

Study of Emotional Spatial Patterns in Doujin Communities

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ABSTRACT

As a new type of cultural community, the emotional space of doujin community has certain specificity. This study conducted a multi-year virtual ethnographic research on 10 different types of doujin communities, and assisted the interviews of eight shippers. In the emotional practice of shippers, two major patterns of emotional interaction are formed, namely, "Shipper & Ship" and "Shipper & Shipper". Under these two patterns, the occurrence of affect, the generation of emotional meaning, the maintenance of emotional interaction, and the fading or ending of emotions are different. The two patterns of emotional interaction are intertwined and work together in a doujin community, and are affected by the source, development status and heat of the ship, which provides shippers with an imaginative space outside of the constraints, and brings about the possibility of constructing a new type of intimate relationship.

KEYWORDS

Doujin Community; Intimacy; Emotional Interaction; Fan Culture.

1. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Shipping, initially derived from the word relationship, is the desire by fans for two people, either real-life celebrities or fictional characters, to be in a relationship, romantic or otherwise. And this kind of relationship is called ship. Shipping often takes the form of creative works, including fan fiction and fan art, most often published on the internet.

Shipper means a person who supports a relationship between two people. Shippers are a very important subculture among the female-dominated young population, and doujin community is an emotionally focused community spawned by this cultural field, similar to Max Weber's "emotional community".

Erich Fromm, in *The Art of Love*, suggested a kind of fake love: one whose essence lies in experiencing love only in thought, rather than in the reality of being with a specific person. The most common form of this kind of love is to experience alternative love satisfactions from screen images, love stories in magazines, and love songs. All unfulfilled expectations of love, union, and intimacy are met in these offerings. This form of love is very similar to the current fashionable doujin culture. Fromm sees this kind of love as an attempt to alleviate the pain of real life and to relieve the individual's sense of loneliness and separation, and categorises it as an inauthentic kind of love that is believed to lead to the disintegration of love.

However, with the development of network culture, doujin culture has become more and more popular among women, more and more doujin communities have been constructed, and the group of doujin culture has been expanding, and the positive significance and value of doujin culture is

becoming more and more obvious. In the author's opinion, in the current era, this kind of "fake love" may be given a new meaning and be regarded as a kind of love construction in contemporary society.

The purpose of this study is to clarify the patterns of emotional space in the doujin community, to effectively understand the underlying logic of doujin culture and doujin community operation, to discover its positive cultural significance, and to make suggestions for doujin community guidance to create a better social subcultural environment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The prevalence of doujin culture has gradually attracted the attention of the academic community. Existing studies on doujin culture are mainly divided into two main lines of thinking, one from the perspective of business and economy, studying the consumption, government and market intervention related to doujin culture; and the other from the perspective of emotion and intimacy, studying the emotional needs and practices of doujin culture and its interaction with intimacy, which involves the following four main perspectives:

2.1. Emotional Drivers of Shipping from a Need Gratification Perspective

The need gratification perspective analyses the motivation and process of shipper fascination mainly from the perspective of emotional needs, arguing that shipping is a dopamine-stimulated need for emotional empathy and pleasurable experiences, a desire for intimacy and displacement of desire (Jacques Lacan, 2001), a form of spiritual dependence and alternative satisfaction, and an active choice of the audience to cope with their emotional dilemmas in the context of a culture of loneliness (Erich Fromm, 1956).

2.2. The Creation of Emotional Experience of Shippers from an Affect Perspective

Research under the affect theory points out that community interaction, personal experience and character pairings together build a rich and diverse emotional space. This space takes shippers' own emotional experience as the axis, and collides with intense affective experiences in the continuous interaction between shippers and character pairings, providing emotional energy support for individuals and pushing shippers to explore the possibility of intimate relationships. (Xu Guanwen and Zhang Hui, 2023).

2.3. The Shaping of the Ship Pattern from a Feminist Perspective

Feminist perspective points out that Boys' love culture is the self-expression and free expression of contemporary women's demands. Homosexual pairing is a concrete spiritual practice to subvert hierarchy and advocate equal dialogue (Mikhail Bakhtin, 1998); it is a practice of pursuing the psychology of curiosity and the satisfaction of desires in the condition of aesthetic fatigue of heterosexual relationship patterns (Zheng Dandan, 2016). It provides women with a subject-object reversal of gaze (Wu Weihua, 2020), a rebellion against patriarchal culture and a struggle against gender inequality (Xing Hu, 2021).

2.4. The Operation of Doujin Communities in a Heterotopian Perspective

The study on the operation of doujin community under the perspective of heterotopia points out that: shippers form group empathy through emotional isomorphism and production of emotional meanings, and construct an emotional heterotopia; and with the help of "other" forces such as external community, capital, idols and so forth, the community breaks through the fixed circle and stabilizes the circle; and finally, after the collision and fusion of the doujin community and the reality, it shows a multiple situation of deconstruction, temporary maintenance, cyclic regeneration, and recycling.

Finally, after the collision and fusion with reality, the doujin community presents a diversified situation of deconstruction, temporary maintenance and cyclic regeneration. (Liu, 2023).

Currently there are fewer studies dedicated to shippers and doujin communities, and most of the existing studies focus mainly on the interaction between shippers and character pairings, ignoring the mutual emotional interaction and connection between shippers. Moreover, the underlying logic of emotional interactions in doujin communities and the special value they generate, as well as the energy and significance inherent in emotions within doujin communities have yet to be studied in greater depth.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is an exploratory study with the doujin community as the main research object, aiming to understand the emotional spatial patterns in the doujin community through the thoughts and actions of shippers. Based on this, this study mainly adopts the qualitative research methods of virtual ethnography and auto ethnography, supplemented by the interview method to collect data.

Doujin community belongs to typical online community, adopting the research method of virtual ethnography and working as a participant-experiencer of doujin community can effectively collect first-line information through online fieldwork. In this study, we will select Weibo super-topic and "bot" accounts where shippers are concentrated, as well as Bilibili and Lofter where fan-works are abundant as the main research positions. Considering the diversity of fieldwork in digital sites, doujin communities in diverse states are selected based on source material, categories, endings, and doujin community activity, number of members, and other difference factors, as shown in Table 1 (relevant information as of 1 August 2024) for details. In this study, participatory observation and experience was conducted in the selected communities, and textual analyses were conducted on the contents of shippers' postings, messages, and submissions.

Meanwhile, according to Kuzinets' practical guide to virtual ethnography methods 错误!未找到引用源。, this study combines the research method of online interviews with that of virtual ethnography, selecting eight shippers for online interviews, focusing on the emotional interaction of shippers in doujin communities.

Auto ethnography is a style of research and writing that connects the individual to culture and places the self in a socio-cultural context, similar to what Henry Jenkins refers to as the "academic fan" identity, which is both a researcher who is familiar with a certain amount of pop-culture theory, ethnographic literature, and who can effectively analyse fan communities, and a fan who understands the habits and behaviors of fans and is immersed in the community[2]

The author has up to more than 10 years of personal involvement, is familiar with the doujin culture, and maintains close interaction with the real doujin community. This study connects personal experience with doujin community culture and examines the self in the context of doujin community as one of the ways of data collection and analysis.

Table 1. Basic profile of the selected doujin communities

No	Relationship	Type	Source material	Relevant data by digital sites	Activity level	Field Information
1	LanJiu (Ling Jiushi / Ruan Lanzhu)	M/M	The Spirealm (TV 2024)	Weibo super-topic: 178,000 followers, 571,000 posts, 4.72 billion reads. Lofter: 21,000 engagements, 4,299,000 views.	Explosion in development	2024.2 to date
2	XianZe (Fan Xian / Li Chengze)	M/M	Qing Yu Nian (TV 2019) Qing Yu Nian 2 (TV 2024)	Weibo super-topic: 55,000 followers, 11,000 posts, 150 million reads. Lofter: 41,000 engagements, 25.07 million views.	active development	2019.12 to date
3	YaoJing (Xiao Yao / Tu Shanjing)	F/M	Chang Xiang Si (TV 2023)	Weibo super-topic: 337,000 followers, 161,000 posts, 2.1 billion reads. Lofter: 9,736 engagements, 814,000 views.	active development	2022.4 to date
4	HuMiao (Hu Fei / Miao Renfeng)	M/M	Fei Hu Wai Zhuan (TV 2022)	Weibo super-topic: 266 followers, 245 posts, 1,663,000 reads. Lofter: 660 engagements, 4831 views.	buddhist development	2022.8 to date
5	FeiChang-XiaoZhang (Xue Fangfei / Xiao Heng)	F/M	Mo Yu Yun Jian (Unfinished TV)	Weibo super-topic: 130,000 followers, 97,000 posts, 1.51 billion reads. Lofter: 2010 engagements, 111,000 views.	Explosion in development	2024.6 to date
6	WenXuan (Liu Yaowen / Song Yaxuan)	M/M	Teens in Times (idol group)	Weibo super-topic: 2,612,000 followers, 2,751,000 posts, 30.66 billion reads. Lofter: 461,000 engagements, 280 million views.	active development	2017.8 to date
7	KP (Huang Jiaju / Huang Guanzhong)	M/M	Beyond (Band)	Weibo super-topic: 907 followers, 922 posts, 3,948,000 reads. Lofter: 448 engagements, 52k views.	buddhist development	2021.9 to date
8	PingXie (Zhang Qiling / Wu Xie)	M/M	Time Raiders (2011 Novel)	Weibo super-topic: 959,000 followers, 48,000 posts, 1.09 billion reads. Lofter: 247,000 engagements, 140 million views.	active development	2018.3 to date
9	YinQiu (Hermit / Poisoner)	M/M	Identity V (Video Game)	Weibo super-topic: 104,000 followers, 16,000 posts, 210 million reads. Lofter: 57,000 engagements, 20.26 million views.	active development	2022.8 to date
10	SKK (Dazai Osamu / Nakahara Chuya)	M/M	Bungo Stray Dogs (Anime & Manga)	Weibo super-topic: 279,000 followers, 93,000 posts, 1.6 billion reads. Lofter: 177,000 engagements, 80.34 million views.	active development	2018.7 to date

4. TWO MAJOR PATTERNS OF EMOTIONAL INTERACTION IN DOUJIN COMMUNITIES

In China's doujin community, the emotional interaction can be divided into two major patterns: "Shipper & Ship" and "Shipper & Shipper". Under the former emotional interaction pattern, Shippers mainly focus on the interaction of characters, and obtain emotional resonance and satisfy emotional needs from ships. In the latter emotional interaction pattern, the shipper obtains affective experiences, generates emotional interactions, and satisfies emotional needs in the process of interacting with other shippers in the same community.

4.1. Occurrence of Affect

Stewart.K defines affect as an immediate state of feeling.[3] She argues that the fluid and cyclical nature of affect allows it to be realized through the body, dreams, performances and other forms of experience, and is no longer tied to meaning. The key to this process is the intensity of affect, i.e. the richness and depth of the individual's affective experience in different experiential forms and the kinds of thoughts and feelings they make possible. Newell.S's discovery that the social significance of objects is intensified or reshaped in the transmission of affect suggests that affect transcends the physical limitations of matter, that the resonance of affect with matter enlivens geographic locations, commodities, images, and sounds, and that objects are capable of carrying the affective meanings of the past and triggering affect in the present[4] .

In the cultural practice of shippers, the production of affect experiences is complex and diverse due to each shipper's own experience, preference for shipping, and understanding and interpretation of intimacy of ships. Therefore, the phenomenon and process of shipping generates an affective space that is mediated by emotional engagement and characterized by emotional interaction and resonance, and which offers new, even unpredictable, possibilities for the production of unique social meanings[5]

Shippers may fall in love at first sight with characters, their interactions, story lines, or ships with subjective colors of other shippers' fan works, thus generating an affect. It is also possible that in the process of shipping, one may have thought exchanges and emotional interactions with other shippers, thus generating an affect. The former often leads to the "Shipper & Ship" pattern of emotional interaction, while the latter catalyses the "Shipper & Shipper" pattern.

4.2. Generation of Emotional Meaning

After the affect is generated, with the investment of time and energy, shippers will deepen the affect experience by interconnecting their own emotional experiences with ships or other shippers, and the meaning generated by their emotions will provide the emotional value and practical motivation for shippers to continue to be active in the doujin community.

Willis argues that "isomorphism" brings about a "symbolic coincidence" between a group's values and ways of life, and between its subjective experience and the symbolic forms it uses to communicate its core concerns[6]. In the emotional interaction pattern of "Shipper & Ship", the value cognition and emotional imagination of shippers are "isomorphism" with the ship, creating an emotional resonance with the ship, which becomes the foundation and premise for shipping. For example, the ship patterns such as "childhood sweethearts", "love-hate relationship" and "widowhood" are in line with the love concept and aesthetic preference of shippers. At the same time, shipping is the empathy and alternative satisfaction of shippers' self-emotions[7]. For example, "I'm shipping = I'm in love", which is often seen in the message texts of doujin communities.

In the emotional interaction pattern of "Shipper & Shipper", shippers often experience emotional meaning in the process of community interaction, which on one hand satisfies the shippers' need for

recognition, i.e. to receive praise and approval for their own works or opinions from other community members; and on the other hand satisfies the shippers' need for social interaction, i.e. to become close friends with other community members. In addition, because of their familiarity with the source material and each other's fan works, and also because of their common love for the characters, shippers within the community will naturally form a sense of intimacy with each other. This sense of intimacy will naturally spill over from the relationship between characters to the relationship between shippers, forming a double line of emotional and relational isomorphism. Furthermore, the emotional resonance of shippers with fan fiction creators through the emotions, opinions and thoughts revealed in fan works is also one of the possibilities of emotional meaning's generation. In the fieldwork, it is found that two shippers, in the process of shipping together, established an intimate relationship and became lovers because they admired each other and regarded each other as confidants.

4.3. Maintenance of Emotional Interactions

In the emotional interaction pattern of "Shipper & Ship", emotional interaction is often maintained through the interpretation, imagination and text reproduction of ships. Firstly, the most common behaviour in doujin communities is "sugar-picking", i.e. through irrational interpretations of ships' micro-expressions, actions, and other interactions in their works and outside their works (offline framing, social media interactions, etc.), or analyses of ships' horoscopes, personalities, etc., so as to prove that "What I'm shipping is real" or that they are a "natural pair". Secondly, through appropriating media materials, reassembling and editing them into new stories, or creating short texts according to one's own imagination (most commonly found in some curtainfics or holes in heads), one can fantasize about ship interactions.

In the emotional interaction pattern of "Shipper & Shipper", the main way to maintain the emotional interaction is creating fan works, among which, fan fiction is the most effective. Fan fiction is the most prominent form of online writing with a communal nature, and its communal character is most significantly manifested in its strong intimacy. In describing the characteristics of fan fiction, Kristina Busse mentions that fan fiction is performative in the sense that many fan fictions consist of components of intra-community conversation; and that fan fiction is intimate in the sense that fan fiction writers and readers tend to show sexual openness and vulnerability in their stories and related discussions[8]. Since readers are already very familiar with the content of the canon, fan fiction writers can skip the characterization part and directly imagine and create based on the original plot. This kind of fragmentary and strong creation greatly reflects the thoughts and feelings, knowledge reserves and human attitudes of the fan fiction writers themselves, so that fan fiction can play the role of emotional interaction. This kind of interaction is most effective in text writing, followed by fan-made plot comics, and the interaction of fan arts and fan videos is relatively weak.

In addition to this, fan work creators within the doujin community will also engage in intra-community dialogue directly through fan works in order to reach direct emotional communication. That is to say, they will create fan works based on the inspiration or works of another creator (e.g., painting fan arts based on the settings and plots of a fan fiction, etc.); or they will comment on each other's fan works and exchange views, so as to further become close friends.

4.4. Fading Or Ending of Emotions

In the "Shipper & Ship" pattern of emotional interaction, the maintenance of emotions is highly dependent on the activity of both ships, i.e. the ship have enough interactions to provide material for interpretation, imagination and reproduction. When the material is exhausted, the emotional interactions of shippers are often transformed into the "Shipper & Shipper" pattern. Shippers who do not complete the transformation have a high probability of dropping out. Another situation is more common in real person ships, that is, a certain party of the ship, or the source material or creative team fall from grace, and the shippers will then drop out in large numbers. In addition, when the

aesthetic preferences and concepts of the shippers themselves change, the emotional resonance will be weakened, which can also lead to the shippers' dropping out.

In the emotional interaction pattern of "Shipper & Shipper", the fading or ending of emotions is often linked to other doujin community members. When a well-known or favourite fan work creator, or a close friend drops out, shippers in that doujin community may be affected and drop out one after another. When the strength of the emotional connection is high, shippers may follow the fan work creator or friends to a new doujin community. In addition, when the doujin community is not in good condition (having too many groupuscules, trolls, and ship wars, or mainstream aesthetic not in line with one's own preferences, etc.), and then shippers can not be well integrated into the community, the emotional interactions of shippers are often transformed into the "Shipper & Ship" pattern, that is, they will maintain their feelings for the ship, but cut off communication with the community and ship alone; or just completely drop out.

5. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE DEGREE OF EFFECTIVENESS OF TWO PATTERNS

The two patterns of emotional interaction, "Shipper & Ship" and "Shipper & Shipper", do not exist separately, but work together in the doujin community. In different doujin communities, the degree of effectiveness of the two paths varies accordingly. In the online fieldwork, it was found that the following factors have a greater impact on the degree of effectiveness of the two patterns.

5.1. Source Material

According to the source material of ship, ship can be broadly classified into the following three types: (1) three-dimensional ship, i.e. ship originating from real person groups (idol groups, bands, etc.), history, film and television dramas, variety shows, etc.; (2) two-dimensional ship, i.e. ship originating from MAG(manga, anime, games), virtual idol groups, etc., and consisting of 2D characters; (3) one-dimensional ship, i.e. ship originating from novels, etc., and consisting of textual characters without concrete images.

In the survey, it was found that typical of doujin communities such as YaoJing, FeiChangXiaoZhang, WenXuan, etc., in the three-dimensional doujin communities, most of the posting contents and popular contents of the super-topics are "sugar-picking" and analyses, or photos and videos of offline activities, while fan works account for a smaller proportion. This kind of situation is more significant in the variety show and idol group doujin communities. For film, television drama and historical doujin communities, there will be a certain number of shippers who identify them as two-dimensional ships, clearly separating the characters from the real person like actors or actresses, as one shipper said during the interview, "I will regard them as 2D person because it is too easy for real person to fall from garce. So the characters and actors must be separated. " In this case, the doujin community would be closer to the two-dimensional doujin community. In both two-dimensional and one-dimensional doujin communities, the quantity, quality and heat of fan works is far greater than which in three-dimensional doujin communities.

For third-dimensional ships, because the relationship between the both parties is more unknown and explorable behind the image they have presented to the public, the fans of third-dimensional ships are often more eager to prove the authenticity of the ship and gain pleasure in the process of "sugar-picking". Thus, the emotional interaction pattern of "Shipper & Ship" occupies a major position in the three-dimensional doujin community.

For both two-dimensional and one-dimensional ships, all the possibilities of ships are presented in the source materials, thus there is very little content to be explored outside of the canon. Therefore, these shippers enjoy the process of constructing the relationship and self-expression through the ship,

and pay less emphasis on the realities and results of the ship. As a result, the emotional interaction path of "Shipper & Shipper" is more common in two-dimensional and one-dimensional doujin communities.

5.2. Development Status

Depending on the status of the development of a ship, a distinction can be made between developing ships and finished ships. Specifically, developing ships refer to ships in a work that is still being updated or serialised, or real person ships whose relationship is developing continuously in reality; while finished ships refer to ships in a work that has already been completed, or ships with established endings (e.g., one or both of the parties have passed away, ships that have reached happy endings or bad endings, etc.).

In the fieldwork, it was found that, ships like XianZe (TV shows), KP (one of the parties passed away) and other finished ships, even though they belong to the three-dimensional ships, their doujin communities in the current state have a considerable amount and heat of fan works, and the ideological exchanges and emotional interactions among the shippers are much closer. For such finished ships, there will be no new progress in the relationship, so when the ship enters the finished state, the structure of the shippers in the community will gradually become stable, and will be more inclined to satisfy their emotional needs through the creation of fan works and direct exchanges with other shippers.

For developing ships, the relationship is much more unknown, thus shippers will focus more on the ship itself and continue to pay attention because of their curiosity and anticipation of the ship's future development. XianZe is a typical example, its source material QingYuNian, premiered in November 2019 and gained a lot of heat, then the heat slowed down a bit and developed steadily. The second season aired in May 2024, and the heat skyrocketed again. During this period, the proportion of fan works showed a "low-high-low" trend.

It is also for this reason that capital will often increase the loyalty of shippers by creating ships intentionally and increasing ship's interaction. On the one hand, both parties of the ship need the attention and data of fans, and on the other hand, the shippers need the evidence-based fantasy romance to satisfy their self-emotional projections[7] For example, since the existence of Wenxuan, it has completed several times of ship heat recovery by the capital through increasing the interaction between two parties of the ship.

5.3. Heat

The relationship between shippers is even more complex in the hotter doujin community. According to Foucault, space is the site of power struggle and the medium through which power is enacted. In doujin communities, heat of fan works is often an intuitive form of power, with higher heat of fan works implying more voice in the community. There can also be status distinctions in doujin communities, with shippers who create high quality fan works and have a high degree of restoration of the original works tending to be honored and revered by the majority of shippers, while shippers who have low quality fan works tend to struggle to gain traction. Also, GongFuWei (shippers who insist that a character should always be the top), and ShouFuWei (shippers who insist that a character should always be the bottom), or others that lead to ooc (out of character) will receive boycotts from the majority of the community members. In this case, although emotional interactions in doujin communities are active in the "Shipper & Shipper" pattern, they are also prone to negative emotions.

Meanwhile, there are relatively few two-way relationships between shippers. Highly popular and enthusiastic fan work creators play the role of "celebrities" in the community, and tend to have one-way emotional interactions with other shippers, i.e. enjoying the praise and expressions of approval from other shippers, but seldom responding to them.

In less heated doujin communities, posts on Weibo, Lofter and other platforms are updated slowly and with less content, thus each fan work has more chances to be seen by community members. For example, in doujin communities such as HuMiao and KP, fan works in the community will be retweeted by almost more than 90% of the active shippers. Moreover, in less heated communities, community members tend to be more tolerant and do not hold a critical eye on the quality of fan works. As one of the shippers in the interview said, "As a rare-pair shipper, it's already very satisfying to 'have food to eat', so I will never pick on 'the cooks', not to mention undermining the self-confidence of 'cooks'." As a result, the emotional connection between shippers tends to be stronger in less heated doujin communities, where more positive emotional supports are provided.

6. CONCLUSION

In the cultural practice of shippers, the intersection of their own experiences and social emotions has created a complex and diverse emotional relationship and emotional space. In this paper, we take the doujin community as the entry point to analyse the emotional space patterns within it. The emotional interaction patterns in doujin communities are divided into two major types: "Shipper & Ship" and "Shipper & Shipper", which are intertwined with each other and work together. The degree of their effect is influenced by three main factors: source material, development status and heat.

Whether in the process of interacting with ships or other shippers, the emotions and thoughts of shippers that were originally suppressed under social norms are released. In this positive emotional experience, certain normative boundaries of intimacy are broken down, stimulating shippers to conceive, perceive and co-shape a new pattern of intimacy.

With the gradual popularity of doujin culture and the gradual opening of the doujin market, the doujin community, a new emotional space, has not yet been regulated by laws or rules. From the perspective of the "Shipper & Ship" pattern, it is particularly important to regulate the behaviour of both parties of the ship and avoid negative guidance caused by excessive marketing in today's doujin market. From the perspective of the "Shipper & Shipper" pattern, doujin communities may bring negative impacts while providing positive emotions, and community leaders (super-topic hosts, officials, etc.) should pay more attention to avoid serious conflicts or even escalation into cyber violence.

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