The Research on the Role of "Abstract Culture" in the Composition of Chinese Virtual Streamer Fans' Culture

--Taking A-SOUL as an Example

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Abstract: The rapid development of the virtual streamer industry in China in recent years has caused extensive discussions in Chinese Mainstream media. As a corporate virtual streamer group jointly launched by two entertainment giants called ByteDance and YH ENTERTAINMENT, A-SOUL has received widespread concern from many fields in Chinese society. This paper starts from the perspective of Social Identity theory and analyzes the frequent words on the bullet-screen sent by A-SOUL fans in live-streamings as well as the popular comments of A-SOUL related videos, which in order to explore the role of the emerging online language "abstract words" and the abstract culture behind them in the fan culture of Chinese virtual steamer. The study found that A-SOUL's fans has used "abstract words" to increase exposure for the virtual streamer group, to vent their emotions and to satisfy their own sense of in-group identity. Abstract culture plays an important role in the cultural composition of virtual streamer fans, which has practical significance for the study of Chinese Internet subcultures and emerging online language trends.

Keywords: abstract culture, virtual streamer, online language, social identity theory

1. Introduction

In 2016, Activ8 Co., Ltd. from Japan launched the first formal virtual YouTuber (VTuber) in history called Kizuna AI. The character of Kizuna AI laid the foundation for the virtual live-streaming through the combination of motion capture and voice acting from a real performer (the Soul of a virtual streamer) as well as a 3D animation model. Compared with traditional interactive media of ACGN culture (Animation, Comic, Game, Novel), the effect of virtual streamer performance is closer to realistic live-streamings online, and the experience of its instant interaction with fans is also better. From 2016 to 2019, virtual YouTuber have grown rapidly in Japan and developed two major categories of individual virtual streamers and corporate virtual streamers. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic at the end of 2019 and the implementation of strict public health policies in China, Chinese residents are spending more time on online entertainment. Thus, virtual streamers are gaining attention from the Chinese ACGN culture enthusiasts. During the three-year pandemic

restriction period in China, the localization of Chinese virtual streamers developed rapidly. A-SOUL, a representative of Chinese corporate virtual streamer group was born under the background.

A-SOUL is a professional virtual female streamer group launched by both ByteDance and LH ENTERTAINMENT, and it is the first commercial attempt in the field of virtual live-streaming for traditional artist agency LH ENTERTAINMENT. A-SOUL group members are Diana, Carol(resigned), Ava, Eileen and Bella. These five members have different animation models and different character settings, they are even positioned differently while streaming online. They have already owned the best promotion team, live-streaming director and related techniques at the beginning of their activities. Then, A-SOUL has caused numerous discussions on Chinese Internet frequently with their members' professionalism, program formats and their enthusiastic fan groups, especially their fans. The emergence of A-SOUL not only symbolizes the new industry of virtual streamer has gained favor from the traditional idol economy industry , but also represents capital has officially involved in Chinese virtual streamer industry and provides new possibilities for the development of this field.

In the development of the virtual streamer culture in China, the group identities among virtual streamer fans is particularly noteworthy. The concept of Group identity can be first linked to Henri Tajfel's social identity theory. This theory suggests that when people define themselves as members of certain groups, they will incorporate the group membership they belong to into their concept of self-identity and will show a high degree of identification to the groups.

The new Internet language of "Abstract Words" plays an important role in the communication of virtual streamer fans. It was originated from "6324 Studio" headed by a Chinese live streamer called Li Gan, who stood out in the hardcore style live-streamings that mainly focused on Gaming skills at that time through eye-catching and dramatic live-streaming methods. Li's behaviors had laid the foundation of "anti-elite", "anti-authority" and "anti-mainstream" in "Abstract Culture", which can be regarded as an extension of "Loser Culture".

Nowadays, Abstract Culture has become an important part of China's Internet subculture, because these subculture enthusiasts are always at the bottom of Chinese Internet culture zones, which means it is highly overlapping with the core of Abstract Culture. As a typical product of Abstract Culture, Abstract Words has combined multiple languages, emojis and subculture buzzwords. To conclude, Abstract Culture is a representation of ugliness aesthetics on the Chinese Internet with the spirit of satirizing the existing illogical or injustice phenomenon in Chinese society. For instance, a Tibetan teenager called Ding Zhen accidentally became famous on the Chinese Internet in the end of 2020. However, many netizens criticize this incident because Ding Zhen's popularity was only established on his handsomeness instead of his talents, considering he did not finish his primary school. Aside from this, he even had the experience of smoking and speaking rudely in front of the public, which was obvious broke the industry regulations of Chinese entertainers. But he did not get any official warning or punishment and still being popular after that. In this case, young netizens in Baidu Tieba defined this issue as "abstract", and made a lot of memes and videos to satirize Ding Zhen and such similar issues. It can be seen as a peaceful rebellion for the Chinese young generation to protest the injustice society on the Internet.

Abstract culture will usually appear in Chinese virtual streamer culture as well. Its complex composition and usage make the communication between virtual streamer fans more special. In this paper, the use of Abstract Words in the communication of different virtual anchor fan groups will be taken as an entry point to explore the influence of Abstract Culture in the composition of Chinese virtual streamer fans culture.

2. Literature Review

In the research of analyzing the psychological construction of virtual streamer fans, Xu points out that idol is an extension of a fan's ideal image. Besides, fans get satisfaction as well as relief from real-life anxiety in following their idols in a way [1]. Based on the transformation of social structure in China and the increasing survival pressure modern Chinese youth has to deal with, Guo found that some people choose to interact with virtual streamers who have attractive animation models on the Internet, in order to vent their negative emotions and thus satisfy their resistance psychology in avoidance [2]. Tan's sample survey has shown that watching virtual live-streamings helped virtual streamer fans to relieve their stress during the COVID-19 pandemic [3].

In the aspect of constructing and spreading the culture of virtual streamers, Lu et al. discovered that virtual streamer fans would save those programmatic moments while watching virtual live-streamings by taking screenshots or recording videos. Therefore, they can start their derivative works in the in-group fans community. This special creation form has provided initial cultural capital for the production and promotion of exclusive buzzwords and pop culture in the culture of Chinese virtual streamer [4]. Guo indicated that virtual streamers are also actively creating their character settings and exclusive live-streaming style. This behavior promotes the further creation of exclusive buzzwords and Internet memes within fans groups [2]. Xu's work shows that fans achieve emotional expression of their idols in the in-group interaction and deepen their own identity in the group at the same time [1]. However, Lv et al.'s survey illustrates that virtual streamers have the unrealistic nature, which makes viewers more rational in dealing with the emotional relationship between streamers and fans than with the real ones, the virtual streamer fans are less loyal to the streamer than the real streamer fans too [5]. In this regard, Liu and Shi also summarized the principles of "No fans leader, No cliques, No guidance, and No absolute confirmation on A-SOUL" within the ASOUL fan groups [6].

In the discussion on the connection between abstract culture and Internet subculture in China, Tajfel has provided the theoretical basis. He stated that in-groups will choose an element as a carrier to strengthen in-group identity by constructing a sense of superiority to it [7]. Sassenberg's study demonstrated that users who are in the thematic chat groups have a more uniform and standardized use of language and symbols than the users of non-thematic chat groups [8]. Wang and Chen found out that the users of Abstract Words are keen on combining emojis so as spreading, compiling, and deconstructing Internet buzzwords in order to make "abstract words" difficult to understand, so that they can create cultural barriers on the Internet. This jargon-like Chinese Internet language promotes in-group identity among its users [9]. Tang particularly points out that the composition of abstract words usually contains the basic elements of the mishearing(Soramimi) in online streamings, the catch phrases of streamers, fans' derivative creations, emojis and parodies of pop culture. Wang and Chen's research also indicated that Abstract Culture has been widely spread in the youth-oriented subcultures in Chinese Internet due to its unconventional and marginalized nature [10]. Members of these Internet minorities use "abstract words" to quickly dispel unfamiliarity in social networking, which coincides with Liu and Shi's finding that ASOUL has a wide audience among subcultural groups, which is fundamental for spreading Abstract Culture [6].

The Chinese virtual streamer industry has been developing for more than three years and has attracted a lot of attention from the whole Chinese society. However, there are a few academic researches from the perspective of abstract culture, a topic which is highly relevant to the virtual streamer culture. Therefore, this paper is innovative in filling the gap in the related field as well as in further developing the role of Abstract Culture in Internet Cultures from this angle. This paper is going to research the influence of Abstract Culture in the virtual streamer fans culture by analyzing the high frequency words appeared in the bullet-screens of A-SOUL's streamings and the popular

comments involved the use of Abstract Words in the comment areas of A-SOUL's popular videos in Chinese YouTube which is called Bilibili.

3. Method

Lv et al. concluded that "real-time interaction between fans and streamers in the streamings can significantly affect the sense of identity among virtual streamer fan groups" [5]. The writer has selected ten high-frequency words involving the use of "abstract words" in the interactive chats sent by viewers during the peak period of A-SOUL's popularity (before 10th May 2022) and explains how these words work in different contexts in the context of A-SOUL's fans culture based on Lv et al.'s finding. Aside from this, This paper also analyzes the structures and connections of twenty popular comments which are related to Abstract Culture in the viral videos of A-SOUL members.

4. Results

First of all, according to the collection and analysis of viewers' bullet-screens during the streamings of the five members, the writer found that the high-frequency Abstract Words style bullet-screens were mostly expressed their love for these five A-SOUL members. Take the word "Ke Ai Nie(it means 'so cute' in English) " as an example, "Nie" (Romaji: ne; Japanese: ね) was first used as an modal particle by a Japanese virtual streamer called Sakura Miko. This word was later used by A-SOUL fans to express their love for the virtual streamer Diana. Her enthusiasts often shows their great passion for her by adding the "love" emoji at the end of their bullet-screens and comments which includes the word "Ke Ai Nie". Virtual streamer Fans friendly ridiculed this type of comment as "insanity (which called 'Fa Bing' in Chinese)".

Second, by filtering the popular comments in the comment areas, the writer found that hot comments related to Abstract Culture were often consisted of the "insane" sentences with a highly uniform format, which mixed with emojis, or short compositions that assimilated a variety of classic literary styles. Nevertheless, these two categories of comments are usually irrelevant to the video contents. They were mainly used to make fun of interesting phenomenons within the fan groups or A-SOUL members' funny behaviors during the streamings. Here is a typical comments among Diana's fans. It says, "I wish I could be Miss Diana's dog, but Miss Diana likes cats, and I'm just a rat living in the drain". This comment takes a self-deprecation from the point of view of the fans of Diana through the symbolic meanings of "cat," "dog," and "mouse" in previous literature works. Diana's dominant status as a "master" to her fans was able to highlight in this way.

It is worth noting that both the Abstract bullet-screens and the Abstract Culture-related comments were all tightly focused on the A-SOUL members themselves, there were little discussion involving other virtual streamers among A-SOUL's fans.

5. Discussion

For example, at the beginning of A-SOUL's activities, "Ke Ai Nie" or "Jia Ran(Diana's Chinese name) Ke Ai Nie" was usually seen in the form of bullet-screens by A-SOUL fans in the streamings of A-SOUL members and even other virtual streamers, which had the nature of advertising for Diana. Therefore, it had also become one of the most representative idioms of Diana's fan groups. As what Wang and Chen have found, the encryption attributes of Abstract Words help enhance in-group identity [9]. And on this basis, A-SOUL's enthusiasts fullfill their sense of belonging as "A-SOUL fans" by sending Abstract Words bullet-screens such as "Ke Ai Nie" in streamings. Meanwhile, sending bullet-screens has an anonymous feature, A-SOUL fans were more preferred to use this method rather than commenting with the risk of exposing their user information, so that they can achieve the goals of attracting strangers' attention in videos or virtual streamings which were

irrelevant to A-SOUL and thus promoting A-SOUL on the Internet. Enthusiasts spontaneously sending Abstract Words bullet-screens related to A-SOUL played an important role in attracting other users and accumulating initial fans at the early stage of A-SOUL's activities. However, A-SOUL fans dominated the screens by releasing Abstract Words in non-A-SOUL streams and videos, which made it difficult for users who were not familiar with A-SOUL fans culture and increased the difficulties for strangers to learn about A-SOUL. In addition, these extreme actions obviously breached bilibili's "bullet-screen manner" and attracted criticisms for the beginning activities of A-SOUL fans. As the popularity of A-SOUL has stabilized, its fans community has become more and more regulated in the development, such behaviors have been nearly eliminated now. Nonetheless, it is still necessary to punish ultra fans as well as strictly implement the bullet-screen manners in Bilibili in order to prevent similar situations continue appearing in the future.

"Insane" comments mixed with emojis and compositions imitated different classic literary styles were two major popular comments involved in Abstract Culture in the comments zones of A-SOUL's viral videos, but these sentences had little relevance with A-SOUL's video contents. Comments like "I wish I could be Miss Diana's dog, but Miss Diana likes cats, and I'm just a rat living in the drain" are infectious, the sense of artistry combined with the encryption attitudes of Abstract Words A-SOUL's enthusiasts left had exaggerated the fans' enthusiasm for virtual streamer Diana as well as attracting strangers. But most of the time, such comments were aimed to express the self-deprecation of A-SOUL fans. They called themselves as " rats in the drain," they mocked themselves in this way and embraced the stereotype to the animation lovers called "otaku". " rats in the drain" quickly gained popularity among Chinese Internet subculture lovers in 2021 with the publicity of A-SOUL fans. This phenomenon was directly connected with the stresses caused by the increased living cost that Chinese young people had to face during the pandemic [3]. These "insane" comments and compositions had provided a opportunity for A-SOUL's fandom to release their pressures from real-life issues at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in China. They express their love for A-SOUL group members through exaggerated language, so as to seek emotional sustenance, which helps relieve their stress practically. However, these slight ultra expressions were also easy to make misunderstandings or caused trouble to other neutral users based on the feature of high-speed transmission of information on the Internet, thus lead to bad reputation on A-SOUL fans and even the streamers themselves.

Tajfel's in-group identity theory under the social identity [1] can be used to explain the phenomenon that A-SOUL fans rarely talked about other virtual streamers in bullet-screens involved in Abstract Words and popular reviews related to Abstract Culture. A-SOUL fans focus their discussions closely on the A-SOUL members themselves, in order to satisfy their sense of identity within the fandom. This behavior makes the connections between A-SOUL fans closer so as making their A-SOUL-related discussion more standardized and unified [8], which is conducive for new fans to understand A-SOUL culture. But at the same time, refusing to discuss other virtual streamers will also increase the exclusivity of the A-SOUL fan groups, which is obviously not beneficial for cultural exchange and integration with other Chinese virtual streamer cultures.

6. Conclusion

Based on previous discussion, the writer found out that sending bullet-screens and comments involving abstract culture played an crucial role in increasing the exposure of A-SOUL in Chinese network community Bilibili and helping achieve the fans accumulation in a short term at the beginning of the existence of virtual streamer group A-SOUL. Meanwhile, the cultural barrier created by the encryption attribute of Abstract Words bullet-screens helps to raise the in-group identity among A-SOUL fans and make their connections tight. The comments with "insane" style also provide a cryptic outlet for A-Soul fans who were facing stress during the pandemic. Nonetheless, their exaggerated, fanatical expressions usually come with the prices of violating bullet-screen manners

and causing confusion to other Internet users. For this reason, these spontaneous ultra behaviors had caused a lot of criticism at the beginning of A-Soul's streaming businesses. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct the bullet-screen manner system and comment review system strictly in the bilibili network community, so that rational speeches of virtual streamer fans can be guided, a healthy Internet discussion environment can be maintained too.

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