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Constructing Adolescent Mental Health in Natural Research: A Critical Analysis of Social Context, Peer Support, and Reality Television

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Abstract. Adolescence is a formative period for identity development, emotional growth, and social relationships. Youth-oriented reality television can make these experiences visible, though its portrayal of them is shaped by production choices such as casting, editing, and sequencing. This paper examines how the Chinese youth reality show Natural Research represents adolescent development through environmental adaptation, interpersonal conflict, identity exploration, and peer support. Using qualitative media content analysis, this paper reviewed the full season and closely analyzed scenes involving participants' reactions to unfamiliar surroundings, a later group discussion revisiting earlier conflicts, and a conversation between Cui and Chan about their future careers. The analysis finds that the show frames environmental discomfort as a story of adaptation, uses montage to present conflict as an opportunity for self-reflection, and uses contrasting aspirations to foreground identity and mutual support. These narrative choices make complex social and emotional experiences accessible to viewers, while also carrying risks: regional backgrounds may be treated as explanations for individual behavior, and unresolved tensions may be shaped into neat stories of growth. Natural Research is therefore best understood as a media text that influences how adolescent development is imagined.

Keywords: Adolescent mental health, reality television, social-emotional development, peer support, identity formation

1. Introduction

Adolescence is a period in which identity, relationships, emotional regulation, and future aspirations become increasingly important. Going to new places, dealing with conflict, having to ask themselves what they want, and getting support from peers are experiences that relate to social and emotional development. These experiences are represented in youth-oriented media, and thus it is a significant place to explore the understanding of adolescent development.

Reality TV in particular is well suited to this use, as it can show everyday interaction as authentic, and relies on a significant amount of production decisions [1]. What viewers see is created through the casting, setting, editing, montage, subtitles, reaction shots, music, and sequencing. The study of reality-program audiences further reveals that perception of authenticity and knowledge of

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producers' manipulation can coexist [2]. Reality TV should therefore be seen as a media text rather than a direct reflection of what the participants may be thinking.

In this paper, the focus lies on these processes and provides an analysis via *Natural Research*, a Chinese reality television show for youth culture, which launched on August 24, 2024 [3]. It gathers 8 teenagers from various regional and social backgrounds, including Suzhou in Jiangsu, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Yunnan, Macao, Shanghai, and Beijing, under the leadership of four adult leaders. This cross-regional and intergenerational structure makes difference a key element of the program's storytelling and offers content for adaptation, conflict, values, and growth narratives.

This paper focuses on media construction and representation, with the key health area being adolescent mental health and social-emotional development. This paper will discuss the processes of adaptation, conflict, identity inquiry, and peer support being developed in *Natural Research* through setting, pairing of participants, editing, montage, and sequencing. I propose that the program continuously frame experiences around the transitions between environmental discomfort and adaptation, conflict and reflection on oneself and value differences, and peer recognition.

2. Adolescent development and social environment

The representations can be understood in the context of research on adolescent development. Children's sociocultural background is related to their daily activities and lifestyles, highlighting the influence of their social environment on their daily actions [4]. The more pertinent question for the media is how television gives one an invitation to relate a participant's background to the content being presented on the screen.

The social context of the paper and how it relates to the health context is also important to the formation of identity. More social connectedness is linked to reduced levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms and higher life satisfaction among adolescents [5]. Online and offline communication can alternatively facilitate identity exploration, the maintenance of friendships, and social support [6]. Meanwhile, there is a moderate positive correlation between problematic internet use and depressive symptoms [7]. As a whole, this literature indicates the quality and structure of the interaction between online and offline.

A similar view is offered by studies about youth mental health systems of care. Most of these were described as interesting and helpful, but there was limited evidence of effectiveness in the clinical domain, and professional moderation was a key aspect [8]. This paper frames this kind of research as providing context for identity, connection, and supportive communication, instead of evidence that *Natural Research* is a clinical intervention.

3. Methodology

In this study, the entire season of Natural Research is analyzed using qualitative media content analysis. Qualitative content analysis is appropriate for the extraction and understanding of the pattern of meaning in recorded data [9]. By looking at the whole season first and then picking scenes to analyze closely, it was possible to see common stories throughout the season. Three groups of responses proved particularly helpful, which is reaction to situations in the new environment, later reflection on conflict, and a discussion Cui and Chan had on their future careers and their personal values.

Close analysis involves examining both what participants are doing on screen and the formal decisions through which those actions are represented, such as dialog and pairing of participants. The material is edited television footage, and moments of doubt or strife are read into its meaning in

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terms of the narrative's purposes. Regional background is also treated in the same fashion as one of the indirect causes of behavior in the program. All English translations of dialogue quoted from *Natural Research* are my own.

4. Environmental difference: stress and adaptation

Natural Research uses unfamiliar living conditions, participants' reactions, and editing to frame environmental discomfort as the beginning of a story of challenge and gradual adaptation. Early in the season, the program contrasts the teenagers' familiar routines with their new surroundings. Song, from Shanghai, complains about sleeping on a tatami mat and says she would prefer a raised bed, while Zhang, from Suzhou, reacts strongly to insects crawling across the floor [3]. Presented early in the program, these reactions introduce the participants through the difficulties they face and establish a point of comparison for their later adjustment.

Because the audience is given information about the participants' regional backgrounds, and because the unfamiliar natural environment is repeatedly emphasized, even minor variations in response may come to signify differences in lifestyle or upbringing. In those circumstances, minor variations can start to indicate lifestyle or upbringing. Editing, therefore, makes a personal response more visible, and carries more social implications.

While sociocultural environments are linked to various everyday behaviors [4], they do not warrant being considered a stable explanation for personality and are not limited to a city or region. Information that is provided in the background may be useful to help contextualize experience. When discomfort is repeatedly associated with an urban upbringing, however, it may appear as if it is typical of urban adolescents as a whole.

The second dimension is sequence. Early discomfort becomes a point of comparison, so later improvement may be read as adaptation. The natural environment functions both as a setting and as a visual way of showing change over time. However, this framing may imply that rural or outdoor experiences are inherently corrective, while portraying urban adolescents as lacking "real-life" experience.

5. Reframing conflict as self-reflection

The programme's handling of conflict is even more apparent in the editing. An adult leader asks during a group reflective discussion whether anyone has acted in ways that might not be appropriate to broadcast. Chan and Ziqi admit that they had conflicts with other participants, and footage from previous conflicts reappears in the discussion [3]. Montage is the method whereby events set in different times are connected to each other, so that the previous conflict becomes proof in the later process of self-evaluation.

There are two levels of meaning introduced. The adolescents join in the reflective conversation, and producers decide which moments from the film are brought back and how these clips sit beside later comments. Meanwhile, the adult leader sets up an interpretive frame in the scene by asking the group to evaluate their behavior. Audiences first see the conflict and then encounter it again through the participants' later reflections.

The structure makes self-reflection readable, and it also shows a preference for coherence on the part of television. Actual conflicts can be unsolvable, paradoxical, or repetitive. Instead, editing can be used to reduce them into a developmental narrative of emotional regulation and growth.

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6. Constructing identity through contrast: Cui and Chan

Toward the latter half of the show, producers arranged unstructured one-on-one dialogues between the adolescents. The exchange unfolds on a grassland field, where two participants sit facing each other with no adults or other peers present within the frame. The wide, quiet nature setting builds a space for intimate, personal reflections on aspirations and self-identity.

The producers' pairing of Cui from Yunnan and Chan from Hong Kong brings their different aspirations into focus. Cui hopes to become a detective to pursue justice and peace, while Chan wants to become a manga artist but doubts its social value. Cui responds, "Honestly, I don't really know much about this field, but I sincerely wish you all the best in becoming an amazing artist" [3].

Their conversation initially sets two value frameworks beside one another, as Cui speaks in terms of justice and social contribution, whereas Chan expresses self-doubt over whether a career in digital illustration can deliver meaningful social impact. Since regional background has already been foregrounded, audiences may be tempted to read the contrast through assumptions about upbringing, values, or social environment.

That contrast is complicated by Cui's oblique denial of difference as judgement, by offering only encouragement. Identity exploration is an important part of adolescence [6], which makes Chan's hesitation meaningful as a televised representation of uncertainty about future identity and social value.

This exchange is well introduced with peer support. The relevance of such recognition is consistent with research linking social connectedness to adolescent well-being [5]. *Natural Research* highlights varying backgrounds, keeps contrasting answers, and lets the dialogue conclude positively with encouragement, thus giving an ordinary conversation a wider scope of identity, values, empathy, and mutual understanding.

7. Discussion

Natural Research matters to children-media-and-health analysis primarily because of what it represents and how. Audiences encounter unfamiliar environments, disagreement, uncertainty, and friendship as the material through which they can think about adolescent development. The program's production choices shape how viewers understand each experience. By showing the teenagers' early discomfort and their later adjustment in sequence, it presents adaptation as a process over time. It also replays earlier disagreements during the group discussion, allowing viewers to reconsider those conflicts through the participants' later reflections. The paired conversation between Cui and Chan connects their different career aspirations with peer recognition.

The Cui-Chan dialogue is especially helpful, as the supportive attitude is expressed as an ordinary social response, showing acceptance and encouragement. Such scenes can provide informal educational value for adolescents, as reality TV can serve as critical media learning material [10].

8. Conclusion

Natural Research demonstrates how youth-oriented reality television transforms adolescent experiences into a media narrative. Through its production choices, the program makes adaptation, conflict, identity, and peer support visible to audiences. These narratives can invite reflection on adolescent development, while also encouraging viewers to overlook regional and cultural differences or to see conflicts as more resolved than they may be in reality. The central question is what television leads audiences to see, and what it encourages them to overlook.

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These findings are limited to one reality show in China aimed at young audiences, so the conclusions are difficult to generalize to the genre as a whole. The analysis is also restricted to the broadcast text. In the absence of raw footage and production materials, producers' intentions can only be inferred. Comparative studies could help elucidate whether similar trends are found elsewhere, while interviews with producers or editors could shed light on how specific editorial decisions are made. Audience reception remains another unresolved issue. Interviews, focus groups, or surveys might explore viewers' perceptions of regional variation and peer-support messages.

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