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## Engagement as performance

### Implications and challenges of studying reaction media

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## **Engagement as performance: implications and challenges of studying reaction media**

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Beyond precursors like *Kids react* (Youtube, 2010-) and *Gogglebox* (Channel 4, 2013-), reaction media has become increasingly popular, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. The performance of reactions (to music, television shows etc.), alongside the engagement with such reactions have flourished into becoming a complex multi-platform media phenomenon.

Approaching this seemingly simple genre across platforms such as YouTube and Patreon, we use tools from phenomenology including digital ethnography and audience research methods, to understand what this is and what audiences do with it (Mittell 2004; Hermes 2005). In its most basic form: one or more persons react while viewing, consuming or listening to something in front of a camera; and audiences then interact with them and each other through comments and requests. The many forms identified so far suggests the need for a holistic exploration of reaction media, to understand the vast variety of reactions and their popularity – everything from unboxing consumer products; tasting strange brands of alcohol, candy or hot sauce; to listening to foreign music or watching old television shows. Beyond their key relations to fan culture, reaction videos invite and achieve transnational engagement.

In this paper, we focus on reactions to popular culture texts. Using two cases; reactions to the “Danish symphony orchestra’s rendition of *The good, the bad the ugly*” (Youtube, 2018) and to television show *Young Royals* (Netflix, 2021-), we discuss theoretical and methodological implications of studying reactions: where engagement itself is the performance, and the co-creation of experience is the purpose. By looking at the emergent relations between reactors and audiences we gain deeper understanding of fandom, and of the empathic and imagined relationship implied in sharing an experience.