NARRATIVE TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE 5G ERA
A Literature Review on the Development and Globalization of Chinese Web Series

SHANGMINGZHU ZHANG[1], HASRUL HASHIM[1], NURZIHAN BINTI HASSIM [1]
[1] National University of Malaysia, Malaysia

KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
Chinese web series *Digital media* *Cultural impact* *5G technology* *Audience engagement* *Systematic literature review (SLR)*	*This review paper systematically explores the significant evolution, and impact of Chinese's web series in the context of the rapid development of new media technology. The paper analyses the innovative production techniques and narrative developments enabled by 5G and digital streaming platforms. It reveals how web series have become a pivotal component of Chinese digital culture, reshaping entertainment consumption and offering new insights into the interactions between technology and media. Combining current trends and future technological innovations, this paper discusses the potential development trajectory of web series in China.*

1. Introduction

Global media consumption patterns are rapidly evolving, which marks a clear shift from traditional media to digital platforms. The proliferation of Internet technologies and mobile devices has changed the way audiences interact with media (García-Perdomo, 2021). China's entertainment industry, known for its quick adaptation to technological innovations, has embraced web series as a key format to cater to a digital-savvy audience (Zhang & Mastromartino, 2023).

The emergence of web series in China can be traced back to the early 2010s, when internet penetration began to soar and streaming platforms like iQiyi and We TV began to dominate the entertainment landscape (Zhang, 2019). Leveraging the widespread availability of high-speed internet and the expansion of 5G networks, these platforms provide unprecedented access to a wide variety of content, shaping a new culture of media consumption that prioritizes convenience, immediacy, and interactivity (Chen, 2022).

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic caused heavy strike on domestic film & TV industry in 2020. "Online" has become a new working environment. Traditional movies and Web series were shifted to the Internet, and the setting of series was shortened, while the pandemic was found to be a key point of qualitative change instead of the beginning of change. The pandemic caused the elimination of original production bases and decrease in the output of the film & TV industry, the consumers transferred the consumption scenes rather than disappearing, and the receptive context of audiences changed. The ecological organization for movies & TVs would have comprehensive innovation in the face of new environment, and it had been the general trend of shift to the Internet (Zhao & Lv 2020). The domestic pandemic entered a relatively stable period in April 2020, and 5G was gradually popularized. Thanks to the features of 5G like large bandwidth, low delay, wide connection, deepened digitization and improved visual experience, the short-form video industry benefited from a new round of favorable period, and film & TV industry would, by feat of the trend, greet new opportunities, innovate film & TV contents, update production methods, change business models and ground-breaking publicity & release method provide great convenience for the emergence and development of Chinese web series (Sheng 2021), and also pose certain impacts on the expressive context of film & Web series.

In addition, cultural factors also play a crucial role in the development of Chinese online dramas. Unlike traditional TV dramas, web series often explores themes and narratives that resonate with young people who are looking for content that reflects their own experiences and values (Burkholder et al., 2021). This generational shift in audience preferences has encouraged filmmakers to innovate in storytelling and format, further differentiating Chinese web series from its global counterparts and traditional media formats (Webster, 2014).

As mentioned above, the development of Chinese web series cannot be separated from the role of technology and culture. In this context, Chinese web series also reflect current social norms and trends. There is a dynamic interplay between the creator, the audience and the technology (Kackman et al., 2010).

Under the context of digital media, web series developing needs more attention from academic era. This attention can help to understand its impact and potential dynamics. The current situation is the academic literature remains underdeveloped, though the web series have taken popularity and economic. So, it's important to focus on the analysis about the technical, cultural and narrative dimensions (Zhao, 2017). The aim of this paper is to bridge the gap, and examining the evolution about Chinese web series.

There are three parts about the analysis. The first is focus on the impact of the application of technology on content delivery. It can provide insights into future media trends (Ulin, 2019). Then, this review explores the cultural implications of web series, which are critical in shaping and reflecting societal values and narratives. Besides, web series explore unique topics and social issues, providing a platform for diverse voices in Chinese society (Williams, 2012). Analyzing these aspects helps us better understand contemporary Chinese culture and its digital media. Meanwhile, the paper also focuses on how audience engagement is evolving. The interactivity of web series, along with their reliance on online platforms, creates new viewer habits and expectations. This shift changes the traditional ways audiences interact and engage with media (Boursier et al., 2021).

This review provides insights into the factors driving the popularity and growth of web series. It aims to help content creators, media strategists, and policymakers. These insights are essential for creating

effective strategies and policies. They support sustainable growth and innovation in China's digital entertainment industry.

1.1. Historical Overview

In the context of new media, the narrative of TV series has changed. Traditional web series are transforming into online short dramas. And audiences after 2020 are more willing to watch web series. Traditional web series originated late, but they developed extremely quickly. The concept of the Web series originated in the United States in the 1930s, and it developed into a more mature serial format by the 1950s (Yalkin, 2021). Audiences love this new audiovisual mode. Therefore, it has developed very rapidly. In the 1980s, the economic model of American television dramas was already evident (Raphael, 2009). Web series in the 21st century is beginning to sprout. Patil and Surwade (2018) Argued that the emergence of the web has made technological networks and human interaction technology and social systems interconnected, and technological social systems have enhanced human cognition, communication, and cooperation systems. And web series had a new narrative model in the web 2.0 era. The development of Web 2.0 has indirectly triggered the collapse of traditional audiovisual content. The community capacity built by the Internet provides for widespread use of audiovisual formats. Web series is a new audiovisual format that meets the context of the Internet.

Since the early 2010s, the development of the Chinese web series has been marked by significant technological and cultural shifts. Due to strict broadcasting regulations and growing internet penetration, Web Series initially emerged as an alternative to traditional TV dramas (Yin, 2016), and quickly took advantage of the ever-expanding capabilities of the online platform. Major streaming sites like iQiyi, We TV, and Youku have led the way in offering unprecedented creative freedom and accessibility through web series (Xia & Hui, 2023). By the mid-2010s, with the surge in mobile internet usage and the proliferation of 4G technology, web series production and viewership had surged, reflecting younger viewers' preference for on-demand, mobile-friendly entertainment (Dhiman, 2023). The genres and themes explored in these series began to diversify, with a clear shift towards youth-centric contemporary issues that resonated deeply with urban audiences (Christian, 2014). This period also saw web series become a platform for experimental storytelling, using technology to engage audiences through interactive and multi-threaded storytelling (Rizvic et al., 2020). With the introduction of 5G technology in the late 2010s, the integration of higher quality streaming and enhanced interactive features became possible, further changing the production and consumption landscape of web series (Cao, 2023). This historical trajectory highlights not only the adaptability and innovation of the Chinese web series industry, but also their role in shaping modern Chinese pop culture and media consumption habits.

In recent years, China's web series market has shown a significant growth trend. In August 2024, the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) released its 54th *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China during the 2024 China International Big Data Industry Expo*. The report highlights significant growth in digital content consumption, particularly in paid entertainment. In the first half of 2024, the willingness to pay for web series, movies, and long-form videos increased substantially, with nearly 30% of users opting for paid services. Moreover, the micro web series industry witnessed rapid development, with the user base expanding to 576 million, accounting for 52.4% of internet users.

1.2. Scope of Review

The scope of this paper focus on China mainland. Due to the rapid transformation of Chinese web series after 2010 with the blessing of technology and media consumption patterns, the literature is framed after 2010 and prioritized after 2020 (Wang, 2019). This analysis is limited to web series distributed through major online platforms, such as iQiyi, We TV, and Youku. The design can help define the format and reach of these media products (Chen, 2020).

This review delves into a variety of genres and themes. No limit to the subject matter can directly exam how these series reflect and influence social norms and values in China (Zhang, 2023). Besides, this review does not include films that are not suitable for webisodes, films, and traditional TV series. But there are a few that provide perspective to help understand the unfettered nature of the web series (Jiang, 2019).

1.3. Research Objectives

1. To assess the specific impact of emerging technologies on the production and consumption patterns of web series.
2. To analyze how web series reflect and shape Chinese social values and norms at the cultural level.
3. To explore how audience engagement and interactivity shape the narratives and reception of web series.

1.4. Research Questions

1. How is 5G impacting web series production and interaction?
2. What cultural impacts do web series have in China?
3. What are the emerging trends in audience engagement in Chinese web series?

2. Methodology

2.1. Data Sources

This article provides a detailed review of the evolution and impact of Chinese web series using diverse data sources. Academic literature forms the base of this review. We source peer-reviewed articles and conference papers. Major databases include JSTOR, Web of Science, Taylor & Francis e-Journals (PPV), Google Scholar, CNKI, and other report agency. These sources offer insights into the technological impacts and cultural dynamics of web series.

Industry and government reports give additional insights. Industry reports show trends in audience behavior and market dynamics. Government publications help understand the regulatory environment. Legal documents are reviewed to assess how they affect web series production and distribution (Ashcraft, et al., 2020).

Table 1. Archive

Databases	Keywords used	Search results	Included
JSTOR	Ti:("web series") AND Date: (From2020CE To2024CE) AND Subject:(Cultural Studies" AND "Communication") AND Open Access	2	0
Web of Science	Topic ("web series"), AND Year Published ("2020-2024"), AND Web of Science Categories ("Film, Radio, Television" AND "Film, Radio & Television" AND "Communication") AND Open Access	41	1
Taylor & Francis e-Journals (PPV)	Title:("web series")AND Selected filters:2020-2024	16	1
Google Scholar	Find articles with all of the word "web series" in the title of the article AND Return articles dated between 2020-2024	581	16
CNKI	Subjects: ("网络剧" (web series)) AND Disciplines: ("Drama"AND "Journalism and Media") AND Publication Year:(2020-2024)	29	8
Others (Official website of the Chinese government and relevant departments)	Keywords: ("网络剧" (web series)) AND Data duration:(2010-2024)	328	5
Total		1030	31

Source: Data retrieved from JSTOR, Web of Science, Taylor & Francis e-Journals (PPV), Google Scholar, CNKI [2020-2024]., and official Chinese government websites through systematic searches conducted between [2010-2024].

2.2. Selection Criteria

This review adheres to strict selection criteria to ensure focused and rigorous analysis. We carefully select each source based on relevance and credibility. Sources are chosen for their relevance to Chinese web series. Each source's credibility is thoroughly assessed. We evaluate how each source contributes to understanding the web series phenomenon.

We focus on recent publications to capture the latest developments. Our primary focus is on sources published from 2020 onwards. Policy-related data grace period to after 2010. This emphasis captures advancements driven by rapid technological changes.

Sources are aligned with our specific research questions. We review sources for their relevance to our questions. Our questions focus on narrative evolution, audience dynamics, and technological impacts. Confirming relevance ensures we address the complex dynamics of web series effectively (Table 2).

Table 2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Category	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Publication Type	Peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, government reports, industry reports	Non-peer-reviewed articles, editorials, opinion pieces, blog posts
Language	English, Chinese	Articles in languages other than English and Chinese
Time Frame	Literature published from 2020 onwards, emphasizing recent developments; policy-related data from 2010 onwards	Publications before 2020, Policies before 2010
Relevance	Studies directly related to the evolution, technological impact, cultural dynamics, and audience engagement of Chinese web series	Studies not related to web series or focusing on other media formats
Subject Area	Works focusing on film, radio, television, communication, and film studies as relevant to Chinese web series	Works outside these subject areas or not applicable to the specific context of Chinese web series
Data Availability	Full-text available for access and review	Abstracts or summaries without full-text access

Source: Inclusion and exclusion criteria were formulated following systematic review methodologies (e.g., PRISMA) and adapted to the scope of this study on Chinese web series.

2.3. Systematic review process

The systematic literature review (SLR) commenced with the identification of records from various databases such as Web of Sciences, JSTOR, Google Scholar, CNKI, and other sources, totaling 1030 entries. This initial set was streamlined by removing 44 duplicate records, resulting in 986 unique articles. These were then meticulously screened against specified criteria that focused on relevance to the core research themes such as technological impacts, cultural dynamics, and market trends in web series. This screening process refined the selection to 464 records.

The analysis began by selecting 163 articles for a detailed full-text review. This review aimed to determine their relevance to key research factors, such as technological advancements and regulatory environments impacting web series. Through a thorough assessment, we narrowed these articles down to 31 studies. These were considered the most relevant and informative for the qualitative synthesis. This process captured both the breadth and depth of the current research landscape concerning web series. This meticulous approach ensures that our understanding of the field is comprehensive and grounded in carefully vetted scholarly work.

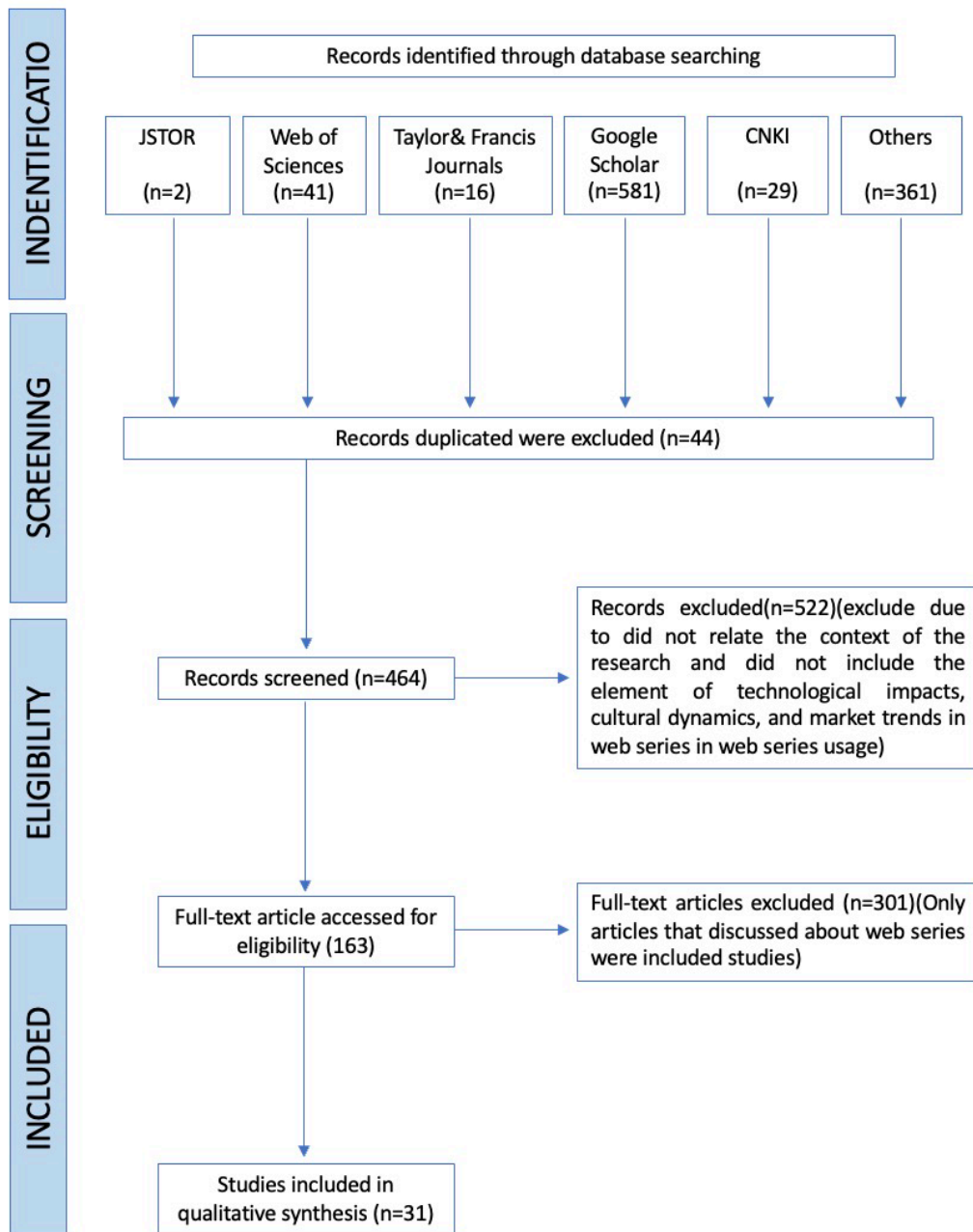**Figure 1.** Systematic Literature Review Flow Diagram.

Figure1: Systematic Literature Review Flow Diagram

Source(s): Adapted from Goodwin et al. (2021), with modifications based on the current study's systematic review methodology.

2.4. Data analysis

Data analysis is conducted through thematic lenses. The data is analyzed using three themes. This method explores the complex nature of web series. It helps reflect on the current state of digital media in China.

Figure 2. Studies/articles included in the review

Themes	Main Factor	Sub-factor	Cites	Findings
Technological impacts	Technological	5G Technology	Lee & Yu (2022)	Studies explore how 5G enhances streaming quality and interaction capabilities in web series, improving viewer engagement and content delivery.
		Advanced Digital Tools	Jiang, Wang & Tsai (2022); López-García et al. (2020); Castro et al. (2021); Burkholder et al. (2021); Wu, 2024; Kakkar & Nayak, 2019; Joshi and Dahiwal, 2021	Research discusses advancements in digital technologies that enable higher production quality and more interactive web series formats.
Cultural Dynamics	Cultural Factors	Traditional Cultural Elements	Yang (2020); Dai (2020); Niu & You (2020); Hu Wen (2020)	Papers analyze how web series incorporate traditional cultural elements to resonate with local audiences and preserve cultural heritage.
		Contemporary Social Issues	Deng & Xie (2020), Yang (2020), Wang & Gao (2020)	Studies focus on how web series address contemporary social issues, reflecting and influencing societal norms and values.
		Audience Insights and Preferences	Yang & Wang (2021), Author et al. (2020)	Research identifies evolving preferences and insights, emphasizing the importance of audience-centric content development.
	Creative Freedom	Creative Expression and Innovation	Ma Xiaoning (2020)	Papers celebrate the creative freedom in web series, showcasing innovative storytelling and format experimentation.
		Diversity of Content and Methodological Freedom	Cui (2020); Wu (2020)	Research emphasizes the diversity in web series content and the methodological approaches to studying them, highlighting the genre's adaptability and expansive reach.
Market Trends	Market Dynamics	Audience Behavior and Media Consumption	Raza et al., 2021; Baber & Fanea-Ivanovici, 2023	Papers examine changes in media consumption patterns and audience behaviors, particularly in response to technological advancements and social contexts.
		Market Trends and Industry Changes	Joshi, Dahiwal & Pagare (2021)	Studies track the impact of market trends on the production and popularity of web series, highlighting the influence of economic and industry dynamics.
	Regulatory Environment	Policy and Standards	National Radio and Television Administration (2010, 2012, 2014, 2017), China Netcasting Services Association (2024) Zhao, 2023	The Chinese government and relevant departments have great support for the development of web series, but there are also many regulations and restrictions
		Media Regulations and Compliance	Atarama-Rojas, Guerrero-Pérez, & Gerbolini, 2020	Paper reviews how compliance with regulatory standards shapes the content and structure of web series.
	Global Trends	International Collaboration and Influence	Burkholder et al., 2021	Studies detail collaborations across borders that enhance the creative and production quality of web series, influencing global media landscapes.
		Cultural Exchange and Global Market Reach	Kumari, Indora & Singh, 2024	Research explores how web series serve as a platform for cultural exchange and extend the global reach of local narratives.

Source: Developed by the author through a systematic review of academic literature on web series, incorporating studies retrieved from multiple databases (2024)

The figure 2 provided a structured overview of the scholarly contributions, which from three main themes: technological impact, cultural dynamics and market dynamics. And then divided into different main factors and sub-factors. This process offers a comprehensive details and findings. Each category addresses the specific elements and technologies that enhance web series production and distribution. Also, it explores the socio-cultural impacts and regulatory frameworks shaping this medium.

The comprehensive classification captures how these studies contribute to understanding the evolution, challenges, and potentials of web series in a rapidly digitalizing world. It provides valuable insights for creators, marketers, and policymakers engaged in the digital media landscape. This organized approach ensures readers can easily navigate, through the complexities and nuances of web series as a significant component of contemporary media studies.

In addition, policies have an ongoing impact on Chinese web series. Table 3 details a series of policies issued by the Chinese government, for web series and related audiovisual programs between 2010 and 2024. These policies have gradually formed more stringent industry standards and management frameworks, ranging from content management, actors' participation qualifications, to the standardization of broadcast models (State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2017; China Netcasting Services Association, 2024).

Table 3. Timeline of Chinese Web Series Regulations

Year	Regulation Title	Issuing Authority	Key Content
2010	"Television Drama Content Management Regulations"	National Radio and Television Administration	Restrictions on the number of episodes aired during prime time and daily limits, ensuring no single drama airs more than 6 episodes in the evening and daytime slots, and that drama broadcasts do not exceed 45% of total programming.

Year	Regulation Title	Issuing Authority	Key Content
2012	"Notice on Further Strengthening the Management of Web Series and Micro-films"	National Radio and Television Administration	Encouragement to produce positive web series and micro-films; enhanced access management for broadcasters, content review, review teams, and program supervision.
2014	"Notice on Strengthening the Management of Production and Broadcasting of Radio and Television Programs, Dramas, and Online Audio-Visual Programs"	National Radio and Television Administration	Prohibition of featuring individuals involved in illegal activities such as drug use or prostitution in productions and suspension of their works from broadcast.
2015	"One Drama, Two Channels" Policy	National Radio and Television Administration	Implementation of a policy limiting a TV drama to airing on no more than two satellite channels at prime time, with each channel limited to broadcasting no more than two episodes.
2017	"Notice on Further Strengthening the Creation and Broadcasting Management of Online Audio-Visual Programs"	National Radio and Television Administration	Additional requirements for the creation and broadcasting of online audio-visual programs.
2018	"Notice on Governance of Overly High Actor Salaries and Tax Evasion in the Film and Television Industry"	Ministry of Propaganda, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, National Tax Administration, National Radio and Television Administration, National Film Administration	Addressing recent issues in the film and television industry; regulating online programs, capping star salaries, integrating 5G technology.
2020	"Notice on Further Strengthening the Management of the Creation and Production of TV and Web Series"	National Radio and Television Administration	Elimination of undesirable themes; mandatory script completion promises during filing; sensitive content requiring written approval from relevant departments; advocating for TV and web series not to exceed 40 episodes, encouraging shorter series of 30 episodes or fewer.
2022	"Notice on Further Strengthening the Management and Creative Improvement Plan for Online Short Dramas"	National Radio and Television Administration	Official administrative licensing for web series; setting entry thresholds for web series broadcasts; redefining online short dramas as having a clear theme and storyline, with episodes lasting from a few seconds to about 15 minutes.
2023	"Multi-measure Governance of Online Short Dramas by the National Radio and Television Administration"	China Netcasting Services Association	Further standardization of TV dramas, web series, and online movies in planning, filing, and content review.

| Year	Regulation Title	Issuing Authority	Key Content
2024	"Latest Guidelines on Filing for Short Dramas"	National Radio and Television Administration	According to the latest notice from the National Radio and Television Administration, platforms must file previously unregistered short dramas with the provincial radio and television authorities by May 31, 2024. From June 1, 2024, unregistered and unreviewed short dramas may not be broadcast online.

Sources: National Radio and Television Administration, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2017; China Netcasting Services Association, 2024; Prospect Industry Research Institute, 2024.

These regulations, issued by authorities like the National Radio and Television Administration and other governmental bodies. They together outline significant shifts in policy from 2010 to 2024. These shifts reflect the evolving landscape of media consumption and production. And they aim to adapt to technological advancements, market dynamics, and socio-cultural trends.

3. Discussion & results

As a type of film and television, scholars have proved that the narrative mode of Chinese web series has undergone great changes. These changes are influenced and guided by three overarching factors: technology, cultural dynamics and audience engagement, and markets. And further, we can draw the conclusion of Figure3 and the influence of different factors on Chinese web series narration.

Figure 3. Key Findings Summary Visualization
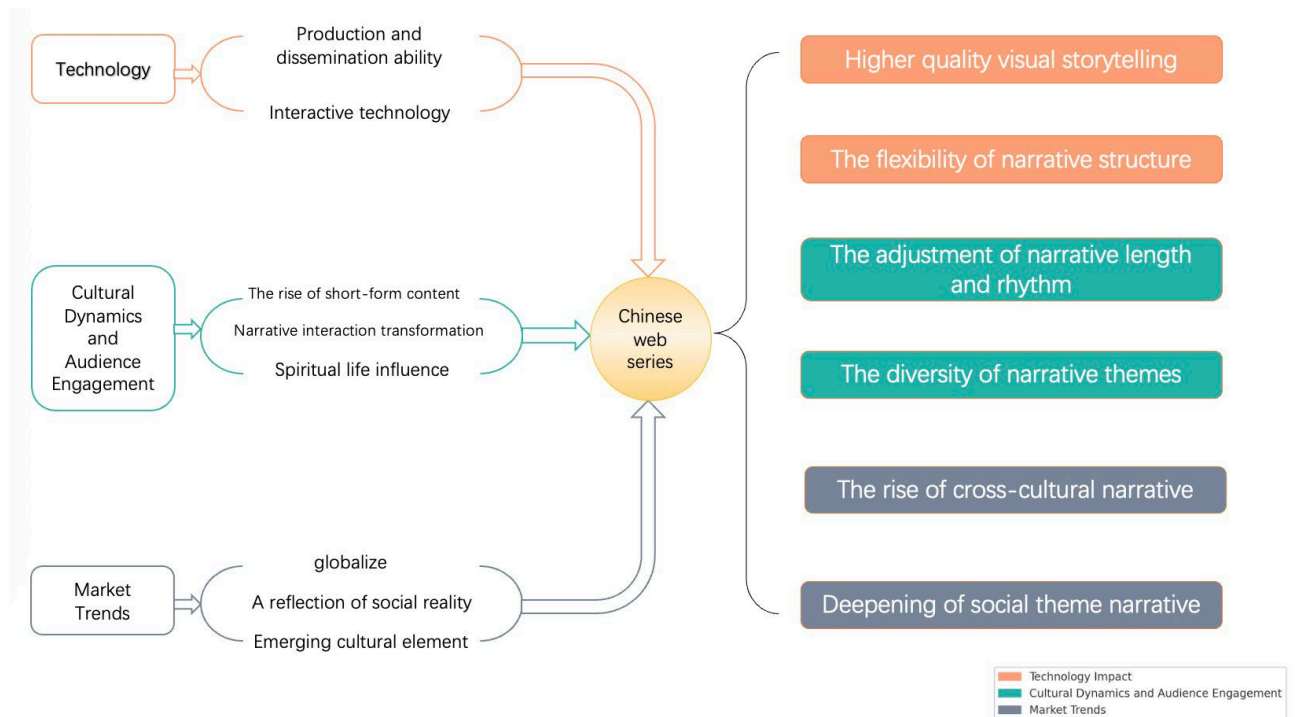
Source: Developed by the author based on the findings of the systematic literature review (2024).

3.1. Technology Impact

The introduction of 5G technology and advanced internet infrastructure has significantly reshaped the Chinese web series landscape. While Lee and Yu (2022) emphasize that 5G technology enhances streaming platforms by providing high-speed and low-latency streaming, thus greatly improving the viewing experience, Jiang, et al. (2022), along with López-García et al. (2020), take this a step further by

highlighting how these technologies have revolutionized the production side. They argue that new tools, such as high-definition cameras and sophisticated CGI, allow creators to produce content with film-quality standards more economically, thereby contributing to higher quality visual storytelling.

Castro et al. (2021) and Burkholder et al. (2021) both emphasize the impact of interactive elements on viewer engagement. Common forms of interaction include viewer voting and adventure-style choices. These elements make the viewing process more engaging. Additionally, the narrative structure has become more flexible. It reshapes the entire viewing experience. Wu (2024) supports these findings. He notes that adaptive streaming and personalized content algorithms have refined the viewing experience. These technologies adjust content based on individual preferences. As a result, there is an increase in viewer satisfaction.

Kakkar and Nayak (2019) discuss the role of mobile devices and improved data connectivity. These advancements have expanded the reach of web series. Now, viewers can interact with content in a variety of environments. This change has made web series more accessible and widespread. As a result, the market for web series has grown significantly.

Joshi and Dahiwal (2021) explore the use of sentiment analysis in web series and movies. Their study highlights how this technology adds subtle layers of audience engagement. Creators leverage machine learning algorithms to analyze viewer sentiment, enabling them to tailor content and marketing strategies effectively. This approach caters to diverse audience preferences, enhancing the impact of web series. Additionally, identifying content that resonates positively or negatively with viewers offers valuable insights into audience reception and content optimization.

In conclusion, these findings indicate that new technologies influence the web series environment. This influence affects the narrative. Improved technological quality enhances visual narratives. Advanced production techniques increase narrative flexibility. They make the narrative more interactive, personalized, and expansive. This redefines the viewer experience.

3.2. Cultural Dynamics and Audience Engagement

Traditional web series are evolving into newer, more dynamic formats. Since 2020, traditional plot structures have seen a significant decline. This change aligns with adaptations to the mobile Internet environment, which demands new narrative modes and communication spaces. Hongbin, Y (2020), Dai (2020), and Niu and You (2020) all agree that shorter, more concise web dramas are becoming the norm. These scholars note that the brevity and realism of these dramas suit the media convergence era well. Yang (2020) specifically mentions that shorter web series meet contemporary audience needs. This observation is supported by Hu (2020), who notes a growing preference for "short" content among online viewers. Additionally, the report from CNNIC (2024) indicates that "short and fast" content is gaining a larger market share.

The shift to shorter content responds not only to technological changes but also to evolving audience preferences. Deng and Xie (2020), as well as Yang, Z (2020), Wang and Gao (2020), assert that short web series fit today's Chinese market well. Yang, Z (2020) observes that the trend towards shorter, high-quality web series is becoming mainstream. This trend is driven by social, market, and audience factors. Wang and Gao (2020) support this view, noting that the rise of short web series mirrors broader social and market dynamics. As a result, the length and pacing of narratives are being adjusted. Shorter web series, growing in popularity, feature compact narrative structures and faster plot developments. These changes cater to the fragmented viewing habits of modern audiences. Dai (2020), Niu and You (2020) argue that the brevity model aligns with contemporary tastes. It also enhances viewer engagement by enabling faster and more intense storytelling.

The narrative shift in web series extends beyond length and pacing. Cui (2020), Huang (2011), and Wu (2020) discuss changes in how narratives explore online life. These scholars focus on everyday Internet-age experiences and concepts. Specifically, Cui (2020) highlights the role of web series in portraying minor characters with complex plots. He argues that these portrayals challenge utilitarian definitions and convey positive values. Furthermore, increased interaction between viewers and content creators has diversified narrative themes. This interaction leads to more varied and responsive storytelling.

Ma (2020) and Ma (2014) note that web series are becoming more refined, reflecting postmodernism. Ma (2020) suggests future web series will embrace a style with high replicability and low costs. This style was first proposed by Ma (2014). This trend also signals deeper audience

engagement. Goffman's theories highlight that viewers increasingly influence the content they watch. This dynamic shapes how media interacts with its audience.

In short, the shift in web series narratives toward shorter, more concise content. The diversity of themes also represents a broader adaptation to the needs of modern viewers. Contemporary Chinese viewers enjoy fast, engaging and diverse stories. This cultural preference makes them more responsive and diverse.

3.3. Market Trends

Curtin (2007) notes that the rapid globalization of content has allowed Chinese filmmakers to adopt and adapt narrative techniques from Western and other Asian markets. This has accelerated the growth of web series in China, especially in the 2020s. as the Internet, new media and decentralization have created fertile ground for this emerging form.

The growth of web serials in China has been remarkable. Gou and Liu (2019) report that by 2008, online video usage reached 71% with 180 million users, signaling the importance of online video in the digital sphere. Into the 2010s, online video grew even more rapidly, becoming the entertainment medium of choice for almost all Internet users. This shift is in line with the growing preference of most video users for "short, small and concise" content. Similarly, Di Giovanni (2020) argues that this trend has contributed to the flexibility of the web series format, allowing a wide range of experimental content to be quickly adapted to changing viewer preferences.

Chinese web series have gained global recognition for their unique narrative style and cultural content. Chen (2024) highlights their blend of traditional Chinese elements with modern storytelling techniques. This fusion represents a rise in cross-cultural narratives. These narratives combine global influences with local traditions. This mix creates new trends that appeal to diverse audiences. Li (2022) notes that many Chinese web series weave in philosophical and historical themes. These themes often draw from Chinese literature and folktales. Such themes are seldom explored in Western media. The flexibility of the web series format allows for cultural preservation. At the same time, it enables exploration of new narrative boundaries.

Chinese web series are now distinctively featuring deeper socially-themed narratives. Wang et al. (2023) note that these series often address contemporary social issues. They cover topics like urbanization, gender roles, and modern life pressures in China. Web series not only entertain but also prompt discussions on social challenges. These discussions occur through social media platforms. Atarama-Rojas et al. (2020) discuss transmedia narratives. These narratives turn viewers from passive observers into active participants. Such engagement deepens viewer loyalty. Social media plays a key role here. It allows real-time feedback from viewers. This feedback makes the narrative more interactive and responsive to viewer input.

Cultural factors play a significant role in the development of Chinese web series markets. Burkholder et al. (2021) claim that young viewers prefer content that mirrors their experiences and values. Baber and Fanea-Ivanovici (2021) highlight the importance of crowdfunding in digital media. Crowdfunding builds trust and engagement. It also enables supporters to fund projects that resonate with their values. This approach has significantly diversified the themes of web series stories.

China's influence over specific groups is an area of interest. Zhao (2023) discuss the challenges facing the LGBTQ community in China. These challenges illustrate the limitations web series creator's encounter. Despite a large potential audience, producing and sharing LGBTQ narratives is discouraged. This restriction affects how creators balance social commentary with the sociopolitical environment.

In summary, several factors influence the evolution of Chinese web series. Technological, cultural, and market drivers and constraints shape this complex landscape. The rise of cross-cultural narratives is a notable trend. Additionally, socially themed narratives are becoming deeper. These trends reflect a broader shift in storytelling. Entertainment is increasingly blending with cultural expression and social criticism.

4. Challenges and Opportunities

4.1. Challenges in the Industry

The Chinese web series industry faces significant challenges despite its rapid growth. Regulatory challenges are particularly prominent, impacting content creation and distribution. Strict censorship and evolving policies can restrict the exploration of diverse topics. These constraints may limit creative freedom and reduce the variety of content available to audiences (Gilardi,et al., 2018).

Market saturation is another critical challenge. The increasing number of episodes produced fuels intense competition for audience attention and advertising revenue. This competition risks lowering content quality as producers may rush production to capitalize on trends (Statista, 2021).

Technological limitations pose a significant barrier, especially for smaller companies. Limited access to advanced technology and capital can prevent small producers from investing in high-quality production resources. This issue creates a digital divide where only well-funded projects benefit from the latest technological advancements, disadvantaging independent creators (Gilardi & Lam, 2022). Creative challenges are also common, with constant innovation and the pressure to engage audiences lead to potential burnout among writers and producers (Kim, 2023). The need for fast content turnaround can hurt narrative depth and character development, potentially alienating audiences looking for more substantial entertainment.

In addition, there are a lot of limitations when it comes to academics. Previous research has limited itself to the research methods of text analysis. A group of academics such as Blakney (2020), Dusi (2016) and Jain and Kaur (2020), conducts qualitative research through semiotics. Jain and Kaur (2020) used the case study method to YouTube content Analyze. Dusi (2016) discusses the narrative of web series through content analysis from the theory of film semiotics. Blakney's (2020) research on web series is still based on semiotics and content analysis. Most of the research on web series uses qualitative research methods. A group of academics such as Wong Garcia and Gómez Fernández (2018), Tang and Zhang (2017), Grignaffini (2016), Yin and Yun (2013) With a new perspective, a textual analysis of web series from a rhetorical point of view was carried out. Wong García and Gómez Fernández (2018) analyze the discriminatory discourse patterns in American web series' *True Love Like Blood* from a rhetorical and narrative perspective. Tang and Xin (2017) analyze the narrative text of the American web series from a rhetorical perspective. Grignaffini (2016) analyzes suspense short drama series, exploring some of the major trends in American serialization from the perspective of genre criticism patterns. Yin and Yun (2013) analyze the role of rhetorical devices such as irony, satire, parody, hyperbole, puns, antonyms, etc. in the dialogue of American television series. But much of these studies are still based on content analysis. Previous research methods have rarely involved quantitative research methods and qualitative research methods involving data collection. In the relevant studies, the research methods are more limited.

Taken together, these challenges require the strategic attention of industry stakeholders, who must navigate the regulatory environment, ensure sustainable production practices, make appropriate use of technological advances, and foster a creative environment that can sustain the industry's long-term growth.

4.2. Future Opportunities

The Chinese web series industry is ripe with opportunities for growth and innovation. Technological advancements are key to transforming the industry. New technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality are changing production and consumption (Li, 2020). These technologies enhance the viewing experience by offering immersive and interactive features. There is a growing demand for engaging and innovative content formats.

International expansion offers vast potential for reaching global audiences. The quality and diversity of Chinese web series are improving. Partnerships with international streaming platforms are becoming more common (Zhang, 2023). This expansion diversifies revenue streams and enhances cultural exchange. It also increases the global influence of Chinese storytelling.

Niche content development allows for targeting specific audience segments. There is a wide diversity among Chinese audiences. This diversity creates opportunities to explore underrepresented genres and

themes. Targeting these niches can attract untapped viewer segments. Tailored content meets the unique preferences of these audiences, enhancing engagement (Sahu et al., 2021).

Sustainable production models can address market saturation and content dilution. Focusing on quality over quantity ensures sustainability and brand reputation (Hu, 2020). Sustainable practices reduce the environmental impacts of production.

Regulatory engagement is crucial for shaping supportive industry policies. Media companies can influence policy development by engaging with regulators. This engagement helps develop policies that support creative freedom while respecting norms (Doyle et al., 2021).

By capitalizing on these opportunities, the Chinese web series industry can enhance its local and global standing, fostering sustainable growth and cultural innovation.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Findings

This article examines the evolution and impact of Chinese web series. It covers technology, themes, and audience dynamics. Technological advancements have reshaped production and consumption of web series. 5G and advanced Internet technologies enhance production quality. These technologies support high-definition and interactive features. They change traditional consumption patterns, promoting immersive experiences.

Global trends influence web series themes and narratives. Chinese creators adapt international genres and narratives. This adaptation enables content to be localized to maintain broad appeal.

Chinese web series feature unique cultural elements. These elements appeal to local audiences. They attract global viewers as well. This global interest helps expand the presence of Chinese web series.

Audience preferences are evolving. Viewers now seek content that reflects real-life issues. They favor interactive and innovative web series. This shift is shaping new web series development.

The industry faces challenges. Strict regulations limit creative freedom. This reduces content diversity. Intense market competition exists. It often leads to similar content across series.

Despite these challenges, opportunities for growth and innovation remain. Expanding internationally could increase the global reach of these series. Developing niche content could attract specific audiences. Sustainable production models could promote long-term success. These models help maintain the viability of web series.

5.2. Critical Reflection

This literature review reveals significant gaps in the existing academic literature and regulatory frameworks regarding Chinese web series in the 5G era. Firstly, Literature is scarce. Especially in prominent databases like Web of Science, it underscores a critical gap in academic research. This indicates either an emerging field or a lack of comprehensive studies on how technological advancements like 5G are reshaping media landscapes in China.

Meanwhile, most of the articles on the narrative and audience participation of Chinese web dramas are in Chinese. This suggests an underlying language barrier and regional focus in current research. And, despite the abundance of literature on web series, studies specifically focusing on the Chinese context are rare. It highlights the need for more targeted research that addresses local cultural, regulatory, and technological nuances.

Additionally, the restrictive regulatory environment in China, particularly concerning LGBTQ themes. It limits the thematic diversity of web series, and reflects broader social and political challenges that content creators face in exploring and representing diverse identities and stories.

Lastly, while Chinese web series are well-received in terms of their duration and accessibility, substantial concerns regarding technological prowess, thematic depth, and narrative quality persist. It suggests considerable room for improvement in content quality and innovation.

5.3. Final Thoughts

This review discusses the current situation of Chinese web series. From the three major themes of technology, culture and market analysis, they have strong influence on the industry. There is no doubt that technology has dramatically changed the way industries are made and shared. This change reshapes audience needs and interactions, and culture is a key factor in determining these web series. The Review shows that while the Chinese government is supportive of the industry to a certain extent, there are still restrictions on many subjects. Such restrictions also make it impossible for Chinese web series to escape deeper social problems. And it also contradicts the needs of the audience. In addition, the industry is also facing a tough market environment. Together, these challenges limit creative freedom.

But the good news is that technological advances and global expansion present opportunities. Technology has greatly improved the quality and interactivity of web series. Global expansion is affecting the coverage of the industry. In addition, with the blessing of technology, creators can quickly find subjects with high audience participation. This enables Chinese web series to occupy a large number of markets under various soft powers.

In addition, this review systematically looks at how technology, culture, and regulation interact, which is important to those in the industry. These insights help support a sustainable, culturally rich media environment. Again, this is valuable to media scholars, industry experts, and policy makers alike.

References

Ashcraft, L. E., Quinn, D. A., & Brownson, R. C. (2020). Strategies for effective dissemination of research to United States policymakers: a systematic review. *Implementation Science,* 15, 1-17.

Atarama-Rojas, T., Guerrero-Pérez, E., & Gerbolini, V. (2020). Participation and Transmediality: Audience Influence on Web Series. *International Journal of Communication*, 14, 3614–3632.

Baber, H., & Fanea-Ivanovici, M. (2021). Motivations behind backers' contributions in reward-based crowdfunding for movies and web series. *International Journal of Emerging Markets*, 18(3), 666–684. https://doi.org/10.1108/IJOEM-01-2021-0073

Blakney, P. (2020). Boutique branding: Televisual signifying the feminine business-owner. T*elevision & New Media*, 21(6), 600-615.

Boursier, V., Musetti, A., Gioia, F., Flayelle, M., Billieux, J., & Schimmenti, A. (2021). Is watching TV series an adaptive coping strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic? I*nsights from an Italian community sample. Frontiers in Psychiatry,* 12, 599859.

Burkholder, M., Ellingsen, S., Evans, N., & Turnbull, S. (2021). Web series, canceled, and the value of engagement. *Participations,* 18(2), 251-268.

Cao, L. (2023). *New Media and Technology Convergence. In When Documentaries Meet New Media: Interactive Documentary Projects in China and the West* (pp. 41-73). Berlin, Heidelberg: Springer Berlin Heidelberg.

Castro, D., Rigby, J. M., Cabral, D., & Nisi, V. (2021). The binge-watcher's journey: Investigating motivations, contexts, and affective states surrounding Netflix viewing. *Convergence*, 27(1), 3-20.

Choat, S. (2018). Science, agency and ontology: A historical-materialist response to new materialism. *Political Studies,* 66(4), 1027-1042.

Chen, C. (2022). *Research on iQIYI's suspense related online home-made dramas* (2017-2021), (Master's thesis) Hebei Normal University.

Chen, Y. L. (2020). A narrative analysis of webisodes Love, Death and Robots from the perspective of Pierce's "Triad Combination" semiotics theory. *World of Sound Screen*, (09), 39-40.

Chen, S. X. (2024). From Traditional to Digital: Children's Learning of Traditional Chinese Culture Through Festival-Related Storytelling. *Event Management*, 28(4), 549–565. https://doi-org.eresourcesptsl.ukm.remotexs.co/10.3727/152599523X16957834460240

China Internet Network Information Center. (2024). Statistical report on internet development in China (54th edition). China Internet Network Information Center. https://www.cnnic.net.cn/n4/2024/0828/c208-11063.html

Christian, A. J. (2014). Indie TV: innovation in series development. In *Media Independence* (pp. 159-181). Routledge.

Cui, Y. F. (2020). "I am Yu Huanshui" A good play that is "short, precise and new". *Broadcasting Times Review,* (Z5), 32-33.

Curtin, M. (2007). *Playing to the world's biggest audience: The globalization of Chinese film and TV.* Univ of California Press.

Dai, Y. Q. (2020). The communication strategy of the short drama "I am Yu Huanshui" is analyzed by the 5W model. *Audiovisual,* (08), 63-64.

Deng, Z. N., & Xie, E. Q. (2020). What are the new trends in the drama market after the epidemic. *China Radio and Television*, (14), 63-65.

Di Giovanni, E. (2020). Reception studies and audiovisual translation. T*he Palgrave Handbook of Audiovisual Translation and Media Accessibility*, 397-413.

Dhiman, D. B. (2023). Unleashing the Power of Television Broadcasting in the Digital Age: *A Critical Review*. Available at SSRN 4598192.

Dusi, N. (2016). Seriality, repetition, and innovation in Breaking Bad's recaps and teasers. *Cinergie–Il Cinema e le altre Arti*, (10), 136-147.

Doyle, G., Paterson, R., & Barr, K. (2021). *Television production in transition: Independence, scale, sustainability, and the digital challenge.* Springer Nature.

García-Perdomo, V. (2021). Re-digitizing television news: The relationship between TV, online media, and audiences. *Digital Journalism*, 9(2), 136-154.

Gilardi, F., Lam, C., Tan, K. C., White, A., Cheng, S., & Zhao, Y. (2018). International TV series distribution on Chinese digital platforms: Marketing strategies and audience engagement. *Global Media and China*, 3(3), 213–230. https://doi.org/10.1177/2059436418806406

Gilardi, F., & Lam, C. (2022). New perspective on UGC, PGC, and OGC: motivating factors of Chinese co-creators' engagement with international television series. *Creative Industries Journal,* 1-16.

Gou, J. W., & Liu, Y. (2019). *Introduction to new media marketing.* Posts and Telecommunications Press.

Goodwin, J., Saab, M. M., Dillon, C. B., Kilty, C., McCarthy, A., O'Brien, M., & Philpott, L. F. (2021). The use of film-based interventions in adolescent mental health education: *A systematic review. Journal of psychiatric research*, 137, 158-172.

Grignaffini, G. (2016). Generi e rigenerazioni nella serialità Tv americana. *Between*, 6(11).

Hu, W. (2020). The key to the future of short plays depends on quality. *China Press, Publication, Radio, and Television News*, 003.

Huang, B. X. (2011). *A Study on the Narrative Art of Chinese Web Drama.* Nanjing University of the Arts.

Jain, S., & Kaur, K. (2020). YouTube content analysis using the case study method. *Journal of Digital Media & Policy*, 11(3), 295-310.

Jiang, F. (2019). Film and television channels and expressions of telling Chinese stories well under the new media environment — A case study of the webisodes Day and Night. *Journalism Research Guide*, (07), 83-84.

Jiang, R., Wang, L., & Tsai, S. B. (2022). An empirical study on digital media technology in film and television animation design. *Mathematical Problems in Engineering,* 2022(1), 5905117.

Joshi, A., & Dahiwal, N. S. (2021). Analysis of web series and movies using sentiment analysis. *International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts*, 9(7), 238-245.

Kackman, M., Binfield, M., Payne, M. T., Perlman, A., & Sebok, B. (Eds.). (2010). Flow TV: Television in the age of media convergence. *Routledge.*

Kakkar, A., & Nayak, K. (2019). Analysis of product placement in web series and its influence on consumer buying behavior. *Global Journal of Management And Business Research*, 19(3), 21-27.

Kim, H. (2023). The Labor of Cultural Conception and Uncertainty in Cultural Work: The Work of Korean Drama Writers. *International Journal of Communication,* 18, 18.

Lee, C. K., & Yu, L. (2022). A multi-level perspective on 5G transition: The China case. T*echnological Forecasting and Social Change*, 182, 121812.

López-García, X., Pérez-Seijo, S., Vázquez-Herrero, J., & García-Ortega, A. (2020). New narratives in the age of visualization. *Information Visualization in The Era of Innovative Journalism*, 51-63.

Li, F. (2020). The digital transformation of business models in the creative industries: A holistic framework and emerging trends. *Technovation,* 92, 102012.

Ma, L. L. (2014). A study on the characteristics of original online short drama communication subjects in media convergence. *Drama House,* (10), 159+167.

Ma, X. N. (2020). From I am Yu Huanshui to see the network breakout of urban short plays. *Audio-visual industry*, (6), 104-106.

Neuendorf, K. A. (2016). The content analysis guidebook. Sage.

Niu, M. D., & You, H. (2020). Bid Kids fuels new trend of personalized drama viewing. *China Today,* (08), 76-77.

Patil, H. J., & Surwade, Y. P. (2018). Web technologies from web 2.0 to web 4.0. *International Journal for Science and Advance Research in Technology,* 4(4), 810-814.

Raphael, C. (2009). The political-economic origins of Reali-TV. In *S. Murray & L. Ouellette (Eds.), Reality TV: remaking television culture, 2nd Edition.* (pp. 123-140). New York: New York University Press.

Rizvic, S., Okanovic, V., & Boskovic, D. (2020). Digital storytelling. *Visual Computing for Cultural Heritage*, 347-367.

Sahu, G., Gaur, L., & Singh, G. (2021). Applying niche and gratification theory approach to examine the users' indulgence towards over-the-top platforms and conventional TV. *Telematics and Informatics*, 65, 101713.

State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television. (2010). *Regulations on the management of television drama content* [Broadcast regulations]. Retrieved from https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2010/content_1724816.htm

State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television. (2012). *Notice on further strengthening the management of online dramas, microfilms, and other online audio-visual programs* [Broadcast No. 53 of 2012].

State Administration of Radio, Film, and Televisial. (2014). *Notice on strengthening the management of broadcast television programs, films, and online audio-visual program production and distribution.*

State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television. (2017). N*otice on further strengthening the creation and broadcasting management of online audio-visual programs.*

Statista. (2021). SVOD market in China. Retrieved from https://www.statista.com/study/106110/subscription-video-on-demand-svod-in-china/

Sheng, Y.P. 2021. Research on the innovation and development of film and television industry in the 5G perspective. *Media Forum.*

Tang, X., & Zhang, X. (2017). The pragmatic analysis of the American TV series' humorous dialogues based on the perspective of relevance theory—Take the example of the 2 Broke Girls. *World Journal of Educational Research,* 4(4).

Ulin, J. C. (2019). The business of media distribution: Monetizing film, TV, and video content in an online world. *Routledge.*

Wang, A., Whyke, T. W., & Dean, L. (2023). The interplay between digital platforms and user-generated content in reinterpreting and recreating mythological narratives with traditional Chinese cultural elements: the animated series Yao-Chinese Folktales. *Creative Industries Journal,* 1–22. https://doi-org.eresourcesptsl.ukm.remotexs.co/10.1080/17510694.2023.2252423

Wang, C., & Gao, Y. J. (2020). The Exploration of Chinese Web Dramas for Excellence: I am Yu Huanshui as an Example. *Northern Media Research,* (06), 53-56+60.

Wang, X. Y. (2022). An Analysis of the reasons for the popularity of suspense online dramas from the perspective of new media — taking iQIYI's "Fog Theater" as an example. *Western Radio and Television,* (13), 127-129.

Wang, Y. (2019). *Chinese television between propaganda and entertainment: socialist traditions, marketisation and popular TV dramas, 1992–2017* (Doctoral dissertation, Loughborough University).

Webster, J. G. (2014). *The marketplace of attention: How audiences take shape in a digital age.* MIT Press.

Williams, D. (2012). *Web TV series: how to make and market them.* Oldcastle Books.

Wong García, E., & Gómez Fernández, W. (2018). FANGS AND POWER: An analysis of discursive patterns of discrimination in the American TV series True Blood. *Cogent Arts & Humanities,* 5(1).

Wu, W. (2024). Application of Intelligent Algorithms and Big Data Analysis in Film and Television Creation. *Scalable Computing: Practice & Experience,* 25(3), 1882–1893. https://doi-org.eresourcesptsl.ukm.remotexs.co/10.12694/scpe.v25i3.2782

Wu, X. Y. (2020). On the value orientation and artistic innovation of suspense short play — A case study of Chinese first family suspense webisodes Bid Kids. *World of Sound Screen*, (19), 51-53.

Xiaying, X., & Hui, L. (Eds.). (2023). *Chinese TV in the Netflix Era.* Anthem Press.

Xiao, Q., & Li, X. L. (2012). *Classic Textbook Series:* Principles of Historical Materialism (3rd ed.).

Yalkin, C. (2021). TV series: marketplace icon. *Consumption Markets & Culture*, 24(2), 217-224.

Yang, H. B. (2020). The development of web sketches and content construction. *Contemporary Television*, (8), 91-94.

Yang, Z. (2020). Genre dramas are interesting, short dramas have breakthroughs, and boutique becomes mainstream: Observations on the web drama market in the summer of 2020*. China Radio, Film and Television,* (19), 38-41.

Yin, Y. (2016). *An Analysis of Chinese Web Series Development and Strategy Go Princess Go: A Case Study* (Doctoral dissertation, Drexel University).

Yin, Z. H., & Yun, M. (2013). Rhetorical devices in dialogues of The Big Bang Theory. *Sino-US English Teaching*, 9(6), 1220-1229.

Zhang, J. J., & Mastromartino, B. (2023). *Transition from Traditional to Digital Strategies. In Digital Marketing in Sports* (pp. 15-87). Routledge.

Zhang, X. (2019). From Western TV sets to Chinese online streaming services: English-language TV series in mainland China. *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies,* 16(2), 220-242.

Zhang, S. (2023). An In Depth Study of Short Web Series in Mainland China-KuaiShou. *Probe-Media and Communication Studies,* 5(2).

Zhao, B. Z., & Lv, P. (2020). The Hibernation Period of Film and Television Workers - Reorganization of the Creative Ecosystem under the Epidemic. *Sichuan Theatre.*

Zhao, J. J. (2023). *Queer TV China: Televisual and Fannish Imaginaries of Gender, Sexuality, and Chineseness*. Hong Kong University Press.

Zhao, Z. Y. (2017). Interpretation of postmodernist elements in new media films and television — A case study of webisodes Lady of the Extreme. *News Research Guide,* (11), 138.