

Artistic Prosumption with Initiative in the Youth Subculture of Original Character in China

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Abstract:

China has witnessed in recent years a rapid development in digital economy and a unprecedented prosperity of various online subcultures, with the subculture of original character as a unique branch of them characterized by the large number of teenage female participants and the large volume of unsupervised transactions within. This article is based on participant observation and semi-structured interviews within this subculture. By meticulously examining the subculture members' behaviors and applying the theoretical framework of both prosumption and post-subcultural theory to the subculture case study, this article construct the subculture members as artistic prosumers with initiative rather than passive consumers, free digital laborers or animalized youths in the post-modern society. It's argued that by putting affections and creativity into the original characters by prosumption and spontaneously reflecting and regulating on the co-optation of the artistic and heterogeneous styles by subculture capital, the youth prosumers in the oc subculture retain a sustainable prosumption mode in which they can seek enchantment and practice collective wisdom.

Keywords: Prosumption; subculture; subculture capital; simulacra; post-modernity.

1. Introduction

With the continuous development of China's digital economy [1], the growth of China's Generation Z's consumption power and the expansion of their spiritual needs, the country has ushered in an unprecedented prosperity of various Internet subcultures, i. e., the ACGN(animation, comic, game and novel) subculture [2]. Among them, this paper selects a

unique branch to analyze: the subculture of original character(oc). As shown in figure 1, a flock of Chinese youngsters, mainly teenage women, create two-dimensional(that is, virtual and fictional) original characters in the form of drawing or text setting online, trading and auctioning these characters directly on social medias and specific platforms under the self-established rules between individuals, with little or no external supervision at all. They continuously

add derivative content to their own character settings (the most common ones are paintings and literary creations) by production and consumption and then hedonically display these stylish contents online, enjoying corresponding recognition within the subcultural group. According to the data from the online platforms, this subculture has gained hundreds of thousands of members or more in its heyday, with the senior aficionados among them willing to spend several hundred thousand yuan or more on oc-related consumption.

Despite its large volume of members and transactions within, there is currently no existing literature focusing on this peculiar youth subculture. Most researches on Internet subcultures within Chinese context take the route of the Birmingham School or post-subcultural theory, with the former focusing on the resistance of subcultures to mainstream culture and the ideology embodied in subcultures and the latter holding the point that the resistance of subculture is constantly weakened, and it is increasingly being embedded in business and assimilated into consumerism [3]. For example, there is a review suggesting that in the era of digital new media, the resistance of Chinese youth subcultures to mainstream traditional cultural values has changed from the fierce resistance of the “Shamate” subculture to the “dependent confrontation” of the “punk health” culture, and then to the mild confrontation of the “Sang(sorrow) culture” and “Buddhist culture”, in which course subculture has gradually lost its resistance spirit and increasingly become a symbol of consumer society [4]. In the case of the oc subculture, it was also once criticized by Xinhua Daily Telegraph for reaping money from the younger generation with imitative and shallow artifacts [5]. However, despite accepting the critique from the post-subcultural theory, this article would additionally apply the notion of prosumption [6] to the subcultural phenomenon and argue that the participants in the oc subculture are active prosumers who create a heterotopia [7] in which they could initiate their ideals and affections rather than being passive traditional consumers or mere digital labour.



Fig. 1 What an original character looks like(original)

The analysis in this article is based on a long-term online ethnography and participant observation within the oc subculture. It would be divided into two sections. The first section reviews the literature on prosumption and demonstrates how the participants in the oc subculture behave as active prosumers with initiative rather than passive consumers. The second section connects the prosumption pattern to the post-subcultural theory, reflecting on the co-optation of the artistic style of prosumption by subculture capital, but at the same time pointing out that subculture members still resist capitalist hegemony through spontaneous reflection and regulation. This article makes the theoretical contribution of synthesizing the separate literatures on the sociology of prosumption and subculture in a specific case study and the realistic contribution of unveiling the mechanism behind the subculture-related prosumers' behaviors.

2. Subculture Participants' Artistic Prosumption with Initiative

2.1 The Rise of Prosumption and Web 2.0

The classic scholars' biased theoretical concentration on production is aligned with the western industrial revolution and the massive machine manufacturing mode. Only later after the World War II, with the post-war

ever-increasing consumer interest and demand and the recession of the American heavy industry, did American sociologists' researching interest shift to the phenomena related to consumption, but after Toffler's the Third Wave in 1980, a growing consensus has been that the dichotomy of production and consumption is imprecise in its essence and inhibits us to fully understand the real transpire happening in the economic and social world, so the notion of prosumption is coined [6] [8]. This accelerating rise of the notion of prosumption, which is an umbrella term that encompasses both production and consumption in a continuum, is highly related to the rise of new technologies such as 3D Printing, self-service cashier and so on. With these new technologies, Many jobs that previously require paid workers to conduct are now assigned to the consumers themselves.

Among these technologies, the emergence of Web 2.0 plays the most important role and most directly led to the revolution of prosumption. Web 2.0 is a generic term referring to a participatory and involving version of the web which allows users to maximize collective intelligence in generating content [9]. Web 2.0 created vast space and diverse platforms for prosumption activities to carry out and brought prosumption to the center of economic value creation. EBay and Wikipedia are typical examples [10] [11].

2.2 Prosumption Phenomenon in Art

The process of prosumption in art field has been specifically examined. It's pointed out that the influence of other artists' works and ideas on the production of certain artworks is an important process of prosumption. Also, the authorial artists' privileged status over audience has been constantly weakened by the movements like Readymade and relational art, in which course the distinction between producers and consumers in art is blurred and prosumption itself is increasingly made a kind of art. It's notable that the rationale of social media is incorporated into this course since it promotes sampling, cutting and remixing as a form of art production [12].

To give an instance of prosumption as art, in the Burning man event in the western U.S.A, with 50,000 people gathering around a ceremonial bonfire and participating in "interactive art", what is conventionally identified as appropriate conceptions of art is challenged by the joint efforts of an inclusive community formed by lay people rather than artists [13].

2.3 Artistic Prosumption in the Oc Subculture with Initiative

The researcher conducted participant observation in online

communities where a large number of oc subculture members gathered, such as QQ groups, Banciyuan, and some tags on Tiktok, focusing on two aspects: the behavior of oc subculture members to construct specific characters in the form of drawings or texts and enrich the characters, as well as their consumption, transaction and auction behavior, which are in fact two highly-intertwined processes. In addition, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with a total of 7 oc subculture members by posting open recruitment in the above communities (this method recruited 4 respondents) and posting needs among oc members that the researcher had contacted earlier (this method recruited 3 respondents). The analyses based on the data are as follows.

Above all, almost everyone participating in the oc subculture are absolute prosumers and their prosumption activities lie near the middle of the "prosumption continuum". In other words, their attributes as producers and consumers are nearly half and half. When they create their own character paintings or create characters in the form of text, they are all producing art and subcultural products. Original characters are the most typical subcultural art products in the oc subculture. At the same time, most members of the oc subculture consume original characters and character-related texts or pictures, and purchase original character designs or commissioned works (customized works) from writers and painters. This makes them both producers and consumers.

Among the seven subculture members I interviewed, three are both consumers and paid painters/writers. In the oc subculture, they earn money by receiving commissions and creating artifacts for others' original characters. At the same time, they also draw pictures, write articles, and spend money for their own characters. They also reinvest part of the money earned from accepting works in the subculture into commissioning works for their own characters. They are typical prosumers. For example, one of them, a 15-year-old middle school student named "Xing", only commissioned works in the oc subculture at the beginning, and later imitated others to post and earned about 4,000 yuan with her painting skills. According to her, if her family needs it, she will give part of this money to her family, and some will be used for commissioning works again. At the same time, she spent a total of 6,000-7,000 yuan in the subculture.

Also, even those members who never create works by themselves but commission works from others are prosumers in the sense that they also incorporate their own ideas into the commissioning process, and put forward their general requirements for the pictures and plots to the painters/writers, and the painters/writers are responsible for implementation. This kind of customized consumption

can also enable them to participate in the creation and become prosumers. This kind of commission as prosumption is in line with the relational art movement and the disenchantment of art and artists' vintage.

2.4 Distinction from Digital Laborers or Passive Consumers

Whether prosumption phenomenon will perpetuate the exploitation of capitalism or will it bring a new form of capitalism and empower consumers is a heatedly debated question in the researching field of prosumption. Investigation on the fashion consumption in Asia may indicate that there exists "passive prosumers" distinguished from "elite prosumers" [14] and a study on the Indonesian pop culture may conclude that youth fans behave between prosumers and free digital laborers [15]. In sum, it has been argued that prosumption can be divided into 5 main types, with some of them empowering and the others exploitative [16]. As far as this paper is concerned, the prosumption in the oc subculture can be identified near the bricolage (craft consumption) and the collaborative (peer-to-peer) prosumption, which are two types mainly considered empowering. Thus the participants in the subculture are prosumers with initiative rather than passive prosumers (consumers) or mere digital laborers.

Just as when the researcher asked the interviewees what were their starting points to participate in the oc subculture and to create original characters, she repeatedly received answers as such:

"Because I like her, because I feel that I created her, and she seems to be with me all the time. I want to have more photos of her, more of her appearance." (Here, "her" refers to the character she created)

"It feels like my daughter/son has grown up. It's easy to be happy looking at beautiful pictures!"

"It's like writing a character and making them come alive, that is, I feel that they must live in a corner of the world. "(the name of an original character), maybe it's my yearning for the future. "

It's easy to see that the answers emphasize that the character is "created" by oneself, and even if one commissions others to write for one's favorite character, it is for the purpose of making the original character that one has affection for more beautiful and richer, but the original character is always one's own product and may contain some of one's own emotions, thus reflecting the subjectivity and initiative of prosumers in this participatory web culture. It is the craft prosumption that can provide prosumers with space to exert their subjective initiative, while in general passive consumption, it is impossible for consumers to freely give their own creativity and values to the products,

so it's valid to say that the prosumption in the oc subculture can be identified as craft prosumption with initiative.

At the same time, though the oc subculture operates in the field of the Internet and creates user-generated content for the platforms, which is a kind of prosumption can be seen as exploitative in the sense that it benefits the digital facilities' owners and the platforms, the original characters themselves and the valuable artifacts attached to them are protected by the subculture members' strong awareness of copyright. The members have a strict public opinion supervision on plagiarism, which highlights the prosumers' ownership of the oc-related artifacts and content, so it's valid to say that participants in the oc subculture are working for themselves instead of being free digital laborers who are exploited.

3. Critiques of the Co-optation by Subculture Capital and Response

3.1 Critiques of Post-subcultural Theory, Simulacra and Postmodernism

As aforementioned, post-subcultural theory suggests that the alternative resistance of subculture to the mainstream ideology constantly diminishes and is assimilated into consumerism. This theory corresponds to the broader theoretical standpoint of postmodernism, which proposes that after the two world wars, the grand narratives represented by various systems such as the nation-states, the revolutionary ideologies and the ideas of humanity and reason have gradually lost their dominance and appeal, so that the small narratives and the simulacra from the subcultures serve to take their places.

As Azuma argued in his analysis of the okatu subculture in Japan, the animation, games and new forms of novels contain no longer even the narrative consumption. Rather, the okatu shut themselves in the consumption of derivative works (simulacra), which do not possess clear originality and thus cannot be distinguished as real or fake, to enjoy animalized satisfaction. The inner layer of the small narratives represented in those subcultures are databases of moe factors that trigger people's intrinsic pleasure just like drugs [17]. At first glance, this strong critique could easily be applied to the oc subculture as well since obviously, the consumption in the oc subculture based on the characters instead of complete cultural works is even more of a "database consumption" than the consumption of the ACGN-related artifacts. The creation of narratives surrounding an original character is even more of derivative simulacra than the creation of the narratives in the ACGN works.

Despite there's no denying that these critiques do grasp some ontological negativity of the subcultural consumption, the pessimistic attitude enclosed towards the subjects immersed in the subcultures is debatable. For instance, Chen has argued in her research on the ACGN prosumption on Chinese social media Bilibili that the prosumers still retain their subjectivity through tactical prosumption and hybrid community construction [18]. In the case of the oc subculture, this study has discovered that though there exists a co-optation of the artistic style of the oc-related prosumption, which may lead it astray on the direction of shallow animalized consumption of moe factors, the participants and prosumers within the oc subculture spontaneously search for reflection and regulation in order to resist the co-optation and maintain the meaningful and enchanted nature of artistic prosumption in the subculture, which can also be seen as a manifestation of their subjectivity.

3.2 The Co-optation of Artistic Style by Subculture Capital

"Subculture capital" is proposed by borrowing the concept of "cultural capital". The possession of subculture capital indicates that a subculture member is considered "cool", high-quality, and different from the general public in the subculture group. Some scholars point out that in the new media era, since anyone can become an information source and can interpret subculture, the question of who is the "real" representative of subculture has become valuable. Therefore, while subculture members distinguish themselves from the general public, subcultures also form factions within them. The members with the most "popularity" and the right to interpret subcultures within the subculture will have more subculture capital, and this capital also represents actual commercial value [19].

In the oc subculture, when a style of work becomes popular and is considered beautiful and unique, or full of moe factors in other words, subculture members will follow and use this style or derivative elements, so this style considered "cool" obtains the meaning of subculture capital and causes sampling, parody and remixing. In this case, prosumers-as-consumers may be attracted by subculture capital and consume disproportionately. For example, there are concepts such as "famous characters" and "famous painters" in the subculture. Since the oc owners of "famous characters" have a high exposure rate and will attract many fans in the subculture group, such original characters are a manifestation of high subculture capital. Some participants hope to render their own oc famous by ordering paintings of a specific style from "famous painters" in order to accelerate the accumulation of sub-

culture capital. In some cases, this will lead young prosumers-as-consumers to spend beyond their capacity. In a sense, that's the cause of an outside observer like Xinhua Daily Telegraph criticizing the subculture for reaping money.

The pursuit of subcultural capital by subcultural members in a particular style promotes the further popularity of this style, which may drive up the price of paintings in this style, transforming subcultural capital into commercial capital, which in turn may attract more imitations from painters who pursue subcultural capital and the commercial capital that comes with it, in which course the initially artistic and creative style of the subcultural prosumption becomes increasingly homogenized. This spiral could ultimately suffocate the creativity of the prosumption in the subculture in a sea of shallow simulacra without originality.

3.3 Participants' Spontaneous Reflection and Regulation

Fortunately, the problem of subculture capital and homogenization of the style has been clearly discerned by the subculture members themselves. Confronted with an incident of a particular subculture member who intentionally commission a lot of famous painters' works to make her original character famous, a large number of comments said, "Don't raise a oc for fame", "It's all done out of everyone's hobbies. Whether it's popular or not depends entirely on oneself, not on deliberate moulding here", "oc cannot become famous just by hype and expensive manuscripts", "Put aside your vanity, and don't let the entire oc subculture be blamed just because of the kind of person you are".

Then, more clearly, there is a boycott of prosumers-as-producers pursuing subcultural capital and the commercial capital that comes with it and imitating popular styles. This is different from the criticisms received. There is indeed a prevalent phenomenon of style homogeneity and even plagiarism in the oc subculture, but the subculture community itself is extremely sensitive and disgusted with this phenomenon. There is even a crime of "painting style plagiarism" in the subculture, which has caused widespread controversy among the members. Opponents of this statement believe that borrowing painting styles is very normal and cannot be called plagiarism. However, most supporters believe that imitating a specific painting style infringes on the interests of the creator of this style and should be prohibited, and in particular, the borrowed painting style should not be used to receive commissions for profit. A lot of members boycott the faction of the subculture that pursues popular styles, and do not think that

they are truly senior enthusiasts who represent the subculture, which in many cases reversely causes the loss of the boycotted members' subculture capital .

In a nutshell, though the co-optation of subculture capital and the problem of homogenization and post-modernization of the subcultural artifacts do exist, with the subculture participants themselves spontaneously regulating these downsides and seeking for the preservation of the artistic presumption within the subculture, it would be unfair to overlook their joint effort, disparage their initiative or reduce them to "animalized" passive consumers.

4. Conclusion

This article analyses the artistic presumption with initiative in the youth subculture of original character in China. The presumption phenomena observed and examined within the subculture by participant observation and semi-structured interviews have the roots in the rise of the Web 2.0 and participatory online subculture. Taking a perspective of the presumption notion raised by sociologists instead of the post-subcultural theory route, the participants in the subculture are theoretically constructed as artistic craft prosumers who take initiative in creating and adding derivative content to their original characters as well as fulfilling the commissions of others by painting or writing. They are distinguished from passive consumers or free digital laborers for their emphasizing, protecting and honoring their copyright and ownership over the original characters. Though such a subculture is often criticized as a symbol of the post-modern society where the grand narratives as well as the rebellion against them diminish and all the things left are some simulacra for animalized consumers to deceive themselves with, it's argued in this article that the prosumers within the subculture do not entirely submit to the assimilation of the capitalist cultural hegemony, neither are the artifacts that they create totally shallow and imitative.

By putting affections and creativity into the original characters by presumption and spontaneously reflecting and regulating on the co-optation of the artistic and heterogeneous styles by subculture capital, the youth prosumers in the oc subculture retain a sustainable presumption mode in which they can seek enchantment and practice collective wisdom. Their presumption instead of passive consumption behaviors can be seen as artistic instead of animalized.

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