The Medium is the Message: Exploring the Introduction of Bullet Comment Culture to China and Its Impact on the Identity Expression of Generation Z Individuals

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ABSTRACT

Ever since the trend of watching Japanese animation became popular in China, the Japanese online culture phenomenon has changed Chinese social media participation for Generation Z (the generation of people born in the late 1990s and early 2000s) in both contents and forms. This essay mainly focuses on Bullet comments culture, Bullet Comments are commentary subtitles that pop up when watching videos. In order to explore how a niche interaction function originated in Japan and was designed for anime fans, evolved into a phenomenal communication tool adopted by many mainstream Chinese video platforms, this essay tries to answer why bullet comments only survive and thrive in Japan and China by using a medium study perspective. Thus, Erving Goffman's Frontstage-Backstage Identities theory and Stuart Hall's Encoding/decoding theory will be used. By interacting with online communities on Bilibili, which is a cultural community and video platform with a high concentration of young generations in China. This paper adopts digital ethnographic methodologies to investigate the Bilibili users' routines when they send bullet comments. Through the case study and interview with the Bilibili users, this essay tries to explore the connection between Generation Z's identity expressions and their bullet comments' posting behaviors.

The conclusion of this essay indicates that entropy of textual information, national character and historical custom have all played a critical part in bullet comment culture's flourishing development in both China and Japan. The result of the research and interview have also shown that bullet comments provide a haven for Generation Z to explore ways of self-expression. As well as for them to confirm they are true identities and to seek a sense of recognition and belonging.

Keywords: Bullet comments, Generation Z, Bilibili, Identity expression

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Japanese online culture has found itself playing an important role in Chinese Internet user's daily life. Starting with the animation "Ultraman" which first came into mainland China in 2004, Japanese animations have experienced a transition from television-based content to Internet-driven platforms. As Japanese entertainment works gain popularity in China, the demand for online animation sites that conform to the contemporary Internet-based mainstay has also emerged. Bullet comments (commentary subtitles that pop up when watching videos), originally created by Niconico (Niconico is an online movie sharing site based in Japan), has also been introduced by AcFun (AcFun is also a Chinese video website, and is the birthplace of bullet comments culture in mainland China) to China in 2008. After years of development, bullet comments as the vessel of messages have gradually turned into a carrier where people interact with others, state their opinions, and discuss their thoughts about videos or films.

According to the statics released by Bilibili (Bilibili is a cultural community and video platform with a high concentration of young generations in China), the total number of bullet comments that have been sent in the year 2020 reached a staggering number of 2.2 billion pieces. [1] Bullet comments have become an integral part of Generation Z's lives, and have become a social habit, a cultural trend, and a collective memory. Thus, this essay seeks to reveal how bullet comments culture has been localized and integrated into Generation Z's online

identity expressions. Another purpose that I hope to achieve though this essay is to explore the motivation behind Generation Z's participation in bullet comments interaction.

The means for the author to conduct research toward revealing the influence of bullet comments-posting in affecting Generation Z's identity expression was through carrying out interviews. Each of the interviewees answered a series of questions regarding their bullet comment-posting behavior. For example, "In what way do you consider bullet comments interaction differs from other social media participation?", Or "Do you agree that the digital avatar image you represent in bullet comments matches your real-life personal character?". The meaning in researching this topic is through understanding how bullet comments culture, as a foreign input element, integrate and coexist in Chinese Generation Z's online participation. As well as, how bullet comments reversely affect these tech-savvy individuals' identity expression. Under today's Internet-oriented social intercourse atmosphere, choosing a popular form of self-expression that is strongly associated with Generation Z's daily life, could be of great significance in studying contemporary individuals' identity expression behavior and mentality.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Erving Goffman presented the dramaturgical perspective in the 1959 book "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life". He defines social life as a "performance" carried out by "teams" of participants in three places: "front stage," "backstage," and "off stage." "The terms "front stage" and "backstage" refer to different behaviors that people engage in every day. Developed by the late sociologist Erving Goffman." [2] According to Goffman (1959), people engage in "front stage" behavior when they know that others are watching. When people engage in back-stage behavior, they are free of the expectations and norms that dictate front- stage behaviour. "People portray themselves in the minds of others primarily through "front stage" performances. Thus, "front stage" is a selective presentation of behavior, an "idealized performance". [3] "Because the video site belongs to the virtual network environment, and the participants of the bullet comments are all in the state of anonymity. According to Goffman's theory, Bullet comments posting is more inclined to the "backstage" state. Through investigating if Generation Z's bullet comments agree with their real-world persona has a certain reference value in researching identity expressions.

Another theory that may explain why bullet comments can be interpreted in multiple ways from the same video content is Stuart Hall's Encoding/decoding theory. The reason why I choose to refer to this theory is that it owns a prestigious position for media-related research. "Hall's model has been the most influential used in media studies within the last few decades." [4]

"The message in its natural form must be encoded by the source and decoded by the receiver so that a symbolic exchange is produced." [5] In 1973, he raised this theory in his article "Coding and decoding in TV Discourse". "Hall argues that a television program or any equivalent media text is a meaningful discourse encoded by producers according to the meaning structure it supports and decoded by audiences with different meaning structures and knowledge frames." [6] Among the most appealing factors for bullet comments to attract Generation Z are its variety and creativity. During the process of viewers acquiring content from videos themselves, they are also surrounded by bullet comments sent by others. The clash of different ideas and interesting commentary in response to the content of the video itself make the bullet comments rather amusing. This is precisely due to the different backgrounds of "decoders". Likewise, the bullet comments they sent in response are also in a sense, "encrypted", for other viewers to keep decoding in their recognition. Hence, form interaction.

3. REASONS FOR THE POPULARITY OF BULLET COMMENT CULTURE IN CHINA

3.1 The Same Language System

The same language system in China and Japan provides good innate conditions for bullet comment culture to take root in China.

Back in 2014, the New York Times published an article that revealed this rising upsurge in Japan. As of today, this mysterious force has created a huge wave of bullet comments culture in China. While in countries like Europe and America, bullet comments remain stagnant. This does not limit to western countries, some Asian country like Korea, Thai, or Vietnam does not have a mature bullet comments culture. The reason behind this phenomenon is not that people in those countries do not appreciate bullet comments. On the contrary, it is their languages that stand as a barrier for them to create bullet comments websites.

One of the reasons that bullet comments were spread virally among Chinese Generation Z users is that both China and Japan share a similar language system. Chinese（Japanese Hiragana also contains Chinese characters）is a hieroglyphic script where the shape of the character is subordinate to the meaning it expresses, while English, French, German, Russian and Spanish are phonetic scripts where the shape of the character is subordinate to the sound of the character. One of the key differences between two language systems is their Information Entropy value. Information Entropy refers to the degree of uncertainty of the receiver before receiving

the linguistic symbol. The higher the information entropy, the more information the language loads.

Take the most heat bullet comment word in Bilibili of the year 2020 for example, the content translates into English means that "My youth is making a comeback". It often appears in some classic animation works, where people send this phrase repeatedly to express their excitement. A series of this particular phrease combined and repeted for several times is not complicated for someone who speaks Chinese to understand. However, if we put this expression in English, "My youth is making a comeback My youth is making a comeback My youth is making a comeback" is simply an unreadable form for native English speakers. Under the bullet comments system's rule that "the longer the length of a comment is, the faster the speed of display". This sentence's complexity combined with high-speed appearance under this circumstance is simply unreadable for others, not to mention to be understood or responded to.

This example demonstrates that same symbolic length, the amount of information loaded in Chinese is significantly higher than that of other languages. This makes it possible to have concise and informative bullet comments in a Chinese-based context. According to the calculation of Chinese scholar Feng Zhiwei, "The Information Entropy contained in a letter for each Indo-European language varies little, with a minimum of 3.98 bits and a maximum of 4.35 bits, while the entropy contained in a Chinese character for written Chinese is 9.65 bits." [7] Therefore, if the contents of bullet comments are replaced with language that is composed with a phonetic script, it will become nearly unreadable for viewers and difficult to comprehend.

That also explains why in Europe and the United States, the only platform that currently has anything close to a bullet comments format is Twitch, a real-time streaming video platform for games. On the right side of its video interface, there is a side window that scrolls comments in real-time. It offers users the possibility to exchange comments online. However, it is not presented in the form of bullet comments in the video.

3.2 Serves as an Ideal Way for Chinese and Japanese Internet Users

The most prominent factor that contributes to the booming bullet comments culture is that it serves as an ideal way for Chinese and Japanese Internet users to seek a sense of recognition online.

As mentioned before, China is also under a strong influence from Japanese ACG (ACG stands for Animation, Comics and Games) culture. Hence, at the starting point of bullet comments' existence, most of the bullet comments-senders are also anime fans. They share same the same enthusiasm for ACG works, which is the fundamental requirement for bullet comments culture's

growth. "The audience has a certain consensus in order to acquire enough recognition and work together to promote the development of community culture." [8]

In the Internet era, people tend to construct their identities in a mimetic environment. Bullet comments provide a virtual place for viewers to co-exist, in which audiences speak, interact, and confirm their compatibility with this collective through others' speech, satisfying their need to construct their own identities.

This opinion also agrees with Erving Goffman's Front Stage and Back Stage theory. "For the relatively introverted East Asians, lurking behind a screen to voice their opinions undoubtedly brings a higher level of social comfort and a stronger sense of security." [9] The unique anonymity environment provides by bullet comments allows people to switch from their daily identity to become a part of a mutually agreeable community. This satisfies the psychological needs of this segment of viewers and gives them a brand-new viewing experience.

Moreover, in my interview with part of Bilibili users. Over 60% of the interviewees stated that they are unlikely to replicate what they post in bullet comments to their other real-world social media platforms. When asked why, the most mainstream idea was that in most of the social platforms as well as in real life, people exist as real individuals instead of avatars. Therefore, it is not appropriate to show all sides of us and one may be afraid to express his real opinions for fear of what others may think of him or her.

One of my interviewees who is in favor of this way of saying, Josephine Lin said that "On bilibili, there is no need to worry about what impact showing the truest side of myself has, because no one knows me. Being in an inclusive and open environment, I'm not afraid to be judged by people who think differently."

There are also voices toward a desire to pursue self-changes. A small portion of my interviewees indicates that they would like their online characters or avatars to be different from their true selves. Cherie Chen, another interviewee described herself as "timid and introverted", she is not very willing to communicate with others in real life. However, the frequency of her participates in bullet comments interactions is more than I previously imagined. "I tried to be more interactive in the bullet comments chat. In hope of exercising my guts to communicate with others and to be comfortable real-life communications as well." She answered.

From this, it is clear that bullet comments are not just a source for Generation Z to find individuals who share common spots for psychological support. The anonymous and friendly environment provided by bullet comments communities is in line with Generation Z's desire to find a suitable place for them to express themselves. As well as stands as a projection of their self-

image in an ideal state, for them to explore all kinds of possibilities and decide who they want to be.

3.3 A Continuation of the "Commenting" Behavior

The formation of bullet comments is in fact a continuation of the "commenting" behavior that has existed in China and Japan since ancient times.

Commenting has always been a part of the cultural traditions of China and Japan. In ancient China, book reviews were also popular and gave rise to several literary greats. Jin Shengsai, the genius who criticized "Water Margin", and Li Yanzhai, the great critic of "Dream of the Red Chamber" has both inspired generations of young people with their sharp reviews.

Ancient Japan was also heavily influenced by Chinese culture. Like the Chinese literati, the Japanese literati were also adept at commentary and criticism. After Shikibu's "The Tale of Genji" came out, there were many books of commentary and criticism, each book has been famous for a while. In the contemporary context of anime culture, this third-party perspective, latent in the cultural roots, has even developed into "Official Trolling" with the interaction of bullet comments culture. Official trolling refers to the official or crew trolling of a drama's characters' original lines as well as their behavior in the form of bullet comments.

In the course of writing this essay, the author also interviewed a few bullet comments-enthusiasts about their thought regarding the current bullet comments culture. One of my interviewees, Anky Fu's answer caught the attention. According to him, the author quotes "The bullet comments themselves have already become part of the video content, and sometimes it's even more interesting to watch the bullet comments posted by others than the video itself."

This interesting phenomenon presented by him brought me back to thinking about Stuart Hall's Encoding/decoding theory. Because of the commentary mentality rooted in the hearts of people in both East Asian countries, people tend to see the same video content and interpret it in different ways depending on their cultural background, economic status, and personal experiences. They then reprocess the information they have "decoded" and understood and send it to the video interface in the form of bullet comments, thus participating in the interaction with other video viewers. In other words, the whole process of watching videos and sending bullet comments is a virtuous cycle of both "Encoding" and "Decoding".

4. CONCLUSION

The reason why bullet comments culture is only popular in China and Japan, on one hand, it is constrained by objective factors, the entropy of textual information. On the other hand, it is also influenced by subjective factors such as national character or historical custom. The flourishing of bullet comment culture in these two countries is just a natural choice to pursue empathy using the form of words under the influence of these above-mentioned factors.

"Seeking empathy in virtual space is a common human spiritual need in the information age." [10] The birth of bullet comment culture can be considered, in a sense, as the construction of Generation Z's identity expression in virtual space. During the course of interacting with other bullet comment participants, it is also a process where Generation Z explore ways of self-expression, to confirm they are true identities and seek a sense of recognition and belonging.

Just like its predecessor web forums provide a similar text exchange function. Web forums that were sought after by a previous generation of Internet users a decade ago, also gradually going into decline. It is my belief that there will come a day when bullet comments will also be replaced by more innovative forms as the trend of social media develops. The bullet comment culture that is extremely popular now will eventually become part of the historical memory.

No matter what scenario the future develops into, the only constant is the eternal pursuit of human's emotional needs. Bullet comment culture will also become a mark for Generation Z people, everlasting as a symbolic element of the era.

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