

Empowering Female Voices: The Impact of Produce 101 on Self-Worth and Gender Equality

Shiyu Pan^{1,a,*}

¹*Institute of Culture Communication and Art, China Women's University, Beijing, China*

a. 1146965547@qq.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Reality television has become a dominant cultural force, influencing views and ideals. *Produce 101*, a Chinese talent competition show, goes beyond entertainment to empower its female competitors and promote gender equality. This qualitative study dives into the show's mechanics, examining its impact on female participants' self-esteem and its role in shaping viewer attitudes. Based on 10 in-depth interviews with senior talent show fans, the study investigates audience involvement, candidate development, and societal standards. The findings highlight the show's significant impact on empowering women and promoting gender equality narratives, providing valuable insights for individuals considering reality TV participation, emphasizing the importance of self-confidence, resilience, and determination. It showcases how contestants on *Produce 101* leveraged their experiences to advance their careers and advocate for gender equality, inspiring others to pursue their passions and embrace empowerment. By highlighting the transformative potential of reality television, this study underscores its role in shaping a more inclusive and equitable society, demonstrating that reality TV can be a powerful platform for social change.

Keywords: Produce 101, gender equality, self-value, societal norms, talent competition.

1. Introduction

Reality television has emerged as a dominating cultural force, shaping societal attitudes and beliefs, with talent competitions standing out as significant forums for individuals to showcase their abilities and influence perceptions of self-worth and gender equality. *Produce 101*, a Chinese reality show, exemplifies this by empowering female contestants and defying traditional gender stereotypes.

The study explores how *Produce 101* impacts female participants' self-esteem and promotes gender equality. By employing qualitative methods, we analyze production components, contestant interactions, and audience involvement. Through interviews with 10 avid and senior talent show fans, we aim to gain insights into audience perspectives and contestant experiences, contributing to a deeper understanding of reality TV's role in empowerment and societal attitude modification.

Reality television has evolved into a potent medium deeply embedded in social and cultural dynamics. Talent competition shows not only entertain but also provide a platform for individuals to exhibit their abilities, shaping notions of self-worth and gender equality. *Produce 101* goes beyond entertainment to emphasize the intrinsic value of female competitors, boosting empowerment and transforming societal perceptions.

The research aims to uncover the complexities within *Produce 101* that influence attitudes towards female self-worth and gender equality. By evaluating the show's mechanics, production tactics, and audience engagement, this study contributes to a sophisticated understanding of how media, culture, and societal change intersect.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Female Contestants' Self-Perceived Value Systems

A complex issue that explores the individual experiences of the female contestants, female empowerment, and larger ramifications for women's roles in society is the effect of *Produce 101* on the female contestants' self-perceived value systems. This subject highlights how reality televisions, in particular *Produce 101*, give competitors a chance to reinvent their sense of value and disobey conventional gender conventions.

One significant aspect of the contestants' journeys on *Produce 101* is their transformation from aspiring trainees to confident performers. The rigorous training and intense competition push these young women to discover their strengths, confront their weaknesses, and ultimately, believe in their abilities [1]. This evolution is a testament to the show's ability to foster self-confidence and resilience among its participants.

Moreover, *Produce 101* contributes to reshaping societal perceptions of female empowerment. By showcasing the diverse talents, dreams, and determination of its contestants, the show challenges conventional gender stereotypes that limit women's aspirations [2]. Contestants become role models who inspire other women to pursue their goals fearlessly, emphasizing that talent knows no gender boundaries.

Beyond personal growth, the empowerment experienced by female contestants also raises questions about gender roles and expectations in modern society. As these women rise to prominence in the entertainment industry, they challenge traditional notions of women's roles, encouraging viewers to reconsider preconceived ideas about what women can achieve [3]. The show's emphasis on the intrinsic value of female contestants disrupts age-old stereotypes, fostering a more inclusive and equitable perspective on gender.

Furthermore, the impact of *Produce 101* on female contestants extends beyond the show's duration. Many former participants continue to pursue successful careers in the entertainment industry, breaking through glass ceilings and paving the way for future generations [4]. Their resilience and determination send a powerful message to society that women can achieve greatness when given the opportunity and support.

In conclusion, *Produce 101* provides female participants with a transforming platform through fostering their growth in self-assurance, resiliency, and feeling of empowerment. Their experiences reexamine gender expectations and the place of women in society. This subject exemplifies the wider cultural effects of reality television since it helps to challenge gender norms and provide an inclusive and empowering atmosphere for women.

2.2. Empowering via Social Media

Produce 101 has left a profound mark on audience engagement, significantly impacting individual perceptions and societal attitudes regarding gender equality and self-worth. This transformation is facilitated by the pivotal role of social media platforms in enabling interactions and discussions among fans and viewers.

2.2.1. The Social Media Revolution and its Impact on Gender Equality

A closer investigation of the show's impact on individual perspectives and societal attitudes towards gender equality and self-worth reveals the enormous impact of *Produce 101* on viewer involvement. Social media platforms, which enable interactions and conversations among fans and viewers, are crucial in allowing this shift.

Social media platforms like Twitter, Weibo, and Instagram serve as virtual meeting grounds for *Produce 101* fans to share their thoughts and emotions about the contestants and the broader themes of the show [5]. Through hashtags, fan accounts, and real-time commentary, these platforms create a sense of community that transcends geographical boundaries, fostering a global conversation about the empowerment of female contestants.

One striking aspect of this engagement is the emotional investment viewers develop in the contestants. Fans not only support their favorite participants but also empathize with their struggles and triumphs, forging a personal connection with these young women [6]. This emotional resonance further strengthens the show's impact, as viewers internalize the message of female empowerment.

In addition to emotional connections, social media also allows viewers to participate in polls, surveys, and discussions that delve into the broader implications of *Produce 101* [7]. These engagements extend beyond the confines of the show, addressing questions about gender roles and societal expectations. Viewers actively seek to understand how the show reflects and influences real-world gender dynamics.

As viewers engage in these conversations, they contribute to a growing body of knowledge regarding the show's effects on gender attitudes [8]. The study titled "Portrayals of Female Contestants on *Produce 101* Korea: A Content Analysis of Image and Role Stereotypes" provides valuable insights into the impact of *Produce 101* on gender attitudes and the content analysis of image and role stereotypes related to female contestants [8]. The conclusions drawn from this research are as follows: "Existence of Gender Stereotypes" The study reveals the presence of gender stereotypes associated with female contestants in the Korean version of *Produce 101*. These stereotypes may include perceptions of traditional gender roles and expectations. This finding highlights the importance of critically examining the portrayal of women in reality TV shows like *Produce 101*. The insights from this study contribute significantly to our understanding of how media representations, such as those seen in "Produce 101," can influence and perpetuate gender stereotypes. This knowledge is valuable for researchers and advocates working towards promoting more equitable and empowering portrayals of women in the media. Researchers can harness this wealth of data to gain insights into the evolving perceptions of gender roles and the impact of reality TV on societal norms. The audience's participation, therefore, becomes an essential component of the show's broader societal influence.

Ultimately, *Produce 101* goes beyond mere entertainment to inspire a deep shift in audience engagement. Social media platforms act as catalysts for dialogues and emotional connections, allowing viewers to rethink their gender roles and self-worth. The audience's combined voice magnifies the show's messages, transforming it into a strong force for change in the field of gender equality. Viewers actively shaping the conversation highlight reality TV's power to influence societal change and shape cultural narratives.

2.2.2. Social Media and Fan Communities

Social media platforms and fan communities play a dynamic and influential role in shaping audience impressions and amplifying the values of female empowerment and gender equality within *Produce 101*.

Fan communities provide a space for enthusiasts to express support for female contestants through fan art, fanfiction, and fan-created content, deepening emotional connections and contributing to the discourse on gender representation [9] .

Moreover, these fan communities serve as hubs of activism and advocacy, organizing campaigns to promote favorite contestants and advocate for gender equality in the entertainment industry [10] . They use social media as a tool for mobilization and raising awareness about gender issues.

The power of fan communities extends to influencing industry stakeholders as they grow and influence, potentially leading to changes in how female contestants are portrayed and treated in reality TV [11]. Additionally, fan-generated content and commentary contribute to academic discourse surrounding *Produce 101* and its impact on gender attitudes, providing qualitative data for in-depth analysis by researchers [12].

In summary, *Produce 101* has not only transformed audience engagement but has also ignited a conversation on gender equality and self-worth, with social media and fan communities serving as catalysts for change. These networks actively shape the entertainment industry and promote fair representation of women in media.

2.3. Long-Term Impact and Legacy

The long-term impact and legacy of *Produce 101* on female competitors and society extends beyond the show's seasons. This theme investigates how former contestants' experiences continue to impact their jobs, objectives, and society notions of gender roles.

One notable aspect of the show's legacy is the continued success of many female contestants in the entertainment industry [4]. Former participants leverage their exposure on *Produce 101* to build lasting careers as singers, actors, and entertainers. This not only underscores the show's role as a launching pad but also challenges industry norms that might have previously hindered women's advancement.

Furthermore, former contestants often become advocates for gender equality and female empowerment [13]. In the study by Suh, Y., & Lee, H. [13], several former contestants from *Produce 101* have become advocates for gender equality and female empowerment. One notable example is Chungha, who gained popularity through the show and has since used her platform to champion women's rights and empowerment. Another example is Somi, who, after her participation in the program, has actively promoted gender equality causes and encouraged young girls to pursue their dreams in the entertainment industry. These contestants' journeys on *Produce 101* contributed to their roles as advocates for female empowerment. They use their platforms to speak up for societal issues, becoming influential voices in conversations about women's rights and representation in media, which demonstrates the lasting impact of the show's empowerment message.

The legacy of *Produce 101* also includes a broader shift in the entertainment industry's approach to gender representation [14]. The success stories of former contestants serve as examples of women breaking through traditional barriers, encouraging producers to consider diverse talent and narratives, which has a ripple effect on casting decisions and storytelling, fostering a more inclusive and empowering media landscape.

Moreover, the show's legacy is reflected in the ongoing discussions and academic research continuing to inspire. Scholars and researchers continue to investigate the show's impact on gender attitudes, empowerment, and representation, contributing to a growing body of knowledge [15]. This enduring scholarly interest signifies the show's enduring relevance and influence.

In summary, *Produce 101* leaves a lasting legacy that extends far beyond its seasons. Former contestants' sustained success, campaigning for gender equality, and influence in the entertainment business highlight the show's enduring significance. Furthermore, ongoing study assures that the

show's impact will be analyzed and comprehended in the context of shifting gender dynamics and media representation.

2.4. Gaps in the existing research

2.4.1. Limited Geographic Scope

Many studies predominantly focus on the impact of *Produce 101* within specific regions, such as Korea, thereby limiting the generalizability of findings to a broader global context. Moreover, there remains a notable gap in research specifically examining the show's reception and effects in China. The show's influence extends across international boundaries, yet few studies explore its reception and effects in diverse cultural and societal settings. Without a broader geographic scope that includes regions like China, the research may overlook variations in audience engagement, societal norms, and the show's impact on gender perceptions in different regions.

2.4.2. Lack of Longitudinal Studies

The majority of studies reviewed offer insights into the immediate effects and short-term outcomes of *Produce 101* on contestants and viewers. However, there is a notable absence of longitudinal studies that track the long-term impact of participation in the show. Longitudinal research could provide valuable insights into how contestants' experiences on the show shape their careers, personal development trajectories, and continued advocacy for gender equality over time. Without longitudinal data, it is challenging to fully understand the sustained influence and lasting effects of reality TV participation on individuals and societal attitudes.

3. Research Questions

Therefore, three main research questions have been proposed as followed.

1. How do audience engagement and participation affect contender evaluations and outcomes?
2. Do the participants' self-perceived value systems correspond with prevailing societal standards, and how do these two dynamics interact?
3. What personal and professional development have female participants gained from participation in the show?

4. Methodology

The study has applied a mixed of both quantitative and qualitative methods, including both questionnaire surveys and interviews. A total of 150 people between the ages of 18 and 25 who exhibited an interest in talent shows were chosen to participate in the questionnaire study. In addition, 10 people were chosen from followers of talent shows on the social media network Weibo to participate in online interviews conducted by Tencent Meeting. These respondents were expected to have a thorough knowledge of talent contests, even going so far as to be fans who have financially backed their favorite contestants. Each interviewee received a modest gift (such as snacks) as thankfulness for their participation. The interviews were conducted one by one at a time, with each session lasting for 20 minutes on average.

Criteria for Selecting Interviewees have been listed as followed:

1. Active Weibo Users: Interviewees are dedicated users of Weibo, checking the platform more than 10 times a day and spending over 6 hours daily engaging with talent shows and related content. They have over 5 years of experience on Weibo and possess a deep understanding of the *Produce 101* program.

2. Influential "Chaohua" Participants: Each interviewee actively participates in and some even operate "chaohua" communities on Weibo, demonstrating significant engagement and influence within these fan communities.

3. Long-Term and Dedicated Fans: All interviewees have been dedicated fans for more than two years, investing substantial time and effort into promoting and supporting their favorite contestants on Weibo. They command a substantial following of over 50,000 fans, highlighting their influential online presence in the fandom community.

5. Findings and Results

The interviews conducted with ten individuals shed light on the diverse portrayals of female contestants on *Produce 101*. Through these discussions, several key themes emerged, highlighting the multifaceted nature of talent, ambition, and gender representation on the show.

5.1. Diverse Talents and Aspirations

The study reveals participants' admiration for the diverse talents showcased by female contestants on *Produce 101*, resonating with the sentiments of one interviewee who shared, "When I first saw the advertisement for *Produce 101* on Weibo, I found the show quite novel, so I clicked to watch it out of curiosity. Initially, it was just because the show showcased young people's talents and efforts, which I found interesting. Especially Wu Xuanyi's performance, it was amazing! Her confidence and talent on stage were truly unforgettable."

The participant's admiration for Wu Xuanyi's performances reflects the captivating nature of the talent showcased on the show, extending beyond traditional expectations. The interviewee's evolving fandom highlights the transformative impact of witnessing such diverse skill sets and aspirations, as they noted, "Each time she performed, it was a breathtaking experience. Not only was her musical talent outstanding, but her stage presence was also impressive. Her performances gave me a lot of surprises and inspiration. Gradually, I became her fan, regarding her as the most eye-catching star on the show."

Moreover, the participant's reflections on the show's influence on gender perceptions and equality underscore its broader significance. By emphasizing talent and effort over gender stereotypes, *Produce 101* challenges societal norms and promotes inclusivity, as expressed by the interviewee: "The outstanding performances of contestants like Wu Xuanyi show that gender should not be a criterion for judgment."

Ultimately, the participant's journey of self-discovery and heightened awareness of gender equality exemplifies the meaningful impact of reality television in shaping viewers' perspectives and aspirations. Their experience highlights how exposure to diverse talents and narratives can inspire individuals to challenge gender limitations, embrace self-worth, and advocate for equality, thus contributing to a more inclusive and empowered society.

5.2. Challenges and Resilience

The study uncovers the challenges faced by female participants on *Produce 101*, with interviewees highlighting their resilience and determination amidst fierce competition. One interviewee remarked, "This program indeed provides more opportunities for women to showcase their talents. Wu Xuanyi's resilience and confidence in the face of various challenges are truly admirable. They not only showcase their musical and dancing talents on stage but also convey a positive, brave, and independent spirit."

The interviewee's admiration for Wu Xuanyi's resilience reflects the remarkable determination exhibited by contestants throughout the competition. Despite facing various tests and obstacles, their

perseverance in pursuing their dreams leaves a profound impact. As expressed by another interviewee, "These female contestants continuously face various tests and challenges, and their response and perseverance inspire me. They persist in pursuing their dreams, undeterred by any difficulties. This made me reassess the status of women in society and their potential".

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of fair competition and judging criteria in promoting gender equality. Interviewees recognized the program's role in breaking gender biases by providing a level playing field for contestants of all genders. As one interviewee stated, "The fairness of competition and judging criteria demonstrated by this program is one of its important ways to promote gender equality. Whether it is the older contestants or the younger ones, they showcase their talents under the same rules and standards, breaking the bias of gender in ability assessment".

The acknowledgment of outstanding performances transcending gender stereotypes underscores the program's contribution to gender equality. By focusing on contestants' confidence, strength, and talent regardless of gender, *Produce 101* reshapes perceptions and inspires viewers to value individual abilities over gender limitations. As one interviewee concluded, "This attitude of treating all contestants equally not only motivates more people to pursue their dreams but also profoundly influences viewers' understanding of gender equality. Such programs provide a new perspective for audiences and society, emphasizing the importance of personal talent and strength over gender. This transformation reinforces my belief that gender should not be a standard for measuring ability and worth".

5.3. Empowerment and Self-Expression

The study delves into how *Produce 101* served as a platform for female contestants to authentically express themselves and challenge societal norms. Interviewees shared insights on the diverse range of attitudes, career pursuits, and social cognitions exhibited by contestants, highlighting the program's role in fostering empowerment and encouraging viewers to embrace individuality and pursue their dreams.

One interviewee noted, "This diversity showcases the broad differences in self-awareness and self-worth among women. On platforms like *Produce 101*, female contestants present various attitudes towards life, career aspirations, and societal perceptions through their performances and character traits."

This sentiment underscores how the show provides a space for contestants to showcase their authenticity and diversity, whether emphasizing traditional feminine traits or focusing on professional abilities and confidence. The diversity portrayed not only on stage but also in societal perceptions reflects the varied cognitive and value systems among women.

Moreover, the study acknowledges the challenges faced by contestants when attempting to break free from traditional gender expectations. As one interviewee expressed, "Some contestants may face skepticism from the audience or society when trying to break out of traditional female frameworks because it differs from society's expectations of women. They may choose to showcase a more independent or powerful side, which may challenge inherent notions of femininity and be deemed too bold or conflicting with mainstream values".

This observation highlights the complex interaction between self-awareness and societal standards. Contestants navigate a delicate balance between maintaining their uniqueness and conforming to societal expectations, aiming to present the most suitable image on stage. In this process, they undergo self-exploration and cognitive shifts, gradually finding ways to align with their own identity while meeting audience expectations.

In essence, the study underscores the significance of *Produce 101* in providing a platform for female empowerment and self-expression, while also shedding light on the nuanced dynamics of self-awareness and societal expectations. Through the diverse portrayals of contestants, the program

encourages viewers to respect and appreciate the individual differences among women, recognizing their diverse values and potentials in society.

5.4. Gender Representation and Stereotypes

The study delves into the transformative impact of *Produce 101* in challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes, as evidenced by participants' reflections. One interviewee shared, "As I delved deeper into *Produce 101*, my views on women's self-worth and gender equality underwent significant changes. The outstanding performances of Wu Xuanyi and other female contestants made me realize that gender should not be a hindrance to personal development and talent expression".

The participant's perspective highlights how the program broadened their outlook on women's capabilities, showcasing female contestants' confidence and strength in various fields. As they noted, "The confidence and professionalism displayed by these female contestants on the show gave me a new perspective, understanding that women can demonstrate equal or even superior abilities compared to men in various domains. Their unique charm and professional standards shattered traditional gender stereotypes, prompting me to reconsider women's roles in society".

Furthermore, the study acknowledges the contestants' resilience and courage in challenging gender norms, inspiring viewers to pay closer attention to gender equality issues. As expressed by the interviewee, "Their confidence and efforts were not only for success in the competition but also sent a signal to society that women have the right to pursue their dreams, free from gender limitations".

Through viewing the program, participants gained deeper insights into the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment. The contestants' performances not only influenced the entertainment realm but also sparked reflections on societal gender roles and empowerment. This deeper understanding of gender equality inspired participants to actively support and engage in initiatives promoting gender equality.

Moreover, *Produce 101* emerges as a platform challenging societal gender norms and empowering women. By showcasing the diverse talents and determined pursuit of dreams by female contestants, the program prompts profound discussions and reflections on gender roles and women's status in society. This portrayal of women's diversity and potential holds the potential to foster deeper discussions and awareness of gender equality in society.

5.5. Audience Engagement and Impact

The study sheds light on the significant influence of audience participation on contestant evaluations and outcomes in *Produce 101*, as articulated by interviewees. One participant remarked, "Audience engagement in *Produce 101* plays a crucial role in assessing contestants and determining the final results. Their votes and support directly influence the judgments of judges and the program's evaluations".

This observation underscores the pivotal role of audience reactions during the show. Through voting, viewers select their favorite contestants, significantly impacting their rankings and eventual outcomes. At times, the audience's preferences may diverge from the judges' opinions, potentially leading to strong contestants receiving lower rankings or elimination from the competition.

For instance, a contestant may deliver exceptional performances on the show but fail to secure a spot due to the audience's voting results. Conversely, a contestant with average skills may continue in the competition or even advance to later stages due to strong audience support. This phenomenon is common, highlighting the importance of the audience in determining the final outcome.

The participants' insights highlight how audience engagement shapes the trajectory of the competition and underscores the show's impact on broader conversations about female empowerment and gender equality. Through social media engagement and fan communities, viewers actively

contribute to discussions on feminism and women's rights, further amplifying the show's influence beyond entertainment.

6. Discussion

In talent competitions such as *Produce 101*, audience engagement and participation are pivotal. The audience wields influence over contestant evaluations and final outcomes through their votes. This democratization of talent assessment not only shifts power dynamics but also promotes inclusivity based on public sentiment.

Moreover, female contestants on *Produce 101* actively challenge gender norms as they navigate the competition. They redefine self-worth based on talent rather than conforming to traditional roles. Their journey mirrors broader societal shifts towards gender equality and inclusivity, highlighting the evolving perceptions of women's capabilities in modern society.

Furthermore, participation in *Produce 101* fosters significant personal development among female contestants. It enhances their confidence, skills, and resilience, providing them with a platform that elevates their visibility in the entertainment industry. This empowerment enables them to break barriers and inspire others, contributing to a more diverse representation of talent in media.

Additionally, shows like *Produce 101* play a crucial role in challenging traditional gender stereotypes. By showcasing diverse female talents and promoting inclusivity, they inspire societal change towards greater gender equality. This representation not only recognizes but also celebrates women's capabilities, reshaping cultural attitudes and fostering a more inclusive society.

Furthermore, beyond entertainment, *Produce 101* influences societal attitudes by highlighting the talents and aspirations of its female contestants. It fosters empathy among male viewers and sparks critical conversations about gender roles and equality, illustrating the profound impact of media representation on societal values.

Lastly, while *Produce 101* contributes significantly to challenging gender norms, achieving lasting societal change requires a multifaceted approach. It necessitates comprehensive efforts across policy, education, and advocacy to dismantle barriers to gender equality systematically. Only through these concerted efforts can we ensure sustained progress towards a more equitable and inclusive society.

7. Conclusion

In addition to its role as entertainment, *Produce 101* serves a profound purpose in empowering female participants and advocating for gender equality narratives. Audience engagement, which shapes contender evaluations, fosters broader discussions on societal norms and gender dynamics.

Moreover, the show's emphasis on empowerment aligns with prevailing societal aspirations for gender equality. Despite varying participant backgrounds and values, there exists a unified desire for inclusivity and empowerment, reflecting evolving societal standards.

Furthermore, female contestants on *Produce 101* undergo significant personal and professional development. They experience enhanced self-esteem and gain valuable professional opportunities through their participation. As a transformative platform, the show challenges traditional gender roles and promotes empowerment within the entertainment industry.

Additionally, this study highlights the transformative power of reality television in shaping societal views and empowering female participants. Within a cultural context increasingly focused on gender equality, *Produce 101* stands as a testament to the potential of media to bring positive social change and foster empowerment.

Theoretical perspectives on feminism, including post-feminism (postmodern feminism) and liberal feminism, emphasize their inclusivity and social progressiveness, significantly inspiring this research. By examining how *Produce 101* enables female contestants to challenge societal expectations and

redefine their roles, this study contributes to broader discussions on feminist theory and media representation. It underscores the importance of media platforms in amplifying voices, reshaping narratives, and advocating for gender equality, thereby promoting a more inclusive and equitable society.

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