I will be revisiting our key findings and tying them back to our original research questions. We aim to position our insights within the ever-growing body of

existing literature surrounding RVs, as well as to highlight their significance and implications for future research and platform design.

5.1 Reviewing Viewer Motivations and Values

5.1.1 Emotional and Social Connections

Our study showed that an almost obvious value for viewers of RVs is their desire for emotional and social connection. Reaction videos serve not just as a medium for experiencing content vicariously, but also as an online space where individuals can find community and shared emotional resonance. As we can see through our interviews, our participants frequently mentioned feelings of joy and validation, as well as being able to engage in their interests with others online that they may not have had the opportunity to do in real-life. Our findings echoed two of the themes identified in [Ghosh and Tripathi](#)'s work. In their study, they had identified "longing for community" and "feeling emotional" from their analysis of RV comments [28] through U&G theory. Our interviews were also echoed through [Swan](#)'s work in which RV appeal extends beyond recapturing a primary experience, functioning as an "online community-building tool" [70]. This suggests that RVs not only motivates viewers to connect with others who also share similar interests, but also the emotional responses provided by the content being reacted to.

These findings of community-building are further supported by our work in which we highlight how RVs can offer a "new community for similar taste". This sense of belonging can be vital to one's viewing experience. Reaction videos foster spaces where viewers feel connected to both the reactor and fellow viewers in their shared enthusiasm and critiques of content.

Online Co-Viewing While reaction videos represent a distinct genre of online video content, the desire for shared viewing experiences is evident across various platforms and formats. One notable platform is Danmaku, a commentary system prevalent on platforms such as Bilibili.com in China [75]. Danmaku creates a “pseudo-synchronized” experience, helping users feel like they are actively viewing the video at the same time as others, although their comments are posted asynchronously [75]. Danmaku fosters a “co-watching atmosphere” and a sense of social presence, which allows users to express their emotions and opinions in “real time” with other users [20, 33, 76]. Similar to the desire for a shared experience in Danmaku, where users seek emotional resonance and the feeling of being accompanied through overlaid comments, our findings suggest that RVs function as an online community-building tool. However, unlike the pseudo-synchronous, crowd-like interaction of overlaid Danmaku comments, the shared experience in RVs is often mediated through watching a specific reactor’s personal engagement with the content. Viewers might feel a sense of connection not only with other viewers in the comments section, but also directly with the reactor, potentially forming parasocial interactions.

Parasocial Relationships Former studies on online viewing habits in related contexts, such as mukbangs, have indicated that viewers often develop a “perceived intimacy with specific mukbangers” even without direct interaction [3]. This suggests a broader phenomenon where viewers of online content, including reaction videos, can feel a sense of connection or, sometimes, even a parasocial relationship with the content creator themselves [51]. Although the existing literature may not explicitly use the term “parasocial relationship” in the context of RVs, the underlying feeling of a one-sided sense of closeness or familiarity likely contributes to the appeal of the genre [51]. Although we do not explicitly discuss this concept of parasocial relationships in our results (due to the limited mention of it), there were instances in our interviews in which participants used the term to describe how these

interactions *can* be parasocial. For example, P5 stated:

“I’d say it’s like... more of a parasocial interaction. I know, we’re not in the same room, but it kind of feels more personal. Like I’m kind of watching this with her and I think that makes it more funny than a YouTuber that’s trying to entertain me in a different way. This is more genuine... and they’re just [in] real time... showing their jokes and stuff.” - P5

In the context of reaction videos, particularly with grassroots creators, watching individuals react in a seemingly authentic and unrehearsed manner can foster a sense of intimacy and connection. As participant P11 noted, finding someone who feels the same way about a video brings a sense of validation and connection, as if saying “you’re like me”. P14 similarly described feeling “more connected to the reactors because they’re just posting videos [out of] love”.

Watching these videos can profoundly influence a viewer’s sense of connectedness with creators, especially those that they perceive as genuine or “ordinary” [45]. The visibility and embodied presence of the reactor on screen, although physically distant, facilitates “felt connections” and emotional attachment, and this looks to be particularly true for grassroots creators whose unpolished, amateur style can be seen as more authentic compared to more professional productions [18]. This shows that YouTubers, as well as content creators on other platforms, have the power to cultivate this sense of connection with their audience through their sharing of genuine reactions and perspectives.

In the context of tragic events, RVs can also become tools for emotional connection and construction of meaning within a community, particularly for marginalized groups such as the LGBTQ+ community [7]. As explored in Baldowski’s study, participants reported forming

personal connections to the reactors and demonstrated how viewing RVs fostered a greater sense of community [7]. Through the raw and, often, unrehearsed nature of testimonial-style RVs, reaction videos possess the potential in creating a more authentic connection through the conveyed emotions of reactors [18]. This is echoed in our own findings, as participants frequently mentioned that their consumption of RVs is heavily dependent on the reactor and their accompanying reaction.

Motivation in watching RVs is very much rooted in one's desire to connect with others on an emotional and social level. RVs provide a platform, and oftentimes safe space, for finding like-minded individuals, sharing emotional responses, and fostering a sense of belonging within a virtual community centered around shared interests and experiences [22]. As stated previously in our motivation, viewers are not just looking for another video to watch, they are searching for a connection and experience that can not be found in other genres, and RVs fulfill it for them.

5.1.2 Gaining New Perspectives and Knowledge

Another key value that was found from our results was that RVs provide viewers the ability to hear new perspectives and gain knowledge. This allowed us to see that reaction videos can be more than just passive and/or mindless entertainment. Take P6 for example who highlighted how they learned new details about singer Frank Ocean's song *White Ferrari* from a reactor's breakdown. This mirrored the findings of Lundby, who observed that reaction videos allow viewers to potentially grasp nuances or perspectives that they might have overlooked in their own consumption [45].

Another appeal to RVs that Lundby found was that reaction videos provide the opportunity to witness how people from various backgrounds and with different experiences interpret the

same material [45]. This appeal was also found in [Alcosero and Gomez](#)'s work in analyzing politeness strategies in YouTube reaction vlogs. Although our study did not focus on expert reactions, participants mentioned that they appreciated when reactors shared informed opinions related to the content, which aligns with the idea that RVs can provide knowledge [1]. Again, this sentiment was echoed in our results, specifically through P14's experience in watching Chinese TV dramas and being exposed to new cultural contexts that enriched her own understanding of women in the military, as well as the Qin Dynasty.

Our findings extend the existing literature by highlighting the various manners in which viewers gain knowledge and perspectives in their consumption of RVs and provides a more concrete foundation for further research to better understand the intentionality in seeking these perspectives in their respective original content genres.

5.1.3 Entertainment and Passive Usage

Contrary to the gaining of new perspectives and knowledge, our results also suggest that entertainment, which includes relaxation, enjoyment, or distraction, can be an initial motivation for newer / casual viewers who engage in RV content. This aligns with the idea that audiences actively select media to fulfill needs such as diversion which is a core aspect of the Uses and Gratifications Theory [28, 64], as well as entertainment which is another fundamental gratification that is sought after in media consumption [23]. Our participants frequently mentioned finding value in being able to take their mind off things, such as homework and other stressors, in their daily lives through the casual consumption of RVs.

Drawing upon the Uses and Gratifications perspective provided by both [Ghosh and Tripathi](#) and [Lundby](#) as well as [Lundby](#)'s reference to hedonic and eudaemonic orientations for viewers, our findings directly echoes that casual viewers might be primarily seeking hedonic

gratifications (immediate pleasure and enjoyment) through their passive engagement. This is contrary to the possibility that active/frequent viewers seek more eudaemonic gratifications, such as the previously discussed aspects of personal salience and social connection [45]. Our findings also echo the suggestion of nuanced distinctions in how different viewer groups approach reaction videos. While active/frequent viewers engage RVs with a higher degree of personal investment and corresponding gratification seeking, newer/casual viewers may be primarily motivated by their pursuit of entertainment [45]. Although [Lundby](#) came to these conclusions through investigating viewers engagement with music video reaction videos, we can further theorize that our results are applicable to all viewers of reaction videos, thus providing a better understanding of the importance in considering diverse viewer motivations and its corresponding influence on viewer engagement levels with RVs of all genres.

5.2 Reviewing The Participatory Culture

Reaction videos exist within a highly interactive and participatory online environment. Our results gave us a first-hand look at this active engagement in which we found that viewers engage with RVs through modalities such as comments, liking, sharing, and downloading, as well as RV specific-patterns in either full immersion or highlight-seeking. In [Khan's](#) study of social media engagement, more specifically viewer motivations in participating and consuming on YouTube, they found that viewers are not simply passive recipients of content, but rather they actively engage with videos, content creators, and other viewers in numerous ways [39]. We extend and expand on [Khan's](#) work, and the overall engagement practices found with RVs in other literature, with our findings on RV-specific patterns and viewer engagement with RVs in general. This new information could potentially be utilized by platforms such as YouTube and Tiktok, in which they could create or expand on already

existing features such as YouTube's most replayed feature, as well as content creators to curate a more immersive experience for the viewer. Finally, the discovery pathways that viewers participate in illustrates how it can influence their engagement with RVs and shape their overall participation whether it be with content creators or other viewers.

5.2.1 The Role of Comments and Online Discourse

Comments are central to the participatory culture surrounding reaction videos, functioning as a key space for online discourse [28, 76]. They provide a platform for viewers to express their personal opinions, analyze content, and engage in discussions, which aligns with motivations for information-seeking and opinion-expression. Again, this thought is highlighted in our work as we saw that viewers often seek RVs related to content that they're interested in, and the comment section allows them to dive deeper into these topics with others. The discourse that is had within comment sections contributes to what can be termed as the "distributed credibility" of online videos [74]. We expand on this term that Werner coined for reaction vlogs, and generalize it to all types of RVs with our work. Viewers have the ability to affirm, challenge, or provide additional context to the reactor's interpretations, collectively shaping the understanding and perceived credibility of the original content [74]. Our results suggests that the meaning-making process is not solely in the hands of the reactor, but is a collaborative effort involving the audience through their textual contributions.

Interestingly enough, our results also showed that the comment section could be utilized passively by viewers as some of our participants mentioned that they engage in the act of simply scrolling through comments. Through our interviews, we can conclude that this passive engagement could be influenced either by their personal reservations or simply a desire in not wanting to directly engage with other viewers. Regardless, the comment section

provides viewers the affordance in seeing if their reactions resonates with others, further reinforcing a sense of shared understanding but allowing the users to control their level of privacy and engagement. Carrêlo proposes the concept of "public intimacy" in online videos and the concept of a "voluntary panopticon". Connecting this back to our results, we can see that frequent viewers may have more comfort with the social dynamics involved in commenting on these videos which in turn can lead to a greater sense of connection and less concern about privacy in the open environment of social media as compared to casual viewers who may be more hesitant and observant. This thought also aligns with Dolan et al.'s definition of consumption as a minimum level of engagement where users consume content without active reciprocation.

Again, contrasting our work with existing literature on Danmaku comments, there is opportunity for platforms such as YouTube and TikTok to implement the pseudo-synchronous functionality of Danmaku within their own comment systems. As Danmaku comments have been found to aid in knowledge sharing, and more specifically timely information supplement and regulation [33, 75], the implementation of this functionality would not only enhance the co-viewing experience for reaction videos, but also aid in the distributed credibility of the discourse that is had within comment sections on these video sharing platforms.

5.2.2 Dissecting Discovery Pathways

The ways in which viewers discover reaction videos directly fuels their participation in the genre. Our results identified four distinct pathways, each encompassing a unique aspect of participatory culture: Content-led, Creator-led, Algorithmically-led, and Socially-led.

Starting off with content-led discovery, we identified its significance as an entry point in which viewers actively sought out reaction videos to specific original content. This directly

reflected the participatory nature that exists in fandoms such as K-pop [46, 52, 53] or even the LGBTQ+ community[44]. It is in this pathway that viewers seek out others who share their interests and emotional investment in content choice. This act of seeking and watching contributes to the collective fan identity [4] and can lead to further participation through commenting and discussing about the original content as well as the reactors' responses as found in the work of Ghosh and Tripathi. As our results showed, viewers might be contextualizing their own interpretations or gauging broader opinions within a community of shared interests, further aligning with the Magoncia's idea of reaction videos functioning as "havens of exchanged knowledge and emotions among fans".

The creator-led pathway is taken when viewers follow specific creators and watch their reaction videos. This pathway highlights the importance of the reactor and their role in fostering participatory culture within their respective audiences. Our participants often noted how they stayed and watch a reaction video because of the creator's personality and style, and vice-versa. This is echoed in the works of Baker et al. and [28] who discuss how the loyalty derived from viewers influences their likelihood of actively engaging with the content creator through likes, comments, and suggestions, which ultimately contributes to the community built around that reactor.

Our third pathway is characterized by the recommendations of a viewer's algorithm on their platform of choice. Our results showed that these algorithms can either be used as entry points into the participatory culture through showing snippets of RVs or full-length videos, with many participants citing TikTok's For-You-Page feature. Generalizing P13's process in this pathway, viewers may find an RV, full-length or snippet, interesting, explore the reactor's channel, and engage with them either through modalities such as subscribing, commenting, and liking. Again, this process falls in line with Khan's work on social media engagement practices, and we can theorize that algorithms influence the engagement and consumption

that viewers have with RVs.

Finally, our socially-led pathway is characterized by RV recommendations from friends and family. These recommendations demonstrate RVs potential in facilitating social interaction and shared experiences, with participants mentioning their reliance on their personal networks in their discovery and consumption of RVs. These acts of sharing and recommending videos, whether in-person through word of mouth or online, are active forms of participation and in turn can facilitate discussions and shared emotions as we saw in our results through P12 and P13. This is supported by [Rodgers](#) who discusses how reaction videos activate “mirror neurons”, highlighting the shared experience.

Also, in our results we found that reaction videos can lead to the discovery of new original content which falls in line with [Jenkins](#)’s tenets of participatory culture, more specifically the idea of “fans and other consumers being invited to actively participate in the creation and circulation of new content” [37]. When a reactor or trusted loved one’s credibility and/or enthusiasm sparks a viewer’s interest in the original content, viewers may seek out that content and potentially engage in further discussions and reactions related to it. Also as noted by [Rodgers](#), the comment sections of these videos, such as music video reaction videos, are usually filled with recommendations in which the viewer can further discover new original content. This highlights the role RVs can play in the circulation and promotion of content.

5.2.3 Lowering the Barrier in Content Creation

As seen in our results, a key aspect that contributes to the participatory nature of reaction videos lies in its low barrier in content creation. Several of our participants noted that the production of reaction videos generally requires less effort as compared to other types of

online content. This ease of creation directly aligns with the core tenets of participatory culture in which Henry Jenkins defines it as one “with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement” [37]. Reaction videos literally exemplify this characteristic with its simple technical demands. Reactors do not need extensive equipment, technical skills, or much financial investment to start creating and sharing their reactions. Now, this does not mean that some capital or technical knowledge is not needed, it just means that if people wanted to, they could start creating and sharing their reactions without much difficulty.

Our results also present a nuanced perspective on this low barrier. To reiterate the words of P1, reaction videos are “weak content”, suggesting that they are “almost taking someone else’s content and just adding a bit of a twist”. In the same breath, P1 also acknowledged the appeal in RVs, with other participants emphasizing how personality and “good” commentary are key in compensating for the perceived “laziness” of the content. This suggests that while the technical barrier might be low, engaging and successful reaction videos still require effort and creativity in terms of the reactor’s persona and contributions.

Shao’s model of user engagement highlights different levels of involvement: consumption, participation, and production. Extending this model to RVs, the low barrier to entry in reaction video creation encourages more users to push past mere consumption (e.g. watching videos, reading comments) and participation (commenting, liking) towards production (uploading their own reaction videos) [66]. As Shao points out, producing is literally the lifeblood of user-generated sites such as YouTube and TikTok. This also aligns with Bruns’s concept of “produsage” in which we see more and more people play a dual role of both producers and consumers [15]. Reaction videos, with their accessible creation process, actively contribute to this vital content flow.

As Burgess and Green discuss, YouTube has shifted from a video archival site to a social

media platform in which self-expression drives its usage and the affordances provided by YouTube have in turn allowed the site to be developed into a cultural phenomenon that facilitates user-generated content creation. YouTube has also developed into a platform in which mainstream media that has not been taken by copyright reasons can be watched - these same sentiments can be applied to TikTok. With this in mind, the potential to create RVs to any form of content has grown more than ever with YouTube’s recent “safe harbor” from copyright infringement [13] and the manner in which TV shows and movies are posted in series of clips on TikTok being likened to that of a pseudo-streaming service [68].

As we mentioned earlier, there are technical barriers that exist in creating reaction videos, such as needing software like OBS for real-time video and audio capturing as well as video editing software like Vegas Pro. Currently, TikTok circumvents these barriers with its features such as stitching in which creators go back and forth between the original content and themselves, and video overlays in which creators place themselves over the original content being played. Here lies an opportunity for other platforms such as YouTube and even Twitch to provide affordances like TikTok in further easing the creation of reaction videos. Overall, this low barrier, and continual lowering, fosters a dynamic online environment where more users can become producers and contribute to the vast ecosystem of reaction videos, and ultimately shape the overall participatory culture.

5.3 Suggestions for Reactors

Balance Reaction and Discussion As previously discussed, engaging reaction videos offer more than just emotional displays. Although our results do point to engaging facial expressions and gestures, they also highlight that viewers value new insights, alternative perspectives, and informed opinions. Valuable commentary consists of grounded reasoning

to support points made, and although emotional display is key to the genre and fosters connection, balancing it with thoughtful discussion is crucial. Commentary style matters, and existing literature has suggested that the manner in which reactors discuss content, the depth of their analysis, and their ability to integrate personal knowledge or broader context significantly shapes the viewers' experience [1, 45]. Pausing the original content for commentary can provide validation or deeper insight, yet excessive or lengthy pauses can be perceived negatively. Longer discussions (over a couple of minutes) risk losing viewer attention, especially for those without a strong existing connection to the original content, but it can also provide priceless, personally noteworthy insights for others. This implies that reactors must navigate a fine line between spontaneous reaction and structured analysis. Essentially, they must consider their audience's expectations and their own goals for the content. As our participants have put it, "when done right", reaction videos can leave long-lasting impressions on viewers and reinforce their connections to the original content and reactor.

Content and Community Interaction With a primary motivation for viewing RVs being rooted in the desire for emotional and social connections, as well as finding a sense of community centered around shared interests, reactors play a key role in fostering this community. From interacting with viewers through watching suggested content, to responding to comments, to facilitating content discovery, these are just a few ways in which reactors can grow their respective communities of viewers. Again, it comes down to the reactor's expectation for their content and how they want to be received.

5.4 Implications

Policy Implications: Navigating Copyright in Reaction Videos Reaction videos, by their nature, usually include copyrighted content from other individuals and companies without obtaining licenses [72]. This practice creates a natural tension with existing copyright law, specifically the Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA), which was created to safeguard copyrighted material online and allows copyright owners to demand the removal of infringing content from internet service providers [72]. Many creators struggle to understand the intricacies within fair use, oftentimes mistakenly believing that the addition of commentary, post-editing, giving explicit credit to the copyright owner, or disclaimers are enough to protect them from allegations of infringement [72].

The application of the fair use defense, outlined in the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, is key to providing a solution but remains ambiguous for reaction videos due to its case-by-case analysis requirement [72]. The application of fair use is determined by the purpose and character of the use (especially if it is transformative), “the nature of the copyrighted work, the amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the whole, and the effect on the potential market or value of the original work” [72]. The DMCA’s notice and takedown system itself has already been criticized for not adequately recognizing fair use and being easily abused by copyright owners, and although platforms like YouTube have provided resources to better explain fair usage, there is still an urgent need for clearer legislative guidance and institutional protections for fair use to prevent content creators and their content from being abused by these owners.

As discussed in lowering the barrier in content creation, YouTube has recently enacted a “safe harbor” from copyright infringement [13] so this may be a step forward in giving content creators, such as reactors, more breathing room; however, there is still more work to be done.

Algorithm Recommendations As discussed in our dissection of the discovery pathways, algorithms can play a key role as gateways to content and communities with the reaction video space. They influence the RVs that viewers can discover and can act as the initial entry point into a particular reactor’s community or the genre itself. However, algorithms can perpetuate existing biases or inequities, for example, potentially influencing the visibility of creators based on identity [48]. Drawing from our results, we suggest that platform algorithms should ideally consider not just content popularity but also the nuanced motivations and gratifications that drive viewer engagement. This includes distinguishing between viewers seeking pure entertainment, those seeking information or deeper analysis, and those primarily seeking social connection. Algorithms could potentially be refined to recommend reaction videos or specific reactors based on characteristics like commentary style (e.g., analytical vs emotional, frequency/length of discussions), in tandem with the original content that the viewers are already interested in.

5.5 Limitations

A limitation of our study lies in our pool of participants. As noted before, most of our participants identified as African-American or Asian, with none of our participants identifying as White. We also did not have participants over the age of 30. Finally, all of our participants lived in the United States, with no representation abroad. This means that the study could not thoroughly investigate how various aspects of a viewer’s identity might influence the types of reaction video content they choose to watch or the specific identities of the reactors they are drawn to.

As mentioned in our literature review, prior studies have explored how Black American fans use reaction videos to express their racial identities within K-pop fandoms [52] or how Filipino

queer fans engaged with Miss Universe reaction videos [44], connecting with specific expressions of identity and fostering solidarity. Without a more diverse sample, such as including viewers from different continents or wider age range, the study was unable to examine, for example, whether viewers from African countries specifically seek out African-American reactors or content related to the African-American culture to gain better understanding or connection, or how older viewers' motivations and content preferences might differ from younger audiences.

Therefore, while this study provides valuable insights into the motivations of its specific participant group, the limited sample prevented a comprehensive exploration of how the viewer's own identity intersects with the identity of the reactor or the content being reacted to, which is a potentially significant factor in shaping viewing experiences and motivations within the reaction video ecosystem and thus limits the generalization of our findings.

Also, due to this research being conducted during my undergraduate studies and graduate studies for my thesis, the data analysis was primarily done by a single researcher, which may introduce another potential limitation. Qualitative research provides better opportunities in furthering the understanding of phenomenons; However, as a researcher using qualitative methods like interviews, my own background, assumptions, and interpretations could have inadvertently influenced the data collection and analysis process. The involvement of multiple researchers could help mitigate bias and provide more detailed results.

Chapter 6

Conclusions

In conclusion, our study highlights the motivations, participatory culture, and spectatorship behind reaction videos by conducting in-depth interviews with 16 participants, as well as through thematic analysis. To address the existing gap of the viewer role in the RV ecosystem, we centered our work around the following research questions:

- (RQ1) How do viewers discover reaction Videos?
- (RQ2) What are the motivations for watching reaction videos?
- (RQ3) How do viewers engage with reaction videos?

As we identified and explored in RQ1, viewers discover reaction videos through four key pathways: (1) Content-led discovery, (2) Creator-led discovery, (3) Algorithmic recommendations, and (4) Social recommendations. Through our dissection of the pathways, we reveal how these different pathways, respectively, fuel their participation in the RV culture, as well as the motivations that may be at play within each pathway.

In RQ2, we identified five themes in viewer motivations to provide a more nuanced understanding into the specific ways reaction videos fulfill their various needs: (1) Shared Interests and Emotional Connections, (2) Consuming Content Together Makes Me Feel Less Lonely, (3) Discovering New Perspectives, (4) Entertainment and Passive Usage, and (5) A New Way to Discover New Content. Our discussion showed how these motivations align with

the tenets of UGT such as the fulfillment of social and relational needs, information-seeking and cognitive needs, and diversion and entertainment. Our fifth theme showed us a unique, and under-explored, byproduct of RVs in which they can function as a discovery mechanism. This theme demonstrates the potential of RVs in not only serving as responses to original content, but also playing a role in guiding viewers toward new media and experiences. This final motivation bridges RQ1 and RQ2, suggesting that the potential for content discovery can be a motivation in itself to watch RVs.

Finally, in RQ3, we identified and explored how viewers engage with RVs, revealing the nuanced manners in which viewers engage in the participatory culture of RVs: (1) Viewing Patterns, (2) A New Community You Can Engage With For Similar Tastes, (3) RVs reflecting viewers' dynamic taste and lives, and (4) Low barrier to content creation. We take a look at how viewers actively tailor their RV experience through specific viewing patterns, the role of comment sections, and its corresponding online discourse, for social interaction and communication, and how the ease of creation contributes to the participatory nature of the genre.

The identified themes in RQ3 help us provide a more nuanced and comprehensive picture of how viewers engage with RVs, highlighting the active role viewers take in shaping their viewing experiences, fostering communities, reflecting their evolving interests, and even contributing to the creation of reaction videos themselves.

We acknowledge that due to the limitations that exist in our participant pool, as well as our data analysis, there may be a gap in our understanding of motivations and engagements and thus the generalization of our findings.

In summary, our results are well supported by our literature review in which we explored existing theoretical frameworks for understanding media consumption and online behavior,

as well as through an explicit alignment of our results with the core tenets of the Uses and Gratifications Theory. By centering the voice of viewers (primarily African-American and Asian-American), we were able to further bridge the existing knowledge gap, as well as examine how reaction videos serve not only as entertainment, but also as social and affective media experiences.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Eligibility Survey

Reaction Video Study Survey

You

are invited to participate in a research study titled "Understanding the Motivations and Participatory Culture Behind Viewing Reaction Videos". This form includes information about the study and contact information if you have any questions.

If

you decide to participate in this study, you will complete either an in-person interview or online interview via Zoom. We also ask your permission to record the interview and will only do so if you agree. We will ask you questions regarding your experiences with reaction videos, whether it be creating or viewing them.

The study should take approximately 1 hour of your time. Participants will be compensated with a \$15 Amazon E-gift card.

We do not anticipate any risks from completing this study.

You

can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which warrant doing so.

We

will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality.

Any

data collected during this research study will be kept confidential by the researchers. Your interview will be audio-recorded using a digital recorder and then transcribed. The researchers will code the transcripts using a pseudonym (false name). The recordings will be uploaded to a secure password-protected computer in the researcher's office. The researchers will maintain a list that includes a key to the code. The master key and the recordings will be stored for 3 years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

If

you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Dr.Sang Won Lee, Rodney Okyere, or Carlos Bautista, researchers at Virginia Tech (917) 819-9079 who are working on this study. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights, or remedies because of your participation in this

research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).

* Indicates required question

1. Email *

Eligibility Screening

We define reaction videos as such:

Reaction or 'react' videos are a popular genre in which an individual or small group analyzes a piece of media, drawing on their personal or specialized knowledge in an informal, often highly emotional way. These videos can vary in format: the reactor may be simultaneously visible alongside the media or the original content may be followed by the reaction where the reactor's commentary alternates sequentially or interactively.

2. We are looking for participants who are regular viewers of reaction videos, as well as actively enjoy them. If that sounds like you, please select Yes and continue the rest of the survey. *

Mark only one oval.

Yes

No

DEMOGRAPHICS

3. Age *

4. Please Indicate your gender *

Mark only one oval.

- Male
- Female
- Transgender
- Non-Binary/Non-Comforming
- Prefer not to respond

5. Race/Ethnicity *

Check all that apply.

- Black or African-American
- White
- Asian
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander.

6. Sexual Orientation

7. What is your education level? *

Mark only one oval.

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior
- Senior
- Master's Degree
- PhD
- Other: _____

8. What is your current occupation? *

General Interest and Viewing Habits

9. How often do you watch reaction videos? *

Mark only one oval.

- Daily
- Several times a week
- Weekly
- Less than once a week
- Other: _____

10. On average, how much time do you spend watching reaction videos in one sitting? *

Mark only one oval.

- Less than 15 minutes
- 15-30 minutes
- 30 minutes to 1 hour
- More than 1 hour
- Other: _____

11. What devices do you typically use to watch reaction videos? (Select all that apply) *

Check all that apply.

- Smartphone
- Tablet
- Computer/Laptop
- TV/Smart TV

12. Through which problems do you usually watch reaction videos? (Select all that apply) *

Check all that apply.

- YouTube
- Twitch
- Instagram
- Facebook
- TikTok
- Other: _____

Genre-Specific Interest

13. What genres of content do you prefer to watch in reaction videos? (Select all that apply) *

Check all that apply.

- Comedy
- Drama
- Horror
- Reality
- Science Fiction
- Music
- Movies
- Video Games
- Documentary
- Educational
- Beauty
- Other: _____

Motivations, Preferences, Engagement and Social Interaction

14. What motivates you to watch reaction videos? (Select all that apply) *

Check all that apply.

- Entertainment
- Finding out about new content
- Seeing others' emotional responses
- Community and Social Interaction
- Other: _____

15. Do you prefer watching reaction videos alone or with others? *

Mark only one oval.

- Alone
- With others
- No Preference

16. Do you follow specific content creators for reaction videos? If so, how many? *

Mark only one oval.

- I don't follow specific creators
- 1-3 creators
- 4-10 creators
- More than 10 creators

Final Recruitment Questions

17. Are you interested in taking part of the research study? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

18. Click this URL to finish the survey: <https://app.prolific.com/submissions/complete?cc=CO8D9EZK> *
-

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Google Forms

Appendix B

Interview Questions

B.1 Interview Introduction

Hello, my name is Rodney, and I am a researcher at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University's department of Computer Science. The study aims to understand not only the motivations behind viewing the phenomena known as reaction videos, but the virality and participatory culture that it embodies.

As we mentioned previously, we would like to record the interviews so that we can make sure to capture your thoughts, opinions, and ideas accurately. Is that ok? We will also be taking notes. The information you give us is completely confidential, and we will not associate your name with anything you say as part of your participation in this conversation. Just so you know, no names or identifying information will be attached to anything we write up or share.

We understand how important it is that this information is kept private and confidential.

Lastly, you may refuse to answer any question. Any questions before we begin?

Before we dive into the interview, I'll first provide you with a definition of reaction videos:

“Reaction or ‘react’ videos are a popular genre on video hosting services, such as YouTube, in which an individual or small group analyzes a piece of media, drawing on their personal or specialized knowledge in an informal, often highly emotional way.”

B.2 Original/Pilot Study Questions

How You Started

1. How long have you been watching reaction videos?
2. Do you remember the first reaction video that you watched? If so, can you share what it was?

How were you introduced to the video?

How did you learn about them?

Could you walk me through your first interaction with reaction videos?

Where/What/How Do You Watch

1. Where do you watch reaction videos? (e.g., livestreams, YouTube Shorts, full-length videos)
2. Do you normally watch reaction videos after watching the video that they are reacting to, or without watching it?
3. What type of reaction videos do you typically watch?
4. Would you be able to show me a reaction video that you found interesting?
5. How do you find reaction videos? How often do you watch them?
6. How do you typically watch them? (e.g., watching beginning to end, skimming, navigating/scrubbing through the timeline)

Why Do You Watch

1. What do you look for in a reaction video?
2. Why do you watch them?

Why do you think it's engaging?

What is the most rewarding part of it?

What's the motivation for watching reaction videos?

3. Why would you watch a reaction video instead of the original content?

How Do You Interact and Participate

1. Have you ever interacted with (or wanted to interact with) those who create reaction videos? If so, how? (e.g., liking, commenting, suggesting content)
2. (Impact) Have you thought of creating content relating to reaction videos?
3. (Participatory Culture) What kind of reaction videos would you create?

B.3 Refactored Questions

Viewer Discovery and Watching Habits (How You Started + Where/What/How)

Do You Watch

1. How do you typically discover new reaction videos?
2. Can you describe your usual process of watching a reaction video?

Types of Reaction Videos and Preferences

1. What kinds of reaction videos do you watch?

How Regularly do you watch reaction videos?

2. Could you show an example of a reaction video that particularly resonated with you and explain why? Or any reaction video that you enjoyed watching from the past?

Understanding Motivations and Values (Why Do You Watch)

1. What do you find most engaging or rewarding about watching reaction videos?
2. In your view, how do reaction videos add value to the original content?

Engagement and Interaction (How Do You Interact and Participate)

1. How do you engage with reaction videos or their creator beyond just watching? (e.g., comments, likes, suggestions, etc.)
2. Have you ever suggested content for reactors to respond to or interact with other viewers? How did that experience feel?
3. Relationship between RV Viewers and the original content:

In the reaction videos, do you typically know of the content that they are reacting to? If so, have you watched them before watching reaction videos? What makes you want to watch the reaction videos when you know the content already?

If you have neither watched nor known the original content, what kind of roles do reaction videos play in consuming the original content?

Personal Impact and Participation (How Do You Interact and Participate)

1. Have reaction videos influenced your opinions towards the original content?
2. Does it influence your taste in content or your broader media consumption habits? If so, how?
3. If you were to create your own reaction video, what kind of content would you choose and why?

Appendix C

Final Codes

Theme	Code	Sub-Theme
Sources/Types of Content that people react to		
	D1	Movie RVs
	D2	Sports RVs
	D3	TV Shows RVs
	D4	Game RVs
	D5	Music-Related RVs (MVs, Live Reactions, Etc..)
	D6	Trailers
	D7	Reacting to RV
	D8	Social Experiments
	D9	Other creators' contents
	D10	Crime-Related RVs
	D11	Wide Variety (Challenges, etc...)
	D66	Horror RVs
	D67	Beauty RVs
	D74	Comedy RVs
	D76	Animal-Related Content RVs
	D77	Product Reaction RVs
	D80	News-Related RVs
Form, Characteristics of RVs		
	D12	Duration / Characteristics depends on the conte
	D13	Shorts/Reels/TikTok
	D14	Atypical Format: Voice-only RV
	D15	Multiple content reacted
	D16	RVs as a medium for argument
	D17	Live Streaming RV
Methods of Watching Reaction Videos		
	D18	Platforms (Youtube, TikTok, Instagram, Etc...)
	D19	Does not actively search
	D20	Watch Original RV Entirely
	D21	Skipping to specific moments
	D22	Shorts lead to RV
	D23	They watch RVs after watching original content
	D24	Revisiting RVs
	D73	Shorts lead to OV
	D75	Watching on Mobile Device
	D78	Watch in 2x Speed
	D79	Youtube Metrics (Most Replayed Feature)

Figure C.1: Sources/Types of Content that People React to, Form/Characteristics of RVs, Methods of Watching Reaction Videos

Context of watching RVs	
D31	Discovered from recommended videos or feed
D32	Discovered while looking for something new
D33	Found a RV from another RV
D34	Found a RV from a content creator
D35	Recommend by their friends/family/SO
D36	Do not know content prior to watching RV
D37	Watch RV because of reactor
D38	Watch RV because of the content
D39	Open to any reactor
D40	the pandemics
RV Frequency	
D41	Often/Everyday
D42	interested in
D69	Infrequently (1-2x a week)
D70	Less than 30 Minutes
D71	One hour or More
Viewer Behavior	
D43	when they watch RV
D44	Lose interests over time
D45	Watch multiple RVs of the same content
D46	The taste of content in RVs evolve
D81	Physically watching RV w/ others
Perceived values of RVs	
D47	Safe Space
D48	New Perspectives on Common/Shared Interests
D49	Emotional connection with reactors
D50	Finding new social connection with for shared interests
D51	Fun/Entertaining to watch
D52	Positive/Funny/Engaging reactors
D53	Casual consumption
D54	Novelty
D55	Want to focus on content (OV)
D56	Critiquing the content [Amateur or Expert] (OV)
D57	Discover new content [Breaking News/Novelty]
D58	Discover new creators
D59	Content consumption through RVs is more engaging than consuming the content itself
D60	not original/weak/harmful
D61	Popular/Trending Content [Recognizing what's Popular / Negative Perception (P1/P9)]
D62	Influenced

Figure C.2: Context of Watching RVs, RV Frequency, Viewer Behavior, Perceived Values of RVs

Viewer Timeframe	
D63	10+ Years
D64	5+ Years
D65	Under 5 Years
Misc.	
D68	Uncomfortable w/ Creating
D83	Parasocial

Figure C.3: Viewer Timeframe, Misc.

Appendix D

Shared Videos

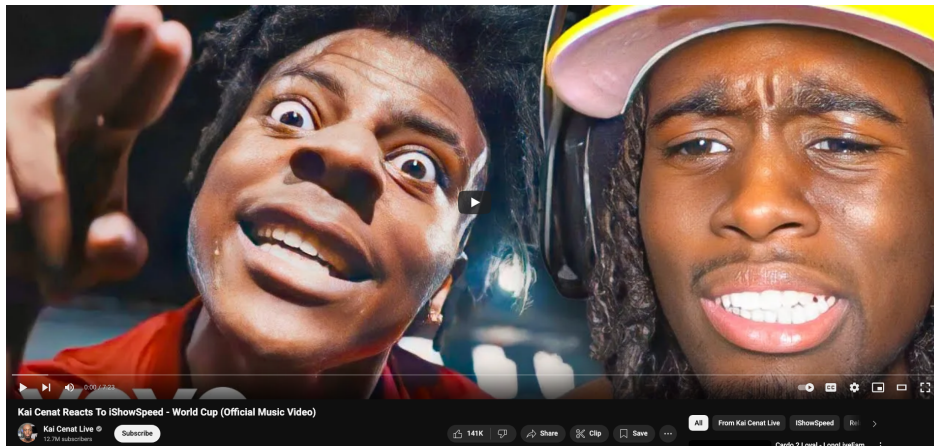


Figure D.1: Kai Cenat Reacts To iShowSpeed - World Cup (Official Music Video) [P01's Shared Video]



Figure D.2: FlightReacts Funniest Moments Of All Time Reaction! [P02's Shared Video]

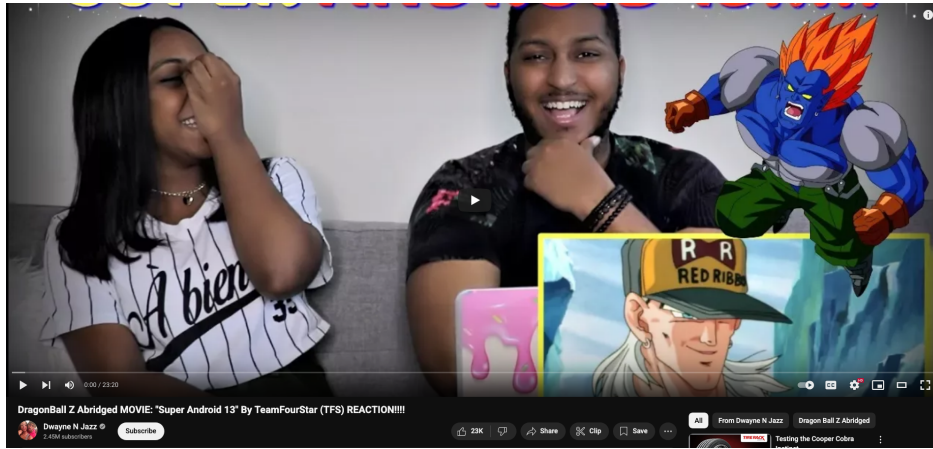


Figure D.3: DragonBall Z Abridged MOVIE Super Android 13 By TeamFourStar (TFS) REACTION!!!! [P03's Shared Video]



Figure D.4: MAX REACTS Tekken 8 Jack-8 Trailer [P04's Shared Video]

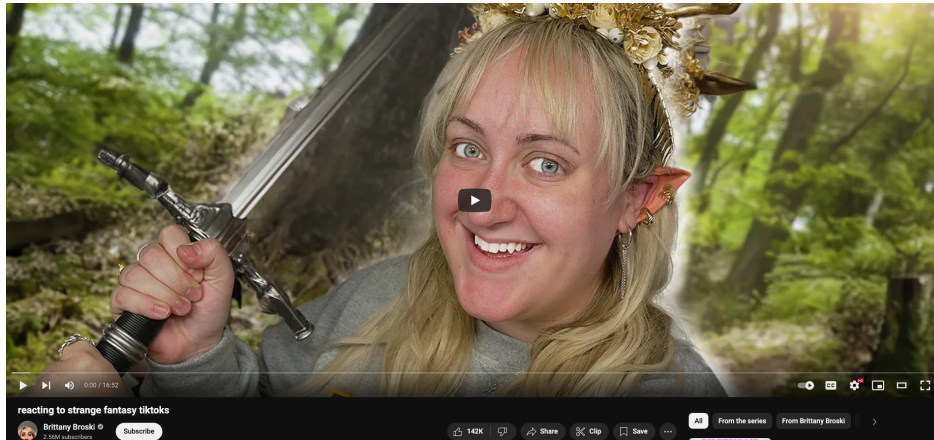


Figure D.5: reacting to strange fantasy tiktoks [P05's Shared Video]



Figure D.6: TLOP First Reaction [P06's Shared Video]

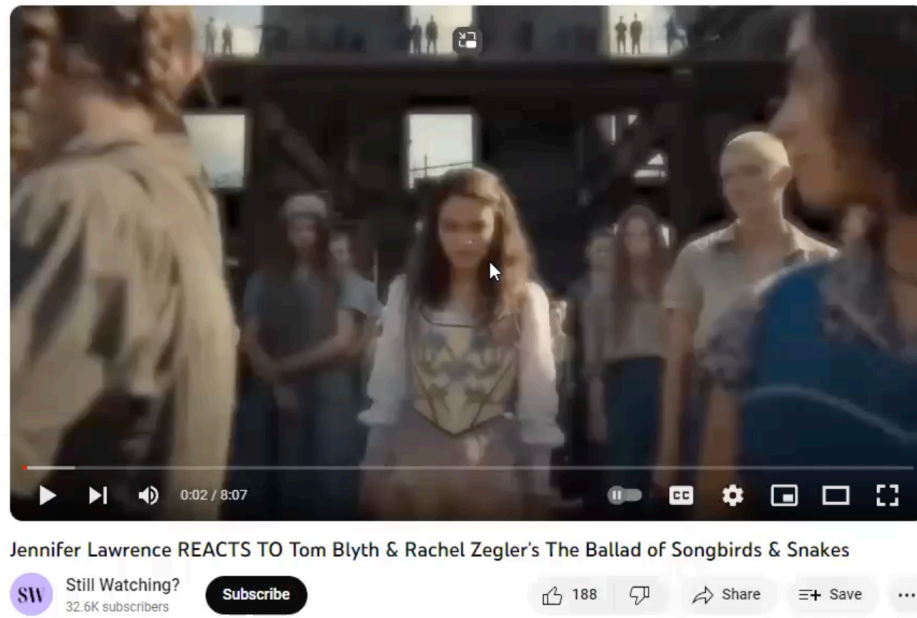


Figure D.7: Jennifer Lawrence REACTS TO Tom Blyth & Rachel Zegler's The Ballad of Songbirds & Snakes [P07's Shared Video]

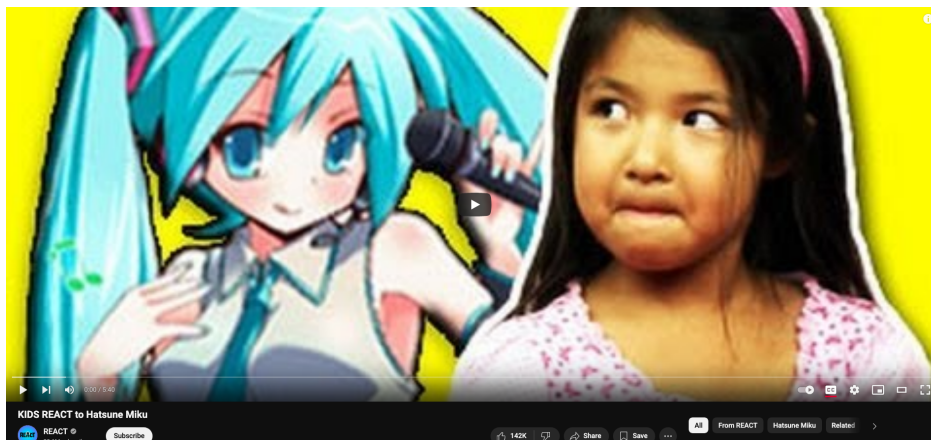


Figure D.8: KIDS REACT to Hatsune Miku [P08's Shared Video]

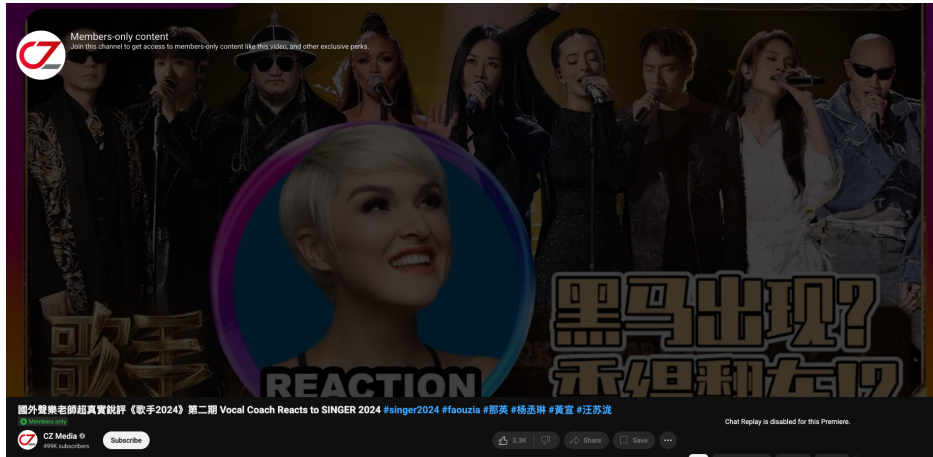


Figure D.9: Vocal Coach Reacts to SINGER 2024 [P09's Shared Video]



Figure D.10: Gen-Z Music Producer FLOORED Listening to Bohemian Rhapsody for the first time - Blind Reaction [P10's Shared Video]

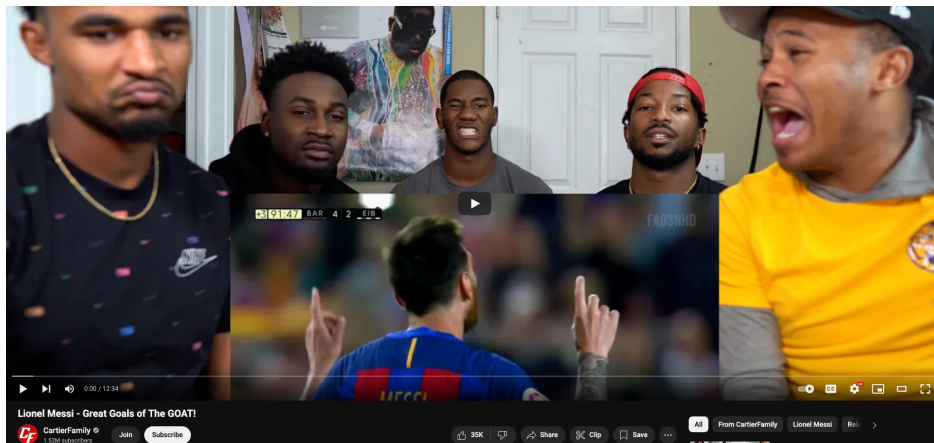


Figure D.11: Lionel Messi - Great Goals of The GOAT! [P11's Shared Video]



Figure D.12: Eminem - Houdini Official Music Video First Time Reaction [P12's Shared Video]



Figure D.13: Boogie2988 Documentary is BAD.. [P13's Shared Video]



Figure D.14: aespa Reaction MV 'Supernova' [P14's Shared Video]



Figure D.15: the funniest tik toks of 2021 [P15's Shared Video]



Figure D.16: KIDS REACT TO KEVJUMBA [P16's Shared Video 1]

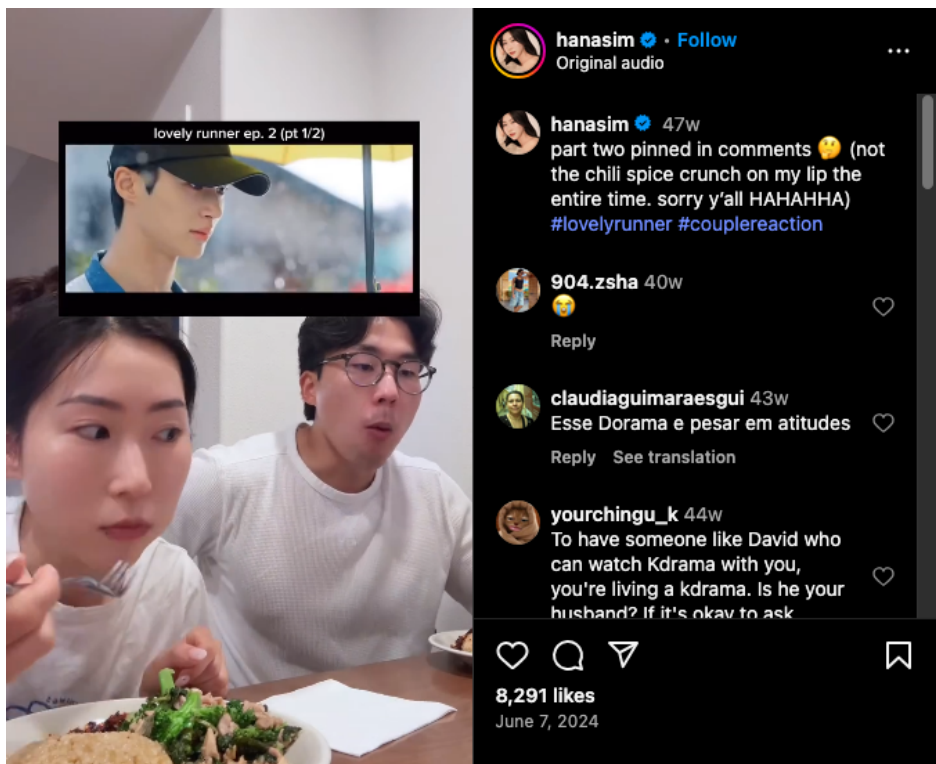


Figure D.17: hanasim lovely runner ep.2 reaction [P16's Shared Video 2]