

The Popularity of Adapted Boy's Love TV Series and the Ambiguous Social Identity of Gay Group: A Case Study of the Audience Analysis on the New TV Series *Word of Honor*

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ABSTRACT

In the 1990s, the Boy's Love (BL) culture has been introduced into China and developed under the Chinese social context. In the past five years, the adapted editions of boy's love TV series have been gaining extreme popularity. Most studies claim that these TV series are positive since they bring the gay community to the public, and few argues its drawbacks in sociological aspect. However, the virtual characters in novel or TV are not real, the adapted boy's love content actually marginalizes the real gay's love under the control of dominant culture of China. Based on the audience analysis of the TV series "Word of Honor", this study explores the audience's thoughts and attitudes toward the gay group. As an evidence, audience analysis is the important source of this case study, collected from Douban, a widely-used comment platform in China. It is discovered that the image of boy's love in the TV series is too ideal to be applied in reality, which is more similar to friendship in the adaption. For audiences, those who love BL culture only focus on the ideal romance narrative, while the public pays attention to another factors in this TV series. Drawing on the subculture theory of Birmingham School, this paper discusses the implications of the findings and provides suggestions for further researches on the actual behavior of gay's community and the influence of TV.

Keywords: TV series, Boy's Love culture, Stereotype, Fujoshi.

1. INTRODUCTION

Adapted BL TV series is the TV series which is adapted from the original fictions about gay's love. In this type of TV series, the the definition of love between homosexuals is nor clear, and the TV series screenwriter will use the friendship or brotherhood to replace it. This form of media content has affected the awareness of public towards the gay group. Many scholars claimed and declared that these TV serials are helpful for audience to understand the gay group better. Yang has stated in her paper that it is useful to help the audience to know the gay group without unequal stereotype [1]. Her paper mainly stated that the TV series are positive for audience to eliminate the prejudice and come to see the gay group equally [1].

However, in this paper, the evidence refuses this optimistic opinion. The drawbacks of this TV series lies in its unclear description of gay's love. Adapted by the mainstream culture, it is not easy to discover the

subculture as gay or BL works. There are few papers have a consonance with this pessimistic view . Lan posted in the essay that, inclusion in to the mainstream is called the 'fatality' of subculture, and it is believed that inclusion is 'the process in which the dominant culture defines and controls the culture outside the system again' [2]. In another paper, Wang claimed that the popularity of BL TV series are just the "enjoyment of the marginal" [3]. He believes that although BL culture more or less affects the strong male hegemony, the imagination of love in the BL culture avoids many unhappy, unclear and other violations of social norms in homosexual literature, which is not connected to the ground and real society. These are the crisis of the adapted BL TV series.

This paper will further explain why the adaptation of mainstream culture is detrimental to the influence of the media. Through the adaptation, the subculture is eliminated, making the audience unable to realize the importance of understanding the BL culture or gay

group. Another reason is that the imagined world of gay group in these TV series is too perfect to believe in real society. After analyzing the character portrayal and the audience comments, it will be verified that the popularity of BL TV series does not mean that the gay group has come to public stage, so these TV series may not be beneficial for the support of gay group.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. The development of BL culture

BL, which means “boy’s love”, this word is not originally made for describing the love between two men, it is just a word to depict a kind of literature that only emphasize on the pure beauty. The word is firstly used and developed during the 1930s and 1940s in Japan. Even the famous writer Mishima Yukio had influenced by this ideology. In 1960s, the female writer MORI MARI (Japan) apply this kind of ideology and write the books to depict the love of men. She is the originator of BL novels, her novels “Lovers' Forest” and “Bed of Dead Leaves”, opened the era of women describing gay love [4].

With the surprisingly popular market, more writers joined to write these kind of books. Until the 1970s, a group of female writers began to create stories about male homosexual love with women as the audience, which was later called “teenage love” theme. According to Zhao, the emergence of “Teen Love” is usually attributed to two manga artists, Hagi Wanto and Keiko Takemiya, whose works such as Poem of Wind and Wood are considered to be a subversion of the dominant themes of the previous girl manga, or, more accurately, a breakthrough of the limitations of the girl manga itself [4].

Later in 1980s and 1990s, the cartoon called BL came into the market in Japan and were published in the magazine JUNE. The BL works got maturely developed and was introduced into China in 1990s. At that time, there were just a small group of women who are interested. When the new era came, BL culture gradually enter the market and its main audience is a group of teenage women who call themselves “Fujoshi girls (which means fag hag in Chinese)”. With the spread of this trend, the group of “Fujoshi girls” is expanding, and the works are no longer limited to specific BL cartoons. In addition to animation, cartoon, game and light novel, they also infiltrate into radio drama, TV drama, film and so on. That is what we see today as the BL and the Fujoshi culture.

So, we can conclude that the BL culture is the ideology which focus on two beautiful boy’s love. Their love should be aesthetic and romantic to some extent, whether from the boy’s appearance or the ending of the

storyline. And the female who love this kind of works accept the calling as “Fujoshi girls”.

2.2. The characteristics of men in girls’ BL works

According to Zhang:

“The popularity of “fujoshi girls” is also a cultural manifestation of entering the “male era”: the male characters who once dominated novels or history have been shaped only to be beautified and symbolized for viewing and ridicule, their stories have been parodied and tampered with with irony, and their authority is deconstructed. This subverts the narrative of male ethnocentrism in traditional literary works, while women become the creation of this joking culture” [5].

So under the “female gaze”, what is men’s characteristics? The protagonist in the BL works, although was set on the male body, but both male and female excellent characteristics, they have a handsome and charming appearance, with a unique delicate emotion on the female body, is the other half of the object of protection. These characters, which combine the advantages of excellent men and excellent women, are undoubtedly intended by the writers, and are an attempt to realize their self-identity as women.

Through the fusion of female beauty and male heroism, the character is endowed with idealized human characteristics. We can see from the BL works, men are always handsome, whether they are not clever or not, they are willing to pursue their love. The kind of men is literally closer to god, a perfect image created only to fulfill “Fujosi girls” needs.

2.3. The definition and theories adapted

Adaption of BL works is a popular type of TV series in these years. BL works have their own storyline; the company will adapt the love between two men to friendship or else to replay this work. These kinds of TV series hide the part of gay’s factor on purpose, mainly to get passed by the censorship. In China, the real gay films can’t come into the public by laws, so these TV series are adapted by mainstream, which turns the subculture as a BL work adaption to a TV series accepted by public. In this way, the BL culture is marginalized and ignored by the public. As Howard Becker notes in his labeling theory, dominant social groups determine who the “out-group” is based on shared values and norms of the “in-group”. The “in group” social groups are oftentimes the dominant culture that decide which values and norms the “out group” cannot perform. “Out group” individuals cannot meet the norms of the dominant culture and are labeled as deviant. According to the marginalization theory,

they are marginalized from fully participating in the dominant culture [6].

What's more, according to The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), Subculture is an adjunct cultural way to challenge the dominant culture and dominant culture through stylized and alternative symbols, which is resistant, stylized and marginal [2]. CCCS scholars went so far as to say that not only does symbolic subcultural resistance have little to no impact on real change, but it may actually work to reinforce their low status in society [6].

BL culture has all the characteristics of subculture, however, influenced by China's national conditions and traditional concepts, BL culture has been accused of sexual perversion and negative influence. In such a cultural environment, BL culture is trying to keep pace with the mainstream culture, on the other hand the mainstream culture's attempt to incorporate BL culture has not stopped. In a theoretical study of the Birmingham School Youth Subculture, inclusion is called the "fatality" of subculture, and it is believed that inclusion is "the process in which the dominant culture defines and controls the culture outside the system again" [2].

3. METHODS

The hypothesis of this study is that adapted BL TV series by the mainstream can't reflect the society's concern on gay's situation, instead, public may marginalize or even ignore the reality of gay group. The reasons are: 1. The adaption TV series are influenced by dominant culture in China. 2. The fantasy images of character's portrayal as gay group are ideal and misleading information of gay group facts

In this paper, the applied methods are the quantitative methods. Based on the case study which focuses on the comments of audience and the character's portrayal, the conclusion comes from the exact feedback and will be summarized to represent a part of the audiences.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Analysis of the adaptation of the BL line in the TV series *Word of Honor*

In 2021, a newly addressed TV series *Word of Honor* attracted most audience. It is an adapted BL series. This TV series portrayed two characters and mainly talked about their story. One of the character called Zhou Xu and the other is Wen Kexing. In the original BL novel, they are lovers. However, in the adaption of TV series, they are depicted more likely as bosom friends and brotherhood.

For example, in the episode 9, Zhou thought Wen was the one that lights his life again and they both believed that each other after they have experienced murder and conspiracy. The scene when they looked in each other was full of emotion, however, they said "confidant" to hide the atmosphere of love, and expressed it in a euphemistic way, as the photo shows below [7].



Figure 1 The biggest change from the adaptation edition compared with the original work is the relationship between the main characters

Although the crew of *Word of Honor* reserved the BL line of the characters, the scriptwriter adapted the original edition of fiction to change the TV series to a more acceptable one in China. Because China is against the gay's love, so the scriptwriter tried other ways to express their intimacy, that is the newly added fellow-apprentice. Fellow-apprentice is a classical relationship in Chinese martial arts films, which means the two men are from the same school of Kongfu and they learn the similar Kongfu. It is a kind of brotherhood, so it is related to the human morality relationship in China.

Based on this relationship, scriptwriter can produce more stories to show their intimacy and promote the plot easily. In the episode 6, Wen said: He is Zhou Xu, I insist. In the original work, Zhou and Wen don't know each other before they meet, and develop their love by the things they go through together. However, in the TV series, they have met in their childhood and they were once the member for the same school. Thus, they have a new relationship like brothers. In this way, their identity have changed from lover to friends. This is the way how dominant culture use adaptation to incorporate the BL works.

The fellow-apprentice relationship was useful. It chose a tortuous way to express their intimacy. In episode 19, when Zhou finally recognized their fellow-apprentice relationship, he gave Wen the first hug in the TV series [9]. It was natural because the hug was from the emotion between the brotherhood, not the love between gay. How did the fellow-apprentice relationship substitutes with the lover relationship? in episode 31, just before Wen combed the hair for Zhou, he gave a salute to Zhou because Zhou was higher than

him in the status of their school. It is normal in traditional Chinese kongfu films. Wen's salute can show his respect rather than his love, so this scene is designed for showing their moral relationship as brother disciples. Their once equal love as gay couple in the original work is transferred into Chinese morally accepted relationship.



Figure 2 Hug is the extreme expression to depict intimacy between gay couple

The reason why the TV series would add this relationship is to pass the censorship. The country has no laws to support gay's love and these kinds of TV series. So scriptwriter has to change the original edition to an edition which most public can accept. This reflects the dilemma of the adapted BL TV series today, they must cancel some lines and change towards the mainstream. That is the only way the TV series can be addressed on public.

Additionally, the TV series depicts the characters of gay people like Zhou and Wen are too perfect. They are handsome, rich and with high level of Kongfu. This perfect imagination is hard to find in the reality, while audience may wrongly label the gay people with those positive stereotypes while they don't exist.

4.2. Analysis of the audience comments after reflecting Word of Honor

As an adaption, the Word of Honor changed many obvious behaviors in previous work, like kiss and the love talk, however, they try to remain some eye contact and hug to express the emotion between two main characters. So for the general public who don't know it is a story about two men's love, it is easy for them to watch the film and attracted by the work, otherwise find it strange and quit it.

As a reflection on the audience, the difference between the real gay's love TV series and the adapted TV series should be presented. In 2021, a new TV series called *The No.1 Forever* in Taiwan is also a popular gay love TV series to mainland audience. In contrast, the changes on the TV series about the love story have great influence on the audience on the adapted TV series. In the NO.1, the gay's love is explicit, and in their advertisement, the label of "BL" and "LGBT" is clearly cited. However, in the *Word of Honor*, the only label is

"Wuxia", which means a type of TV series about conflict among Kongfu leaders. "Wuxia" is one of the most classical types of TV series in Chinese media world. In this way, audience have great possibility to regard it as a normal TV series and have no sense that it was once a story about gay's love. With different topic, the attracted audience are quite variable. From the comments and bullets, audience's attitude and what they care about is an interesting point to reflect.

From the audience who immersed in the story and the two men's relationship, their comments vary a lot. Based on whether to believe the main actors are also fell in love outside the TV series, they have different opinions. One of the audience who only love the virtual characters and the fantasy world in the TV series commented like that: "This beautiful memory in spring is enough, let's just cherish it and regard the TV series as a fantasy for us... I still can't accept what you said like the gay couple of the two actors in reality, it's too fake" [9]. This comment got almost 1000 approvals. It can be concluded that this audience only love the atmosphere showed in this TV series but not the real gay group in reality. If the actors are real gays, she will not accept it easily. In this case, audience is hard to accept the gay and LGBT labels in reality, and it is even harder for them to acquire the issues and situations of real gay people.

Another comment with nearly 600 approvals was written by a heterosexual male audience called "Afei". He claimed that he is a fan for "Wuxia" (the story about the conflict caused by Kongfu leaders and personal resentment) TV series for more than 10 years. It is true after reflecting his comments because he mainly focused on the storyline of the dispute of the different Kongfu school and other factors, such as instructors, special effects and art design [10]. He ignored the part of "gay's love and BL works" to avoid talking the marginalized culture. In this way, although this TV series was seen by public, and whether they realized the emotion between the two men or not, they may choose to ignore it. They mainly focused on the part of "Wuxia" rather than the part of BL or gay's love, which is not helpful to raise the awareness of public towards the gay group in reality.

What's more, there is one short comment under the long comments of "Afei", which presents the marginalization of subculture like BL works. The audience comments like that: "My husband asked me what is the relationship between these two men, I didn't dare to tell him but tried to get him involved in watching the TV series with me" [11]. This words actually show that the Fujoshi who like to watch BL works are not willing to show their identity even to those who are intimate like husband. As a subculture, BL culture can't go straight into public. So if the more fantasy and beautiful BL work even can't be told in reality, the issue

of gay or LGBT is less possible to be talked when people watched the TV series.

The feedback of audiences can be divided to three parts: Firstly, the public who are not Fujoshi and only interests in storyline. Secondly, Fujoshi who only love the atmosphere of gay group in TV series. Finally, Fujoshi who do not dare to reveal their identity. These three audience types from the study are all not beneficial to the reality of gay group. As the hypothesis states, the TV series which is adapted from BL work is popular, but it does not mean the public will consider the gay group as an important issue. They may only love the "Wuxia" and storyline of the TV series, since it is a traditional Chinese culture, or they may only love the imagined world in the screen but not care about the reality. In this way, as a media, the adapted BL TV series can't play a role in getting people to know the gay group, both because of the high degree of adaption by mainstream and the imagined portrayal of the fantasy world.

5. REFLECTIONS

For the general public who dislike the film, they may choose to leave a comment like "why today's young audience lie this" or "could not accept two men's flirting" [12]. If the comments are too aggressive, there are always some feedback from Fujoshi women or supporters of the film like "if you don't like it, just close" "it's our culture, don't criticize it on your view".

The freedom of speaking is clearly stated on those comments, BL culture as a sub-culture on the internet, the supporters still fight for their rights to speak and express as they like. They don't want others' comments, and they regard it as a way to fight for the freedom, which can be seen as a fight from the subculture to the dominant culture.

The TV series also give rise to the controversy which reflects the ethnic standard of nowadays society. The most severe comments maybe the one like this: "We do not discriminate against gay, but also should not fanfare publicity? It's not about acting, it's about the bottom line of values" [12]. The audience said the TV series hit the edge ball and the tendency is not good for leading the young children. It is true that people may watch the film without knowing that the TV series is about gay, and was misled by the behavior of two men. A TV series without any messages saying "I am about two men's love" ended up a love story between men is a wrong leading for many general audiences.

If for a real gay love's film, this concern is less, because the film can't be find unless you have interest on BL work. So for general audience, they can't get access to it and their chance of being misleading is less.

China is still a country against the homosexual marriage, so the adapted BL TV series are still in the gray area. Whether the government should ban on every work or adjust them to become more general is an ethnic problem which need great consideration.

6. CONCLUSION

Through analyzing the audience feedback of the TV series "Word of Honor", the attitudes of different kinds of audiences have been revealed. Back to the hypothesis that the adapted TV series can't contribute to the real gay group in society, the audience analysis give affirmative answers. The results show that for Fujoshi people who love the BL culture, they immersed in the ideal image of boy's love on the internet, but there are no comments on words such as "gay" or "LGBT"; for public audience, they selectively ignored the attributes of the boy's love or regarded it as a friendship, and mainly focused on the other aspects of these TV series. By analyzing through their comments, the shame of discussing gay's love instead of BL still exists. Even as a Fujoshi, they are afraid to touch the topic of real gay group, and only dare to enjoy the subculture in internet, or the virtual world. What's more, under the adaption from the mainstream culture, the subculture as a gay's love are marginalized by most ordinary audience who are not Fujoshi. In conclude, they pay more attention to the virtual and ideal images of boy's love without considering them in the reality of gay group, or just skip this part. In this way, the true support of gay group can't exist, but even label them with the stereotype the TV series showed. In the future, if the sociology focuses on this topic, the point of the difference between virtual image and real existence can be considered. Still, the communication major can apply the results of TV series analysis as a part of how the TV series are adapted by the dominant culture. Additionally, if more researches want to continue this topic, they can further discuss on how can the adaption bring the gay's problems back to the reality, rather than just maintaining a positive image on internet.

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