Female Audiences' Interpretation on Media Programs
—A Research Based on *Sherlock*

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Abstract. Media content has no consistent derivative meaning to female audiences. Female audiences would add their own imaginations into the process of interpreting the popular media content，and finally form a discourse system belonging to subcultural circle. Female audiences routinely engage in the opposite decoding of media content, instead of just following the intrinsic message (Steiner, 1988). To examine this idea, the researcher assumed that female audiences in the digital era would interpret and utilize media content in their own way, and take *Sherlock*, the highquality TV program of BBC, and its audiences as research subjects. The research question is how female audiences engage in decoding of popular media content. This research contains two important aspects: media content and audience responses. The research methods in this study are textual analysis and semi-structured interview. The conclusion is that the way of interpretation and the formation of discourse system are influenced by two important factors: the subculture in the social network and the awakening of females' sense of independence.

1.   Introduction

Sherlock was famous for its "Sherlock/Watson" slash fiction among female fans. Slash fiction is a genre of fan fiction that focuses on personal attraction or sexual relationships between fictional characters of the same gender (Bryson, Holly and Moxey, 1994). However, slash fiction has different origins in western and eastern cultures. According to Zhang (2016), slash fiction is called boys' love (BL) fiction in Asian countries. In western countries, the first slash fiction is Star Trek: The Original series fan fiction with "Kirk/Spock" stories in the 1970s (Marcus, &Nicholls, 2004). At the beginning, slash fictions were not immediately accepted by most of the audiences (Kustritz, 2013). It did not become popular until the late 1990s when internet was accessible to the general public (Kustritz, 2013).

This study aims to explore the derivative significance of media content to female audiences without consistency, as audiences would add their own interpretation to the media programs. As Radway (1984) argued, for many female readers, romance reading is a passive resistance to male-dominated culture. Based on this statement, the researcher of this study assumes that female audiences in the digital era will also interpret and utilize media content in their own way. The researcher believes that the investigation and interpretation process could help media workers figure out what female audiences really get from media productions, and provide feminist researchers a new perspective of feminist reception study.

2.   Review of Literature

Radway (1984) investigated romance novels and their female audiences from the perspective of feminist reception. She mentioned the stereotype of "men strong, women weak" in romance novels, which she attributed to the patriarchal myths (Radway, 1984). In the background of the prevalence of male chauvinism, female characters have to "gain identity through interaction with male characters" (Stanley, &Dennis, 2015). In addition, Radway (1984) found that female readers of popular romance novels often rejected the key assumptions of patriarchal myths.

According to McClearen(2015), girls' power is a media phenomenon that "promoted the seemingly empowering and independence of girls and young women" in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

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Girls' power included young actresses who perform in action thrillers, but these actresses also adhered to narrow standards of femininity and traditional notions of physical beauty.

Slash fiction is another significant concept in the current research. In Bryson, Holly, and Moxey's research (1994), slash fiction could be defined as an fiction reworking which focusing on romantic or sexual relationships between characters of the same gender. As Zhang (2016) mentioned in her article, in 1978, a group of female authors published stories featuring platonic relationships between young boys in JUNE, a female comic magazine . These fictions soon became known as boy's love (BL) fiction in Asia. Zhang (2016) noted that BL fiction became more and more popular among young women recent years due to the development of the Internet and social networks.

According to Zhang (2016) and Kustritz's (2013) studies, slash fictions' development was heavily influenced by the media industry and information technology. For example, BL fictions and western slash fictions both first appeared in the 1970s but finally became popular in the 1990s. Zhang (2016) explained the reason as the internet allowing female audiences to share their fan fictions on social networks. The emergence of BL fictions and slash fictions indicated that female audiences in both the west and the east were concerned with same-sex relationships in their fictions.

However, Shaw (2014) also noted that internet allows groups to "produce new forms of knowledge and posit counter-discourses in a way that can and has spread widely" (Shaw, 2014). For example, Keller (2015) argued that feminists should explore feminist brands by challenging larger cultural trends and using electronic media to promote the understanding of the Renaissance of feminism in today's popular media culture. Keller (2015) mentioned Gevinson and her creation of Rookie Magazine in the article. Gevinson successfully emphasized the importance of feminism for girls by utilizing postfeminist media culture.

The research question of this study is how female audiences engage in negotiated decoding of popular media content. It contains two important aspects in this research: media content and audience responses. Media content refers to the high quality media programs such as the research subject *Sherlock*. Audience response means female audiences opposite decoding and negotiation meanings of *Sherlock*'s slash fiction and characters' romantic relationships.

By reading several articles about feminist reception in mass communication, the researcher found a lot of scholars have already investigated female audiences' opinion about popular media content. On this basis, this research will design interview, text analysis and other research methods to inquire female audiences' opinions about media programs from the perspective of feminist reception.

3.   Methodology

In the research, the TV series *Sherlock* and its audience are observed as research subjects. According to Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (2012), the highest overnight rating of *Sherlock* was 7.5 million viewers. In addition, *Sherlock* was one of most popular programs on iPlayer from January to April in 2012 (Marszal, 2012). For this reason, *Sherlock* could be studied as an example of popular media content in this research. The research methods used in this research are textual analysis and semi-structured interviews.

The first step is textual analysis. Aiming at the research question of how female audiences engage in negotiated decoding of popular media content, researcher needs to define what is media content. Therefore, if the researcher plans to analyse the contents of *Sherlock*, it is necessary to read the original novels such as The Hound of the Baskervilles again and taking notes before analysing the BBC version. The last step of this section is searching director and editors' statements online. Their opinions could be used to compare with female audiences' personal opinions after the interviews.

The second step is conducting the interviews. Bourdage (2014) noted that semi-structured construction will help researchers get participants' personal views and life experiences in a convenient way. In this research, the researcher also has to collect this information from female audiences, so it is appropriate to use semi-structured interviews and conduct conversations with them separately. The participants will be interviewed by the researcher. They will be asked 9 required questions and 1 optional question about *Sherlock* and its slash fiction. The questions includ personal opinions of the

characters in *Sherlock*, *Sherlock*'s slash fiction and the influence of *Sherlock* on one's real life. The conversation between the researcher and the participant will no more than 60 minutes.

Additionally, considering that the research method should be appropriate for studying subcultures and specific groups, the researcher created a profile on the social network Lofter under the hashtag of BBC's *Sherlock*, in order to get enough female audiences who are *Sherlock* fans.

During the interviews, the researcher will use an online instant messaging service to communicate with the participants, as it will give the researchers access to a wider geographic area and ensures the interviews could able to "take place at the respondents' convenience" (Zhang, 2016).

During the interview, the researcher will talk about some original content in *Sherlock* with the interview participants to establish rapport with participants. Here are the potential questions that might be mentioned during interviews:

1.How do you know the character Sherlock Holmes?
2.How do you know *Sherlock*?
3.How do you feel about the quality of *Sherlock*?
4.What do you think about the relationship between *Sherlock* and Watson in the TV series?
5.Who is your favorite character in *Sherlock*?
6.What characteristics of this figure attracted you most?
7. Can you briefly introduce one of your favorite *Sherlock* slash fictions?
8. Can you briefly describe one of your favorite scenes in *Sherlock* series?
9. How does *Sherlock* impact on your real life?
10. How do you write *Sherlock* slash fictions?
11. What do you think about female characters in *Sherlock*?

The conversations will be verbatim and recorded in research notes. The researcher will keep the notes in the personal computer and set them as encrypted files. The researcher will not collect names, email addresses or other identifying information. Upon completion of the study, information collected from the participants will be removed from the identifiable private information.

4.   Results and Discussion

Ten Asian females from China, Australia and Canada volunteered to be interviewed for the research. All the participants can converse fluently in mandarin. Each participant will be asked to identify their demographics and use a pseudonym during the conversations. Most of the participants are college students aged 18 to 22, including eight undergraduates and one graduate student. Only one participant works as a government official in a public institution.

Table 1. Participant demographic information

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Location	Occupation
Levy	18	Asian	China/Changsha	Undergraduate Student
Mang Mang	20	Asian	China/Changchun	Undergraduate Student
Glim	21	Asian	China/Chengdu	Undergraduate Student
Mikayla	19	Asian	Australia/Newcastle	Undergraduate Student
Tian Dong	20	Asian	China/Chongqing	Undergraduate Student
Eliza	20	Asian	China/Yantai	Undergraduate Student
Karel	20	Asian	China/Shanghai	Undergraduate Student
Olivia	22	Asian	Canada/Halifax	Graduate Student
Mao	21	Asian	China/Wuhan	Undergraduate Student
Jessy	24	Asian	China/Fuzhou	Government Official

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4.1   Subculture in the social networks

Female audiences will add their own interpretation to the media programs when decoding the content of media products. Meanwhile, the spread of BL culture and other subcultures on the Internet enables female audiences to further strengthen their imaginative interpretation in the process of sharing, reading slash fictions and communicating with their peers on social networks.

BL culture and slash fiction have been developing for decades since the 1970s, and they become popular among female audiences globally (Zhang, 2016). As the development of BL culture is heavily influenced by the media industry and information technology, slash fictions are very popular on the Internet (Kustritz, 2013). After being affected by the BL culture on the Internet, female audiences realize that same-sex characters are more intimate than ordinary friendships, and accept a new perspective of "same-sexual love" to interpret the relationship between characters.

Under the influence of BL culture, participants reported that in order to satisfy their imagination about the media content, they would review the TV series to find details that might indicate that "Sherlock and Watson are in a romantic relationship". When the scholar asked the participants to briefly describe their favorite scenes in *Sherlock*, all the participants chose scenes involved the interaction between Sherlock and Watson. These factors indicate that female audiences will add their own interpretation to the media programs for their spiritual demand. Otherwise, several participants also emphasized that they "clearly knew" that in the TV series, Sherlock and Watson were not a couple. They could distinguish their own imagined romantic relationships from the friendships between Sherlock and Watson on TV, and even emphasized this opinion to the researchers.

4.2 The awakening of females' sense of independence

Female audiences will be influenced by the female identity when they decoding the media content. Although some interviewees were not aware of this during the interviews, through analysis, it could be found that the participants did interpret the media content from the perspective of women. They would like to make up for the unfair treatment they encountered in reality by decoding the content of media products.

The separation of gender identity is also a significant factor affecting the decoding process of female audiences. In BL culture, homosexual love between men is the main consumption object of female audiences. Through this approach, female audiences could be emancipated from the male gaze and objectify male characters to cater to female desires for men. In Jin's research (2016), she described this gender separation as a self-protection mechanism to escape from the patriarchal society. in particular, Deng described that the description of romantic relationships in mainstream media products in China is all heterosexual, with male dominance and female weakness. Female audiences are uncomfortable with stereotypes of women. Female audiences without a voice can hardly change the status quo of the media market. By reading or writing slash fictions, female audiences can add their romantic fantasies to equal relationships without a sense of crisis in the male gaze.

5. Conclusion

In the process of decoding the popular media content, female audiences add their own imagination, and finally form a discourse system belonging to the subcultural circle. The approach of interpretation and the formation of discourse system are influenced by two significant factors:

First, subculture in the social networks. With the development of Internet and information technology, social network has played an important role in cultural communication in recent decades. Subculture spreads to the public through social network and influences female audiences. This is a factor that was not available in the era of traditional media when female audiences had few opportunities to be affected by subculture. The spread of social networks allowes female audiences to find more diverse perspectives to negotiated or oppositional decode media content. For this reason, the opinions of female audiences become less traditional, distinctive and innovative.

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Second, the awakening of females' sense of independence. As a new generation born in the 1990s, modern female audiences have awakened their sense of independence. They were influenced by feminist theories and the civil rights movements, through education and other online approaches. Due to the low social recognition of women in reality, these female audiences pay more attention to the content related to independence and equality when interpreting media content.

Additionally, the limitation of this research is the lack of academic analysis of slash fiction. Zhang (2016) mentioned that BL fiction started from the 1970s. As a genre of subculture, it did not become popular on the internet until the 1990s (Zhang, 2016). Until the 21st century, only a few researchers had paid attention to slash fiction and investigated it. The lack of racial diversity is the limitation of the current research. The native language of researcher and subject in this study study is Mandarin. In order to ensure that there will be no communication problems during the interviews, all the interviewees in this research are Chinese speakers over 18 years from Chinese social networks. Although the result shows that the research subjects are from three different countries, all of them are Asian female who are deeply influenced by Chinese culture and identify themselves as Chinese. Therefore, the content of the research could only reflect the views of Chinese females.

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