

Gender heterogeneity and social imagination in ABO fiction

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Abstract. As a form of heterotopian narrative within female-oriented online literature, ABO fiction reconstructs gender roles and social power relations through its triadic gender system of Alpha, Beta, and Omega. Based on an analysis of 35 texts and 279 survey responses, this paper examines the differences in physiological traits, personality types, and social status within ABO narratives. The power dichotomy between Alpha and Omega, alongside the marginalization of Beta, mirrors structures of oppression and resistance found in real-world gender systems. Meanwhile, non-mainstream pairings (such as AA and OO) offer narrative possibilities for gender equality. Although the entertainment-oriented nature of these stories may dilute their critical edge, ABO fiction nonetheless provides a space for young women to project emotional desires and engage in gendered social imagination.

Keywords: ABO fiction, gender heterogeneity, power dynamics, social imagination, online literature

1. Introduction

ABO (Alpha/Beta/Omega) fiction, as a significant subgenre of online literature, has rapidly developed since its emergence in Western fan communities around 2010. Its distinctive gender configuration and power dynamics have attracted widespread global attention. Within this fictional framework, in addition to the traditional binary of male and female, humanity is further divided into three “primary genders”: Alpha, Beta, and Omega—forming a six-gender system. This system reshapes gender order through imagined physiological characteristics, social structures, and power relations, thereby constructing a heterotopian space for readers to explore gender politics, social hierarchy, and identity.

ABO fiction initially gained popularity in Western fan communities, especially accumulating a large volume of works on platforms such as AO3 (Archive of Our Own) and Wattpad. Its dissemination reveals a mode of cross-cultural reinvention: the earliest ABO fanfics were based on Western television series such as *Supernatural* and *Sherlock*, gradually developing into a narrative mode rich with gender-political metaphors [1]. This setting extends beyond male pregnancy (Mpreg), pheromones, and mating marks, centering primarily on power relations to probe deeper issues of gender difference and social inequality [2]. In Western academia, ABO is regarded as a cultural phenomenon that simultaneously critiques and reproduces patriarchy. Kristina Busse [3] argues that ABO fiction, by intensifying gender traits, renders visible issues of power structures and gender-based violence, while also potentially reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes. Marianne Gunderson [4] further contends that the gender-heterogeneous structure of ABO provides readers with a distinctive lens through which to reflect on the interrelations among gender, power, and desire.

In East Asia, the ABO framework was first introduced through Japanese manga [5] and quickly gained significant traction in original Chinese online literature. Female-oriented reading communities—most notably Jinjiang Literature City and Changpei Literature—have become major incubators for ABO fiction. According to incomplete statistics, more than 10,000 ABO-themed works have been published on the Jinjiang platform alone, including many popular titles with over one hundred million points and bookmarks. The widespread popularity of ABO fiction in China is primarily attributed to its distinctive gender narratives, which fulfill young female readers’ emotional desire for diverse gender relationships and power equality. In these texts, the traditional binary opposition between male and female is disrupted, allowing readers to imagine and experiment with alternative gender relations and modes of intimacy through a fictional gender system [6]. However, ABO fiction has also sparked controversy due to its sensationalist and entertainment-oriented features. Some scholars argue that while it subverts conventional gender order, it may simultaneously reproduce the very patriarchal power logic it seeks to critique [7].

Compared with the growing body of theoretical research on ABO fiction abroad, Chinese academia has yet to offer systematic engagement with the topic. Current domestic literature tends to focus on fan culture as a whole, with the ABO setting often treated as a marginal phenomenon. Even when academic papers touch upon gender issues in ABO fiction, they often

remain at the level of surface description, lacking theoretical depth and cross-textual comparison. For instance, some studies have explored metaphors of pheromones and structures of sexual power in ABO narratives, yet they fail to contextualize these analyses within the specific framework of original Chinese online literature. Moreover, research into the social psychology and cultural needs of ABO readers, as well as the dissemination mechanisms on digital platforms, remains absent. This research gap calls for greater academic attention to the cultural value, social impact, and potential for gender discourse reconstruction embodied in ABO fiction in China.

As a subcultural phenomenon within online literature, the popularity of ABO fiction reflects contemporary youth's desire to explore issues of gender, emotion, and power, while also revealing how digital platforms shape modes of literary production and consumption. Chinese online literature has long been characterized by its female orientation, fast-paced narratives, and emotional appeal. ABO fiction has flourished within this cultural environment, and its diversified gender pairings and plot designs have made it an important vehicle for articulating gender issues in digital culture. Investigating the gender narratives of ABO fiction not only helps illuminate how online literature mirrors shifts in social gender perceptions but also enriches the interdisciplinary dialogue between gender studies and literary studies.

In light of this, the present study focuses on original Chinese ABO fiction and undertakes a systematic analysis from three dimensions: gender construction, power dynamics, and social imagination. Through close reading of 35 representative texts, supplemented by 279 valid questionnaire responses, this paper seeks to uncover the uniqueness of gender narratives in ABO fiction and their ruptures with—or continuities of—traditional gender norms. The innovation of this study lies in three main aspects: first, it selects original Chinese ABO fiction as the research corpus, centering on the local context to address a gap in domestic scholarship; second, it adopts a mixed-methods approach combining textual analysis with questionnaire data, balancing qualitative and quantitative perspectives to provide a comprehensive picture of textual features and reader reception; third, through the lens of gender heterogeneity, it explores how ABO fiction, despite its entertainment-oriented narrative, articulates demands for gender equality and bears potential social significance—offering new theoretical insights for the study of online literature and gender culture.

2. Research design

This study aims to investigate the gender construction and social imagination within original Chinese ABO fiction by analyzing its textual features, power dynamics, and patterns of reader reception. To this end, a mixed-methods approach is adopted, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Through the integration of literature review, textual analysis, and questionnaire survey, the study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the gender narratives and cultural significance of ABO fiction in Chinese online literature.

The theoretical framework of this study draws primarily from gender studies, online literature studies, and narratology, with the research methods designed to balance theoretical depth and empirical validity. First, the literature review establishes a solid theoretical foundation. Relevant scholarly works on ABO settings, fan culture, and gender heterogeneity were collected through searches in databases such as CNKI, Google Scholar, and JSTOR. This process helped to synthesize existing research findings, identify gaps, and clarify the academic positioning of the present study.

Second, textual analysis constitutes the core methodology of this research. The analysis focuses on the construction of gender roles and the representation of power relations in ABO fiction. A total of 35 representative Chinese original ABO novels were selected as the sample for close reading. The analysis concentrates on aspects such as character design, physiological traits, social status, gender interaction patterns, and narrative structure. Both inductive and deductive strategies were employed: common features were summarized from the textual corpus, while cultural metaphors and social implications were examined through critical interpretation.

In addition, to supplement the findings from textual analysis and gain deeper insight into the cultural and psychological profiles of ABO readers, a questionnaire survey was designed and administered. The survey covered respondents' demographic information, reading habits, textual preferences, and gender consciousness. It was distributed online via platforms such as WeChat, Douban, Xiaohongshu, and reader communities of online literature. A total of 279 valid responses were collected, with young women aged 18 to 29 accounting for 72.4% of the sample. Descriptive statistical analysis was used to interpret the data and present the demographic characteristics and cultural demands of ABO fiction readers.

To ensure the representativeness and diversity of the research sample, the following criteria were used in the selection of texts: (1) all works must be original Chinese online literature explicitly employing the ABO setting; (2) the sample must include a variety of gender pairings, including mainstream configurations such as male A/male O and female A/male O, as well as non-mainstream pairings (e.g., female A/female O, B/O); (3) all texts must be published on major female-oriented platforms such as Jinjiang Literature City and Changpei Literature, and possess high readership or collection counts to ensure a broad audience base. Based on these criteria, 35 texts published between 2015 and 2024 were ultimately selected as the research sample. These works not only represent the classic narrative modes of the ABO setting but also reflect recent trends in challenging and reconstructing traditional gender order.

Table 1. Corpus of fictional texts selected for this study

No	Title	Type	Author
1	Renyu Xianluo (The Fall of the Merman)	Male A – Male O	Lin Qian
2	Chui'er Zhishi (The Lop-Eared Butler)	Male A – Male O	Lin Qian
3	Riluo Dadao (Sunset Boulevard)	Male A – Male O	Ka Bichou
4	Dingji Lüeshizhe (Top Predator)	Male A – Male O	Shui Qiancheng
5	Weishenme Zhezhong A Ye Neng You O (Why Can This Kind of A Have an O?)	Male A – Male O	Tunan Jing
6	Wenzhu, Ni Keyi (Chuanshu) (Steady Now, You Can Do It [Transmigration])	Male A – Male O	Tong Ke
7	Dingji Youbu Gongshi (Top Luring Formula)	Male A – Male O	Songzi Cha
8	Wo Xihuan Ni de Xinxisu (I Like Your Pheromones)	Male A – Male O	Yin Luxing
9	Xiaoxingxing (Little Asteroid)	Male A – Male O	Weifeng Jixu
10	Busi Zhe (The Undying One)	Male A – Male O	Huai Shang
11	Mojituo yu Cha (Mojito and Tea)	Male A – Male O	Zi Lu
12	Shaowang Jiju (A Few Less Barks)	Male A – Male O	Bing Kuai'er
13	ABO Tenong Xinxisu (ABO Extra-Strong Pheromones)	Male A – Male O	Mu Sanguan
14	Liang A Xiangfeng Bi You Yi O (When Two Alphas Meet, There Must Be One O)	Male A – Male O	Mu Sanguan
15	Qingleng Alpha de Heilian O Gonglue Jihua (The Cold Alpha's Black Lotus Omega Strategy Plan)	Male A – Male O	Siwen Youliao
16	Nijiu (Drunken Drowning)	Male A – Male O	Naikou Ka
17	Jinshi Fangu (Foul Play Forbidden)	Male A – Male O	Lü Tianyi
18	Qiangzhi Biaoji (Forced Marking)	Male A – Male O	Chi Ranye
19	Goubing (Stigma)	Male A – Male A	Chi Zongzha
20	Chenshang (Old Wound)	Male A – Male B	Huinan Que
21	Anhe Changming (The Hidden River Everbright)	Male A – Male B	Leng Shan Jiumu
22	Wanmei Ouhe (Perfect Coupling)	Male A – Female O	Jiu Jie Huanfang
23	Shenjiao Tiruǎn Nan Omega (Delicate and Tender Male Omega)	Female A – Male O	Hong Ci Bei
24	Baitao Wulong (White Peach Oolong)	Female A – Male O	Xi Wen
25	Baiyueguang Omega Zong Xiang Yongyou Wo (The White Moonlight Omega Always Wants Me)	Female A – Male O	Gezi Buhui Gugugu
26	Yu Ni Zhaozhao Mumù (To Be With You Morning and Night)	Female A – Female O	Li Sinuo
27	Wufa Jujue (Unable to Refuse)	Female A – Male O	Bailu Wei Shuang
28	Yurong (Down Feathers)	Male O – Male O	Wan Feng
29	Ni Suanshenme Nüwang (What Kind of Queen Do You Think You Are?)	Male O – Male O	Shihua Luofan
30	Qingcha Tianjiu (Light Tea, Sweet Wine)	Male O – Male O	Yue Ban Ding
31	Xiyang Zai Chimù Zhong Siqu (The Sunset Dies in the Twilight)	Male B – Female O	Chen Hunxian
32	Yige Bei Fengkuang Qiulai de Beta (A Beta Madly Pursued)	Beta Top – Alpha Bottom	Chou Chuan
33	Dang Wo Bei Omega Gongle Hou (After I Was Topped by an Omega)	Omega Top – Alpha Bottom	Gu Jin Xian
34	Yaohen (Bite Mark)	D/S	Weifeng Jixu
35	Qing Kongzhizhu Ni de Xiangdaosu (Please Restrain Your Guide Pheromones)	Sentinel–Guide	Qingmei Jiang

As shown in Table 1, the majority of the selected texts adopt the male A – male O pairing (24 titles), while works featuring female A – male O and female A – female O pairings are comparatively fewer (4 and 3 titles, respectively). In addition, 4 works center on Beta characters and adopt a “non-binary gender” narrative structure. This distribution reflects the dominant and marginal trends in gender imagination within current ABO fiction writing.

By integrating textual analysis and questionnaire data, this study achieves an organic combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, enhancing both the depth and breadth of the research. However, certain limitations remain. First, the

selection of sample texts was primarily based on online popularity, which may have excluded lesser-known yet innovative works. Second, the questionnaire was distributed through online platforms, resulting in a sample heavily skewed toward young female readers, which may not fully capture the cultural attitudes of the broader readership. Future research may consider improving sample diversity and refining methodological design, such as incorporating in-depth interviews or cross-cultural comparisons, to enhance generalizability and explanatory power. Nevertheless, the multi-method research design of this study provides strong support for understanding the gender narratives of ABO fiction and its sociocultural implications. Through a dual-dimensional analysis of both texts and readers, this paper seeks to reveal the unique cultural value of ABO fiction within Chinese online literature and its potential contributions to the discourse on gender equality.

3. Discussion and analysis: gender heterogeneity and power dynamics in ABO fiction

3.1. Binary gender roles in ABO fiction

The narrative core of ABO fiction is built upon the oppositional structure between the Alpha and Omega genders. As two extremes within a fictional world, these gender categories exhibit marked differences in physiological makeup, physical appearance, personality traits, and social status. Together, they constitute a symbolic and hierarchical gender system. This system not only intensifies narrative tension but also serves as a metaphorical and exaggerated reflection of real-world gender power relations.

3.1.1. Physiological characteristics of alpha and omega

Table 2. Physiological structures of the three gender roles in ABO fiction

Gender Category		Possesses Penis	Possesses Vagina	Reproductive Cavity (Womb-like)
Alpha	Alpha Male ✓	Large, highly functional	×	No reproductive cavity; no reproductive capacity.
	Alpha Female ✓	Second largest after Alpha (Male)	✓	Degenerated reproductive cavity; very weak reproductive capacity.
Beta	Beta Male ✓	Moderate size	×	Smaller reproductive cavity; relatively weak reproductive capacity.
	Beta Female ×	None	✓	Normal reproductive cavity; capable of normal reproduction.
Omega	Omega Male ✓	Usually smaller/slimmer	×	Intact reproductive cavity; strong reproductive capacity.
	Omega Female ×	None	✓	Intact reproductive cavity; strong reproductive capacity.

Table 3. Physical features of alpha and omega characters

	Alpha	Omega
Body	Tall and well-built	Slender and thin
	Muscular physique	Unclear or subtle muscular definition
	Firm waist, no excess fat	Slim waist
	Strong and long legs	Attractive lines in legs/arms
	Hips rarely described	Perky, rounded hips
Skin	Male Alphas typically have darker, natural or tan skin with calluses; females are relatively fair-skinned	Cold, fair, delicate skin; pale as snow
	Males are handsome; females are stunning	Pretty
Facial Features	Cold, angular features; sharp and chiseled facial lines	Small, narrow face, palm-sized
	High nasal bridge	Delicate, upturned nose
	Thin lips with sharp lines	Plump, pale pink lips
	Sharp, well-defined eyes and brows	Refined, deep-set eyes and brows
	Eyelashes rarely described	Long, thick, curled eyelashes
Expression	Cold, fierce, dominant, and arrogant; alternatively calm, composed, and aristocratic as a superior type	Lively and cute; either sweet and gentle, or quietly resilient with a sense of vulnerability
Aura	Males exude strong hormonal tension; females are typically cold and poised—both radiate intimidation	Possess a fatal charm and allure, provoking imagination and desire

As shown in Table 2 and 3, the physiological differences between Alpha and Omega in ABO fiction serve as the biological foundation for gendered power disparities. Alphas are typically portrayed as possessing robust physiques and a high capacity for pheromone secretion. These traits not only reinforce their physiological dominance but also provide narrative justification for power hierarchies within the story. In contrast, regardless of biological sex, Omegas are consistently depicted as having a fully developed reproductive cavity and pronounced fertility. The narrative device of the “heat period” (estrus) further accentuates their dependence on and vulnerability to Alphas. The detailed physiological descriptions in Table 2 can be summarized as follows: Alphas possess stronger sexual function but lack reproductive capacity; Omegas, by contrast, are characterized primarily by heightened reproductive potential. Betas, whose physiological structure closely resembles that of real-world human sexes, lack any clear biological advantage or distinctiveness. This contrast is further amplified through visual representation. The Alpha is often associated with “strength” and “sternness,” while the Omega is closely linked to traits such as “slenderness,” “delicacy,” and “pure desire.”

3.1.2. Personality traits of alpha and omega

Personality is a key component of character construction. By comparing the personality traits of Alphas and Omegas, one can better understand their respective gendered positions within the ABO world. Based on an extensive review of texts, Table 4 summarizes the primary personality characteristics associated with Alpha and Omega characters, categorizing them into three overarching types—“externally cold,” “externally warm,” and “externally hot”—along with several subtypes. This classification offers a crucial foundation for analyzing the contrasts and oppositional dynamics between these two gender types.

Table 4. Summary of personality types of alpha and omega characters

Alpha Personality	Type	Characteristics	Textual Examples
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Externally Cold	Aloof and Abstinent	Cold and abstinent like an iceberg; career-focused; rarely opens up to others emotionally.	Renyu Xianluo (The Fall of the Merman), Chui'er Zhishi (The Lop-Eared Butler)
	Dominant and Overbearing	Strong-willed and intolerant of disobedience; possesses a strong sense of control and possessiveness; often conceals interest in the Omega with indifference or sarcasm.	Dingji Lüeshizhe (Top Predator), ABO Tenong Xinxisu (ABO Extra-Strong Pheromones)
	Scheming and Forbearing	Calm and composed on the surface, but deeply obsessed with the Omega; excels at protecting and planning for them in secret.	Zhaomu (Dawn and Dusk)
	Gentle and Gentlemanly	Gentle and considerate; attentive to manners and respect; avoids excessive dominance; carefully attends to the Omega's feelings.	Wanmei Ouhe (Perfect Coupling), Riluo Dadao (Sunset Boulevard), Weishenme Zhezong A Ye Neng You O (Why Can This Kind of A Have an O?)
	Steady and Mature	Calm, composed, and responsible; especially attentive to the Omega; gives off a sense of reliability and reassurance.	Wo Xihuan Ni de Xinxisu (I Like Your Pheromones), Wenzhu, Ni Keyi (Chuanshu) (Steady Now, You Can Do It [Transmigration])
Externally Warm	Free-spirited and Unconventional	Casual and uninhibited; rejects tradition and constraint; flirtatious and teasing in speech; often portrayed as a roguish figure.	Baiyueguang Omega Zong Xiang Yongyou Wo (The White Moonlight Omega Always Wants Me)
	Humorous and Playful	Cheerful and lively; uses humor to entertain the Omega and create a lighthearted atmosphere.	Wo Xihuan Ni de Xinxisu (I Like Your Pheromones)
	Loyal and Protective	Devoted and faithful to the Omega; willingly dependent and submissive; takes care of the Omega's needs wholeheartedly with deep attachment.	Shaowang Jiju (A Few Less Barks)
Omega Personality	Pure and Devoted	Emotionally direct and single-minded toward the Omega; innocent and sincere in expressing love, without schemes or pretense.	Xiaoxingxing (Little Asteroid)
	Type	Characteristics	Textual Examples
	Independent and Resilient	Self-reliant and tenacious; often possesses their own skills and ambitions; does not easily rely on dominant Alphas.	Dingji Lüeshizhe (Top Predator), ABO Tenong Xinxisu (ABO Extra-Strong Pheromones), Chui'er Zhishi (The Lop-Eared Butler), Liang A Xiangfeng Bi You Yi O (When Two Alphas Meet, There Must Be One O), Wanmei Ouhe (Perfect Coupling)
Externally Cold	Aloof and Abstinent	Appears cold and distant; keeps Alphas at arm's length, showing apparent disdain.	Busi Zhe (The Undying One), Wenzhu, Ni Keyi (Chuanshu) (Steady Now, You Can Do It [Transmigration])
	Naive and Defenseless	Innocent and kind-hearted; easily trusts others; completely defenseless around Alphas; highly dependent.	Wo Xihuan Ni de Xinxisu (I Like Your Pheromones), Renyu Xianluo (The Fall of the Merman)
	Self-deprecating and Reticent	Sensitive and gentle; deeply attentive and accommodating toward the Alpha; often feels unworthy and tends to avoid closeness.	Riluo Dadao (Sunset Boulevard)
Externally Warm	Virtuous and Gentle	Cares for the Alpha's daily life; tender and considerate; like an ideal house-spouse, attentive and meticulous.	Chui'er Zhishi (The Lop-Eared Butler), Yu Ni Zhaozhao Mumù (To Be With You Morning and Night), Weishenme Zhezong A Ye Neng You O (Why Can This Kind of A Have an O?)

Externally Hot	Cheerful and Outgoing	Extroverted and sunny; enthusiastic and optimistic; radiates warmth and joy to the Alpha.	Qioufa Faze (Courtship Law), Baitao Wulong (White Peach Oolong)
	Tsundere and Explosive	Internally fond of the Alpha but verbally combative; often acts tough to conceal true feelings.	Dingji Youbu Gongshi (Top Luring Formula), Mojituo yu Cha (Mojito and Tea)

Alpha personalities in ABO fiction are largely characterized by traits of dominance and leadership. Across numerous texts, they exhibit diverse features such as aloof abstinence, domineering assertiveness, and gentle gentlemanliness, yet all consistently demonstrate initiative and control within relationships. For instance, the male Alpha in Chui'er Zhishi (The Lop-Eared Butler) combines a cold exterior with a scheming and patient inner nature, embodying a complex interplay of dominance and protection. Omegas, in contrast, display a broader spectrum of personality types. They include traditionally "feminine" traits like innocence, kindness, and gentle caring, as well as newer archetypes such as independent resilience and tsundere liveliness. However, even among the "independent" Omegas who emphasize autonomy, physiological traits such as the "heat period" often compel them to submit to Alpha dominance. The Omega protagonist in Renyu Xianluo (The Fall of the Merman), for example, strives to maintain independence but loses agency during the heat, reflecting the inherent tension in gender relations.

3.1.3. Social status of alpha and omega

When examining the social status of Alphas and Omegas in ABO fiction, occupational roles serve as a key entry point. Occupations not only directly reflect a character's position within the social hierarchy but also indirectly reveal how gender roles correspond to power distribution and resource control. Based on 23 popular ABO novels, this study systematically organizes the occupational settings of Alphas and Omegas, resulting in the occupational distribution presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Common occupational roles of alpha and omega

Title	Gender Combination	Alpha	Omega
Renyu Xianluo (The Fall of the Merman)	Male A – Male O	Tactical Command Leader	Merman Assault Operative
Chui'er Zhishi (The Lop-Eared Butler)	Male A – Male O	Chamber of Commerce President	Stay-at-home Husband
Riluo Dadao (Sunset Boulevard)	Male A – Male O	Senior Officer of the Asian Alliance, former Army Colonel	Unemployed Drifter
Weishenme Zhezhong A Ye Neng You O (Why Can This Kind of A Have an O?)	Male A – Male O	Doctor	Stay-at-home Husband
Wenzhu, Ni Keyi (Chuanshu) (Steady Now, You Can Do It [Transmigration])	Male A – Male O	Infamous Actor	Top Celebrity Idol
Dingji Lüeshizhe (Top Predator)	Male A – Male O	Executive Director of Xingzhou Group	Rare Earth Researcher
Dingji Youbu Gongshi (Top Luring Formula)	Male A – Male O	Student	Student
Wo Xihuan Ni de Xinxisu (I Like Your Pheromones)	Male A – Male O	CEO of Lu Corporation	Poor Student
Xiaoxingxing (Little Asteroid)	Male A – Male O	Music Superstar	New Actor
Busi Zhe (The Undying One)	Male A – Male O	Special Forces Captain	Team Member
Mojituo yu Cha (Mojito and Tea)	Male A – Male O	CEO	Florist
Shaowang Jiju (A Few Less Barks)	Male A – Male O	Pseudo-weak Student	School Bully
ABO Tenong Xinxisu (ABO Extra-Strong Pheromones)	Male A – Male O	Young CEO	Young CEO
Liang A Xiangfeng Bi You Yi O (When Two Alphas Meet, There Must Be One O)	Male A – Male O	School Bully	Top Student
Qingleng Alpha de Heilian O Gonglue Jihua (The Cold Alpha's Black Lotus Omega Strategy Plan)	Male A – Male O	CEO	Ordinary Person
Xinxisu Shuo Women Bukexing (Pheromones Say We Are Impossible)		School Bully	Art Specialty Student

Nijiu (Drunken Drowning)	Male A – Male O	CEO	Lawyer
Jinzhi Fangu (Foul Play Forbidden)	Male A – Male O	CEO	Racecar Driver
Shenjiao Tiruan Nan Omega (Delicate and Tender Male Omega)	Female A – Male O	Federation's Strongest Female Warrior	Interstellar Commander
Wanmei Ouhe (Perfect Coupling)	Male A – Female O	Divine Servant	Mecha
Baiyueguang Omega Zong Xiang Yongyou Wo (The White Moonlight Omega Always Wants Me)	Female A – Female O	Student	Student
Yu Ni Zhaozhao Mumù (To Be With You Morning and Night)	Female A – Female O	Family Business Heir	Family Business Heir

In terms of occupation and social class, Alphas are typically assigned high-power, high-resource professional roles such as military officers, entrepreneurs, and scientists, highlighting their dominant status. For example, the Alpha in Dingji Lüeshizhe (Top Predator) is described as a "predator of genetic dividends," symbolizing a high monopoly over social resources. Conversely, Omegas tend to occupy dependent or service-oriented roles, such as househusbands, artists, or ordinary employees, reflecting their disadvantaged position within the social hierarchy. The Omega character in Riluo Dadao (Sunset Boulevard) is unemployed and situated at the bottom of society, relying on the economic and emotional support of their Alpha partner. This occupational distribution not only reflects the gender power inequalities within the ABO worldview but also mirrors stereotypical gender divisions in real society.

In summary, ABO novels construct an extreme gender order through the binary depiction of Alphas and Omegas in terms of physiological traits, personality characteristics, and social status. Alphas, as symbols of strength and dominance, stand in sharp contrast to the softness and dependency of Omegas, reinforcing power disparities in gender relations. Although some texts attempt to grant Omegas agency and rebellious consciousness, overall, the gender construction in ABO fiction continues to perpetuate a power logic rooted in biological essentialism. This setup serves both as a source of narrative tension and as a metaphor for gender politics.

3.2. Gender power dynamics in ABO novels

ABO novels reconstruct the relationship between gender and power through their unique ternary gender system. On one hand, this setting breaks through the traditional male/female binary framework in society, providing rich imaginative space for the fluidity and diversity of gender roles. On the other hand, it simultaneously reaffirms and even reinforces hierarchical power structures, biologizing and institutionalizing relationships of dominance and subordination. Building on the analysis of power dynamics within the mainstream binary gender combinations formed by Alphas and Omegas, this study further examines power operations in non-mainstream gender combinations such as Alpha/Beta, Omega/Beta, Alpha/Alpha, and Omega/Omega, revealing the multifaceted constructions of gender and power relations in ABO novels.

The power structure within the ABO setting is first established through physiological mechanisms. The Alpha's pheromones, heat cycles, and marking behaviors constitute an overwhelming physiological advantage over the Omega. In Renyu Xianluo (The Fall of the Merman), the Alpha's scent is described as "rising like a tide," completely enveloping the Omega and rapidly breaking down their rationality—this depiction clearly reinforces the inevitability of Alpha dominance and Omega passivity. Marking behavior further solidifies this dominance. By leaving a mark on the Omega's glands, the Alpha forms a bond that creates physiological dependence, which then extends to psychological and social binding. In Wufa Jujue (Unable to Refuse), this bond is narrated as a "bond of love," but essentially it deprives the individual's freedom, causing the Omega to lose the possibility of establishing intimate relationships with other partners. Nevertheless, ABO novels do not entirely exclude the fluidity of power. Some works introduce narratives of resistance and balance, allowing Omegas to gradually escape their passive roles. For example, in Juexing de Omega (The Awakened Omega), the Omega protagonist takes inhibitors to weaken the dependence on the Alpha during heat cycles and explicitly rejects marking relationships. This choice signifies a challenge to the traditional gender power structure. However, even in such texts, the Alpha's restraint is still regarded as a moral height, implying a "gentle protector" type of patriarchal logic, indicating that the restructuring of power relations has not yet fully freed itself from the invisible constraints of gender hierarchy.

Compared to binary gender combinations, non-mainstream gender combinations exhibit more complex power dynamics. In Alpha/Beta relationships, although Betas lack the passive physiological traits typical of Omegas, they still lack significant physiological advantages and are prone to suppression by Alpha pheromones and marginalization within social power structures. In Chenshang (Old Wound), the Beta protagonist is forced by family pressure to unite with a high-ranking Alpha, with his personal will completely disregarded, revealing the Beta's vulnerability and limitations within the ABO social structure. This narrative portrays Betas as a gender caught in the power struggle between Alphas and Omegas, lacking both physiological advantages and social discourse power.

Alpha/Alpha and Omega/Omega combinations, to some extent, blur the traditional hierarchical power boundaries. In Alpha/Alpha relationships, due to the physiological and social parity between both parties, power interactions often manifest as competition and checks and balances. In Goubing (Stigma), the pheromone conflict between two Alphas is likened to “clashing blades,” implying mutual antagonism. In such relationships, one party’s willingness to accept marking is usually seen as an emotional concession and a realization of relational balance, reflecting the possibility of power transformation and negotiation. Omega/Omega relationships construct a flexible power space, lacking Alpha’s physiological suppression and social privileges, making their relationship more based on emotional support and mutual assistance. In Yu Ni Zhaozhao Mumu (To Be With You Morning and Night), two Omegas build a close emotional bond while jointly resisting external prejudice, presenting a de-hierarchized intimacy model.

Additionally, Beta/Beta and Beta/Omega combinations, due to the lack of physiological power differentials, represent the closest to “equal relationships” in the ABO world. However, these relationships also carry vulnerability in the narrative. Due to the absence of pheromone matching and marking guarantees, such relationships often face external pressure and doubt, showing the instability of free relationships within a hierarchical society. In Xiyang Zai Chimu Zhong Siqu (The Sunset Dies in the Twilight), the relationship between a Beta and an Omega breaks down due to misunderstanding, highlighting the difficulty of maintaining bonds without physiological ties. A few works further challenge traditional power structures through gender-reversed combinations (e.g., Beta top – Alpha bottom, Omega top – Alpha bottom). In Yige Bei Fengkuang Qiulai de Beta (A Beta Madly Pursued), the Beta character breaks through his disadvantaged position to become dominant, redefining standards of strength and weakness. This subversion not only reflects the awakening of marginalized gender subjectivities but also reveals ABO novels as a textual experiment deeply reflecting on gender power relations.

In summary, the gender power dynamics in ABO novels present a complex and diverse structure. Binary gender combinations perpetuate hierarchical patterns of dominance and subordination, while non-mainstream gender combinations attempt to break fixed power orders, creating more equal relational models through decentralization and power negotiation. This diversified narrative enriches the emotional expression forms in ABO novels and provides new cultural imaginaries for critiquing and reconstructing real-world gender relations.

3.3. Social imaginaries and reflections in ABO fiction

As a distinctive genre of online literature, ABO fiction—with its fictional ternary gender system and extreme settings—has rapidly gained popularity among a predominantly female readership. Its narratives not only satisfy desires for sensory stimulation and emotional investment but also, at a deeper level, reflect and reconfigure the gendered power structures present in reality. This reflects the complex psychological states of female readers navigating traditional gender ideologies. Based on extensive questionnaire data, this chapter systematically outlines the characteristics of ABO readers, the reasons for its popularity, and the social imaginaries and cultural reflections it embodies.

First, in terms of readership demographics, ABO fiction exhibits clear gender and age-based trends. Survey data show that over 90% of readers are female, with male and non-binary readers making up only a small minority. This demonstrates ABO fiction’s strong centripetal appeal within the female literary market. In terms of age, more than 70% of readers were first exposed to this genre before the age of 18, while those aged 18 to 29 account for approximately a quarter of the readership. Readers over the age of 30 are almost nonexistent. This indicates that ABO fiction is especially popular among adolescents and young adults, likely due to its intense emotional dynamics and novel world-building. Regarding reading channels, around 80% of readers encountered ABO fiction through online literature platforms or social media recommendations, about a quarter were influenced by friends’ suggestions, and a smaller proportion discovered it via fan culture communities and derivative works. This trend shows that ABO fiction has evolved from its origins in niche fan culture into a more mainstream segment of online literature, with social media playing a key role in content dissemination and audience mobilization. It is worth noting that despite the high level of interest in the genre, reading frequency varies significantly. Only about 6.5% of readers engage with it on a daily basis, while the majority treat it as an intermittent emotional outlet rather than a habitual or core reading interest. This suggests a reading pattern marked by a certain degree of temporality and affective modulation.

The reasons behind the popularity of ABO fiction lie both in its innovative internal setup and in the favorable external cultural environment. Internally, the ternary gender system comprising Alpha, Beta, and Omega identities, combined with extreme physiological mechanisms such as the influence of pheromones, heat cycles, and mating marks, creates intense emotional tension and a sense of novelty. These settings not only drive the development of narrative conflict, but also simulate intense confrontations between power and desire in a virtual space, offering readers psychological stimulation and emotional resonance. Survey results show that over half of the readers agree that the ABO setting provides a “novel and emotionally charged relationship model,” and affirm its potential for reflecting on real-world gender hierarchies. Furthermore, ABO fiction offers rich narrative possibilities for diverse gender pairings, such as female Alpha with male Omega, or Beta with Omega, effectively challenging the traditional “strong male, weak female” gender framework. The rise of the female Alpha is particularly notable, highlighting a reversal of gendered power and satisfying some readers’ longing for gender equality and plural subjectivity, granting female readers a cultural space for imagining and expressing their own agency. From an external

perspective, the increasingly open gender discourse of the new era and the rapid development of online literature have provided fertile ground for the dissemination of ABO fiction. Society's growing acceptance of LGBTQ+ groups and gender diversity has led to broader recognition and acceptance of the once-sensationalist ABO setting. The algorithmic recommendation systems of online platforms have greatly increased the visibility of these works, fan communities have enhanced readers' sense of participation and belonging, and the rise of derivative products such as short videos, comics, and fan creations has further expanded the influence and cultural reach of ABO fiction. This multi-channel, multi-media dissemination model has enabled the ABO genre to transition from niche to mainstream, forming a cultural phenomenon with wide social impact.

ABO fiction constructs emotionally fraught entanglements between Alpha and Omega through physiological mechanisms such as pheromones and heat cycles, creating a narrative space that is both impactful and full of tension. Readers commonly use descriptors like "strong sexual tension," "intense," "exciting," "erotic," and "gratifying" to describe their reading experience. In this setting, emotion and sexuality are closely intertwined, not only propelling plot development but also granting the narrative an implicit sense of legitimacy. Scholar Gunderson [4] points out that the ABO setting, by invoking physiological impulses rooted in human animality, alleviates the sexual shame experienced by female readers, softens the coerciveness of sexual behavior, and presents the union of emotion and physicality as inevitable. Such lifelong, irresistible emotional bonds cater to readers' fantasies of absolute loyalty and extreme romantic love, offering deep emotional satisfaction.

Survey data indicate that although the main audience of ABO fiction is heterosexual women, they are especially enthusiastic about reading romantic relationships between two men. This reflects a desire among female readers for equality in relationships. One survey respondent noted: "Watching male-male romance gives me a stronger sense of equality than heterosexual romance—I can project my ideal relationship onto the Omega." In particular, the trope of male pregnancy reverses traditional female reproductive functions onto male characters, fulfilling readers' psychological need for "the feminization of men," and by inverting gender roles, dissolves constraints found in real-life gender relations. This offers female readers an emotionally balanced and alternative experience of equality. Moreover, ABO fiction also provides female readers with a space to express their power and agency. The emergence of the female Alpha figure subverts traditional gender stereotypes of "strong man, weak woman," allowing women to occupy a more proactive role in the fictional world. According to the survey, 13.6% of readers indicated that they enjoy identifying with female Alpha characters and experiencing the satisfaction of control and dominance. This form of character identification not only reconstructs gender power relations but also opens up imaginative space for female readers to explore their own identities and subjectivities. However, this kind of extreme gender inversion also provokes questions: Does ABO fiction truly dismantle traditional gender norms, or does it merely reinforce inequality through another set of physiological traits and power logics?

To further investigate the role of ABO fiction in reflecting on gendered power relations, the questionnaire included open-ended questions and received 248 valid responses. The results show that 48% of readers believe that ABO fiction has prompted them to reexamine gender power dynamics in reality, 18% think it may offer some inspiration, while 34% hold a negative view. Supporters argue that ABO fiction breaks free from the traditional binary gender framework and offers possibilities for redefining gender and power. By portraying Omega rights movements, workplace struggles, and resistance, these novels amplify the injustices faced by women and marginalized groups in real life. The image of Omega as a vulnerable group dependent on Alpha mirrors women's circumstances in reality, creating a safe space for critical examination and prompting readers to reflect on social inequality from a certain emotional distance.

However, some readers point out the limited capacity of ABO fiction for social critique. On the one hand, its entertainment-oriented and commercial nature makes it difficult for such works to carry out in-depth social criticism. Most readers engage with them in a relaxed state, with little inclination to contemplate their broader social implications. On the other hand, while the extreme power dynamics may transcend traditional gender boundaries, they also reinforce binary gender opposition. Some works even legitimize unequal power relations through sensational or eroticized narratives. Most readers show strong interest in these extreme power dynamics, but exhibit limited critical awareness. The market-driven orientation of online literature and the limitations of the texts themselves make it difficult for ABO fiction to guide readers toward serious reflection on social issues.

As erotically tinged female-oriented texts, ABO novels often fail to completely break free from gender stereotypes and hierarchical thinking when constructing egalitarian intimate relationships. Some works attempt to balance power differentials by endowing Omega characters with abilities equal to Alpha, or by portraying Alpha characters as controlling their desires and showing respect. However, these often remain at the surface level of the plot and do not probe the deeper societal issues behind the power structure. This reflects an internal contradiction among female creators: on the one hand, they seek to reform traditional gender systems, while on the other, they find it difficult to escape existing power frameworks. When the gender status quo in the ABO setting comes too close to real life, the critical edge of the text is weakened, often presenting idealized emotional expressions rather than a systemic reconstruction of power structures. This limitation renders the social imagination of ABO fiction more of a compromising revision of traditional gender norms than a complete subversion and reconstruction [8].

In sum, ABO fiction, through its fictional gender settings and extreme power dynamics, provides female readers with an imaginative space to escape reality, while also reflecting their desire and psychological need for egalitarian power relations. Although some works promote reflection on gender inequality through narratives such as rights movements, their entertainment and sensationalist features tend to dilute the depth of social critique. ABO fiction satisfies emotional and sensory needs while

revealing the complex mindset of female authors and readers who, under the constraints of prevailing gender ideologies, both long to break through traditional boundaries and struggle to fully escape the influence of power. This contradiction lies at the heart of their social imagination and critical reflection.

4. Conclusion

As a fictional gender construct originating from Western fan culture, ABO fiction has undergone localized reconstruction and widespread dissemination within the context of Chinese online literature. Its unique gender system and extreme power configurations not only offer emotional catharsis and sensational experiences for readers but also carry complex socio-cultural significance. Through textual analysis of 35 representative original Chinese ABO novels and empirical research based on 279 questionnaire responses, this study reveals the multiple dimensions of ABO fiction in terms of gender construction, power dynamics, and social imagination, and attempts to explore the cultural value and potential gender-political implications of this genre in contemporary online literature.

First, ABO fiction significantly expands the imaginative space of gender narratives through the construction of a tripartite gender system—Alpha, Beta, and Omega. The binary opposition between Alpha and Omega, with its highly symbolized physiological and social characteristics, reinforces dominant–subordinate power relations, reflecting gender inequality in real society. This power disparity based on biological determinism is further amplified through narrative mechanisms such as pheromones, heat periods, and marking, making gender differences not only manifest in social roles and psychological traits, but internalized as inescapable physiological destinies. While this setup provides intense narrative tension, it also creates a heterotopian space for emotional release and self-projection for female readers. When identifying with the Omega character, readers experience a passive yet absolute emotional attachment; when identifying with the Alpha character, they attain fantasies of control and dominance. This dual identification experience reveals the contradictory psychology of female readers under real-life gender structures: a simultaneous desire to be protected and understood, and a yearning for subjectivity and empowerment.

Second, the power dynamics in ABO fiction display a diversified developmental trend. In the mainstream Alpha/Omega pairing, hierarchical structures remain solidified, with Alpha's physiological superiority and social status forming the basis of Omega's dependence. The marking system further reinforces this dependent relationship. However, the emergence of non-mainstream gender pairings (such as Alpha/Alpha, Omega/Omega, Beta/Alpha, etc.) disrupts the established hierarchical order, presenting more egalitarian, negotiated, and mutually supportive relationship models. In particular, narratives involving female Alphas and male Omegas reverse the traditional “strong man–weak woman” gender framework, allowing female readers to identify with female Alpha characters and derive emotional satisfaction through subjectivity and gender equality. These narrative attempts reflect ABO fiction's latent potential for gender critique beyond its entertainment-oriented surface—questioning and reconstructing real-world gender power logics through fictional extreme gender settings. However, as the analysis shows, such reconstruction of power structures mostly remains at the level of plot; in-depth social institutional critique and reflection on gender equality are still relatively limited. Some works even inadvertently reproduce patriarchal logic, maintaining traditional gender power structures through portrayals of gentle, protective, or self-restrained Alphas.

Third, the social imagination carried by ABO fiction reflects the subjective aspirations and psychological needs of contemporary young female readers within gendered culture. Questionnaire data show that ABO fiction readership is predominantly composed of young women, who, through reading, seek both emotional comfort and sexual fantasy, as well as opportunities to reflect on real-world gender inequality through the lens of fictional egalitarian narratives. This dual demand—emotional and rational—grants ABO fiction a dual function in female online culture: as both an escape from reality and a potential critique of it. Some works attempt to break traditional gender boundaries through plotlines involving Omega resistance, female Alpha empowerment, and non-mainstream relationship models, responding to readers' desires for gender fluidity and equality. However, the entertainment and commercial nature of ABO fiction tends to weaken its social critical function. Most readers still engage with it as a form of leisure or for curiosity, and the texts themselves struggle to support systematic reflection on gendered power structures.

This study shows that ABO fiction, as a subcultural phenomenon within online literature, reflects the complex gender psychology and cultural demands of female online literature readers. On the one hand, such texts reinforce gender hierarchies and power differentials through extreme settings and biological determinism; on the other hand, they explore alternative gender imaginaries through the reversal of traditional gender roles and the depiction of diverse gender relationships, offering emotional compensation and expressions of subjectivity for female readers that are often unattainable in real life. This inherent contradiction is precisely what has made ABO fiction the subject of widespread discussion in the contemporary cultural context.

However, this study must also acknowledge its limitations. First, the selection of samples was primarily based on online popularity and platform recommendations, which may have overlooked niche works that are experimental or critical in nature, thereby affecting the generalizability of the research findings. Second, the questionnaire respondents were mainly concentrated within the young female demographic, and thus the study has not yet comprehensively covered ABO fiction readers of different genders, ages, and cultural backgrounds. Future research could expand the sample structure through in-depth interviews and

cross-cultural comparisons to obtain richer data on reader psychology and cultural attitudes. In addition, this study's analysis of ABO fiction has primarily focused on the internal textual dimensions of gender construction and power dynamics, while discussion remains insufficient regarding its manifestations in fan culture, online dissemination, and multi-media interactions. Future research could further explore how the ABO genre is received, transformed, and reproduced within online spaces from the perspective of cultural production and consumption.

Overall, ABO fiction, as a form of gender narrative practice with distinct characteristics of online culture, reflects the complex psychological states and cultural demands of contemporary female readers within the context of gender equality discourse. It is both a virtual emotional utopia and a potentially critical social text, reminding us that when interpreting online literature, we should go beyond the surface of entertainment and consumption and pay attention to its cultural significance as a site for gender discourse production. In the future, with the further awakening of gender consciousness and the diversification of online literary creation, ABO fiction may transcend the limitations of entertainment-oriented narratives and become a more critical and constructive experimental space for gender culture.

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