

Not Acting, *Reacting*: An Analysis of Reaction Videos,
Reactors, Viewers and Authenticity

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ABSTRACT

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The digital age has brought about a new type of YouTube content creator, the Reactor. Reactors film their supposed first-time reaction to various online videos including trailers, film, television etc. Reactors represent a new performance mode at the intersection of audience member and performer attempting to recreate a lost sense of community in an increasingly digitally mediated world. The act of filming one's reaction calls into question the authenticity of a reaction however, it is this very authenticity that drives Viewers to watch the content made by Reactors. Using reaction videos to the first year of Marvel Studios Disney+ shows as case studies (*WandaVision*, *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, *Loki*, & *Hawkeye*) this essay explores how reaction videos expose authenticity as a quality that is performed and received rather than inherent in a given performance. This performance is found and discussed in three ways, through involuntary physiological responses, being claimed through fandom and through viewing Reactor as Celebrity.

Keywords: reaction videos, authenticity, fandom, YouTube

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Table of Contents

<u>TITLE PAGE.....</u>	<u>I</u>
<u>ABSTRACT.....</u>	<u>II</u>
<u>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</u>	<u>III</u>
<u>TABLE OF CONTENTS</u>	<u>IV</u>
<u>TABLE OF FIGURES.....</u>	<u>V</u>
<u>INTRODUCTION.....</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>INVOLUNTARY PHYSIOLOGICAL RESPONSES.....</u>	<u>7</u>
<u>AUTHENTICITY CLAIMED THROUGH FANDOM.....</u>	<u>12</u>
<u>REACTOR AS CELEBRITY</u>	<u>20</u>
<u>CONCLUSION</u>	<u>27</u>
<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY</u>	<u>33</u>
<u>APPENDIX-DATA AS OF FEBRUARY 24TH, 2023.....</u>	<u>35</u>

Table of Figures

Figure 1- Views by Show.....	35
Figure 2-Views by Channel and Show.....	36
Figure 3- Total Views by Channel	37
Figure 4- The Reel Rejects WandaVision Likes.....	38
Figure 5- The Reel Rejects WandaVision Views	39
Figure 6- The Reel Rejects Falcon and the Winter Soldier Likes.....	40
Figure 7- The Reel Rejects Falcon and the Winter Soldier Views	41
Figure 8- The Reel Rejects Loki Likes.....	42
Figure 9- The Reel Rejects Loki Views	43
Figure 10- The Reel Rejects Hawkeye Likes	44
Figure 11- The Reel Rejects Hawkeye Views.....	45
Figure 12- p'Reviewed WandaVision Likes.....	46
Figure 13- p'Reviewed WandaVision Views	47
Figure 14- p'Reviewed Falcon and the Winter Soldier Likes.....	48
Figure 15- p'Reviewed Falcon and the Winter Soldier Views	49
Figure 16- p'Reviewed Loki Likes.....	50
Figure 17- p'Reviewed Loki Views	51
Figure 18- p'Reviewed Hawkeye Likes.....	52
Figure 19- p'Reviewed Hawkeye Views.....	53
Figure 20- fictionalardarling WandaVision Likes.....	54
Figure 21- fictionalardarling WandaVision Views	55
Figure 22- fictionalardarling Falcon and the Winter Soldier Likes.....	56
Figure 23- fictionalardarling Falcon and the Winter Soldier Views	57
Figure 24- fictionalardarling Loki Likes.....	58
Figure 25- fictionalardarling Loki Views	59
Figure 26- fictionalardarling Hawkeye Likes.....	60
Figure 27- fictionalardarling Hawkeye Views.....	61

Introduction

In 2017, Marvel Studios released a short video teasing a new trailer for their 2018 film *Avengers: Infinity War*. This advertising tactic is not uncommon, 10-15 second announcement videos posted to social media announcing the release of the highly anticipated trailer happen frequently. However, this trailer tease was a minute-and-a-half long video that was essentially a full-length trailer for a teaser trailer. This “Trailer Tease” highlighted Marvel fans recording their live reactions to the trailers for the studio’s past films and uploading them to YouTube. Some fans had been alone, some with friends, family, or romantic partners, but all had made a name for themselves online by reacting to Marvel trailers. No new footage from *Infinity War* was included in this tease, only footage of past reaction videos and the caption “Thank you to the best fans in the universe! Marvel Studios' "Avengers: Infinity War" Trailer TOMORROW.”¹ This tease brought into the mainstream a new variation of YouTuber/Content creator, the “Reactor.”

The concept of more general reaction videos is not new, but in recent years the form has evolved substantially. The base principle behind reaction videos is familiar, whether it is a book recommendation or something as simple as showing a meme on one’s phone, an innate pleasure is derived from watching someone’s reaction to something. While this happens in mundane live ways regularly, reaction has grown into a source of entertainment itself. During the peak of the COVID-19 lockdowns, a tweet went viral of a video filming an audience’s reaction to the opening night of *Avengers Endgame*. More recently there has been a wide circulation of compilations of young Black girls watching the trailer for Disney’s live-action remake of *The Little Mermaid* starring Black actress Halle Bailey. The authentic reaction of people unaware they are being filmed started a trend that has

¹ Marvel Entertainment “Avengers: Infinity War Trailer Tease” YouTube video, 1:46. November 28th, 2017.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VbHg5fqBYw>

evolved into “Reactors” who are YouTubers who record their reactions to any given piece of media while intentionally filming themselves and posting them online.

For the sake of clarity, I will define some terminology used in online spaces. A “Reactor” is someone who films themselves reacting to a piece of media and puts it on YouTube. In the context of YouTube web culture, there is a difference between someone who posts a reaction and a Reactor. The former is anyone posting a reaction to a given video. The Reactor has dedicated reaction YouTube channels in which someone professionally reacts to things (memes, films, tv, other YouTube videos, etc.). I use the term “Viewer” to describe someone who watches a YouTube reaction video and more broadly “Audience Member” to refer to a person who consumes any piece of media. So, a Viewer and a Reactor are both Audience Members of the same piece of media.

Early reaction videos were multi-partied, there were distinct camera operators in on the joke and then there were people reacting, not necessarily knowing that they were being filmed. The draw of these reaction videos was to find a humorous while still authentic reaction. That is Viewers of these videos held the tacit assumption that the reaction seen on screen from these pre-reactors was the same reaction they would have seen had they not been filmed. But as the people reacting have transformed into Reactors, this authenticity must be called into question. Reactors stylistically mimic the work of the YouTuber, creating a persona and using the act of watching as content itself. Reactors also monetize their work thanks to adds or sponsored content. This essay seeks to understand the reasons why reaction videos are so enticing to Viewers given that any suggestion of assumed authenticity of their earlier form has been sacrificed Reactors knowingly filming themselves and monetizing their reactions. And to what end?

Reactor performance is a product of the age of YouTube at the intersection of audience and performer, in the form of these reaction videos. The structure of reaction videos is relatively uniform, the Reactor introduces a piece of media they will react to (a trailer, music video, TV

episode, film, etc.) and then films themselves watching it. The screen is split between the Reactor and the media. There are hundreds of video types that follow this structure, some are challenge-oriented (such as “try not to laugh” or “try not to cry” videos), while others attempt to recapture the experience of watching something for the first time (for example audience reaction videos to the opening night of *Avengers*).

TV reaction videos for popular streaming television (*Stranger Things*, *Game of Thrones*, Marvel/Star Wars Disney+ original shows, etc.) offer the most potent insights to explore what motivates their Viewers. Viewers watch an episode of a given show and then go online to watch Reactors watch the same episode they just finished. Recently, two days after HBO’s *The Last of Us* aired on January 15th, 2022, reaction channels averaged between 10-100 thousand views depending on a given reaction channel’s subscriber count. To avoid copyright infringement reaction videos are edited in such a way that they cannot be coherently watched without the Viewer already having seen the episode the Reactor is reacting to. This is significant because other forms of reaction videos with shorter content (trailer reactions, music reactions, challenge reactions with popular vines or Tik Toks) can have the media being reacted to play in their entirety. Viewers can watch the media in its entirety for the first time alongside the Reactor. Reactions to appointment TV, however, are predicated on the idea that the Viewers have already seen the episode and are now watching the reaction video solely to see the Reactors.

For this reason, I use TV reaction videos looking at the first year of live-action Marvel Disney+ shows (*WandaVision*, *Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, *Loki*, and *Hawkeye*) as case studies. While TV reaction videos date back to *Game of Thrones*, they had an exponential growth in popularity with the increased use of streaming services.² This occurred because so many of the existing Reactors in

² Many reaction channels credit season two Disney+’s *The Mandalorian* and *WandaVision* and the shows that dramatically increased their audience.

the fan communities got their start with trailer reactions to Marvel content, given how much more Marvel content there was to react to compared to content from other fandoms. The four shows mentioned above all contain a range of factors contributing to the performance of the authentic, in reaction videos (recognition of easter eggs, pathos, horror/jump scare elements, spectacle/ surprise, etc.). And because they all come from the same fandom, it is easier to isolate the different Viewer motivations for watching different Reactors under the umbrella of one of the largest fandoms in the world.

Reaction videos of various types have existed since the internet allowed users to post videos though they have not yet been the subject of academic inquiry. However, their impact has not gone unnoticed in the eyes of cultural commentators. Some have suggested that the rise in popularity of reaction videos is a sign of cultural decay, the same content being endlessly cycled for someone else to watch and call their loose form review of their reaction “content.” There is a certain cynicism with which to approach these videos, one that suggests media literacy is so low and audience engagement with anything so degraded that now people look to Reactors to do the watching for them and tell them what to think. This is underscored by the fact that the work of Reactors, particularly in film and television, centers on franchises with existent fandoms (*Marvel*, *Star Wars*, *Game of Thrones*, etc.) that, given their proliferation, are already the subject of much cultural critique. The monetization of reaction begs the question; What is a Viewer gaining? More and more clearly reaction videos seem to be attempting to replicate the experience of sharing live community via the performance of authenticity.

Because of the strong ties between TV reaction videos and fandom, subcommunities have sprung up around these types of fandom-oriented reaction videos. Compilations of individual Reactors work also exist with videos such as “*Avengers: Infinity War* Reactions Mashup” where 70 individuals posted reaction videos, showing the reactions of close to 100 individuals, are played

simultaneously with the trailer for *Infinity War* centered in the middle of the screen. A top comment to this video says simply, “this was like being in a movie theatre,” a comment which has been liked six thousand times.³ These mashups are a further attempt to recreate a trailer-watching experience surrounded by an audience while putting Reactors in contact with one another.

While limits of editing prevent reaction mashups from crossing over to the TV reaction space, many Reactors have met one another via the work of reaction compilation YouTube channels. These channels take specific moments from Reactors videos to create a compilation of them all reacting to a specific moment one after another, or taking highlights from throughout the episode to create a single video that has the top 2 or 3 most interesting reactions to a given moment and then moves through the episode chronologically. Looking at the popular channels that repeatedly showed up on compilation videos established the three YouTube channels I use as case studies.

The Reel Rejects is the most popular of the YouTube channels with 1.04 million subscribers. They consist of a rotating group of 1-3 Reactors spearheaded by Greg Alba. The two to three men then watch the episode, first, welcoming the Viewers to “The Reject Nation” and throughout the episode making jokes/predictions with one another. The morning a Disney+ show drops *The Reel Rejects* are among the first reactions to be posted.

pReview’d is a smaller reaction channel with 127K subscribers and hosted by Jay Schmidt and Adam Lash. Schmidt and Lash have a background in standup comedy and an element of their reactions are to make inside jokes and bits with their audience. Their customary greeting is an ongoing bit “Hey Peaches! Welcome to p’Reviewed...” which names and helps codify their fan communities similar to “The Reject Nation” mentioned above. Their TV reaction videos often go

³ *Avengers: Infinity War Trailer Reaction Mashup* 2017.

up midafternoon the day the episode drops. Their brand as a channel (which is evidenced by many of their comments) is that they are watching whatever is being reacted to with their friends with their salutation finishing "...where friends don't let friends watch [television or trailers] alone".

Fictional Darling is a smaller reaction channel with 92K subscribers led by Jess, whose content is more catered to former Tumblr users and fans who may not have a background in comics. These channels represent a spectrum of how videos are edited, the number of Reactors, popularity, video release relative to when episodes are dropped, expertise in the given fandom, etc.

Due to fair use laws, there is a limit to how much of a given episode (or more broadly piece of media in non-TV reactions) can be shown in each reaction video as well as a minimum percentage of a reaction video's runtime that features trademarked material. The rest of the length of the video can either be the raw reactions without the media they are reacting to, pausing to discuss what just happened, commentary/review, etc. The three YouTube channels I analyze all have a different approach to filling this additional time as well, which may provide an answer to the motivations to watch a given channel. Furthermore, these channels perform their fandom in a very different way, which contributes to the answer as well.

To investigate the popularity of a given reaction, I look at how the views and likes vary from episode to episode across YouTube channels. While this is not a quantitative study, using this information as a baseline is useful in determining what exactly makes some videos viewed more than others.⁴ The main tool I use is a new YouTube feature called "Most Replayed". The Most Replayed feature creates a distribution graph of seconds rewatched when toggling over the playback bar at the bottom of the video. While its intended use is to skip to the most important/educational parts of a tutorial it also allows viewers of reaction videos to find the most rewatched moments of a given reaction. Using this information for every reaction video across the four shows, for all four channels

⁴ This is scaled as each of the case studies have different levels of popularity.

in the case study, the most replayed moment was recorded and tagged describing what was happening on screen (Excitement/shouting at action, emotional outburst sad, appreciation for character arc, recognition of easter eggs/excitement, sense of expertise, etc.). See Appendix.

The popularity and proliferation of reaction videos call into question the very nature of authenticity. In exploring these case studies, I isolate three ways that this authenticity is performed, rather than discovered; Authenticity via involuntary physiological reactions, authenticity claimed through fandom, and authenticity because of the celebrity of the Reactor allowing the Viewer to feel they know them personally. These categories complicate simple notions of authenticity and suggest that authenticity is something only ever performed for personal gain. In the case of TV Reaction videos, the authenticity is performed and monetized by Reactors and consumed by Viewers to empower themselves as Audience Members to create a sense of community in an increasingly digitally mediated world.

Involuntary Physiological Responses

A common thread among reaction videos, including early reaction videos, is the capturing of an involuntary physiological response. Viewers recognize certain embodied responses (jumping in fear or surprise, crying, gagging, throwing up, laughter, etc.) as hallmarks of authentic reactions. Sam Anderson for the New York Times elaborated on this concept by discussing reaction videos over a decade ago:

The great lesson of the genre is that we are physically different — our couches, beds, hairstyles — but spiritually uniform. A grandmother sitting in front of a ferret cage is the same as two college girls in a dorm room. This is part of the appeal of reaction videos: they allow us to experience, at a time of increasing cultural difference, the comforting universality of human nature... Reaction videos are designed to capture,

above all, surprise — that moment when the world breaks, when it violates or exceeds its basic duties and forces someone to undergo some kind of dramatic shift. This is another source of the genre’s appeal: in a culture defined by knowingness and ironic distance, genuine surprise is increasingly rare — a spiritual luxury that brings us close to something ancient. Watching a reaction video is a way of vicariously recapturing primary experience.⁵

Largely what Anderson was responding to in 2011 was reaction videos to viral internet videos/memes that all elicited embodied responses. Whether it was laughing while watching the popular video *Charlie Bit Me*, screaming after a zombie suddenly appeared while playing *The Scary Maze Game*, or throwing/throwing up watching the infamous *Two Girls One Cup* (A trailer for a piece of scatt porn that is credited as one of the earliest reaction video trends), they all caused a reaction that was physically embodied. What Anderson never could have predicted would be the ways that this phenomenon would expand beyond reactions to memes and short-form videos into the Reactor landscape that exists today. Beginning with the early seasons of *Game of Thrones* and exponentially increasing because of more genre/fandom content being created for streaming with the development of Marvel and Star Wars Disney+ shows, a sizeable amount of overall reaction videos has become dedicated to reactions to television, but the embodied nature of the reactions has remained paramount.

Michael Kirby in *On Acting and Not-Acting* describes a continuum outlining the five stages of human behavior and presentation of self from non-acting into acting: “we can follow a continuous increase in the degree of representation from non-matrixed performing through the symbolized

⁵ Anderson, Sam. *Watching People Watching People*. (The New York Times, 2011.)

matrix, received acting and simple acting to complex acting”⁶. Received, simple and complex acting refers to when an actor onstage presents as a character and the various degrees of emotional depth that acting on a stage presence. A nonmatrixed performer is void of any identity in the context of a performance, such as a stagehand or a puppeteer. The final stage, and one that best categorizes Reactors, is the symbolized matrix. In this stage, the performer presents as a heightened version of oneself. More traditional examples of performers in the symbolized matrix would be storytellers, standup comedians, etc.

In the posted videos, the Reactors are not “acting” but they are not *not* acting either. Undoubtedly the Reactors are still themselves, however, there is a clear heightening of their reactions to what is seen. The more vocal, excited, and emotional the filmed reactions are, the more views and rewatches the video gets, This is contingent on the media containing surprises, spectacle, or payoffs proportional to the performed reaction in the eyes of the Viewers. Reactors must navigate this space carefully, signaling character and over-the-top personas to garner more views while simultaneously working to hide any element of character to remain authentic. The performance of authenticity (heightened, while still genuine first-time reactions) directly correlates to Reactor's work recreating a sense of live community and the affirmation that comes with consuming media with like-minded peers. Viewers have a similar suspension of disbelief to what occurs seeing an actor onstage. They choose to believe that what they are watching is an authentic first reaction to the trailer.⁷ The clearest signifiers to a Viewer that a Reactor has not crossed from the “symbolized matrix” into acting are physiological responses.

⁶ Kirby, Michael. "On Acting and Not-Acting." (*The Drama Review: TDR* 16, no. 1, 1972): 3-15.

⁷ Comments on some reactor videos indicate at times a suspicion of a reaction being rehearsed ahead of time to match certain moments in a trailer.

WandaVision marked a rapid expansion in the popularity of reaction videos as it was the first Disney+ show of its kind to seamlessly weave characters from films into streaming with the audience knowing that the characters were already earmarked to show up in a future film. To date, it is the most popular Marvel show in the Reactor space.⁸ Given *WandaVision*'s sitcom pastiche, the moments most replayed were not moments of spectacle, but character moments/reveals that elicited embodied responses. Moments where the horror elements of the show took center stage, causing the Reactors to jump, were the most replayed in the first four episodes (jump scares, disconcerting editing, etc.). The latter episodes are defined by Reactors making their commentary through tears as the show became more emotional.

Warren-Crow posits in *Screaming Like a Girl: Viral Video and the Work of Reaction* "...the presumed authenticity of the reaction video is based largely on the perceived authenticity of the vocal performance."⁹ While it may be impossible to achieve a pure authentic reaction while knowingly filming oneself, Warren-Crow argues that this "presumed authenticity" can overcome the feeling that a video is staged (For example props seen nearby; tissues, a trashcan to throw up in, etc.). Warren-Crow goes on to focus on the gendered ways these vocal authenticities are explored (screaming like a girl, fandoms, and the coining of the term "Squee" as an expletive indicating bubbling excitement spilling out, etc. The work of the Reactor then becomes to augment one's vocal performance to increase entertainment, and counterintuitively the performance of authenticity. Simultaneously they must restrain these augmentations so Viewers do not perceive them as inauthentic.

⁸ Note: Given that *WandaVision* aired first in Late January of 2021, there may be a bias in the data given that these reactions had 10 more months to gain views compared to *Hawkeye* which aired in November of that same year.

⁹ Warren-Crow, Heather. "Screaming Like a Girl: Viral Video and the Work of Reaction."

In a chapter dedicated to cringe culture in reality-tv/ documentary in *Documentary's Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship*, Middleton argues that the bridge to authenticity in a reaction is in involuntary responses. “[A] subject dry heaving or vomiting in a reaction video becomes the pinnacle of authenticity,” he writes, evincing “an involuntary, incontrovertible bodily reaction that serves the function of the money shot in pornography.”¹⁰ This principle is true in many of the early reaction videos in internet history where the joy came largely from the Viewers knowing something the people reacting in the videos did not. The reaction video brings people together not just by a Viewer watching a Reactor watch a given piece of media but watching Reactors involuntarily react in the same way the Viewer involuntarily reacted.

Schmidt and Lash of *p'Reviewd*, gained much of their following because of the earnestness of their feelings about the source material that they watch, never being accused of leaving Kirby's symbolized matrix. They have been known to cry on camera at what they are reacting to not only in intense emotional moments but also moments of character development. Both men are straight and in committed relationships, but this expression of vulnerability has become part of their brand with their fans holding them up as a counter to toxic masculinity in fandom. *p'Reviewd*'s reaction to *Loki* demonstrates a preference for involuntary reactions over content, particularly evident in the final two episodes.

In the penultimate episode of *Loki* where the titular character has been stranded in a realm dominated by a supernatural entity known as “Alioth”. Loki, alongside alternate versions of himself from different universes, engages in a spectacle-heavy battle distracting the monster in an attempt to escape. This spectacular ending complete with VFX and swelling orchestrations were not the most

¹⁰ Middleton, Jason. 2014. *Documentary's Awkward Turn: Cringe Comedy and Media Spectatorship*. New York, NY: Routledge. [\[Google Scholar\]](#)

rewatched part of *p'Reviewed's* reaction. Immediately before this scene, there was a quieter moment in which Loki, a character known for his isolation and lack of meaningful relationships, gives Mobius, a new character introduced in the series, a hug, solidifying a friendship. That moment caused Lash to tear up exclaiming, "That's awesome"¹¹ and was rewatched more than the duo's impressed looks minutes later as the climactic fight began. Similarly, the final episode ended on a massive cliffhanger and introduced a major character for the future of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. However, the most rewatched moment was a jump scare at the beginning of the episode which caused both men to audibly react and then laugh at themselves.¹²

This jump scare was the most rewatched scene in the *Loki* finale across all three channels. Similarly, the moments in *WandaVision* where it leaned into its horror subgenre similarly all marked a substantial spike rewatching. A clear pattern is that moments in the shows that elicit an embodied response will be rewatched more often regardless of what is going on in terms of the plot of the shows themselves. They tend to be the moments discussed by Warren-Crow where the vocal performance is more difficult to fake, lending credence to their performance of authenticity securing them in the Kirby symbolized matrix. As a result, rewatched moments often elicit feelings of sadness and fear. Happier emotions such as excitement are easier to fake than more somber and involuntary responses and therefore when performed in a vacuum are received as less authentic.

Authenticity Claimed through Fandom

Physiological reactions are more likely to be viewed as authentic because they are generally viewed as unpleasant to experience (crying, jumping in fright, throwing up, etc.). Authenticity can be

¹¹ pReviewd. "Loki - Season 1 Eps 5 Reaction" YouTube video, 25:12. July 7, 2021.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-VfHU-KvMqw&list=PLxTffvZN2SPdDmqwcm_XZfjC5TuQ-Nkbj&index=25&t=1127s

¹² pReviewd. "Loki - Season 1 Eps 6 Reaction" YouTube video, 27:48. July 14, 2021.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aw-wAZuZ1r8&list=PLxTffvZN2SPdDmqwcm_XZfjC5TuQ-Nkbj&index=26&t=1211s

performed when reacting to positive experiences when coupled with the reactors attributing their positive reactions to allegiance to fandom. While involuntary reaction speaks to, as Anderson said “a universality of human nature” as a path to authenticity, the nature of fandom in TV reactions speaks to the specificity of fan identities as an alternate path. Performing one’s fan identity becomes a shorthand for authentic entertaining reactions. Each channel has different approaches to performing this authenticity given the obvious performative barrier, keeping them from truly reacting as they would if they were alone. This comes from embracing their expertise or else acknowledging that they are not in fact experts, or have had scenes spoiled, etc. This is underscored by Anna Lee Swan who argued in *Transnational Identities and Feeling in Fandom: Place and Embodiment in K-Pop Fan Reaction Videos* that the appeal of the reaction video was more than vicariously recapturing primary experience but could function as an online community-building tool.

Reaction videos are useful texts to study when exploring the omnipresence of communities that are inherently hybrid, but primarily sustained through feeling and emotional attachment. While my focus is on the user-generated self-surveillance of the music video reaction, YouTube is rife with people unboxing products, tasting new foods, playing video games, and watching pornography trailers. The reaction video as a communicative tactic centralizes shared meaning that brings people together and expands far beyond a singular object, allowing people to creatively insert themselves into the media narrative...K-pop YouTubers invite others to exist in multiple communities at once, as viewers both actively participate in the

uninhibited feelings of fandom and may revel in sharing a YouTubers' visible differences of culture and identity.¹³

If, as Swan states, Reactors have the power to reify identities and build community, how exactly do they do it? Reactors are not acting by Kirby's metric, however, careful steps are taken to keep their performance squarely in the symbolized matrix. Reactors record their reactions in high-quality sound booths with ring lights, actively seeking to perform with a sense of professionalism. As a (re)actor they both observe a piece of media but adopt a sense of co-creation as well. (Re)actors react, presumably for the first time, to a performance while simultaneously acting in such a way as to share a sense of liveness in a digital space with the Viewers seeking their videos at home. The sharing of first-time experiences as the impetus for recreating live communal consumption is particularly evident in fan culture.

In his chapter on "Interactive Audiences" in his foundational book on Fan Theory *Fans, Bloggers and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, Henry Jenkins outlined how the digital age has created an environment in which fan production has become both easy to create and easy to distribute. Jenkins explores the formation of online fan pseudo-communities brought about by the creation of new materials such as fan fiction, fan-made videos, and collages.¹⁴ Jenkins's focus lies primarily on how creators have utilized their fandom as a starting point for the advent of new franchised-inspired material and performances.

In the decade since Jenkins' book was first published, reaction videos have emerged as an additional online means of interactive audiences. Fandom-specific reaction videos such as audience

¹³ Swan, Anna Lee. "Transnational Identities and Feeling in Fandom: Place and Embodiment in K-Pop Fan Reaction Videos." *Communication, Culture and Critique* 11, no. 4 (2018): 548-565.

¹⁴ Jenkins, Henry. *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers* (New York University Press, New York, 2006b.)

reactions (reactions of an audience at the opening night/weekend for a movie filmed and distributed), trailer reactions, and even more recently TV episode reactions have all emerged as ways fan communities can discuss their fandom online. Effectively reaction helps to replace live interpersonal community-building experiences. In these latter two, rather than acting solely as “performers” as would be the case in fan fiction or video production, Reactors perform as audience members. These performances allow audiences to perform their fan identity and form online communities.

Fan communities have historically had the opportunity to interact with one another at various conventions, opening night events, and in theatre experiences generally. At these events, fans can passively observe the behaviors of one another while primarily focusing on either direct fan performances, such as cosplay or on new texts such as franchise panels or new films. As these fandoms have grown, logistical barriers prevent all those who identify as members of a fandom from attendance. Reactors help fill this void, recreating a sense of community online in an evolving fan landscape where there is now a fundamental change in how fan media is consumed. Jenkins discusses fan communities growing online thanks to fan message boards. One of the most popular platforms for this is the Tumblr fan community, which is what *fictionaldarling* caters to.

What sets *fictionaldarling* apart from other reaction channels is that while *p’Reviewd* and *The Reel Rejects* are constantly reacting to every significant episode of television in the cultural zeitgeist, *fictionaldarling* reacts to considerably less. Despite their being less of a claim to mainstream “expertise” on the content she is reacting to, *fictionaldarling* indicates loyalty to a smaller fandom (which may contribute to her being the case study with the least number of subscribers). While the previous two channels bring a sense of expertise with knowledge of the comics a given show is adapting or else behind-the-scenes information from things gleaned from set photos etc.,

fictionaldarling's commentary stems from ideas surrounding popular fan fictions or “ships” (imagined potential romantic relationships between two given characters) developed on Tumblr.

The most rewatched moments in *fictionaldarling's WandaVision* reactions tend to be character-driven moments of domesticity and fan fiction come to life (the titular characters “having a gag” looking at their calendar, bantering in bed together, comforting one another, etc.). Jess conveys a sense of joy and talks about Wanda with a great deal of empathy and in later episodes, cries alongside her. Jess also uses profanity more so than other channels often sobbing while exclaiming, “What the fuck?!” which narrows her audience more but contributes to a sense of authenticity. After she reacts to a significant moment, she almost always pauses the video and comments on what she has seen. Often these tangents are asking questions about how other characters in the Marvel universe would feel about what’s going on or what the larger implications would be for them. These tangents are not something she expects to be answered by the show itself but is almost a form of creating real-time fan fiction/theories recognizable to those from the same fan communities which are viewed as more feminine or queer ways of being a fan. *Loki* reactions on *fictionaldarling* were equally informed by Tumblr and the ways fans interact on the platform. Most rewatched moments were more character-driven, perhaps most notably being the revelation that the character is canonically bisexual, underscored by Jess's identifying as bi-romantic.¹⁵

Bucky Barnes, the Winter Soldier in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, was a very popular character to create fan fiction around after the release of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* in 2014. This is in part because many fans engaged in a queer reading of his relationship with Steve Rogers but also from a sense of wanting to comfort a character they felt had been through too much. This

¹⁵ *fictionaldarling*. “the dynamic disaster duo we DEFINITELY needed | loki commentary (episode 3!!)” YouTube video, 20:27. June 23, 2021.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bBynWixOOQ48&list=PL6rP1Ev5V4JzOiV4e2kE0TOU8ye-kYWqc&index=4&t=581s>

became significant in *fictionaldarling's* reactions because thanks to Tumblr, Bucky (along with Loki and to a smaller degree Wanda) was already a favorite character Jess was attached to. This is despite the character having had around thirty minutes of screen time in all the Marvel movies so far. There are homoerotic moments, particularly at the beginning of the show where the titular characters fall off a truck and roll down a hill on top of each other, and then later do a joint therapy session that is reminiscent of the couple's therapy. *Fictionaldarling* has more extreme reactions to these moments compared to other Reactors, precisely because they cater to a more niche audience in the fandom summarized best by her at one point exclaiming, "Someone in the writer's room was on Tumblr."¹⁶

The Falcon and the Winter Soldier, as a series, was far more action-packed episode to episode than *WandaVision*. *The Reel Rejects* general more excitable style, as a pillar of the online fan community, was interrupted when the most replayed moments were not instances of spectacular action, but rather when the shows social commentary took the forefront. *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier's* central conflict was whether Sam Wilson, a Black man, would feel comfortable taking on the Mantel of "Captain America" given the country's fraught history with the Black community. Early episodes introduced a replacement Captain America, John Walker who behaved much more violently than other Marvel heroes in ways reminiscent of police brutality. Scenes where the characters discussed whether a Black man could be Captain America, and the impact that whiteness had on the legacy of the mantel, and also the United States, were the most rewatched.¹⁷ This was underscored by the fact that Alba is a person of color. The most rewatched moment of the entire show on their channel was the very end of the fourth episode replacement when Captain America,

¹⁶ fictionalDarling. "sam & bucky are living in a FANFIC (& it has a lot of hurt 🥺) | falcon & winter soldier commentary!!" YouTube video, 19:36. March 26, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kz8aCu27xF4&list=PL6rP1Ev5V4JyY_-l67asgkMAyMuWbv85t&index=3&t=860s

¹⁷ Reel Rejects. "FALCON AND THE WINTER SOLDIER EPISODE 5 REACTION!! 1x5 Spoiler Review | Mid-Credits Ending Scene" YouTube video, 46:45. April 16, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YRsofmZXdJ8&list=PL-bIhJVeYWw_kBcEC0gluDGgb9qB7Pp6V&index=7

John Walker, publicly beheaded an unarmed and surrendering enemy using the Captain America Shield.¹⁸ Their reaction was one of shock and horror. The iconic shield, a core symbol in the Marvel fandom, had been used so violently, its blood-stained image was shown in the final shot of the episode. Claiming a fullness of identity as Marvel fans, *The Reel Rejects*, with a framed image of the shield hanging on the wall behind them, used their fan identity to imbue their reaction with additional emotive weight. This was supported by an environment of the room they filmed their reaction signaling their fandom and allowing for greater authenticity to be performed in part by the space when a symbol reflected in that room was desecrated.

The reaction to the fifth episode of *WandaVision* was *The Reel Reject's* most viewed reaction video of the entire show. The most replayed moment was when Evan Peters appeared at the end presumably reprising his role as Quicksilver (Wanda's brother from the comics and *Avengers: Age of Ultron*) from the Fox X-Men universe. The cheer that this elicited is a common thread among reactions to the episode and signals a specific type of fandom, pointing to a sense of expertise. This moment is only significant if Reactors are familiar with the Fox X-men films and the behind-the-scenes licensing deals that had to lead to both Peters and Aaron Taylor Johnson playing versions of Quicksilver in two competing franchises before Disney Marvel acquired 20th Century Fox. This in-depth knowledge of the business aspect of fandom allowed Reactors to infer that Evan Peters was reprising his character from the Fox films because Aaron Taylor Johnson's iteration of the character had been killed previously in Marvel's *Avengers: Age of Ultron*.¹⁹ The fan expertise to recognize the easter egg across two previously disparate franchises was paramount for the reaction's authenticity.

¹⁸ Reel Rejects. "FALCON AND THE WINTER SOLDIER EPISODE 4 REACTION!! 1x4 Spoiler Review | John Walker Ending" YouTube video, 41:52. April 9, 2021.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LyL9kfh4NBk&list=PL-bIhJVeYWw_kBcEC0gluDGgb9qB7Pp6V&index=5

¹⁹ Reel Rejects. "WANDA VISION 1x5 REACTION!! (Episode 5 | Spoiler Review | Theories) 'On A Very Special Episode...'" YouTube video, 28:56. February 5, 2021.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgETiKGUg1o&list=PL-bIhJVeYWw97-LVzPkb1_ACATJGHzwVo&index=6&t=731s

This was underscored further in the reactions to *Hawkeye*. In *The Reel Rejects'* reaction, it quickly became clear that while they were performing their fan identity as Marvel fans, they were even more specifically performing their identities as fans of the Marvel Netflix show *Daredevil*. At the end of *Hawkeye's* 5th episode, it is revealed that the villain of the show is the Marvel villain Kingpin with Vincent D'Onofrio reprising his role as the character from the Netflix show. This reveal is subtly hinted at throughout the season *The Reel Rejects* caught every single one of them and exclaimed each time. Of the six-episode series, half of the most replayed moments were moments that hinted at or featured D'Onofrio's Kingpin.

Fictionaldarling's *Hawkeye* reactions were noticeably similar. While *The Reel Rejects* were focused on *Daredevil*, *fictionaldarling* was performing her identity as a Black Widow fan (both the character and the film that had been released earlier that year). A secondary antagonist in the show was Florence Pugh's Yelena Belova, a character introduced only months previously as the younger sister to the now-dead Natasha Romanoff in the feature film *Black Widow*. In her commentary, she often lamented that fans didn't get to see Black Widow (Natasha) and Hawkeye (Clint) spend more time together in the previous Marvel films. Her most rewatched moments were when Clint was remembering Natasha and scenes with Yelena.

This is an evolution of the optimistic universality of humanity revealed by reaction videos Anderson described in the New York Times. While the universally embodied reactions are certainly appealing, there is an additional layer. Details about a Reactor such as the fullness of their fandom, create more tailored but still authentic reactions. Reaction videos speak to both the universality and specificity of being an Audience Member. Regardless of background, watching someone experience

the same thing you have experienced yourself is satisfying, and yet, fan identities and demographics making those reactions even more similar, can make the experience even more satisfying.²⁰

Reactor as Celebrity

A natural continuation of Reactors being actively sought out for their expertise as fans is that Reactors gain dedicated fans themselves. Given that Reactors primarily post to YouTube, aspects of YouTuber celebrity begin to be adopted into their work. This leads to authenticity to be found in reaction through a sense of intimacy with the Reactor themselves with fans dedicated to their celebrity. Phillip Auslander while discussing the impact of a musician's persona in *In Concert: Performing Musical Personae* observes the following regarding celebrity:

Although musicians usually initiate musical identities by presenting specific fronts, these identities are not simply created by musicians and consumed by audiences. Rather, such identities are social in a number of crucial ways. Although a musician's persona is expected to be more or less continuous from performance to performance, it is also produced at any given performance through the negotiation of a working consensus with the audience. The audience is thus the cocreator of the persona and has an investment in it that extends beyond mere consumption.²¹

²⁰ Reactors can be advertised and searched by race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, expertise, and group size/relationships (romantic partners and families). There are entire compilations now dedicated to sorting reactors by demographic identities such as "Black Creators react to the *Black Panther Wakanda Forever* Trailer" or "Female Reactors react to *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*". In this way the traditionally "communal" is mediated further, not only by digital spaces but also by being having its members, and the affirmations they provide, tailored to a consumer's demographic or ideological preferences.

²¹ Auslander, Philip. "Musical Personae." *In Concert Performing Musical Persona*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2021.

Auslander's observations concern the relationship negotiated in live performance spaces, however, can easily be mapped onto the work of Reactors (and YouTubers more broadly). YouTube, as a platform, prides itself on the increased direct exposure content creators can have with a wider audience. Reactors responding to their Viewers becomes evident in the aspects of their identity they choose to highlight when filming themselves and as the Viewer becomes a "cocreator" in the Reactors persona, the absurdity of expecting an authentic reaction from someone knowingly filming themselves is mitigated.

The question of authenticity when it comes to performances of self on YouTube is not new. The study of the YouTube "video diary" as a means by which a creator performs themselves (and by extension, Reactors who are performing themselves while watching something) has been going on for a decade. Michael Strangelove, in an exploration of YouTube, argues that YouTubers create a negotiated identity. Fans demand authenticity. But the mere act of pointing a camera at yourself, to a degree, compromises "authenticity." This also calls into question what the function of a "diary" is that is simultaneously meant to be shared with a legion of unknown online followers. Many YouTubers make videos entitled something akin to "The Real Me" and lament the fact that there are aspects of their personalities that they do not share with their online following. Strangelove argues that the video diary culture of YouTube helps YouTubers experience their video practices as transformative and perhaps represents a new model of self-construction, multiple selfhoods, and identity maintenance.²² In different language, Strangelove here describes the effects of audience co-creation in a YouTube Celebrities prolonged performance in the symbolized matrix described by Kirby. Even these more "authentic" videos created by YouTubers ultimately are ultimately performed and the performed nature of this category is all the more apparent in with Reactors.

²² Strangelove, Michael. "3. Video Diaries: The Real You in YouTube." *Watching YouTube*. University of Toronto Press, 2020. 64-83. Print.

Reactors intentionally work to mimic the financial success of YouTubers by incorporating standardized phrases into their videos. *P'Reviewed* and *The Reel Rejects* have a standard scripted salutation, (“Welcome to the Reject Nation”, “Hey Peaches!”, “Thank You for Watching. You. Yes you” etc.) to help establish a sense of community with the Viewers. All three channels end with a farewell along the lines of “If you liked this reaction give it a like and subscribe for more reactions.” These scripted beginnings and endings help indicate to Viewers that despite the difference in space and time, their posting of the reaction creates a communal watching experience. Swan indicates that this desire to replicate drives the demand for reaction in *Transnational Identities and Feeling in Fandom: Place and Embodiment in K-Pop Fan Reaction Videos*. The popularity of all reaction channels indicates that the channels using the script aren’t the only ones building community, however, this script helps in building loyal Reactor fan bases. By christening their fandom or directly thanking their Viewers, Reactors create a more personal or intimate bond with them. This is a common tactic used by YouTubers and the draw to the persona of Reactors as online celebrities is a force for community building itself.

Rebecca Rowe establishes an application of commercial use of Reactor celebrity. Rowe looks at how reaction videos to Netflix’s *A Series of Unfortunate Events* can be used to assess the fidelity of an adaptation. Rowe concludes that reaction videos can expand our knowledge of audience reception, especially how audiences perceive adaptations and observed: “Instead of having to rely on reviews, surveys, ethnographies, or autoethnographies that flatten responses to one given point in time ... reaction videos show reactions as they happen, granting us a more detailed and dynamic depiction of how audiences interact with adaptations and ideas of fidelity.²³ Rowe argues reaction videos are vehicles of fidelity in adaptation and true empathy. While Rowe’s focus is on their ability

²³ Rowe, Rebecca. "The More Accuracy the Better?": Analysing Adaptation Reception in Reaction Videos."

to gauge perceptions of fidelity to a source material her methodology touches on the genuine sincerity that is assumed in the contents of a reaction video and the power of the Reactor as an Influencer.

A seemingly unspoken objective of Reactors is to popularize the show they are watching. The more popular a given show is, the more likely people are to seek out reactions. Reactors seldom have much negative to say about what they are watching, instead talking up the positive aspects of what they are watching, and this is for a clear reason. As *The Reel Rejects* popularity has grown, they have increasingly been invited to premieres alongside other online influencers. Reactor as influencer (celebrity), functions because as Rowe notes, they are seen as vehicles of fidelity and empathy. The medium by which they “review” material by its nature cannot be rehearsed. To combat this, of the multiple people in a *Reel Rejects* reaction, where they are invited to the premier, they take care to ensure not all three attended.

While this may seem to indicate that once Reactors reach celebrity status that would be seen as inherently inauthentic, this is not the case. *The Reel Rejects* works to make sure they are seen in a variety of contexts outside of TV reactions. When not reacting to episodes of television, they will react to trailers, and easter egg breakdowns from other channels, and go over news headlines as a YouTube entertainment news channel. This increased exposure to the Reactors outside of the context of reaction allows the Viewer to feel they know the Reactor personally and breeds a sense of loyalty.

The loyalty of this community building is often monetized via the platform Patreon. Patreon is a membership platform that provides business tools for content creators to run a subscription service for just their content that is used by both *The Reel Rejects* and *p'Reviewd* as well as many other YouTubers. The platform is a means by which artists earn a monthly income by providing rewards and perks to their subscribers. Patreon perks for reaction channels often include full unedited

reactions where the episode is not shown on the screen at all but rather a time code showing exactly where they are in an episode so one could watch along in its entirety. Or when a given Reactor goes back and watches episodes of a show more than a week after it is released then Patreon subscribers may have access to them a few days early etc. While *pReview'd* do not have an overwhelming number of subscribers, the fanbase is potent with many Viewers subscribing to the channel's discord server and Patreon to create an ongoing relationship with the duo. Being a part of these additional platforms gives these Viewers/fans access to exclusive content such as reactions to less popular shows and more direct contact with the Reactors.

While not having a Patreon account, *fictionaldarling's* reaction videos mimic mainstream YouTubers stylistically. Her videos are substantially more edited compared to other channels and often go up a full day after the episode is aired. It is also common for a *fictionaldarling* video to begin with sponsored content. The format of her reactions alternates between the episode taking up the whole screen with her head in a small bubble or her on the full screen making commentary on what she just saw. Most Reactors play the episodes uninterrupted but *fictionaldarling* is not afraid to pause the episode to comment, emphasizing that while her videos are reactions, they are also commentary videos. Fans hoping to have what is being reacted to flow uninterrupted will be disappointed. The increased editing of *fictionaldarling* reactions creates a unique identity or personalized style that sets their reactions apart and helps to cultivate dedicated audiences to Jess herself rather than Viewers watching any reaction videos they can find of a given episode.

WandaVision was the show where many Reactors gained or dramatically increased their subscriber base. *pReview'd* was no exception. Schmidt and Lash's most replayed moments for the early episodes reflected the reactions of most fans. From the sixth episode onward, however, their reactions took a distinct turn. In the later episodes, it became a frequent occurrence that Schmidt would physiologically respond by crying. Starting when it seemed the character Vision would cease

to exist in the sixth episode, then again at the now iconic line, “What is grief if not love persevering”²⁴, and again at the show's end. These moments were either the most or second most replayed moments of the reaction videos that they were in. The efficacy of embodied reactions such as tears has been discussed but Schmidt and Lash take this a step further and are known for this brand of nontoxic masculinity. These expressions of emotion are not common among male Reactors but were significant in establishing the online persona of Schmidt and Lash, becoming a defining trait in the *pReview'd* reactions to *Falcon and the Winter Soldier*.

As mentioned above, the earnestness of care for the source material is a pillar of *pReview'd*, developed most acutely during *Falcon and the Winter Soldier*. Schmidt and Lash made it clear that they felt strongly about the mantel of “Captain America”, and Sam Wilson needed to adopt it by the end of the series. As the show progressed, their passion for this became the most rewatched aspect of every given episode, from outrage that the character John Walker had been named the new Captain America to horror and tears after the beheading in episode four mentioned above.²⁵ Notably, the most rewatched moment of their reaction in the fifth episode came right at the beginning when the titular characters retrieved the Captain America shield from Walker and Bucky threw the shield down next to Sam. Upon seeing this Schmidt started to tear up saying, “He’s got to take the shield.”²⁶ The last two episodes were filled with moments of the two men beaming at scenes of Sam Wilson becoming Captain America and articulating multiple times, “That’s my Captain America.” In a time where racist rhetoric about a Black man donning this mantel was prevalent in online discussions,

²⁴ pReviewd. “Wandavision - Eps 8 Reaction” YouTube video, 23:51. February 26, 2021.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9u4u46Nqg1Q&list=PLxTffvZN2SPdDmqwcm_XZfjC5TuQ-NkbJ&index=9&t=682s

²⁵ pReviewd. “The Falcon and The Winter Soldier - Season 1 Eps 4 Reaction” YouTube video, 21:58. April 9, 2021.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dJ8-9hGQc44&list=PLxTffvZN2SPdDmqwcm_XZfjC5TuQ-NkbJ&index=16&t=1139s

²⁶ pReviewd. “The Falcon and The Winter Soldier - Season 1 Eps 5 Reaction” YouTube video, 25:25. April 16, 2021.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZHjVrRKis8&list=PLxTffvZN2SPdDmqwcm_XZfjC5TuQ-NkbJ&index=17&t=357s

Schmidt and Lash's unabashed support became a haven for fan engagement. It is worth noting that both men are white which helped contribute to their brand of not only nontoxic men but nontoxic white men. The vulnerability displayed consistently through the physical expression of sadness established a loyal fan community to the Reactors themselves in addition to the *Falcon and the Winter Soldier*.

Laura Hudson explains this phenomenon for *Wired*, positing that there is an element of comradery that comes about when watching a reaction video. An Audience Member of the episode feels the pain of a beloved character's death and as Viewer can watch a Reactor go through the same journey and is now joined in a sort of fellowship on the other side of the experience.²⁷ As Reactors have grown increasingly popular, fellowships with individual Reactors have grown as well. The goodwill *p'Reviewed* gained in their reactions to *Falcon and The Winter Soldier* created a legion of fans who want to support the two men as individuals, thanks to their emotionally vulnerable online persona. And in response to this thanks, Schmidt and Lash learned about the aspects of their identities that could be revealed as the most authentic.

This has created a sense of competing fan identities at work in engagement with reaction videos. Viewers can be a fan of the show and a fan of a Reactor at the same time while influencing each other in what shows to watch. Fans recommend a popular show that Reactors should begin watching (which recently occurred when *p'Reviewed*, following a fan suggestion, began watching Netflix's *Wednesday* two months after the show came out). Conversely, favorite Reactors going through a show a dedicated Viewer hasn't seen yet, motivates them to watch it to make sense of the Reactor's content.

Hudson's piece also points to how Viewers and Reactors interact by sharing or not sharing information the Reactors may not have. Hudson points to the fans of the *Game of Thrones* books,

²⁷ Hudson, Laura, "What's Behind Our Obsession With Game of Thrones Reaction Videos" (*Wired*) June 5th, 2014

hiding the reveal of what happens at The Red Wedding since the show began specifically to preserve the experience of their fellow fans, and reaction videos become artifacts of this experience. This is particularly relevant when Reactors are working their way through a show dropped using the binge model rather than releasing one episode per week, for example, Netflix's *Wednesday*. Viewers can spoil the show in the comments and choosing not to contributes to a sense of intimacy and therefore authenticity.

The intimacy between Viewers and Reactor's online persona fosters a sense of authenticity. If a Viewer feels they know a Reactor, then they will be able to recognize the nuances in their reaction that are more authentic. The Viewers work in cocreating the performance of the authentic reaction comes by responding positively to aspects of the Reactor's performance. This can take the form of comments responding to the editing, commentary, or emotional vulnerability displayed by the Reactors. It can also take the form of more direct communication such as suggesting and in turn receiving suggestions for shows or directly funding the Reactors via Patreon. The opportunity for the Viewer to be engaged as a fan of both the content and the Reactor fosters a greater sense of community. This exchange, Viewers giving monetary compensation via views or more direct patronship in exchange for a sense of community requires a suspension of disbelief that a transaction is taking place. The most prolific Reactors have turned reaction into a full time job and primary means of employment and have no motivation to react the same way they would if they were not filming themselves. Their motivation is to react in the most entertaining way possible using performances of authenticity as tools because of their efficacy in creating their actual product, not the reaction itself but the sense of community the reaction elicits.

Conclusion

Consuming narrative media such as theatre and film has historically been a communal activity. In the brief amount of time, since media consumption has shifted to be more isolated

(primarily television, but content in the age of streaming as well), almost as quickly, technology and performance have adapted to fill this void of isolation with the work of Reactors.

Reaction is most popular when it feels most akin to a live communal experience, in short, authentic. Because of the obvious signifiers that these reactions are not completely authentic, disparate interweaving identities and physiological responses become key. While not impossible, it is difficult to superficially perform genuine fear, surprise, and tears, and as such, these become the clearest signifiers of authenticity, and therefore community building. The potential for this digitally mediated community is possible because reaction encompasses the universality of the human experience, the singular identities of fandom celebrity.

But reactions have also allowed for a more personal relationship with the audience's peers. The recent trend of young Black girls watching the teaser trailer for the new *The Little Mermaid* exists because subconsciously we understand that one's demographics might mean the same piece of media elicits different or stronger involuntary reactions. This can be looked at as a riff on or evolution of the business term "target audience". Rather than the audience a studio or distributor thinks a given piece of media is ideal for, Viewers of reaction videos can choose what type of Reactor would have the most satisfying reaction to a piece of media they have already seen. Viewers can either look for someone similar to themselves and hope they will react the same way or else look for someone who for any given number of reasons will have a more satisfying reaction. In the case of Marvel TV reactions, this takes the form of performing fan identities. How reaction videos can reify marginalized identities such as Black Reactors reacting to *The Little Mermaid* is an opportunity for further inquiry.

Inquiry into the impacts of Reactor as a Celebrity on the community formation in a reaction is also worth exploring. Unexplored in this essay is the larger question, of when are different types of reaction videos watched and for what reasons. *The Reel Rejects*, *pReview'd* and *fictionaldarling* all have a

standard distribution schedule releasing the reaction within a day of the episode airing. However other reaction channels do not react to things in real-time or to the same degree, sometimes with months or years passing between the Media release and a reaction being posted. If the purpose of a reaction video is to build a community by reliving experiences of watching a shared text vicariously through a Reactor, then the timing of these delayed Reactors versus more immediate Reactors illuminates how this works in real-time versus in retrospect.

Channels that post their reactions the day of or within hours of the episode being added to the streaming service cater to an immediacy of wanting to share experience and engage in a dialog. The space and time being traversed in the interim between both the Viewer and Reactor watching the episode is a matter of hours, so the reaction becomes a part of the online conversation surrounding the Marvel fandom. Other reactions offer more of a “re-experiencing” when there is a much longer interim period and Reactor celebrity may be more pronounced. In these instances, Viewers can go back and experience the series as a whole as if for the first time motivated perhaps by nostalgia for the show and certainly the Reactors celebrity. This is opposed to the work done by *The Reel Rejects*, *p’Reviewd*, and *fictionaldarling* where the re-experiencing of the episode, is bound up as a part of the contemporaneous online discussion as a show is airing but has not finished.

A reactor as a celebrity reveals an added dimension to Viewers watching habits. The existence of reaction compilation channels initially suggests that videos were watched and rewatched to see the reactions to a specific moment of a given episode, the episode or moment as the impetus. However, the discrepancies of what the most rewatched moments across different reaction channels indicate are that some reaction videos are rewatched to re-see a specific Reactors reaction, with the persona of the reaction as the impetus. While this is not always the case, and there are some moments where every rewatched moment across multiple reaction channels lines up with one another, this points to Viewers, dedicated fans of the Reactors, and their celebrity, rewatching the

same reaction video multiple times for its performance of authenticity. The increase in the interim period also requires a larger suspension of disbelief from Viewers as they have to assume that despite a TV show or film having released months previously that the Reactors has not had the plot spoiled.

The impact of this re-experiencing as a driver behind the demand for reactions is also an avenue for further study. There is a clear desire to rewatch old reactions to recapture the authentic feeling of watching something for the first time, evident by comments made within the last year on reaction videos posted over five years ago. While this essay focused on Reactors creating real-time online fan communities, reaction videos as nostalgia have yet to be explored.

The value of reaction in rhetoric has not gone unnoticed. Swanson discussed the power of theatre reactions (the filmed reactions of audiences watching a movie in real-time) in advertising the *Paranormal Activity* franchise²⁸. And Marvel has also utilized the *Paranormal Activities* reaction style in its marketing in its Marvel Studios Celebrates the Movie promotional video to highlight the 2021-2023 film slate²⁹, as well as the announcement for the teaser trailer for *Avengers Infinity War*.³⁰ Marvel as a franchise has particularly built its identity around the communal experience it creates in the theatres. As it transitioned to creating TV, it lost a central element to the experience that Reactors came to fill. It is for similar reasons that the existence of high-quality ProShots of *Hamilton* or *The Phantom of the Opera* has not hindered the production's ticket sales.

While I indicate that the drive to watch reaction videos is community formation, what is formed is an insufficient pseudo-community when compared to the live experience. The nature of

²⁸ Swanson, Alexander. "Audience Reaction Movie Trailers and the Paranormal Activity Franchise."

²⁹ Marvel Entertainment "Marvel Studios Celebrates the Movies" YouTube video, 3:10. May 3rd, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdpxoFcdORI&t=1s>

³⁰ Marvel Entertainment "Avengers: Infinity War Trailer Tease" YouTube video, 1:46. November 28th, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3VbHg5fqBYw>

the pseudo-watching community brought about by reaction necessitates further study. In many ways, the existence of Reactors justifies Guy Debord's 30th thesis in *The Society of the Spectacle*

The alienation of the spectator, which reinforces the contemplated objects that result from his own unconscious activity, works like this: The more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him. The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.³¹

In searching for a "home," Viewers have looked to reaction as an answer. Reaction videos offer the next step of Debord's notion that society unifies around the shared watching of the spectacle. Recognizing the alienation of the spectacle, spectators have become Viewers and Reactors. Reactors integrate into the spectacle, their watching becoming monetized via sponsorships, YouTube ads, or Patreon. When performing an authenticity, reaction videos hope to mimic communal consumption, though the sense of community formed through engaging with reaction is just that, a sense. While this drives Viewer's desire for engagement, it fundamentally lacks any hallmarks of true community and fails to address any of Debord's concerns. Reactors evolve Debord's concerns to match innovations in technology and distribution of the spectacle. Despite lacking the necessary markers of true community, these pseudo-communities, shaped through fandom, are large and expanding, representing a fundamental shift in the role of contemporary audiences.

³¹ Debord, Guy. 1992. *Society of the Spectacle*. London, England: Rebel Press, London.

The role of the audience is expanding in the digital age creating online communities replicating communal media consumption experiences through Reactor performance. The increased removal of live bodies in the theatre space has created a vacuum that filled by the innovation recreating the affirmation associated with the live community in these digital spaces, while also adding additional nuances based on various identities and personas dedicated to performing “audience-ness”. As the field of audience and fan studies continues to grow, an exploration of how live performance makes its way into digital spaces and its impacts on preexisting thoughts of performance modes is an inevitability. The areas where Viewers seek to replicate the authenticity of the live experience will inform how authenticity in an increasingly digital world has become a quality that is performed in multiple ways rather than having any inherent meaning. Reactors represent a new mode of performance at the intersection of audience and performer and further digitally mediated performance modes and their impact on our understanding of the “authentic” remain unexplored.

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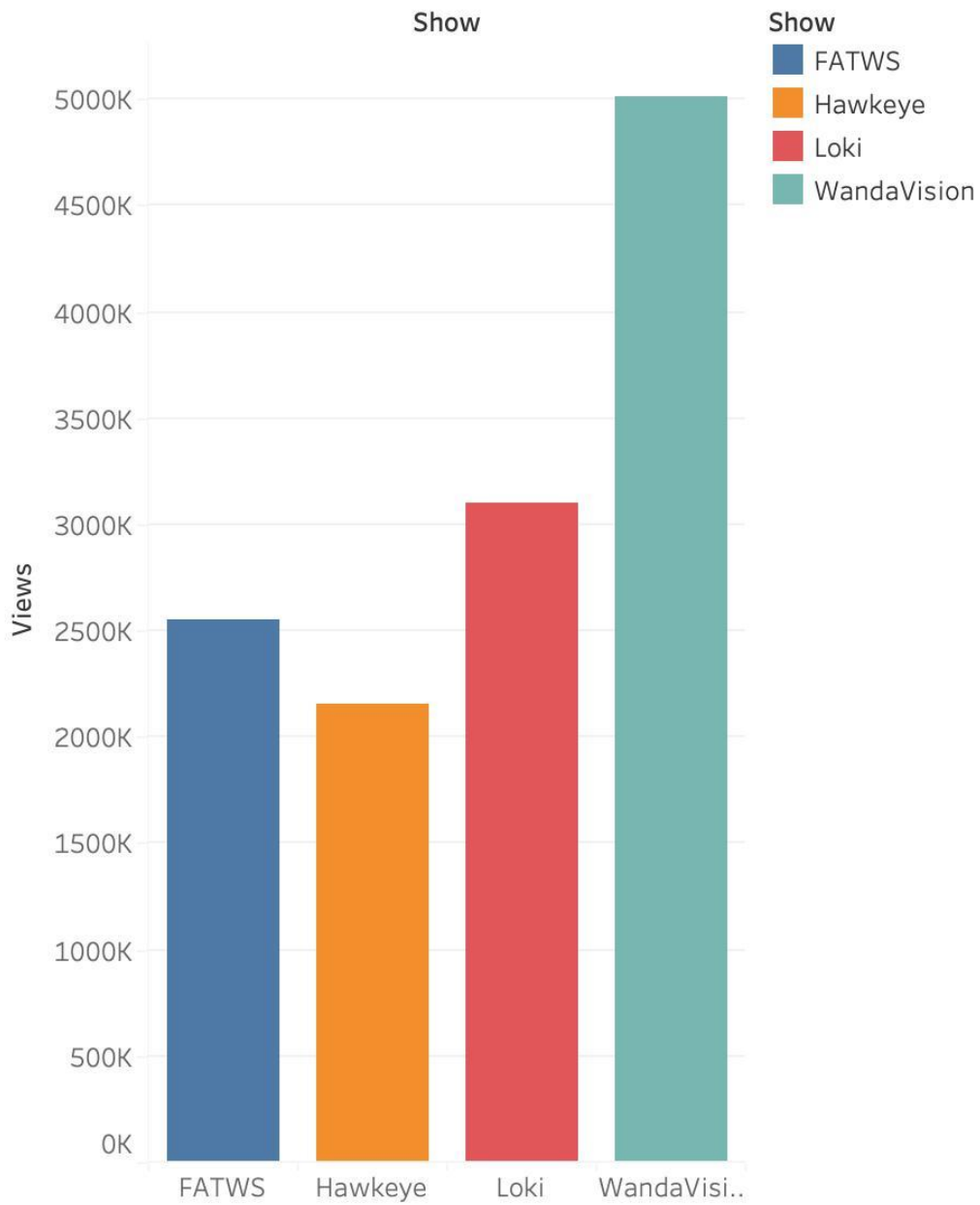
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Views by Show

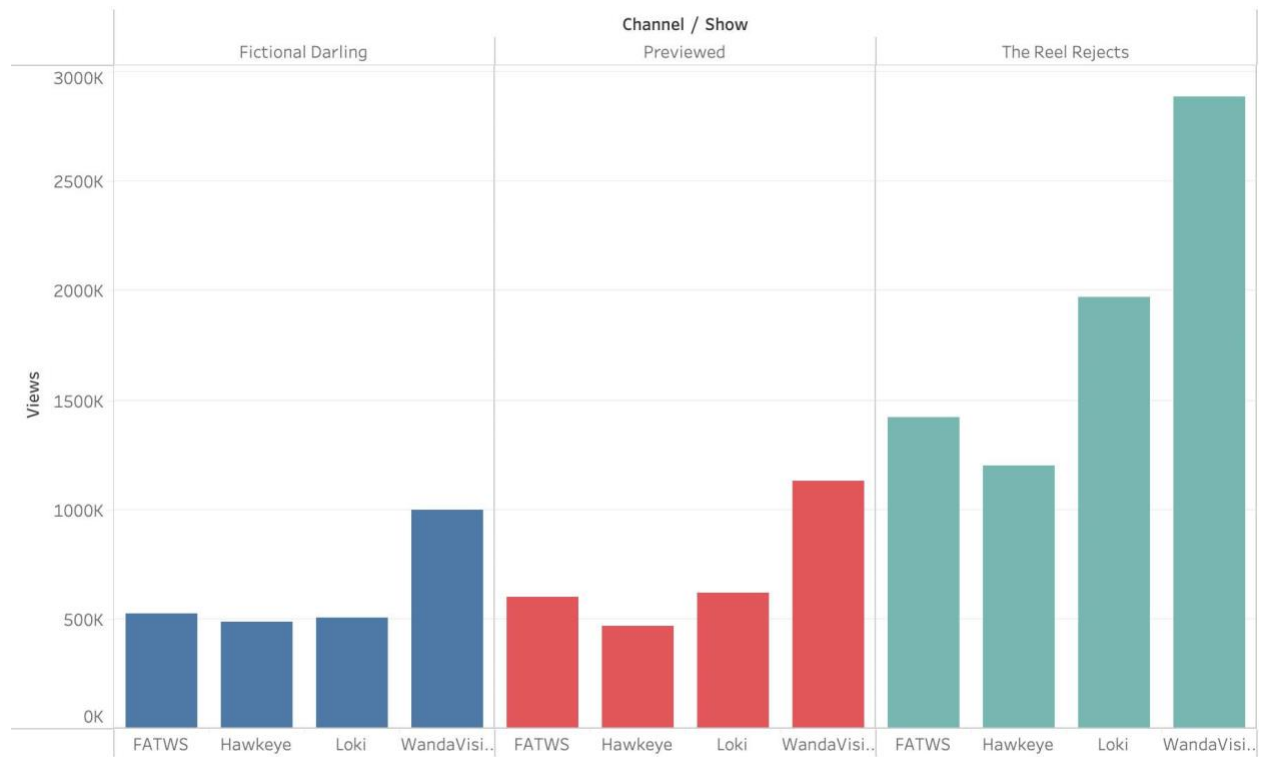


Sum of Views for each Show. Color shows details about Show. The data is filtered on Channel, which keeps Fictional Darling, Previewed and The Reel Rejects.

Appendix-Data as of February 24th, 2023

Figure 1- Views by Show

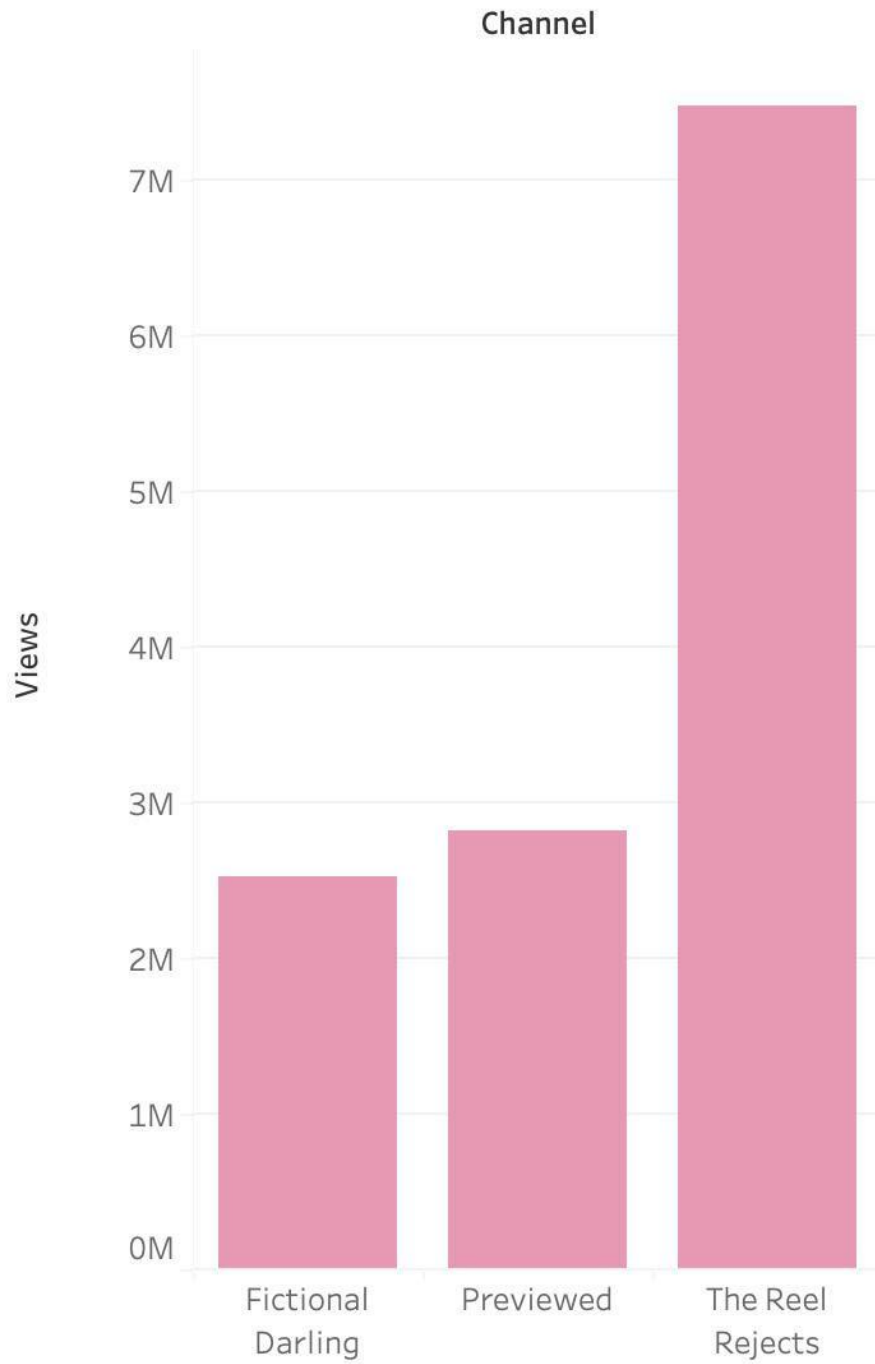
Views by Channel and Show



Sum of Views for each Show broken down by Channel. Color shows details about Channel. The view is filtered on Channel, which keeps Fictional Darling, Previewed and The Reel Rejects.

Figure 2-Views by Channel and Show

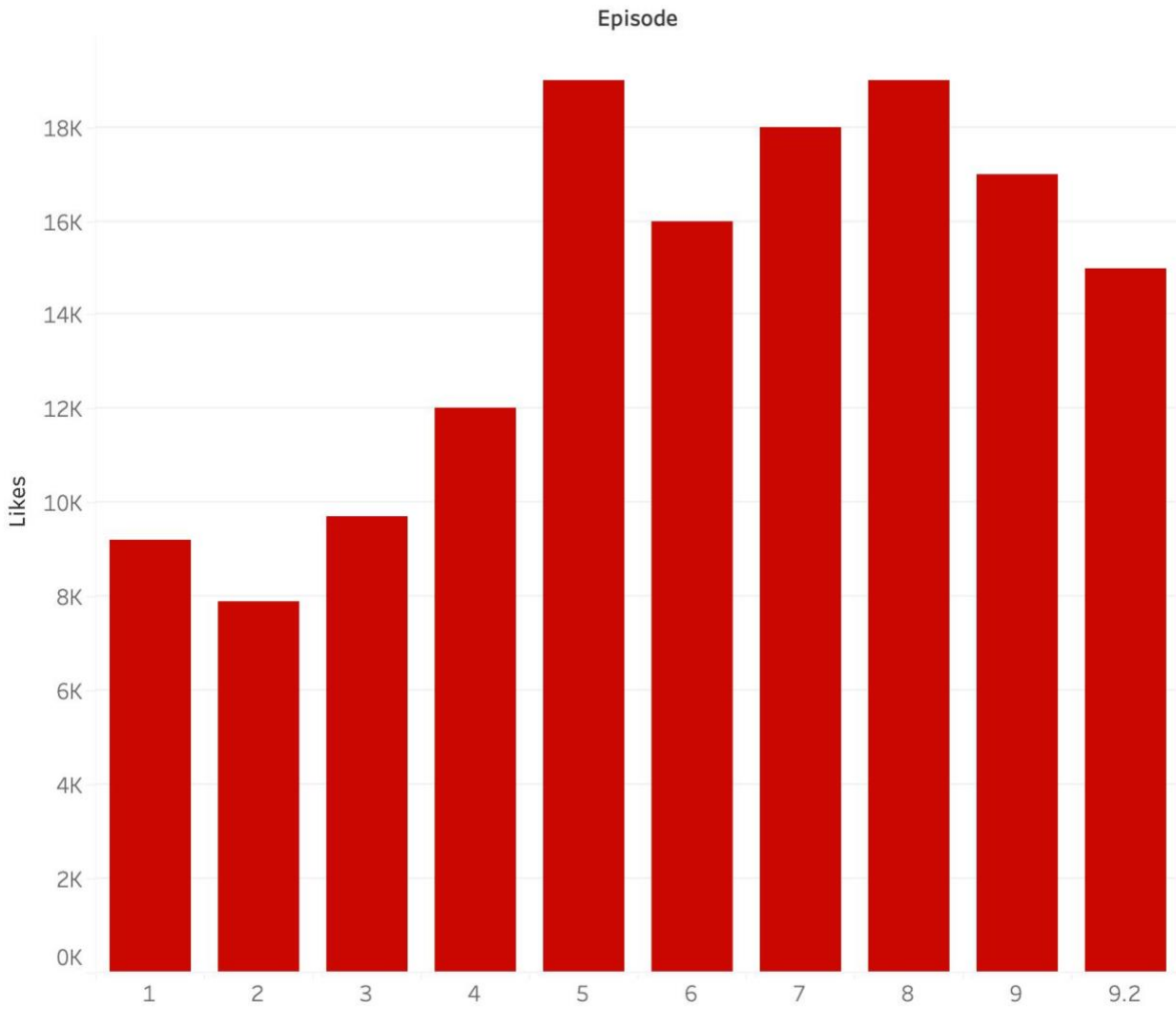
Total Views by Channel



Sum of Views for each Channel. The view is filtered on Channel, which keeps Fictional Darling, Previewed and The Reel Rejects.

Figure 3- Total Views by Channel

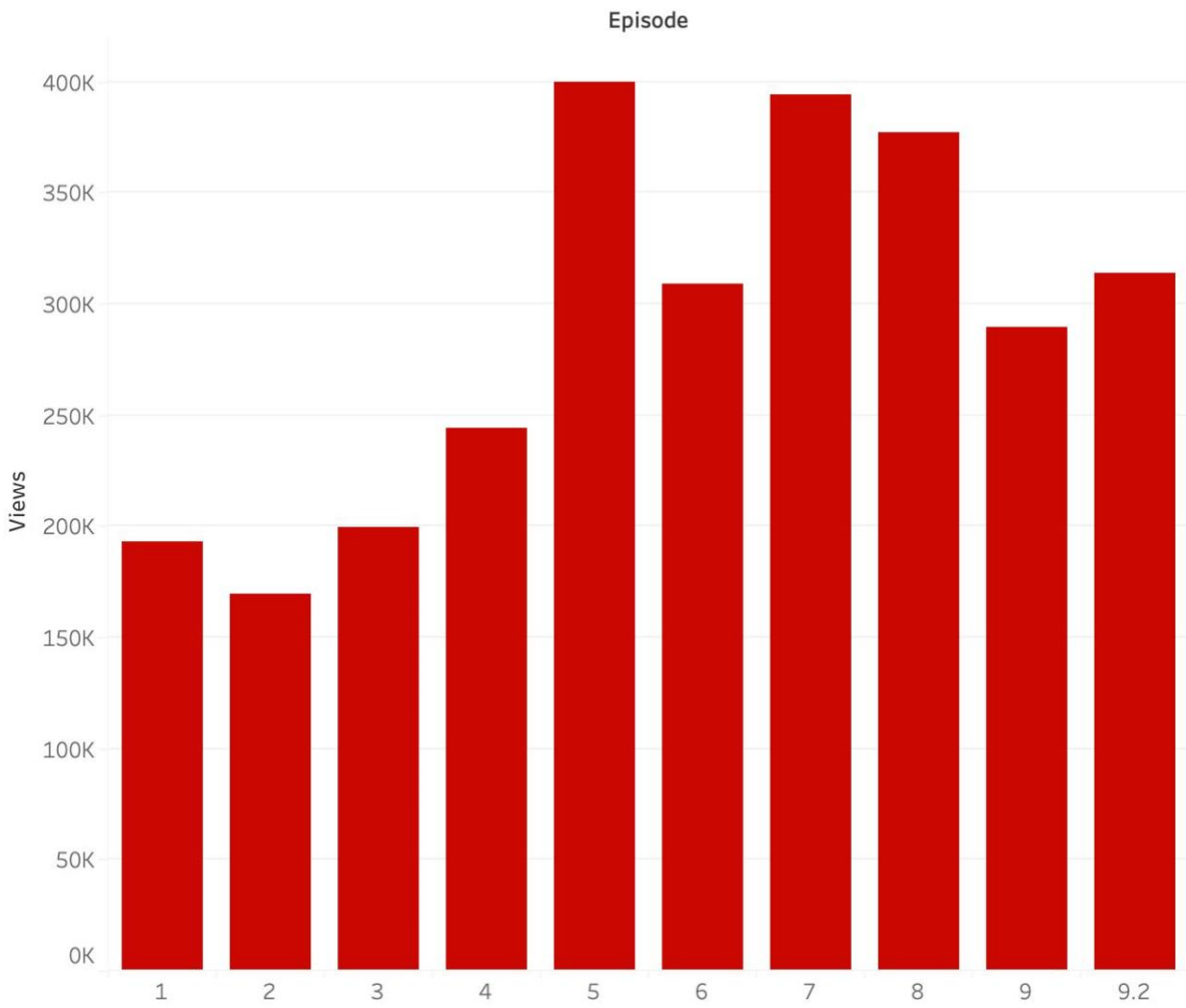
WandaVision Likes - The Reel Rejects



Average of Likes for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps The Reel Rejects. The Show filter keeps WandaVision.

Figure 4- The Reel Rejects WandaVision Likes

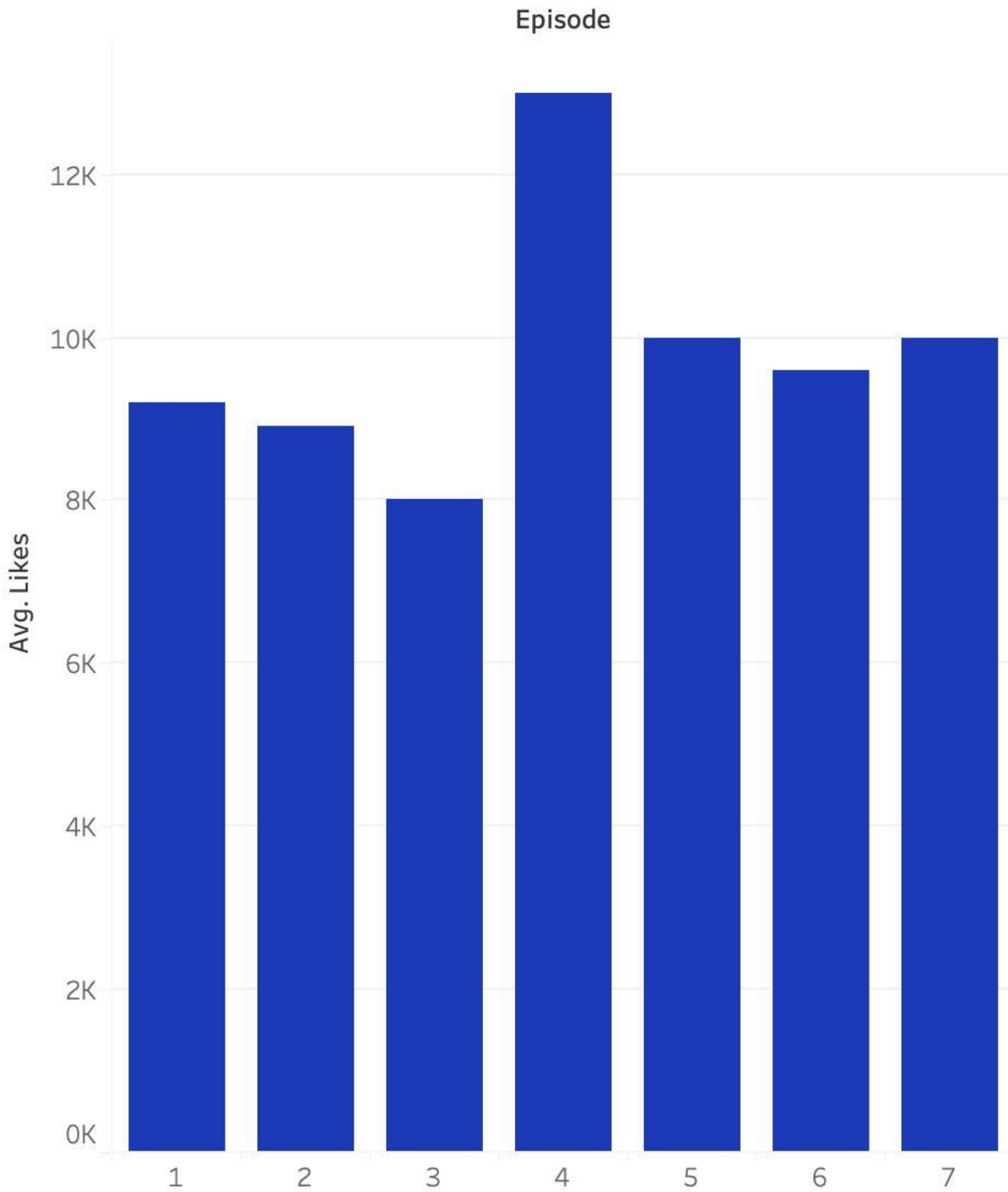
WandaVision Views - The Reel Rejects



Sum of Views for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps The Reel Rejects. The Show filter keeps WandaVision.

Figure 5- The Reel Rejects WandaVision Views

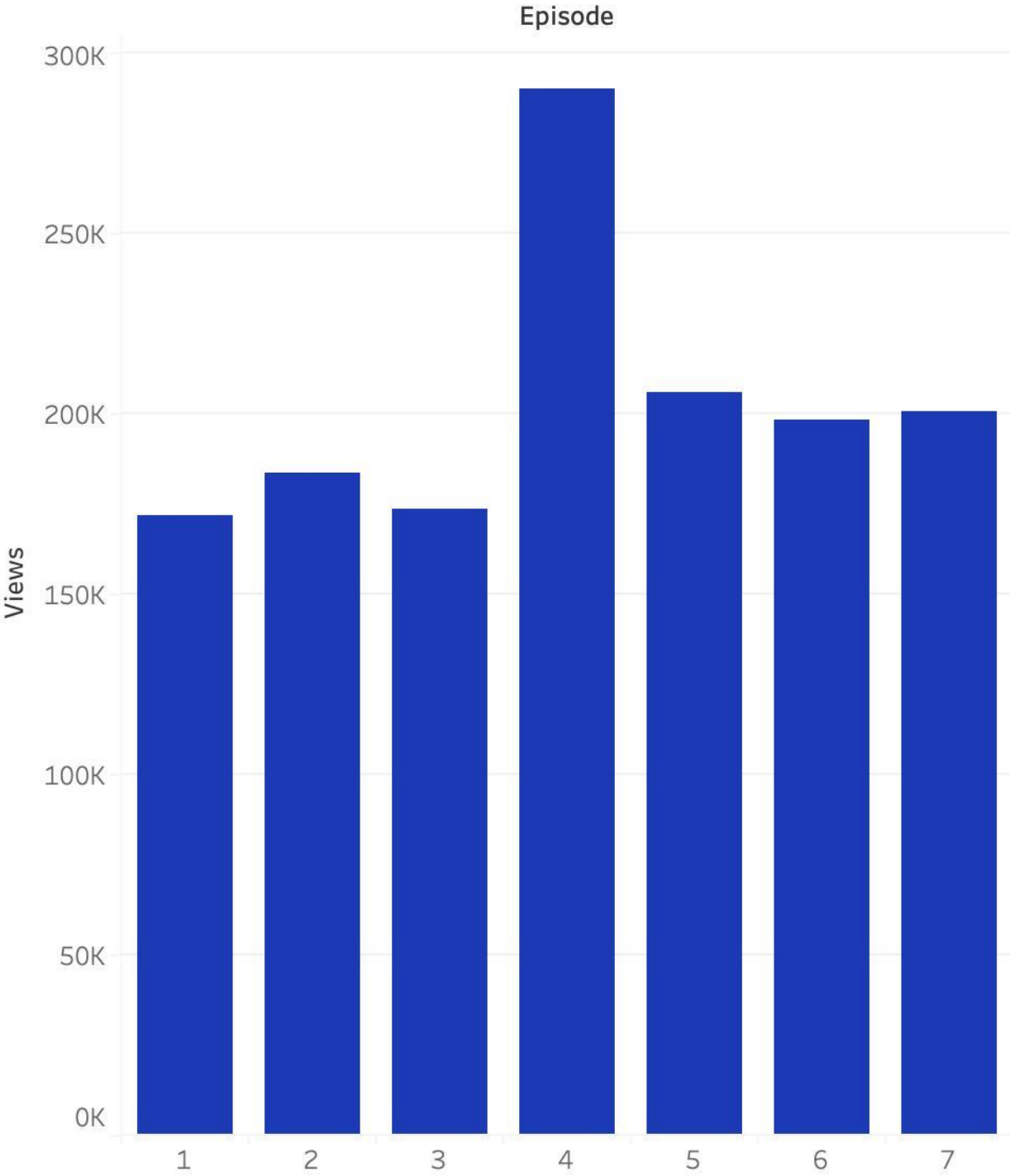
FATWS Likes - The Reel Rejects



Average of Likes for each Episode. The data is filtered on Show and Channel. The Show filter keeps FATWS. The Channel filter keeps The Reel Rejects.

Figure 6- The Reel Rejects Falcon and the Winter Soldier Likes

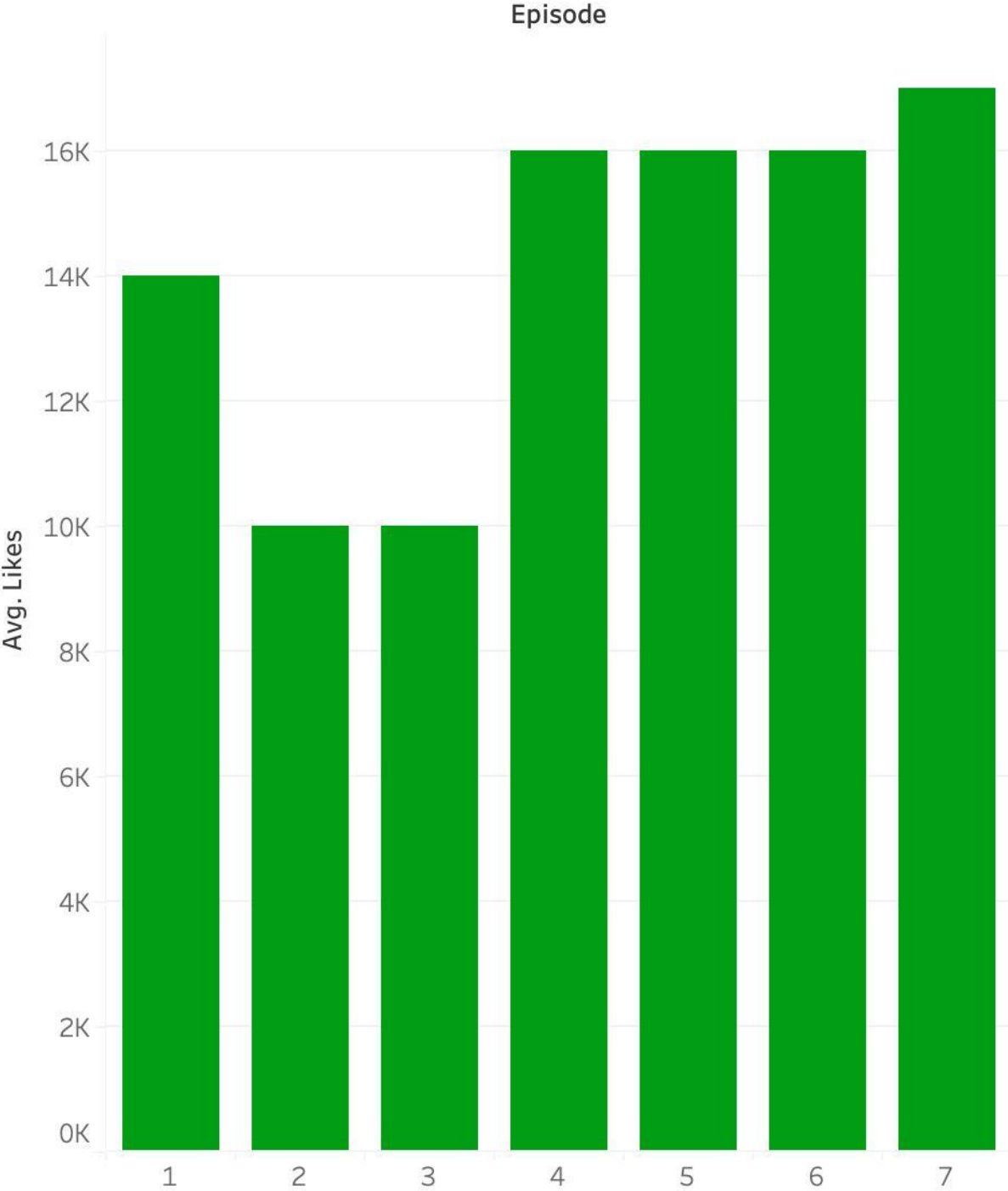
FATWS Views - The Reel Rejects



Sum of Views for each Episode. The data is filtered on Show and Channel. The Show filter keeps FATWS. The Channel filter keeps The Reel Rejects.

Figure 7- The Reel Rejects Falcon and the Winter Soldier Views

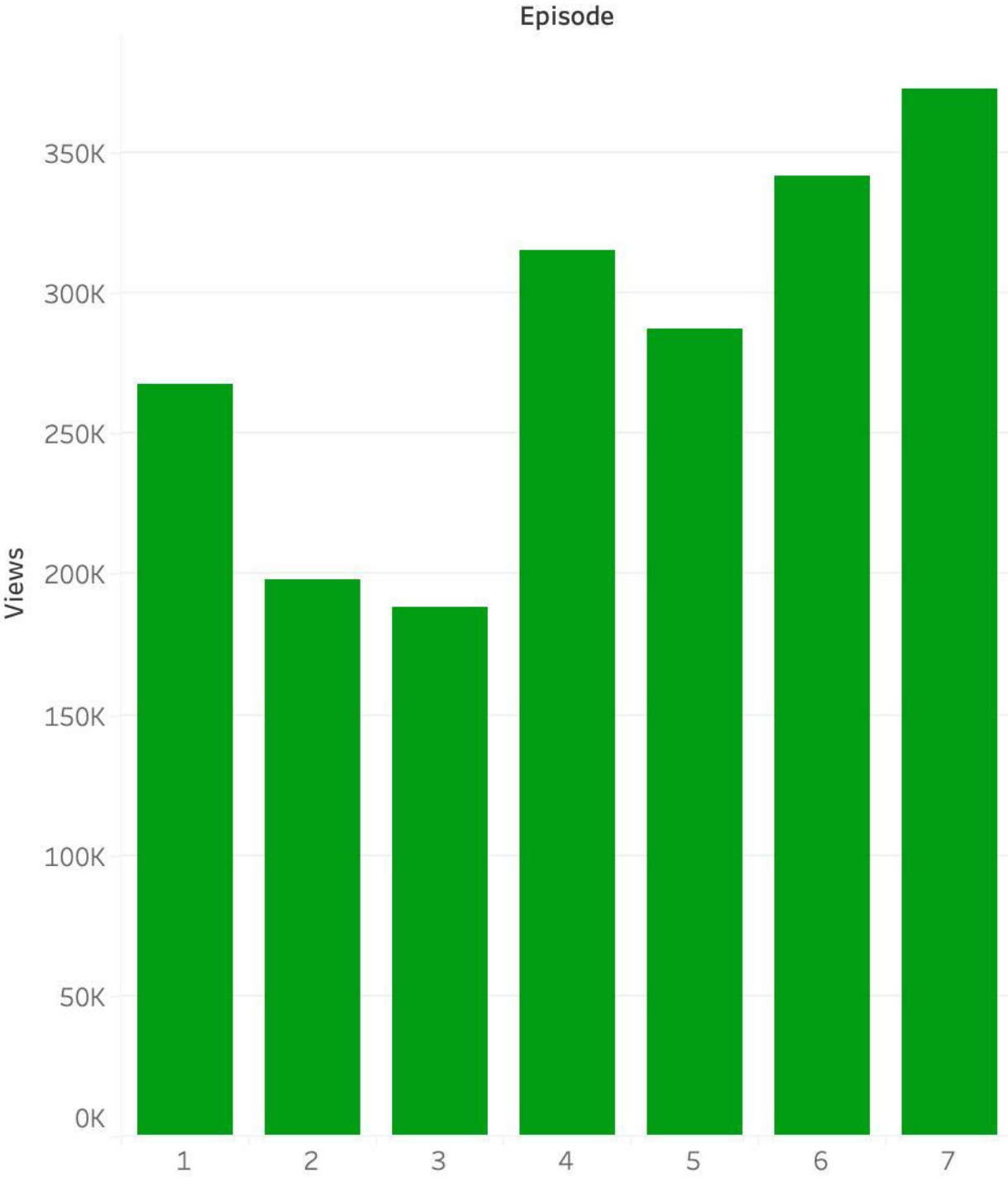
Loki Likes - The Reel Rejects



Average of Likes for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps The Reel Rejects. The Show filter keeps Loki.

Figure 8- The Reel Rejects Loki Likes

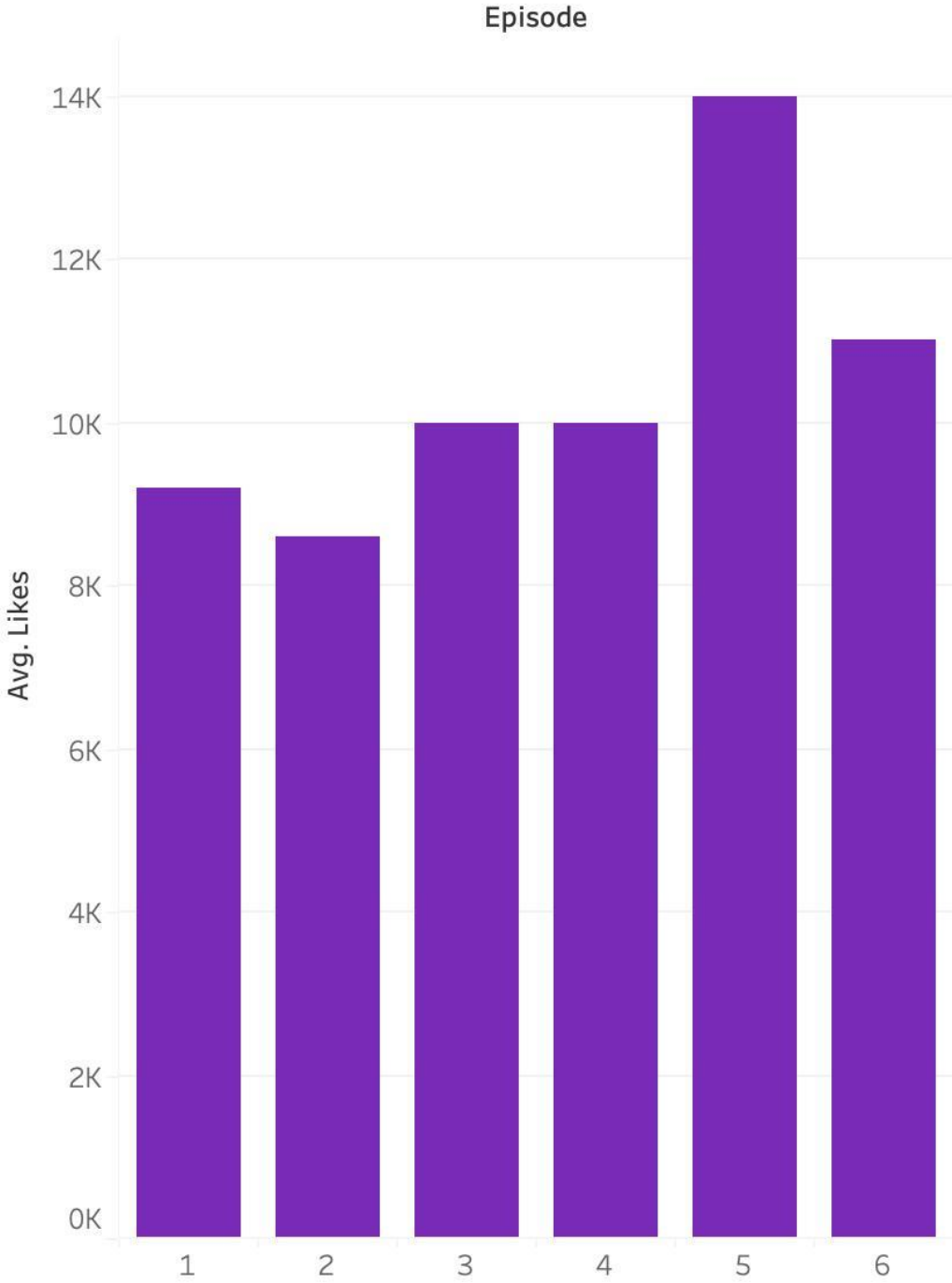
Loki Views - The Reel Rejects



Sum of Views for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps The Reel Rejects. The Show filter keeps Loki.

Figure 9- The Reel Rejects Loki Views

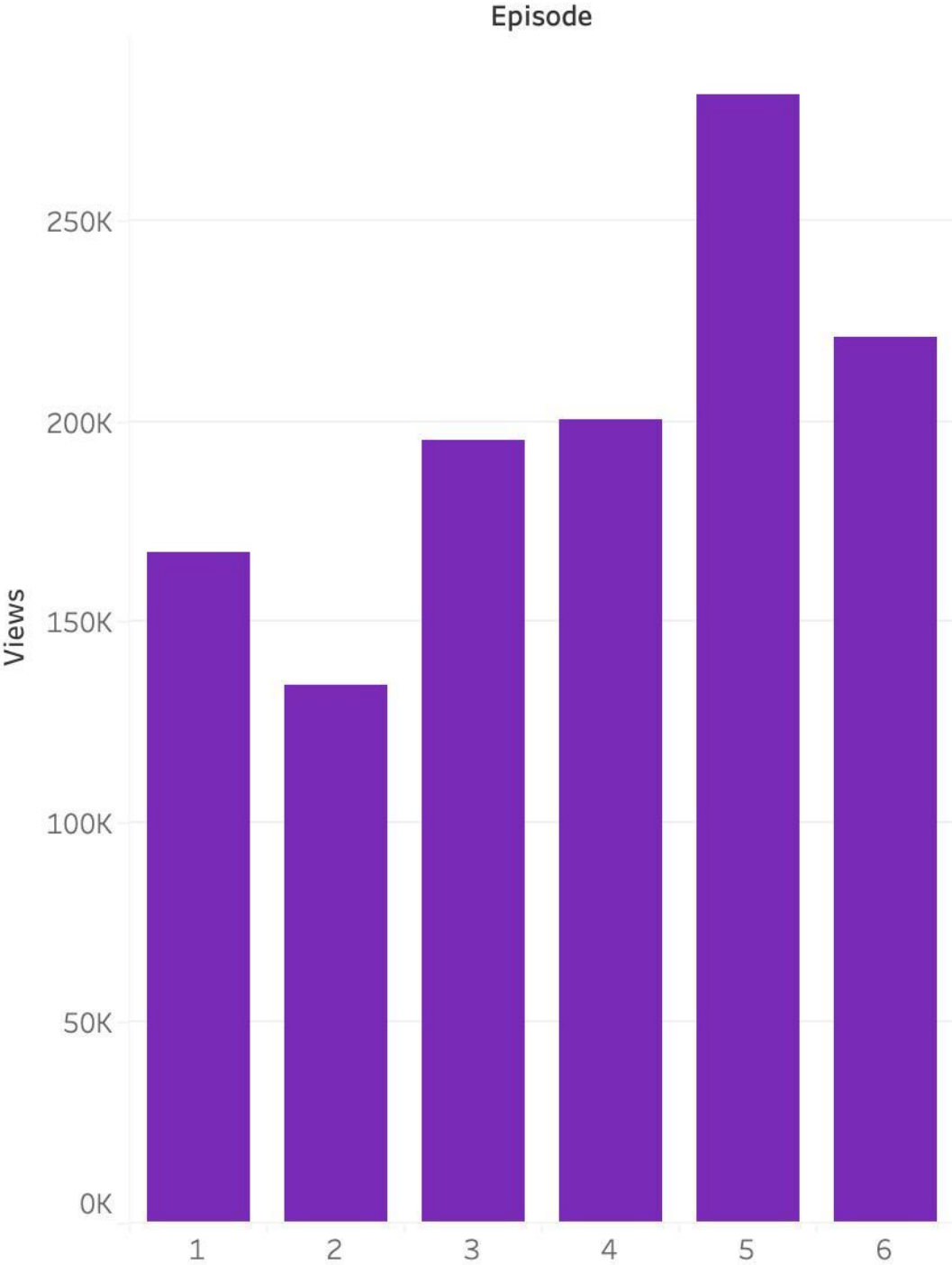
Hawkeye Likes - The Reel Rejects



Average of Likes for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps The Reel Rejects. The Show filter keeps Hawkeye.

Figure 10- The Reel Rejects Hawkeye Likes

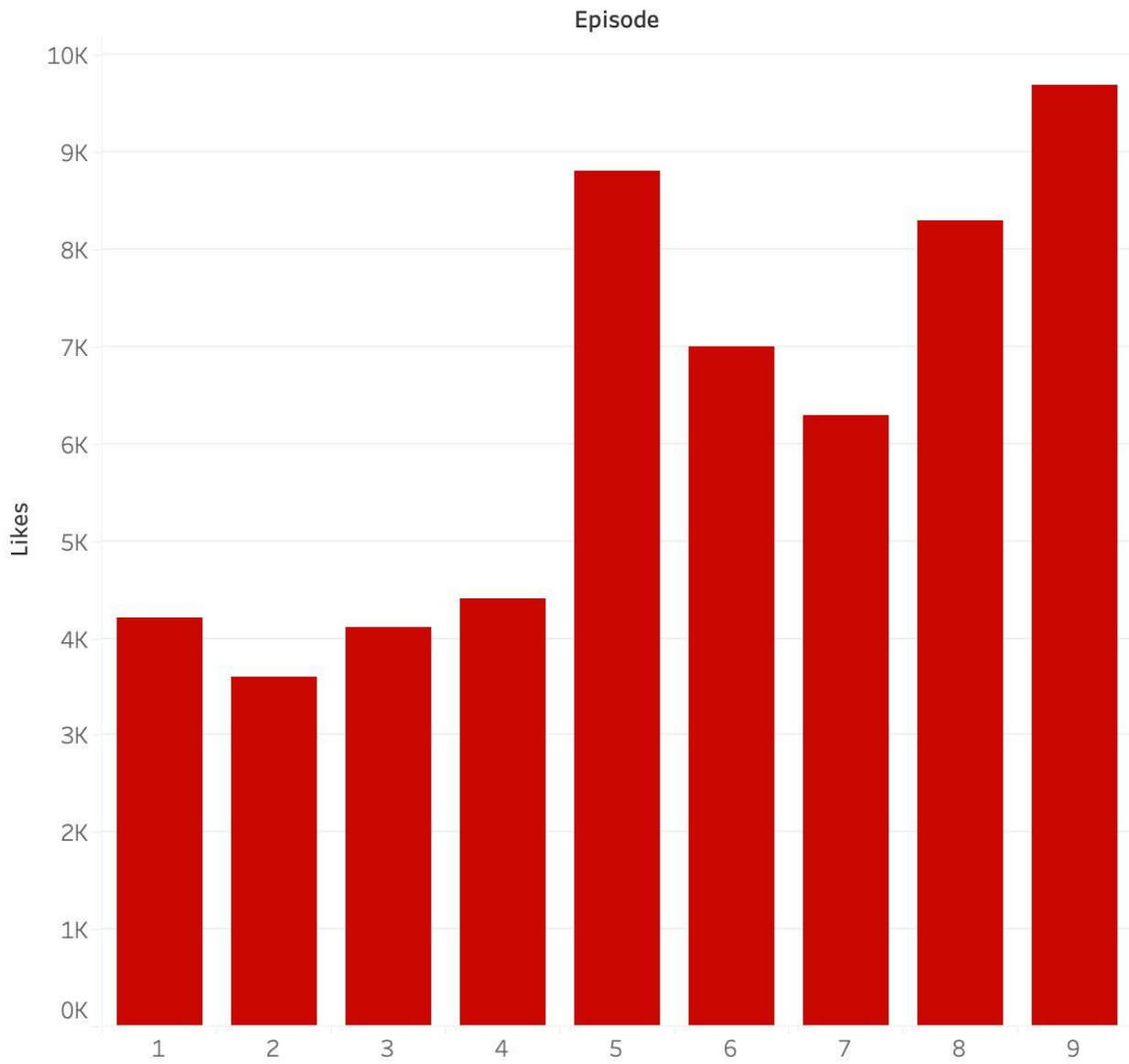
Hawkeye Views - The Reel Rejects



Sum of Views for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps The Reel Rejects. The Show filter keeps Hawkeye.

Figure 11- The Reel Rejects Hawkeye Views

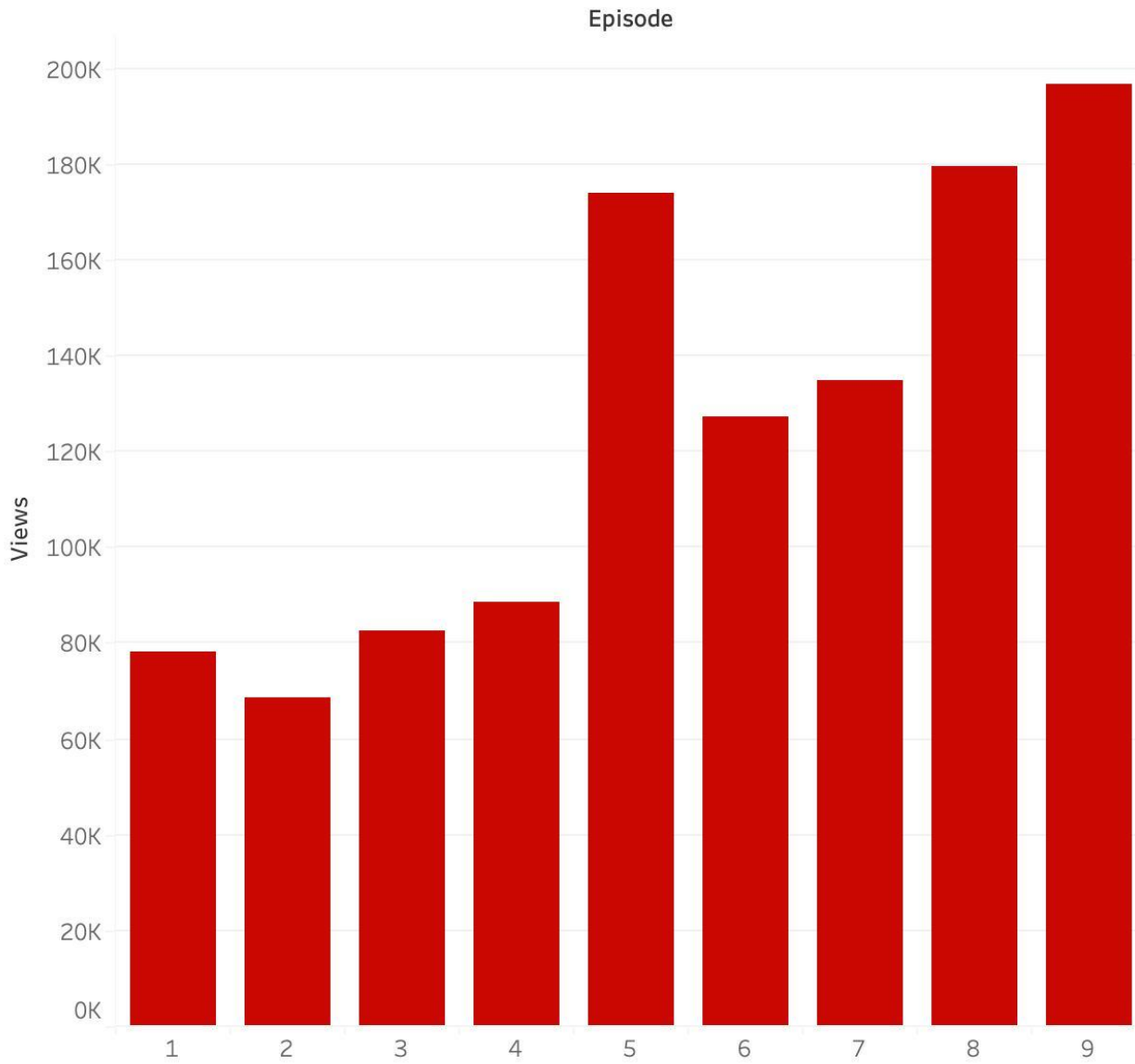
WandaVision Likes - Previewed



Average of Likes for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps Previewed. The Show filter keeps WandaVision.

Figure 12- p'Reviewed WandaVision Likes

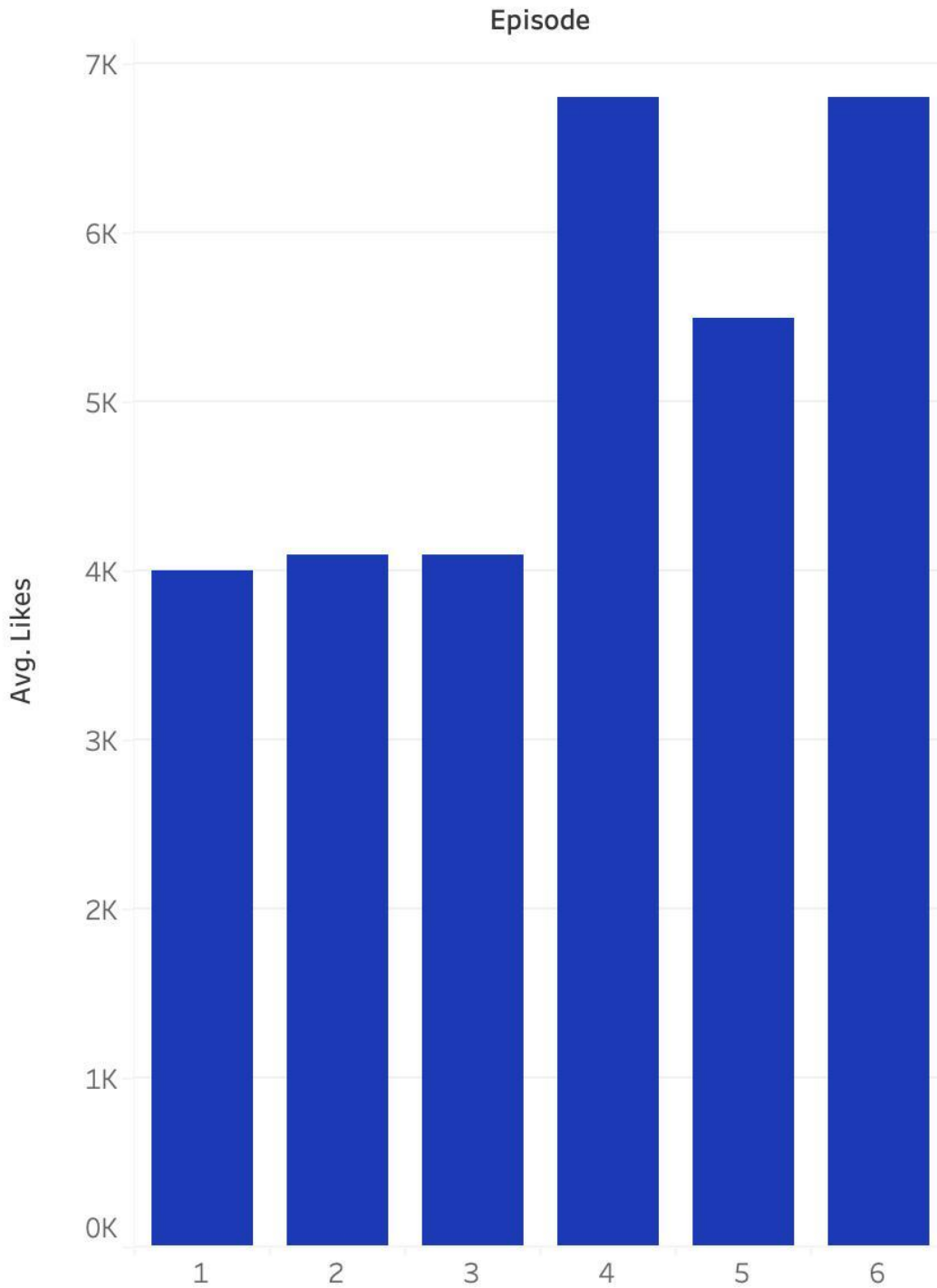
WandaVision Views - Previewed



Sum of Views for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps Previewed. The Show filter keeps WandaVision.

Figure 13- p'Reviewed WandaVision Views

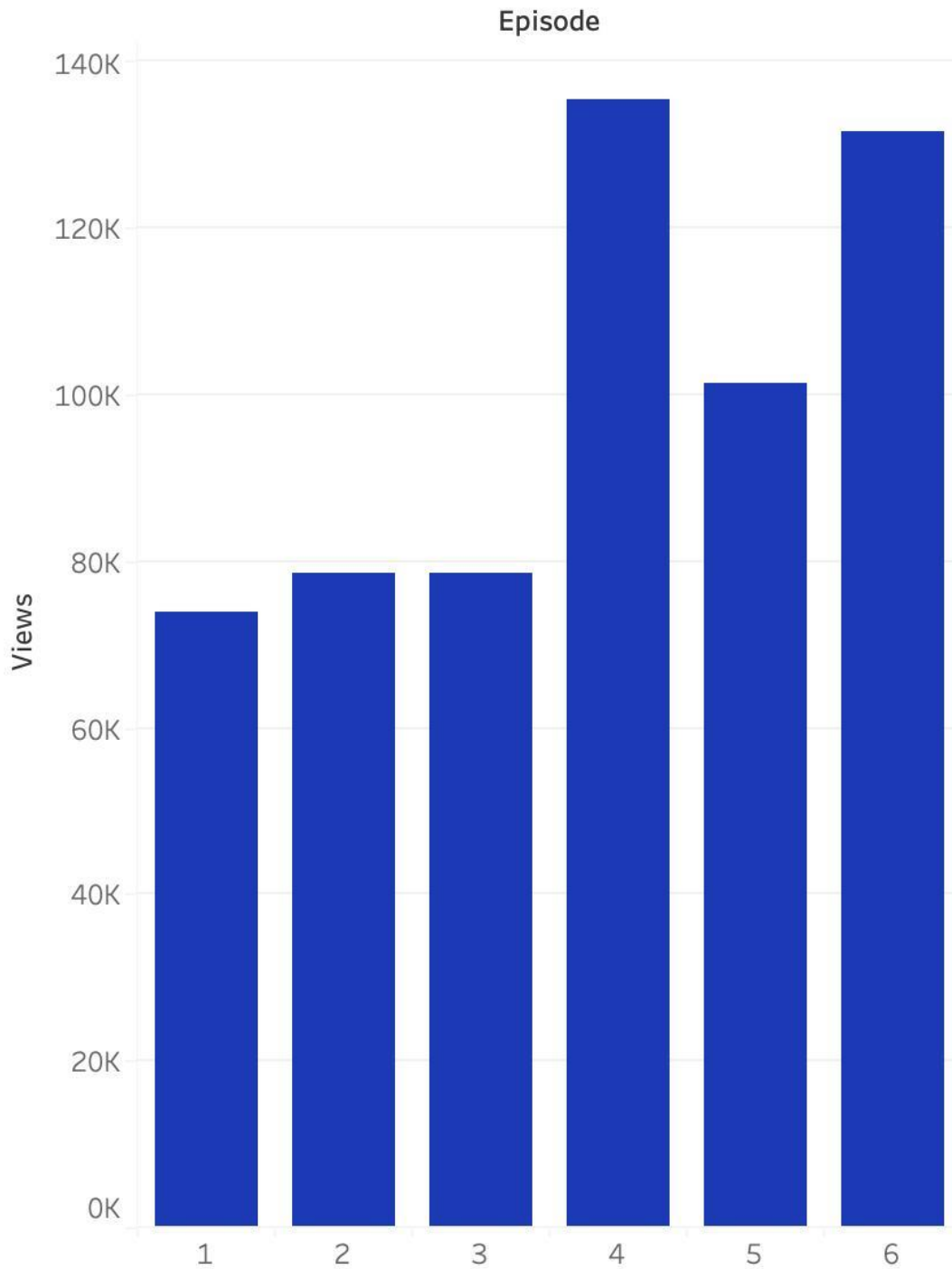
FATWS Likes - Previewed



Average of Likes for each Episode. The data is filtered on Show and Channel. The Show filter keeps FATWS. The Channel filter keeps Previewed.

Figure 14- p'Reviewed Falcon and the Winter Soldier Likes

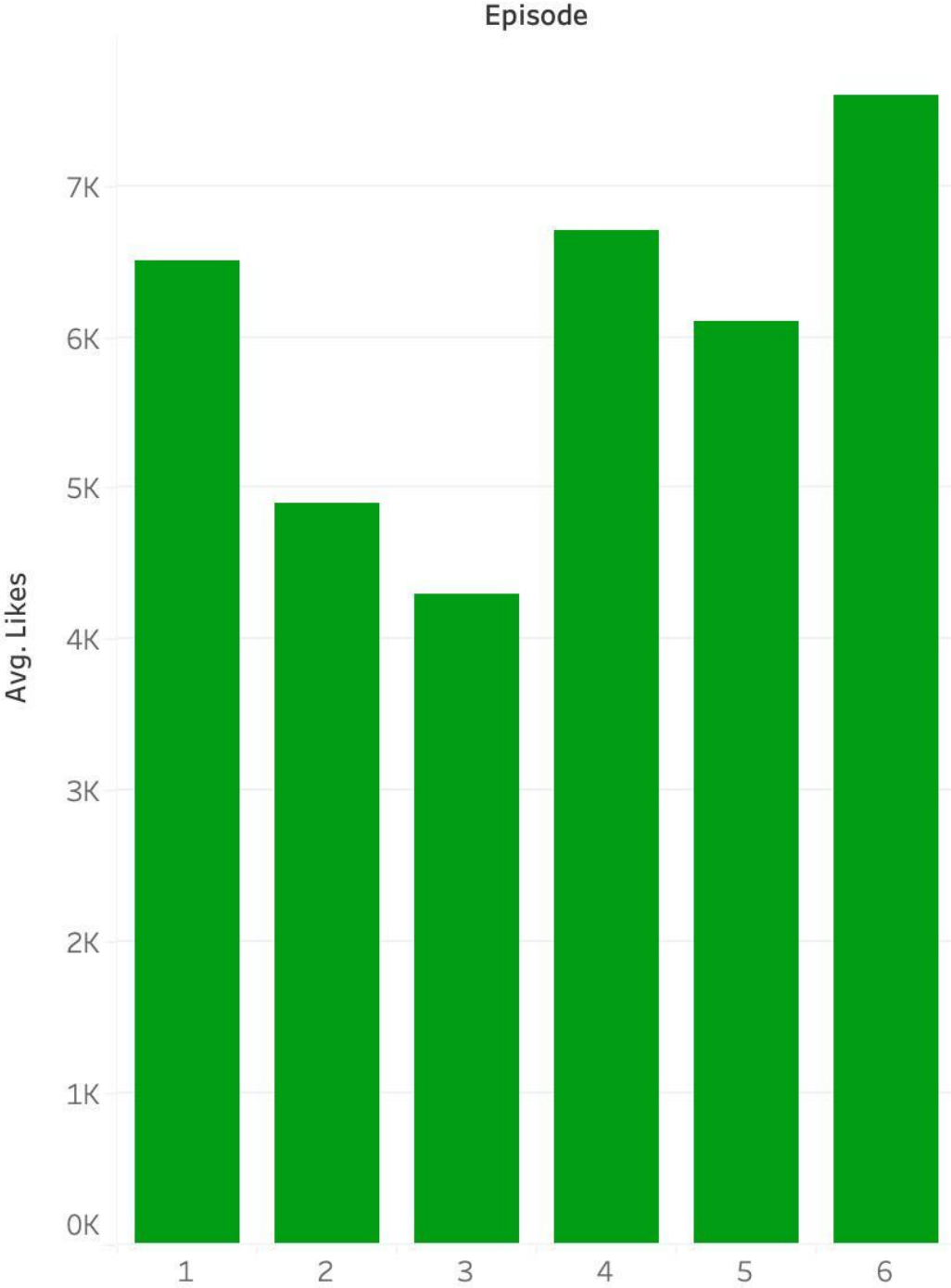
FATWS Views - Previewed



Sum of Views for each Episode. The data is filtered on Show and Channel. The Show filter keeps FATWS. The Channel filter keeps Previewed.

Figure 15- p'Reviewed Falcon and the Winter Soldier Views

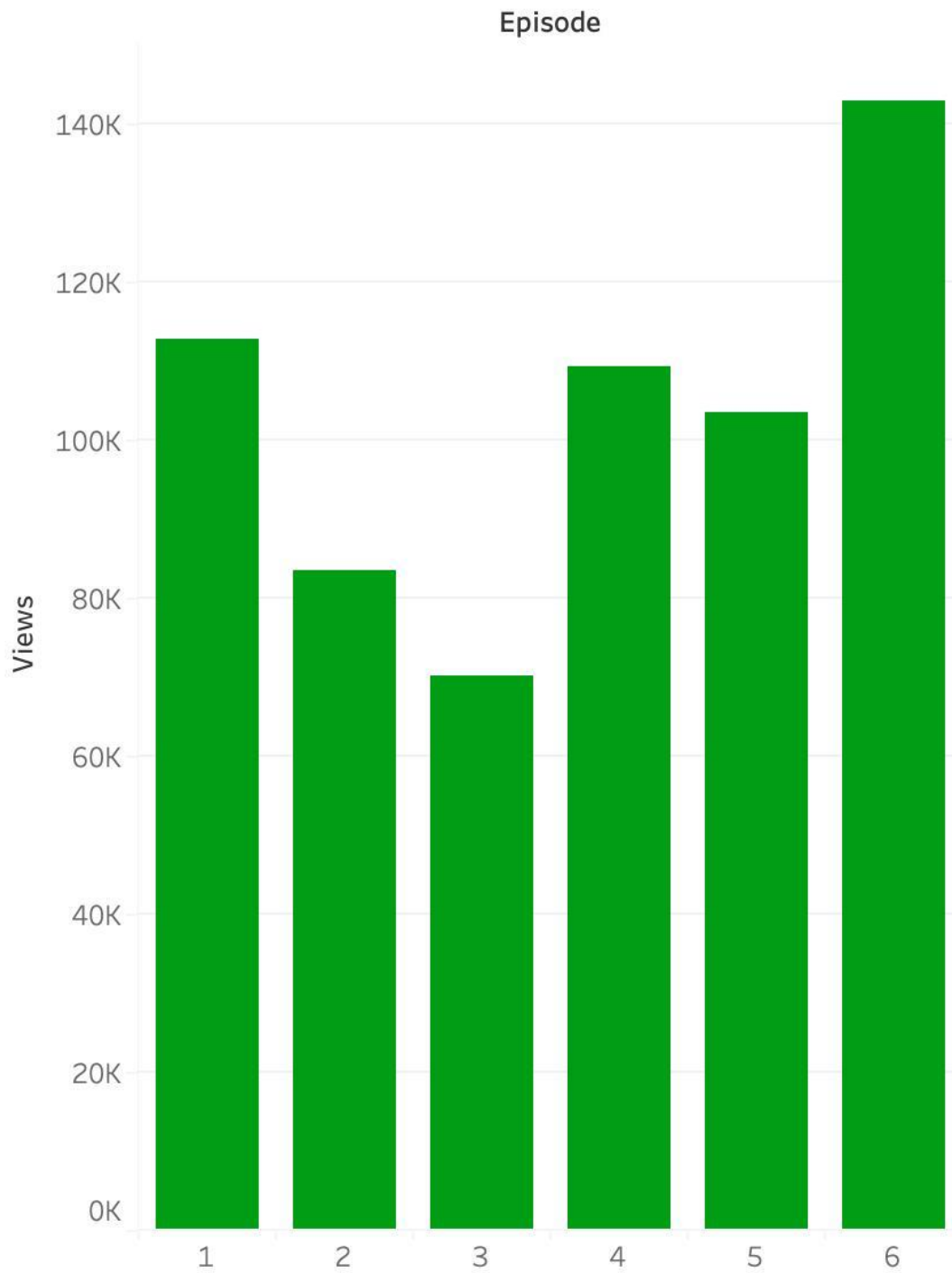
Loki Likes - Previewed



Average of Likes for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps Previewed. The Show filter keeps Loki.

Figure 16- p'Reviewed Loki Likes

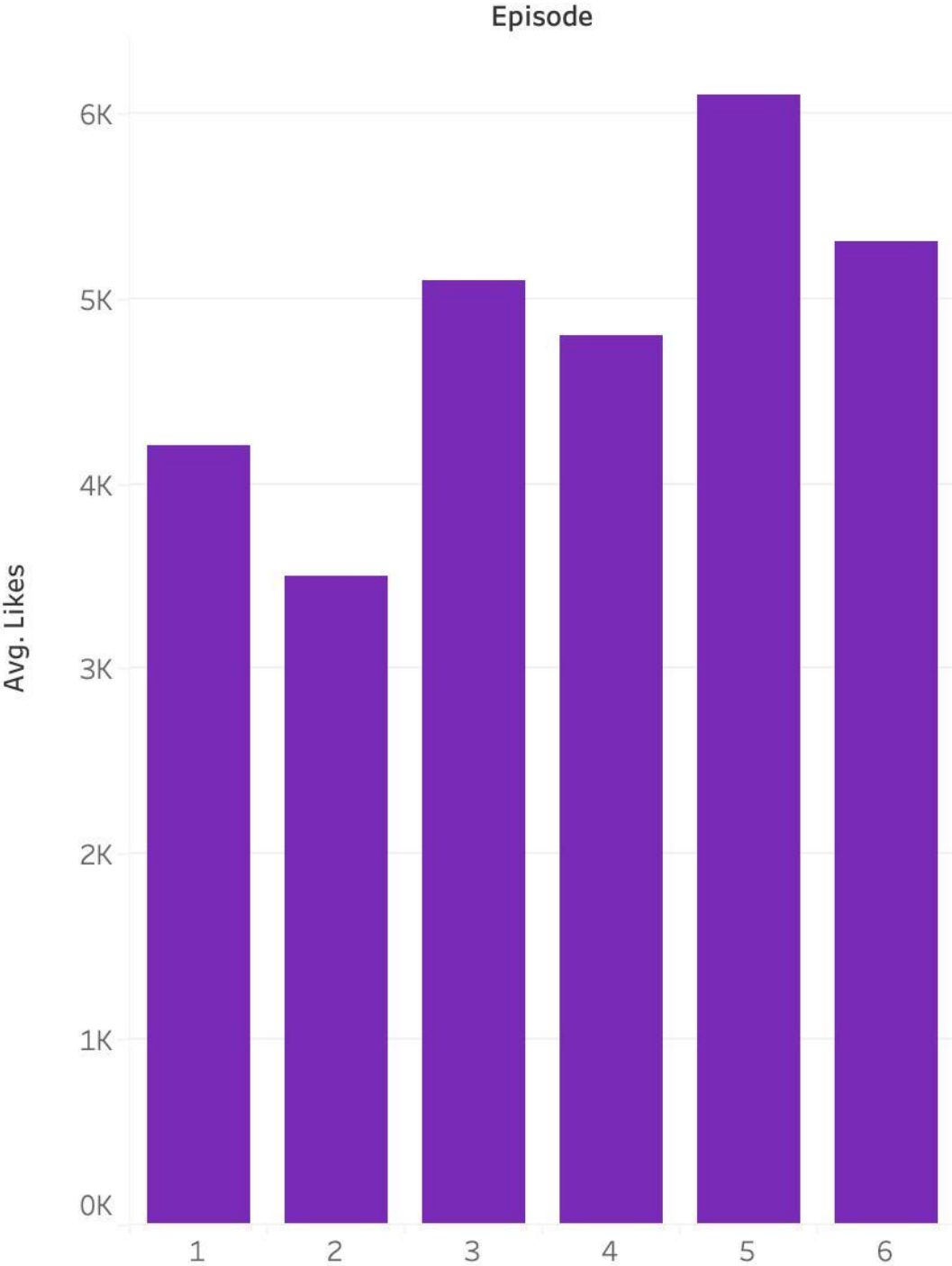
Loki Views - Previewed



Sum of Views for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps Previewed. The Show filter keeps Loki.

Figure 17- p'Reviewed Loki Views

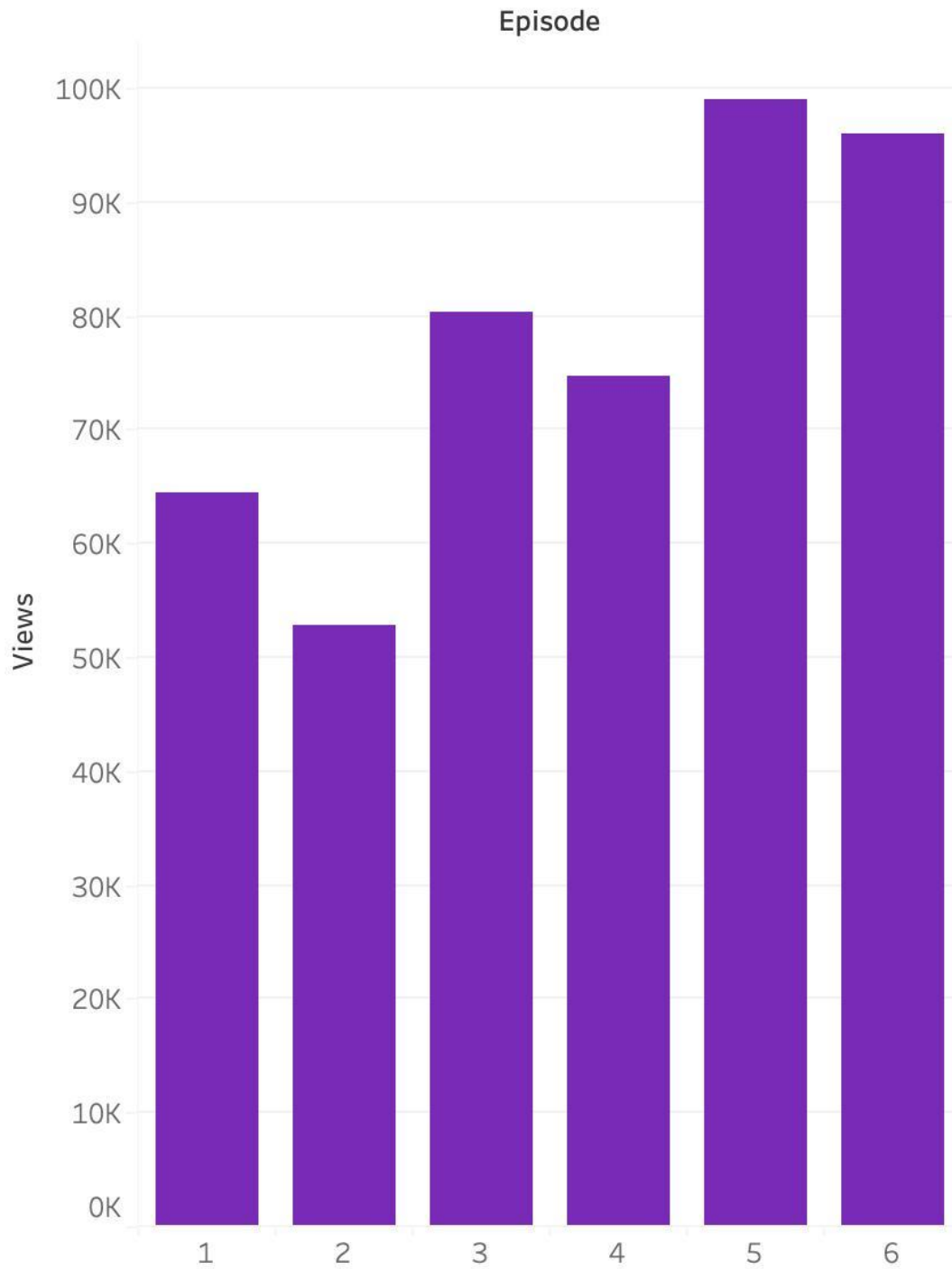
Hawkeye Likes - Previewed



Average of Likes for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps Previewed. The Show filter keeps Hawkeye.

Figure 18- p'Reviewed Hawkeye Likes

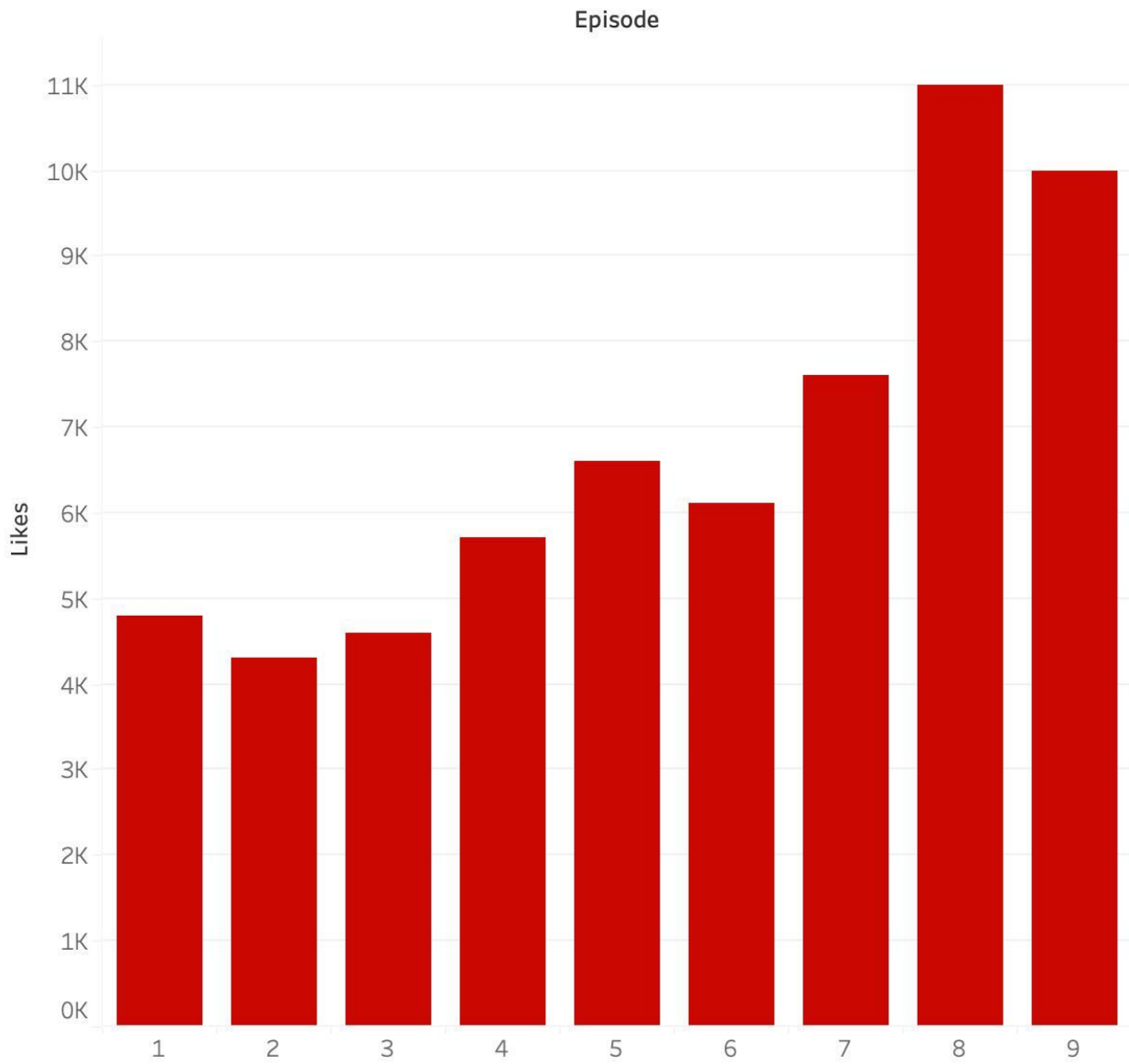
Hawkeye Views - Previewed



Sum of Views for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps Previewed. The Show filter keeps Hawkeye.

Figure 19- p'Reviewed Hawkeye Views

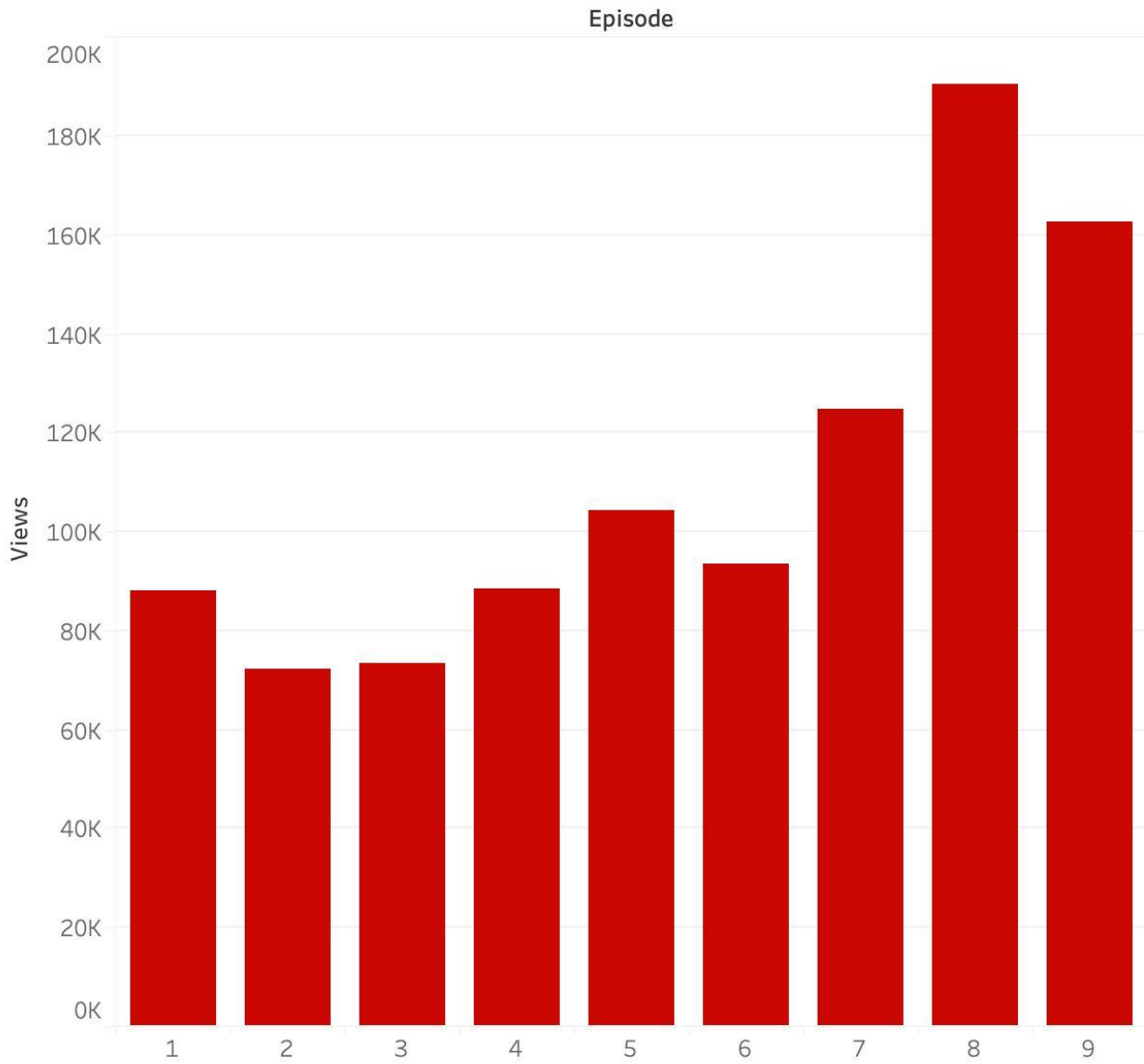
WandaVision Likes - Fictional Darling



Average of Likes for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps Fictional Darling. The Show filter keeps WandaVision.

Figure 20- fictionalardarling WandaVision Likes

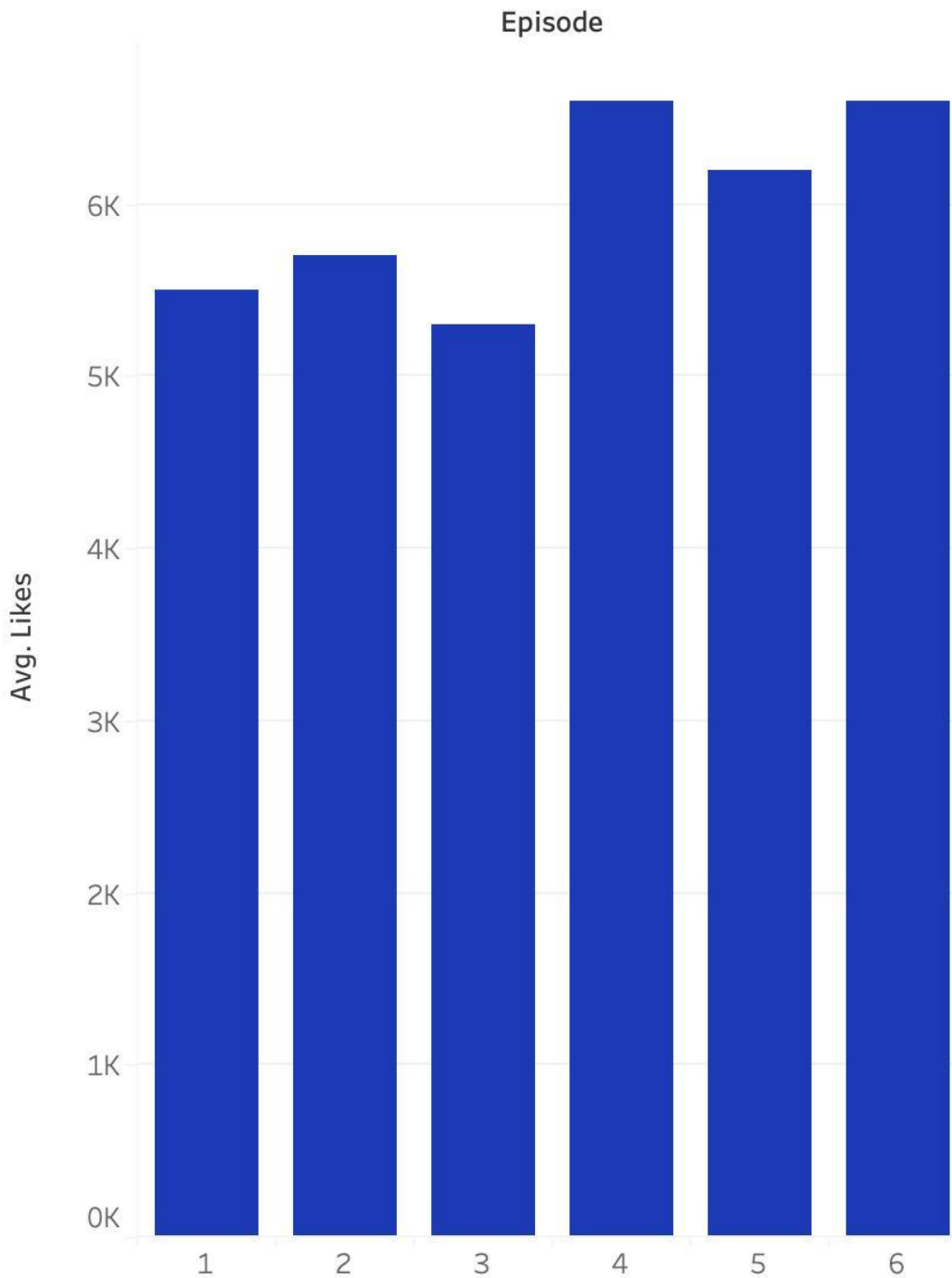
WandaVision Views - Fictional Darling



Sum of Views for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps Fictional Darling. The Show filter keeps WandaVision.

Figure 21- fictionaldarling WandaVision Views

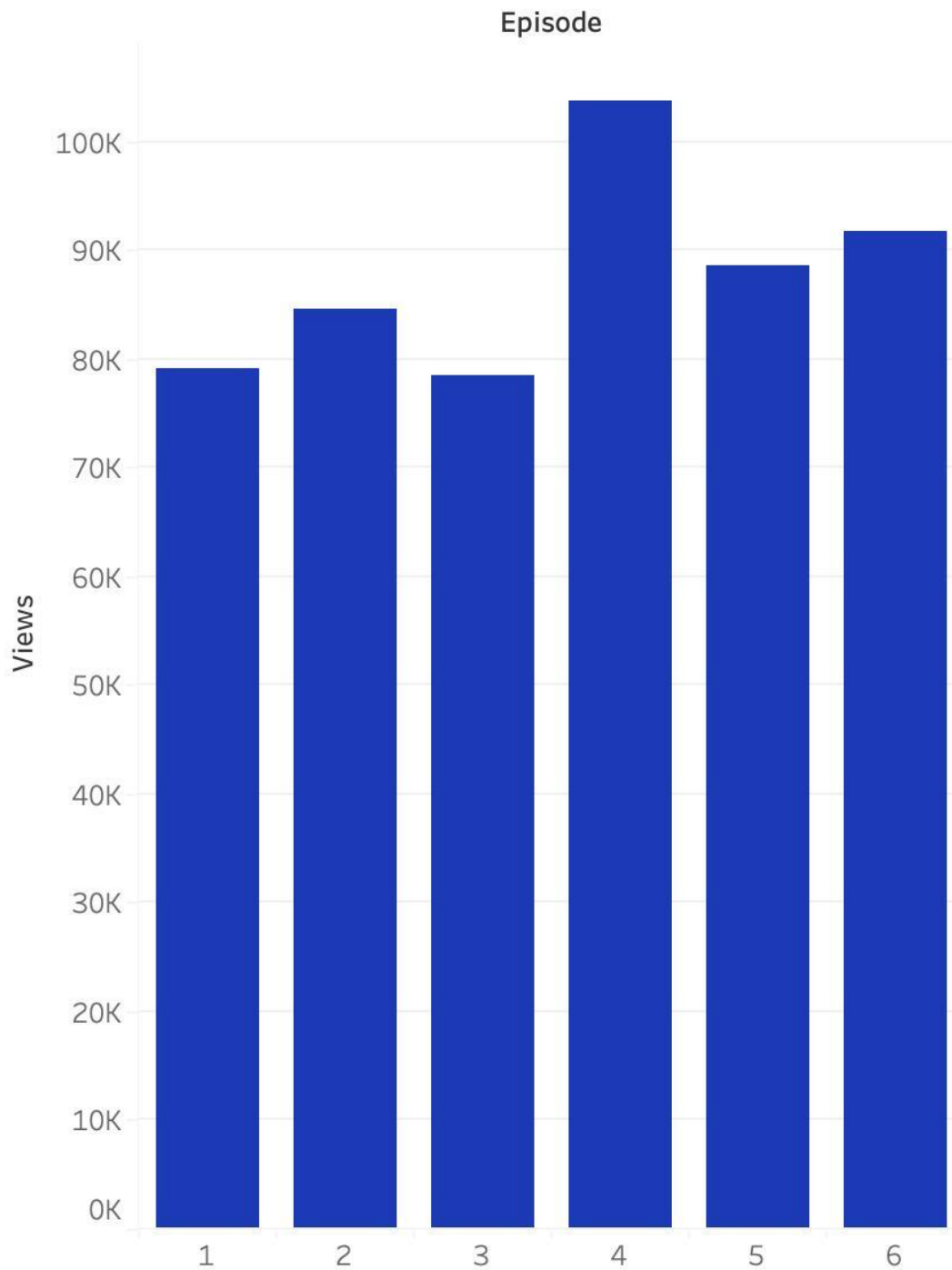
FATWS Likes - Fictional Darling



Average of Likes for each Episode. The data is filtered on Show and Channel. The Show filter keeps FATWS. The Channel filter keeps Fictional Darling.

Figure 22- fictionalardling Falcon and the Winter Soldier Likes

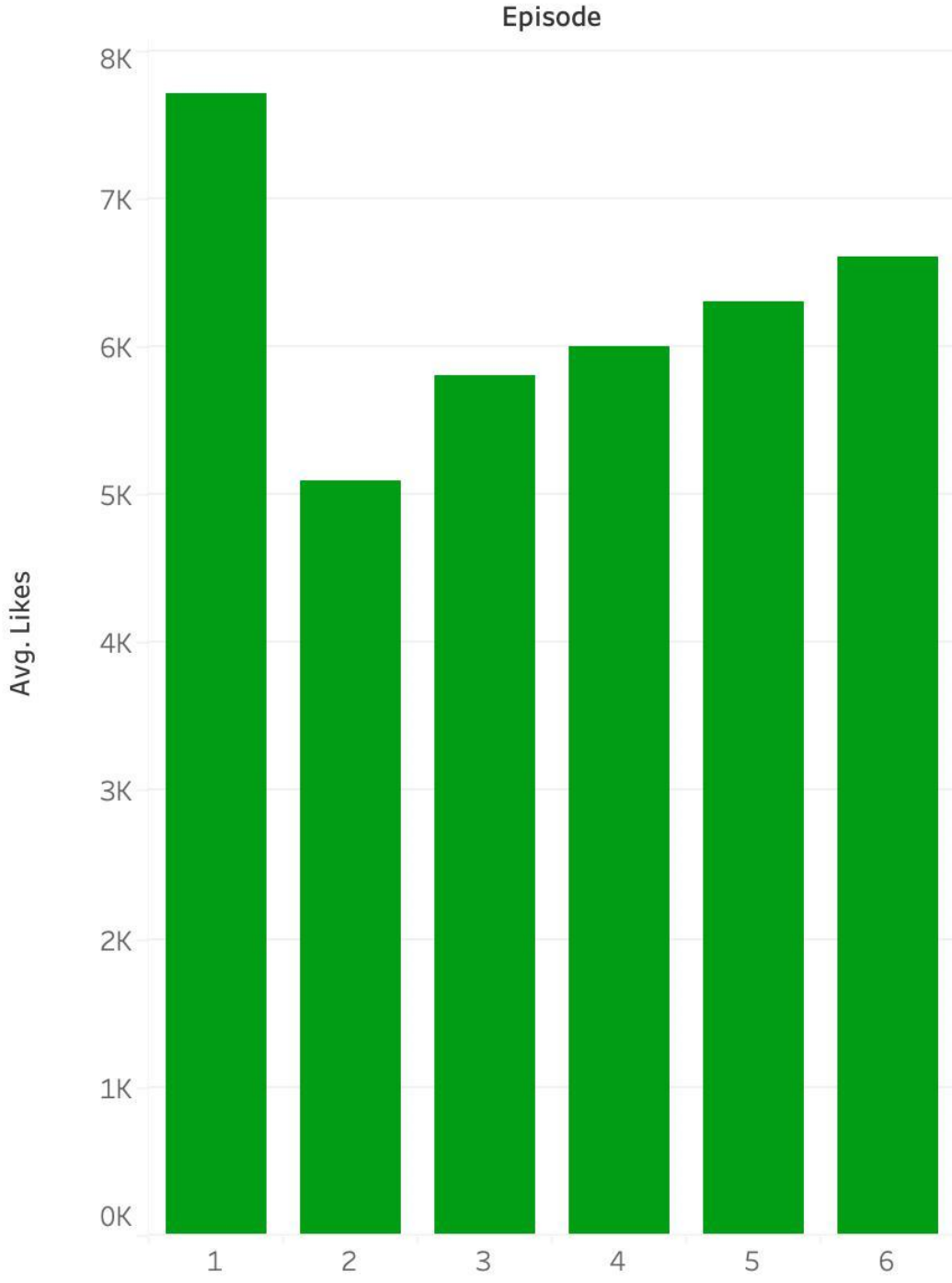
FATWS Views - Fictional Darling



Sum of Views for each Episode. The data is filtered on Show and Channel. The Show filter keeps FATWS. The Channel filter keeps Fictional Darling.

Figure 23- fictionalardling Falcon and the Winter Soldier Views

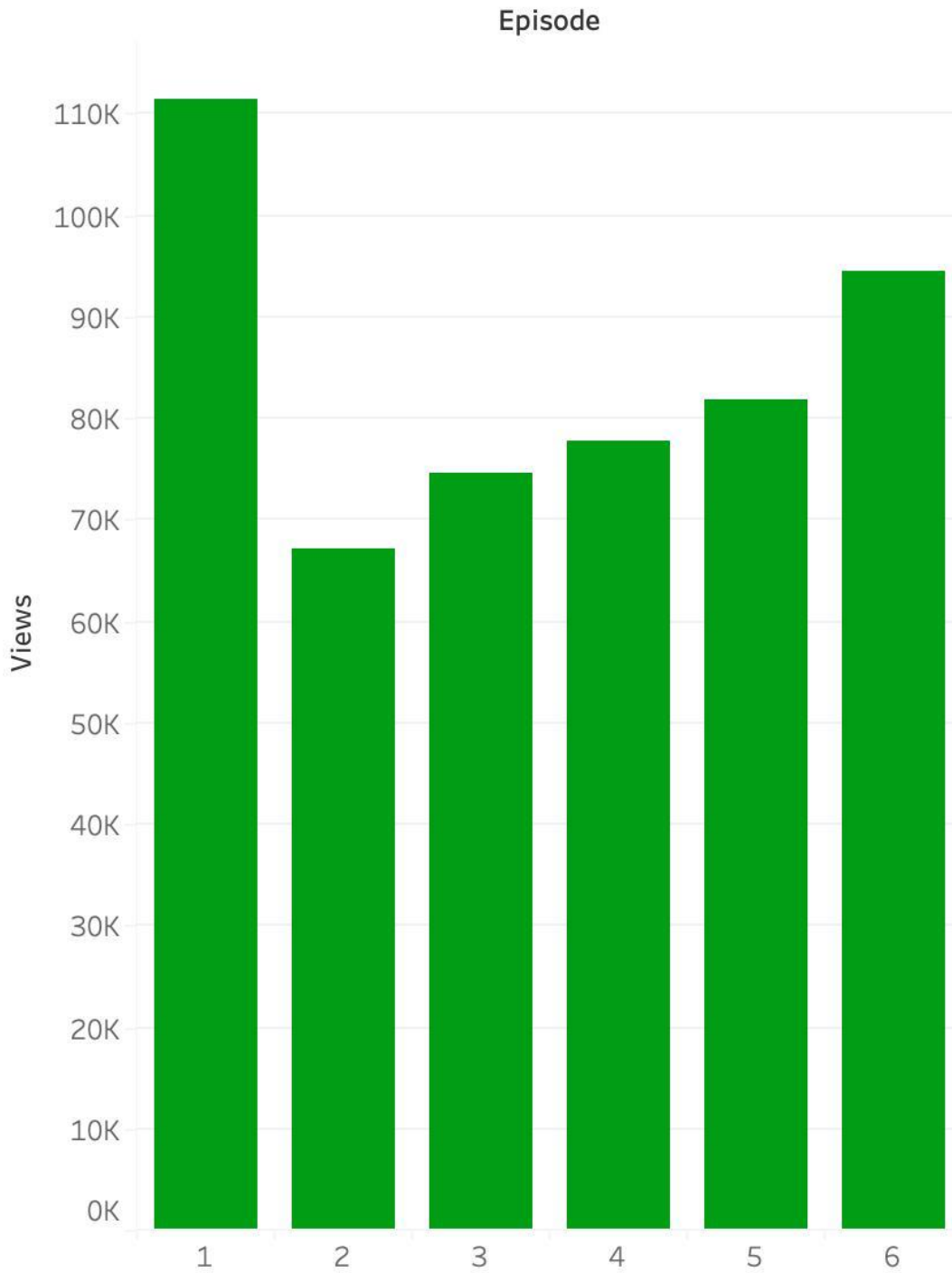
Loki Likes - Fictional Darling



Average of Likes for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps Fictional Darling. The Show filter keeps Loki.

Figure 24- fictionalardarling Loki Likes

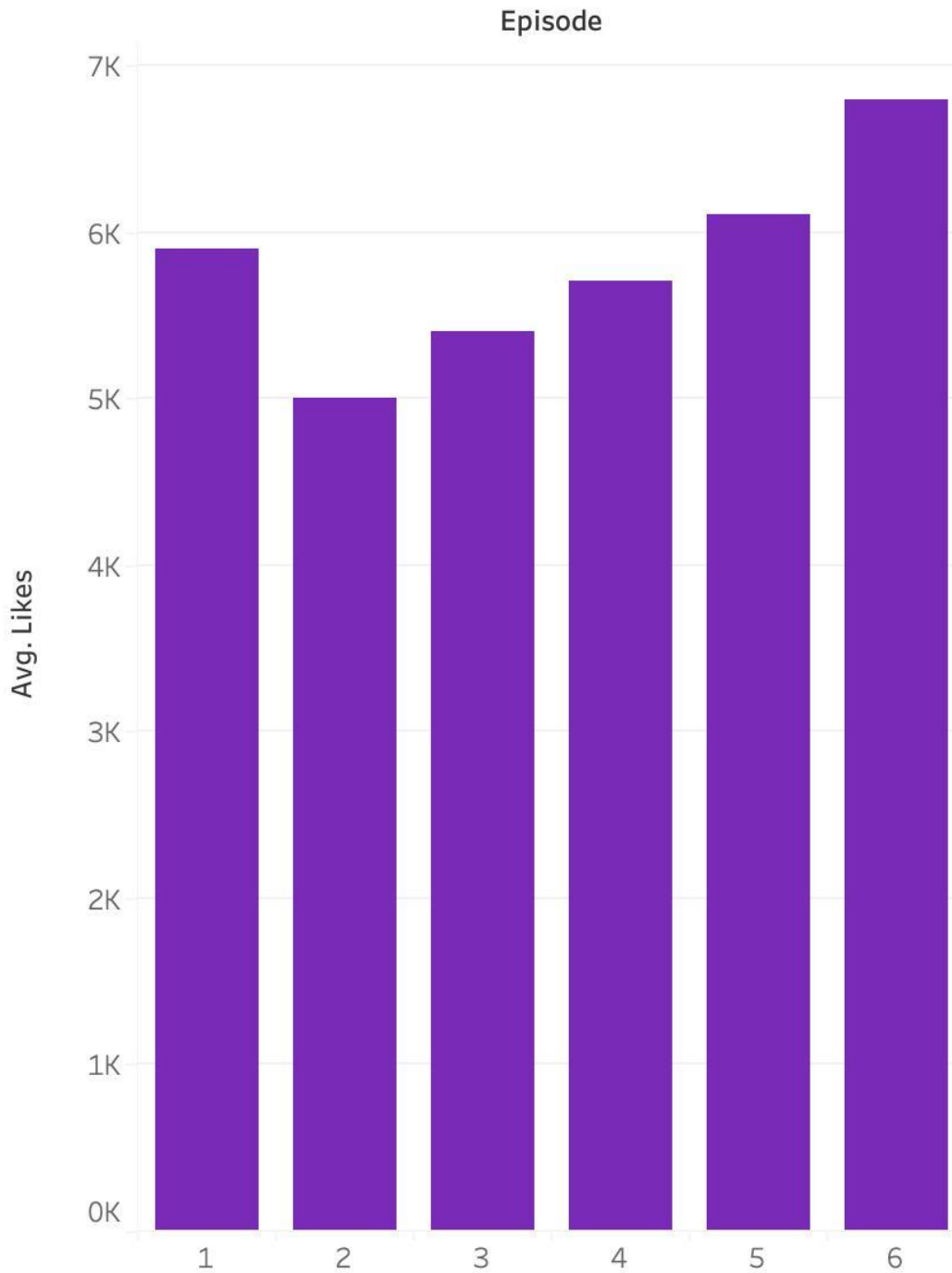
Loki Views - Fictional Darling



Sum of Views for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps Fictional Darling. The Show filter keeps Loki.

Figure 25- fictionalardarling Loki Views

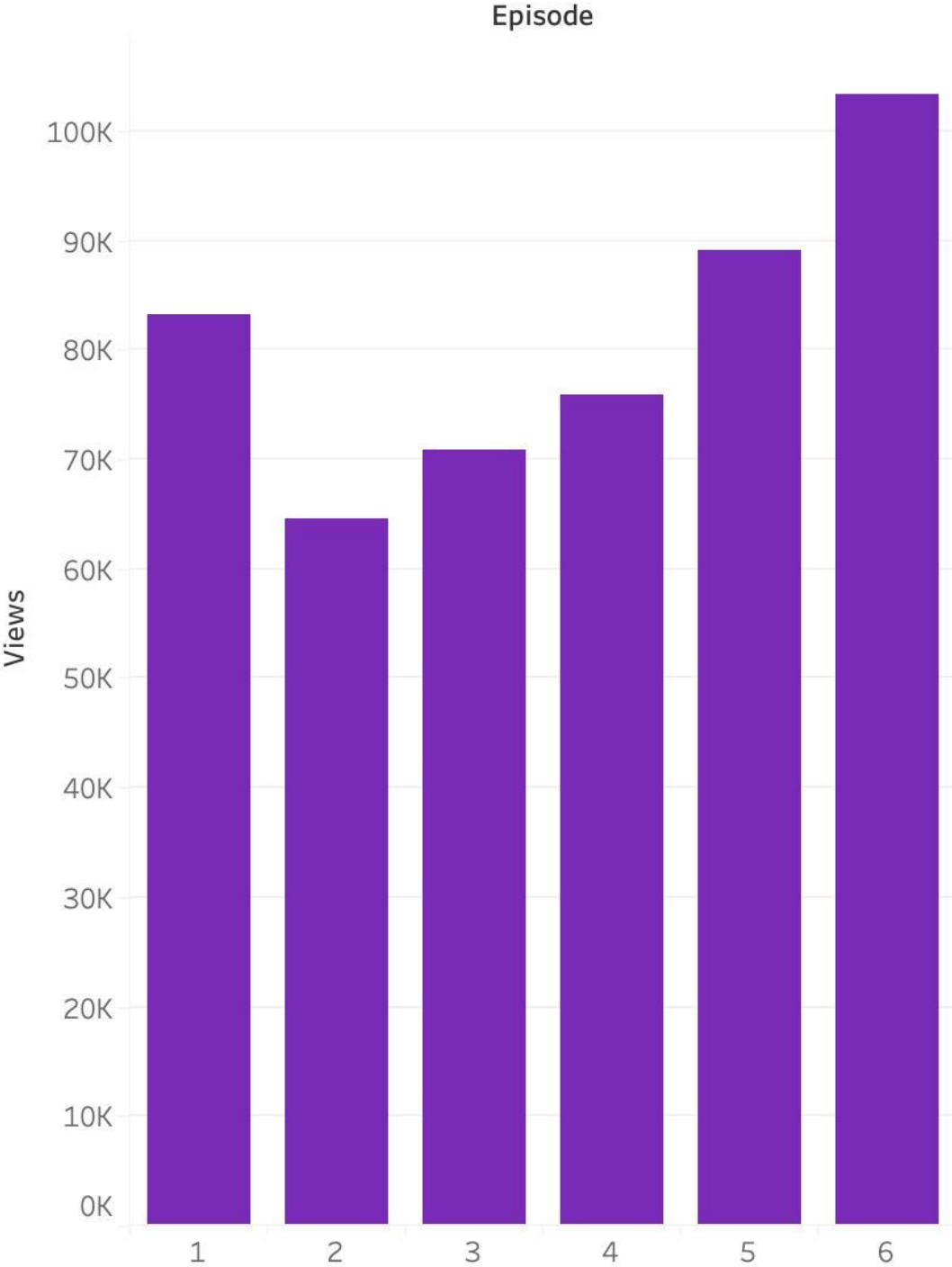
Hawkeye Likes - Fictional Darling



Average of Likes for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps Fictional Darling. The Show filter keeps Hawkeye.

Figure 26- fictionalardarling Hawkeye Likes

Hawkeye Views - Fictional Darling



Sum of Views for each Episode. The data is filtered on Channel and Show. The Channel filter keeps Fictional Darling. The Show filter keeps Hawkeye.

Figure 27- fictionalardling Hawkeye Views