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Research on Media Use of LOFTER Fanfiction Users: Postprint

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Abstract

Online fan fiction is a form of internet literature created and read by fan enthusiasts, primarily teenagers, and NetEase LOFTER is one of the major fan fiction platforms in China. From the perspective of the “Uses and Gratifications” theory, this study employs methods such as in-depth interviews to understand the media usage motivations, attitudes, and behaviors of LOFTER fan fiction users, explores how the platform meets the needs of fan fiction users, analyzes the functional characteristics of the platform from a user perspective, and further reflects on the utilization relationship between LOFTER fan fiction users and the platform. The findings indicate that the platform primarily satisfies fan fiction users’ information needs, self-actualization needs, instrumental utilization needs, and emotional communication needs; however, due to issues such as the content review mechanism, the platform also faces hidden concerns regarding user attrition.

Full Text

A Study of Media Use Among LOFTER Fanfiction Users

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Abstract

Online fanfiction is a form of internet literature created and consumed primarily by youth subcultures, with NetEase LOFTER being one of China’s major platforms for such content. Grounded in uses and gratifications theory, this study employs in-depth interviews and other methods to investigate LOFTER fanfiction users’ motivations, attitudes, and behaviors regarding their media use. It examines how the platform satisfies fanfiction users’ needs, analyzes the platform’s functional characteristics from a user perspective, and reflects on the utilitarian relationship between LOFTER fanfiction users and the platform.

The findings indicate that LOFTER primarily fulfills fanfiction users' needs for information, self-actualization, instrumental utility, and emotional communication. However, due to issues such as its content moderation system, the platform faces a hidden risk of user attrition.

Keywords: LOFTER; fanfiction; uses and gratifications

Fan culture represents a subcultural form favored by Generation Z youth. As a vehicle for fan culture, online fanfiction has developed into a significant phenomenon with a unique ecosystem. “Fanfiction” (同人) refers to secondary or tertiary creative works based on original works or pre-existing materials, which may include adaptations or continuations of existing literary characters, as well as creative works inspired by films, animation, games, novels, celebrities, historical events, and other naturally occurring source material.

As China's current “primary production base for fan content,” NetEase LOFTER boasts 13 million content creators, including 330,000 high-quality creators, with writers comprising over half of this number [1]. The platform hosts more than 80 million segmented interest content tags, making it the preferred interest-based community for fanfiction enthusiasts to read, create, and communicate. This has attracted attention and research from young scholars. LOFTER was initially positioned as a lightweight blogging product for literary youth, but in 2014, it experienced an influx of fanfiction authors from *The King's Avatar* fandom, marking its transformation into a fanfiction platform. Fan communities spontaneously gathered, and the platform subsequently adapted to this trend, continuing to attract fan enthusiasts to settle in. This process demonstrates the active agency of users in shaping platform development.

Understanding the psychological characteristics, needs, and usage experiences of fanfiction users, analyzing LOFTER's functional features, exploring the reasons for its emergence as a fanfiction hub, investigating what needs it satisfies and how it does so, and reflecting on the development challenges of LOFTER fanfiction based on current conditions—these efforts not only theoretically explain fan communities' media contact behaviors but also provide valuable reference for the healthy development of fan culture on the LOFTER platform.

2.1 New Media Applications of Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and gratifications theory is a classic communication theory that emerged in the 1960s. It conceptualizes media contact behavior as an active process in which audiences select media based on specific motivational needs to achieve gratification, thereby emphasizing the audience's central role. Katz identified five categories of audience motivations for media contact: cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and tension-release needs. In contemporary scholarship, many researchers have applied this theory to study new media audiences. In their article “On the Uses and Gratifications of Network Media,” Song Linlin and Liu Naizhong summarized seven gratifica-

tion patterns of network media, arguing that self-actualization needs, dominant psychological needs, instrumental needs, and deliberative needs represent forms of gratification unique to network media beyond traditional media. This article primarily references these perspectives. Additionally, Zeng Yan’s work “Fanfiction Creation in Subthreshold Network Communication from the Perspective of Uses and Gratifications Theory” employs online participant observation and textual analysis to explore the motivations driving fanfiction creation and its impacts, offering valuable insights for this study.

2.2 Research on Online Fanfiction

Domestic research on online fanfiction emerged primarily around 2006, spanning themes in literature, law, sociology, and communication/publishing—including literary interpretations of fanfiction, copyright issues, the “fujoshi” (同人女) phenomenon, and fanfiction dissemination. Literary scholar Xu Miaomiao mentioned fanfiction when introducing online novel genres in 2009, defining it as works that adapt or continue existing literary characters [2]. In the same year, Wu Xinyi’s “Research on Fanfiction in Online Literature” systematically categorized this literary form, examining its writing characteristics, emergence factors, and its audience and creator communities, thereby establishing foundational concepts for subsequent scholarship.

Research on the fujoshi community and fan enthusiasts more broadly has focused extensively on social psychology and gender issues, primarily investigating group psychology and behavioral characteristics through empirical methods such as in-depth interviews and ethnography. This body of work provides theoretical support for this study’s analysis of fan community characteristics and behavioral motivations.

Communication research closely related to this article falls into two main categories. The first examines fan culture and communities through the lens of youth subculture studies. The second investigates fanfiction in connection with digital platforms. The latter category remains relatively scarce in terms of published articles, with most contributions appearing in recent dissertations. Hu Zewei and Zhang Li’s 2019 article analyzed the communication mechanisms and characteristics of interest-based communities on LOFTER, arguing that their communication processes emphasize member participation, feature strong interactive elements, and maintain open and diverse content and forms [3]. Chen Lin’s review of fanfiction communication patterns on social media platform LOFTER noted that the platform’s functional design accelerates a chain reaction in fan work dissemination. Wu Fang used LOFTER as a case study to examine how platform data operations and commercial logic challenge fanfiction writing practices [4]. Xu Yanling, using “CP fandom” as an example, illustrated LOFTER’s traffic support and creative incentives for film and television fanfiction [5]. These studies all emphasize the alignment between LOFTER’s interactive design and fanfiction creation, providing entry points for this research.

In summary, current domestic research on this topic remains limited, with most researchers being students and a lack of high-level authoritative scholars. Studies involving the LOFTER platform lack depth, consisting primarily of preliminary descriptive research. There is an urgent need for more diverse and in-depth research to fill this gap. Examining the alignment between fanfiction user needs and LOFTER’s functional features from a user experience perspective represents an underexplored angle with significant research value.

3. Research Methods

This study employs in-depth interviews and participant observation. The in-depth interview method allows for a deep understanding of LOFTER fanfiction users’ needs, habits, and experiences, capturing their cognition, attitudes, and behaviors. Since Jinjiang Literature City is also a major fanfiction platform in China, the interview protocol included comparisons between the two platforms to further understand LOFTER’s advantages. The researcher randomly selected ten recently active users on LOFTER and conducted online interviews lasting 0.5 to 1 hour each via private messages or QQ. Additionally, the researcher engaged in one month of online participant observation as a LOFTER user. Beginning at 11 PM each night, the researcher observed and recorded the posting and interactive behaviors of followed fanfiction authors and fans for half-hour sessions, while also browsing and posting content and participating in interactions to gain firsthand user experience.

4.1 Information Acquisition: Content Characteristics of the “Fanfiction Granary”

The most fundamental and critical need that fan communities fulfill through LOFTER is information need—that is, the demand for fanfiction content. Thanks to its user-generated content (UGC) model, the platform features diverse writing styles, substantial total output, and abundant, varied fanfiction content. The content is typically of moderate length, catering to fragmented reading habits, with short stories predominating to meet contemporary youth’s preference for bite-sized consumption.

Interviewee Xiaoqiu noted: “LOFTER always surprises me. When I think I can’t find content for some obscure fan pairing, I come here. It’s really friendly for fans of niche CPs.” Satisfying niche and unpopular interest demands represents a crucial reason why fanfiction readers prefer LOFTER. Users obsessed with 冷门 (lengmen—niche) characters and pairings often struggle to find relevant content, making their desire for such material particularly intense. In this era of personalized, segmented audiences, the needs of every niche group cannot be underestimated, as they generate significant “long-tail” benefits. The 传播 (communication) effect of niche, bidirectional sharing can rival or even surpass mass communication [6].

Conversely, the platform’s fanfiction suffers from uneven quality. Authors pro-

vide no guarantee of updates, leaving works unfinished; content quality varies widely, with characters acting out of character (OOC). This stems partly from limited writing skills among some users and partly from the voluntary, free nature of the content, making it difficult to demand quality or consistent updates. Interviewee Xiaoqi remarked: “There are high-quality works, but most are uneven. It’s hard to find content that suits my taste—like fishing blindly. But LOFTER has diverse forms, and just browsing takes up quite a bit of time... I’m in the Arctic Circle for every fandom, so I have no choice but to use multiple apps simultaneously.” Xiaoliu added: “When I encounter abandoned works, I don’t care about one or two instances. The platform has so many short stories that I can just keep scrolling to find others.”

Evidently, despite these drawbacks, the platform still satisfies users’ information acquisition needs. In December 2020, LOFTER launched a new brand 宣言 (declaration): “See Every Interest.” As a creative community where diverse cultures coexist, ensuring user content production remains paramount for retaining users.

4.2 Self-Actualization: “Creating for Love” in Fanfiction Production

John Fiske argued that while general audiences actively interpret and consume cultural products, they stop at personal interpretation, whereas fans go further to create cultural products that circulate within their own communities [7]. Fan culture is essentially fan culture, and fan communities engage in participatory cultural practices. Through creation, they increase their contribution to the fan circle, gain a sense of participation and belonging, boost their confidence, and achieve higher status and recognition within the community. This represents a pathway for users’ self-actualization and expression of personalized appeals.

LOFTER provides convenient conditions and a favorable creative atmosphere for user production. Some creators shared: “My fandom is so niche that I can create a new life for them through my writing, which feels particularly fulfilling” (Xiaoqiu). “Writing on LOFTER is relatively simple. You can post both text and images, include external links, and the overall environment is diverse and pure for creation” (Xiao I). The platform’s publishing process is easy and low-threshold, allowing anyone to create. Its article publishing function supports multiple media types; by tagging content with “tags,” works can be categorized into corresponding fan circles. It also supports copyright declaration through Creative Commons licenses to ensure a healthy original content environment. Serial works or related content can be added to “Collections” for reader subscription. The transition from reader to creator requires no cost. Active users serve as “prosumers,” completing production, circulation, and consumption within their followed tags, fostering a positive and active creative ecosystem in fan circles.

Reader feedback primarily occurs through “likes” and “recommendations,” which accumulate popularity for fanfiction works, and through comments

expressing appreciation for articles and creators. The “private message” and “ask” functions allow users to chat and ask questions with favorite creators. These diverse interactive designs bridge the distance between LOFTER fanfiction authors and readers, enabling authors to receive timely feedback and clearly confirm communication effects, thereby receiving reader encouragement that boosts creative enthusiasm.

Xiaoshuang shared: “For creators, LOFTER makes it easier for people to discover your work, and the forms are more diverse. You can make friends and crave comments every day.” Xiao E noted: “When an article is great but has few comments, receiving comments can boost the author’s confidence and let them know, ‘Oh, I’m not alone.’” Xiaoliu revealed: “I once created eight accounts to comment on a niche creator’s work, just to encourage them to update more.”

However, relying solely on interest makes it difficult to sustain creative enthusiasm. Consequently, LOFTER has established a comprehensive creator incentive mechanism, such as “LOFTER Fanfiction Master” certification, which provides more platform promotion and commercial cooperation opportunities, as well as tipping functions and free or paid virtual gifts. However, interview findings indicate that most users have not developed payment habits, and since the majority of fanfiction users are students with limited savings, their willingness to pay is low.

Xiaoxin admitted: “Even if I really like a creator’s work, I won’t tip because I’m broke... I prefer commenting and chatting, showering them with 彩虹屁 (rainbow farts—effusive praise).” Xiaoqi added: “Tipping is also a way to encourage creators, but I probably won’t tip authors. Instead, I might purchase fanzines.” Only a minority of fanfiction users can earn income through platform incentives; most still prefer the “creating for love” and free reading model. Comparatively, more effective platform incentives involve LOFTER’s official collaborations with different IPs to launch fanfiction creation campaigns, which motivate excellent fanfiction production while promoting the IP. For example, NetEase’s game *Identity V* launched the “Manor Night Tales Fanfiction Collection Campaign” on LOFTER, offering cash rewards and merchandise prizes to winners, bringing honor and feedback to creators while providing quality fanfiction for readers. Moving forward, LOFTER should continue leveraging this cooperation model to achieve win-win outcomes with IP brand owners and establish a positive fan circle creative ecosystem.

4.3 Instrumental Utilization: Targeted Dissemination for “Precise Mine Avoidance”

Fanfiction users have particularly discerning reading preferences. For instance, users who ship characters A and B as a couple generally avoid reading articles pairing A with C. Therefore, in terms of selective exposure to media content, the platform must offer convenient search settings that align with fanfiction users’ personalized preferences, enabling them to largely avoid “stepping on mines”—

that is, avoiding unwanted content and saving time and effort in searching for articles. LOFTER's functional settings enable precise, targeted dissemination of fanfiction content, satisfying fanfiction users' instrumental need for convenient searching and granting users control over media to autonomously select and access information.

On one hand, regarding content search, LOFTER's "tag" function allows users to quickly lock onto interest circles. Interviewees reflected: "Tags are great. They categorize well and make it easy to find what you're looking for. My ship is pretty niche and not easy to find. On other apps, it might take forever to search, but on LOFTER (affectionately called 'the old grave'), I just need to find one tag" (Xiaoyi). Xiaoshuang added: "Using LOFTER for fanfiction is more convenient because you can search by character and original work, whereas Jinjiang only allows character searches."

On the other hand, regarding content recommendation, the platform can "provide personalized recommendations based on browsing habits," precisely pushing content from tags users are interested in and popular content. Simultaneously, users can block tags they dislike. The algorithmic recommendation is relatively mature, capable of pushing content that aligns with users' preferences.

To prevent traffic data from interfering with content promotion, LOFTER also launched the "Co-building the Granary Plan," developing a new feature called "Recommendation Collections" that encourages users to create shared bookmarks for their favorite tags, aggregating quality content for all fans to access—essentially an instantly readable booklist. Within one day of the feature's launch, the number of collections exceeded 200. This fully mobilizes user enthusiasm, allowing ordinary users as readers to also feel a sense of contribution to the community. It not only promotes quality content but also facilitates content discovery for other readers.

The platform's functional settings increase connections between users and facilitate reading for fellow fans, fostering a community atmosphere of co-creation and sharing. Its communication model enables vertical penetration and network diffusion of fanfiction content within each user's interest domain, concentrating within relatively bounded small circles. This neither disturbs users from other circles nor achieves excellent communication effects. LOFTER fully respects the 圈层化 (circle-based) characteristics of fan communities, continuously refining functions that align with users' dominant psychological needs and making the software more convenient and user-friendly as a tool. This is also why the platform attracts fan communities.

4.4 Emotional Communication: "Enjoying Within Circles" in Community Interaction

As a subcultural group, fan communities are generally exclusive. "圈地自萌" (enjoying within one's circle) is the unwritten rule of fan circles, meaning to entertain oneself within small circles—both respecting others' hobbies and pro-

protecting one's own circle from external criticism. LOFTER has formed numerous "small circles" under its tag system. Given that fan communities generally have needs for emotional identity and social interaction, many scholars have identified sociality as a key focus area for LOFTER's fanfiction zone.

For fanfiction users, moderate social interaction can satisfy their need for environmental monitoring within their circles, obtain information about community dynamics, and promote collaborative content production. For example, near the Spring Festival, some circles hold collaborative writing events, or multiple creators cooperate to update articles within a "co-created collection." Fanfiction users typically undergo four stages to establish social relationships: "searching," "probing," "connecting," and "stabilizing," thereby shifting from weak connections among all community members to strong connections between individuals [8].

Xiaoqi shared: "I chat with creators I like. I've added many authors, urging them to update and discussing plot developments to get insider information." Xiaoyi revealed: "I met one of my best friends through LOFTER. I've met quite a few people through the platform who are now my QQ Space friends. I like recommending and commenting, which might make people feel they're not shipping alone."

However, too much of a good thing can be harmful. In the new media era, users' attention shifts quickly, and interests have short durations. Spending time and energy "mixing in circles" (joining and participating in community activities) is not every fan enthusiast's choice. Even some veteran fan lovers, tired of the mixed environment in circles, wish to avoid complicated social interactions and focus solely on acquiring fanfiction content.

Xiaofang confessed: "LOFTER's small cliques are super active. I was once doxxed and publicly criticized by a fujoshi who spent 100 RMB to expose my identity and behavior online. Now I want nothing to do with socializing. Sometimes shipping CPs solo is better. I only mix in one circle now, even though I have many other ships." Xiaofeng added: "LOFTER's 'like' and 'recommend' functions are very convenient, but other social functions are too complicated. Some popular circles are mixed with all kinds of people, so I rarely comment or chat with others. I hope for more simplicity."

In summary, LOFTER's light social interaction represents weak ties—relationships where social network nodes are distant and social interaction is infrequent. Such ties offer low-cost, high-efficiency communication, can transmit non-redundant information between different groups, and are stronger than strong ties in diffusing new information [9]. It primarily creates a sense of presence and companionship, providing an active and pleasant environment. While satisfying fanfiction users' emotional communication needs, it also enriches fanfiction content, enhances user stickiness, and enables users to achieve the joy of "enjoying within circles."

4.5 Restricted Freedom: The Migration Crisis of the “Happy Home”

LOFTER’s fanfiction content has long faced not only the constant risk of deletion but also strict moderation restrictions. Regarding platform design flaws, interviewees pointed out:

Xiao I: “LOFTER will ‘bomb tags’ (i.e., block, clean, or delete tags), which is inconvenient. The Zheng He tag was completely cleared, and *The Age of Awakening* was also blocked once, leaving nowhere for good articles with proper values to be placed.” Xiaoqi: “During a particularly strict period, even the word ‘kissing’ wasn’t allowed. Even ‘clean water’ fics (articles without sexual content) were inexplicably blocked.”

A major pain point for fanfiction development on LOFTER is the conflict between strict moderation mechanisms and the need for free creation and reading. While fanfiction does involve gray areas such as value orientation and pornographic content that warrant strengthened supervision, the platform’s moderation mechanism suffers from mechanization and “one-size-fits-all” approaches that seriously hinder normal creative and reading behaviors.

First, users cannot know the specific rules and standards for moderation. After articles are blocked, they often revise them multiple times yet cannot identify the specific violating paragraphs or sensitive words. In this regard, LOFTER should learn from Jinjiang Literature City by marking the parts requiring revision for users, which would both facilitate user experience and save multiple rounds of review.

Second, sensitive word settings are unreasonable, and machine moderation technology needs improvement. Many users reported that their articles contained no sexual descriptions yet were blocked. After paragraph-by-paragraph and sentence-by-sentence investigation, they found bizarre sensitive words such as “violent storm,” “hospital,” “village chief,” and “lonely.” On one hand, unstable filtering technology causes misjudgment issues; on the other hand, the absence of human review fails to provide adequate correction. Technology should be improved and reasonable blocking mechanisms established.

Third, the phenomenon of “tag bombing”—sudden blocking and deletion—occurs without prior notice to users, and the operation involves “one-size-fits-all” approaches that affect fanfiction user experience, reduce creators’ trust in the platform, interfere with users’ access to non-violating content, mistakenly delete compliant creators’ painstaking work, and lead to creator attrition and migration.

Once fanfiction authors feel that the shackles on creation are tightening and the space for free creation is being squeezed, while readers cannot obtain fanfiction content that meets their needs, fan communities will become wanderers displaced from their homes, just as early fan communities gradually abandoned Baidu forums and migrated to suitable online platforms.

Xiao I: “I think it’s purely a tool. If it doesn’t work well, you throw it away. Those who stay find it useful; those who leave find it useless. That’s all.” Xiao E: “Now LOFTER is also just a springboard for reading, eventually leading to places like ‘Love Power Generation’ (a patronage platform). Actually, my own brain is my true happy home.”

Fan communities need platforms and spaces to gather, but they are not bound exclusively to LOFTER. This is precisely the logic of media contact in uses and gratifications theory. Of course, for the platform, fanfiction users have become a massive core user base. Through various strategies to capture fanfiction users and improve platform deficiencies, LOFTER has been continuously striving in this direction. In the short term, however, there is still no domestic fanfiction platform that can completely replace LOFTER.

From the perspective of uses and gratifications theory, fanfiction users primarily use LOFTER based on their need to acquire fanfiction content. Its convenient platform functions satisfy users’ needs for information publishing and reception, self-actualization, instrumental utilization, and emotional communication. LOFTER has become China’s primary fanfiction platform because it fully respects and understands the characteristics and habits of fan communities, insists on content as the core, users as the foundation, functions as the support, and interests as the orientation. It employs multiple methods to incentivize content production, increase fanfiction user retention, and foster a positive interactive fanfiction creation atmosphere.

However, fan communities have unique demographic profiles. They excel at finding platforms they can utilize rather than continuously self-censoring under platform regulations. Over the past 20 years, fanfiction enthusiasts have shifted from scattered gathering in marginal internet spaces to residing in commercial digital platforms, ultimately achieving a “requisition” of commercial digital platforms [10]. When platforms cannot satisfy fanfiction users’ needs, LOFTER will also become a springboard or even be abandoned. Fanfiction users possess strong agency, and platforms serve an instrumental function. This reminds the LOFTER platform to pay attention to fanfiction users’ demands and protect creators’ rights. It also warns society to attend to the online living space of fan communities. As the age of this group trends younger, failure to timely understand their needs and provide guidance will be detrimental to youth mental health and the healthy development of fanfiction creation.

Appendix 1: Interview Record Table

ID	Nickname	Gender	Age	Years of Use	Interview Method	Date
M1	Xiaofang	Female	23	-	QQ Text	Jan 7, 2022
M2	Xiaoliu	Female	21	-	QQ Voice Call	Jan 10, 2022
M3	Xiao I	Female	17	-	QQ Text	Jan 11, 2022
M4	Xiaoyi	Female	21	-	QQ Text	Jan 11, 2022

ID	Nickname	Gender	Age	Years of Use	Interview Method	Date
M5	Xiaoshuang	Female	24	-	QQ Text	Jan 11, 2022
M6	Xiao E	Female	24	-	QQ Text	Jan 12, 2022
M7	Xiaoqi	Female	18	-	LOFTER Chat	Jan 12, 2022
M8	Xiaofeng	Female	15	-	QQ Text	Jan 15, 2022
M9	Xiaoxin	Female	13	-	QQ Text	Jan 16, 2022
M10	Xiaoqiu	Female	14	-	QQ Text	Jan 18, 2022

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

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.