

# Transmedia Migration of *Squid Game*, from Netflix to Bilibili, by Chinese Fan Communities

## A Digital Ethnographic Study

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### Abstract

Although fan cultures highlighting active audience engagement is prevalent in East Asia, the process and impact of such engagement have not been thoroughly explored in the literature. This study adopted a digital ethnographic approach to examine the fan-driven migration of the Korean television series *Squid Game* from Netflix to the Chinese online space, focusing on its spread on Bilibili. Despite the lack of access to Netflix, and thereby to the televised *Squid Game* series, under the country's censorship policies, Chinese fans reutilized and repurposed elements from the series obtained from various social media and other platforms and released a significant number of fan-made videos on Bilibili. In doing so, they created new meanings and connections and facilitate the international cross-cultural spread of audiovisual artifacts. This study includes time as a factor to study audience engagement and uses the metaphor of ripples in a pool to describe the changing focus of altered audience engagement over time. Social media platforms are described as ecosystem life cycles that decompose and reuse uploaded audiovisual materials.

**Keywords:** Audience engagement; Chinese fandom culture; participatory culture; *Squid Game*; Netflix; Bilibili

## Introduction

The global phenomenon of *Squid Game* has captivated audiences worldwide, but its impact in China is particularly intriguing. Despite censorship restrictions, Chinese fans have actively engaged with the show, creating an active community on Bilibili, a leading streaming platform based in China. This essay explores how these fans have remediated and recreated *Squid Game* on this platform, showcasing a unique example of transmedia migration. This is to highlight how fan productivities of vidding have expanded *Squid Game*'s influence into the Chinese media context and how fan vidders may perfect their vidding praxis, based on this example illustrating the media phenomena, to adapt to the evolving participatory culture.<sup>1</sup>

## Background

Prior to the study description, it is necessary to introduce the Korean television series *Squid Game* and its connection to China, especially to its Chinese fan base. Released on the video streaming platform Netflix in September 2021, *Squid Game* is an intense survival drama written and directed by Hwang Dong-hyuk, a Korean director known for works that reflect social and psychological issues. The title of the series is derived from a popular Korean children's game named 오징어 (ojingŏ, "Squid"). The plot of the television series revolves around a contest wherein 456 players, all of whom are in deep financial debt, are invited to play a series of children's games for a chance to win a massive cash prize. However, these familiar games have deadly consequences for the losers, and players must push their psychological and physical limits to survive and win.

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1. Henry Jenkins, "Afterword: The Future of Fandom," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, ed. Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington (New York University Press, 2007), 361–62.

Beyond its gripping plot and technical excellence, *Squid Game* resonates with audiences due to its exploration of universal themes like social inequality, insufficient support for the elderly, and the marginalized status of minorities. The series demonstrates the stark disparities between the wealthy elite and the struggling working class, using the deadly games as a metaphor for the harsh realities faced by those trapped in cycles of poverty. China, with no exception, is facing those social problems. These themes, in addition to the show's direction and acting, mirror the Chinese cultural and societal contexts and caused a wide cultural phenomenon, influencing various aspects of popular culture and influencing fashion, memes, and social media trends, despite its unavailability on official platforms.

Although *Squid Game* is not officially available in mainland China due to the lack of Netflix service and the strict governmental censorship on violence and social critique,<sup>2</sup> the series reached a vast audience in China. It sparked a vibrant “platformed sociality.”<sup>3</sup> In the platformed sociality, Internet users “nurture connections, build communities, and advance democracy.”<sup>4</sup> Consequently, *Squid Game* content spread through informal networks and fan communities, fueled by the very mechanisms of transmedia migration that this study explores. These fan-made videos, often sharing pirated content, served as a crucial conduit for the show's spread, acting as hubs for information, links, and discussion. While acknowledging the ethical and legal complexities surrounding piracy, it is equally important to recognize how it can function as a form of cultural resistance in contexts where access

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2. Jun Liu and Jingyi Zhao, “More than Plain Text: Censorship Deletion in the Chinese Social Media,” *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 72, no. 1 (2021): 18–31, <https://doi.org/10.1002/asi.24390>; David Bandurski, “Can the Internet and Social Media Change the Party?,” in *Routledge Handbook of the Chinese Communist Party*, ed. Willy Wo-Lap Lam (Routledge, 2018), 372–90.

3. Yiyi Yin and Zhuoxiao Xie, “Playing Platformized Language Games: Social Media Logic and the Mutation of Participatory Cultures in Chinese Online Fandom,” *New Media & Society* 26, no. 2 (2024): 619–41, <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211059489>.

4. José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 20.

to official content is restricted.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, piracy can often fuel the demand for more localized content production, further contributing to the transmedia migration process.

### *Studies in Fan-Based Engagement*

To clarify the intricate phenomenon of audience engagement, it is important to first recognize how terms like *fans*, *audiences*, and *consumers* are used. While these terms often overlap and lack a consensus on their definitions, they carry distinct connotations with the context of this study.

The term *consumers* encompasses anyone who engage with media, regardless of their level of engagement or investment. This broadly includes those who watch, listen to, or read media content. *Audiences*, on the other hand, represents a more engaged group of consumers who actively pay attention to and interpret media. However, *fans*, as elaborated in the following paragraphs, go beyond passive consumption. They demonstrate a deep passion and commitment to a specific media product or creator, often feeling a sense of ownership. This passion manifests in various ways, such as creating fan-made content, attending events, and actively participating in online communities.

The rise of the Internet and social media has revolutionized fan engagement, providing fans with new ways to engage with media content. This shift has been particularly impactful in East Asia, where fan cultures are known for their active participation and creative expression. Jenkins asserts that within a fandom, fans transform the reception process of the media content into opportunities for social interaction, making the watching experience just the starting point of their consumption. Fans also view audiovisual programs repeatedly, objectively, and critically to scrutinize meaningful details, resolve

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5. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York University Press, 2013), 15.

narrative gaps, and explore potential storylines.<sup>6</sup> By “textual poaching,”<sup>7</sup> a term introduced by Michel de Certeau,<sup>8</sup> active fans, resembling nomads, are constantly “ripp[ing] (segments) from the remains of the text”<sup>9</sup> to tussle with the original author over control of the meaning of literary works they find relatable or pleasurable, challenging the traditional producer-audience binary<sup>10</sup> and evolving from passive consumers to “produsager.”<sup>11</sup>

Jenkins indicates that fan creations are shaped by “the social norms, aesthetic conventions, interpretive protocols, technological resources, and technical competence”<sup>12</sup> of their fandoms. By “poaching,” fans are not merely picking up what is available but following broader guidelines in their own culture that are built upon raw media materials,<sup>13</sup> which can render mass culture popular.<sup>14</sup>

Henry Jenkins’s concept of “textual poaching” is crucial for understanding how Chinese fans engage with *Squid Game* on Bilibili. Fans are not passive consumers but active participants who “poach” elements from the original text to create their own meanings and interpretations. In this context, fan vidding embodies textual poaching through remediation, recreation, and expansion of narrative and challenging the conventional producer-audience binary through their engagement. This study draws upon the concept of textual poaching to understanding how Chinese fans engage with *Squid Game* on Bilibili. This framework, combined with

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6. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (Routledge, 1992), 75.

7. Jenkins, 23–28.

8. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steve Rendall (University of California Press, 1984).

9. Gray Jonathan and Lotz Amanda, *Television Studies*, 2nd ed. (Wiley, 2019), 55.

10. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 36–37.

11. Axel Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Produsage* (Peter Lang, 2008), 9–36.

12. Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 50.

13. Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, in *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader*, ed. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (University of Iowa Press, 2014), 33, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/hkuhk/detail.action?docID=1629507&ppq-origsite=primo>.

14. Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York University Press, 2006), 40, 49–54.

Elizabeth Evans's model of audience engagement, provides a lens for analyzing the dynamic and participatory nature of fan vidding in the context of transmedia migration.

To clarify the intricate phenomenon of audience engagement, Evans argued that industry practitioners recognize the role of medium specificity in promoting audience engagement and apply different strategies when operating on different media forms. However, audiences regard engagement as a more unified experience while acknowledging medium specificity.<sup>15</sup> Based on such observations, Evans presents an engagement model that describes how audiences behave when they are engaged. These behaviors can be receptive and interactive, which are further categorized as textual (when audiences make direct contact with the core content of media products, such as watching a television drama) or peritextual (when audiences engage with content that surrounds the core text, such as producing fan fiction or discussing with friends). Hence, the types of engagement include receptive-textual, receptive-peritextual, interactive-textual, and interactive-peritextual.<sup>16</sup>

Although her model provides criteria for researchers and practitioners to reexamine audience engagement, this model needs further refinement to account for the specificities of fan vidding. Fan-made videos on Bilibili fall under the interactive-peritextual category, but they can be further categorized based on their relevance to the core text.

In addressing this problem, given the poaching culture discussed earlier, it can be argued that interactive-peritextual fan-made videos can be further categorized as videos directly about the core text—the plot and characters of *Squid Game*—and videos surrounding and accommodating elements retrieved from the core text. To illustrate, before a more detailed

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15. Elizabeth Evans, *Understanding Engagement in Transmedia Culture* (Routledge, 2020): 19–34.

16. Evans, *Understanding Engagement in Transmedia Culture*, 45–46.

introduction in the “Data Visualization and Discussion” section, topics including “plot breakdown,” “character cut scenes,” and “plot remixes” are considered directly relevant to the plot and characters of the series. Videos featuring interviews, offline decoration, and spin-offs are considered adjacent to the core text. For instance, although dialogues and scenes from the series are included in videos classified as “fan dubbing and sound effects,” they are in decontextualized segments that cannot contribute to the understanding of the plot or characters and are therefore categorized as “adjacent to the core text.” Examples of elements retrieved from the core text include the numbered green sportswear worn by players in the series, the masked guards, and the Dalgona (달고나, “honeycomb toffee”). Engaging with these elements, fans produced video games imitating the Red Light, Green Light game, designed player skins in the multiplayer video game *Among Us*, and made recordings of making and playing with Dalgona.



Figure 1: Left: The square guard from *Squid Game*. Right: The character skin designed by fans in *Among Us*.

Source: Left: “Best Squid Game costume: Squid Game tracksuits and masks for Halloween 2023,” RadioTimes, accessed October 19, 2024, <https://www.radiotimes.com/tv/squid-game-costumes/>.

Right: “Among Us Squit Game Square Guard Skin,” Pinterest, accessed October 19, 2024, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/1033998395667704216/>.

However, while research on audience engagement and fans has thrived in the rest of the world, studies of the East Asian region are rare, particularly in the Chinese context, wherein fans are active. Huang Ting<sup>17</sup> conducted a case study on the female-dominated BuBu fandom surrounding the popular Chinese television drama *步步惊心* (*Treading on Thin Ice*) released in 2011 and drew the conclusion that Chinese fandoms operate on the exchange of amateur fan writing and the need for potential interest, self-directed informal learning, and friendship. Yin Yiyi<sup>18</sup> reported that Chinese fan creation within fandoms is motivated by “private pleasure and commercial success.” In Wang Dingkun’s<sup>19</sup> perspective, fan creation may stem from the anticipated impact that the engagement could have on reality and is particularly active when the initial media material is unavailable. From the literature, it is evident that Chinese scholars focus on fandoms’ motivation rather than the impact of their active creation on cultural dissemination and the evolution of fan engagement over time, which raises a number of questions. In particular: What media content is regarded as “raw material” by the poaching culture wherein cultural artifacts and literary works are interrelated and collaborative projects that yearn for constant crafting?<sup>20</sup> What is the life cycle of fan creation on social media platforms where active fan creation take place? How does fan vidding develop and evolve over time in the participatory culture?

In search of the answers to these questions, the paper begins with an overview of the Netflix television series to provide context. Then a systematic literature review suggests a reexamination of the model of audience

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17. Ting Huang, “BuBu Fandom and Authentic Online Spaces for Chinese Fangirls,” *Transformative Works and Cultures* 38 (September 2002), <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2022.2315>.

18. Yiyi Yin, “‘My Baby Should Feel No Wronged!’: Digital Fandoms and Emotional Capitalism in China,” *Global Media and China* 6, no. 4 (2021): 460–75, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364211041681>.

19. Dingkun Wang, “Chinese Translational Fandoms: Transgressing the Distributive Agency of Assemblages in Audiovisual Media,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 25, no. 6 (2022): 655–72, <https://doi.org/10.1177/13678779221102974>.

20. Claudia Georgi and Brigitte Johanna Glaser, *Convergence Culture Reconsidered* (Universitätsverlag Göttingen, 2015).



engagement proposed by Elizabeth Evans and the current scholarship on Chinese fandom studies. This is followed by a description of the methodology, detailing the criteria for selecting the field for digital ethnographic observation as well as the procedures for data filtering, categorization, and analysis. Subsequent sections visually present and systematically examine the study's findings, highlighting their significant scholarly and practical implications.

This article builds upon existing scholarship on fan culture, particularly the concepts of textual poaching and audience engagement models. These frameworks provide a lens for understanding the dynamic and participatory nature of fan vidding in the context of transmedia migration. In the following section, I further explain the reasons for the platform selection and the process of data selection and filtering applied in this study.

## Methodology

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data analysis to examine the phenomenon and impact of Chinese fans' transmedia migration of *Squid Game* from Netflix to Bilibili.

### *Clarifying Key Terms*

To ensure clarity, I first define key terms used throughout the study. *Migration* refers to the cultural phenomenon where Chinese fans of the Korean television series engage with digital materials they collected online, introducing the series from Netflix to a Chinese streaming platform where both Netflix and the series were unavailable. Chinese fans not only created original fan-made videos but also conducted *shi-pin ban-yun* ("video transference"), borrowing and uploading both authority-made and fan-made videos from other platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, and Weibo. This activity

led to *er-chuang* (“the generation of secondary content”) as showcased in this study. The term *fan vidding* is thus used to encompass all these activities, spanning from original fan creation to content recontextualization and reappropriation.

While *cross-media* storytelling involves telling a story across different channels,<sup>21</sup> *transmedia* goes beyond simple retelling. It involves a more complex, interconnected narrative experience that unfolds across multiple platforms, with each platform contributing unique elements and enriching the overall narrative.

Fan videos on Bilibili are not simply replicating *Squid Game* but expanding upon it, creating new narratives, interpretations, and connections. These fan viddings contribute to a larger transmedia narrative where fans actively participate in shaping the meaning and impact of the show. Therefore, this study uses *transmedia* to describe the dynamic and participatory nature of fan engagement in the fan-driven migration of *Squid Game* to Bilibili, as cross-media might not fully capture the complexity of this fan engagement.

### *Data Sampling and Platform Selection*

Acknowledging that all contributors to fan vidding on Bilibili are “users” of the platform, this study focuses on those who demonstrate a clear fandom for *Squid Game*. This distinction is crucial, as not all users who create content related to the show are necessarily “fans” in the sense of exhibiting a deep passion, commitment, and sense of ownership toward the show.

For example, some users might create videos about the series for purely commercial reasons, seeking to capitalize on the series’ popularity. Others might be driven by trends and create videos without necessarily having a

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21. Kevin Moloney, “Multimedia, Crossmedia, Transmedia . . . What’s in a Name?” *Transmedia Journalism*, April 21, 2014, <https://transmediajournalism.org/2014/04/21/multimedia-crossmedia-transmedia-whats-in-a-name/>.

genuine interest in the series itself. This study, however, focuses on identifying and analyzing the work of those users who demonstrate a clear passion for *Squid Game* through their content creation. This passion is evident in the depth of their engagement, the creativity they bring to their videos, and the level of detail and understanding they demonstrate in their interpretations of the show. Data inclusion was also determined by the direct relevance of a post's content to the 2021 series. For instance, a user posted a young boy watching a tank of fish and hashtagged #魷魚遊戲 (*you yu you xi; Squid Game*); this item was excluded from the dataset. These filters were applied to similar posts that sought to capitalize on the hashtag's popularity to boost the visibility of their content.

By focusing on these fans, the study aims to explore the specific ways in which their passion for the television series translates into active engagement and creative production on Bilibili, contributing to the show's transmedia spreading.

To understand this dynamic process, this study employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods. Quantitative research allowed me to use the wide range of videos under the topic *Squid Game* as examples with which to study fan engagement and the spread of a cultural artifact across various social media platforms and cultures while a digital ethnographic approach on Bilibili allowed for a deeper understanding of the cultural context behind fan creation. Specifically, as the largest streaming platform in mainland China, Bilibili has more than 272 million active monthly users, with professional user-generated content (PUGC) accounting for more than 94 percent of the platform's total views. Over 86 percent of audience users belong to Generation Z, comprising those born in 1985 to 2009 and raised in a unique socioenvironment that cultivates a sense of belonging to a community and a strong desire for self-expression via digital tools and technology. Therefore, fandom activities are frequent, making Bilibili an ideal social media platform for studying fan engagement, as users from the more developed regions in China may be more familiar with the topic, have more access, and may be willing to use digital material for self-expression.

Bilibili's participatory nature and active fan activities make it a valuable platform for studying fan culture and content transformation.<sup>22</sup> This study builds on existing research by examining Bilibili's role in international transmedia and transcultural media spreading.

Digital ethnographic observation and quantitative analysis were applied to identify patterns in the dataset. Selecting Bilibili.com as the field for digital ethnography observation involved registering as a platform user who views content on Bilibili regularly while calculating the percentage of videos in each topic group and analyzing their evolution over time to understand the spread and impact of *Squid Game* on Bilibili. Python was programmed to collect all fan-made videos with the hashtag #鱿鱼遊戲 on Bilibili posted within the time period from September 19, 2021—two days following the Netflix release of *Squid Game*, season 1—to November 3, 2021. The forty-five days were divided into three phases: early, middle, and late, all carefully distinguished from each other.

### *Data Categorization and Analysis*

After filtering and reviewing all the data collected on Bilibili, the 723 videos regarded as valid were categorized into twenty-one groups based on their content, as listed below:

- Plot breakdown
- Fan-made animation and games

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22. Fei Li & Mingyu Li, "A Study on the Changing Trends of Popular Videos on Bilibili," *Proceedings of the 2022 5th International Conference on Humanities Education and Social Sciences (ICHESS 2022)* (Atlantis Press, 2022), 842–53; Yuntian Mai, "Analysis of Bilibili's Transformation from the Perspective of Communication," *BCP Education & Psychology* 9 (2023): 72–80; Feifei Zhou, "Orality, Multimodality and Creativity in Digital Writing: Chinese Users' Experiences and Practices with Bullet Comments on Bilibili," *Social Semiotics* 34, no. 3 (2024): 368–94; David Randolph Craig, Jian Lin, and Stuart Cunningham, *Wanghong as Social Media Entertainment in China* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-65376-7>.

- Series on social media
- Behind the scenes and offline fan activities
- Fan reactions on the series
- Character cut scenes
- Plot remixes
- Makeup application
- Music compositions
- Culinary explorations
- Funny editing and fan-made special effects
- Linguistics
- Green screen material
- Pets
- Interior design
- 3D modeling
- Action figures and toys
- Society and economy
- Interactive videos
- Fan dubbing and sound effects
- Psychology

Videos with similar topics were grouped to avoid redundancy in the categorization. For instance, content such as plot commenting and criticizing, explaining hidden Easter eggs, and character analysis were categorized as “Plot breakdown.” Detailed information on the videos, such as titles, thematic content, duration, hashtags, links, published date, and the number of views, comments, and likes, were noted. Based on these details and excluding potential noise in the data, table 1 was created.

The quantitative analysis reveals that the top three fan-vidding topics were “Fan-made animation, games, and imitation,” “Behind-the-scenes and offline fan activities,” and “Funny editing and fan-made special effects,” together occupying 58.5 percent of the total distribution. To enhance understanding and enable a detailed examination of the evolving audience

Table 1. The number of videos on each topic about *Squid Game* on Bilibili.

No.	Topic Group	Number of Videos (listed in descending order)
1	Fan-made animation, games, and imitation	239
2	Behind-the-scenes and offline fan activities	93
3	Funny editing and fan-made special effects	91
4	Character cut scenes	67
5	Plot breakdown	55
6	Plot remixes	40
7	Culinary explorations	23
8	Music compositions	21
9	Series on social media	20
10	Makeup application	19
11	Fan reactions on the series	15
12	Linguistics	12
13	Action figures and toys	10
14	Society and economy	7
15	Fan dubbing and sound effects	3
16	Pets	2
17	Interactive videos	2
18	Interior design	1
19	Psychology	1
20	3D modeling	1
21	Green screen material	1

engagement on UGC media platforms, as demonstrated through the rich practice of fan vidding where topics change over time, and to engage in an in-depth discussion on its implications, the dataset is presented visually in the subsequent section.

## Data Visualization and Discussion

The study categorized the 723 fan-made videos collected from Bilibili into twenty-one topic groups based on their content. To better understand the evolution of fan engagement over time, the data was divided into three fifteen-day phases: early (September 19, 2021–October 3, 2021),

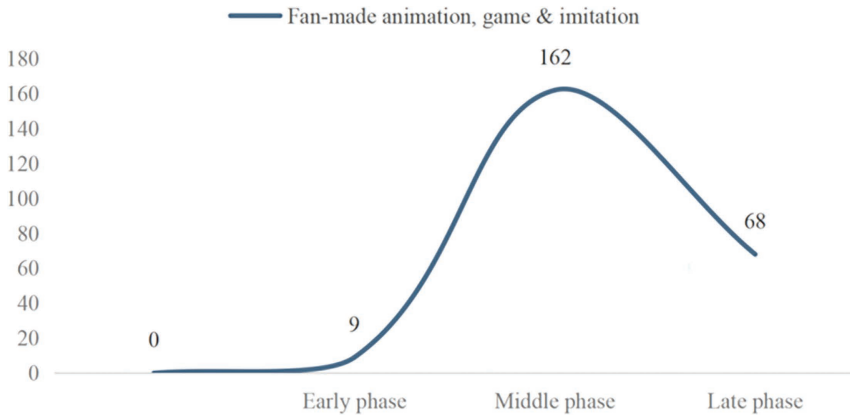


Figure 2: Number of “Fan-made animation, games, and imitation” videos released across the three phases.

Source: Author’s own analysis.

middle (October 4, 2021–October 18, 2021), and late (October 19, 2021–November 3, 2021).

The numbers and percentages of the twenty-one topics were calculated for each phase. Consider the topic “Fan-made animation, games, and imitation.” Among the 239 videos in this group, nine were published during the early phase (3.8 percent), 162 during the middle phase (67.8 percent), and sixty-eight during the late phase (28.4 percent). Figure 2 illustrates these observations.

From this perspective, a critical question arose: How does the time factor affect audience engagement?

Current scholarship on audience engagement often overlooks the crucial role of temporal factors. While scholars like Plantinga<sup>23</sup> and Hills<sup>24</sup> acknowledge engagement as an emotional and multifaceted experience, they tend to simplify and concretize it, neglecting the dynamic and evolving nature of

23. Carl Plantinga, *Screen Stories: Emotion and the Ethics of Engagement* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

24. Annette Hills, *Media Experiences: Engaging with Drama and Reality Television* (Routledge, 2019).

audience interaction with media over time. Scholars like Beddow,<sup>25</sup> Askwith,<sup>26</sup> and Napoli<sup>27</sup> have attempted to incorporate temporal factors by focusing on audience behaviors, attitudes, and desires, but their models still fall short in fully capturing the complexities of engagement in the context of participatory culture. Therefore, the importance of studying the connection of audience engagement with media material over time is highlighted in this article.

The twenty-one topic groups were first further classified as shown in table 2, depending on their relevance to the core text.

Table 2. The subcategories of interactive-peritextual fan-made videos.

Category	Topic Group
Videos directly about the core text	Plot breakdown Character cut scenes Plot remixes
Videos adjacent to the core text	Fan dubbing and sound effects Fan reactions on the series Behind-the-scenes and offline fan activities Series on social media
Videos with elements from the core text	Funny editing and fan-made special effects Music compositions Culinary explorations Society and economy Green screen material Pets Interior design 3D modeling Action figures and toys Linguistics Interactive videos Psychology Fan-made animation, games, and imitation Makeup application

25. Emma Beddows, "Consuming Transmedia: How Audiences Engage with Narrative Across Multiple Story Modes" (PhD diss., Swinburne University of Technology, 2012), quoted in Elizabeth Evans, *Understanding Engagement in Transmedia Culture* (Routledge, 2020), 73.

26. Ivan D. Askwith, "Television 2.0 Reconceptualized: TV as an Engagement Media" (Master's thesis, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2007), 49, [http://www.hrenatoh.net/cursos/textos/txt\\_ivan\\_askwith2007.pdf](http://www.hrenatoh.net/cursos/textos/txt_ivan_askwith2007.pdf).

27. Philip M. Napoli, *Audience Evolution: New Technologies and the Transformation of Media Audiences* (Columbia University Press, 2010), 90–91.



The subtopics were then correlated with their respective release phases. The curve chart depicting the association between time and the average number of videos (calculated as the total number of videos in a category divided by the number of topic groups in that category) released for each subcategory is shown in figure 3.

The division into three phases helps reveal the changing focus of fan engagement with *Squid Game* on Bilibili. In the early phase, fans were primarily interested in creating content that was directly relevant to the core text of the TV series, such as introducing the protagonists, hypothesizing plot development and survivors in the coming episodes, and explaining the rules of each Korean children's game included in the series. This suggests that in the initial period after the show's release, fans were focused on understanding and engaging with the narrative and characters of the series.

In the middle phase, fan engagement expanded to include more creative and diverse content, such as visiting offline promotional exhibitions of *Squid Game*, recording how the series was reported and perceived on various international social media platforms, and sharing interviews with the cast. This indicates that fans became more familiar with the core text, they began to explore ways of reinterpreting and expanding upon the original material, moving beyond simply retelling the story.

Finally, in the late phase, fan engagement shifted further toward more peripheral or "adjacent" content. Fans produced fan-made animations and video games reproducing settings from the series and humorous edited videos connecting the series with Chinese cultural icons. These included imagining Monkey King and different nonfictional Chinese celebrities participating in the Red Light, Green Light game, and asking participants to undertake the impossible task of carving a Chinese ancient painting, *Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival*, from a Dalgona in the second game.

This evolution suggests that as time passed, fans began to engage with the show in more indirect ways, finding novel approaches to incorporate

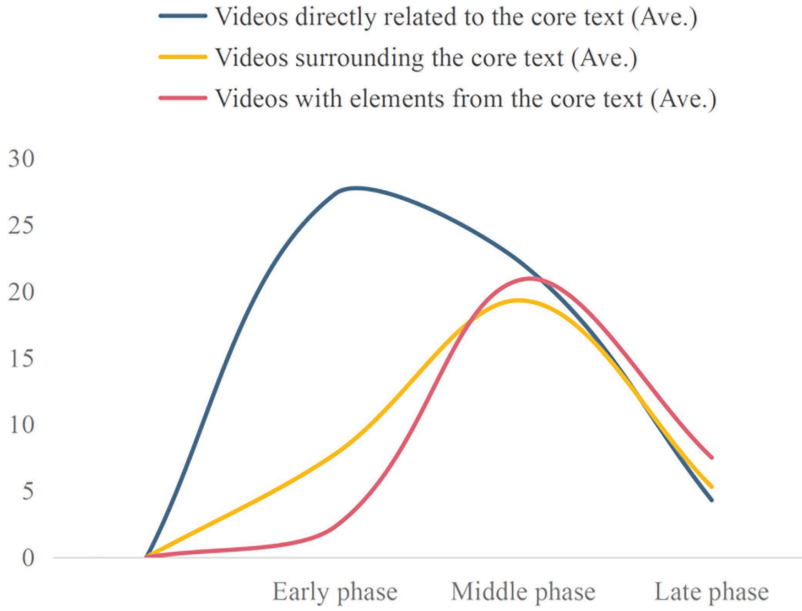


Figure 3: Average number of the three subcategories of videos released in the three phases.

Source: Author's own analysis.



Figure 4: Fan photo-edited Riverside Scene at Qingming Festival on a Dalgona.

Source: "Home," Xiaohongshu, accessed October 19, 2024, <http://xhslink.com/802lcT>.

elements from the series into their own creative pursuits and everyday lives. This scenario can be imagined as throwing a stone into a pond: ripples appear near the center, gradually expand, and then fade.

This temporal analysis using the three-phase approach helps illustrate the changing focus of audience engagement over time, as described by the metaphor. The initial interest in the core text gradually expands to encompass more diverse and creative content, reflecting the dynamic and participatory nature of fan engagement in the digital age. However, it is important to point out that while this study focuses on the temporal factor that affects audience engagement in a ripple model, other factors could also collaboratively affect the observed mechanism of ripples. For example, fan-made videos on the Netflix television series *3 Body Problem* released on March 21, 2024, were removed from Bilibili in April, approximately a month after fans' active creation started, without any reasons announced. This led to an abrupt halt in the digital spreading of the series on the platform. A similar phenomenon was observed when China issued the *xian han ling* ("Limit on Korean content") policy in 2016, resulting in decreased visibility of K-pop content on Bilibili. Thus, alternative factors influencing how Chinese fans interact with and recreate televised content could be dependent on the platform's policies and algorithms, as well as broader cultural and sociopolitical influences at the national level.

These ripples, on the other hand, representing the expanding influence of *Squid Game*, spread outward from its initial source on Netflix, reaching new platforms and audiences. The fan-made videos, memes, and discussions on Bilibili, for example, contributed significantly to the show's popularity in China, echoing outward and influencing the creation of similar content in other regions around the globe. This phenomenon, akin to cultural diffusion, highlights the powerful impact of transmedia migration in shaping cultural landscapes across borders.

### *Further Discussion on Time and Engagement*

This section focuses on analyzing the research findings presented in the previous section to elucidate the relationship between time and audience engagement and provides guidelines for media and communication researchers and practitioners based on the observation.

In the previously mentioned ripple model, audience engagement is observed from a horizontal rather than vertical perspective such that temporal factors are considered a crucial variable and the potential connections among engagement behaviors are not neglected.

The initial appearance of videos directly relevant to the television series indicates the cultivation of Chinese audiences' attention and interest, despite having limited access because of governmental censorship and the unavailability of Netflix. Through plot breakdowns and remixes of character cut scenes, the nine sixty-minute-long episodes on Netflix were migrated to Bilibili by active Chinese fans as short videos of approximately ten minutes each in an alternative media format, introducing the series to a national audience base that was otherwise unapproachable.

The first peak-shaped wave in figure 3 indicates the noticeable shift in audience attention over a relatively short period (fifteen days). This could partly be due to Netflix's operational mechanisms. In 2013, Netflix introduced a new way of viewing television series called "binge-watching," wherein audiences can watch as many episodes as they wish at a time since entire seasons of television series are made available at once.<sup>28</sup> Audiences tend to binge-watch to fulfill their needs for social connection and being recognized in a fandom,<sup>29</sup> especially when the television series is recommended

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28. Jolanta A. Starosta and Bernadetta Lzydorzcyk, "Understanding the Phenomenon of Binge-Watching—A Systematic Review," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 17, no. 12 (2020): 4469, <https://doi.org/10.3390%2Fijerph17124469>.

29. Swati Panda and Satyendra C. Pandey, "Binge-Watching and College Students: Motivations and Outcomes," *Young Consumers* 18, no. 4 (2017): 425–38, <https://doi.org/10.1108/YC-07-2017-00707>.

by others.<sup>30</sup> The migrated series on Bilibili inherit and enhance the binge-watching experience of Netflix by integrating and condensing information in a short video format and simultaneously directing audiences to access and binge-watch the full-length series in pirated channels. However, while catering to audiences' diverse viewing habits and retaining paid subscribers, binge-watching scarcely allows audiences time for fan discussion and participation between episodes, likely resulting in the steep increase and sudden decrease in the amount of videos directly relevant to *Squid Game* produced in the early phase.

Aiming for long-term audience engagement, some producers design “drillable” media content with sophisticated storylines for audiences to invest “more of their time and energies” to dig into the narrative.<sup>31</sup> An example is the US television show *Lost* (2004–2010), originally broadcasted weekly. The series follows the survivors of oceanic flight 815 that crashes on a mysterious tropical island in the South Pacific. The survivors come from various backgrounds, and as they strive to adapt to their new environment, encounter strange occurrences, supernatural elements, and a series of interconnected mysteries. The island itself holds secrets, including a unique electromagnetic field and ancient ruins. With a complicated plot that provides fans with fertile soil to dig into between episodes, an online fan forum “Lostpedia” was formed, which is still active at the time of writing this article, for fans to engage with the series, discuss possible plot progress through well-designed details, and share their hypothesis on character developments. Therefore, comparing *Lost* with *Squid Game*, wherein Chinese platform audiences achieved a basic understanding of the series by viewing information-dense short videos and showed waning enthusiasm for the original television series two weeks after its release, suggests that the complexity in storyline is

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30. Hongjin Shim and Ki Joon Kim, “An Exploration of the Motivations for Binge-Watching and the Role of Individual Differences,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 82, (2018): 94–100, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.12.032>.

31. Jason Mittell, “Forensic Fandom and the Drillable Text,” *Spreadable Media: Web Exclusive Essay* (2021), <http://spreadablemedia.org/essays/mittell/index.html#.YTNodi21E1k>.

not the only catalyst for developing a drillable product—the influence of a media product, television series in particular, can be enhanced when audiences are given sufficient time to engage and drill.

Unlike *Lost*, *Squid Game* was released in a more participatory and convergent era wherein grassroots content creators are more traffic sensitive. Utilizing the reputation of this emerging intellectual property (IP), content creators shifted their attention from introducing the television series to reappropriating its elements to form various video genres in the middle and last phases of the ethnographic observation. Notably, in addition to the original television series, the early videos produced and uploaded to the platform became raw materials for content creators to recontextualize, repurpose, and reconfigure in the latter phases. This finding regarding participatory and convergence culture challenges the identities of audience and producer, as media products offered by grassroots content creators are subject to cultural reappropriation and poaching as well and provides fresh insight into the examination of the boundary defining media production and the consumer in the traditional sense. A content creator uploading a video with elements from *Squid Game* need not have viewed the television series. This phenomenon could be increasingly significant in the late phase, as videos produced in both the early and middle phases could serve as the origin and inspiration of the work. Consequently, the information contained in the original television series becomes increasingly fragmented into symbolic references during the process, and the variety of video topics gradually increase and move away from the series while constantly expanding its influence.

Therefore, coupled with the ripple image mentioned earlier, the platform could be described as an ecosystem that systematically decomposes organisms tossed inside and extracts and reuses nutrition from media materials for new creation.

Content creators collect and recontextualize the cultural symbols of *Squid Game* scattered across social media platforms and translate them based on personal perception and understanding of cultures, providing the show with extended lifespan and meanings. The boundaries between active

audiences and producers begin to blur. Audiences from this perspective are no longer passive consumer or “pure receiver[s]”<sup>32</sup> but important participants for the building and spreading of the IP, enriching cultural diversity on social media platforms and enlivening the process of media production and consumption.

The successful migration of *Squid Game* from Netflix to Bilibili provides a novel transmedia perspective for scholars of audience engagement. Many scholars see fans’ engagement on social media platforms as context specific.<sup>33</sup> For example, focusing on social media platforms and audience engagement, Shahbaznezhad et al. examined the connection between media specificity and audience engagement behavior.<sup>34</sup> By analyzing extensive cross-platform posts and comments generated across eight months, Aldous et al. proposed a predictive framework for audience engagement behavior, utilizing linguistic features and platform-specific factors.<sup>35</sup> This academic focus is likely affected by industry practitioners who recognize the role of medium specificity in promoting audience engagement and applying different strategies when operating on different media forms.<sup>36</sup> However, despite acknowledging medium specificity, audiences tend to see engagement as a unified coordinated experience across platforms in a media-converging era.<sup>37</sup>

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32. de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 31

33. Roderick J. Brodie, Ana Ilic, Biljana Juric, and Linda Hollebeck, “Consumer Engagement in a Virtual Brand Community: An Exploratory Analysis,” *Journal of Business Research* 66, no. 1 (2013): 105–14, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2011.07.029>.

34. Hamidreza Shahbaznezhad, Rebecca Dolan, and Mona Rashidirad, “The Role of Social Media Content Format and Platform in Users’ Engagement Behavior,” *Journal of Interactive Marketing* 53, no. 1 (2021): 47–65, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.intmar.2020.05.001>.

35. Kholoud Khalil Aldous, Jisun An, and Bernard J. Janse, “Predicting Audience Engagement Across Social Media Platforms in the News Domain,” in *Social Informatics*, ed. Ingmar Weber, Kareem M. Darwish, Claudia Wagner, Emilio Zagheni, Laura Nelson, Samin Aref, and Fabian Flöck (Springer, 2019): 173–87, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34971-4\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-34971-4_12).

36. Evans, *Understanding Engagement*, 25

37. Henry Jenkins, “Adaptation, Extension, Transmedia,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (Spring 2017), [https://lfq.salisbury.edu/\\_issues/first/adaptation\\_extension\\_transmedia.html](https://lfq.salisbury.edu/_issues/first/adaptation_extension_transmedia.html).

Therefore, although media practitioners seek and promote specific strategies to enhance audience engagement on different social media platforms, audiences' cross-media engagement and its impact remain neglected. For instance, the *Squid Game* series originally exclusively aired on Netflix was shared for engagement on various other media platforms, including Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, as well as Bilibili, where Chinese audiences forwarded videos uploaded to YouTube to join the discussion. Focusing on medium specificity and regarding different media platforms as separate parts could potentially lead to overlooking the role that active audiences play on social media platforms in convergence culture. They are encouraged to collect and reassemble dispersed media pieces to create new meanings and connections that are reinforced and strengthened through social interactions. During this process, content creators negotiate cultural differences to make their products more acceptable to different communities and moderate content that might be regarded as controversial for a coherence effect.<sup>38</sup> Like grassroots content creators, professional media producers borrow, reappropriate, and engage with content from diverse sources.<sup>39</sup> Netflix announced a video game in December 2023 as an extension of the *Squid Game* universe. Netflix's gaming division is expected to drill into the initial television series through the ten-episode spin-off reality show released in 2023 and social and economic news for inspiration, turning game developers into consumers of IP. This cross-media engagement not only tears down the structural hierarchy between audiences and producers further but also encourages the examination of audience engagement on social media platforms from a more macro, cross-media perspective. As a starting point, this study contributes by examining the relatively general phenomenon of audience engagement on a single platform over forty-five days. Future research could complement

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38. Bruns, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life*, 137–70.

39. Chandler Harriss, "The Producer as Fan: Forensic Fandom and *The Good Wife*," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 41, no. 4 (2017): 368–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859917712233>.



this by comparing audience engagement with various media products on multiple social media platforms globally and for a longer duration.

In light of the earlier discussion regarding the dynamics and intricacies of audience engagement on social media platforms and their role in facilitating the dissemination of media products, three practical transmedia guidelines can be proposed for practitioners in the fields of media and communication. These guidelines aim to enhance the impact of media artifacts. First, media producers are encouraged to become aware of the shifting attention in audience engagement over time and adjust their strategies. Consider the spread of *Squid Game* as an example. Aiming to extend the series lifespan, Netflix released *The Making of Squid Game* series in the second quarter of 2022. However, based on the current study, it is highly likely that audience attention had shifted from the series itself to its cultural representations by then. Although the series was not shared on Bilibili, it was uploaded by a content creator on YouTube, Netflix: Behind the Streams, who has more than two million subscribers. The first episode garnered approximately five hundred thousand views; however, the number of views for the sixth and last episode of the series released a month later dropped to seventy-six thousand, highlighting the significant value for producers in tailoring transmedia marketing strategies for audience engagement that changes over time.

Second, producers may gain from the finding of this study that social media, particularly streaming platforms, function similar to ecosystems that constantly break down materials for reappropriation and repurpose to extend their works' on-shelf lifespan. The recognition of transmedia strategy that does not aim to collect and display systematically distributed narrative elements that are too much for a single medium,<sup>40</sup> or boost a fictional world-building process, is crucial at this stage.<sup>41</sup> For example, instead of producing an explanatory documentary or behind-the-scenes video on the

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40. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York University Press, 2006), 95.

41. Jenkins, 113–22.

well-known 1988 film franchise *Die Hard*, the producer of the film series regarded the characters and plot as cultural representations of the audiovisual culture that had been digested by the digital ecosystem and worked with Activision to turn the protagonist of the film series, John McClane, into a playable character in the online multiplayer mode of the first-person shooter video game *Call of Duty*, for which McClane's classic postures and voice tracks were retrieved from the original film. Besides this successful collaborative campaign in terms of financial and promotional outcomes, Activision released other franchise crossovers with elements from popular audiovisual culture including *Dune*, *Rambo*, and *The Boys*. In addition to utilizing IPs as cultural elements in the digital realm and producing official recontextualized and repurposed works with new meanings, media producers are encouraged to surrender, to some extent, their control over the narration of stories and handle amateur and grassroots productions with greater tolerance. These works, including fan fiction, fan-made music, videos, games, fan art, and memes, not only represent how much the product is favored by fans but also demonstrate how mass fan audiences aspire to engage with the source material on traffic-oriented social media platforms. Tolerating, even encouraging, fan production, as seen in the migration of *Squid Game* from Netflix to Bilibili, assists in the proliferation of a media product and enables it to reach a larger audience.

Third, although the process and outcome of audiences' active engagement are seemingly beyond media producers' control, the latter can promote and stimulate audience engagement with exclusive resources, especially at the beginning of ecosystemic digestion. There is a noticeable trend on Chinese social media platforms such as Douyin, Kuaishou, REDnote, and Bilibili where professional media producers take the initiative to produce and release short videos, categorized as "videos adjacent to the core text" in this study, taking full advantage of their firsthand audiovisual resources. Before release, meticulously prepared video clips featuring the making of a television series or film franchise are treated as raw materials for preheat videos alongside teaser trailers. A significant number of these videos are

presented in a casual and informal manner, with humorous and light visual effects, captions, and background music. Consequently, the digestion of the media artifact begins before its formal release, giving the marketing a head start and attracting more audience attention and digital traffic for the early phase of audience engagement. This transmedia marketing practice is rarely observed in Western media distributors and streaming platforms. Contrary to the Netflix producers' consumption of *Squid Game* for the production of its spin-offs, Chinese producers cross the fragile border separating them from the audience and assume the identity of content creators, or decomposers, on social media platforms while scrutinizing, selecting, and editing short videos to be uploaded.

Considering the social media platform as a decomposing ecosystem leads to the inference that audiences' enthusiasm for engagement can also be boosted by prolonging the duration of the early phase engagement. When audience engagement is portrayed as waves that fluctuate over time, and later waves obtain elements and nutrition from the previous ones, a prolonged early phase indicates more material for later digital digestion. The early phase can be extended by circulating videos categorized as iconic during the middle phase, designing complicated in-depth narratives and characters that are challenging to fully digest in a short period of time, and adjusting the duration between each episode's release, providing audiences more time to discuss, hypothesize, and engage with the series, thereby inspiring more discussions and topics for short videos and postponing audiences' attention shifting.

## Conclusion

This study explored audience engagement within the context of Chinese fans and audiovisual culture. Despite Netflix's unavailability in mainland China, active Chinese Internet users successfully migrated the Korean television series *Squid Game* from Netflix to Bilibili, a prominent video streaming platform

based in China. Chinese fans engaged in recontextualization, repurposing, and reconfiguration of the initial television series on the Bilibili platform through the production and uploading of short fan-made videos categorized into three groups based on their topics—videos directly relevant to the series, adjacent to the series, and incorporating elements from the series.

By applying the theoretical frameworks of “textual poaching” and audience engagement models, this study provides a valuable understanding of fan vidding as a form of active engagement with media content. Fan vidding goes beyond simply consuming and interpreting the given text; it involves creating, remixing, and expanding upon the original source, demonstrating the power of fans in shaping the meaning and impact of cultural artifacts.

The Chinese fan-made videos exhibited a ripple-like engagement pattern. Videos directly related to the series dominated the first fifteen days of this digital ethnographic observation, with the numbers gradually decreasing as the observation progressed. Subsequently, videos adjacent to the series and with elements from the series replaced the initial wave of fan-made videos in the remaining thirty days of observation. By the end of this period, the average number of videos with elements from *Squid Game* slightly exceeded those adjacent to the series. This trend signifies that *Squid Game* underwent a gradual assimilation into Bilibili, resembling a digestive digital ecosystem that decomposes and reutilizes cultural elements for new creations within the broader audiovisual culture.

This case study indicates that the migration of *Squid Game* from Netflix to Bilibili is afforded not by official cooperation and promotion but by active Chinese fans of the television series assimilating available resources online and negotiating and engaging with the series to the extent possible within the authoritative censorship and governing in the country. With the second season of the series slated for release in 2024, another surge of fan engagement is expected on Chinese social media platforms, which would be a significant landmark in East Asian audiovisual culture.

The findings of this study hold certain implications for media and culture scholarship. Notably, the expansion of fan creation caused by enthusiastic audience engagement on streaming platforms is revolutionizing the traditional identities of media producers and consumers globally. However, an academic perspective to examine audience engagement is yet to be fully established. By proposing time as a crucial factor in audience engagement, complementing Elizabeth Evan's current model that focuses on the types of engaging behavior, this study suggests that audience engagement is not a static process to be rigidly categorized. Therefore, media producers can adopt various marketing strategies during the different audience engagement phases to facilitate the spread of products. Meanwhile, active audiences in participatory and convergence cultures similarly serve as decomposers in an ecosystem, assisting the viral circulation of products as per their preference, reaching destinations that are likely inaccessible to official channels.

How, then, can the transmedia migration observed in this article inform us about the intricate relationship between media texts, producers, audiences, and platforms, particularly those situated in a cross-border, cross-cultural environment? Future research could explore how media products, particularly those originating from streaming platforms, migrate across platforms and media forms within a broader scope. While this study focuses on the performance of Chinese digital fandom and audiovisual culture on Bilibili, researchers can examine how a product is engaged across multiple channels in a convergence culture. Essentially, they can identify media platforms other than Bilibili that feature user-generated content and work collaboratively as a massive digital ecosystem that enables media products to be decomposed and reutilized. It is equally important to trace how media-streaming platforms respond to the phenomenon wherein viewers integrate rich media texts available online and, especially in cases of limited access, transform and migrate texts from other resources and forms for grassroots fan creation and expression. Finally, it is crucial to understand the complex effects of

transmedia audience engagement on media products within a transcultural context. As members of participatory and convergence cultures continue to interact with popular culture, sharing their original or referenced insights, it becomes important to recognize how fan activities and the dissemination of popular texts constantly transcend borders in a convergence culture.<sup>42</sup>

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42. Bertha Chin and Lori Hitchcock Morimoto, "Towards a Theory of Transcultural Fandom," *Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 92–108.