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Boundaries and Sharing: The Impact of Fan Creative Participation on Original Works—A Case Study of “The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation” (Postprint)

Authors: Yang Yuting

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Abstract

A quality work is not constructed solely by an excellent main creative team, but rather through the collective intelligence of multiple stakeholders—including the main creative team, production team, and audience. Pierre Lévy notes, “In traditional definitions, collective intelligence refers to a state where no single individual knows everything, yet everyone possesses some knowledge, and any member’s understanding can be shared with others through immediate question-and-answer exchanges. Networked culture can engender novel power structures, allowing diverse groups to accumulate knowledge and collaborate through research, debate, and analysis to distill a collective understanding of the world.” However, when fans participate in collective creative endeavors as a non-professional group, they may introduce their own emotional attachments and interpretations regarding the original work’s plot or characters, potentially failing to fully respect the source material. Under such circumstances, how to assess the impact of fan participation on the original work, how to negotiate the boundaries between the two, and how to enable fan creations to coexist harmoniously with the original work while maximizing benefits without compromising its structural integrity and details constitute the central topics this paper seeks to address. This analysis will employ the novel “Mo Dao Zu Shi” as a case study to examine these issues.

Full Text

Boundaries and Sharing: A Case Study of *Mo Dao Zu Shi* Discussing the Impact of Fan Participation in Creation on Original Works

Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing 102600

Abstract: A quality work is not built solely on the merits of its creative team, but rather through the collective wisdom of multiple parties—including the creative team, production team, and audience. As Pierre Lévy notes, “In its traditional definition, collective intelligence means that no one knows everything, everyone knows something, and any member’s knowledge can be shared with others through instant Q&A. A networked culture can create new power structures, enabling people from diverse backgrounds to accumulate knowledge and collaborate through research, debate, and analysis to extract an understanding of the world” [1]. However, when fans join this collective creative process as non-professional participants, they may bring their own emotional attachments and interpretations of the original work’s plot or characters, potentially failing to fully respect the source material. This paper examines how to assess the impact of fan participation on original works, how to delineate boundaries between the two, and how to enable harmonious coexistence between fan creations and original works while maximizing benefits without compromising the structure and details of the source material. Using the novel *Mo Dao Zu Shi* as a case study, this article analyzes these issues.

Keywords: fan creation, collective wisdom, boundaries and sharing

1. Introduction to Relevant Concepts

1.1 Introduction to *Mo Dao Zu Shi* and Its Derivative Works

Mo Dao Zu Shi is an original danmei fantasy novel by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu, serialized on Jinjiang Literature City starting October 31, 2015. The first edition concluded on March 1, 2016 (main text), with revisions completed on September 7, 2016 (main text + three extra chapters), marking the official completion of the online version. Four additional side stories were updated on January 1, 2018. On December 8, 2017, Kuaikan Manhua launched an adapted scroll comic; on June 1, 2018, Maoer FM released an adapted radio drama; Tencent Video launched an animated adaptation on July 9, 2018, and broadcast a TV drama adaptation *The Untamed* on June 27, 2019; in November 2018, Sichuan Literature and Art Publishing House released the first volume of the simplified Chinese print edition, *Limitless*.

[FIGURE:N]

1.2 Introduction to Fan Participatory Culture

The term “fan” is originally a transliteration of the English word “Fans,” referring to individuals and groups who engage in communicative activities centered on a particular person or object and possess group consciousness and a sense of belonging. Fan participatory culture was proposed by Jenkins in *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. In summary, fan participatory culture is a media cultural model in which fans spontaneously engage in content production, dissemination, and community building on internet platforms around original works. Characterized by democratized methods, standardized organization, mainstream content, and diversified channels, fan participation has become a crucial intermediary in the convergent media era for original works to “break circles” from fan communities to mainstream audiences, thanks to its tremendous potential influence and economic benefits. However, fan participation also carries risks. Issues such as fans’ distinction between works and the actors who portray them, confidentiality concerns regarding unreleased works, whether fan secondary creation constitutes copyright infringement, and the impact of fan creation on original works are common. Therefore, properly managing the relationship between fan participation and original works has become a key consideration for creative teams.

2. How Fans Participate in the Original Work’s Creative Process

Fan participation in the original work’s creative process occurs primarily in two stages: during creation and after completion. During the serialization of a work, whether due to the work itself or the author’s personal reasons, fans accumulate and, in the process of following updates, may create their own content based on existing plot developments or communicate with the author to suggest revisions to completed sections or provide inspiration for future parts. After the work is completed, the author has established a complete story universe, providing a framework and foundation for fan creation, upon which fans can develop secondary creations such as side stories. The following uses *Mo Dao Zu Shi* as a detailed example.

2.1 During Original Work Creation

2.1.1 Interaction with the Creative Team As the textual work forms the foundation for most transmedia adaptations, the author interacts with fan readers in real-time through comment sections during the text creation and platform update process, listening to fan opinions and deciding whether to modify content, plot, or character settings after comprehensive consideration. For instance, in the first edition of *Mo Dao Zu Shi*, certain plot points were incomplete and had logical issues in the narrative flow, which the author later revised and supplemented, also releasing side story content based on fan demand.

For multimedia works based on textual sources—such as comics, animation, TV

dramas, films, and games—the concretization process of character images, environments, and details also involves interaction with fans to maximize fidelity to the original work. In the early stages of animating *Mo Dao Zu Shi*, the Tencent Video creative team proactively understood fan preferences, conducting surveys on character designs, costumes, prop colors, and theme songs. Fan opinions became a reference for the animation team, with fans participating in the creative process in an “auxiliary” role. This positive interaction resulted in high fan recognition after the launch of the *Mo Dao Zu Shi* animation, with Douban ratings of 8.8, 8.9, and 8.8 for the three seasons—demonstrating relatively high adaptation quality and fan recognition compared to contemporary domestic animations.

Through interaction with the creative team, fans complete “participatory emotional labor” by liking and commenting on social platforms and work release platforms to refine the work alongside the creative team. On one hand, this participatory behavior enhances fans’ sense of gain and achievement; on the other hand, fans who invest emotional labor develop higher stickiness and recognition toward the work, laying the foundation for further fan economy consumption.

[FIGURE:N]

2.1.2 Fan Secondary Creation During the update cycles of works on platforms, which vary in duration, fans engage in secondary creation based on known plot points and content during waiting periods between text and multimedia adaptation releases. Forms include but are not limited to text, artwork, video editing, and handicrafts. Secondary creation is based on the original work and constitutes “productive emotional labor.” Driven by emotions toward the original work, fans use plot or characters as material, combining their own skills with affection to create works related to the original, aiming to express emotions rather than seek economic compensation.

Taking *Mo Dao Zu Shi* as an example, on LOFTER, China’s largest fan creation platform, related fan works number 508,000, with related topics garnering 130 million views. In contrast, another work by the same author, *Heaven Official’s Blessing*, has only 123,000 related fan works and 60.361 million topic views—a significant lead in data (Figure 3). Although the novel and its adaptations have been completed, fan secondary creation remains active. Using Weibo data as an example, the *Mo Dao Zu Shi* super-topic features real-time posts of fan fiction and animation mashups, with 2.756 million super-topic fans and 283,000 posts, ranking 3rd among book-related super-topics. Active fan secondary creation continuously brings vitality to the original work, attracting “outsiders” while stabilizing the existing fan base. Additionally, the unrestricted and inclusive nature of UGC (user-generated content) free secondary creation, along with fan recognition, motivates more people to engage in secondary creation.

[FIGURE:N]

2.2 After Original Work Creation

As demonstrated above, fan participation is not limited to the creation and update stages of the original work; after completion, creative enthusiasm may decline but remains active. At this stage, fan participation primarily takes the form of secondary creation and peripheral product consumption, though the themes of secondary creation shift from focusing on original character settings, plot, and content to themes more tailored to fans' own creations.

2.2.1 Fan Secondary Creation At this stage, the original work and its derivatives are settled, with relatively stable character images, plots, and content. The themes of fan secondary creation also transform from speculative continuations of subsequent plots to free thematic expression, broadly divisible into supplementary creation of side plots and in-depth excavation and expansion of original details.

Given that the original work cannot narrate all characters and details due to length and structure constraints, but as an ensemble novel, *Mo Dao Zu Shi* features numerous characters with inconsistent narrative shares for supporting characters and brief explorations of side plots. For fans, however, the unexplored parts of the original work represent free space for their creativity. In the Yicheng arc of *Mo Dao Zu Shi*, the emotional trajectory between supporting characters Xiao Xingchen and Xue Yang is not detailed, but fans have expanded on their emotional development and rewritten their endings based on the original work. Fan replies and comments carry strong emotional color, and the symbols and language in interaction rituals serve to condense participants' shared emotions—emotion being one of the bonds linking fans' shared experiences. The strong emotional nature of secondary creation enables it to achieve greater dissemination within fan communities.

Behind-the-scenes footage, as authentic records of filming, also becomes an important source for fan secondary creation and in-depth excavation. Fans incorporate actors' performances in behind-the-scenes footage into characters, using them as a basis for secondary creation, to some extent blurring the boundary between reality and virtuality.

2.2.2 Peripheral Product Consumption In *Understanding Popular Culture*, John Fiske analyzes fan behavior and argues that fans are excessive “readers,” and that fans' investment in texts is active, fanatical, and participatory [2]. This “excessiveness” also extends from the production stage of fan secondary creation to the consumption stage, primarily manifested in purchasing peripheral products, paying to participate in live events, and crowdfunding for voting, characterized by sociality and conformity.

Sociality. In the social media era, fans cluster according to preferences and other factors, with different communities possessing different labels. Creative teams target production and distribution of IP peripheral products based on

these community labels. For example, most *Mo Dao Zu Shi* fans are “CP fans” of the main characters Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji (CP is an abbreviation of the word Couple; CP fans refer to fans who are obsessed with a pair set as a couple in a variety show or TV drama). To maximize IP revenue, creative teams prioritize the needs of this community. Searching “Mo Dao Zu Shi” on Taobao, the top ten peripheral products are all CP products featuring Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji.

Conformity. Fan groups, initially grassroots in nature, see discourse power concentrate among a few “opinion leaders” as gaps emerge in activity level, financial investment, and creative content volume. On one hand, opinion leaders in fan communities can produce high-quality secondary creation works and organize fan collective activities, pointing the way for fan groups; on the other hand, they also play a directional role in fan consumption, with ordinary fans choosing to follow opinion leaders or the general trend in consumption.

3. Impact of Fan Participation in Creation

3.1 Positive Impacts

1. Satisfying Fan Creative Psychology The psychological motivations for fan creation include but are not limited to emotional outlet, group belonging and recognition, and self-actualization. Fan creators transfer emotions toward the original work through secondary creation, expressing residual feelings about the original work. Fan groups are democratized, community-based, and professionalized organizations, with those who hold discourse power referred to as fan heads or, respectfully, as female creators—that is, “opinion leaders.” Fans increase their activity within the organization, and producing works related to the original work enhances community recognition. For fan creators themselves, when their self-created works receive recognition from group members or opinion leaders, the reward of having their emotional labor recognized by the organization enhances their loyalty and sense of belonging. According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Figure 4), the highest human need is self-actualization. Fans’ emotions toward the work become the motivation for secondary creation, through which they can improve their abilities in aesthetics, software operation, social interaction, and other fields. Recognition received during this process constitutes acknowledgment of fan creators’ abilities, enabling them to achieve self-improvement through secondary creation.

[FIGURE:N]

2. Positive Publicity Effect Fan-initiated secondary creation is based on emotions toward the original work rather than economic motives, thus possessing emotional loyalty and singular purpose. These characteristics make fan secondary creation works excellent publicity channels. During the creation and promotion of original works, creative teams generally affirm fan creation for achieving “breaking circles” publicity. On one hand, for creators, incorporating or recognizing fan works enables the original work to gain publicity within and

beyond fan circles through fan secondary creation, bringing traffic to the original work. On the other hand, for fan creators, it satisfies goals of emotional outlet and self-actualization. High-quality fan creation works can attract traffic for the original work or be incorporated by the creative team, providing ideas for subsequent marketing and promotion. Fan secondary creation brings high-quality, free promotional traffic to creative teams, while fans achieve self-actualization in the creative process—a mutually beneficial win-win situation.

3. Enriching Character Portrayal As mentioned above, after the original work and multimedia products are completed, the themes of fan secondary creation shift to continuation of side plots or excavation of details, which can supplement and coordinate the original work. In *Mo Dao Zu Shi*, the villain Jin Guangyao’s wife Qin Su has minimal screen time but is a key character driving plot development. Her relationship with Jin Guangyao receives little attention in the novel, with only the basic outline provided, and is similarly glossed over in the TV drama *The Untamed*. However, fans have seized upon this tragic character’s experiences to meticulously portray her psychological journey, enriching this supporting character’s image and making her more three-dimensional and well-established.

3.2 Negative Impacts

1. OOC Detachment from Original Work OOC (Out of Character) refers to situations in creation where character settings deviate from the original work, becoming inconsistent with or even contrary to the original character design, commonly used in fan circles and ACG communities. As mentioned above, fan creators’ psychological motivations for secondary creation include emotions toward the original work. However, as different individuals, fans also embed their own understanding of the work, characters, and plot, incorporating personal emotions called “private settings.” Since OOC lacks unified standards and its definition is relatively subjective—usually determined by the fan creator themselves—the quality of created works varies. While high-quality content can certainly promote the original work, works mixed with private settings or severely inconsistent with the original work may cause misunderstandings among casual users, resulting in counterproductive effects.

4. Coping Strategies

(1) Tagging Secondary Creations When fan creators submit secondary creation works to social platforms, they can provide tagged explanations in the introduction or cover, such as noting if the work contains OOC. Concise tags avoid cumbersome explanations while enabling casual users to clearly understand the content and settings, preventing misunderstandings caused by OOC.

(2) Using Public Materials Whenever Possible Currently, most fan secondary creation does not aim for economic profit, but there are cases of paid access, such as the platform “Afdian,” which provides a platform for fan cre-

ators to offer paid reading submissions. Users must pay a certain amount to gain reading access. This type of secondary creation exists in a gray area. Moreover, to promote the original work, fan secondary creation works usually highlight character images (or actors), potentially constituting infringement on actors' portrait rights and work copyrights. Considering these two points, fans must consider copyright and legal issues when engaging in secondary creation, using public materials whenever possible to avoid legal disputes. Creative teams also need to conduct public opinion monitoring, communicate with fan groups promptly, and when potentially infringing works are discovered, communicate with creators in a timely manner regarding removal or authorization.

In summary, fan participation in creation is a double-edged sword. It is a shared paradise for creative teams and fans, but it has clear boundaries. Creation within boundaries can have positive effects such as emotional outlet, positive publicity, and enriching original character portrayal. However, among the mixed quality of fan creation works, settings that deviate from the original work may cause misunderstandings and aversion among casual users, bringing negative effects. Accordingly, we propose tagging secondary creations and using public materials to avoid misunderstandings and legal disputes. It is hoped that through the above...

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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