

A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY ON SOCIAL MEDIA USE RELATED TO ANIME, COMIC, AND GAME AMONG ADOLESCENTS

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Abstract: The young generation is confronted with increasing online social media and Anime, Comic, and Game (ACG) culture. Their mental health and motivation related to ACG are worthy to be examined. This empirical study carried out in-depth interviews among Chinese adolescents. The analysis reveals that the popularity and gender differences in ACG exist and corresponding social media use shows direct or indirect impacts on the psychology of adolescents, especially when they suffer from negative events. Freedom is pursued in the use of social media related to ACG and more friends are gathered in the online community. This research sheds light on the psychological development of adolescents and the social media supervision of the ACG groups with adolescents.

Keywords: Anime, Comic, and Game; Psychology of adolescents; Social media; Escape from freedom

1 INTRODUCTION

Anime, an approach to Japanese animated entertainment, has become more and more popular around the world in recent years. According to the data of the anime industry, it created a sales record in 2017 of 2.15 trillion Yuan (approximately \$19.8 billion) with seven years of continuous growth, driven largely by demand from overseas [1]. Exports of anime series and films have increased by three times since 2014 and some of them were beneficial in part by sales to streaming giants like Netflix and Amazon – and show the tendency of increase [1]. They are not only important on the world, but also indispensable in China. For example, China has a large anime expo every year called Bilibili World in Shanghai, and the expo drew over 700 exhibitors and 800 content creators from China and other countries [2]. With more than 450 creator booths set up, the event attracted more than 250,000 visitors over three days, establishing itself as China's largest comprehensive Anime, Comic, Game (ACG) expo [2]. These visitors contained various age groups, especially adolescents. To be specific, according to the age group of readers, anime can be categorized as Kodomomuke (little kids), Shōnen (boys of 8-18 years old), Shōjo (girls of 8-18 years old), Seinen (male adolescents and adults), Josei (female adolescents and adults) [3].

Moreover, adolescent mental health attracts a public concern in recent years. Adolescence is a period of vulnerability, thus the development of depression in young people are at higher risk rather than in other periods throughout their lives [4]. According to statistics about adolescent mental health, a large number of high school students are experiencing symptoms of depression significantly over a ten-year period [5]. What is more, suicidal thoughts and actions for many high school students show an increasing trend from 2011 to 2021[5]. In addition, most adolescents who have mental health problems depend on social media (such as TikTok, Bilibili, and WeChat) obsessively, and wish to find some suitable approaches to release their pent-up emotions. Regarding Chinese adolescents, 15% of them show an addiction to social media, leading to a high risk of becoming depressive [6].

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Adolescent depression and social media use may exist a connection because of freedom. Formm, the theory of escape from freedom proposes that human existence and freedom have a great connection and the development of humans and the growth of freedom are dialectically unified [7]. According to this theory, freedom can be divided into two kinds, one is positive freedom and the other one is negative freedom. Negative freedom is considered that while individuals cannot show their personality in the process of development, instead of actively realizing themselves [7]. It is being forced out of the present. This view is suitable to analyze the relationship between adolescents and social media, especially the adolescents who enjoy anime and have mental health problems.

Adolescents who have mental health problems and are addicted to anime social media have a common psychology in that they want to separate themselves from the current situations of loneliness [7]. With the development of activities and the growth of individuals, when people are faced with some complex social situations, some of them seem powerless and unable to solve them. Therefore, in order to overcome this sense of powerlessness and loneliness, the impulse to escape freedom becomes more and more intense, and eventually the psychological mechanism of "escape freedom" is formed [8].

3 RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted a qualitative research method and conducted in-depth interviews with two Chinese adolescents. First-hand data was from two teenagers between 17 and 18 who were high school students in Guangdong province of

China. The data collection took place in November and December 2024. These teenagers were selected based on their interest in anime, and their mental health was different from that of other people. Both of them had depression or used to be depressed.

This study adopted the form of an interview, the questions in the interview focused on how long they had been watching anime, which type of the anime they liked, whether they resorted to anime to escape reality when they were in a terrible mood, and what made them had such bad emotion, and so on. The questions would be deeper and deeper but if the interviewer found the participant did not be willing to answer, the questions would be changed or the interview would stop to pacify participants' feelings. The conversation would last 10 to 20 minutes in the interview and it would be recorded in the form of audio recording. Both participants had already given their informed consent before the beginning of the interview.

After data collection, the researcher conducted a thematic analysis of all interview data. After being fully familiar with the recorded content, it was transcribed into text, and gradually summarized the coding and theme, and the coding was improved and checked. The content of the interview is presented below.

4 RESULTS

Based on the interview data, the phenomenon related to ACG and its social media use among Chinese adolescents is analyzed and shown in the following.

4.1 Popularity and Gender Difference

Both participants are found to have been watching ACG for more than 7 years in their spare time. Participant A started to like ACG in Year 4 of primary school. Similarly, Participant B began to like ACG in Year 5 of primary school. Both of them commenced to know ACG from the sharing and recommendation of classmates. It means many pupils in China have habits related to ACG. Furthermore, this habit starts with friends but develops actively by themselves. For instance, Participant A said, "I was introduced to it by my classmates in the fourth grade, and then in the fifth grade, I started watching it on my own".

However, gender difference exists. Participant A, a boy, likes to watch relaxing ACG, such as *Demon Slayer*, and his personality becomes stronger after watching ACG. It matches the classification of *Shōnen* which is watched by boys of 8-18 years old. Participant B, a girl, expressed her preferred ACG type is suspenseful and mystery topics, different from *Shōnen* and *Shōjo* (which is mostly romantic for the female reader of 8-18 years old). It reveals that the types of ACG among Chinese adolescent readers are diverse.

4.2 The Wide Use of Social Media

Social media is found to be widely used when participants watch ACG. To be specific, Bilibili is the most frequently used website mentioned by both participants. Bilibili was founded in 2009 in China and aimed at constructing ACG content communities at the beginning. It has become a large video-sharing (inclusion of free or paid contents) website in Asia and is viewed as China's YouTube. Participants A and B ranked Bilibili the first when they used social media about ACG. They can watch comments below each ACG video and find online friends and accounts that show similar feelings with themselves. As Participant A states, "I watch those exciting anime montages and also the videos of anime recommendation UP owners".

Apart from Bilibili, both participants mentioned WeChat and QQ when they employed social media about ACG. The group chats are the major type of social format in WeChat and QQ. Based on the interview data, the teenager "also join QQ groups to play anime games together" (Participant A).

Strangers at different places can be gathered in the online group chats totally free. It shows that Chinese adolescents do not only watch ACG by themselves but also like to connect with others on multiple social media platforms. However, the social chat online is not always frequent. For example, according to Participant B, she rarely talks and most of the groups she joins are for gaming.

4.3 Reasons to Love ACG

The motivation of Chinese adolescents to watch ACG is different. Participant B said "I don't think my mood is affected much. I watch it when I feel like it, just as a hobby--not as a way to vent emotions, just a pastime...Different anime brings different things. For example, I like mystery and horror because I have always found those genres interesting". Participant B's opinion represents a pure motivation of ACG fans instead of utilitarian reasons. Particularly, the outcome of each ACG could be distinct. She feels funny to watch horror themes in ACG. The feelings of Participant B belong to the intrinsic motivation.

Regarding the reasons of Participant A, the boy mentions the environment of his life. He lives in the school dorms on most days and rarely goes home, suffering from a very bored life and limited habits. It is easy to be access to ACG in his smartphone to kill time. Meanwhile, he would like to be motivated and encouraged by figures in ACG who are teenagers like him. According to Participant B, "I found an animated movie called "Your Name" on the TV homepage, which needed 6 Yuan to unlock. Then I paid 6 Yuan and it opened a new world for me. Since then, I have fallen in love

with various animes". It reveals that the international products of ACG, such as "Your Name" which is a ACG movie made by Japan, are widely spread and inspire teenagers.

4.4 Impacts of Social Media

Participants enjoy the outcome of making more friends via social media use. Although they do not chat a lot in online communities or groups, they can share their recent watches and loved figures of ACG publicly or forward some comments (Participant B). It broadens their communication scope, not restricted to the offline scope. They are surprised to find others who have similar ideas and preferences. They can also be found by others. In brief, Participant B thought anime brings happiness and friendship to her.

In addition, Participant A introduced his experience in solving offline bullying issues on his school campus. Originally, he was scared to witness bullying happening to his classmates. He is strongly against bullying. Then he watched ACG which has a figure who also grows up from the weak to the strong. Apart from bullying, "sometimes some animes give me inspiration. They inspire me to become better" (Participant A). ACG brings positive chances to imagine for the young, just like the summary of Participant A: "Something that real life can't give you, but you can find it here".

4.5 Freedom

Freedom employed in this research refers to the free status of psychology among teenagers. Participant A illustrates his positive status of freedom brought by ACG and corresponding social media use. His conventional life is highly limited in the small campus, including classrooms and dorms. It leads to negative emotions in that a young boy is active and needs a relatively free life but the strict school boarding regulation controls his physical freedom, further leading to negative psychological status. For example, Participant A said he often watches ACG videos and social media in his dorm which is a pleasant way to solve his study pressure. Online social media reduces his negative status and helps him enjoy free time. ACG gradually develops an almost fixed part of his daily life. For example, he mentioned that "I definitely watch a lot when I'm in a bad mood, and also when I'm in a good mood".

However, Participant B did not pursue freedom via ACG and its social media. She states her negative feelings in life but she would like to reduce these negative feelings through offline communication, such as a face-to-face chat with friends. For instance, "I just watch it when I feel like it. If something bothers me, I'd rather vent to someone instead" (Participant B). It demonstrates that she purely likes to surf online about ACG but does not rely on it to reduce her negative emotions. Although Participant B did not rely too much on ACG, she acknowledged that she noticed this phenomenon, as she said "I've noticed it online. Many people seem to escape reality through anime".

Both Participant A and Participant B were asked about their belief in ACG's impacts on general peers. They show similar opinions. Teenagers' value is in the progress of development and too much use of ACG and its social media may be not helpful to their value. As mentioned by Participant B,

"Anime may not directly affect mental health, but for younger kids, exposure to unsuitable anime or social media could influence their values. Social media, especially platforms like TikTok or Kwai, has everything, so early exposure could impact how teenagers form their worldviews".

In particular, the adolescent who is very young cannot distinguish reality and imagination, so their value may be lost in diverse types of ACG which is published on Chinese websites for broad ages. Some ACG videos only show the age boundary of 18 years old, which is too general. She suggests teenagers mainly adjust their emotions casually and do not escape from reality and avoid facing problems in the world of ACG.

In terms of Participant A, he also approves that ACG and its social media can adjust their emotions of adolescents. However, it is crucial to select appropriate types for adolescents, such as relaxing and positive themes of ACG. As he stated, "It's better to watch some relatively light and cheerful animes".

5 DISCUSSION

The findings above reveal that Chinese adolescents have the competence to make use of ACG and corresponding social media to relax in their daily lives actively. It is in line with a recent study which finds that Japanese adolescents enjoy to realize mental health with the help of ACG [9]. Furthermore, the use of ACG can predict the mental status of adolescents with neural networks [9]. Whereas, the watching times need to be controlled. Based on another empirical study in Chinese adolescents, the increasing watching time of video caused more mental problems, especially boys and teenagers who lived separated from their parents [10]. Educators and managers of video websites could make full use of ID3 algorithm and node optimization technology and it is necessary for monitoring the social media abuse of teenagers [11]. Hence, the usage of social media about ACG is worthy of continuous attention for scholars, educators and parents. In addition, it is found that some teenagers may purely like ACG but have no special physiological treatment effects. In other words, ACG has various related products, such as ACG games, movies, and figurines, which may not necessarily be social media. Its impacts on adolescents are also diverse. It is consistent with the other scholars who carry out large-scale research and conclude that the impacts of ACG on Chinese adolescent psychology and values are not fixed [12].

6 CONCLUSION

In summary, this research conducts an empirical study to examine the current status of ACG and its social media use among Chinese adolescents, especially the relationship between mental health and ACG social media use. Based on two interviews, it is found that as a highly popular habit, many types of ACG are frequently watched by Chinese adolescents and this habit is motivated by peers and automatic love. The problems are found in the lack of supervision and imagined freedom since some teenagers cannot bear boring daily life or psychological trauma such as school bullying.

Suggestion is recommended to use ACG social media. Some little teenagers are suggested to pay more attention to distinguish values in diverse ideas shown in the ACG. The type of ACG should be selected carefully and the suitable theme and age could be considered before teenagers choose to watch. When their mental status is negative, the advice is to watch relaxing and inspiring ACG but not to escape from reality.

For future research, the findings in this study could be expanded to more locations and methods. Qualitative interviews are adopted in this study and more quantitative research methods could be added in the future. Besides, the scope can be expanded to more provinces in China to gather supplementary data.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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