

# ***NZ Idol: Youth Audiences and Local Meanings***

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## **Introduction**

The reality television show *NZ Idol* has been one of the most successful locally made entertainment programmes in New Zealand over the past ten years. Three seasons were broadcast on TV2 in 2004, 2005 and 2006. According to its producer, the final episode of the first season was the most-watched television show in New Zealand in 2004, with a staggering 1.4 million people, a third of the New Zealand population, tuning in to find out who won the first *NZ Idol* crown (South Pacific Pictures 2004). On top of impressive ratings the show also attracted considerable secondary media attention. Stories about *NZ Idol* and its contestants featured regularly in local media such as newspapers, popular websites, and women's, youth and gossip magazines.

*NZ Idol* is an adaptation of the global *Idols* format, which has been sold to more than 40 other territories around the world (Fremantle Media 2009). Although all adaptations are structured similarly – starting with regional auditions by a large pool of aspiring young people in front of a jury and finishing with live shows in which the remaining contestants perform on stage (Holmes 2004a: 153-154) – each *Idols* version also incorporates typically local aspects. Existing scholarship on global formats has indicated that in the process of adaptation, local stories, events and characters can be included in the narrative (Moran 1998; Waisbord 2004). In the case of *NZ Idol* this has resulted in, among other aspects, a unique mix of contestants from Pacific Island, Māori and Pākehā backgrounds, 'going home stories' shot in locations all over Aotearoa/New Zealand, the use of local New Zealand music, and an overall appeal to New Zealand viewers to support and vote for the contestants and buy the products associated with the show.

This article will explore the significance of local meanings of *NZ Idol* at the level of audience interpretation. New Zealand audiences were in a unique position to compare the show with other adaptations of the *Idols* format. Before *NZ Idol* made it to their screens they had already been exposed to *American Idol* and *Australian Idol*, which gave them the opportunity to reflect on what was specifically 'New Zealand' about *NZ Idol*. The aim of incorporating local elements in adapting global formats is

generally to facilitate audience involvement by creating a cultural community which viewers feel they can belong to (Waisbord 2004: 371), but this assumption has as yet scarcely been tested through actual audience research. Concerning *NZ Idol* this raises questions such as: 'What sort of connection does *NZ Idol* invite from its audience?', 'How do audiences respond to local stories, events and characters within the show?', and 'Is *NZ Idol* successful in giving viewers a sense of belonging to a New Zealand cultural community?'

The article will draw on the results of a small-scale audience study in which 25 young people between the ages of 15 and 18 participated. Although adaptations of the *Idols* format tend to attract mass audiences, the format appeals particularly to the tastes of people in their teens and early twenties (Stahl 2004: 215). Young people are implicated in the programme in several ways: they can audition for it (the age limit to enter was 28 for the first two seasons of *NZ Idol* and 30 for the third season), as a result the contestants appearing in the programme are young people, and the way in which the programme uses multi-media to reach its audience ties in pre-eminently with media consumption patterns of young people.

### ***Idols* and its audiences**

Most of the academic writing about *Idols* has focussed on *Pop Idol*, the original British version, and *American Idol*, the US adaptation of the format. Su Holmes (2004a: 148) proposes that *Pop Idol*'s success can be explained by the universal appeal of stardom. The programme provides audiences with a unique insight into the internal workings of the music industry and the star making process. The aspiring idols are essentially drawn from the audience, and as a result viewers can recognise themselves in the people who audition for the show (Stahl 2004: 221). *Idols* is governed by the logic of the success myth, which states that ordinary people have a chance of making it if they have the talent and work hard (Holmes 2004a: 156). In relation to *American Idol* specifically, Matthew Stahl argues that "literal and utopian mappings of American character and opportunity structures (...) played a decisive role in this talent/reality show's wide appeal" (2004: 213). The promise of a journey of social and economic mobility resonates with viewers who aspire to similar opportunities.

While *Idols* shows start with thousands of contestants, this number is reduced rapidly after the audition phase. In subsequent phases of the programme viewers get to

know a selection of contestants on an intimate basis (see Holmes 2004a: 159; Stahl 2004: 214). They can see them develop into stars on stage, and biographical vignettes about and interviews with contestants give viewers more insight into their character. Decision power over who stays on the show is moreover transferred from the *Idols* judges to the audience halfway through the season. In the final phases of the show viewers can vote for contestants by phoning in or sending text messages, which gives them a sense of control over the narrative of the programme (Holmes 2004b: 214).

It has been argued that rather than a reality television show *Idols* is in fact a marketing campaign in which the audience plays the role of focus group (Stahl 2004: 217). Henry Jenkins (2006) describes how the producers of *American Idol* have aimed to build a brand community which viewers are invited to relate and respond to. The *American Idol* brand is advertised through different outlets, not only the television show but also DVDs, CDs, Internet sites and audience interactivity. Jenkins conceives of the relationship between *American Idol* and its audience in terms of 'Lovemarks', which signify the emotional impact of viewers' investment in the show (ibid.: 70). This emotional investment is of great value to the *American Idol* producers due to the expectation that a connection with the contestants will forge a long-term relationship with the *Idol* brand and the products advertised on the show (see Fairchild 2007).

An audience study carried out by Jenkins (2006: 80) and his research team indicates that *American Idol* successfully caters for the preferences of different types of viewers. In most viewing contexts they encountered, viewers with differing levels of commitment were present. Watching the show was often seen as family ritual and less loyal viewers were pulled in by dedicated viewers through family conversations. *American Idol* works well as family entertainment, according to Jenkins, "because it lies at the intersection between youth and adult tastes, allowing everyone to show some expertise" (ibid.: 81). Viewers indicated that an vital part of the entertainment value of the programme was talking with other people about it. While a considerable amount of talk focussed on *American Idol* contestants, viewers also engaged in critical evaluations of the show, especially regarding its commercial nature. Jenkins outlines the field of tension within which *American Idol* operates in relation to its audience:

“At a time when networks and sponsors are joining forces to shape the emotional context through which we watch their shows, then consumers are also scrutinizing the mechanisms of participation they are being offered. If the rhetoric of Lovemarks emphasizes the audience’s activities and investments as a central source of value in brands, then the consumption community may well hold the corporations accountable for what they do in the name of those brands” (Jenkins 2006: 91).

According to Annette Hill, television audiences tend to “watch reality TV in a default critical position” (2005: 185). Critical readings of reality television programmes can be directed at the attitudes, behaviour and moral values of the people appearing on those programmes, but also at the intentions and practices of the producers (ibid.: 9). This critical position may be the result of stereotypical ideas about reality television viewers which circulate in public debates about the genre:

“[Reality TV] viewers are variously assumed to be lower in intelligence, lacking in judgement and/or taste, unthinking voyeurs, unwitting dupes of commercialist broadcasters, in danger of mistaking reality-TV programmes for ‘reality’, and essentially in need of being saved from these forms” (Hight 2001: 390).

Adopting a critical stance allows viewers to illustrate that the stereotype may apply to other people, but not to them. As yet, there is not much actual audience research available which analyses the impact of reality television on its audiences (Hill 2005: 11). Emerging work has highlighted that, contrary to the public stereotype, audiences use a considerable amount of cultural literacy when interpreting reality television programmes (Holmes 2004b: 216), that the genre can teach viewers about their own behaviour by displaying how other people behave (Hill 2005: 99), and that discussions about reality television can encourage reflection on moral and ethical dilemmas (Jenkins 2006: 84). Hill (2005: 87), moreover, suggests that for young people the perceived low cultural status of reality television may not impact negatively on their viewing practices and pleasures. Because they generally value entertainment when watching TV, reality television’s reputation as ‘mindless entertainment’ actually enhances their preference for the genre.

## The audience study

In order to explore how young people could relate to *NZ Idol* in general and more specifically to local meanings within the programme, a small-scale audience study was undertaken. Research into New Zealand television audiences has thus far relied quite heavily on audience ratings rather than actual audience research (Zwaga 2001: 311). This study aims to contribute to the emerging tradition of qualitative audience research in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Ien Ang (1996: 69) has contended that qualitative audience research is 'radically contextual', and is as such not aimed at generalisation. Media audience research therefore needs to take into account the everyday context in which people give meaning to the media, as well as the context in which people's media use is studied by researchers.

The interviews for the present study took place at a secondary school in the Wellington region. The young people who took part in the interviews were contacted via one of the school's Media Studies teachers. In August and September 2005, when the second season of *NZ Idol* had just started, I visited the school on Mondays to invite students in two of the Year 13 Media Studies classes to participate in a group interview. A couple of weeks earlier I had asked them if they could watch *NZ Idol* on a regular basis. The second season of *NZ Idol* had a duration of 17 weeks. The show was generally aired twice a week with, in the second half of the season, performance shows on Sundays and results shows on Mondays. The interviews thus took place after a performance show and before the ensuing results show.

The study consists of nine group interviews, in which 25 young people (15 girls and 10 boys) participated. Their ages ranged from 15 to 18 years old. Ten young people participated in two interviews, and the other 15 in only one interview. The participants conducted the interviews themselves. Groups usually consisted of four people, one of which had been assigned the role of interviewer. The model of asking young people to interview each other about media is inspired by audience research by Chris Barker (1997, 1998). The underlying assumption of Barker's approach is that "we are more likely to get closer to young people's perceptions and uses of television the less it is mediated by adults asking questions" (1997: 612).

The interviewers used a topic list as starting point for formulating questions. There were seven topics: 1) introduction of all participants; 2) *NZ Idol* in general; 3) the episode that was aired the day before the interview; 4) contestants on the show; 5)

voting for candidates; 6) the practice of watching *NZ Idol*; and 7) talking about the programme. All participants in the study received an interview training, in which they were advised to – when assigned the role of interviewer – ask as many open-ended questions as possible and, rather than foregrounding their own opinion, give other group members ample opportunity to speak their minds. All interviews were audio taped and the tapes were transcribed verbatim. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, and consequently their real names are not used in this article.

The fact that interviews took place at school and that I had approached the participants via their Media Studies class turned out to be significant factors in how the young people interpreted *NZ Idol*. Participants used both everyday and academic discourses when talking about the show. While everyday discourses are informed by people's own experiences with media, academic discourses are informed by adults' perspectives and arise from participation in official learning environments. Everyday discourses are characterised by spontaneous experience and emotional involvement; academic discourses, on the other hand, by distance from immediate experience and self-reflection (Buckingham & Sefton-Green 1994: 147-150).

When young people use academic discourses while talking about television they display that they possess particular forms of cultural capital, which in turn has implications for how they define themselves in relation to others (ibid.: 150). Hannah Davies, David Buckingham and Peter Kelley state, based on audience research into children's television culture, that "children's judgements about the cultural value of television articulate power relations, both within the peer group and in terms of the wider social groupings to which these children belong. Proclaiming one's own tastes, and thereby defining oneself as more or less 'mature' represents a form of 'identity work'" (Davies, Buckingham & Kelley 2000: 11). A similar process was apparent in the interviews about *NZ Idol*, in which some participants were quite heavily involved in articulating their cultural capital, hence leaving a certain impression with the other group members during the interview as well as, via the tape recorder, to myself as a researcher. In analysing the interviews I have consequently aimed to apply a similar approach to David Buckingham and Julian Sefton-Green, who explain:

"We have tried to 'read' the data, not as transparent evidence of what students really think or feel but as a form of social action that needs to be related to the social context in which it is produced. From this perspective, what students say about popular culture (...) [is] part of the process by which

they construct their own social identities” (Buckingham & Sefton-Green 1994: 10).

The remainder of this article discusses how the participants in the study tapped into everyday and academic discourses when talking about *NZ Idol* and how, as a result, they identified themselves in relation to the research project and vis-à-vis each other.

### **Watching *NZ Idol***

Similar to what Jenkins (2006: 80) found regarding *American Idol*, several participants in this study mentioned that they enjoy the ritual of watching *NZ Idol* together with their families. Family viewing is more popular than watching with friends:

CARRIE: So with whom do you watch *New Zealand Idol* in particular?

JOANNE: Yes, family, it's definitely a family occasion...

CARRIE: It is a family occasion, you don't get your friends around to have a big *New Zealand Idol* watch.

JOANNE: Yeah, come round eat some popcorn [sarcastic tone].

STEPHANIE: Yeah but my Dad doesn't like to watch it. But um yeah, generally is it a family event.

(Interview 9)

One of the pleasures of watching *NZ Idol* together with other family members is that you can exchange opinions about the contestants while watching:

BRAD: Last night I watched it with my sister, and we spent the whole time criticising people. [laughter] That's actually what happens every time we watch *Idol*, and if Dad comes in, because he thinks he's a singer, he'll come and have a listen and see, and whenever someone does a bad note, it just sounds pretentious. But I think that's kind of the nature of us watching *Idol*.

(Interview 1)

Talking about the *NZ Idol* contestants can generate involvement with the show:

HOLLY: My Mum is always there as well. She's criticising, but my Mum is also the one who like goes 'That's the one I want, that one's going to win'.

You always make predictions and stuff, it's quite silly. You kind of get involved in it.

(Interview 1)

While watching and talking about *NZ Idol* can be part of a shared family culture, the show does not seem to be part of participants' peer culture at school. Notions of age play a role here: the participants in the study are Year 13 students, which means that they are the oldest age group at school. *NZ Idol*, conversely, seems to be the domain of the younger students. This manifests itself in how the show is talked about. Some interviewees admit that they occasionally talk about *NZ Idol* at school:

MIRANDA: Me and my friends talked about *New Zealand Idol* this morning to be honest.

MEG: To be honest?

JEREMY: (...) You sad, sad person, get some new friends or a different TV show.

MEG: I know, I know! Or get a life!

MIRANDA: Every time I see Nic I say, 'So, did you see *New Zealand Idol*?'

(Interview 7)

Miranda is one of the few, however. Most interviewees do not talk about the show, or, as indicated in the next quote, do not want to admit that they talk about it:

BRAD: I don't talk about it at all.

NIC: You don't even talk about how bad it is?

BRAD: Not really, because it's kind of admitting that you watched it. [laughter]

HOLLY: Shame. [mocking tone]

BRAD: It's kind of not cool to watch *Idol*, I guess.

(Interview 1)

Watching *NZ Idol* is 'not cool', and talking about the programme is deemed to be the domain of Year 9 students, or 'third formers':

PHOEBE: I'm sure third formers talk about *New Zealand Idol* all the time.

WILLIAM: Yeah.

CARRIE: Yeah.



WILLIAM: Yeah, well I mean seventh formers are still immature as hell, I mean...

CARRIE: Oh yeah definitely.

PHOEBE: Yeah.

CARRIE: I still like to talk about trivial things because it is a light relief on the serious things that are going around in the world at the moment. I think that is another good point to make, that *New Zealand Idol* is quite...

WILLIAM: It's a distraction.

(Interview 2)

As a Year 13 student, or a 'seventh former', you have to start identifying as a mature person. As Chris Richards explains: "age-relations are organized through a division between childhood, adolescence and adulthood and the power relations they entail" (1998: 176). Showing too much involvement with *NZ Idol* is therefore risky, since it poses questions about the appropriateness of your age identity. One way of resolving the threat of seeming immature is to emphasise the relief from adult responsibilities *NZ Idol* can provide. Distancing yourself from media consumption patterns of people younger than yourself is another way of articulating your maturity. A participant talks about a conversation of third formers about *NZ Idol* he overheard on the train:

CHRIS: Um have you guys ever heard people talking about *New Zealand Idol*?

SIMONE: Yip.

CHRIS: What kind of stuff gets said?

DAVID: 'Oh my God, he's so hot' [mocking tone] (...)

SIMONE: You hang out with little girls don't you?

DAVID: It's on the train to work.

SIMONE: Ok, I believe you.

CHRIS: Who's saying this stuff?

DAVID: You get the train like on a Saturday, or a Monday morning or whatever to school or whatever and there's always third formers or whatever on there and they're always talking about it and that's basically the gist of their conversations.

CHRIS: Just 'Oh my God he's so hot'?

DAVID: Yeah.

(Interview 3)

This idea that younger girls have a certain obsession with *NZ Idol* also plays a role in how the participants talk about voting for contestants on the show. Some expressed frustration with the fact that ‘thirteen year old girls’ can take control over *NZ Idol*:

MIRANDA: See the thing is, what I think is stupid about *New Zealand Idol* is that the audience votes out who leaves. So there can be someone who is a really, really good singer but if the audience, say like the preppy thirteen year old girls who vote, don’t think they’re hot enough, they could do better than anyone else and they could get voted off.

MEG: Yeah, because that’s like the main people that vote aye, like young teenagers.

MIRANDA: Yeah.

(Interview 7)

Talking about *NZ Idol* and its contestants is a precarious affair. While engagement with the show is acceptable within a family context, power relations around age and gender at school seem to prevent the expression of too much involvement.

### **Talking about the contestants**

In spite of the problematics of talking about *NZ Idol* at school, the reported family rituals of evaluating the *NZ Idol* contestants and their performances – criticising some of them and expressing favour for others – were reproduced during the interviews:

JACOB: Ok, what participants have caught your attention?

HELEN: Jesse.

MIRANDA: Jesse, I don’t like Jesse.

HELEN: Theresa. I do.

NIC: I like Frank, even though his last song... Like his first song he did before they got into the top ten, that was pretty smooth, I was like ‘oh yeah, he’s smooth’.

JACOB: I reckon Rongo’s still going to be up there for a while.

MIRANDA: Yeah, because he’s got the little girl vote.

HELEN: I like Jesse too, and Rongo.

NIC: Yeah. Is Jesse the rock guy? He is awesome, I love that guy. He’s just like representing for the wrong crew.

MIRANDA: It's amazing that considering the fact that Theresa was the wild card she managed to make it so far in the top ten.

(Interview 5)

The participants in the study obviously enjoyed exchanging opinions about different contestants. Evaluations can be directed at contestants' singing abilities, appearance, song choice, the feedback they receive from the *NZ Idol* judges, or their chances of being successful in the *Idol* competition. While the young people talked about several contestants, they seemed to focus on two specific ones, Jesse and Teresa:

HOLLY: Um, with singing talent, it was the big guy, blonde hair. And um the chick after him who sang Alanis Morissette, I think it was because it was the standout song, it was like the different song.

NIC: Was that the chick from Wellington?

HOLLY: Yeah, yeah, think so.

NIC: The law student?

HOLLY: Yeah, the law student. Yeah, I thought she was really quite good. I mean it wasn't an excellent, excellent like performance but she did do it quite well.

(Interview 1)

Teresa and Jesse belong (with Steve and Ashley) to a minority of Pākehā contestants in the top ten of *NZ Idol*'s second season. Almost all of the participants in this study have a Pākehā background, and they seemed to identify more easily with the Pākehā than with the Māori or Pacific Island contestants. Teresa is moreover easy to relate to because she is from Wellington:

NIC: Do you guys like I don't know, feel proud when you see someone say from like Wellington out there like doing their thing?

BRAD: Yeah, I guess there is some degree of pride there. I always want them to do better. Then you kind of think you could see them or meet them and stuff...

HOLLY: Yeah, you kind of feel...

NIC: Like even though it's *Idol* and you don't really like it but they're from Wellington so you still want to be...

NATALIE: It's kind of like they're representing for our...

NIC: Yeah...  
(Interview 1)

Jesse is liked for different reasons. He is the candidate who sings predominantly rock songs, as opposed to pop songs, and seems to have succeeded in creating a style of his own within the parameters set up by the programme:

STEVE: Well, I'm going for the large rock singer guy, not because I think he's good, I just think he's different from the other people and he's doing something different rather than just all the pop songs and he's got his own style and he adapts all the songs to his own style. Like he sees what he wants to end up being like, and he makes all the songs he is made to sing his own. I don't know, I just like him because he's different, he's not just part of the same pop formula that all the others seem to be just doing.  
(Interview 8)

For the participants in this study, the idea of sticking to your own style and doing something different than others is appealing. Preferring rock music over pop music furthermore ties in with academic definitions in which pop is seen as mass-produced and therefore superficial and rock as more sincere and 'authentic' (see Frith 1996). Hill (2005: 68) found that audiences appreciate moments of authenticity within the contrived settings of reality television shows, looking for instances when people are truly 'themselves'. In addition to his preference for rock, Jesse's physique reinforces his authenticity as a candidate:

CHRIS: How big is Jesse?

JEREMY: Jesse is...

MEG: He's short and he's wide.

JEREMY: He's about as wide as he is tall.

MIRANDA: But you see that's the thing, he'd be getting in because he's got a good voice, that's why he's in the competition.

JEREMY: Or because people feel sorry for him or because they...

MIRANDA: I don't think anyone would vote because they feel sorry for someone.

JEREMY: Or because he has beautiful children who wear T-shirts that say...

MEG: Well, I like him because he seems like a really nice guy.

JEREMY: See.

MIRANDA: And he sings well.

(Interview 7)

Another reason why Jesse is liked, especially by the girls, it seems, are his children:

STEPHANIE: Oh it was so cute last night! He started crying and then his wife was crying and his kid was like yeah, yeah and then the kid looked up at the Mum and the kid cried. Oh, it was so sad!

ANNA: I know! Yeah Jesse's good, I didn't like him last night though...

STEPHANIE: I think it's cool how he auditioned last year and didn't get through because his wife was having a baby and he got through this year.

(Interview 4)

This seems one instance in which *NZ Idol* has managed to score 'Lovemarks', to use Jenkins's (2006: 70) terminology. The producers' aim of establishing an emotional connection with viewers is for the latter to start spending money on the show, either by buying products associated with the show or through voting for its contestants. Although not many of the participants had voted for Teresa or Jesse, or admitted that they had voted for them, some seemed open to the possibility:

NIC: Cool, um did any of you guys vote? And if yes, for whom?

HOLLY: Nah I didn't vote. I kind of wanted to vote though, because you kind of always get the feeling that the person that you kind of like won't get through. And that would be like oh, no point in watching the rest of it, but... I was going to go vote for the baby guy [Jesse] and that Theresa chick.

(Interview 1)

Participants used the opportunity provided by the interview to exchange evaluations about the *NZ Idol* contestants. They particularly pay attention to contestants that they perceive as having something in common with them, be it their cultural background, place of residence, or musical taste. In doing so they draw on everyday discourses, which are characterised by spontaneity and emotional involvement. It is in talking about *NZ Idol* as a reality television show that academic discourses come to the fore.

## Criticising *NZ Idol*

In contrast to Hill's (2005: 87) suggestion that young people do not care much about the low cultural status of reality television, some participants in this study were quite critical of the reality television genre, *NZ Idol*, and even television in general:

DAVID: It's just like any of those pop star shows, and I'll never watch them.

CHRIS: Why?

DAVID: Cos they're crap.

CHRIS: Why are they crap?

DAVID: All it is, is basically a bunch of talentless idiots who think they can sing and they just use it as a get rich quick scheme.

SIMONE: Isn't that what TV is about anyway?

STEVE: It seems like half of the stuff on TV is about that these days.

SIMONE: Yeah, all the reality TV shows are cheap and it gets people to watch it.

(Interview 3)

Echoing Hill's (2005: 185) more general findings on reality television audiences, the young people recurrently adopted critical stances when referring to reality television. They drew on academic discourses, possibly acquired in their Media Studies classes, to criticise underlying principles of reality television shows such as *NZ Idol*. These discourses are characterised by distance from own immediate viewing experience and, instead, reflection on the position of *NZ Idol* within the wider media landscape:

AIMEE: What do you think about *New Zealand Idol*? Sarah?

SARAH: I hate *New Zealand Idol*.

AIMEE: Why? (...)

SARAH: Ooh, um, where do I start? Ok it's like ripping off New Zealand filmmakers and stuff. Um, it's boring, they don't have any talent at all. It takes up a really good primetime slot that could be used for something much better. (...) Yeah, it's just a shitty programme. It's overdone. It's been done far too many times. And reality TV's so gross, it's so like...

MOANA: It was cool in the beginning for a little while but then the novelty...

WILLIAM: It's repetitive, it's just like you can't recycle the same thing over and over because it's not worth it.

(Interview 6)

A lot of criticism was directed at the formulaic nature of *NZ Idol*, especially the way in which the results shows are structured. The young people criticised the techniques used to keep viewers watching the programme, including the ad breaks:

HELEN: I don't really like the length of time it goes on for, I think it's too long and they build it up too much and the finales are like three hours long and only like five minutes are spent on telling you who wins.

MIRANDA: I actually really don't like the whole suspense thing. They're like who's going to get voted off after the break.

HELEN: They're like, nobody really cares.

MIRANDA: It irritates me and more often than not I'll just turn it off rather than waiting and watching the ads. Because that's the whole idea of it.

(Interview 5)

As with viewers' responses to *American Idol* in Jenkins' (2006: 91) study, participants also criticised the commercial elements of the show, such as the emphasis put on advertising products from the sponsors of the show in stories about the contestants:

HOLLY: I hate the product placement. Allens lollies, and last year it was more Nescafe. (...) Like at the start of it and the end of it, and they always have like the mugs and shit, and like placed so it's facing the camera.

BRAD: That's what I noticed about the final last year, was that they did a judge thing that was Nescafe, Nescafe, Nescafe. And the actual brand on the thing was made sure it was facing forward.

HOLLY: And they had that little section right before they all start singing, like how they had adapted to the *Idol* house. I've watched every single one so far, there's been three because there was three groups (...), and in every single one it had the Allens lollies in them. Like the first thing the *Idol* group is interested in was feeding their stomachs, and then it had them running to the pantry and pulling out all this food and showing the brand names to the camera and going 'oh yum this is mine!'

(Interview 1)

In the context of the interviews, a critical analysis of *NZ Idol* had currency. Being able to come up with a sophisticated analysis of a media product – by criticising the genre a television show belongs to or by signalling the commercial nature of television, for instance – has particular value in the presence of other Media Studies classmates.

Participants also put effort into deconstructing the mechanisms that make viewers, including some of their classmates, feel connected to *NZ Idol*, thereby critiquing the premise of the show:

JEREMY: They show you clips, all these little like nice happy...

MEG: They go back to their home town and stuff and show them their family. It's kind of like...

JEREMY: It's the human interest bit...

CHRIS: Is that so you feel like sympathetic if they get kicked out and start to form an emotional attachment to them and shit?

MEG: Yeah. Well I think...

CHRIS: Rubbish. Call me cynical...

MEG: Because like last week they showed Jessie who has like two little kids and they were wearing vote Jessie t-shirts...

MIRANDA: Vote my Dad...

MEG: Yeah, yeah that's the one. And it was just cute, and now everyone's like 'oh I love Jesse', like I've heard people say that.

CHRIS: That's just downright manipulative!

MIRANDA: Show them the kids so that...

JEREMY: Yeah.

CHRIS: Yeah exactly! That's the kind of thing...

JEREMY: It's like begging off your children...

CHRIS: Yeah exactly, this is why I don't watch the show. It's tactics like that that are so indicative of the whole like pop genre. It's bullshit.

(Interview 7)

Whereas Holmes (2004a: 148) and Stahl (2004: 213) propose, based on textual analysis of *Idols* shows, that their appeal lies in inviting viewers to witness and identify with the star making process, the participants in this study were quite cynical about the opportunities for stardom that *NZ Idol* promises:

BRAD: I kind of think *Idol*'s a bit delusional because everyone that goes in for 'oh yeah I'm going to be famous and do this'. But the reality is that you come out the other end and even if you won it you're not that famous really. You'll just get the occasional look in the street and might have to sign a few autographs...

(Interview 1)



Adopting a critical stance when talking about *NZ Idol* is a different way of engaging with the show than feeling connected with its contestants. Even though some of the comments sound negative, the fact that participants were able to come up with quite detailed analyses of the programme demonstrates involvement. Participants seemed to enjoy showing to their fellow classmates that they possess the cultural capital to criticise *NZ Idol* in a sophisticated manner.

### **Comparison with other *Idols* shows**

A theme which came up spontaneously in most of the interviews is the comparison between *NZ Idol* and its American and Australian counterparts, both of which were aired on New Zealand television before the start of *NZ Idol*. Many participants liked *American Idol* and expressed involvement with its contestants. The conclusion of the comparison between the different *Idols* shows is almost unequivocally that *NZ Idol* does not stack up against overseas adaptations:

PHOEBE: *American Idol* was fun to watch the first time because it was different, it was something that we hadn't seen on television before and we were like 'oh that's cool'. And 'haha, the judges are mean' and that sort of stuff. And then so when the first *New Zealand Idol* came out we wanted to watch that as well, (...) because we had favourites on the first *American Idol* and stuff and we wanted to see if there was anyone like, who could be as good as that in our country. But after it got to after that show we realised we weren't actually up to that standard I don't reckon. And anyone who could have been either didn't make it or made it and failed afterwards. And I don't know, I just reckon it's pointless now, (...) like you can see that they're not going to get anywhere. You release a song or something and that's about it. (Interview 2)

The fact that the top ten contestants of the first season of *NZ Idol* did not have much of a career after the show finished is seen as evidence that the New Zealand show fell short in quality. Participants talked about Ben Lummis and Michael Murphy, the winner and runner-up of the first season, and weighed their lack of success against the career of Kelly Clarkson, the winner of the first season of *American Idol*:

NIC: Ben Lummis he's like, isn't he like detached from his recording label now?

MIRANDA: Yeah, and that guy, what's his name, the producer said that he would never have signed him like if he hadn't have come through *New Zealand Idol*, like he would have told him to go away straight away. (...)

JACOB: But he had his fifteen minutes of fame really. He's a bit of an icon for a while then like he's faded slowly away. (...) Michael Murphy still stuck in there for a while. He had that one song. He's a bit of a gimp that kid.

NIC: But that's the thing. They're just like one hit wonders. They have no um, what is it, sustainability. See like in America they actually have talent.

MIRANDA: Yeah, Kelly Clarkson, she's actually really successful now. She's got like three hit singles.

(Interview 5)

A reason for the supposed lack of talent of the *NZ Idol* contestants is, according to the young people, the size of the New Zealand population:

BRAD: I don't think New Zealand has the wealth of talent that other countries like America and Australia with more population [have]. (...) There is one singer in *NZ Idol*, I don't know her name but she's good, but the rest of them are just kind of weak.

(Interview 1)

By stating that *NZ Idol* contestants are not in the same league as the American and Australian ones and that the show therefore is not as good as other *Idols* adaptations, the participants engage in a discourse of 'cultural cringe', which is defined by Trisha Dunleavy as "the negative, rejecting reaction of some New Zealanders to domestic TV programmes, particularly characterised by a predominance of imported material" (2006: 5). The opportunity to compare *NZ Idol* with *American Idol* and *Australian Idol* which arose because the latter two shows had already been aired on New Zealand television, is taken up to construct a somewhat self-depreciative critique. Participants thus align themselves with a typical New Zealand way of evaluating local media products, which stresses that the small size of New Zealand's population sets limits on the level of quality that can be achieved:

DAVID: *New Zealand Idol* will never work as well as in like America. The whole point of it is getting mass exposure to the public and the reason New Zealand's not good at it is because we've only got four million people and so the rock thing is big in New Zealand, there's good there's great rock bands,

we've produced great talent, but in terms of like super stardom we're not really geared up for that kind of thing. And I mean that's fine, that's just what we're good at but that's why I think the American ones are better to watch because, I don't know, it just seems like it's more up there.

CHRIS: So you reckon where there's a bigger population pop thrives and where there's like a smaller population you get things like rock coming out.

DAVID: Yeah, more individual, more creative kind of things, rather than things to sell to huge markets and make a lot of money, which is the difference between America and New Zealand I guess. And that's why the Australian one works, because they've got a much bigger market than we have.

(Interview 3)

The suggestion is that the global *Idols* format is out of touch with the rock-oriented New Zealand music culture. One participant proposes that the show could be more successful in New Zealand if it would shift its musical focus:

STEVE: What I would like to see changed is the style of music and the kind of music to be more general and more open to people and more effort put into the shows and stuff, make them proper really good shows not sort of sad imitations of American and Australian ones. So, I don't know, I'd just like to make *New Zealand Idol* more to do with New Zealand's music scene at the moment rather than just what America's music scene is at the moment. (...)

DAVID: I mean it's good that it's trying to increase New Zealand's music depth and give people a chance, but it sort of needs to get away from the stigma of being just another *Idol* show.

(Interview 3)

It seems that rather than making 'just another *Idol* show', *NZ Idol* producers should have put more effort into adapting the *Idols* format to the specificities of local music cultures by paying attention to particular New Zealand notions of creativity.

## Conclusion

The assumption of the research method used for the study discussed in this article – asking young people to interview each other about television – is that we are able to get a closer look at young people's 'actual' interpretations if they are not mediated by the presence of an adult interviewer (Barker 1997: 612). Yet as became apparent in

the discussion of the results of the study, the participants seemed to be quite aware of the social implications of talking about popular culture. They alternately drew on everyday and academic discourses to make sense of *NZ Idol*. Whereas the use of the latter articulates cultural capital, the use of the former turned out to be, at least in the context of the interviews, inherently risky. Nevertheless, both discourses offer clues about how *NZ Idol* was localised at the level of audience interpretation.

Adaptations of the *Idols* format invite their audiences to emotionally invest in the show by identifying with the contestants and supporting them through voting. *NZ Idol* achieved this in some respects with the young people who participated in the study. Several participants talked about contestants they liked and could relate to: Teresa because she is from Wellington and therefore a 'local', and Jesse because he is the most authentic candidate and represents a music style that the young people felt they could support. In these instances the global *Idols* format is successfully localised; viewers recognise something from their everyday experiences in the show, which creates a unique association. The young people moreover indicated that they enjoyed discussing *NZ Idol* with their families. Peer group relations at school, however, made it dangerous for them to express a liking for *NZ Idol*. When being 'obsessed' with *NZ Idol* is seen as a trademark of 13-year-old girls, admitting to your classmates that you have voted for a *NZ Idol* contestant becomes age-inappropriate and, in the case of the male participants, gender-inappropriate behaviour.

Because of these gender and age dynamics as well as the existing stereotypes about reality television viewers, distancing yourself from *NZ Idol* by critiquing and deconstructing it turned out to be a safer mode of interpretation. Adopting a critical stance towards popular media is a social act which can ease anxieties about maturity (Buckingham & Sefton-Green 1994: 150). Participants criticised the repetitiveness of reality television, the techniques that *NZ Idol* employs to establish connections with its viewers, and the overall commercial nature of the show. In the context of this study, the use of academic discourse also seemed to result from the circumstance that participants were contacted via a Media Studies class. Buckingham and Sefton-Green state that Media Studies at secondary schools has "typically emphasised the importance of students' acquiring a specialist academic discourse" (1994: 146). Using this discourse allowed the young people to present themselves as knowledgeable and critical subjects rather than emotional and unreflective media consumers.

The comparison of *NZ Idol* with other *Idols* shows points to a desire that *NZ Idol* could have been a better television show. Participants expressed disappointment that *NZ Idol* did not live up to their expectations, which were triggered by watching *American Idol* and *Australian Idol*. The realisation that *NZ Idol* contestants do not seem as talented as American and Australian ones, combined with the fact that the top two contestants of the first season did not have a successful music career, lead to the use of a cultural cringe discourse in which New Zealand does not attain the standard of other, bigger countries. The lack of success of *NZ Idol* finalists also undermines the basic premise of *Idols* shows, namely the promise of a journey of social mobility and the idea that everyone can be a star (Holmes 2004a: 48; Stahl 2004: 213). At the same time, the use of a cultural cringe discourse invites the participants to a particular New Zealand way of making sense of local media. *NZ Idol's* perceived lack of quality thus creates a typical local viewing community that the young people can belong to.

To conclude, the New Zealand adaptation of the global *Idols* format acquired local meaning in contradictory ways for the young people interviewed for this study. On the one hand, they were able to feel the 'Lovemarks' that *NZ Idol* producers were looking for, on the other hand, the show provided them with ample opportunities for criticism and articulations of cultural capital. In both cases this created possibilities for belonging to local viewing communities. Participants also came up with ideas for how the show could have worked better, asserting that a more localised version of *NZ Idol* would have been more successful. It seems that *NZ Idol* is a show that they both love to love and love to hate, even though it is not quite 'New Zealand' enough.

### **Note on the contributor**

Joost de Bruin is a lecturer in Media Studies at Victoria University of Wellington.

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