

Chinese Online Readers' Perceptions of Character Portrayals in Fan Fiction: A Content Analysis

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Abstract:

The objective of this study was to explore the potential differences in readers' understanding of characterization in Chinese novels, specifically between those who read original novels and those who read fan fiction. This was done through a semantic analysis of readers' character-related comment texts from both types of novels. The aim was to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of fan creations and the psychological kernel of such recreations. This study employs a content analysis method to investigate users' perceptions of character portrayals. The initial step involves the selection of user comments from several popular Chinese online novels. These comments are then summarized and organized into a coherent structure. Secondly, the software NVivo was employed to disassemble the statements and calculate the word frequency of the comment texts about the user's character portrayals. Subsequently, the character portrayals are encoded and sorted, the users' character cognition after reading the novels is quantitatively analyzed, a character portrayal bias model is constructed, and the model results are applied and verified. By analyzing the reader's character perception, it is possible to quantitatively assess the potential differences in the understanding of character portrayals. This enables a deeper understanding of the psychological causes of fan creation and provides a basis for additional research into the creation of fan content.

Keywords: Fan Fiction; Content Analysis; Fan Culture; Character Portrayal

1. Introduction

Fan fiction, also referred to as fan fiction, is defined as a genre of text created by fans of a particular work of fiction [1]. These stories incorporate elements from the original source material, which is referred to as the “canon” of that fictional universe. The precise origins of fan culture are difficult to ascertain, but it is clear that from the earliest days of the novel, readers have sought to prolong the adventures of their favorite characters and disseminate these narratives among like-minded individuals. During the eighteenth century, fan fiction was viewed by contemporary writers as a means of enhancing their own popularity by building upon the works of others. However, many fan creators choose to disseminate their work freely and without charge, rather than attempting to profit from it.

The advent of internet culture has precipitated a shift in the manner in which individuals disseminate their fan fiction. Instead of relying on traditional methods such as print publications or physical sharing, many have turned to social networks as a platform for sharing their creative works. In this fan fiction, Frodo, the main character in *Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, perhaps ultimately did not choose to cross the sea to Valinor, and he might have been able to enter Hogwarts (A particular piece of fan fiction, entitled “Alternative Universe,” involves the introduction of a character into an alternative, popular fictional universe.). These descriptions are usually private and personal. It encompasses the emotional investment of the creator in the character and the aspiration for a positive resolution.

Richard Dawkins writes in “The Selfish Gene” that memes also propagate themselves through a process broadly referred to as imitation, facilitating point-to-point transmission between brains, thereby spreading within the meme pool. According to him, amidst the surge of ideas on the internet, two main trends can be observed: destruction and creation [2]. From this perspective, fans can be considered to be part of the transmission of information. The collective deconstruction of character images by creators leads to the reconstruction of character portrayals by readers. This reconstruction also affects all aspects of the characters themselves, which in turn affects the entire fan market.

As of today, 2 May 2023, over 300,000 people have gathered in Shanghai within a two-day period, all for one significant event: the Comiccup29 (also known as CP29). This is the largest fanfiction event in China, with over 4,800 booths in operation on a single day. In the application for stalls at CP29, it is stipulated that each stall must feature at least one fan fiction book or pamphlet. The San Diego International Comic-Con, the largest such event in

North America, attracted guests from over 80 countries and 135,000 fans in 2018. The total on-site spending at the event reached \$87 million, with a total socio-economic impact of \$147.1 million. In contrast, the Archive of Our Own (AO3), which was established in 2008, is a non-profit and open-source database for fan fiction. In 2019, the Hugo Awards bestowed the “Best Related Work” accolade upon AO3, thereby conferring this honor upon over four million fan creators.

2. Literature Review

Despite the significant economic benefits gained, academia still knows very little about fan fiction. The literature surrounding fan fiction can generally be categorized into the following three types: first, discussions on copyright infringement and the protection of original works; second, explorations of the creative motivations and expressive methods of fan creators; and third, case analyses of community marketing under fan fiction.

In this first category of works, the copyright of derivative works is generally considered to be unprotected. Even if derivative works do not infringe upon the copyright of the original work, commercial use of character portrayals, names, and other elements created in the original work may still constitute unfair competition [3]. In Japan, the primary origin of fan culture, the Intellectual Property High Court ruled in a 2020 judgment that “the fan comic in this case does not completely infringe upon the copyright of the original work. Based on the content of the comic, aside from aspects related to the basic setting, including the protagonist’s appearance, clothing, and other similarities to the original work, there are no similarities in other parts of the scenes and plot. The originality of its derivative creation should be fully recognized, and the defendant’s website’s unauthorized publication is prohibited.” In other words, whether a fan’s work infringes on the copyright of the original work does not conflict with whether its original aspects enjoy copyright protection.

The second category of works delves deeper into the fields of psychology, linguistics, and communication studies, often focusing on the exploration of the psychology of fan works and their creators. Research indicates that individuals who typically spend more time writing fan fiction tend to have higher levels of parasocial interaction and social belonging [4]. On the other hand, Rebecca W. Black investigates how online technology and fan culture offer a venue for young English language learners (ELL) to enhance their English language and writing proficiency [5].

Research of the third type leans more towards practice, facilitated by the strong aggregation and virality of user

communities, as well as the marketing models of brand communities and a consumer model that emphasizes experience, which promotes innovation in self-organizing community business models [6]. Sociologist Rheingold proposed the concept of “Virtual Community” in 1993, referring to a special relational network formed by people connected through the internet, transcending geographical limitations, and engaging in communication, sharing information and knowledge based on similar interests and emotional resonance [7]. This third type typically extends the second type of research by incorporating the concept of groups into the creation of roles.

A review of the existing literature reveals a notable absence of in-depth analysis and research on character representation in these works. In essence, the majority of fan works are recreations based on the character representations present in the original texts. Furthermore, some studies concentrate on the creators’ domain, whereas research on fan readers is comparatively limited. The aim of this paper is to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of fan fiction on social media by analyzing readers’ perceptions of character portrayals in both the source texts and fan fiction, as well as the psychological distinctions inherent in this recreation. The objective of this study is to investigate the perceptions of character representations held by online readers of both the original texts and fan literature. To this end, a questionnaire survey will be employed. The author presents two inquiries: firstly, whether there are any discernible differences in the portrayal of fan characters and the original characters, and secondly, what cognitive bias a character in an origin novel from those in fan fiction written from the perspective of online readers.

3. Methodology

This section describes the method selection and research design in the study. A quantitative research design was employed for this study, with content analysis conducted on selected comments from the origin novels and fan fiction. This section will provide a comprehensive overview of each research stage, including the sampling procedure, data collection methods, and analysis techniques.

In order to examine the cognitive bias of Chinese online readers with regard to character portrayal in original and fandom literature, the author elected to select the comments appended to popular Chinese original novels and fan fiction on the Internet between 2007 and 2023 for content analysis. Due to the extensive volume of material, the author selected three contemporary Chinese full-length novels for analysis: *Lord of the Mysteries*, *The King’s Avatar*, and *Daomu Biji*, whose large community of fanfiction

readers and creators still exists. Only comments exceeding 100 words in length and containing sufficient information were included in the study.

Initially, the inclusion criteria for the qualitative research will be divided into two groups. Group A is the comments under Original Novels. Its inclusion criteria should include (a) the work is a web novel of more than 10,000 words in length;(b) the story and characters are original;(c) the work is written in Chinese as a first language and(d) the reviewer provides a detailed analysis and exploration of the characters in the work over 30 words. Group B is the comments under fan fiction. Its inclusion criteria should include (a) Web novels of more than 1,000 words;(b) whose characters are based on existing literary characters;(c) the work is written in Chinese as a first language and(d) the reviewer provides a detailed analysis and exploration of the characters in the work over 20 words.

The unit of analysis is the characters that appear in each text, along with the words and phrases used to describe them. In accordance with the research questions, the authors proceeded to categorize the concepts in question based on the characters and character portrayals.

The majority of coding schemes are derived from one of three sources: data, existing relevant research, and established theory [8]. In considering the category of “character”, comments pertaining to the surnames of the principal characters in the text will be coded accordingly (e.g., Xiu Ye, Klein Moretti, Xie Wu). In contrast, the category of “character portrayals” is more detailed and focuses on the essential characteristics of the character, such as courage, thoughtfulness, and reliability. To ensure the validity and fairness of the coding process, the study selected two raters as coders, and the coders were given brief training was given to the coders. In the event of encountering ambiguous terminology during the coding process, the words in question will be adjusted in accordance with the prevailing standards and then recorded in order to guarantee the integrity and consistency of the code [9].

By the established coding rules, the author will undertake a detailed examination of each comment in the sample, recording the name of each character mentioned, as well as all words and phrases used to describe said character in relation to their traits [10].

4. Results

The content analysis yielded a total of 1,174 comments, which allowed for a total number of 231 words to be obtained as a result of the content analysis.

(1) *Lord of the Mysteries* In character-related comments, the main things readers said about the original novel’s Klein Moretti (198) were careful and restraint (41), lone-

liness (32), and effort and intelligence (30). The main things readers said about Klein Moretti in fan fiction (434) were that he was lovely (165), gentle (78), and powerful (69).

(2) *The King's Avatar* In character-related comments, the main things readers said about the original novel's Xiu Ye (106) were gentle (85), powerful (61), and mature (42). The main things readers said about Xiu Ye in fan fiction (165) were that he was lovely (85), cheap (84), and powerful (76).

(3) *Daomu Biji* In character-related comments, the main things readers said about the original novel's Xie Wu (106) were Innocence (47), gentle (34), followed by maturity and experience (43). The main things readers said about Xie Wu in fan fiction (165) were that he was kind (69), firm (39), and alienated (23).

Concurrently, within the commentary sections of fan fiction, the aforementioned characters are referenced, and other characters within the novels are depicted as engaging in intimate relationships with a high frequency, reaching as high as 34.33% of the total occurrences, with a notable prevalence of male couples. Furthermore, the three most popular Chinese web novel protagonists exhibit no overt indications of intimate relationships. In the original collection of comments, only seven instances of such relationships with other characters in the novel are documented.

5. Discussion

There are some discernible differences in the portrayal of fan characters and the original characters. The outcome is in accordance with the anticipated hypothesis. The loss and distortion of information during transmission has resulted in the reprocessing of information by fan creators, which has in turn led to a divergence in characterization between readers of fan fiction and readers of original novels. These acts of dissemination serve to retain certain character traits, which are subsequently reinforced in the reader's mind and eventually form an inherent label within the fandom community. Consequently, discrepancies in characterization are almost inevitable due to the influence of cognitive differences. However, this does not preclude the possibility of certain portrayals of the characters being enhanced.

To illustrate, Klein of *Lord of the Mysteries* evinces a conventional fan portrayal, combining elements of a black cat and octopus tentacles. This concept is only referenced a few times in the original text, such as Klein's interaction with the cat, and the octopus is not even mentioned (although *Lord of the Mysteries* draws inspiration from Cthulhu mythology). However, it was incorporated into a

traditional cartoon portrayal that eventually gained widespread distribution on the Chinese Internet. It is evident that the character portrayals derived from fan culture can exert a considerable influence on original novels in a reverse manner.

A comparison of the horizontal and vertical aspects of the reading process reveals that readers of network novels tend to focus more on the inner shaping and personal experience of characters, whereas those engaged with fan fiction demonstrate a greater interest in the distinctive character traits and intimate relationship of the characters, which they supplement with their own understanding. In conclusion, fan fiction can be defined as a process of deconstruction and reorganization of character portrayals.

In the case of the original works, the elements in question are, to some extent, both negative and positive, although the proportions of each are not identical. It is possible that some fan writers may simply disapprove of a minor plot point in the original work and may therefore choose to rewrite that particular part of the plot or segment. Some fan writers retain the character setup from the original but rewrite the entire worldview, plot, and other elements of the story.

The results of the experiment align with the insights presented by Henry Jenkins in his analysis of cultural poaching in the book *Textual Poachers*. In *Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, Jenkins introduces the concept of fans as active participatory creators, enthusiastic borrowers of material from film and television source texts, and textual poachers, who construct their own cultures. The data facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the psychology of fan creation, enhance characterization, stimulate user-generated content (UGC) activism and participation, inspire the operation of fan websites and related content, and ultimately enhance user satisfaction and the portrayal enhancement of the original intellectual property (IP).

The study employed a content analysis approach, which may be overly simplistic in its focus on words or phrases in isolation. This approach often ignores context, nuance, and ambiguity. Additionally, content analysis typically involves a degree of subjective interpretation, which can affect the reliability and validity of the results and conclusions. This can lead to various types of research bias and cognitive bias. Furthermore, manually coding large amounts of text is a time-consuming process, and it may be challenging to automate this process effectively.

The study is still susceptible to the influence of uncontrolled confounding variables. Specifically, the sequential relationship between reader reviews of the original characters and fan fiction cannot be assumed to be straightforward. Additionally, reviews by readers of the original

characters may be subject to influence from the creation of fan fiction. These effects can be mitigated and avoided by filtering comments with higher word counts where possible while maximizing the number of comments selected and increasing the corresponding response costs. This approach ensures the results remain valid for answering the research question.

The section ends with several recommendations for future research. Firstly, further research is needed to establish the extent to which fan-derived portrayals exert a reverse effect on the original. Secondly, future research should also employ a variety of research methods to corroborate the findings of this study. In conclusion, future research should continue to examine the similarities and differences between the communication of fan creations and other forms of communication.

6. Conclusion

This paper employs content analysis to examine the information characteristics of character portrayal reader comments on popular Chinese online novels and those containing fan themes. By disambiguating the reader's comments into utterances, calculating word frequency, and coding design, we present a summary of the differences in the character portrayals of readers when they read fan fiction and original novels. Although the characters in the fan and original novels are identical, there are nevertheless differences in their portrayals and characterizations. These are typically attributed to the loss and gain of information resulting from the redistribution of content. Furthermore, the character portrayal provides a basis for additional research into the creation of fan content. This

includes the ranking of the relative importance of different character label usage preferences and the analysis of the psychology of fan creation through the process and results of the content analysis method.

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