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From real creators to real audiences: tracing the communication pathways of Chinese web series narratives

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Introduction: This study investigates how creators and audiences interact in shaping Chinese web series narratives, drawing on reception theory as a guiding framework. The aim is to trace communication pathways that influence narrative development and to examine how audience feedback shapes creative decisions.

Methods: Using qualitative methods, the research involved in-depth interviews with web series creators and viewers, followed by multi-level coding of the data.

Results: The findings show that creators construct an “implied reader” to guide narrative design and adapt their storytelling in response to real-time audience reactions. This dynamic exchange marks a shift from one-way content delivery to a collaborative process of meaning-making.

Discussion: The study highlights the role of digital platforms in transforming narrative practices and provides insights into balancing artistic vision with market demands. These results contribute to a broader understanding of digital storytelling and offer practical implications for enhancing content creation and audience engagement in the evolving digital entertainment landscape.

KEYWORDS

Chinese web series, reception theory, audience engagement, narrative evolution, digital storytelling

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The rapid development of digital media and the popularization of mobile Internet have made web series a key part of youth entertainment culture, especially among younger audiences who increasingly prefer online streaming over traditional broadcast (Latif et al., 2022). Compared with traditional TV, they are more flexible in production and dissemination by virtue of their short, fast and interactive features. Unrestricted by fixed airtime and geography, they are able to respond quickly to market demands and cater to the fragmented and personalized viewing habits of viewers (Li, 2021).

These advantages have enabled web series to gain widespread attention globally. For example, Netflix is a leading OTT service provider in more than 190 countries, and TV shows such as web series have evolved into a more sophisticated art (Jang et al., 2023; Forni, 2020). Even in markets such as China, where Netflix is not present, there are OTT platforms such as iQIYI, WeTV and Youku that distribute web series in large numbers (Zeng, 2024). According to statistics, the size of the online audiovisual market has exceeded one trillion yuan, and the market share of web series in China is very large [China Netcasting Services Association (中国网络视听节目服务协会), 2024].

1.2 Audience engagement and interactivity

Web series are also unique in their interactive nature. Streaming and OTT (over-the-top) platforms are also distinguished from the traditional television industry by the level of audience engagement (Sadana and Sharma, 2021). Through pop-ups and comments on OTT platforms, as well as ratings and reviews on social media, creators can obtain audience feedback in real time (Li et al., 2023; Li and Zou, 2024). They in turn make adjustments and optimizations during the creation of their works. At the same time, viewers can directly participate in the discussion on the platform and share their understanding and emotions, thus forming a dynamic relationship with the creators in a two-way communication and meaning-making. As Iser (1990) pointed out in his study of literary creation, readers' participation and creativity play a key role in the process of meaning generation; in today's decentralized information age, this interactive characteristic also applies to web series, which leads to the continuous development and refinement of the work through audience participation.

1.3 Research gap

However, the existing literature mainly focuses on the dissemination effect, platform effect and macro audience behavior of web series. These studies focus on statistical data and platform effects, but lack a systematic and in-depth exploration of the micro interactions between creators and viewers in the process of narrative reception. Scholars generally agree that web series are distinguished from traditional TV programs in terms of narrative form, presenting features such as short and concise, compact rhythm and multiple plot lines (Tang et al., 2025; Zhang et al., 2022). At the same time, due to relying on the OTT platform, web series breaks the time and space limitations in the dissemination mode, so that the content can spread rapidly across platforms and regions (John, 2023). In addition, the continuous progress of digital communication technologies (e.g., 5G, intelligent recommendation algorithms) provides a technical guarantee for the narrative innovation of web series, which makes the ways for viewers to obtain information more diversified (Xu and Liu, 2023). When describing the narrative structure of web series, existing literature focuses on how to satisfy the demand for fragmented information consumption through subplot structure, plot editing, and the use of symbols. However, there is a lack of systematic explanation of the logic of digital communication behind these narrative features, and no attention has been paid to the counterproductive effect of audience participation on textual narratives.

In addition, under the digital media environment, a new type of interactive relationship has been formed between creators and audiences that goes beyond the traditional one-way transmission. Existing literature shows that creators of web series often predefine the ideal audience image during the creative process, and guide the audience's emotional response and meaning generation through text design, narrative strategy and symbol construction (Campbell et al., 2020). For example, some studies have pointed out that creators consider how to stimulate audience empathy through detailed design and plotting at the script conceptualization stage (Wang and Chew, 2021). Meanwhile, through pop-ups, comments, and social media interactions on digital platforms, audiences not only realize immediate

feedback on the content, but also participate in the reconstruction of the narrative, forming a two-way or even multi-directional process of information exchange (Healy, 2022, pp. 223–240). This mode of interaction makes the narrative of web series no longer fixed, but in a constant state of evolution and reconstruction. However, although there are more studies on creator strategies and audience interaction, there is still no unified theoretical perspective on how to organically combine the two and construct a systematic model of interaction paths.

1.4 Research aims and contribution

This research gap limits our comprehensive understanding of the inner logic of web series narrative communication mechanism, and also leaves the question of how to optimize the creative strategy and user experience in a long-term exploration stage. In order to reveal the interaction patterns between creators and viewers, this paper adopts mixed sampling and multilevel coding methods to systematically analyze the interview data. In total, we constructed a coding framework with six major themes, 18 secondary themes and 36 tertiary themes. The study aims to trace the transmission path of web series narratives and provide theoretical and empirical support for the creation of film and television content and optimization of user experience in the digital era by analyzing the interaction mechanism between the two parties.

2 Theoretical framework

2.1 Reception theory and web series

Reception Theory emphasizes that the meaning of a text is not unilaterally determined by the author, but is dynamically generated in the process of interpretation by the audience (Jauss, 1982). The core idea of this theory is highly compatible with the communication mode of web series, especially in the digital media environment, where viewers of web series are not only the receivers of the content, but also the co-creators of the meaning of the text. Compared with traditional movie and television works, web series are more interactive, and the audience can express their understanding and feedback of the plot in real time through pop-ups, comments, social media, etc. The creators can take these feedbacks into consideration. The creators are able to adjust their content according to these feedbacks. This two-way communication mechanism makes the narrative of web series no longer a one-way transmission of information, but a process that is constantly interpreted, reshaped and expanded by the audience (Preston, 2019).

2.2 Key concepts of reception theory

In the development of audience theory, Wolfgang Iser's concept of the Implied Reader has provided important insights into the audience behavior of web series. Iser argues that texts presuppose an ideal audience within the narrative structure to guide their emotional and cognitive responses (Iser, 1990). In web series, this concept is reflected in the creator's setting of the target audience, such as certain episodes will cater to the aesthetics and values of a specific audience group in

terms of plot development, characterization, and visual style. For example, some youth-themed web series will utilize elements such as school life and growing up experience to attract young viewers, while suspenseful dramas will guide viewers' speculations and discussions through complex narrative structures and suspenseful designs. This implied reader shaping not only affects the audience's viewing experience, but also further determines the web series' market positioning and communication strategies (Gao and Xu, 2022).

In addition to the concept of implied readership, Iser's theory of "textual lacunae" (Leerstellen) also applies to web series narratives. According to Iser, texts intentionally leave gaps in order to prompt readers to fill them in during the interpretation process, thus enabling the co-construction of meaning (Iser, 2012, 2014). Web series widely adopt this strategy, one of the typical manifestations of which is the open-ended endings or unanswered questions. This type of narrative encourages viewers to speculate based on existing information and to engage in discussions on social media. For example, the endings of some episodes do not explicitly explain the fate of the main characters, but instead leave it to the audience to make their own interpretations through symbolic shots or white lines, thus creating different paths of interpretation among the audience. At the same time, the multi-line narrative structure of web series also provides room for "textual gaps," where different character perspectives, unaccounted for backstories, or complex time-jumping narratives prompt viewers to piece together information and fill in the logical chain on their own in the process of watching, so that the integrity of the narrative is jointly constructed by viewers (Preston, 2019).

The high interactivity of web series also echoes the concept of Horizon of Expectations in reception theory. According to Hans Robert Jauss, audiences form certain expectations based on their own experiences when they read or watch, and the extent to which a text fulfills or deviates from these expectations determines the audience's receptivity (Jauss, 1982). This mechanism is particularly evident in web series. Since viewers usually form certain expectations about the development of a drama based on information such as previous episodes, official previews, and social media discussions, if the development of the drama meets or even exceeds the expectations, viewers' acceptance and satisfaction will increase, whereas if the direction of the drama deviates from the core expectations of the viewers, controversy may be aroused. For example, when a drama's trailer suggests that its main plot revolves around a certain pair of CPs (Couple Pairings, i.e., imagined romantic pairings between characters created by fans or audiences), but the actual development of the episode causes the two characters to ultimately fail to come together, viewers may express strong dissatisfaction on social media and even lower the overall rating of the drama. This discrepancy between expectation and actual experience not only affects viewers' emotions, but also has a direct impact on the drama's communication effect and market reputation (Gao and Xu, 2022).

2.3 Audience interaction in the digital era

With the development of digital media technology, the audience behavior of web series is no longer limited to viewing itself, but is deeply integrated into the process of content dissemination, forming a multi-level audience interaction mode. The widespread use of social platforms, short video platforms and pop-up systems enables viewers

to react to the plot in real time and exchange views with other viewers in a wide range of social environments. This phenomenon also exemplifies a key point of reception theory—the audience is not a single passive recipient, but continuously constructs and redefines the meaning of the text in the process of social interaction and group communication (Preston, 2019). For example, after a web series is aired, viewers may create secondary works on short-form video platforms, including editing key plot clips, making character analysis videos, and even interpreting and recreating the plot. Such secondary creation not only enriches the way the episode is interpreted, but also makes the textual outreach of the episode expand, forming a continuously growing network of meaning.

2.4 Proposed analytical model

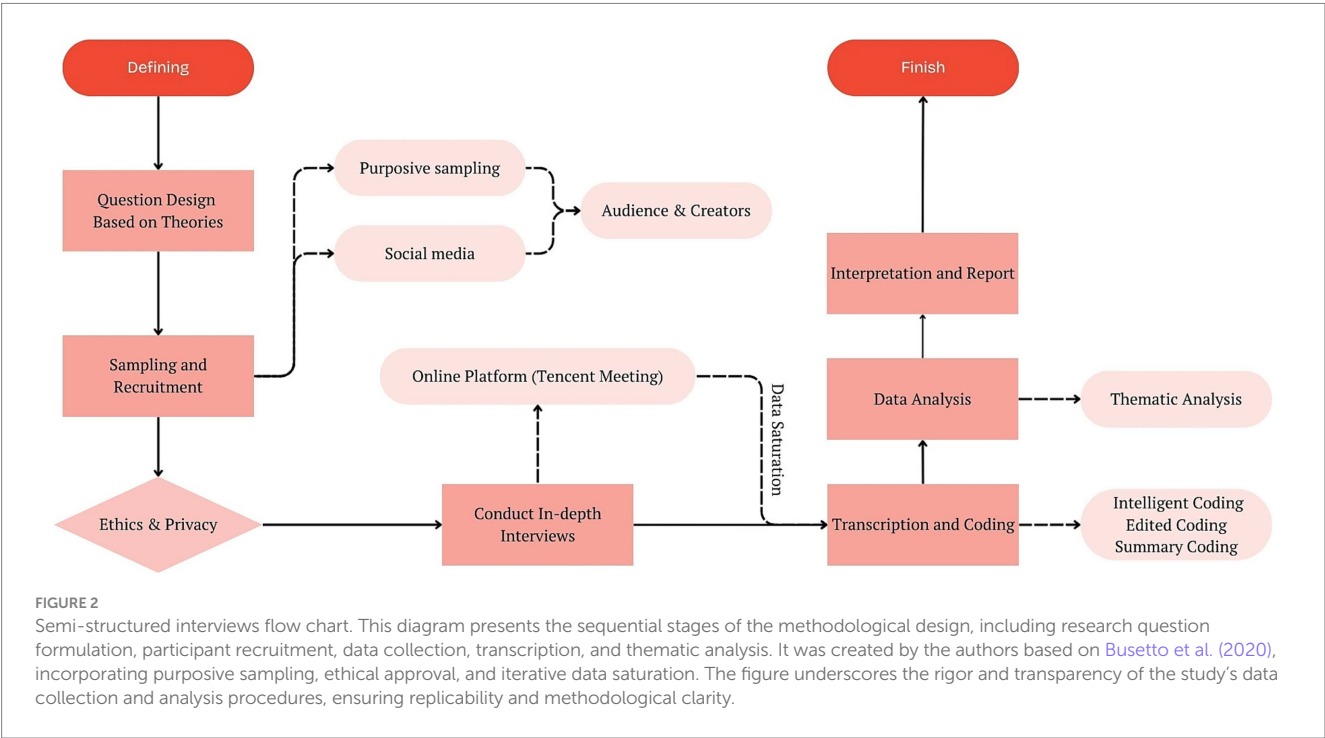
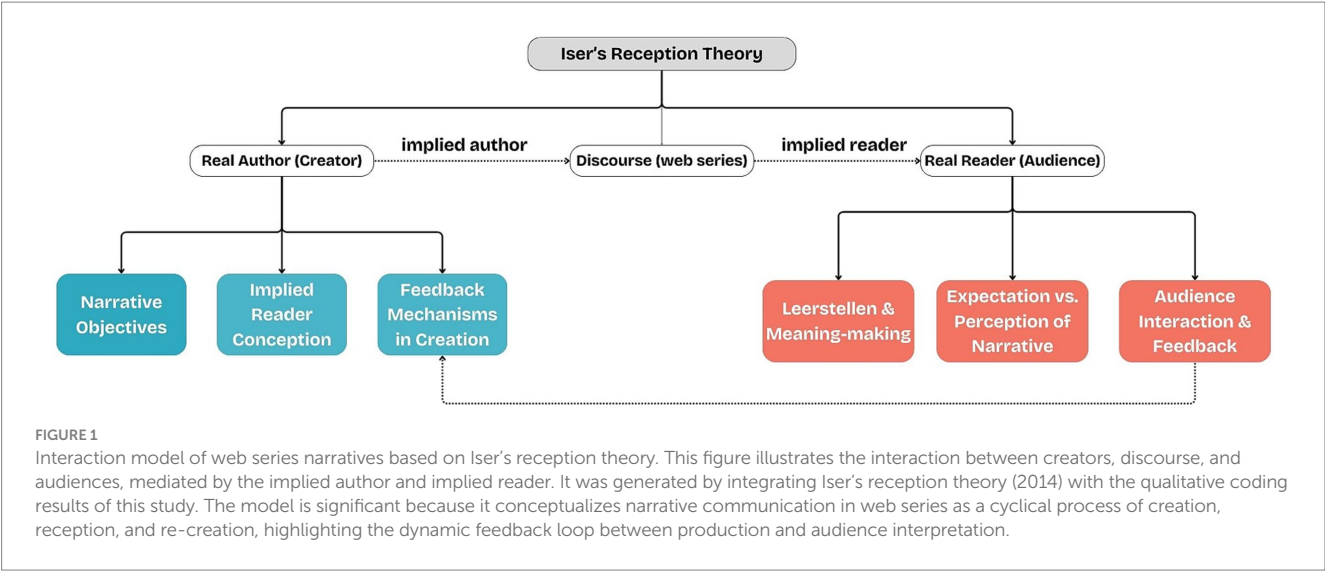
In addition, the creation mode of web series is also influenced by reception theory. Unlike traditional TV dramas, many web series refer to audience feedback on social media during the production process and even make content adjustments during broadcast. For example, some episodes may adjust the direction of subsequent episodes according to the audience's preference for certain characters in the early stage of broadcasting, and the production of sequels often refers to the audience's response to the first season. This mode of creation reflects the "text-reader interaction" emphasized by reception theory, i.e., the meaning of a text is not unilaterally shaped by the creator, but is continuously adjusted and reconstructed in the dynamic interaction between the creator and the audience (Iser, 2014). Therefore, based on the existing theoretical framework, this paper intends to innovatively construct an interactive path model of "from real creators to real audiences" (Figure 1).

The framework focuses on how creators in web series narratives utilize textual design and feedback mechanisms to guide meaning making, and how audiences can reconfigure narratives through active participation. By dividing the Real Creator and Real Audience, which can be practically accessed, into three different core concepts each, it serves as the first layer of themes for subsequent coding. This study not only helps to enrich the theory of digital media narratives, but also provides empirical support for content creation and user experience optimization.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology that combines in-depth interviews and textual analysis to explore the interaction patterns between creators and viewers in web series narrative communication. Following Busetto et al. (2020), the methodological design is illustrated in Figure 2. In the data analysis part, this paper mainly uses a combination of manual coding and software-assisted coding. The first author conducted preliminary manual coding on the interview text and web series text to form an initial thematic classification; subsequently, with the help of qualitative data analysis tools (ATLAS.ti), the coding results were further analyzed and cross-validated to construct a multilevel coding framework comprising primary, secondary, and tertiary themes



(Campbell et al., 2020; Wang and Chew, 2021). Coding proceeded in two cycles: initial open coding to generate broad categories, followed by focused coding to refine sub-themes and construct the hierarchical framework. The analysis followed a reflexive thematic approach (Braun and Clarke, 2019) within an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasizes researcher reflexivity and theoretical transparency rather than statistical inter-coder coefficients.

All transcripts were coded by the first author. To enhance trustworthiness, an audit trail was maintained documenting code definitions, revisions, and exemplar quotations (Carcary, 2009). Coding decisions were iteratively refined through regular discussions with the second and third authors (doctoral supervisors), ensuring conceptual clarity and reducing potential bias (Johnson et al., 2020). Although intercoder reliability was not formally tested, methodological

rigor was reinforced through reflexive memo writing and supervisory review (McGrath, 2021, pp. 245–262). In reflexive qualitative methodology, rigor is not measured by intercoder agreement but by audit trails, supervisory debriefings, reflexive memoing, and thick quotation evidence (Nowell et al., 2017). Any potential disagreements in interpretation were resolved through consensus between the first author and supervisors. The monitoring of data saturation is described in Section 3.2 on data collection and sampling.

3.2 Data collection and sampling

First, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, and the selected interviewees mainly included web series creators (e.g.,

script writers, directors, producers) and active audience groups. In order to ensure the diversity and representativeness of the data, the study adopted purposive sampling and stratified sampling strategies across dimensions such as creative experience, types of works, audience participation, and geography.

The participants were recruited between May and September 2024 through invitations distributed on major Chinese digital platforms, including Douban, Weibo, Douyin, Zhihu, and WeChat groups. For creators, purposive sampling targeted professionals with verifiable industry experience in the production of web series. Creators were identified through their publicly available profiles and professional activities on platforms such as Weibo and Douyin, and subsequently contacted with individual invitations. For audiences, invitations were extended to active viewers who regularly consumed web series and engaged in online discussions. In total, 75 invitations were distributed (Douban 20, Weibo 15, Douyin 15, Zhihu 10, WeChat 15), resulting in 31 positive responses (Douban 9, Weibo 7, Douyin 5, Zhihu 4, WeChat 6). Screening was conducted using a standardized checklist based on inclusion and exclusion criteria (e.g., age, region of residence, viewing history, and professional experience), which was applied consistently across all respondents. After screening for eligibility and obtaining informed consent, 18 participants (6 creators, 12 viewers) were retained for the final sample.

Participants were eligible if they were aged 18–40 and provided written informed consent. The lower limit (18) ensured legal adulthood, while the upper limit (40) targeted groups most active on digital platforms and within the web series industry, as engagement declines beyond this age. Audience participants qualified if they had watched at least 30 web series in total and had engaged in online ratings or discussions within the past 6 months on platforms such as Douban, Weibo, or Zhihu. Creators were required to have at least three officially released web series on major OTT platforms (iQIYI, Youku, or WeTV) within the past 3 years, which confirmed substantial and verifiable professional experience. To ensure cultural and industrial relevance, only individuals with

long-term residence, study, or work in first-tier or economically developed cities (predominantly in coastal regions) were included, as these regions concentrate both media production and consumption.

Age and region were initially screened through IP location and publicly available information on the recruitment platforms. For participants whose age was not explicitly provided, a private message was sent to confirm missing information before extending a formal invitation. This procedure ensured that all respondents met the predefined criteria of being 18–40 years old and residing in first-tier or economically developed coastal cities. Respondents who did not meet these conditions, were underage, or declined consent were excluded. The final sample achieved a balanced gender ratio (see [Tables 1, 2](#)). Audience participants were primarily recruited from Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen, while creators were concentrated in Beijing and Shanghai. Age distribution was deliberately stratified to reflect the dominant demographic of web series audiences while maintaining diversity of perspectives.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 min. Interviews with creators and audiences were conducted in parallel over six sequential phases, with interim analysis guiding further recruitment. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim in Chinese before translation. Data saturation, defined as the point at which no new codes or themes emerged from additional interviews ([Guest et al., 2006](#); [Fusch and Ness, 2015](#)), was reached at the sixth creator interview and suggested at the eleventh audience interview. A twelfth audience interview was conducted to confirm thematic repetition, thereby validating saturation ([Saunders et al., 2018](#)). This iterative approach ensured that both breadth and depth were achieved without redundancy. In addition, to ensure the practicability, the study was ethically reviewed by the National University of Malaysia (*ethics ref. no.: JEP-2024-944*). All interviews were conducted in Chinese; quotations were translated into English by the authors and back-checked by a bilingual assistant, with all identifiers removed to ensure anonymity. Participation was entirely

TABLE 1 Overview of audience participants in web series interviews.

Serial number	Age	Gender	City	Occupation	Source
1	24	F	Guangzhou	Postgraduate (Journalism)	WeChat
2	23	M	Shenzhen	Undergraduate (Accounting)	Douyin
3	25	M	Guangzhou	Lecturer (Web and new media)	WeChat
4	31	F	Suzhou	Freelance work	Douban
5	31	M	Shanghai	Estate researcher	Zhihu
6	26	M	Guangzhou	Lecturer	Weibo
7	37	M	Hangzhou	Programmer	Douban
8	20	F	Nanchang	Undergraduate (Radio and television editor)	Zhihu
9	25	F	Guangzhou	Postgraduate (Veterinary specialty)	Weibo
10	33	F	Shanghai	Lecturer (Education)	Douyin
11	37	F	Shenzhen	Internet operation	Douban
12	33	M	Shanghai	Freelance work	Douban

All personal data have been anonymized. Interviews were conducted between May and September 2024. One participant was studying in Nanchang at the time of the interview but was originally from Hangzhou, and thus met the criterion of long-term residence in economically developed regions.
Source: Created by the authors (2024).

TABLE 2 Overview of creator participants in web series interviews.

Creator number	City	Age	Gender	Occupation
1	Shanghai	26	M	Actor/Director
2	Beijing	35	M	Music producer, Composer
3	Beijing	36	F	Producer
4	Beijing	26	M	Actor/Producer
5	Beijing	25	F	Assistant director
6	Beijing	32	F	Script Writer

All personal data have been anonymized. Interviews were conducted between May and September 2024.
Source: Created by the authors (2024).

voluntary, and participants retained the right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

4 Results and discussion

Through interviews and textual analysis, this study systematically summarizes the narrative strategies of web series creators, the meaning construction of viewers, and the interaction mechanism between the two. Using a hierarchical coding method, six primary themes, 18 secondary themes and 36 tertiary themes were extracted from the perspective of creators and viewers to construct a systematic analytical framework for the communication process of web series (see Figure 3). It is found that the narrative of web series has shifted from the traditional unidirectional mode of communication to a two-way interactive mechanism between creators and viewers, in which the creators presuppose an “implied reader” (Implied Reader, Iser, 1990) in the text production process, and the viewers fill in the blanks (Leerstellen, Iser, 1990) through the text. Leerstellen, Iser (2014), the management of narrative expectations (Horizon of Expectations, Jauss, 1982), and interactive feedback, the audience continuously shapes the final meaning of the work. This interactive mechanism not only affects the textual structure of the episodes, but also profoundly changes the mode of communication of web series, creating a dynamic cycle of creation, reception and re-creation.

4.1 Narrative strategies of web series creators

The results of the study show that creators’ narrative strategies are mainly centered on three core elements: narrative goals, implied reader shaping and feedback mechanisms (see Table 3). The frequency counts reported in the tables indicate the number of coded text segments associated with each theme. They are presented to show the relative salience of themes across the dataset, rather than to imply statistical significance.

Among them, the task-oriented pragmatic strategy (123 counts) is much higher than the artistic expression-driven strategy (96 counts), indicating that creators are more inclined to cater to the market demand rather than purely pursuing their personal style in the process of content creation. As Creator2 explained, “I care

about artistry, but living in mainland China, the daily pressures shape our creative mindset.” In addition, the constraint of platform rules on content (144 counts) is a key factor influencing creators’ decision-making, with OTT platforms’ norms on episode length, content review and audience preferences directly shaping narrative pacing and content selection. As Creator3 observed: “What you want to say may not get aired, and what gets aired might not be what you want to say.” This phenomenon is consistent with Huang and Ho’s (2023) study on the commercial logic of OTT platforms dominating creativity, suggesting that creators face a trade-off between artistry and commerciality in the text production process.

In terms of implied reader shaping, creators set their target audiences based mainly on cultural background assumptions (67 counts) and audience consumption habits (86 counts). The study found that the creators interviewed generally design characters and plots according to the aesthetic preferences and emotional needs of the intended audience. For example, certain youth dramas use elements such as school life and growing up experiences to enhance the sense of immersion for young viewers, while historical dramas attract specific audience groups through cultural symbols and national sentiment. Creator1 noted, “For audiences with higher educational backgrounds, they no longer focus on looks or popularity; they care about the substance and philosophical resonance of the work. But for younger viewers, appearance and celebrity status still matter greatly.” This strategy is in line with the concept of “implied readership” in reception theory (Iser, 1990, 2014), which suggests that creators predefine audience roles at the textual level and guide audiences’ understanding and emotional responses through narrative design.

Feedback mechanisms also play a particularly prominent role. The study found that creators increasingly rely on audience feedback to optimize their content, with social media monitoring (44 counts) being the main channel for obtaining audience opinions, and some creators going further by using data analysis tools (7 counts) to quantify audience preferences. The integration of feedback was mainly reflected in content revision strategies (35 counts) and future creative direction adjustments (29 counts). Creator2 described, “If a certain character is popular, we will increase their presence in later episodes. If negative comments pile up, we quickly adjust the storyline.” Similarly, Creator6 reflected, “Through the bullet comments, you can see their expectations for the genre, for the male and female leads, and their attitudes toward certain topics. This feedback is very valuable for writing” (Creator 6). These practices underscore the highly interactive nature of web series and further validate reception theory’s view of dynamic text–reader interaction (Iser, 1990), namely that the meaning of a text is not fixed but continuously shaped and evolved through audience participation.

Although the majority of creators are influenced by market orientation, there are still some creators who emphasize the drive for artistic expression (96 counts), especially when it comes to social issues (23 counts) and emotional scene design (62 counts), where creators try to inspire audience empathy through narrative strategies. This phenomenon corroborates Severson’s (2022) study on the reception theory of digital content, suggesting that web series do not cater to the market exclusively, but rather enhance their cultural impact by subtly guiding emotional engagement through audience interaction.

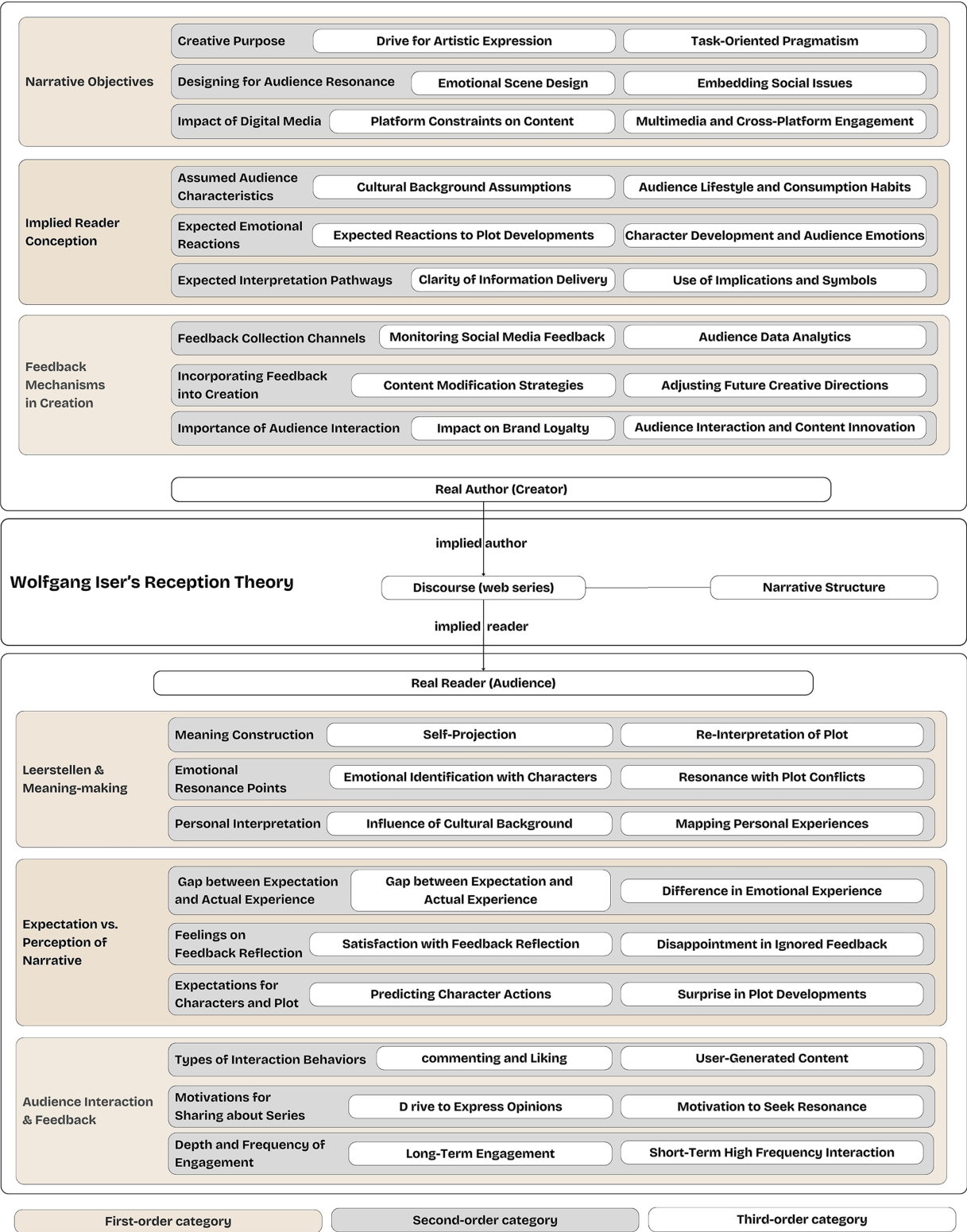


FIGURE 3
Multilevel coding framework based on reception theory. Hierarchical coding framework derived from qualitative interview data, consisting of six primary, 18 secondary, and 36 tertiary themes. Coding proceeded in two iterative cycles (open and focused coding) and was managed with ATLAS.ti software, supported by audit trails and supervisory debriefings. The framework illustrates the transformation of narrative communication from a unidirectional transmission model to an interactive co-construction process, integrating both creators' perspectives (narrative objectives, implied reader conception, and feedback mechanisms in creation) and audiences' perspectives (meaning-making, expectation vs. perception of narrative, and interaction/feedback).

TABLE 3 Coding results of creator interview data.

First-order category	Second-order category	Third-order category	Frequency	Representative quotation (anonymized)
Narrative Objectives	Creative Purpose	Drive for Artistic Expression	96	Creator2: “(For creation) I’m all for making infinite attempts. (It has) Infinite possibilities.”
		Task-Oriented Pragmatism	123	Creator1: “...let us take <i>The Long Season</i> (2023) as an example, was probably the fact that the paychecks were better, and that was the first thing that made me look at in a glowing way.”
	Designing for Audience Resonance	Emotional Scene Design	62	Creator3: “However, if you start out with the intention of doing an emotional expression with depth, such as <i>A Lifelong Journey</i> (2022), which came up with an expression for that era, that upbringing, and the family, then it’s going to have a big thematic concept, and it’s going to look different that way.”
		Embedding Social Issues	23	Creator6: “Because this mystery drama that I’m doing right now, it’s a female mystery. ... We both felt that this play needs to find a female director. Otherwise, it’s hard to capture the feminist expression in it. But we realized there are too few female directors in the market ... the market gives too few opportunities to female directors.”
	Impact of Digital Media	Platform Constraints on Content	144	Creator6: “(The influence from platform is) very big, very big. Because creativity, film and television, although it is an industrialized thing, it is an industrial production output, and finally it has to flow to the market.”
		Multimedia and Cross-Platform Engagement	20	Creator3: “In this (multimedia) case, both middle-aged people, young people and viewers in their sixties and seventies are likely to find content of their interest on these platforms.”
Implied Reader Conception	Assumed Audience Characteristics	Cultural Background Assumptions	67	Creator6: “For ancient costume dramas, some young audiences feel distant from those stories, while older audiences might find them nostalgic. So, we think about which cultural touchpoints different groups can relate to.”
		Audience Lifestyle and Consumption Habits	86	Creator 4: “Yes, when I am acting, whether I am acting or creating, I will always think from the audience’s point of view, and how they will live their lives, etc.”
	Expected Emotional Reactions	Expected Reactions to Plot Developments	38	Creator6: “When we design a turning point, like killing off a main character, we anticipate strong emotional reactions from the audience, so it has to be carefully timed.”
		Character Development and Audience Emotions	34	Creator1: “If a character grows in a way that resonates with their struggles, the audience feels they are growing together with them.”
	Expected Interpretation Pathways	Clarity of Information Delivery	24	Creator6: “Sometimes the platform reminds us that the audience may not follow complicated symbolism, so we adjust the script to make the key points clearer.”
		Use of Implications and Symbols	30	Creator4: “...a lot of it is left ... (to the audience)—it’s the kind of meaning that emerges upon reflection.”
Feedback Mechanisms in Creation	Feedback Collection Channels	Monitoring Social Media Feedback	44	Creator5: “We constantly monitor Douban and Weibo comments to see which storylines audiences are discussing the most.”
		Audience Data Analytics	7	Creator4: “The platform provides viewing data, like drop-off rates and heat maps, and we analyze these to understand audience preferences.”
	Incorporating Feedback into Creation	Content Modification Strategies	35	Creator2: “Sometimes if an audience reaction is particularly strong, the platform asks us to adjust the script accordingly.”
		Adjusting Future Creative Directions	29	Creator 4: “If I think the suggestions are valid, I incorporate them into the next production.”
	Importance of Audience Interaction	Impact on Brand Loyalty	17	Creator5: “If viewers feel we listen to them, they are more likely to follow our future dramas.”
		Audience Interaction and Content Innovation	25	Creator 2: “I was just trying to do an experiment to see if such a combination of episodes and singers could get my songs more exposure. Maybe next year or the year after that I’ll look back and realize that there’s a lot missing.”

Frequency counts refer to the number of coded text segments; they do not represent statistical significance.
Source: Created by the authors, 2025.

4.2 Meaning construction by audience

The analysis of viewers' data shows that their meaning construction is highly dependent on self-projection (106 counts), plot reinterpretation (112 counts), and text filling (Leerstellen, Iser, 2014) (Table 4). Unlike traditional film and television audiences, web series viewers are not passive receivers during the viewing process, but rather reshape the plot understanding through their own experiences and social contexts, and even form secondary creations on social platforms. As one participant noted, *"Sometimes I imagine myself in the character's position and consider the story from multiple perspectives—it's a two-way projection"* (Audience 2). Another added, *"This moment really moved me, so I edited the relevant scenes and shared them online to connect with others"* (Audience 12). These practices exemplify how audiences transform reception into a participatory meaning-making process.

Audience's narrative expectation management is also a key factor influencing the episodes' word-of-mouth. This study found that the discrepancy between viewers' expectations and actual experience of the episode (420 counts) is the core of the discussion heat and evaluation divergence. When the plot development meets viewers' expectations, they tend to reinforce their identification with the work; however, when the narrative deviates from the expectations, viewers may criticize the creators on social platforms and even affect the ratings. For instance, one Audience6 complained, *"I originally thought it would be a satisfying revenge story, but it became increasingly depressive—I could not accept that shift."* Others criticized "misleading marketing," particularly when trailers suggested a certain character outcome that the final episodes contradicted. This phenomenon verifies the theory of "horizon of expectation" proposed by Jauss (1982), i.e., the acceptance of a text depends on how well it matches the audience's existing expectations.

Audience interaction has gone beyond the mere viewing experience, with comments, likes and shares (87 & 136) becoming an important way to drive the distribution of episodes. It also plays a central role in episode communication. Research shows that viewers' interactive behavior can be divided into short-term high-frequency interaction (28 counts) and long-term deep engagement (38 counts). The former is mainly manifested during the broadcast of an episode, when viewers promote the episode through pop-ups, comments and discussions on social platforms, while the latter includes the establishment of fan communities, the writing of lengthy movie reviews, and the continuous following of a director's or script writer's work. This pattern of interaction is consistent with the trend of user-generated content (UGC) (12 counts), whereby viewers not only consume content, but also actively participate in its production, e.g., by creating character analysis videos, editing famous scenes, or writing plot speculation posts. This phenomenon not only expands the outreach of episodic texts, but also reflects the evolution of the web series distribution model from a one-way narrative to a community-driven dynamic construction process (Preston, 2019).

4.3 Summary

This study found that creators' narrative strategies and viewers' meaning construction do not exist independently, but rather interact with each other in a constant feedback and adjustment process.

Creators rely on real-time audience feedback to optimize episodes,—*"Through bullet comments you can see their expectations... this feedback is very valuable for writing"* (Creator 6)—while viewers shape the communication direction of episodes by filling in textual gaps, adjusting narrative expectations, and social interactions. For example, during the broadcast of a particular episode, if the audience resonates with a certain character, the creator may increase the role of that character in subsequent episodes; whereas if the audience generates strong negative feedback on certain plot arrangements, the creator may make adjustments by revising the subsequent episodes or making adjustments in the sequels. This two-way interaction mechanism further validates the reception theory on the dynamic evolution of the text-reader relationship (Iser, 1990), i.e., the meaning of a text is not shaped by a single subject, but is generated under the joint action of the creator, the audience and the platform environment.

Through an in-depth analysis of the interaction mechanism between creators and viewers, this study bridges three major shortcomings of existing research: (1) on the theoretical analysis of web series narrative structure, this paper combines the theory of acceptance to explore in detail the creator's strategy in the construction of the text with the audience's actual process of constructing meanings (2) for the role of implied readers in real-time interactions, this paper reveals the dynamic interpretation mechanism of the audience during web series viewing through qualitative data analysis, complementing the application of Iser's (1990, 2012, 2014, 2022) theory to digital media (Severson, 2022); (3) Compared with previous macro-statistics-based studies, this paper explores the role of implied readers in real-time interactions by means of qualitative interviews and multilevel coding methods, it provides an in-depth analysis of the micro-interaction process between creators and viewers in content optimization and dissemination (Campbell et al., 2020; Wang and Chew, 2021).

Although this study provides important theoretical and practical contributions, there are still some limitations. First, the study samples are mainly from specific platforms and audience groups, and future research could be extended to web series creation and consumption behaviors in different cultural contexts. In addition, the audience's emotional response and participation patterns may be further influenced by social trends and technological development, and subsequent studies may incorporate big data analysis to validate the qualitative findings of this study.

5 Conclusion

Based on reception theory, this study explores the interaction patterns between creators and viewers of web series, and through qualitative interviews and multilevel coding analysis, reveals how creators shape narrative strategies, how viewers participate in the construction of meaning, and how the two interact dynamically through feedback mechanisms. It is found that creators not only actively set up "implied readers" in the text production process to guide viewers' understanding and emotional responses, but also are deeply influenced by audience expectations, social media feedback and platform rules. The audience, on the other hand, actively intervenes in the re-creation of the text by filling in narrative gaps, adjusting expectations and participating in discussions during the viewing process, showing a high degree of interactivity.

TABLE 4 Coding results of audience interview data.

First-order category	Second-order category	Third-order category	Frequency	Representative quotation (anonymized)
Leerstellen & Meaning-making	Meaning Construction	Self-Projection	106	Audience7: "...if it's an episode that I feel more deeply about, ... I will be more deeply immersed in the character's gains and losses and feelings. ... I would think about the character's choices, focus on their internal struggles, and the character's actual behavior and performance would affect my own feelings."
		Re-Interpretation of Plot	112	Audience1: "In <i>Blossoms Shanghai</i> (2023) ...there are a lot of similar episodes, I feel that this is the director intentionally left a gap that can be discussed, it does not have an ending."
	Emotional Resonance Points	Emotional Identification with Characters	125	Audience12: "(In <i>The Long Season</i> (2023)) The final shot of the protagonist, a train driver, gives him a moment to look back at himself in the past... This scene struck a chord with me because it brought to mind some of the frustrations and challenges, we encounter in life. ... This moment really moved me, so I wrote down my thoughts, edited the relevant scenes, and shared them online."
		Resonance with Plot Conflicts	100	Audience8: "When I saw the family conflict escalate, I immediately thought of my own parents' arguments—it felt very real to me."
	Personal Interpretation	Influence of Cultural Background	195	Audience9: "For me, maybe it's because I'm from a one-child family, so when I watch stories about siblings, I always feel a bit distanced."
		Mapping Personal Experiences	111	Audience2: "It's easy to get into the character, it's easy to resonate with them ... Sometimes I imagine myself in the character's position and consider the story from multiple perspectives—it's a two-way projection."
Expectation vs. Perception of Narrative	Gap between Expectation and Actual Experience	Gap between Expectation and Actual Experience	420	Audience9: "Take <i>Bid Kids</i> (2020), which was adapted from a novel. I actually watched the show first and then went and read the original novel... I do not think the novel was written as well as the play adaptation."
		Difference in Emotional Experience	58	Audience11: "I expected the character's development to be deeper, but in the end, it felt very superficial, which made me less emotionally invested."
	Feelings on Feedback Reflection	Satisfaction with Feedback Reflection	64	Audience7: "Sometimes I see later episodes or even sequels take into account what audiences talked about online. It feels like they really listened to us."
		Disappointment in Ignored Feedback	36	Audience8: "I sometimes leave a lot of comments, but the production side never responds. It makes me feel like what I said was useless."
	Expectations for Characters and Plot	Predicting Character Actions	122	Audience1: "From the way she looked back, I thought she might betray him later, but I did not expect it to happen so soon."
		Surprise in Plot Developments	265	Audience3: "...the ending of the love story should have been more unexpected. Instead, his ending makes all this buildup to the piece a little too high, and the ending does not hang together."
Audience Interaction & Feedback	Types of Interaction Behaviors	Commenting and Liking	87	Audience12: "After watching an episode, I usually go to Douban to give it a score or click like on comments I agree with."
		User-Generated Content	12	Audience5: "There's a desire to talk or create in itself, I guess. I always feel like I have thoughts and feelings and want to get them out... So, I will go through these feelings and form a lengthy text. At that point, I'll feel that I can write and post it systematically. I think there's an inherent need to express or even create."
	Motivations for Sharing about Series	Drive to Express Opinions	136	Audience7: "If I feel something strongly, I cannot help but write about it or post a comment. It's like I have to get it out."
		Motivation to Seek Resonance	145	Audience9: "The motivation might be, first of all if the show is popular, there are more people discussing it. That way you can find people who share your opinion and there is a sense of identification. Also, posting a discussion is a sign of sharing desire, wanting to share one's views and feelings."

(Continued)

TABLE 4 (Continued)

First-order category	Second-order category	Third-order category	Frequency	Representative quotation (anonymized)
	Depth and Frequency of Engagement	Long-Term Engagement	38	Audience10: "I've been following Chinese web series for more than ten years now. Even if sometimes I stop for a while, I will always come back, and I feel like it has already become part of my life."
		Short-Term High Frequency Interaction	28	Audience4: "...I just go to the discussion group and talk to people or whatever, and then I might record some, let us say there's a web series that has a lot of lines in it that I think are really good, and then I'll record them in the discussion group, and then after I'm done recording them, people will give me likes, or they'll just be able to hear their voices and stuff like that."

Frequency counts refer to the number of coded text segments; they do not represent statistical significance.
Source: Created by the authors, 2025.

Key findings from the study suggest that creators' decisions are driven by multiple factors, with "the influence of platform constraints on content" appearing most frequently among respondents, reflecting the direct shaping of narrative modes and creative strategies by digital platforms. Although the creative space of web series is freer than that of traditional film and television, platform rules and business models still impose restrictions on creators' expression, resulting in a certain tension between market-oriented operation and artistic expression. In addition, the creators' textual strategies show a task-oriented pragmatism, i.e., the goal of creation is often driven by commercial interests, and some creators will cater to the market trend rather than entirely based on artistic pursuits. This finding contrasts with traditional theories of cultural production, suggesting that in the digital environment, creators must constantly adapt to market feedback rather than unilaterally shaping the audience experience.

On the other hand, the audience's viewing experience is highly personalized and influenced by social interactions, especially the discrepancy between expectation and actual experience, which is the most significant in the data. This phenomenon not only indicates that viewers' content consumption is highly predictable and participatory, but also highlights the challenges of web series in terms of text openness. When the plot fails to meet the audience's expectations, social media becomes an important channel for the audience to vent their emotions, and this feedback mechanism in turn shapes the future creative direction. This is a departure from traditional reception theory, suggesting that the audience is no longer just a passive interpreter, but an active participant in shaping the text. In addition, the audience's construction of meaning is influenced by cultural background, personal experience and social networks, and in the process of filling in the gaps of the text, the audience's interpretation often transcends the creator's original intention, forming a multi-layered process of meaning co-construction.

5.1 Critical analysis and relevance

Although this study reveals the interactive mode of web series creation and dissemination, it also exposes certain inherent contradictions and challenges in the current web series ecology. First, creators often adopt a pandering strategy in the face of market demand, resulting in a homogenization of narratives. Although this kind of "algorithm-driven storytelling" can effectively enhance the market effect, it may compress the space for innovation and lead to the

homogenization of cultural products. Secondly, although the feedback mechanism of the audience on social media enhances interaction, such feedback is often limited by emotional expressions and short-term hotspots, which makes creators' adjustment strategies more inclined to immediate reactions than long-term planning. The "instantaneous feedback pressure" of social media may reinforce short-term traffic orientation and reduce narrative depth and complexity.

In addition, the study reflects the power structure of platforms in web series content shaping. Although digital platforms grant creators greater freedom, the platforms' content review mechanisms, recommendation algorithms, and profit models profoundly affect content production. Some interviewees mentioned that creators must conform to the platform's commercial logic when choosing topics and constructing narrative models, otherwise their works may struggle to gain sufficient market exposure. This suggests that although web series have broken the centralized distribution model of the traditional film and television industry, platform power still plays a key role in the decentralized distribution system. Future research should further explore how this platformized power structure shapes the boundaries of content creation, and how creators can seek a balance between commercial restrictions and creative freedom.

At the same time, it should be acknowledged that the empirical sample itself is relatively limited in terms of geographic distribution, age range, and cultural background. While this does not invalidate the findings, it constrains their generalizability and calls for cautious interpretation.

5.2 Practical implications

Building on the contradictions identified in the previous section, this study highlights several practical implications for stakeholders in the web series ecosystem. For creators, the findings suggest the need to balance market orientation with artistic vision by adopting measured audience integration. Rather than responding mechanically to short-term feedback trends, creators can selectively incorporate feedback that aligns with long-term narrative coherence (Iser, 1990; Jauss, 1982).

For producers, the results emphasize the importance of acting as mediators between creative teams and market pressures. Producers can establish guidelines that ensure social issue-driven narratives and diverse perspectives are not lost under the demand for traffic-maximizing

formulas, echoing [Bhutia and Rastogi's \(2025\)](#) observation that OTT platforms' commercial logic often constrains creativity.

For platform managers, the evidence underscores the dual responsibility of providing data transparency and protecting creative autonomy. As [Severson \(2022\)](#) notes, audience feedback in digital environments is often volatile; thus, platforms should avoid over-reliance on short-term metrics such as click-through rates or comment volume and instead highlight long-term engagement indicators when communicating with creators.

5.3 Theoretical contributions

This study advances reception theory by demonstrating its value in the digital media environment. The findings show that meaning is not fixed in the text but constantly reshaped through visible exchanges between creators and audiences ([Iser, 1990](#); [Jauss, 1982](#)). In web series, this process extends beyond interpretation into real-time participation, where comments, ratings, and user-generated content actively influence narrative direction ([Preston, 2019](#)).

The results also enrich digital narrative theory. Classical ideas such as the implied reader and textual gaps acquire practical relevance in guiding audience-centered storytelling ([Iser, 2014](#)). At the same time, the study highlights the mediating role of platforms: algorithms and review systems not only transmit feedback but also structure the creative boundaries within which narratives evolve ([Healy, 2022](#), pp. 223–240; [Huang and Ho, 2023](#); [Severson, 2022](#)).

By situating reception theory within this platform-driven ecology, the research reframes authorship as a collaborative process between creators, audience, and digital infrastructures. This perspective provides a theoretical bridge between traditional literary reception and contemporary practices of digital storytelling.

5.4 Technical mediation of interaction

Beyond creators and audiences, technology itself mediates their interaction. Algorithms, moderation rules, and platform dashboards form a technical layer that filters what is visible, measurable, and valuable ([Healy, 2022](#), pp. 230–238; [Xu and Liu, 2023](#)).

Algorithms decide what content is promoted and what remains unseen. Data dashboards track completion rates, drop-off points, and comment sentiment, feeding back into creative choices ([Huang and Ho, 2023](#)). These tools make emotions quantifiable but also privilege instant reactions over slower forms of narrative depth ([Li and Zou, 2024](#)).

Participation is therefore never neutral. Audience voices are ranked and redistributed by algorithmic logic ([Preston, 2019](#)). Creators face dual pressures: meeting audience expectations while adapting to platform incentives ([Huang and Ho, 2023](#)).

5.5 Future research directions

Although this study provides a systematic analysis of web series creation and dissemination, it still has some limitations. First, the study sample is relatively small and concentrated in major cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen. While this enhances

contextual depth and reflects culturally active regions, it inevitably limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations, including audiences in smaller cities or rural areas. Second, the reliance on qualitative interviews means that the insights are interpretive rather than statistically representative, and future research should test their applicability across larger and more diverse datasets. Third, the data were collected within a specific timeframe (May–September 2024), which may not capture longer-term changes in audience behavior or platform strategies. In addition, with the increasing application of AI in content creation, future research can focus on how AI intervenes in web series production and how it further influences the interaction patterns between creators and audiences.

Future research can address these constraints in several ways. Expanding the sample to include participants from non-metropolitan regions and different demographic backgrounds would strengthen representativeness. In addition, integrating large-scale social media analytics or survey-based methods could provide quantitative validation of the qualitative findings. Cross-national comparative studies would also allow researchers to explore how governance structures and cultural environments shape creator–audience dynamics. Finally, longitudinal research could examine how audience feedback influences not only immediate revisions but also the development of sequels and long-term narrative strategies, while emerging questions about the role of AI in content production and recommendation systems merit close investigation.

In summary, this study reveals the logic of interaction between web series creators and viewers, emphasizes the applicability of reception theory in digital content distribution, and points out the dynamic relationship between creation and market feedback. Future research should further explore the far-reaching effects of platform power, audience feedback mechanisms and technological advances on web series creation, in order to promote the in-depth development of this field and provide more targeted guidance for industry practice.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Research Ethics Committee, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

SZ: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft. HH: Supervision, Writing – review & editing. NH: Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The authors declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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