

Research on the Multiple Exclusion Phenomenon in the Chinese “Core Weeaboo” Group

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Abstract. Among the subcultures that have developed rapidly in recent years, weeaboo culture covers a growing number of people. Meanwhile, corresponding differentiation has taken place among the weeaboos, typically including “core weeaboo” group and “pan weeaboo” group. Generally, “core weeaboos” refer to a group of people who are deeply involved in the weeaboo culture. On one hand, in the online community, “core weeaboos” tend to reject normal interaction with “pan weeaboos”, who they think are not deeply involved in the culture; on the other hand, due to the long-term prejudice of the mainstream culture against the weeaboos, the “core weeaboo” group has also suffered from the exclusion from the mainstream culture for a long time, thus forming a unique chain of “multiple exclusion”. With the “core weeaboo” group as the research object, this paper conducts online and field research on the phenomenon of “multiple exclusion” in the relevant groups by means of questionnaire and interview. It is found that the phenomenon of “multiple exclusion” in essence can be considered a two-way interaction between the “core weeaboo” group and the mainstream culture. In order to alleviate this phenomenon, this paper advocates that mainstream culture should increase its understanding of subcultural groups, and actively encourage high-quality “fusion”, so as to reduce the adverse effects on corresponding subcultural groups.

Keywords: weeaboo culture; subculture; exclusion.

1. Research Background and Questions to be Explored

Originated in Japan, weeaboo culture refers to the virtual cultural space created by comics, animation and games. As early as the 1990s, weeaboo culture entered China. In recent years, its audience has continued to expand. Take “bilibili”, a video website with weeaboo culture as its main content, for example. The number of its active users has exceeded 272 million by 2021. At the same time, mainstream culture is also actively seeking ways to enter the field of weeaboo culture. As early as 2017, the “Central Committee of the Communist Youth League”, which represents the mainstream voice, registered an account on “bilibili” with a high profile. By publishing comics and animations, it actively interacts with the weeaboo group, achieving relatively good results.

Although partially recognized by the mainstream culture, weeaboo culture is still regarded as a synonym for “immaturity” or “doing no decent work” by mainstream views in the society. On the one hand, differentiation has taken place among the weeaboo group due to its rapid growth. In online forums such as “Tieba” and “NGA”, a large number of “core weeaboos”, who are more familiar with weeaboo culture, have accused “bilibili” of losing its original intention by accepting the mainstream culture. Meanwhile, they have actively expressed their exclusion towards the “pan core weeaboos” who are not deeply involved in the culture, believing that they “pollute the environment”. However, on the other hand, the mainstream culture also excludes the “core weeaboos” more, due to their deeper participation in weeaboo culture. It can be seen that the “core weeaboo” group is in the dual position of the initiator and the target of exclusion. Why does this special relationship come into being? How does this special position affect their behavior and mental state? The answers to these questions will be explored in this paper.

2. Literature Review

As a kind of contemporary subcultures, weeaboo culture also has the typical characteristics of subculture. Dick Hebdige, an important member of the Birmingham School, once summarized the formation basis of subculture as “labeling and symbolizing”, that is, “it is in comparison with various cultures that subculture can be clearly defined” [1]. In weeaboo culture, this formation is reflected in the “deconstruction and splicing of the discourse in the Japanese weeaboo works by means of collective participation”. Moreover, because weeaboo culture lays emphasis on the promoting and shaping of its unique attributes as a subculture, mainstream culture tends to further deepen its exclusion to weeaboo culture [2].

In terms of exclusion, Williams defined it as “the state of being rejected, lonely, or isolated”. Exclusion will eventually have multiple cognitive and psychological effects on the target. For example, psychologically, the target will report negative psychological feelings [3], while cognitively, the target tends to recall more information related to sense of belonging [4]. In relevant weeaboo communities, exclusion is basically carried out through the network. Compared with the exclusion in real life, the frequency of network exclusion is similar. Meanwhile, due to the weak connection of network interpersonal communication, individuals have lower communication expectations. When subjected to exclusion, individuals may attribute isolation to network failures [5]. Therefore, the negative impact of online exclusion on individual emotion is weak [6]. In terms of the motivation for the initiation of exclusion, Greenbaum put forward the perspective of “conflict-retaliation”, that is, the conflict generated in interpersonal communication makes people retaliate and eventually leads to exclusion [7]. In contrast, the identity theory proposes another research perspective on exclusion motivation, that is, exclusion initiators cannot well understand the meaning of their social roles. Furthermore, because of the urgent need to clarify their own roles, selective interaction takes place in interpersonal communication, resulting in exclusion [8]. It can be seen that the impact and motivation of exclusion are different. Since the core weeaboo group acts as both the initiator and the target of exclusion, we will discuss whether there is a corresponding relationship between the two different roles in this paper.

In China, the vigorous development of weeaboo culture and its corresponding problems have attracted the attention of many scholars. For example, Otaku, the main body of weeaboo culture, are becoming younger. For lack of communication with the surrounding people, multiple and diverse psychological problems arise among them [9]. In terms of its development, weeaboo culture considers the process of transforming cultural capital into economic capital to be the key to its survival [10]. Take games and live streaming, the main sources of revenue for weeaboo websites, as an example. It is necessary for the creative group to have a continuous and stable output on these projects, so as to attract more weeaboo lovers to get involved. And their involvement can further bring richer output. At the same time, the vigorous development of domestic weeaboo industry has also attracted scholars to think about the relationship between mainstream culture and weeaboo culture. Zhang Yanhui summarized the relationship as a life cycle of “Confrontation - Mitigation – Incorporation”, and pointed out the inevitable trend of mainstream culture entering the field of weeaboo culture and having the discourse power [11]. Meanwhile, the weeaboo group is actively seeking the support and understanding from mainstream culture. For example, by adding “partitions”, a large number of weeaboo video websites are actively introducing the content of mainstream culture, so as to attract non-weeaboo users. These efforts can be regarded as a weeaboo group’s active pursuit of “legitimacy” for itself [10].

Previous research has covered many aspects of weeaboo culture, with detailed analysis of its overall characteristics. However, as to the segmentation of the audience, there is still room for further exploration: the inner weeaboo culture is not an “iron plate”; the “core weeaboo” group mentioned above obviously cannot be generalized with the “pan weeaboo” group; the phenomenon of multiple exclusion shown in the “core weeaboo” group is difficult to find in the “pan weeaboo” group. The existence of these differences also demonstrates the diversity and complexity of the weeaboo culture itself, and further indicates that a more precise research scope will be necessary. In this paper, research

scope will be focused on the small group of core weeaboos, and their behavioral motivation and psychological state will be analyzed.

3. Definition of the Concept

Weeaboos originally referred to the cultural audience of Japanese-style “ACG” (i.e., animation, comics, games). Under the operation of commercial capital and other factors, products originally outside the field of weeaboo culture have also been labeled as weeaboo, including variety shows and online literature mixed with weeaboo elements, as well as films born out of animation [2]. In this case, “core weeaboo” is used to refer to “traditional” weeaboos interested in Japanese-style “ACG” under the generalized weeaboo culture. Such people often have a deeper understanding of weeaboo culture, with more affection as well. However, with the further expansion and differentiation of the weeaboo group, the “core weeaboo” group is increasingly used to refer to those opposite to the “pan-weeaboos”. That is to say, the “core weeaboo” group is gradually used to refer to the weeaboo group excluding “pan-weeaboos”. However, in practice, the division of such groups often lacks clear standards. The “core weeaboo group” usually sets standards by itself through “self-empowerment” and conducts exclusion based on this.

“Multiple exclusion” is a unique phenomenon that occurs among the “core weeaboo” group. Such people reject normal interaction with those who they think are “pan weeaboos”. Meanwhile, the “core weeaboo” group suffers the most prejudice and exclusion from the mainstream culture, due to the long-term prejudice against it from the mainstream culture, together with its position as the inner part of weeaboo culture. Therefore, the “core weeaboo” group is in the dual position of the initiator and the target of exclusion.

4. Research Design and Methods

This paper takes the “core weeaboo” group in weeaboo culture as the research object. With multiple considerations, this paper has made some exploration by combining questionnaire survey with case interview. Questionnaires are distributed through the network and the results are counted. On this basis, interviewees are further selected. The interviews are then conducted through multiple ways, including online and offline methods. The survey objects of the sample data mainly come from college animation clubs and online weeaboo communities. A total of 105 questionnaires are distributed online, with 83 valid questionnaires recovered. Based on their filling in the questionnaires, six people are invited to participate in personal interviews, of which, five are interviewed online and the other one offline.

In the specific research process, the questionnaire design includes two parts with a total of 19 items, involving single-choice questions and multiple-choice questions. The main purpose of the first part is to understand the basic situation of the respondents and their sense of identity with weeaboo culture. The main purpose of the second part is to understand how the interviewees view the “pan-weeaboo” group and mainstream culture. In the second part, based on their filling in the questionnaires, the subjects who have expressed strong exclusion to the pan-weeaboo group are invited to participate in the interview. The interview is designed in two parts. The first part mainly involves how the interviewee views weeaboo culture and their relationship. In the second part, the interviewee is asked to watch two videos first. One is about mainstream culture’s attempt to integrate into weeaboo culture, and the other is about a typical representative of the “pan-weeaboo” group. The viewing performance of the interviewee will be recorded at the same time. The interview starts from interviewee’s understanding of the above phenomenon, and ends with interviewee’s views on group identity.

5. Research Findings

5.1 Basic Information of Research Object

In the paper, respondents to the questionnaire are aged between 16 and 31, with a median age of 21.3. In terms of their understanding of weeaboo culture, 51 respondents (the majority) have been involved in weeaboo culture for two to three years, accounting for 61.4%. 29 respondents (the second largest number) have been involved in it for more than 3 years, accounting for 34.9%. In terms of their sense of identity with weeaboo culture, over half of the respondents believe that they are members who actively participate in the interaction in the circle, accounting for about 57.8%, while the rest believe that they are “only slightly interested in weeaboo culture”.

5.2 Results

5.2.1 Far reaching negative impact of mainstream culture

In terms of how to view the impact of mainstream culture, the vast majority of respondents believe that “mainstream culture rejects subcultures”, and that they have suffered prejudice and exclusion from mainstream culture both online and in life, accounting for 91.5%.

Table 1 Forms of prejudice and exclusion suffered by interviewees

Interviewees	Forms of prejudice and exclusion suffered
WCY	Verbal irony
XXY	Verbal irony; Opposition from teachers and parents; Emotional abuse from people around
LYD	Verbal irony; Opposition from teachers and parents
LWJ	Verbal irony (only from Internet)

When faced with prejudice and discrimination from mainstream culture, respondents generally choose to respond negatively, like actively evading them.

I will never show my preferences to unfamiliar people. In their eyes, weeaboo is a synonym for “immaturity” or “soft porn”... Some schoolmates might give me a strange look or say something with sarcasm when they saw my mobile wallpaper (a weeaboo animation image). I can't say anything, so I can only avoid them. (wcy)

It can be seen that, the long-term prejudice and exclusion from mainstream culture are not only diverse in form, but also have a wider coverage. For the weeaboos suffering from the exclusion, they are more likely to feel a “sense of isolation”, which further leads them to pay more attention to information related to sense of belonging, and actively create a sense of belonging within the cultural circle.

5.2.2 Contradictory attitudes towards mainstream culture

In terms of views on mainstream culture’s attempt to integrate into weeaboo culture, the respondents have many disagreements. 45.7% of them prefer a positive view, believing that it will expand the influence of weeaboo culture. 42.1% of them hold a negative view, believing that it will “worsen the community atmosphere”. The rest adopt an attitude that “it doesn’t matter”. However, in the interviews, almost all the interviewees give a positive response after watching the corresponding videos, thinking that such attempt of fusion should be encouraged.

I think this form is very good. Anyway, you can promote yours. Seeing well-shot (videos) and high-quality content, I am very happy. It is a win-win situation. (xxy)

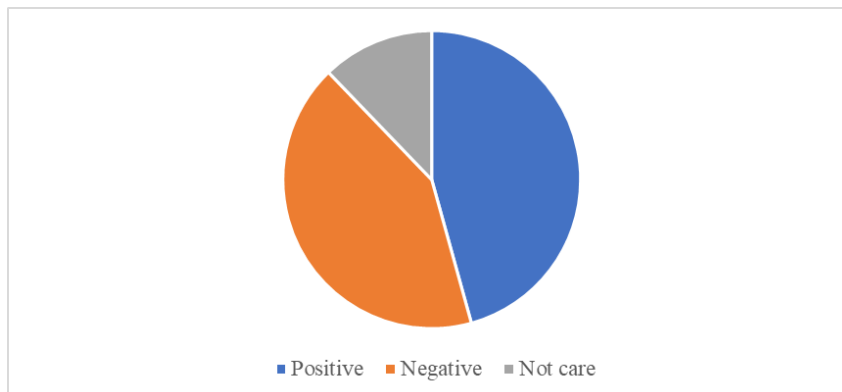


Fig. 1 Interviewees' views on mainstream culture's attempt to integrate into weeaboo culture

The differentiation in respondents' attitudes towards mainstream culture is the epitome of the coexistence of the confrontation and fusion between the present weeaboo culture and mainstream culture. When mainstream culture can provide high-quality weeaboo cultural products by means of fusion, weeaboos do not express exclusion. It shows that the creation of corresponding cultural products is still the core of weeaboo culture.

5.2.3 Exclusion and decentralization of the “pan-weeaboo” group

In terms of attitudes towards the “pan-weeaboo” group, most of the respondents show a repulsive attitude, accounting for 86.3%. At the same time, some suggest that they may express exclusion in real life.

(Such people) I have them all around me. Anyway, I don't have much contact with them, and I never participate in their “awkward chat” about animation. (xxy)

However, in terms of measurements of the “pan-weeaboo” group, there is greater disagreement among respondents, with only about half of those surveyed holding the same view. Bigger disagreement occurs on the issue of “why are pan-weeaboos excluded”, but neither gains a significant quantitative advantage. Both argue that pan-weeaboos destroy the community environment, have low personal quality, and lack sufficient understanding of weeaboo culture. In the interview, all six respondents clearly express their exclusion towards the “pan-weeaboo” group. However, in terms of specific division criteria, members of each group tend to give strongly subjective answers, and use this as the basis for exclusion.

In fact, it (the division) is very simple, that is, the weeaboo elements they like is not the same as ours, but a suture they have created out of thin air. (xxy)

In general, the traditional weeaboos will watch the newly released season of animation, but those people will not watch it at all. If occasionally watching some “popular animations”, they will feel that they are weeaboos. The real weeaboo is familiar to all kinds of characters and settings, but those people know nothing... If you don't know anything, you must be a “pan-weeaboo”. (lyd)

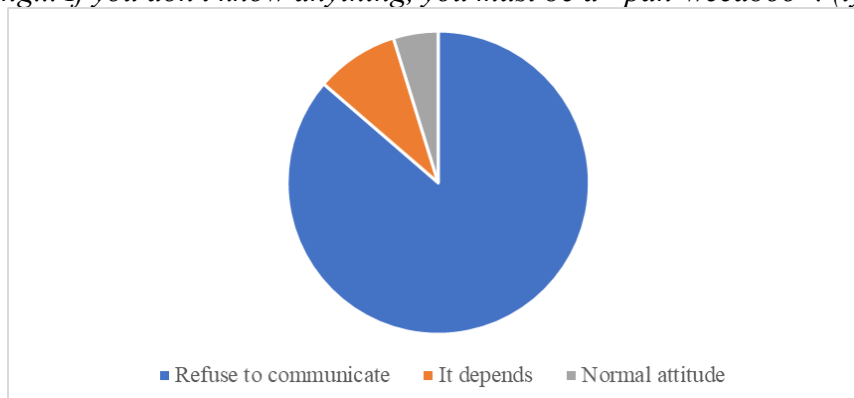


Fig. 2 Interviewees' attitude towards the “pan-weeaboo” group

Different respondents differ greatly in the specific division criteria, but it is generally believed that the “pan-weeaboo” group does not understand weeaboo culture they recognize. Moreover, they do not actively interact with the “pan-weeaboo” group. Therefore, it can be concluded that in weeaboo culture, the sense of belonging plays a greater role in guiding the exclusion of the core weeaboo group.

5.3 Problems and Analysis

As a subculture, weeaboo culture involves participants with the characteristics of a typical subculture group. In terms of sense of identity, only about half of the respondents believe that they belong to the weeaboo group, and even some respondents deliberately express a “disdainful” attitude towards weeaboo culture. However, in the follow-up questions on the prejudice from mainstream culture, substituting themselves into the identity of the “excluded”, the majority of the respondents still unconsciously affirm their sense of identity and belonging to weeaboo culture. It can be seen that under the influence of prejudice and exclusion from mainstream culture, most two- weeaboos still have obstacles in recognizing their group identity.

In the survey, the core weeaboo group has showed a contradictory attitude towards the mainstream culture. While responding negatively to the prejudice and exclusion from mainstream culture, most of the respondents approve attempts made by mainstream culture to integrate into weeaboo culture. In practice, the prejudice and exclusion from mainstream culture are often not specific to individuals. It is usually the case that the core weeaboo group is subject to exclusion actively and consciously. In contrast, a small number of subjects who do not have a deep understanding of weeaboo culture will not think that the target excluded by the mainstream culture is themselves.

In relevant issues on attitudes towards the pan-weeaboo group, the definition of the pan-weeaboo group by the core weeaboo group shows a strong personal subjectivity. Specific reasons for exclusion are also quite different from person to person, indicating that exclusion is decentralized and has no specific organization. However, in terms of sense of identity, core weeaboos generally do not think that they and the pan-weeaboo group are in the same weeaboo subculture circle. In the absence of a clear definition of the pan-weeaboo group, the image of the pan-weeaboo group considered by the core weeaboo group is highly overlapped with that considered by mainstream culture, such as “not understanding weeaboo culture deeply” and “not loving the real weeaboo”. Hence, the pan-weeaboo group further becomes the spokesperson of “mainstream culture in the weeaboo circle”. To a certain extent, the widespread exclusion from mainstream culture has deepened the group identity and sense of belonging of the core weeaboo group. For the purpose of “maintaining the weeaboo circle”, by means of decentralization, many core weeaboos have expressed exclusion towards those who they think belong to the pan-weeaboo group.

Generally speaking, “multiple exclusion” should be regarded as a two-way interaction between mainstream culture and the weeaboo subculture. That is to say, the exclusion from mainstream culture deepens the sense of belonging of the core weeaboo group, and promotes the core weeaboo group to exclude the pan-weeaboo group that is considered to be representative of mainstream culture through the mechanism of “conflict-retaliation” (Quade, Greenbaum, 2017). In fact, “multiple exclusion” still reflects the process in which mainstream culture expresses exclusion to the weeaboo subculture and the core weeaboo group responds to the exclusion as the target.

5.4 Recommendations

The prevalence of exclusion has exacerbated the deterioration of relevant online communities to a certain extent. In the community atmosphere of long-term “confrontation”, the weeaboo subcultural group, mainly composed of teenagers, is more likely to be affected by a bad community environment. For example, in the survey, some respondents have presented symptoms of excessive anxiety in the corresponding questions.

The long-term exclusion from mainstream culture and the brutal fusion attempts are the main causes for the status quo. In order to alleviate this confrontation, it is necessary for mainstream culture to re-examine its relationship with the weeaboo subculture. The sound development of weeaboo

culture and other subcultures needs not only sufficient space given by mainstream culture, but also the active interaction and understanding from mainstream culture. How to establish effective interaction with the weeaboo subculture while fully respecting its original ecology will be the key to eliminating the phenomenon of exclusion. In the survey, the creation of high-quality animations recognized by the core weeaboo group provides an efficient solution.

6. Conclusion

Nowadays, with the rapid development of entertainment industry, various subcultural circles have also sprung up. Due to a long-term “unpopular” position and the lack of better understanding from the public, these subcultural circles have been excluded by mainstream culture for a long time. This paper is an attempt to study the sub-groups in the field of weeaboo subculture. Through the survey, we have a deeper understanding of the psychological state of the relevant subcultural groups after their being excluded by mainstream culture, and further explore how the impact of the mainstream culture gives birth to the differentiation within subcultural groups and the phenomenon of “multiple exclusion”. On this basis, we propose a solution that mainstream culture should improve the understanding of subcultural groups. Furthermore, the interview results show that the high-quality “fusion” of mainstream culture and subcultures is likely to become a new breakthrough in resolving exclusion. Due to the limitations of the author’s social experience and knowledge, this paper may have certain shortcomings. In the future, the author will pay continuous attention and conduct further research on this issue.

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