



From Sub Cultural Capital to Algorithmic Visibility: Media Evolution and Gender Reconstruction of Cult TV Fan Culture

Yulin He

Chengdu College of University of Electronic Science and Technology of China,
Chengdu, China

19938278951@163.com

Abstract. This paper discusses how Cult TV fan culture continues and transforms its core characteristics in the age of digital media, focusing on the reconstruction of sub cultural capital, participatory practice and gender structure. Through the analysis of Doctor Who, Twin Peaks, Sherlock and other dramas, the article points out that the core of Cult culture is the demarcation and identity construction between cult culture and mainstream culture. In the new media environment, fans shift from passive receivers to active creators, and emotional labor and re-creation become important paths. However, the intervention of business logic and platform algorithm also makes the original subculture tension face the risk of mainstreaming and "de-marginalization". At the same time, although the gender dimension presents a more open space for expression, the platform mechanism still continues the patriarchal structure in the potential, forming a new discipline for the expression of women and marginalized groups.

Keywords: Cult TV, fandom culture, participatory culture

1 Introduction

The reason why Cult TV series are called "Cult" is not only because of the strangeness of their content, but also because of the highly participation and identity strategy displayed by their fans. Gwenlian-jones and Pearson point out that the essence of Cult texts does not lie in narrative types ^[1], but in the cultural boundaries between "inside" and "outside" through aesthetic taste and knowledge barriers. This "performative boundary" allows fans to construct identities in opposition to mainstream culture, demonstrating what is known as "sub cultural capital" ^[2]. In this structure, fans are no longer passive consumers, but symbolic resisters. They often reject the public interest and express their doubts to the mainstream consumption logic through the deep interpretation and derivative creation of the text. But as Hills points out ^[3], fan culture, despite its anti-business posture, is still deeply embedded in the capitalist system. Their loyalty and knowledge input also constitute a special embodiment of cultural capital in the market logic.

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2 Fan Ethnographic and Consumption Culture

The "moral dualism" model proposed by Abercrombie and Longhurst further illustrates the value divide between fans and ordinary consumers: the former is considered to pursue the depth and continuity of text ^[4], while the latter is regarded as shallow and utilitarian consumers. This distinction builds a sense of self-superiority, but it also conceals the intricate interplay between fans and the mainstream industry ^[5].

The Doctor Who experienced 'indefinite halt' in 1989, for their fanatical fans, however, the show is not dead, but in the form of books, comic books and audio drama. Most of these forms are created by fanatical and professional fans, whose target groups are small and fixed. It can be said that the Doctor Who after the TV series completely existed in the form of a cult text, which changed from children's program to TV idol and became a niche interest of a part of the audience.

In 2005, the BBC introduced a new Doctor Who (2005-Present), produced by Russell T. Davies, a longtime fan and fan writer of previous TV text, the series was not marketed for niche audiences, so it craved a new audience called Whovian. Davies changes the theme and logo, the Doctor is a new Doctor, and the beginning of the first episode is unlike any that has aired since 1963. In the first episode of the Series 1. Through the eyes of Rose Tyler, an ordinary shop-girl in London, the audience gradually meets the protagonist, aiming to attract more new audiences with a new model. However, although Davies and most of his production team members are fans of Doctor, but they attacked a strong cult audience, insisting that the real fandom participatory culture is not about creative interpretation and reinterpreted, but about love, the real fans are concerned about the emotional resonance with the series, not just the continuity of the series.

Therefore, those fans who want their opinions to be catered to and referred to, and who hope to have a certain influence on the cult text by virtue of their unique audience status, cannot be called true fans. Thus, in order to maintain the integrity and consistency of the cult text, it is necessary to keep elite fans powerless. Fandom is not just a mode of participation, but a framework of taste, an identity. With the gradual acceptance of Cult text into the mainstream, its original marginality inevitably encounters "dilution". When TV dramas gain a larger market, they inevitably move closer to the mainstream, and introduce more characters, complex narratives and cross-media communication strategies to maintain audience adhesion ^[6]. The original niche text thus becomes a kind of "hybrid": retaining some subcultural characteristics while becoming commercialized in content and communication. What this shift has triggered is an ongoing battle between fans and content producers over "text ownership."

In the case of Twin Peaks, although the series gained Cult status due to director David Lynch's cinematic aesthetic, its commercial success also exposed the contradiction between the openness of the text and the logic of the industry. After the wide spread of Cult TV series, its subcultural identity has not been weakened, but has become a symbol of high cultural consumption because it is endowed with "meaning excess". This process also foreshadowing the "visibility" logic of later social media platforms, which maintains fan loyalty through over-symbolization while satisfying algorithmically driven content distribution mechanisms ^[7].

3 Participatory Culture and Fan Empowerment

The development of digital technology has blurred the boundaries between viewers and content creators, allowing fans to get deeply involved in the reproduction process of text through bullet screens, fan creation, and community organization. Jenkins and Ito point out that this phenomenon reflects the "democratization" of media culture and enables fans to have some symbolic power^[8], which then influences and even dominates the direction of text.

But this "empowerment" is not really disengagement from the power structure. With platform logic and capital mobilization, fan culture is often incorporated into the market mechanism and becomes part of the emotional labor and data economy^[9]. The history of Doctor Who illustrates the complexity of this fan-industry interaction.

One of Britain's most iconic Cult shows, Doctor Who has enjoyed a steady and loyal fan base since it first aired in 1963. The series combines the qualities of a Cult text -- time travel, non-linear storytelling, and fantasy elements such as character reincarnation -- with a growing appeal to the mass market. In the 1970s, it even had more than 10 million viewers and entered the mainstream cultural horizon. However, with the repetition and quality of the series declining, ratings declined, and it was forced to close in 1989.

But for many die-hard fans, the end doesn't mean the end. Instead, the series continued to live on through novels, comics, and radio plays. At this stage, the text production relies heavily on the participation of "professional fans", and the target audience is also more niche and vertical, reflecting the typical subculture logic.

When the BBC revived Doctor Who in 2005, it chose longtime fan Russell T. Davies as its creator in an attempt to bring Cult text back into the mainstream. While retaining the core setting, the series significantly revamped the narrative structure and visual style, and lowered the threshold of understanding for new viewers through the everyday perspective of the character Rose Tyler. This "demystification" strategy was extremely successful at the viewing level, with the average audience of the first season of the new version exceeding 10 million, and the fan community quickly became active.

However, this pattern of overlapping fan-producer identities also introduces new tensions. Davies, though a member of the fan community, maintains control over the "textual interpretation" of the series. As Hills puts it, true fandom is not about "participating in the creation"^[3], but about "emotional identification". This argument is reflected in the redesign of Doctor Who - although the production team uses fan logic to attract audiences, it does not really give fans the right to control, but further delineates the standards and boundaries of "real fans".

This redefinition of "fandom" also reveals the paradox behind participation culture: On the one hand, fans have discourse space; On the other hand, its expression is limited to the framework allowed by the platform and the producer. The closer the fan is to the center of the text, the easier it is to discover the boundaries of his own power. Under this structure, "mainstream Cult culture" both caters to fans and disciplines them.

Meanwhile, there are also differences in the perception of participation rights among fan groups from different cultural backgrounds. In non-Western contexts, the collective behaviors of fans are often not only cultural expressions, but also closely related to

social relations, identity recognition and class mobility. For instance, China's "fan circle culture" is a kind of group activity with fan support, data ranking and traffic control as its core mechanisms. This highly organized behavior is significantly different from the traditional free expression mode. In this type of culture, fans are not only consumers and disseminators of content, but even have a certain degree of "agent" identity, actively getting involved in the management of the artist's image and the allocation of industry resources. This phenomenon reflects a more complex power structure between fans and the platform: on the one hand, fans obtain symbolic power through collective actions; On the other hand, their participation behaviors are also more likely to be manipulated and guided by the platform algorithms, forming a "self-managed" emotional labor model.

Furthermore, in the process of cross-cultural communication, platforms often tend to "neutralize" content aesthetics and emotional expressions in pursuit of global traffic. Although this strategy has expanded the audience group, it has also compressed the diverse expression space of fans, marginalizing some non-mainstream cultural practices. For instance, on international platforms such as Netflix, the visibility of fans' works is not only restricted by the content language and cultural context, but also influenced by the platform's recommendation mechanism. This has led to many local fan cultures being forced to "translate" themselves to conform to the expression logic dominated by the West, thereby triggering the dual predicament of "cultural adaptation" and "cultural repression".

4 Gender Relationship Between Fan Culture and Cult texts

Cult culture, while resisting the mainstream, does not naturally embrace gender diversity. Instead, there is often another kind of structural exclusion within it, particularly in the marginalization of female fans. Gwenllian-jones and Pearson have noted that letters of complaint from female viewers of the X-Files were derided as "emotional" and "unprofessional" by the male-dominated fan culture ^[1], reflecting the "unorthodox" presence of women in Cult circles. This mechanism stems from stereotypical perceptions of mainstream beauty and femininity: mainstream = feminine = shallow, Cult = masculine = deep, thereby excluding female fans from cultural "orthodoxy."

One response from female fans has been the rise of "Slash culture." By rewriting heterosexual textual relations and constructing same-sex emotional clues, female fans re-create on the basis of the original text, breaking the limits of its gender and emotional structure. This "textual reconstruction" is not only an emotional projection, but also a challenge to the dominant discourse ^[10]. For example, in *Sherlock*, some female fans interpret the friendship between Sherlock and Watson as a romantic relationship and create a large number of fan works around this setting. In the third season, the series even responded to sexual innuendo and showed kindness to fans with vague expressions, which also reflected the awareness and utilization of the producers' influence on female fans.

However, even if female fans are given more space to express themselves, that expression is not entirely free. Sobande et al. ^[11] point out that seemingly open social platforms are in fact algorithmic mechanisms that re-encode visibility - favoring male creators, mainstream aesthetics, and commercialized content, while the voices of female, queer, and minority fans are often marginalized. This "inequality of visibility" makes female fans, even if they "own" the platform in expression, still limited by the gender power logic behind the algorithm at the structural level.

Therefore, the participation of women in Cult culture reflects a "double contradiction" : they are the challengers on the fringe, and they are disciplined in the new platform structure; It not only obtains the expression channel, but also faces the "invisible boundary" constructed by the algorithm. This situation shows that the evolution of fan culture in the gender dimension is not linear progress, but is always limited by the negotiation mechanism of the platform and the market.

5 Conclusion

Cult drama fan culture, starting from the attitude of subculture counter mainstream, has experienced the evolution from linear media to digital platform. In this process, the identity of fans has changed from passive viewers to active participants, and community collaboration, text reproduction, and emotional labor constitute a new cultural practice. On the surface, this change is empowering and democratizing, allowing fans to seemingly "take over" some of the production rights. But a closer look reveals that this power shift is not really a structural change. First, platform logic integrates fan behavior into a predictable and controllable business system through data monitoring and algorithmic push. Emotional connection and participation become the basis of fans' identity, and are also absorbed as "quantifiable flow value" by capital logic. Fans are gradually transformed from "anti-consumers" to "professional users" whose creativity is wrapped up in platform rules and content moderation.

Secondly, although the gender structure has gained more space for expression in form, it is still subject to the male-dominated logic of the platform and the aesthetic expectations of the market. The expression of women, queer, and marginalized groups is often erased or weakened due to "incompatibility with algorithmic efficiency," indicating that digital platforms have not broken the inequality of cultural power, but have completed new disciplinary mechanisms through technological intermediaries.

Therefore, from "Doctor Who" and "Twin Peaks" to today's social media re-creation culture, we are not seeing the "victory" of Cult culture, but its transformation under algorithmic capitalism. It is not only the continuation of cultural rebellion, but also the product of systematic absorption. The future direction of fan culture may still revolve around the contradiction between "freedom of expression" and "structural control".

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