



Original Article

# Slice of life in a live and wired masquerade: Playful prosumption as identity work and performance in an identity college Bilibili

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## Abstract

This article investigates Chinese urban youth's mediated 'slice of life' and playful encounters as part of their identity construction and performance work on Bilibili, one of China's most influential video-sharing social media sites mediating anime, comics, games and novels. Using a mix-method approach of digital ethnography, participant observation, interviews and data visualisation, this article examines fans' hermeneutic practices through anime, comic, game and novel prosumption, exemplified by *danmaku*: 'bullet screen', barrage-like comments overlaid on videos. This article argues that Bilibili works as an 'identity college' for fans to perform various roles and explore their hybrid identities in a social-hermeneutic engagement process. In particular, the function of anonymous *danmaku* comments will be closely analysed as it offers a quasi-real-time engagement experience for fans and helps shape fans' social self. Following a symbolic interactionist tradition, Mead's 'generalised other' and Goffman's dramaturgical theory are contextualised in the Chinese socio-cultural milieu where fans' identity performance is regarded as masquerade. Departing from the moral panic rhetoric that Generation Z is 'amused to death', becoming 'infantile and animalised', or even enslaved by their desires and capable only of 'cold intimacies', the findings of this explorative study present a more complex understanding of Chinese youth's identity work through participatory social media use and networked fandom.

## Keywords

Anime, comics, games and novels, Bilibili, *danmaku*, human becomings, identity performance, Otaku, social and transitional self, social media, symbolic interactionism, youth culture

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## Introduction

With the proliferation of anime, comic, game and novel (ACGN, or the two-dimensional (2D) world) culture in China, Bilibili has stood out as a leading animation-streaming social media platform, one which fosters a booming virtual community around animated fictions and beyond. As I argued elsewhere, ACGN fandom in China extends from the conventional, if not stereotypical, understanding of Otaku as socially misfit geeks to active and socially progressive prosumers (Chen, 2018). This article develops a theoretical framework based on the symbolic interactionist perspective (hereafter, SI) and identity performance, and contextualises it in Chinese philosophical traditions, to investigate fans' various interactions in a networked virtual space, Bilibili. ACGN fandom and the narrowly defined Otaku culture has caught considerable academic attention in past decades. However, the dominant approaches taken are Marxian material fetishism or Freudian and/or Lacanian psychoanalysis (Yiu & Chan, 2013), which tends to pathologise the Otaku community.<sup>1</sup> This article synthesises Mead's social self and Goffman's dramaturgical theory to examine ACGN fandom in a newly established technoculture. In particular, I address how this new technoculture and Chinese values affect Chinese youth's identity construction, which includes claiming and granting. Such a process is learned, performed and negotiated through different interactions, such as 'danmaku' commenting and other UGC presumption practices.

I will demonstrate what the specialness of fans' *becoming* identity on Bilibili is compared to more traditional fandom interactions. The performance of fans' identities is actualised through social self-reflection and self-construction. Because fans perform, claim and grant different identities, I will explain how their knowledge is learned and performed (acted out) by mapping and visualising the affective play and encounters through a networked semantic web using Gephi. Such a cartography challenges the binary opposition between passive and active fans, underpinned by pessimistic and optimistic philosophical traditions (see review on the Althusser/Thompson and Fiske/Grossberg debate in Bailey, 2005; de Certeau and Foucault in Chen, 2018). This article extends Mead's social self from interpersonal communication (where conversational analysis is employed following the SI tradition) to the investigation of fans' sociality and everyday engagement on social media, individually and collectively. Therefore, the 'slice of life' genre in animation is chosen as it is primarily based on the everyday mundane of the protagonists and is a perfect match for consumers' everyday interactions being studied. Using qualitative methods and data visualisation, this article yields more nuanced insights on communication in flux with fandom, social media and the wider socio-cultural milieu. The ensuing paper consists of five parts: a contextualisation of ACGN fandom in China, a transcultural theoretical framework, a methodology and an explorative analysis, which are followed by a discussion and conclusion.

## Bilibili, Otaku and danmaku technology

Bilibili, initially a fan-created prototype site imitating AcFun and its Japanese equivalent Niconico, presents a striking case where a utopian fan community got captured by a capitalist and consumerist logic. Bilibili users and Otaku fans are at once 'perfect consumers' and 'rebellious fans' in the same virtual space (Hills, 2002). The slogan 'Bilibili Cheers' (哔哩哔哩乾杯) sits at the top of the site with two cute female mascots toasting to each other, celebrating the intoxicated and enchanted mood of being affectively electrified. Bilibili's community culture is underpinned by *moe* (affective), *fu* (homo-romantic/erotic) and *Otaku* (geeky) characteristics (Chen, 2018). *Moe*, literally budding, desirable or cute, are affective elements used by producers to stimulate fans' affects,

emotions, dispositions and desires (Azuma, 2009), and these elements have developed to a *moe* genre itself (Chen, 2019). *Fu* comes from *fujoshi/danshi*, consumers of BL/GL (Boy's love or Girl's love, or Yaoi) with homoerotic themes (Lavin et al., 2017). Bilibili fans emphasise the tolerant atmosphere of this particular social media site where the community is not morally judged as 'social deviants' and thus feel at home and safe (Chen, 2018). This leads to its third feature, *Otaku*, literally home in Japanese, which was originally used as a first person pronoun for fans to address each other and later became a subculture label for geeky and obsessive fans of ACGN. However, the term has expanded its meaning and interpretation in China, and now refers to the wider fan base (hence used interchangeably) who can choose freely to stay in comfort zones, reflecting a liberal and agentic ethos (Chen, 2018).

The uniqueness of Bilibili is its *danmaku* (or danmu) function. Inspired by the *shoot'em up* game genre (STG), *danmaku* literally means bullet screen: the displaying of comments as curtain fire bombarding the screen, creating a quasi-real-time viewing experience. Danmaku accumulates around a certain character, plot, or character voice, as comment, annotation and fan-created voice-over (*neixinxi*, implied inner drama/performance). I use an umbrella and hybrid term 'affective moe-elements' to refer to such cultural offerings that cater to a transnational audience and to bring the affective and the genre together. They are identified by relevant danmaku, which can stimulate derivative responses based on a shared timestamp. Danmaku can be posted by viewers anytime; therefore, it is not exact real-time. The uniqueness of danmaku, compared with traditional comments, is its moving and dynamic modality, making it a hypertextual 'audiencing tool' together with subtitles, traditional comments and other visual modalities (Chen, 2019). Such gamification endowments gained popularity in the Otaku community and have facilitated the formation of vernacular fan culture around ACGN (Johnson, 2013). Adopted by major video-sharing social media sites in China, danmaku also extends to the offline film-going experience (Dwyer, 2017). Investigated from a social linguistic perspective, danmaku is deemed an important research object as an intensified text-on-screen modality and source of fan-created secondary discourses (Hsiao, 2015; Johnson, 2013). Dwyer (2017), for instance, focuses on the 'heckle' tendency which is deemed annoying for some, while others argue that danmaku creates a discursive space with potentials for political debate and change, fostering a counter-culture (Yin & Fung, 2017).

In this article, I regard these secondary discourses as digital orality due to their short and immediate form, which brings a distinctive pattern of audience interaction. They are a new form of *conversation* that fits nicely into SI. Compared with orality, these discourses are mediated and can be retrieved for hermeneutic analysis. As 'textual poachers', fans are already performers (Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992); their performance of doubling selves (Bailey, 2005) constantly navigates among the polysemic texts, both primary and derivative (Sandvoss, 2005). The theoretical development of this article is based on the notion I term 'social and transitional self', which is mediated via a distinct form of conversation. This is especially the case for the witty political humour and satire employed in danmaku comments that add a critical edge and foster a discursive force online (Wang & Hallquist, 2011). That is, I don't investigate 'self' from an ontological sense. Instead, I examine how Chinese young ACGN fans engage with primary media texts, the platform and among themselves. Therefore, I am not creating a causal relationship between why fans talk and type in a certain way and who they really are. The becoming and transitional self, presented as hybrid identities within different social relationships, arguably renders such a question unanswerable from an SI perspective. This is because the primary assumption of SI is to understand how people (within their world, in this case vernacular otaku culture) interact with each other to create symbolic worlds and meaning, and in return, how these worlds shape individual behaviours (Scott, 2015, p. 82).

## Fans' multiple and contested identities

Studies of fandom and fan culture have unpaid debts to a plethora of interdisciplinary literature (Hills, 2002). However, fandom and fan culture are seldom investigated from a micro-sociological perspective since they are often viewed as a collective identity or subculture. The etymology of fandom suggests it comes from 'fanatic' and analogies to cults and religiosity render it a highly debated area. Following Fiske (1992) and Jenkins (1992), fandom studies tend to celebrate the agency of fans. Yet despite the significance of their works, Otaku culture is still haunted by the spectre of moral panic in the social media era. Turkle's (2011) 'cold intimacies' and 'alone together' and Azuma's (2009) 'animalised Otaku' are just some examples frequently amplified by mainstream media in China for regulatory purposes and ethical concerns (Chen, 2018). Following the 'agentic fan' theorem, scholars have demonstrated online virtuality, such as Bilibili, can work as alternative spaces (Chen, 2018), function as a shield against interpellation and control (Yin & Fung, 2017) and serve as a field to negotiate with 'gamified patriarchal order and normative romantic ideals' (Liu & Lai, 2020, p. 14). Furthermore, Zhang and Cassany (2018) identified language learning participation on Bilibili as having great potential for intercultural competence through collective intelligence and re-contextualisation. This is possible despite Otaku and gamers' significant emotional and affective investments, since the 'network effect' and accumulated social capital make leaving such a social space rather difficult (Chen & Cheung, 2018).

### *Double blurring boundaries: the polysemic texts and hybrid identities of fans*

Bilibili is a symbolic space built around ACGN, mediating transmedial and polysemic texts as well as hybrid identities explored through tactical prosumption. Polysemic texts are constructed around 'super IP' that connects to fantasies, underpinned by a specific *worldview* (alternative universes), key protagonists and plots. Derivative ACGN works can then be developed based on such super IP, which is the copyright exploitation of well-tested adaptive works initiated normally by platforms for wider circulation among different fan groups (Li, 2016). Bilibili also leaves multiple spaces for prosumers to recreate derivative works, creating a production-consumption continuum. These include fanzines, mash-up videos, embodied performance (such as cosplay and translation), light novels and secondary discourses, all of which can cross national boundaries (Cruz et al., 2019; Jenkins, 1992). Bilibili works as a temporal symbolic and virtual space for such polysemic texts to flourish, creating a database of simulacra, where the origins do not matter and sometimes have to compete with imitations for attention and monetisation. In Goffman's term, such a symbolic and virtual space is the 'situation' where the design and display of social roles are *performed/acted out*. Dramaturgy regards social life analogously as a theatrical performance, where actors constantly monitor, reflect on and adapt the public display of their desirable identities as part of the self-presentation and impression management process (Goffman, 1971). Here, the 'desirable' is subject to context and is highly contested as a 'dialectics of value' (Hills, 2002).

Such an agentic performance process is defined as an exploration of hybrid identities for Chinese urban youth since their identities are not stable but 'becoming', like wearing masks in a live and wired masquerade. Such performance extends the metaphor of carnivalesque (Chen & Cheung, 2020; Yin & Fung, 2017), where fans poach and transcode cannon media texts through online chatting/comments to unleash the potentials of resistance towards capitals and hegemonic power. Masquerade is transient in a socio-cultural sense, just as performance is underpinned by the fleeting *danmaku* and its short onscreen appearance in a given 'situation' registered via a given plot,

character and/or cultural event, among other references. In addition, this masquerade is wired and networked through the tactical and explorative manipulation of ideas and language, dissolving the tensions and suppressions fans encounter in their everyday life. Such tactical manipulations in the virtual space are conducted through playful transposition (of gendered language) and parody (attack on mainstream or canonical texts). They take many forms at the behaviour level, such as *soramimi* (phonetical mistranslation of lyrics or dialogues for a comic effect), witty jokes and cynical comments (*tuciao*), among a range of other creative articulations that are specific to the vernacular culture but connected to the wider socio-cultural sphere (see critical discussions in Giappone et al., 2018; Sugawa-Shimada, 2011). Therefore, the initiators of conversations are performing an imagined collective identity through anonymous and concurrent *danmaku*. A social-hermeneutic model is feasible and appropriate to unpack such a micro-to-macro sociological process as I will explain below.

### *Database, symbolic space and the semantic web*

The polysemic nature of ACGN contents help accumulate an ocean of texts, signs and semiotics, and create multiple echo chambers or assemblages. They are home to like-minded people linked by certain themes, dispositions, affects and emotions. Even though Azuma (2009) claims simulacra-like affective moe-elements are occupying, if not replacing, grand narratives such as ideology, the symbolic fandom space is surprisingly well ordered in the form of a database or architecture (see also, Manovich, 2013). I would argue, this architecture is also a memetic and associative one, constituted by fluid symbolic texts that appear to have a life of their own. Its lifeblood is fans' prosumption and co-creation. Therefore, it is hard to single out an overarching and orderly framework, rather, such an architecture produces various *situations* for both individuals or like-minded fans as groups. Associations and memes are built around emotions and affects rather than on a pure logic, thus may appear disordered. It may seem anecdotal and hard to digest for people with Cartesian rationality; however, it is easier to understand in a culture where associative philosophy has a strong and lasting influence (Hall & Ames, 1998). Such emotional and memetic semiotics (signs and semantic cues) affect the way people make sense of the world around them, the symbolic space they are operating in, the media texts they are prosuming, as well as themselves (identities). Some examples of memetic categorisation may be useful for better illustration. For instance, animations are categorised according to their genre, studio or director/auteur, by way of a database. Websites and online communities are fostered around such themes. These spaces are 'backstage' for fans to rehearse their collective identities through *learning* insider knowledge. For example, affective moe-elements are organised via crowd-funded databases, including character traits, tropes, plots, contexts, worldviews, voice/tone, and multiple genders and universes. The associative nature of such databases also requires a more qualitative and contextualised reading of such categorisations, as their meaning changes in a transcultural context, through a learning and performative process.

### *A Chinese × Western theorisation of self-change and becoming*

Following the discussion above, the *social and transitional self* is performed and actualised through learning and communication, as in a 'becoming' process. Self-reflection and self-construction are crucial for the social-hermeneutic self, a learned projection and reflection between the relationships of two beings, human beings and things-in-themselves (including technologies such as social media

and danmaku). To invoke a Hegelian concept, *wirklichkeit*, at a metaphysical level, I treat fans' identity construction as a result of not only the world as it is, but also how things in the world work with each other (Yang, 2016, p. viii). In this sense, the danmaku communicative behaviour should be examined through a behaviouristic approach, as 'work in progress'. However, I am aware that not all the specific behaviours would conclusively lead to the discovery of certain patterns of identity construction. Within the context of a vernacular culture, identity claiming and granting are much easier than that in an ontological sense. By focusing on agency (what fans can do), this article does not aim to draw such self-discoveries as fixed identities, but to offer a Foucauldian *epistémé* or heuristic tool to think about how fans situate, reflect and perform their identities (Butler, 2004). Inspired by Yang's (2016) synthesis of Chinese and Western philosophy in *The Mutual Cultivation of Self and Things*, I rely on the holistic *epistémé* contextualised in Chinese traditions. His central idea was 'mutual cultivation', accomplishing oneself (成人) and accomplishing things (成事) (Yang, 2016, p. 25). To me, agency (of both human and thing) is key in this accomplishing and cultivation process. Hall and Ames (1998) argue that such a self-cultivation process is 'an ongoing, dynamic achievement of equilibrium' (p. 49). It requires voluntary enchantment and deference, as fans often do, when consuming fantasies in the virtual world. The changing and accomplishing (inner)self also takes care of the social self with agentic tactics, an assumption held by Goffman where a real self is behind various performing social selves in dramaturgical theory (Scott, 2015). It offers a nuanced and much neglected strand of thought in terms the social-self construction, an attempt to resist yet not leave certain socio-cultural hegemony. The cultural and meaning offerings work as 'vectors' which are fluid and contingent in nature (Bailey, 2005). The internalisation process can be understood as a 'folding' process (Deleuze, 1988), where an individual subject synthesises Mead's 'I and me' fold (Bailey, 2005). Me, or the objectified I, is a 'generalised other' within a socio-cultural context. By selectively taking in external meaning offerings, the 'me' is incorporated into the 'I', making self-construction a negotiated process. This process never ends and is always becoming (Scott, 2015). Therefore, the agency of the subject is activated through learning and playing, allowing a change to happen by actively working against, with and around the stimuli, affect and the environment it is situated in, thus being tactical and pragmatic in nature. This is in line with the Chinese processional philosophy tradition, which has a primary focus on ethics (Du, 2015). That is, how to become a better person and how to lead a good and happy life (Behuniak, 2004). Extending Bailey's (2005) social-hermeneutic self, this Chinese × Western *epistémé* emphasises the hermeneutic dimension within a symbolic media context, which is seldom discussed in studies about effects and uses and gratifications. As the British cultural studies approach has a primary focus on practices, individual subjectivity is largely missing. By contrast, the original and transcultural synthesis proposed is particularly useful, as it values the dynamics between the symbolic/material space and the self-reflections in the making. In addition, this process is coordinated between 'regions' (frontstage and backstage) and 'roles' performed by the social selves to maintain a certain social order in Goffman's (1971) term. Therefore, this model foregrounds the self-construction and performance at both the individual and collective level, intersecting with the primary-to-secondary media text, platform-to-fan and fan-to-fan interactions.

## Case selection and methodology

The conventional methodology used in fandom studies is interpretive in nature (Bailey, 2005; Sandvoss, 2005). Conversely, danmaku analysis tend to rely on algorithms and quantitative

methods (Liu et al., 2016; Wu & Ito, 2014). However, this article takes a mix-method approach. Taking a hermeneutic and interpretative approach when analysing data visualisation, I initially map out conversation clusters and then provide interpretations based on interviews and participant observation. The mix-method approach is a perfect fit since I examine the relationships between the comments and the primary visual texts and how they contribute to the construction and performance of the social self. This is supported by Gephi, which is good at conducting social network analysis by visualising the connections between the subjects/fans (displayed as nodes) so that the major themes can be identified, interpreted and further validated through interview and observation data.

When fans prosume and co-create, and try to make sense and negotiate their identities, they build their own mind-maps to categorise fan-created discourses and database tags, enabled by *danmaku*. Despite the hybridity and multifacetedness of the vector-like, cultural and meaning offerings, there are patterns to be discovered. Bilibili's open API allows data scraping, including the danmaku shooter/commenter's ID, comments, timestamp. Even though the comments are often coded language, forums and databases such as Moegirlpedia.org work as a dictionary to help explain the terms. One challenge is that even though large amounts of data can be obtained, when dealing with self-reflection and construction, as in a becoming process, I nonetheless have to be selective, to choose quality and relevant data.

The majority of the observation and interviews were conducted between 2015 and 2017 involving 20 informants, with four additional interviews conducted in 2018. Observation included online and offline observation where the researcher watched the show recommended by fans *and* together with some fans. Two sets of data were collected because ethical clearances were approved by two different institutions with a follow-up study on fans' identity work. Such digital ethnography, also known as netnography, encompasses multiple research methods, approaches and analytic techniques emerging among participants on interactive (social) media and fully utilises information publicly available in those online communities and forums (Kozinets, 2015). Fandom and social media ethnographers keep up-to-date with, engage and collaborate in online discussions, and approach the rich lived worlds of cultural experience that people share and experience on social media (Chen, 2018; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 1992). Significant quotations and specific themes emerged from a thematic analysis of the observation notes and interviews.

The animated series selected is entitled *My Youth Romantic Comedy Is Wrong, As I Expected*; a Super IP. Its abbreviation is Oregairu which means 'I exist'. Oregairu was originally a top ranked light novel series in Japan for three consecutive years from 2015 to 2017. An animated series and video games were later adapted and arranged through licencing deals with Bilibili, reflecting the transmedial and polysemic feature in the ACGN production circus. Oregairu is part of both the slice of life and Harem genres, targeting coming of age male ACGN fans. The 'worldview' of this show is quite conventional, set in a fictional High School. The male protagonist, Hachiman is socially a misfit loner, who is often shunned by his classmates. The plots evolve around Hachiman's cynical view, revealed in an assignment on 'how wild animals live', where he criticises people forming packs to protect themselves and attack each other for selfish gain. He takes pride in wanting to be a bear that lives in solitude. After reading the assignment, his teacher forced him to join a Service Club in the hope that he could change his personality a bit. Two other, female, protagonists Yukino and Yui, despite their own respective problems, are in the same club and offer help and solve schoolmates' problems that are common for their age. As part of the Harem genre, encounters with various female characters are essential, like those between Hachiman and female

schoolmates, a younger sister and a seemingly androgynous character, Saika. Saika clarifies his gender frequently when it gets mistaken. He is one of the few people who would address Hachiman with his first name *correctly* (as a sign of friendship and intimacy), while others either mispronounce Hachiman or give him nicknames. At times, Hachiman finds himself unconsciously attracted to Saika, despite knowing he is a boy. This ‘fan service’ is particularly designed to attract *fujoshi* who are excited about bromance and homoeroticism. This practice is also known as queer baiting.

In a word, Hachiman is a typical Otaku who is friendless, socially awkward and ordinary, almost invisible at school. This includes his ordinary look (his dead-fished eyes and gloomy expressions) and ordinary academic performance (not even bad). The slice of life of a self-contained protagonist makes it easier for Otaku to associate with. Such genre is also regarded as ‘feel-good’ with a therapeutic and healing affect. Therefore, it would be useful to test if self-construction, reflection and performance are evident in such affective media texts.

### *Data selection and visualisation*

Given this article’s exploratory nature, I only selected danmaku in Episode 1, Season II. As it is a returning show, the initial episode of the second season must produce exceptional tension, and thus it works well in showcasing the special role of danmaku for identity construction and performance. Bilibili’s API has a cap for each episode to store 3000 danmaku comments. Initially, I captured all comments and did a clean-up with the aid of word segmentation software, which excels in analysing Chinese characters. However, as the ACGN community often use vernacular expressions including signs, emoji and typos with a mixture of Chinese and Japanese, it is difficult to train such software for sophisticated analysis. I thus chose to manually complete the analysis. After the clean-up, I used Excel and Gephi, respectively, to sort and visualise the connections and nodes of captured variables based on their relationships with a shared timestamp (appearing time). The variables include User ID, post-time, timestamp and danmaku text. To put it simply, the data show who posted what danmaku with the exact time appearing on the screen, corresponding to specific plot points in the episode or with specific characters. In producing the graph visualisation, I applied Yifan Hu Proportional layout in Gephi with improved speed (Hu, 2005).

## **Data analysis**

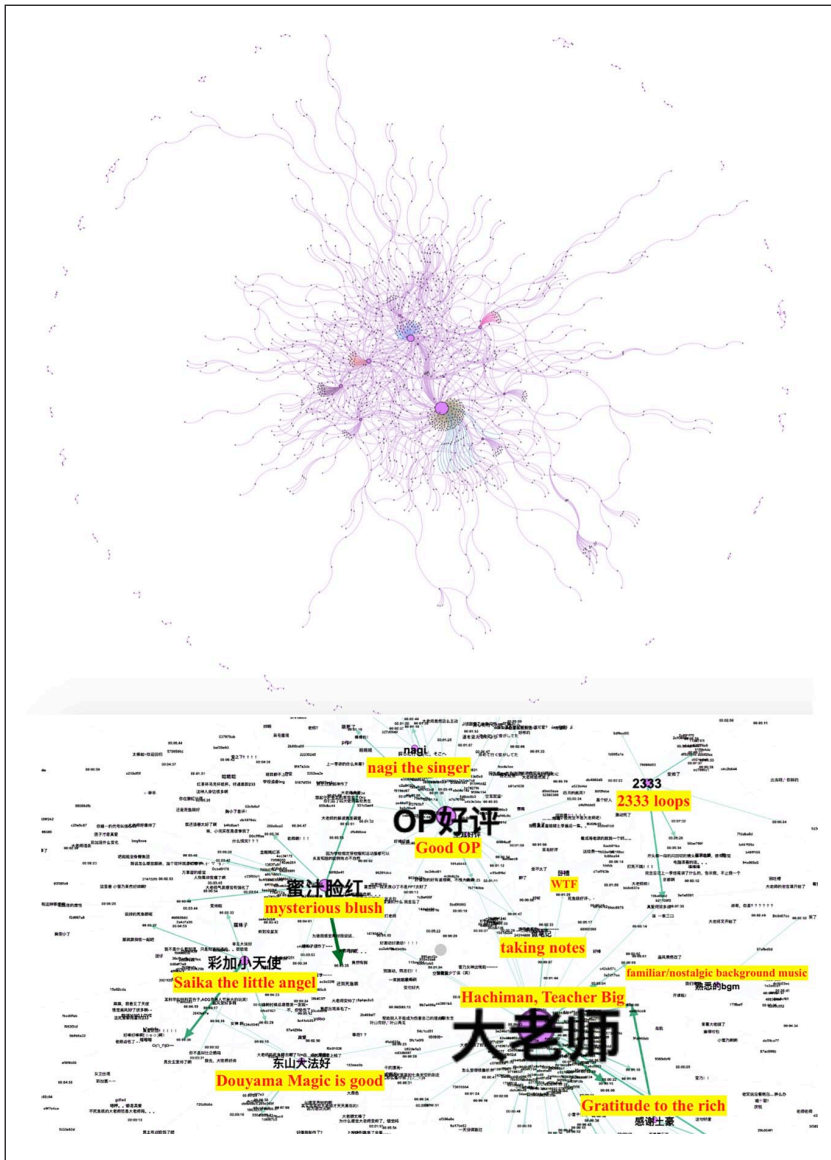
### *A networked semantic web: live and wired masquerade*

Figure 1 shows that intensified danmaku accumulate in the vicinity of User ID and Timestamps (nodes) corresponding to central themes or memes. By ranking the repetitive themes in the overall semantic web (Figure 1), different moe-elements can be categorised as intensified nodes in Figure 2. As I will explain below, these visualisations demonstrate how different levels of interaction are practised through danmaku, namely, platform–fan, fan–primary text and fan–fan interaction and how identity performance is conducted individually and collectively.

### *Fans and primary media texts*

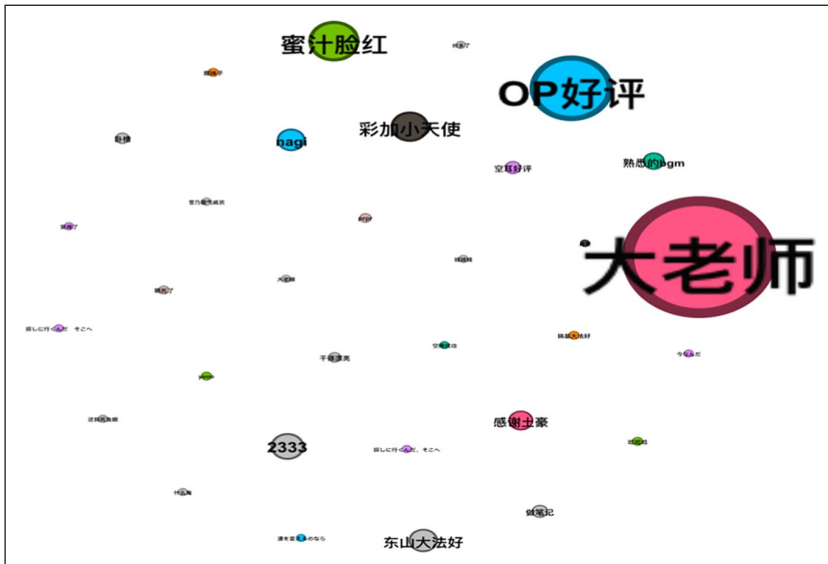
*Character calling and greeting.* For this episode, the interactions between fans and primary media texts are evident via characters, plots and theme songs, opening (OP) and ending (ED). It includes





**Figure 1.** The visual semantic web based on danmaku in Episode I.

2D fictional characters, Hachiman (Teacher Big), Saika the little Angel, Hina the *fujoshi* and Nagi from the three-dimensional (3D) real-life, the singer-songwriter. Names are called with additional comments to show fans' affections. From an SI perspective, such calling and greeting works as rituals for users to identify with their beloved avatars/stars, creating a collective ACGN fandom identity. There are divisions and competitions within such a collective community, since fans are claiming 'ownership' of their beloved characters, which is reflected from the danmaku nodes. This



**Figure 2.** Repetitive memetic terms in Episode I (see Supplemental Material for CSV table of a glossary with English and Japanese translations).

claiming-in-action is also part of their identity performance where their real identities are concealed and rehearsed behind the screens.

*Praise and direct expressions of emotions.* ‘Good bgm/OP/ED’, ‘2333/hahaha’ loops, ‘Too short/not enough to watch/instant noodle series’, ‘moe to death’, ‘prrr’, ‘WTF/WTH’ and ‘talented soramimi’ are dramatic expressions to show affections for certain plots, characters or other fans’ witty jokes and services. For example, ‘prrr’ is onomatopoeia for licking, used to express affection towards fictional characters. It is deemed too erotic to be used in everyday conversations. However, such moral obligations are suspended in such a situation where actors perform as deviants to create social bonds. Rule-breaking attempts used to create a sense of a collective identity are common among subcultural groups (Scott, 2015, p. 119).

### *Platform–fan and fan–fan interactions*

*Platform rituals.* Set phrases such as ‘Gratitude to the Rich’, ‘See you next week’, ‘Take the coins!’ and ‘High energy alert’ have become platform rituals on Bilibili. The first three bombard the screen when the show begins or ends as fans show gratitude to more invested fans, ‘the rich’ who commissioned/crowdfunded the show. ‘Take the coins!’, ‘不就是硬币么’ (Aren’t coins what you need?) and ‘硬币要你有什么用!?’ (Coins, what do I own you for?!) are more witty responses to give the coins to the platform and mash-up video uploaders for their gratifying service/work, often performed unwillingly. ‘High energy alert’ is used when a climax is about to take place. It is a quasi-spoiler without giving the explicit spoiled text. This fan-to-fan interaction is much appreciated, especially when violent scenes catch viewers off guard. It works as a shared register to strengthen



**Figure 3.** Dead-fished eyes as affective moe-element, by author.

the sensation generated from a certain affect, plot or climax in a collective fashion. Such individual interaction gradually becomes ritualised through fan–fan engagement and collective learning. The situation created on Bilibili is a memetic one since fans use such tropes and devices in a performative way to trigger further response from the imagined audience who are watching the show asynchronously. Such interactions then become rituals and are used to incite further engagement, thus solidifying and strengthening the power of ritual and in turn granting a rehearsed identity in the making.

### *Interactions in flux*

*Affective moe-elements.* Character traits, plots and reference/meme are identified and learned collectively as moe-elements, which are later shared across the platform through interactions in flux. Common ones include ‘Kabe-Don (wall bang)’,<sup>2</sup> ‘Dead-fished eyes’ (Figure 3), ‘Daimao/アホ髪’ (antennae hair), ‘Mysterious blush’ (triggered by homoerotic scenes), ‘Kind person card’, ‘Queering is good’, ‘Familiar bgm’ and ‘It’s the society’s fault’ (Hachiman’s cynical philosophy). As argued by Azuma (2009), such non-narrative consumption of datafied moe-elements has substituted the overarching ideology to stimulate fans’ emotions and desires. Fans learn and internalise these elements during collective watching, situated in the fan–platform, fan–primary text and fan–fan interactions, which are re-contextualised and prosumed with new meanings.

*Typing into existence.* ‘Taking notes’ (learn from Teacher Big), ‘screenshot captured’, ‘perfect gui-chu material’ (perfect material for funny and nonsensical mash-up videos), ‘pause to learn the pose’ and ‘type with two hands to show I am innocent’ (not touching themselves) are dramaturgical (linguistic) behaviours, expressing affections in a comic and witty naughty way. Through the deviant ‘licking the screen’ and ‘note-taking’ behaviour, the marginalised Otaku type themselves into existence. In Zhang’s (2016) term, to increase their own visibility is political in nature. Therefore, such moe-elements are not consumed in a de-contextualised and postmodern way as claimed by Azuma. The database non-narrative elements, narrative and ideology are not mutually exclusive. There are many occasions where the Japanese protagonist’s monologue and preaching gained much applause, resulting in taking notes, pausing to take screenshots or learning poses. Therefore, Bilibili functions as an ‘identity college’ for the re-contextualisation and meaning making processes in a transnational fandom. This ‘live and wired masquerade’ creates situations where intense emotions accumulate and spread across the platform. The ‘liveness’ of danmaku is reified through their intensified short format and exact timestamp to correspond to a specific plot and visual modality that is proximate and intimate for fans in China.

As analysed above, danmaku is emotionally charged towards certain moe-elements with loaded references. Such affective elements work as stimuli to attract and retain audiences, and they ‘leak out’ to other social media platforms and reflect a light-hearted and sometimes cynical attitude. Danmaku is similar to *tucao/tsukk* (satire and parody) to vent out discontent in Japanese comedies. This is where Bilibili and danmaku work as regions/situations and role-offerings within mediated communication. Role-offering in *tucao* includes the topic initiator or the funny man (*tsukkomi*), performed through humorous wordplay or punch lines as in a cross talk. The straight man (*boke*) helps the leading role make the audience laugh by maintaining composure. On Bilibili, this is achieved by the imagined audience’s non-interaction, watching without shooting danmaku. Therefore, ‘being true to one’s self’ is not key here, rather, ‘being creative with one’s self’ is a more accurate description of the ethos of the Bilibili fan community. Through breaking out funny and witty jokes and its danmaku reaction, jokers get a sense of achievement, belonging and existence. It is performative, operatic and attention-seeking, in that they do not even need an audience to interact with as is commonly needed in conversational SI. What is more striking is that ACGN fans know about it well. The performed cynical and snobbish attitude towards society and life via danmaku are extravagant, mean and, sometimes, toxic. This will be explained below with regard to their self-reflection and self-construction process.

### *Self-reflection and self-construction*

ACGN fans are viewed as obsessive media consumers, and Azuma (2009) argued that Otaku are becoming animalised, submitting to their desire without negation. For example, there is a conventional setting for Harem genre where the protagonist has a younger sister. This has created a derivative sister-complex genre, which is heavily scrutinised as it uses incest as a plot/joke. However, associative and re-contextualised danmaku are identified, which make the presumption of Chinese fans self-reflective and performative. Danmaku likes ‘I want to have a sister’ and ‘the country owes you a sister’ (国欠妹), ‘the country owes you a dick’ (国欠吊) and makes implicit reference to the one-child policy. As the last generation of single children in China, Generation Z associates this plot with an immediate critique on social policies, which has the possibility of becoming a ‘fandom public’ (Zhang, 2016). It is a powerful correction by expanding Azuma’s de-contextualised assessment of Otaku and their submission to desire. Such reflections are not always progressive, but it

indeed offers an alternative public space for political discussion. Based on interviews and observation, relevant pop memes and catch phrases (references) also point to gender politics in China. The ‘sister and dick owed by the country’ are mean but also transgressive wordplays that reveal the complicated side of Bilibili fandom, where cynical, conservative and sometimes nationalist sentiments elevate to quarrels and debates. To some extent, fans defend the government in general (one-child policy included) advocating that young Chinese netizens should no longer be accustomed to the idea that ‘the state should be responsible for everything in life’. But some danmaku comments obviously are clinging to that socialist legacy, which is the trigger of the ideological clash. Such wordplays work as satire that aims to defend the state and ‘to return’ the responsibility to the individual, suggesting ‘you are responsible for your own business!’. This is problematic given the fact that ‘the country owing you a sister’ actually means ‘don’t complain and just ask your mum and dad to have a sister for you’, whereas ‘the country/state owing you a dick’ actually means ‘don’t complain, you either get one or grow one yourself’. This is a ‘double kill’ targeting and attacking the stereotyped, ‘single and often unhappy’ progressive women/feminists who are ‘moaning and groaning’, in addition to ordinary women who ‘lack’ dicks (personal communication, 2018). This is very problematic and misogynistic, which is NOT uncommon (stressed by author) among single Otaku fans, male and female both included. These are the dark and toxic becomings (cynical, offensive and non-progressive) that are lurking in the community.

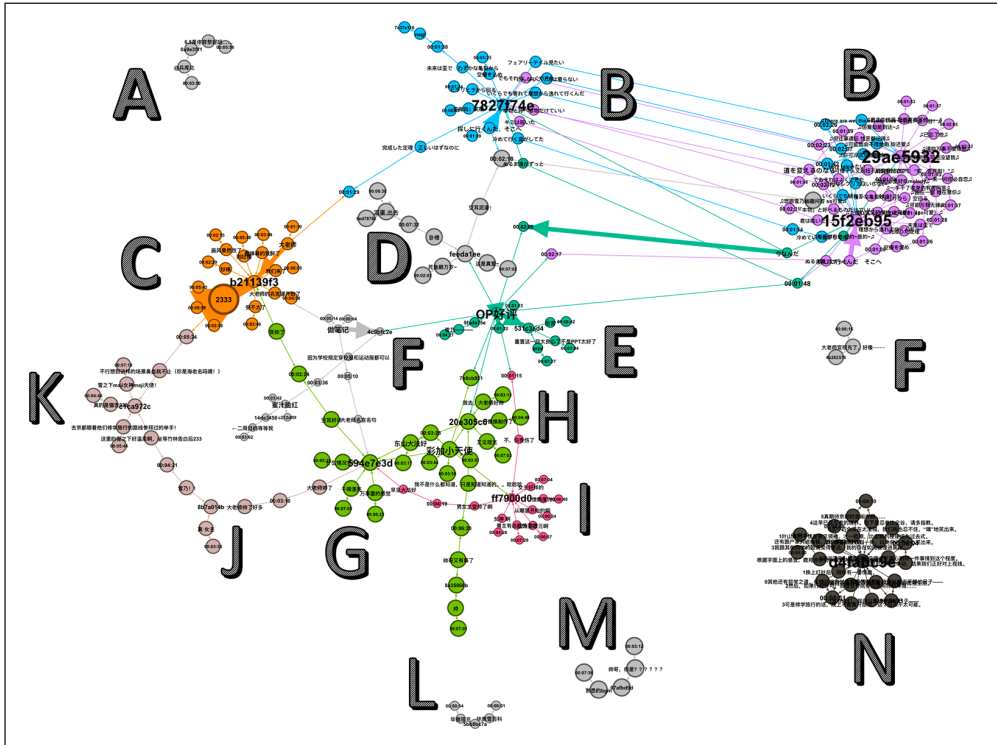
Based on the observation of and conversation with the fans, such dramatic expressions and witty jokes should not be regarded as ‘authentic’ reflections of fans’ identities. Such performative and coded language is used to produce a comic effect for social and political purposes. Such performance does challenge certain norms where young ACGN fans are the weak and marginalised given their young age, lack of experience and subordinate status at home, school and the wider society (Chen, 2018). Besides the short and fragmented danmaku, it is significant to find that fans identify *with* (not necessarily as) the characters in the show in extensive, reflexive and autobiographical reviews. Hermeneutic reflections are also evident in affective danmaku, which are emotionally charged. For example, a 20-year-old fan talks about his own experience:

I am also a loner, bad student at school. In high school, the only thing you are asked to do is to perform well and get to a good university. Our Physical Education classes even got cancelled (regarded as wasting time). So even you are good at sports, you are still a loser. I think Teacher Big is the kind of bad guy who tells you: being ‘weird’ is OK. It is not us who are patients, it is the system. Teacher Big is a non-conformist. He sticks to his value and I admire him a lot. (Personal communication, 2016)

The informant makes explicit reference to Hachiman’s line ‘it is the society’s fault’. Hachiman’s story and philosophy help the informant find peace with his ‘traumatic’ experience at school. This shows why fans enjoy such a feel-good, thus ‘therapeutic’ genre. When asked if he would act like Hachiman in real life, he commented that he would not, in that Teacher Big is an idealised figure manipulated at will by the producer and some fans. In SI’s term, this creates a situation where the fans can perform and negotiate their social self so that life could go on. He knows well about the shortcomings of Hachiman; however, Hachiman’s story can help ‘get the steam out of him’.

### *Performative and negotiated identities*

Following fan’s self-reflection and self-construction, identity performance is more evident in danmaku nodes and clusters. As shown in Figure 4, I rank the influencers who posted danmaku generating



**Figure 4.** Clustering analysis of influencers with (dis)connected themes.

networked nodes. Echoing Jenkins' account on fans' collective intelligence, these danmaku consist of annotations, explanations and translations, as well as spoilers. Such practices are functional, emotional and creative. For example, *soramimi* is used to entertain the audience who consume both primary and secondary texts. These misheard lyrics and lines are homophonic and often nonsensical translations of lyrics/dialogue for a comic effect. *Soramimi* is more functional in the sense that it aims to establish sociality 'more via form than content' among *Otaku* (Nakajima, 2019, p. 105).

In Figure 4, the danmaku in cluster A consists of hypertext referencing other shows/memes. Cluster B is providing Japanese subtitles and translations for the OP/ED. Cluster C is centred around Hachiman, commenting on the change of drawing style and 'taking notes when he lectures'. Clusters C, D, E, G and H focus on the implicit BL line between Hachiman and Saika, stimulating 'mysterious blush', while Clusters I, J and K focus on the GBL (Girl-Boy's Love) line with two respective female characters. These separate clusters reflect the division in fandom following different preference of 'shipping/coupling' between different characters. For example, in commenting in the BL line, many danmaku stated, 'I'm a guy, but I don't know why I am watching this', followed by 'Guy+1' and 'Guy+10086'. Such a performative response adheres to the notion of 'civility' and 'facework' in SI, which help ease tensions and spare the interactor's blush, thus face-keeping (Scott, 2015, p. 96). Through posting 'mysterious blush', even though it points out the supposedly deviant consumption of the BL/GL, it eases such deviance by acknowledging 'togetherness' to maintain a collective facework (Scott, 2015, p. 129). Such danmaku is also a

performance of gender (sexuality) arguably by female/queer danmaku shooters pretending to be male fans, reversing and ridiculing heteronormativity (Lavin et al., 2017). It is also a 'polite fiction' collectively performed while everyone knows what is 'really' going on (Scott, 2015, p. 160).

Although danmaku influencers tend to form nodes in the cluster, isolated nodes are also identified, namely, F, L, M and N. F and L comment that Hachiman becomes a 'real', a vernacular phrase in Otaku culture referring to the opposite of an Otaku, one who is living a fulfilling and satisfactory (though also pretentious) life. The signature trait of a 'real' is having a girlfriend and being popular among peers. Therefore, it partially explains why such a comment is isolated since it is too mainstream and spoils the atmosphere for Otaku. Which is to say, it breaches the collective polite fiction. N is worth noting because despite the abundant comments, this cluster is the most isolated. The comments did not make sense until one danmaku pointed out that they are dialogues in light novels. It is a live presumption parallel with the primary text, extending to the psychological developments of various characters in the form of monologue and dialogue.

Despite the performance of gendered talk, on a different level, these comments also work as supportive and networked performance for the audience to engage with. They are a harmonious cooperations between Otaku/homers to form cohesive social bonds. Such symbolic interactions reify a series of shared meanings about what is really going on. In Goffman's term, the 'ritualization of identificatory sympathy' is accomplished by exchanging and communicating feelings of empathy, care and solidarity (Scott, 2015, p. 123).

## **Discussion and conclusion: self-discoveries beyond moral panic**

This study takes a micro-sociological SI approach to study danmaku interactions in ACGN fandom on social media. It focuses on fans' engagement with the primary text, secondary discourses and with each other. The platform works as an 'audiencing tool' for danmaku presumption, 'accomplishing oneself and things' for the tolerate and networked community. The results from danmaku analysis demonstrate fans' identity performance is social and pragmatic. For example, fans develop (para)social relationships, constructing and maintaining a collective identity. While some scholars such as Turkle (2011) criticise social media as leading to 'cold intimacies', I would argue that it is beneficial simply because it is 'cold'. Such coldness is tactically used as 'non-observance', a strategy for fans to play 'indifferent strangers' and to maintain a collective facework for ACGN fandom, especially when certain plots and comments may cause controversy and make the whole community appear to be 'deviant'. More importantly, fans' identity construction and performance are embedded in the networked and associative Chinese milieu, orchestrated by and contextualised in the framework of mutual cultivation between 'human becomings' and the environment. The article so far has made a specific case, that Bilibili is an identity college for Chinese youth to explore their hybrid identities. It provides a space for a self-reflective process that connects to both personal fantasies and collective identities. Compared with the question of 'who they are', more research on 'what they can do with their identities' are needed to understand the youth culture, fandom, and the wider Chinese society.

In addition, danmaku interaction is also a learning process, for example, taking notes from Teacher Big, appropriating and re-contextualising moe-elements for the creation of new meanings. Subtitle and translation providers, evident in danmaku, are also part of the learning process, making Bilibili a place for intercultural competence building (Zhang & Cassany, 2018). When considered together, these aspects demonstrate more complex identities and practices beyond the

conventional portrayal of fans as cultural dopes who are amused to death. The exploration and performance of multiple and hybrid social selves in the identity college is powered by reflective, constructive and performative practices. Refuting the claims of ACGN fandom's complete submission to desire, this article presents a more complex picture of playful encounters of fans with media texts, secondary discourses and among themselves to negotiate identities. Informed by the mutual cultivation *epistémé*, the social-hermeneutic self can be thought anew with positive and progressive potentials in such fan practices. The accomplishing of oneself is parallel with achieving things for social and educational purposes, despite their close association with emotions and affects.

That said, the playful encounters are not always orderly and unproblematic. With the case of the virtual fan community on Bilibili, the networked selves and subjects reveal a fashion of conformity and deference. Fans adhere to platform rituals and sometimes become cynical, revealing a cohesive nature even in such emerging social bonds. This is not surprising given the fact that the majority of fans are adolescents and emerging adults who are adjusting and developing their identities. ACGN fans reveal an ambivalent attitude towards the media texts they prosume, sometimes absorbing, mocking and rejecting their latent values and norms. Some may become database animals in Azuma's term, however, by acknowledging this, their tactic is not to withdraw but to engage, to co-create and to *tuciao* (vent out emotions), laughing at the obscurity of such a symbolic and materialist social milieu. They gain self-affirmation through such seemingly contradictory practices and rely on self-mocking, witty jokes and collective identity formation as critical and symbolic resistance. They are rebellious towards cultural conventions and norms through anti-heteronormative wordplay. They challenge the linear progression of one's life, such as to get educated, grow up, get married and have kids – things a 'real' would do. However, they still long for a 'normal' relationship, friendship and a happy life, evident in the performance of their social selves.

There are several implications from this. First, self-construction is a 'becoming' process, especially for young people. The term 'hybrid identities' describes this dynamic rather than static process as a whole, a process which can vary at the individual level for each self. This process can also go towards different directions, positive or negative, progressive or destructive. For fandom and cultural studies, this case provides some up-to-date analysis of how a new symbolic space, community and a vernacular culture is constructed, developed and maintained. A particular focus was on the individual and collective networked social selves through danmaku interactions. Therefore, it calls for more qualitative research to use the hermeneutic approach to analyse processes in specific socio-cultural and technological contexts. The novel use of big and small data in this article is useful for such explorative investigation in addition to purely algorithm-based analysis. In addition, such an approach reveals the complexity and diversified variants of fandom while challenging and extending that term. This mixed approach tries to find some recognisable order within this complex and dynamic space and process, both spatial and temporal. To invoke Bailey's (2005) account on identity construction, there is some order and coherency, even though it is fleeting and fluid.

Finally, since the investigation and theoretical attempt has an associative nature, it is open for challenge and development. This is due much to the data/database available for investigation – one can only interpret to the degree limited by the primary text and secondary discourses. For example, context-specific concepts are only available to fans who have been exposed to and *learned* such texts and who have gone through the selection, rejection or acceptance of various contingent cultural and meaning offerings. Therefore, the completed internalisation process is foregrounded by



such contingency. While this article is written through consulting sources of more than three languages, one episode of the slice of life genre – despite its richness underpinned by 3000 danmaku and various secondary discourses provided by multiple reviewers and interviews – it may still seem foreign for readers who are out of the selective thus contingent group. At the same time, it may seem unconvincing or even irrelevant to some cynical fans who see any serious investigation of their tribal culture as laughable – a position that is ultimately an evidence of their agency. Finally, the key of hermeneutic self-construction lies in what kind of playful encounters users (will) have and how creative they are with their social-selves, in the process of self-becoming and socialisation, not far from here and now.

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### **Supplemental material**

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### **Notes**

1. A clear shift is evident in psychoanalyst fandom studies from Lacan to Winnicott (i.e. the transitional object, 1971) since the 2000s, though. The cultural-sociological camp and the psychoanalytical camp are caught-up in the contradictions between the empowered and tactical fans vs the 'little madness' of fans' cult following, which is 'deemed defective, deficient, or deprived' (Smith, 1988, p. 41). This article serves as one of many attempts to break such binary oppositions.
2. In Japan, Kabe-Don mainly appears in plots of girls' manga or anime when a man forces the woman against the wall; at the same time, his hand slaps the wall and surrounds the woman, producing the sound of 'don'. It is regarded as 'a clever move for confession' in manga and ranked high in fans' fantasy. However, it is problematic in real life as a form of harassment of the vulnerable, though not necessarily of women.

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