

Anti-ACGN: A Study on the Network Relationship of the Real-life Enjoyer Based on the Birmingham School Subculture Theory

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Abstract:

Real-life enjoyers have gradually emerged with the development and commercialization of the ACGN culture. Because of its anti-ACGN stance, this group has had run-ins with the ACGN community. Based on the Birmingham School subculture theory, this study interviewed 14 ACGN culture enthusiasts, 7 followers of ACGN cultural works creators, and 6 real-life enjoyers. It systematically examined the network relationships between Real-life enjoyers and the ACGN community online. Anti-ACGN Since its inception, real-life enjoyers have been regarded as opposed to and incompatible with the ACGN community. In essence, real-life enjoyers exhibit anti-ACGN characteristics, as evidenced by the opposing values of the two groups. As a subculture, ACGN culture seeks to restore the social cohesion lost in its parent culture. Its resistance to Real-life enjoyers stems from ongoing social structural contradictions, and its values have influenced Real-life enjoyers' lives and mass culture to some extent.

Keywords:

Anti-ACGN, Real-Life Enjoyer, Birmingham School, Subculture Theory

1. Introduction

With the development and commercialization of the ACGN culture, a group known as Real-life enjoyers has gradually emerged. This group, characterized by an anti-ACGN stance, has encountered conflicts with the ACGN group. Within the confrontations between the ACGN group and real-life enjoyers (or named normies), representative of mainstream culture, an observed phenomenon of integration is also observed. The ACGN group's values have influenced Real-life enjoyers' lives and mass culture to some extent. Based on the Birmingham School subculture theory, this study explores the network interaction between the Real-life enjoyers and the ACGN group.

2. Study Origin

ACGN is the collective title of animation, Comic, Game, and Novel corresponding to reality. The content of ACGN covers a wide range, from basic animation, comics, games, novels as the root, a series of derivative fan works, virtual idols, etc., belonging to the category of ACGN. The ACGN culture is a youth subculture form that gradually emerges by expanding the scope of the ACGN works and its derivative content, such as dubbing, fandom, virtual idols, and other cultural expression forms. It also includes a series of specific values and thinking patterns gradually produced by the ACGN group, a complex systematic concept. As a branch of youth subculture, the ACGN culture is still minority and non-mainstream compared with the mass culture, and its inherent antagonism cannot be ignored.

Bilibili, as the most extensive ACGN cultural integration base in China, mainly faces the ACGN group. As seen from the 2022 financial report released by Bilibili, Bilibili has become the most preferred application for young users aged 24 and below. The total number of users exceeds 200 million, and more than 2.4 million uploaders (video producers) are active on the platform monthly. At present, animation and games are the most significant sections of the Bilibili, and other sections, such as music, dance, etc., are also permeated with ACGN elements, and the ACGN culture has become the core of the Bilibili.

With the continuous development of the Internet, the Bilibili continues to expand, and the types of groups accommodated are also increasing. Real-life enjoyers also gradually appeared in Bilibili. In a broad sense, being a real-life enjoyer means being fulfilled in the real world, having many friends, and having their own distinct goals and things they need to do in the real world. In the narrow sense, Real-life enjoyers refer to those who do not belong to the ACGN group and do not care about or even dislike the ACGN culture but follow the trend and talk about it in the process of irresistible commercialization and development of ACGN culture. At the same time, the source of irony and disgust in the meaning of Real-life enjoyers also includes the jealousy and opposing attitude of the ACGN group after reviewing their low social and homebody life.

Real-life enjoyer is the exclusive and oppositional name of the ACGN culture, which starts from maintaining the purity and cohesion of its circle and contains certain negative emotions and attitudes. In essence, it shows the resistance and opposition of the ACGN culture to the commercialization and entertainment characteristics of mass culture in the context of industrialization.

3. Theoretical Framework

(1) Mass culture

Mass culture is born in the background of mass society. With the development of industrialization and urbanization, commercialization development is unstoppable. In the development of industrial society, the individuality and independence of people are gradually eliminated, thus forming a “mass”, and the spirit and consciousness are gradually materialized in this process [1]. The materialization of spirit and consciousness inevitably leads to the materialization of culture [2], and cultural production gradually evolves into the production of commodities to meet the needs of the public, thus giving rise to the so-called mass culture.

The concept of mass culture is very complex. It comes into being and rises along with industrialization and urbanization. It is a culture made by the masses and intentionally caters to the masses. Hence, it no longer distinguishes between elegance and popular culture, and has the characteristics of daily, entertainment, commercial and civilian.

(2) Three accepting positions of the Birmingham School: submission, negotiation and confrontation

The Birmingham School consists of scholars engaged in relevant cultural studies around the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) of the University of Birmingham, and subculture is the focus of its early research. Among them, subculture's resistance to mainstream culture and its hegemony is one of the core issues of its research. They put forward three acceptance positions: submission, negotiation and confrontation.

The young people in the subculture have a specific identity for a certain point, thus producing the so-called "circle" and forming the style in the "circle"; The "confrontation" of subculture refers to the young people's resistance to mass culture in a unique, alternative and non-mainstream style because of the need to express and solve social contradictions. Mass culture cannot ignore such confrontational phenomena so that it will incorporate and dominate subcultures. Therefore, "submission" and "negotiation" refer to the integration of different forms such as commercialization and ideological incorporation in mass culture's assimilation and domination of subcultures. Thus, the mass culture has a certain degree of compromise, submission, integration, and the phenomenon of consultation and mutual transformation with the mass culture [3].

4. Research Method

The ethnographic method is one of the primary methods in cultural anthropology, including participatory observation and in-depth interview methods. The study used maximum variation sampling to assess saturation [4]. In the study, Bilibili was selected as the field site for investigation. The study has conducted in-depth interviews with 14 active enthusiasts of ACGN culture on Bilibili, 7 followers of creators of ACGN cultural works, and 6 people from the Real-life enjoyers group. The study has systematically analyzed the network relationships between Real-life enjoyers and the ACGN community online based on comments, bullet screen interactions, and data collected by surveys. Information of interviewees is as follows:

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of interviewees (ACGN culture lovers).

ACGN culture lovers			
Respondents	Age	Gender	Duration
A1	26	Woman	16 years old
A2	20	Man	11 years
A3	22	Man	17 years
A4	20	Man	10 years
A5	15	Woman	5 years
A6	20	Man	7 years
A7	21	Man	11 years
A8	21	Woman	11 years
A9	34	Man	15 years
A10	34	Man	14 years
A11	26	Woman	8 years

A12	21	Woman	9 years
A13	20	Woman	10 years
A14	19	Woman	13 years

Table 2. Demographic characteristics of interviewees (followers of producers related to ACGN culture).

Followers of producers related to ACG culture			
Respondents	Age	Gender	Duration
B1	22	Man	8 years
B2	20	Man	8 years
B3	20	Man	6 years
B4	20	Woman	6 years
B5	32	Man	10 years
B6	21	Woman	9 years
B7	20	Woman	7 years

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of interviewees (Real-life enjoyers).

Real-life enjoyer			
Respondents	Age	Gender	Age at the time of learning about ACGN culture
C1	20	Woman	15 years old
C2	20	Woman	13 years old
C3	22	Woman	15 years old
C4	40	Woman	24 years old
C5	35	Man	20 years old
C6	21	Man	15 years old

5. The Resistance of ACGN Culture to Mass Culture

(1) The “dimensional wall” and the opposition of cultural values between the ACGN group and the Real-life enjoyer’s group

“Dimensional wall” means that the ACGN group believes there is a thick barrier between the ACGN world and the reality, which not only refers to the physical space dimensions, but also the differences in identity and group values [5]. Due to the identity constructed by the ACGN culture, the internal cohesion of the ACGN group is solid, and its exclusivity is also extreme. Bilibili's VIP system is a very representative example.

Much of the content of Bilibili requires users to become VIPs to watch. Unlike other video sites to “recharge” as the primary form of becoming a VIP, Bilibili’s VIP qualification needs to pass the form examination of ACGN knowledge to obtain. The questions in the examination are highly targeted and challenging, and users often fail to pass the exam. In recent years, with the expansion of user groups, the requirements have been relaxed, the difficulty has been reduced, and the number of VIPs has increased significantly.

From the VIP assessment system of Bilibili, it can be seen that in order to ensure the consistency, identity, and purity of the internal users of the site, the ACGN group in Bilibili has a strong exclusivity, trying to exclude the Real-life enjoyers who do not understand the ACGN culture knowledge from the circle. It proves that the ACGN group has a strong sense of identity, produces a style that belongs to the ACGN culture, constructs a “circle” that belongs to the ACGN culture, and draws a line with the Real-life enjoyers in a way of exclusion.

Regarding value, the ACGN group also has a relatively heavy barrier with Real-life enjoyers. Out of dissatisfaction and confusion with reality, the ACGN group chooses the way of low social interaction, immersion and animation games to escape from the world of reality. "You can say that I am escaping from reality, but I think it is not in the traditional sense, and games are also part of my life." Interviewee A8 said. The ACGN world is a "refuge" for the ACGN group from the pressures of the natural world, and this seemingly negative mode of escape is also a unique way for them to resist reality: "Games can help me reduce stress, and games can allow me to do things that are impossible in real life." Interviewee A12 said.

However, the Real-life enjoyers are committed to cultivating in real life, which is very upward and never evades in the traditional sense, and has a sharp contrast with the ACGN group, and even has an opposite value. For example, interviewee C1 thinks: "Not going out to work, watching anime and playing games at home is a bit self-defeating." The values represented by Real-life enjoyers represent the requirements of mainstream values in popular culture for young people, requiring young people always to be positive and not escape; At the same time, the usual hobbies of Real-life enjoyers, such as TV series and adoring a real star (C6), also reflect the immersion of mass culture in youth life. In contrast, the opposite is alienation and even contempt for ACGN culture.

In essence, the opposition between the ACGN group and the Real-life enjoyers represents the confrontation between the ACGN culture and the mass culture: the identity of the ACGN group shows the group values within the ACGN culture, so that the values represented by low social needs and strong self-satisfaction run counter to the mainstream values [5]. "You can also say that I like ACGN, which is escapism." Interviewee A4 says mockingly. Such self-deprecating behaviors are also far from the image of youth expected in mainstream culture: "My parents think that watching anime and playing games is a waste of time, but I think it is my hobby and it brings me much value." Interviewee A7 indicates. Moreover, this "dimensional wall" of values expresses the confrontation between the ACGN culture and the internal values of mass culture.

(2) Indiscriminate tease

Tease refers to the style of ridicule, from the program, words, pictures, etc., a loophole or key point as the entrance, to question, sigh, ridicule, complain, and other ways of speech. The tone is usually teasing, playful, or even mocking [7].

There is almost no limit to the object of tease, and everyone can participate in tease. The object of tease can also be everything, the ACGN group of Bilibili not only mercilessly tease the Real-life enjoyers, but also tease themselves. For example, in animation, often for a character with a very upward image and a happy life: "Are these Real-life enjoyers?" "Bad Real-life enjoyers!" Etc. On the contrary, the ACGN group will also make self-deprecating jokes about themselves, such as comparing themselves to "mice" to laugh at their low social activities of watching animation at home as mice, so there is an "As a mouse, I..." Such expressions.

In essence, tease brings the Real-life enjoyers to the same level as its own with an ACGN language style and an undifferentiated teasing object, eliminating the class difference between the two and, at the same time, expressing its dissatisfaction and venting of the natural world through the undifferentiated teasing of the world (B4). Such teasing behavior gives the ACGN group a stronger sense of identity and

belonging and produces a more vigorous opposition to the identity of the Real-life enjoyers. “It was much fun. I felt like many people had the same idea as me. There was much solidarity.” Interviewee A1 said.

6. The Integration of the ACGN Culture

(1) Stigmatizing stereotypes of the ACGN group

According to the Birmingham School, the assimilation of ideology by mass culture generally consists of two processes: one is to exaggerate the danger of subcultures by causing “moral panic”, and the other is to bring subcultures back into the family (Hu, 2007). The stigmatized stereotype of the ACGN group belongs to the former. It is in the stage of “dominant culture defines and labels subcultures” [6]. For example, the core concept of the ACGN culture, “Otaku”, was initially intended to be highly passionate about a thing and wholeheartedly contribute to it. After the spread of the media, “Otaku” in the eyes of the Real-life enjoyers has become messy, houseless, and even gnawing at home (C4).

The stereotype of the Real-life enjoyers in the ACGN group originates from the process of “labeling and redefining” in the ideological assimilation of the ACGN culture by mass culture. On the one hand, ACGN groups choose to despise and alienate such integration, ignoring its distortion; on the other hand, they take the initiative to explain and refute, trying to change the stereotype.

(2) The ACGN cultural uploaders become more like the style of Real-life enjoyers

The expansion of the plate of the Bilibili leads to the expansion of the core layer of the website. In the past, the circle of Bilibili concentrated on the ACGN culture, and with the entry of more people, its circle gradually expanded to include technology, life, and multiple circles. Among them, the life-recording video section in Bilibili is usually associated with commercialization because many of the uploaders in the life-recording video section are to produce videos to sell products, so many people criticize it as a “feeding area” (to make money); Moreover, the production cost of life-recording video section’s video is low, and the content is mainly unrelated to the ACGN culture. The most prominent manifestation of the subservience of the ACGN culture is that the uploaders who initially focused on the ACGN culture began to extend to the life-recording video section.

For example, the famous uploader “China Boy-Hans” submission content has gradually shifted from the original live game to the life vlog. So far, the life submission almost occupies the majority of the content of his submission, most of which are about commercial advertisements, and the original focused games exist as a small part of its life submission or as the introduction of commercial advertisements. As a result, many of the old fans were disappointed, leaving behind the words, “He has also become a Real-life enjoyer” (B1, B3).

At this time, the so-called “becoming a Real-life enjoyer” actually refers to the commercialization of the ACGN uploaders, which is not only manifested in abandoning the original circle to a more comfortable and commercial circle but also in using the original pure ACGN culture as the introduction of advertising, using its unique style as a commercial symbol to use, collect and copy. Thus, “the subcultural style that originally had a class dimension became a commodity, which was alleviated and promoted as a ‘popularized’ symbol and lost its class meaning” [6].

7. Conclusions

The war of opposites between the ACGN group and real-life enjoyers started at the beginning of the establishment of the ACGN culture. ACGN culture of Bilibili, as a kind of youth subculture, contains cultural group values and unique content such as tease and bullet comments, which all reflect the unique style of the ACGN culture. This style is also one of the most important reasons for and the core of the identity construction of the ACGN group. With the continuous development of industrialization and urbanization, the Real-life enjoyers, representing the mass culture, cannot stop including the ACGN group. In this process, the ACGN culture resists, builds barriers to identity, and eliminates differences in form. However, in the face of the wave of integration, the ACGN culture still negotiates and obeys the mass culture. From ideology to commercialization, the continuous development of Bilibili shows its integration with all aspects of mass culture.

However, the ACGN culture of Bilibili is not only in the submissive status of “being incorporated” but also in the opposition between the ACGN group and the Real-life enjoyers [8]. For example, Bilibili encourages all major video platforms to introduce bullet comments and tease and integrate them into the broader daily life. To a certain extent, it also affected the entertainment circle of the Real-life enjoyers. Another example is that some of the values promoted by the ACGN group, such as “low social needs,” have also influenced today’s Real-life enjoyers and mass culture to a certain extent, forming a “loss culture.”

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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