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Disordered Desire: An Examination of the Media Practices of Nisu Fans from a Gender Perspective (Postprint)

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of continuous iteration in new media technologies, the subject status of fans has been increasingly elevated, leading to the emergence of distinct fan typologies. Nisu fans endow male artists with feminine traits, imagining them as female figures, thereby deriving pleasure from fandom. As social gender culture becomes increasingly open and evolves, alongside heated public debates on gender issues, this gender-inverted imagination of male artists has gradually moved beyond niche circles, enabling Nisu fans to transition from the margins to the center stage and compete for central discursive power within fandom communities. Although Nisu behavior appears to reverse the traditional gazing position, it in reality fails to alter the unidirectional power structure; instead, it is exploited and co-opted by commercial capital, unable to escape the constraints of traditional gender structures, thereby reinforcing stereotypical perceptions of gender.

Full Text

Disordered Desire: An Examination of Ni-su Fans' Media Practices from a Gender Perspective

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of continuous new media technological iteration, fans' subjectivity has been significantly enhanced, giving rise to diverse fan subcultures. Ni-su fans feminize male celebrities, imagining them as female figures to derive pleasure from their fandom. As societal gender culture becomes more

open and contested, this gender-inverted imagination of male artists has gradually moved from margins to mainstream, with ni-su fans transitioning from peripheral corners to center stage, vying for discursive power within fandom circles. While this practice appears to reverse traditional scopophilic dynamics, it fails to alter the unidirectional power structure. Instead, it becomes co-opted by commercial capital, unable to escape the constraints of traditional gender structures, ultimately reinforcing stereotypical gender cognitions.

Keywords: Gender Theory; Ni-su Culture; Gaze Theory; Gender Cognition

Introduction

Research Background

With the continuous evolution of new media technologies, fans' subjectivity has been substantially elevated, enabling them to actively participate in star-making through voting and other forms of engagement, thereby gaining greater discursive power. The power dynamics among fans, celebrities, and capital have been fundamentally restructured—fan communities are no longer flat, passive recipients but actively influence the artistic activities of celebrities and production companies upstream. Moreover, fan communities are not homogeneous or isolated; they differentiate into various types according to fandom rules and modes of engagement. The “ni-su” phenomenon that has entered public discourse in recent years represents precisely such a unique “cultural landscape” constituted by ni-su fans.

“Ni-su fans” is a homophonic variation of “inverse Mary Sue fans,” contrasting with “orthodox Mary Sue fans” (known as “zheng-su” fans). Broadly defined, ni-su refers to the secondary creative practice of ignoring or blurring a celebrity's biological sex and imagining them as the opposite gender. In its narrow sense, it specifically denotes fans who feminize male artists, imagining them as female figures to derive pleasure from their fandom. These fans enthusiastically “female-ify” male celebrities, addressing them as “wife,” “daughter,” or “little sister,” actively participating in ni-su text creation and frequently clashing with “orthodox” factions within fandom circles, who demand they “keep to their own circle.” As societal gender culture becomes increasingly open and contested, this gender-inverted imagination of male artists has gradually moved beyond niche circles, with ni-su fans transitioning from peripheral corners to center stage, competing for discursive power within fandom. Because this gender-reversal imagination conflicts sharply with mainstream gender discourse, public understanding of ni-su fans inevitably remains fraught with 隔阂 and misunderstanding.

Research Purpose and Significance

This study aims to examine the media practices of ni-su fans and explore, from a gender perspective, whether ni-su practices constitute progressive gender political praxis, thereby enriching understanding and knowledge of this fan community. As an emerging youth subcultural phenomenon, ni-su fans have received

limited scholarly attention. The theoretical significance of this research lies, first, in enriching the typology of fan studies, and second, in offering novel insights for gender studies through this single yet dual gender inversion between fans and male artists. The practical significance of this study is to provide references for the healthy guidance and scientific management of fan ecosystem dynamics.

Research Methods and Approach

This study primarily employs textual analysis and participatory observation. First, the author selected 111 Weibo posts from 2021 from the accounts “@Neiyu Ni-su Bot” and “@Bangquan Ni-su Bot” as analytical materials, totaling 5,649 characters. Additional observations were conducted by searching Weibo public squares for keywords such as “mommy” and “ni-su” to monitor ni-su fans’ posts.

Conceptual Definition and Literature Review

Definition of Ni-su

The term “ni-su” originates from the homophonic adaptation of “inverse Mary Sue.” Since the fantasy subjects and creative agents of ni-su are typically heterosexual female fans, and the intended audience is also heterosexual women, the narrow definition of ni-su refers exclusively to “female-ification” (feminizing male artists), which constitutes the focus of this discussion. Due to its cross-gender and pan-gender 特殊性, some particularly ardent ni-su fans consider the practice to represent a sophisticated and highly innovative aesthetic sensibility [1].

Ni-su fans’ motivations vary and integrate with their existing fan identities. For instance, “mother fans” may regard male artists as “daughters” or “little sisters,” while “girlfriend fans”—who wish to romantically partner with celebrities—may view male artists as “wives.” Depending on their sexual orientation, fans adopt different perspectives: heterosexual fans insert themselves as male identities to “get close to their wives,” whereas homosexual fans maintain their female identity while desiring intimacy with their “wives.” Fans of danmei pairings (those who ship the male artist with other male celebrities) may feminize the receptive partner, creating what they call “someone else’s wife.” While the self-identification of these fans as male or female is complex, they collectively adopt the traditional male perspective in heterosexual relationships, gazing upon the “feminized man” as a commodity. In ni-su practice, these fans insert themselves into the male position, gazing at the feminized male celebrity as an object of desire [1].

Theoretical Foundations

Gender Theory Ann Oakley’s publication *Sex, Gender and Society* established the distinction between biological sex and socio-cultural gender, defining

sex as anatomical and psychological characteristics of biological males and females, while gender refers to socially constructed masculinity and femininity. Masculinity and femininity are not determined by biological sex but formed through social, cultural, and psychological influences [2].

In gender studies, many feminists connect gender to power systems, arguing that power is organized through gender. Gayle Rubin links gender to reproductive sexuality, subsuming both under the conceptual term “sex/gender system.” Rubin defines gender as “a socially imposed division of the sexes” and “the product of gendered social relations.” Simone de Beauvoir emphasizes the hierarchical nature of gender, arguing in *The Second Sex* that women are socially constructed as Other, their subordination not naturally given but produced by a binary system that serves patriarchal power.

Postmodern feminists offer alternative perspectives on gender. Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* that gender has no expressive “substance” or externalized “entity,” nor does it pursue any objective ideal; it is not a thing in itself but rather an idea created by various gendered performances. Butler conceptualizes gender as an active process—not a noun but a verb—wherein humans are compelled daily to perform our gender. Despite differing deconstructive approaches, feminist scholars collectively caution that when gender becomes a neutral term for socio-cultural difference, it undermines the political analysis of male power underlying the concept [2].

Connell’s Masculinity Theory Masculinity and femininity as “socialized” products represent cultural constructions of gender difference. Connell delineates four relational configurations within masculinity through dimensions of power relations, production relations, and emotional investment: hegemonic, subordinate, complicit, and marginalized. Hegemonic masculinity is “hegemonic,” ensuring the stability of patriarchal order. Subordinate masculinity is exemplified by homosexuals, effeminate men, and “mama’s boys,” all rejected by hegemonic masculinity. Most men in society possess complicit masculinity, benefiting from patriarchy without displaying overt hegemonic traits. Marginalized masculinity refers to those socially marginalized and unable to obtain prestige or wealth [1].

Discourse Expression and Media Practices of Ni-su Fans

Through screening content accounts that meet three criteria—active external output, high interaction volume on social platforms, and rich textual content—this study selected “Neiyu Ni-su Bot” and “Bangquan Ni-su Bot” as sample sources. Since neither account resumed updates in 2022, Weibo posts from 2021 were extracted. It should be noted that because this study focuses narrowly on ni-su fans of male artists, the 极少数 posts related to female celebrities were manually removed, which does not affect the accuracy of word frequency analysis. After manual collection and content screening, 111 valid samples were obtained. These were analyzed using word frequency software goseeker and

Nvivo. After removing nouns, adjectives, and prepositions unrelated to ni-su creative elements from the frequency reports, high-frequency vocabulary lists and word clouds were generated, excerpts of which follow:

Characteristics of Ni-su Text Creation

Short Formats and Variable Narratives Ni-su fans are primarily active on Weibo. Although the platform has abandoned its 140-character limit, textual habits remain fragmented. Consequently, ni-su texts are generally brief, mostly two to three hundred characters, offering not complete narratives but short scene descriptions and subjective narration that leave room for readers' imagination. Narratologist Tzvetan Todorov argues that facts constituting a story's environment are presented to the audience through the narrator's gaze from a particular vantage point, rather than actively crowding onto the stage for the audience to see. The narrator's gaze determines their identity in storytelling—whether as “I” (first person), “you” (second person), or “bystander” (third person). Ni-su fans frequently switch narrative perspectives in their creative texts. For example: “I made my wife angry yesterday, so I went early to wait for her after work at her company. I didn't expect her to work overtime until late at night. When she saw me, she just glanced and walked away.” In first-person texts, ni-su fans insert themselves into the “I” perspective, showcasing the feminized male star's actions and expressing the “I” character's passionate feelings, often describing psychological states. In second-person texts like “After watching your father walk out the door, under the subtle atmosphere, you slowly shift your teasing, burning gaze toward your little stepmother,” ni-su fans do not insert themselves into character perspectives but address the reading audience, creating scenarios and atmospheres where readers intimately engage with the male celebrity. Readers become protagonists, allowing their imaginations to unfold with the text. Third-person texts such as “Hong Kong-style female office worker's daily routine, Hong Kong-style beauty five months pregnant, loving the baby in her belly” generally exclude fan presence, focusing instead on the male celebrity's psychological activities and will.

Heavy Sexualization and Sexual Fantasy Ni-su textual creation is highly sexualized. By reversing the male celebrity's gender and imagining them as female, fans project their sexual fantasies, expressing desires constrained by female sexual shame through the voice of the feminized male star. In these texts, the post-ni-su male artist possesses a body that arouses desire and indulges in sexuality, while ni-su fans insert themselves into the male perspective in intimate relationships with these “beauties,” positioning themselves in the dominant position of gazing at the Other. Like traditional men expressing desire toward women, ni-su fans rationalize the 宣泄 of sexual desire through the male perspective. The vast majority of ni-su texts involve pornographic fantasies, with male stars becoming female figures that trigger sexual imagination, embodying societal feminine aesthetics of “white, young, thin” and sexiness.

Collage of Elements and Template Production Cultural studies scholar John Clarke applied collage theory to youth lifestyles, where collage functions as an improvisational or adaptive process whereby objects, symbols, or behaviors are grafted onto different meaning systems and cultural contexts to generate new significance [1]. Ni-su fans similarly employ element collage in textual creation. Despite varying images and traits of different male celebrities, post-ni-su figures are constructed from common collage elements. Since the foundational narrative logic of ni-su is direct praise of beauty, fans frequently use “animals” and “fruits” as metaphors to describe male artists’ beauty, with common imagery including “rabbits,” “fawns,” “cherries,” and “strawberries.” Generic templates also exist for ni-su creation across different male stars, such as the “little stepmother literature” trope featuring relationships between stepsons and stepmothers in the father’s mourning hall. Beyond 同人创作 conventions, ni-su fans quickly adapt to internet memes, such as when Weibo blogger Xu Xu Ru Yue Lai’s “coquettish wife literature” became popular, ni-su fans would replace the original text’s protagonist with male celebrities, adapting interactions between the star and their “husband.”

Imagination of Kinship and Intimate Relationships Word frequency and cloud analysis reveal that terms like “wife,” “mom,” “mommy,” “little sister,” and “daughter” appear with extremely high frequency in ni-su texts. When imagining male stars with reversed gender, fans frequently cast them as women with intimate relationships in daily life interactions. Examples include: “Mom went to bars to accompany drinkers after school to raise money for my medical treatment,” or “My silly wife is a new mommy just starting to show her pregnancy.” Another example: “Shortly after marriage, my wife became pregnant. She only grew a belly without gaining weight elsewhere, her limbs remaining slender, vomiting more than she ate. After returning home from work, I would often find my wife busy in the kitchen. Seeing me, she would look up and ask what I wanted to eat, appearing exactly like a virtuous little wife. Thinking about how this proud young lady was impregnated by me, carrying my baby, I felt an indescribable sensation. Happiness? Conquest? I couldn’t tell.” The feminized images of male celebrities constructed by ni-su fans all feature stereotypical feminine social characteristics. Male stars are not only endowed with female appearance and temperament but also with physiological capabilities, bearing women’s reproductive responsibilities. When imagining male stars as female relatives, fans insert themselves as male family members who may be absent from the narrative, sometimes self-inserting as “domestic abusers,” “weaklings,” or “violent” male figures in family narratives, self-mockingly commenting in discussion threads: “It’s me, I admit it, curse me, I’m a kept man.” This reflection on real-life men, seemingly self-attacking, actually targets the male identity that fans themselves perform [1], revealing that the gender stereotypes invoked in ni-su text creation constitute dual oppression for both genders.

Characteristics of Ni-su Fans' Media Practice

Appeal Structure and Collective Imagination Space The concept of “appeal structure” derives from reception aesthetics, proposed by German reception theorist Wolfgang Iser. It refers to the uncertainty created by blanks and negations in artistic works, presenting an open structure that actively summons recipients' participation through imaginative re-creation [2]. Ni-su textual creation is suffused with a sense of “to be continued,” leaving ample blank spaces—typical appeal structure texts. Fans' media practice activities essentially co-create collective imagination spaces for particular male celebrities' feminization, allowing fans highly participatory and autonomous supplementation. For instance, fans can continue writing in comment or repost sections for particularly interesting text segments, or illustrators can create drawings and video editors can produce relevant clips. Within ni-su communities, no single text is revered as canonical; fans collectively participate in imagination, and encouraging diverse interpretations makes the ni-su image of male celebrities more vibrant and dynamic.

Self-Concealment to Avoid Mainstream Scrutiny Ni-su fans' gender-inverted imagination of male celebrities conflicts with mainstream ideology and values. This taboo nature aligns with the “boundary consciousness of avoiding external scrutiny” found in female-oriented cultural production [3]. Ni-su fans' media practices embody this concealment: on social media, they avoid using celebrities' real names, employing nicknames instead to prevent searches by other circles that might trigger trouble. Due to pornographic content, fearing platform censorship, they migrate across multiple platforms, sharing links to Write.as or Shimo documents separated by emojis in comment sections to direct readers to original texts elsewhere. Since ni-su media practice is essentially driven by sexual desire, mixed with unspeakable sexual shame and privacy, community members habitually conceal themselves to avoid mainstream cultural surveillance.

The Empowerment Paradox: Significance of Alternative Gender Political Practice

Reverse Gaze for Discourse Power and Sexual Freedom Social constructionist gender theory posits that gender is a creation of social symbols, with human sexual expression and cognition perpetually constructed within discursive power. Historically, women have been positioned as objects of the gaze, projected upon by male desire to fulfill fantasy. For women, publicly discussing sex or acknowledging sexual desire carries shame. Ni-su fans' gender-inverted imagination of idols and active expression of sexual desire represent, at the consciousness level, women's post-awakening pursuit of discourse power, sexual freedom, and sexual liberation, destigmatizing female sexual expression. Female fans seize agency, positioning male artists as objects of their gaze, watching the shaped “spectacle” wherein male stars become gazed-upon Others. This reverse

gaze constitutes the progressive dimension of ni-su as gender political praxis.

Ni-su Fans' Contradictory Identity with Femalehood Ni-su fans treat feminization as praise for male idols, condensing their idealized expectations into gender reversal. They consider the highest compliment to male artists as distinguishing them from ordinary men by endowing them with feminine qualities, viewing ni-su as a more advanced and innovative aesthetic taste. In this regard, ni-su fans hold female identity in high esteem and pride. However, when objectifying and gazing at male stars, ni-su fans insert themselves into the male perspective, fantasizing about being male identities engaging in intimate relations with feminized idols. Their desire 宣泄 still relies on the traditional “male-female” power structure. They transfer and project the constraints and suffering of their real-life female identity onto an aversion toward femalehood, striving to escape their own female identity while projecting desire onto a perfect, deified “false female image.” Ni-su fans remain trapped in this contradictory identity regarding femalehood.

Entrapment in Traditional Gender Structures and Stereotypes The objects of ni-su fans' practice are male artists, seemingly representing “male consumption” through female fans' elevated status and reverse gaze. In reality, this constitutes an illusion of empowerment that fundamentally fails to alter the unidirectional power structure of traditional scopophilic relations. Positioning feminized men as “objects of gaze” does not substantively change women's status; instead, it solidifies and deepens traditional gender cognitions. What is actually consumed remains the beautiful, vulnerable feminized image. Therefore, the essence of ni-su is not male consumption but continued female consumption.

Ni-su fans believe that only the beautiful deserve feminization, with beauty constituting ni-su's core narrative. Consequently, this female consumption process is saturated with societal aesthetic demands and anxieties toward women. The feminized images of male celebrities all cater to the “white, young, thin” aesthetic. While promoting “female-ification,” ni-su fans cannot accept “auntification,” using the stigmatized term “aunt” as a tool for verbal attack, reflecting women's age and appearance anxieties. Ni-su fans' media practice cannot escape the discipline of traditional gender structures and stereotypes. In textual creation, they may employ misogynistic slurs like “bitch” or “slut” for slut-shaming, even applying domestic violence or victim-blaming logics, callously ignoring gender violence against women and unconsciously becoming accomplices to such violence.

Through observation of ni-su fans' media practices, their textual creation appears fragmented with variable narratives, frequently employing real-life kinship relations for imagination, and demonstrating high degrees of sexualization. Fans collectively create and build collective imagination spaces for male celebrities' feminization while migrating across platforms to conceal themselves from mainstream cultural surveillance. Ni-su fans' reverse gaze that feminizes male

celebrities represents progressive consciousness and discursive agency on one hand, yet fundamentally fails to alter the unidirectional power structure of the gaze, constituting an illusion of empowerment. Their media practice cannot escape the discipline of traditional gender structures and stereotypes, even unconsciously becoming accomplices to gender violence. Overall, ni-su fans represent a positive attempt at gender political practice following the power shift from stars to fans, with further transformations anticipated as female consciousness continues to awaken.

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