The Cultural Communication Mode of Cosplay of Language in Chinese Youth Groups

Ziyue Yu

College of Literature and Journalism, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China

Email: yuziyue0509@stu.scu.edu.cn

Abstract:

Cosplay of language is an online communication activity in which characters are described by words. The study mainly explores the communication mode of cosplay of language in Chinese youth groups under the background of the Internet, especially the aspects of Japanese ACGN culture that constitute the motivation of language cosplay participants. Through online interviews with 18 active users in the two sections of *Honor of Kings* and *Bungo Stray Dogs*, it is found that: first, Japanese ACGN culture greatly influenced the cultural aesthetic standards of cosplay of language participants; Second, cosplay of language provides the emotional experience that similar with discussing ACGN works with others, and becomes a platform for participants to convey the values under the two-dimensional culture; and lastly, cosplay of language is seen as an alternative to ACGN productions, offering new entertainment options. This study reveals that cosplay of language is a cultural product of the two-dimensional culture and the development of modern media, where participants' motivation is greatly influenced by Japanese ACGN culture. As a subculture, cosplay of language shows its unique significance on existence and development.

Keywords: Cosplay of language; ACGN culture; subculture; cultural transmission.

1. Introduction

Cosplay of language (CL), influenced by Japanese pop culture, is a form of game that interprets characters by words. It can be regarded as the localization of cosplay culture in China, which is common in network social platforms like QQ, Tieba, Weibo and Apps. At present, the mainstream view is to treat CL as a social means, so almost all the negative reports related to sociability, such as writing discrimination, property fraud, bad remarks and negative values that threaten teenagers' physical and mental health [1, 2]. Some reports even rise a kind of prejudice, regarding these problems as inevitable drawbacks of subculture.

CL was widely popular from 2012 to 2015 [3], but it remains a minority culture. Up to now, there is no literature related to CL on foreign websites, while there are 4 essays directly related to CL on CNKI. The research directions are mainly divided into two categories: The first type focuses on the culture, studying

the inherent textual characteristics of CL activities, and explains how the participants obtain the emotional experience of identity from it; The second category focuses on the sociability, studying the group characteristics of CL, which includes the causes of construction, consolidation requirements and community rules, and exploring the similarities and differences between CL groups and reality groups.

Chen Jiao outlined both two research directions in *Discourse Analysis of Cosplay of Language*. It proposes that CL, as an important representative of virtual culture, fails in getting away from the rules, cultural background and ideology of reality [4]. That essay provides a reference for realistic factors as well as the relationship between CL and the two-dimensional culture, so that lays a theoretical foundation for this study.

There are two essays that mainly focus on the culture, which provide the direction of the identification-based motivation analysis for this study. In *Cosplay of Language as a New Medium of Literature and Art*, Liu Xin starts from the CL group of *The King's Avatar* and explains that CL combines the characteristics of immersive narrative and interactive narrative. CL enables participants to realize self-participation and observation and realizes the localization of foreign culture in the context of non-native characters [5]. In *Generation and Reconstruction: A Study of Mediated Memory in Cosplay of Language Activities*, Gao Xu stated that CL activity is a process of mediating memory by connecting characters and participants with media. Through text creation, participants commemorate and reinvigorate characters. As a result, private memory and text identity are gradually transformed to public memory and identification respectively through media communication [6].

There is a document that mainly focuses on the sociability, as a supplement to the mode of CL cultural transmission. In *Research on the Communication Mechanism of Cosplay of Language in Online Community*, Zhang Jing elaborated on the important factors for the construction and consolidation of CL groups, which are closely related to reality: First, the construction of "virtual family relationship" is similar to the interpersonal relationship in the real world; Second, the example guidance of cultural works just like the ideological guidance in reality; Third, the group rules and thresholds follow the normative consciousness of the real society [7].

CL seems to be closely related to the relatively widespread cosplay culture, and its emergence must be the result of a variety of factors, which can be initially revealed from the motivation of the participants. In this study, active users of CL App (Celebrity Friends Circle) in the *Honor of Kings* area and *Bungo Stray Dogs* area were selected as samples

to conduct online interviews. Thus, people can understand the cultural transmission mode of CL among Chinese youth groups under the background of the Internet, especially how the Japanese ACGN culture affects the motivation and behavior of CL participants. At last, people can understand the significance of the existence of subcultures like CL and two-dimensional culture and accept and absorb the essence of foreign culture.

2. Cosplay of Language and Its Cultural Background

Originating from the Internet, CL is a kind of social activity which takes the network social platform as the carrier and literary deduction as the main communication mode. It develops with the Internet. Some studies show that the phenomenon of CL appeared in about 2004 on platforms such as Tieba and QQ and reached its peak around 2009 [7]. There are different opinions on the origin of CL. Some scholars believe that CL originated from foreign role-playing games, and it is an online activity developed by underline games under the influence of the Internet [4]. Other scholars also believe that CL is created by Chinese, which is derived from the two-dimensional culture of virtual network and has been developed in the three-dimensional direction [6]. However, without doubts, CL has been widely influenced by the two-dimensional culture, especially in 2015. At that time, many two-dimensional films and television works gained capital attention, and apps dedicated to serving CL have gradually appeared in the market, and CL has gradually shifted from open Internet platforms (QQ, Tieba and Weibo) to deeply immersive social software [4].

CL, which can be regarded as a cultural branch of cosplay, has similar deduction cores with cosplay activity. The differences are mainly in the form of character expression. For CL, people focus on online literary description. For cosplay, people focus on visual presentation, including both online social media communication and underline anime expos. But at their core, they're all role-plays with social functions. Based on their understanding of a particular character and the corresponding world view, CL players describe characters' status with words, like description of appearance, language, action, psychology and even the time and environment, which can be likened to the creation of novels.

CL contents are mainly divided into two categories: original and doujin. First, original contents mean the character characteristics and world view are created by CL participants themselves, similar to original novels, such as OC (Original Character, generally referring to the

ACGN character of personal original) creation. Second, doujin contents are based on the existing literary works, where people create or continue the stories according to the characters' setting and background, which is similar to fan-fiction. Therefore, in CL community, a hidden set of assessment exists. It is mainly used to examine whether participants follow setting as they acting. If the creation deviates from the setting, it will be called OOC (Out of Character). Gradually, more similar rules are risen and develop into a specialized system.

On popular social platforms (Tieba, Weibo, Celebrity Friends Circle, etc.), CL users have created many special literary terms. They use the word "pi" (means "skin" in English) to call the roles they are playing, the word "shang pi" ("shang" means "put on" in English) to describe the state of users acting like those roles, and the word "xia pi" ("xia" means "take off" in English) to represent the state of users themselves without the characters they are acting. Meanwhile, CL is a kind of role-playing communication. What users need to show is not the real personalities of users themselves, but the established or ideal virtual role. Besides, the way to win the favor in communication is not by their own charm, but by the degree of understanding of the roles they play. It is the performativity and virtuality that make CL different from usual social activities.

To sum up, CL should be regarded as a literary phenomenon. When discussing the significance of its existence, people should give due consideration to its cultural influence, rather than overemphasize its sociability.

3. Research Methods

The main research method is to sample the users of the *Honor of Kings* section and *Bungo Stray Dogs* section on an application specialized in serving CL called Celebrity Friends Circle. Interviewees were asked about original intention and the understanding of CL, and the degree of participating in ACGN activities. At present, 18 effective answers have been adopted.

The reasons for choosing the Japanese manga *Bungo Stray Dogs* and the domestic game *Honor of Kings* as the objects of investigation are: First, investigating under both Japanese and Chinese ACGN works at the same time can results more comprehensive. *Bungo Stray Dogs* is a representative work of Japanese ACGN culture, which includes novels, comics, animation, stage plays and games, and there is no domestic animation that can include these categories at present. Correspondingly, in the field of games, only *Honor of Kings* has a complete world view and character biographies, with a number of official comics, novels, film and television works (films such as *Chapter of Glory*, animation such as *Is the King*, musicals such

as *Pick up the Stars*, game CG, etc.). Obviously, they are similar in the mode of communication, so *Honor of Kings is* chosen to be the representative of domestic ACGN culture.

4. Research Findings and Discussion

According to the data, Japanese ACGN culture has greatly influenced the emergence of CL phenomenon, and these effects can be roughly summarized into three aspects: cultural aesthetic, emotional experience and entertainment choice. Moreover, *Bungo Stray Dogs* and *Honor of Kings* are two works from different countries and cultural backgrounds, but the feedback is similar.

4.1 Cultural Aesthetics

Cultural aesthetics refers to the perception of the beauty of culture itself, or the appreciation of it as an art form. People's aesthetic standards for two-dimensional characters and animation are frankly influenced by Japanese ACGN culture. This is the most frequently mentioned aspect by interviewees, with three main keywords – role, anime and doujin.

4.1.1 Role

To begin with, the most important keyword is "role". Interviewees show an appreciative attitude towards characters' settings (appearance, personality, experience, etc.), and therefore hope those roles can continue their life in the reality. In fact, the Japanese ACGN culture has a great influence on CL users when they choose roles to perform.

In the *Honor of Kings* section, more than half of the users said that their original choices are those roles of the Japanese ACGN works (such as *Demon Slayer*, *Touken Ranbu Online*, *Jujutsu Kaisen*, etc.), rather than roles of the *Honor of Kings*. When asked about the reason for playing the character, *Honor of Kings* user A said that he was "attracted by the charm of the character, therefore wanted to write something". User B said that "I stuck with it because I really loved some characters", and user C claimed that she wanted her favorite characters to "experience more things alive".

Similarly, users of the Bungo Stray Dogs section have similar statements. The user1 is a strong fan of the role of "Morikaki" in *Bungo Stray Dogs* and wants to "move him out of the two-dimensional space and make him more alive". User 2 also said that he was not satisfied with his favorite character being a "Paper Man" but wanted to "give them life and the most perfect ending". What's more, some interviewees are cosplay enthusiasts. In order to play their favorite characters better, they participate CL activities to obtain views and experience.

4.1.2 Anime

The second key word is "anime", which involves the world view and values of animation works. Animation (includes the world view, plot and role) has different value orientation and aesthetic view compared to the role. That's why anime and role are divided into two different key words.

Despite the fact that the users of the *Honor of Kings* section are performing game characters, the survey results show that they have a high degree of recognition of Japanese anime culture: 12 out of 18 people mentioned that they like manga. For instance, user D said that he "entered the circle which is more Japanese at first". Two other interviewees said that Japanese animation production is much better than domestic animation production.

Needless to say, 16 out of 18 users of the *Bungo Stray Dogs* section mentioned their love for manga. For example, user3 said that he was "exposed to CL in the childhood, enjoying watching *Detective Conan*, and then simply want to join some two-dimensional groups". "Chinese ACG culture is indeed weak compared to Japanese, but I am looking forward to its progress." said user4.

4.1.3 Doujin

The third key word is "doujin", that is, the second creation of ACGN works. The word was originally introduced from Japanese. In the two-dimensional culture, people are accustomed to regard the act of "second creation" as "cooking", "meal replacement" or "food production", and regard doujin works as a kind of spiritual food. For example, user E of the *Honor of Kings* section said frankly that the participation CL is "in order to read and create fungible stories for favorite CP". Moreover, some users are affected by the fan-fictions so that they join the *Honor of Kings*.

Actually, it is more common to witness this phenomenon in *Bungo Stray Dogs* section. As an example, user5 said that "CL can provide my favorite 'meal'", and another interviewee said that she was originally "read Japanese fan-fictions, so wanted to see the differences between domestic ones and Japanese ones".

4.2 Emotional Experience

Emotional experience, as the name suggests, is mental activity. CL users love a certain animation or character, not only because those cultural aesthetic factors above, but also due to emotional and value resonance. When they realized that participation in official ACGN cultural activities could no longer meet their emotional needs, they gradually shifted from passive acceptance of the values of their roles in ACGN culture to active output, and the most direct way of output was role-playing -- cosplay or CL. The findings focused on two types of emotional experience – a sense of belonging and self-esteem [8].

4.2.1 A sense of belonging

A sense of belonging, the desire to obtain or maintain certain social ties, is shown in the survey results as "people of the same taste or hobby", one of the definitions of "doujin" in Japanese. However, the "doujin" mentioned above focuses on cultural creation, and people of the same taste or hobby focuses on interpersonal relationship and emotional connection: First, people who have a common interest in cultural creation, representing the friendship; Second, people gather together because they love ACGN culture, which represents the recognition or appreciation of ACGN work, characters and the values behind it.

Japanese ideology is significantly different from that of China, but some of the values in Japanese ACGN culture (such as friendship, unity and perseverance) cater to the Chinese cultural context, so characters showing these values can also be welcomed. Examples are as follows. The user F of the *Honor of Kings* section said, he "simply added a group when the interest tribe brushed it," and got together with friends because of common interests. User G said that her original intention is to "meet more CL masters", and there are other users bluntly said that they join CL just to "find friends".

User 6 of *Bungo Stray Dogs* section said that he "want to live the life of playing CL with others", and user7 said that "at the beginning, it was because of making friends, and I want to interact with my favorite character and build a relationship."

4.2.2 Self-esteem

Self-esteem, which represents a positive self-awareness or a sense of achievement, is reflected as sharing and lyrical willingness in CL activities. Many interviewees hope to express their opinions and emotions through CL, or to make others love their favorite characters and ACGN works, or to pass on the morality and spirit they have experienced from ACGN works.

For example, user H of *Honor of Kings* section hopes to create "a good atmosphere that can bring others good experience of playing CL and exchange useful experience." User J said that her original intention is "to let more people find the diversity of the character from the character's perspective as much as possible", so that more people can understand those merits and positive meanings.

The user 7 of *Bungo Stray Dogs* section said that he had a "competitive heart". "I found that people around me have written so well why I can't, and then I have been writing," said user 7. User 8 focus on the value of the character's

existence, "this role can bring a certain positive value, such as positive, responsible and so on."

4.3 Entertainment Choice

Entertainment choice refers to the fact that users will use CL as a supplement to ACGN works, and their outputs will form part of ACGN culture. First of all, it is based on the limitation of the original works. For example, an animation's official content must be limited, but fans look forward to the subsequent development of the story, so they turn to find other alternatives. At this moment, CL is an apparently good choice. Secondly, it is also based on the needs of cultural aesthetics and emotional experience. The three are mutually developing relations. Cultural aesthetic and emotional experience are expected to constitute the motivation of entertainment choice, and people also achieve aesthetic and emotional gains under the chosen entertainment.

According to the results, CL mainly bears the substitute of two hobbies – games and literature, which is very similar to the definition of CL itself.

4.3.1 Game

The "game" mainly refers to "role-playing", which is a general term. It involves the nature of "Game" in ACGN, and becomes a substitute for the original ACGN works, which is an entertainment way that integrates experience and production.

The user K of the *Honor of Kings* section briefly described his journey from "enjoying role-playing games in Tieba" to "joining CL in QQ groups", and finally fully entered the "this game field called CL". In short, he wanted to "find a substitute for deductive games". There are also two users who were introduced by a friend to participate in role- playing games and began to try CL after finding it interesting.

Besides, user 9 in B*ungo Stray Dogs* section said he himself like "wordplay stuff". "Through the two-dimensional culture, I was exposed to role-playing games, it is very interesting. Then gradually, I came into contact with CL", user 10 said.

4.3.2 Literature

Literature can be regarded as one of the main characteristics of CL, so it attracts many literature lovers. To some degree, the text output of CL users can be regarded as "Novel" in ACGN, enriching the content of ACGN culture. In *Honor of Kings* section, user L said that she hoped to "learn more knowledge about CL" and hone her writing skills, and user M clearly expressed his love for "writing". User 11 of the *Bungo Stray Dogs* section said that she is "always willing to write some short plots and form a

deeper understanding of the role by constant thinking". Meanwhile, she can "pretend to be artistic". Of course, there are users simply "generating electricity for love", and carry out some fan-fictions.

4.4 Discussion

To sum up, for the domestic CL participants, Japanese ACGN culture has greatly induced their aesthetic needs. And in the process of playing the role, they are eager to convey the values gained from their own cultural background or ACGN works. In addition, they are not satisfied with the existing content of ACGN works but take CL as a substitute to build a virtual parallel world. Thus, CL not only exists as a means of social communication, but also provides a platform for the exchange of spiritual civilization among Chinese youth. Its existence and development are of great significance.

Of course, there were some problems with the investigation. For example, the motivation of looking for "people of the same taste or hobby" includes both the love of ACGN works and the need to establish relationships. However, it is difficult for interviewees to express whether they are more inclined to "become a certain character" or "look forward to the social interaction of common topics". This study made a contextual analysis and divided them into categories according to the answers to other subsequent questions, but there would still be slight subjective influence. Additionally, when asked about "understanding of the CL", some respondents' answers were too concise or official, and did not reflect their own personal ideas, of which reference value would be relatively low.

5. Conclusion

The research shows that, from the perspective of participation motivation, the emergence and prevalence of the CL phenomenon in China is greatly influenced by the Japanese ACGN culture. First, users' aesthetics are influenced by Japanese ACGN culture. Second, in order to meet broader aesthetic and emotional needs, people are not limited to passive acceptance but turn to output the values contained in the two-dimensional culture. Therefore, they choose C as an additional experience mode or substitute for ACGN culture. The existence of CL is not accidental, but the result of the introduction of Japanese ACGN culture into China, the development of media, the development of Chinese youth's spiritual civilization and many other factors. In conclusion, CL is a combination of two-dimensional culture and modern media. As a subculture, it bears many functions such as aesthetics, emotion and entertainment, and provides a platform for emotional exchange and cultural output for people who love ACGN

culture.

The main contribution of this paper is to clarify the great significance and multi-faceted influence of Japanese ACGN culture on CL activities, which is conducive to the public to consider it as a cultural phenomenon, rather than simply judging it from social means. However, the current research still has problems such as insufficient samples and spatio-temporal constraints, and it is not clear whether the three-dimensional section of CL is also affected by Japanese ACGN culture. Besides, the significance of sub-culture is not comprehensive. Thus, future investigation samples can make breakthroughs in ACGN types to better show the overall picture of cultural transmission.

References

[1] The Procuratorate Daily. Beware of "Cosplay of Language" service injury to minors, China Youth Network, May 24, 2024.

[2] Zhang Pingzhou. "Cosplay of Language" industry chaos, urgent need to strengthen supervision, Guangxi News Network, May 23, 2024.

[3] Xie Kurong. For nine years, I used words to play someone else, Sohu, December 5, 2022.

[4] Chen Jiao. Discourse analysis of Cosplay of Language. Sichuan International Studies University, 2019.

[5] Liu Xin, Hong Ruocheng. Cosplay of Language as a new media literature and art - An investigation based on the phenomenon of Cosplay of Language in The King's Avatar. Network Literature Research, 2023(01): 92-108.

[6] Gao Xu. Generation and reconstruction: A study of mediated memory in Cosplay of Language activities - A case study of parent group of Hello Old Time. New Media Studies, 2024, 10(01): 60-65+69.

[7] Zhang Jing. Research on the communication mechanism of Cosplay of Language in online community - taking "Gong Dou" role play as an example. Shi Ting, 2020(05): 187-189.

[8] Reysen, S., Plante, C. N., Roberts, S. E., & Gerbasi, K. C. "Coming Out" as an anime fan: cosplayers in the anime fandom, fan disclosure, and well-being. 2018 (05).