Research on the Impact of LGBT Culture in Social Media on Chinese LGBT Community

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ABSTRACT

There are many LGBT cultures in today's social media, such as BL novels, BL film and television dramas, and CP culture. The LGBT culture originally belonging to specific groups has affected the contemporary overall culture to a certain extent. This paper attempts to answer the impact of the wide spread of LGBT culture on LGBT groups, mainly from three perspectives: society, media and entertainment. This research mainly adopts qualitative research methods, through interviews with LGBT groups and heterosexual groups, to jointly understand the deep reasons for the wide spread and popularity of LGBT culture. This paper finds that the impact of LGBT culture on LGBT groups is actually less than our expected. However, the wide spread of LGBT culture will inevitably affect young people. For heterosexual groups, the popularity of LGBT culture may not break the public's stereotype of LGBT, but add interesting and fashionable labels to the impression of LGBT, so as to form a new stereotype. Therefore, there is no doubt that social media provides space for the popularity of LGBT culture, so that more people pay attention to and accept this group. At the same time, LGBT groups will face new challenges. Although there are some limitations in the methods and conclusions, this paper will still be beneficial to further explore the LGBT group research from the perspective of contemporary mass culture.

Keywords: *LGBT culture, Entertainment, LGBT community, social media*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, as the Media modernized Chinese people's minds with its giant information band, the identity of the potential LGBT people in China then is "founded" by society and themselves. This causes unprecedented exposure of the sexual minority group on social media, which results in more controversial discussions and opinions [1]. Nonetheless, the LGBT community has built to a considerable scale on Chinese social media, with the total number of LGBTQ people estimated to account for about 40-70 million in China, therefore making advocacy for their rights and social visibility of this population become an increasing demand [2].

As a new language communication tool, social Media enables sexual minorities to get a sense of personal psychological security [3], interpersonal

support with online activities to meet their own needs [4], and share and mobilize social resources to explore their identity [5]. It was suggested that social media might also provide an informal educational environment for LGBTQ youth, offering them opportunities to explore and enhance their confidence about their identities [6]. Evidence has shown that their engagement on social media may also allow them to be affected by LBGT role models or social media influencers, seeking emotional connection from them [7].

At the same time, under the context of social media, 'Danmei' or YAOI culture, which was originated in the 90 Century in Japan, has been disseminated virally in recent years on the Chinese Internet through the 'boy-love' novels and T.V. series, establishing huge female fandom, who were usually heterosexual [8]. The evolving B.L. subculture, which is generally romantic fiction portraying the love between 2 men, along with

the female fans self-identified by 'fujoshi' (Funu in Mandarin), which can be both the readers or the writers of the B.L. novels gradually cause a non-negligible impact on the LGBTQ group [9].

On one side, the extensive discussions on the Internet, various LGBTQ culture novels, and websites have enabled the public and the LGBTQ group to have a new perspective on their sexual orientation and identity, and to accept this difference; New media provide them with the possibility space to make their voices heard so that they can enter the public view as "main subjects," no longer marginalized [10].

But on the other side, although homosexuals were no longer considered "mentally ill" and "abnormal," the discrimination against the community has not disappeared, which may subsequently exert negative impacts on mental well-being for the minority group [11]. Furthermore, the trend of consumerism and economic interests behind the popularization of Danmei culture are likely to make use of the voice of the LGBT group and turn the hot-debating topic into a form of entertainment and novelty, causing misconception for the audience and even forming new types of stereotypes [10]. Therefore, the stereotype of homosexuality from the public and the self-identity cognition of the minority group influenced by social media together form the general social image of this group.

This study examines the implications that arise from the spread of LGBTQ-related subculture on Chinese social media, especially the 'Boy Love' Culture on the LGBTQ community in China and their attitudes towards the phenomenon of excessive entertainment of the sexual minority group. We use qualitative methods of in-depth interviews with LGBTQ youth for analysis. In comparison, the heterosexual 'fujoshi' perspectives are also included to give a holistic and multi-faceted overview of the possible difference that exists between the virtual world and reality, as well as to evaluate the impact Danmei culture could have brought to the real LGBTQ youth and the new challenge or opportunity Chinese LGBTQ youth experience within the unique social media atmosphere in China.

For our research, we would mainly use the concept of 'affordance' [12], 'parasocial interaction' [13], and 'pseudo-environment' as the theoretical framework [14].

Affordances, in definition, means 'the range of functions and constraints that an object provides for, and places upon, structurally situated subjects' [15]. Gibson, who proposed the theory, said the form of the object shapes our perception of the world [12]. In the context of our study, it suggests how social Media as the 'object' can act as a medium for the emergence of LGBTQ related subculture, and how social media information or 'online affordance' can act as 'symbols' that contains semantic meaning, therefore, may be perceived

differently by the LGBTQ youth in reality and the heterosexual population [16]. It examines how people can be the best fit in the environment, for instance, how LGBT youth make use of social media platforms. All the possible actions given by them, so social media could be a unique context that may provide more ground for social interactions and public opinion that other activities or places can't afford [17]. Based on the Affordance Theory, the role of social media can be emphasized in the research for its possibility of leading the new direction of LGBT groups. There are also previous studies researching social media affordance and curation for the group. It was concluded that LGBTQ youth used different mechanisms provided by media to manage their identity, and this kind of 'queer-world-building' was crucial for the group's well-being [18].

Another theory used is "parasocial" interaction [13]. It refers to 'the emotions and behaviors an audience member experiences while interacting with the media character. The audience may experience the same emotion the person on the Media is experiencing, resonant with them, and may engage in maintenance behavior to preserve this relationship [19]. In our research context, we expect to use the framework in two ways; First is to find out if Chinese LGBT youth experience the same kind of "parasocial interaction" for their LGBT role models on social media, if they would be affected by the role model on their behavior or decision such as to be "out of the closet", or to reveal their identities to the people around them [18]. Second, parasocial interaction may suggest reasons for the dissemination of LGBTQ culture in heterosexual people, and their level of acceptance is central to the investigation of the topic. As a result, the impact of LGBTQ culture can be shown.

The theory of "pseudo-environment" refers to the impact the media environment establishes on the audience because "the real environment is altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance.[14]" A subjective and biased mental image is created in people's minds [14]. People's behavior is no longer a response to the objective environment and its changes but to some "pseudo environment" suggested by the news organization [14]. As proposed by Yu [10], the fans of boy love novels are often immersed in the pseudo-environment or the joyful vibe that was created intentionally in the literary works or movies; therefore may be inclined to believe in their "Utopian fantasy" and forgot about the actual situation homosexuality was in. Thus, the "pseudo-environment" created may cause the audience's opinions to differ and can be applied to analyze the "fujoshi" character involved in the spread of the subculture.

2. METHOD

Considering our research questions: the effects of social media entertainment on the LGBTQ culture and community, which is hard to collect numerical data, we claim our overall method belongs to qualitative methods. Furthermore, with the dabbling of diverse fields of social media and social science of our topic, we focus on interviews as the primary research method with interpretivism to interpret, contextualize, and deepen understanding of a specific population—LGBTQ. To be precise, we designed some questions to ask about in interviews and extracted some exciting and rarely discovered points that we have access to discussing and supporting arguments in our essay.

First and foremost, we discussed and came up with some specific questions that we may ask during interviews. Then, we randomly selected LGBT students near us who were willing tbno be interviewees and interacted with them about relevant issues like when and how to interview. Due to the coverage of some questions designed which were more suitable for non-LGBT students to answer, samples are selected from the population of both LGBT students and monosexual students from different cities in China, from senior high schools and universities, age range:16-20)Later, we started to conduct semi-structured interviews with 12 individuals that fitted into our target group. We conducted interviews in a quiet room or through WeChat, and each lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes. Every member would interview about 2 or 3 people. Eventually, after accomplishing interviews and collecting information that we needed to support our claim, we would analyze interview records, extract useful information and integrate.

These questions designed are based on our first interview. We extracted a point from the previous one to conduct in-depth research. What we aim to find out belong to. As a consequence, we divided the questions into three parts: Society, Entertainment and Online social media platform.

Different interview approaches are utilized. Consider some inevitable factors like time and location; we use the method of the online interview via WeChat (break the limitations of places since not everyone is in the same city or the same school. Transportation can be a problem) and face to face interviews (that is for students around us). Plus, we have a chat record from the online interview as a piece of evidence. Specifically, we have access to interviewing with a voice recorder and camera, which enables us to reorganize the content more efficiently. Lately, we will integrate similar points between different interviews to support our claim.

Admittedly, we may have sample bias and convenience sampling since most of the interviewees are selected from LGBT students around us. We have

difficulty connecting with other people and finding simple random samples (SRS) on our own. Later, we may conduct an online questionnaire. In this questionnaire, we will set up a question: How did you feel after exposure to social media? There are five answers which correspond to 5 different levels of mental health that they can choose:(this is closely related to our research topic) much worse, worse, same, better, much better. We hope to discover the effect of social media on them. Also, we lack some numerical data to support our research, so this online questionnaire will fulfill this gap. Furthermore, we may conduct a case study to enhance the depth of evidence and get a complete detailed picture of LGBT students.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Analysis from LGBT community perspective

3.1.1. Cause of the Popularity of BL Culture

Given the current LGBT culture, Alice believes that compared with the consumption of the LGBT groups, it contains more projections of women's beautiful fantasies to men. "Most of the authors and audiences of BL novels are heterosexual women. Most of the men in their works have excellent qualities like bravery, good-looking, and kindness, which expresses women's favorite male qualities through homosexual images. After all, homosexuality is still a minority group, so prevalent still caters to most people's hobbies. There is not much overlap between the circle of the so-called 'LGBT culture' real audience and the LGBT group. "

There is another opinion. Lisa thinks that, apart from projections of women's beautiful fantasies of men, BL culture is also an unfinished form of women's consciousness liberation under the discipline of patriarchal society. In the traditional patriarchal society, women often take on caring for their husbands and educating their children. Compared with careers and dreams, the priority of families is usually higher. Today, with the gradual awakening of women's consciousness, the male images in BL novels also carry women's fantasies about their pictures. With the help of male identity, they can break the stereotype and shackles of society and accomplish what they want to do more easily.

3.1.2. Influences on the LGBT community

According to our interview, the influence of the prevalent LGBT culture on this group is actually smaller than we thought. They convey that BL fans do not overlap with their daily life track much and seldom directly impact them. Because of pan-entertainment, fan groups often pay attention to characters or stars, while

natural LGBT groups are invisible in entertainment works.

Talking about the influence of the popularity of this culture on LGBT groups, Roy said this: "There's not much influence directly touches our interests, but it may affect some heterosexual groups' views on us. The most obvious effect is that many people will think,' If you are gay, then you should look good.' The people who say this can be inferred to be immersed in the LGBT culture in the media. BL fans always regard homosexuals as handsome guys or beautiful women who fall in love like BL novels or TV dramas. But if you walk into our community, you will find that most of us are ordinary people. "

It beautifies entertainment works and can also be explained by survivor bias. LGBT, which often dares to make public appearances, has specific capital to support its courage; perhaps it is beauty or a successful career. However, unfortunately, this will cause the public to recognize the LGBT community incorrectly.

3.1.3. Influences on Kids

In our first interview, Sue expressed her concern about the excessive spread of homosexual culture, which contributed to determining our final research direction: "A while ago, my niece, still in elementary school, asked me if I had read a BL novel called Run Ye, and I was very alarmed. I didn't know that the spread of homosexual culture had reached this point. Many children even say, 'heterosexuality is for reproduction, and only the same sex is true love,' which will bring new discrimination to LGBT groups."

The popularity of LGBT culture, represented by same-sex idol cp, BL novels, and BL adaptation, has formed an irreversible trend. At the same time, the widespread of LGBT culture inevitably leads to a younger audience. Whether from the perspective of cultural diversity and inclusiveness, or fashion trends, this phenomenon can't be changed.

Since this phenomenon is irreversible, in the final interview, Sue thinks that it is not good to make teenagers look at sexual minorities correctly with this phenomenon. "I don't think the widespread of the LGBT culture, especially to the kids and teenagers, is a terrible phenomenon. I've noticed that some Japanese kindergartens are equipped with vending machines painted with six-color rainbows, which symbolize the LGBTQA+ community. Hence, the prevailing thought of 'provide bad influence to youths' is without theoretical evidence. The popularity of BL novels and CP culture can lead the young to understand this group correctly and help them better know themselves. Therefore, it can't say this kind of widespread to the young is a bad thing."

3.2. Analysis from the heterosexual fan perspective

In recent years, the LGBTQ culture has spread to more audiences through the popularization of BL (Boy Love) novels on Chinese social media. As a result, it generally developed into a kind of subculture called YAOI culture among the female youth groups with a huge fan base [9]. To further investigate the subculture's impact on the LGBTQ group, four heterosexual 'fujoshi' or the fans of the LGBT-related novels were interviewed. In the section below, findings on how the fans perceive the subculture and the LGBT in reality and some common issues that emerge under the social media context are discussed.

3.2.1. Pseudo-environment created for the fans within a social media context

From the interview, when being asked about the level of correlation between the LGBT group in reality and the ones portrayed in novel or film works, almost all of the interviewees responded that they felt there was too much 'glamorization' in the media environment compared to the LGBT they saw in a real-life context, as mentioned by Amy for their experience in reading BL novels: "I feel the characters in the novel are much more 'beatified' than the reality because, in novels or fan-fictions, authors are inclined to depict the romantic vibe between the two boys and focus on exciting plots to attract the audience. Also, a common practice adopted by the writers was to set dramatic conflicts between the characters and use idealized character settings to make it more entertaining; therefore, it differs a lot from the LGBT I know in reality, their life doesn't have that many ups and downs, and also not that romantic as is illustrated." (Amy, 16, Shanghai, non-LGBT)

It can be inferred that the literary works widespread on the Internet can create a kind of 'pseudo-environment' in which the public only responds to specific elements that have been stressed in the mass media instead of what is present in reality [20]. Because this kind of environment only exists in people's imagination and is influenced subjectively by their values, the content created by the authors, which are mainly served to attract more readers, may have the underlying effect of producing deviation in readers' cognition process the LGBT group. As said by Carrie, the media environment may form a separate 'world' apart from the reality for the youth: "I think for most teenage readers, they are attracted to the LGBT contents on social media not because they are concerned about their current status in the society or if they recognize themselves with recognized, but mainly for entertaining, they may feel it's a very unconventional and innovative concept, or they may follow the trend as others may watch the BL novels, for example. I don't think they

would think deeply behind what's on media and the significance of the LGBT in real-life." (Carrie, 16, Shanghai, heterosexual)

There are potential risks for the young fans to blur the boundary of media and reality, which may cause an inverse reaction from the public; Misunderstanding public can arise as a result of the extreme opinions the "fujoshi" may form because of the novels: "For some 'fujoshi' I know, when they saw two men walking together, she may think they are homosexual; however, they may not be; also, I saw some opinions on social media which are very ignorant and extreme such as 'only homosexual can be true love', I feel these are all actions that can disturb other people's lives and cause others to feel even more objected for this minority group, which I think can cause negative effects for the recognition of LGBT in reality and to improve their situations." (Carrie)

In addition, the novels may provide the female fans subversive gaze upon men, allowing them to play with patriarchal gender construction from the homosexual relationship, giving them the possibility to escape from their heterosexual relationship or reconstruct an idealized one [8]. The media character may set "agenda" in their mind and shape their cognitive belief [20], causing them to think differently than the others who haven't been exposed to the culture. The image set in their mind may be 'filtered' so they may only accept the LGBT characters in novels for entertaining; this may cause situations Sissi said in which 'fujoshi' may not take LGBT in reality: "Because there are too many differences between what media presents about LGBT and this group in reality, for whom I saw in real life, I don't feel they are homosexual for their own heart; it's more likely that they want to draw attention from others. Also, there are more issues in real life such as the gay's wife, the conflict between the older and younger generation; therefore if you consider it in a real-life context, it wouldn't be that pure anymore." (Sissi, 20, Hunan province, non-lgbt)

Therefore, the dissemination of LGBTQ-related media contents among the younger audience - which are considered to be 'widely spread' (all interviewees have given score 7-8 in the overall score of 10 regarding the coverage of LGBT culture in teenage groups) - can create a nonfactual environment for them, resulting in adverse impacts on forming right perception on the LGBT group. Also, their perception about the group may only stay in social media without bringing substantial effects for the LGBTQ in the real world.

3.2.2. A Platform for voice or commercialization

It has been proven that positive role models can positively impact the LGBT population and expand their possibilities to break the stereotype [7]. However, the

heterosexual views may also be essential to be involved as it's one of the factors influencing the overall image of LGBT in China, and the participants mentioned their interest in the LGBT social influencers: "There is one LGBT blogger on Weibo which I like a lot, she is a writer of fan-fiction of a BL couple, but she is also lesbian herself. She often posts her own opinion about the LGBT situation in China, and she would also share a lot of daily life pictures, as well as write her daily life story as a lesbian. and the blogger, I would think more deeply about the gender or sexuality issues." (Casey, 16, Guangdong, non-LGBT) "I have followed LGBT social media influencers who often post funny content about their own life because I consider this information very interesting and helps me release stress; however, sometimes I think they may go too far on trying to make their audience laugh."(Sissi)

As has been illustrated by Casey and Sissi, they would pay attention to LGBT influencers if their content is interesting or educational. They tend to accept the ideas sent by the LGBT role models in the social media, by doing this, the audiences and the LGBT role models are engaged in pro-social behaviors which are' behaviors desirable and beneficial to other individuals and society at large as the LGBT role models can directly communicate their homosexual views with a mass audience, expanding their influence to the heterosexual using the media as a platform [21]. Social media can help them reach more target audiences, open up the possible actions provided by the platform [10], and is beneficial for achieving higher cognition and spread of knowledge about LGBT among the youth. As Amy explains, "I think another point is that people may give affection for the role model; for example, they may recognize good qualities in that character in which they hope they can be. Also, a lot of LGBT bloggers, and the LGBT characters depicted by the author, have the courage a lot of people in real life don't have; it seems like they can break the limits set by the secular society and don't care about others' stereotypes or discrimination, and this may inspire people." (Amy)

People may form 'wishful identification with the LGBT media character, which means they identify the character as an idealized self and form empathetic ties with the character [19]. This would allow them to merge of the self with a media character, so they would be better able to see from the LGBT perspective, form parasocial interaction, experience the same emotion and behavior with them [13].

The world interacts with us the way we interact with it [12]. When social media provides as an 'object' for the users to interact with it, the LGBT population can also use social media as a place for voice and awareness. The individual can adapt to the culture presented by the media gradually [22], which means as long as there are a higher amount of positive LGBT role models on social

media, the general public may change its social image for the minority group, turning its attitudes into accepting the culture.

However, the participants pointed out that with the widespread of LGBT subculture and the amplification of the fan base, it becomes a shortcut to gain attention, followers, and benefits by pretending to become LGBT: "I think it has become a new trend for every new TV series, shows, as well as idol groups to have BL couple. Usually, they are not real LGBT but are 'made' to seem like the LGBT to attract the large female 'fujoshi,' By doing this, the companies and the artists themselves can gain more benefits as the 'fujoshi' would like to watch the show or even become fans of the two persons. There's even one kind of accounts called 'marketing accounts' which are paid to promote these contents, and because they have a wider audience base, the information can be diffused more easily." (Casey)

In recent years, Chinese TV shows and series would create a romantic atmosphere to lead the audience to make associations with two male/female characters as LGBT [9]. As a result, the Danmei culture becomes highly commercialized, emphasizing people's impression that LGBT culture is only a kind of entertainment and should not be treated seriously. This is also the commercial exploitation of the LGBT population in real life; it will result in rumors and misconceptions for the public when it is advertised and disseminated irresponsibly. The interviewees Carrie and Sissi indicates their concern over the phenomenon: "I often feel some LGBT bloggers are just trying to become an internet celebrity and gain more influence by showing their identity of LGBT. I'm not sure if they are LGBT, but for one homosexual couple I have seen, they were filming vlogs, but they may do strange things in front of the camera that is very unnatural. I think with this kind of trend on social media; the culture has lost its initial attraction for me." (Carrie) "I think a lot of people may associate the word 'interesting,' 'unique,' 'cool' with LGBT as a lot of social media influencers are like that, so many people may try to pretend they are LGBT so that they belong to these categories, they can also become interesting and special people." (Sissi)

Therefore, the public, even the ones who engage in this culture, may be skeptical about the authenticity of the LGBT identity of the social media influencer when being exposed to the mass data that has been presented commercially. Instead of breaking stereotypes for LGBT, the public may form new stereotypes as the tags of funny, stylish are added into the impressions for LGBT.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper mainly discusses the impact of LGBT culture on contemporary culture from two perspectives through qualitative research methods and interviews with LGBT groups and heterosexual groups. This paper believes that LGBT may face unique challenges with the development of LGBT culture. In addition, commercialization may change the original function of social media as a more sound platform, because social media has the potential of affordable in both aspects. However, in terms of the overall trend, according to the evaluation of respondents, at least social media has improved people's awareness of this issue, all respondents believe that the LGBT group has received more attention from the popularity of BL / GL novels, so that more people are willing to understand this group. This paper will be beneficial to deepen the LGBT group research and provide cases for contemporary cultural research.

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