

Oppositional Gaze and Gender Power Reconstruction: Feminist Analysis of Chinese Female Fans' Real Person Slash (RPS) Cultural Practices

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Abstract: In 1975, Laura Mulvey published *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, introducing the "Male Gaze" theory to analyze film/TV media, arguing female characters are objectified as targets of male gaze. Inheriting Freud's scopophilia concept, the theory highlights women's passive position and loss of gaze rights due to gender in modern media. During the 1990s feminist second wave, black feminists critiqued its implicit racial bias. Bell hooks (born Gloria Watkins) redefined feminism in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, integrating popular culture critique with feminist media analysis and proposing the "Oppositional Gaze." She challenged Mulvey's focus on white heterosexual male gaze, emphasizing its neglect of race-class-gender intersectionality. Bell posited gaze as a resistance tool for marginalized groups to actively interpret visual culture and subvert dominant power structures. Her theory prioritizes individual subjective agency, advocates diverse group perspectives, and opposes monolithic gazing to foster visual culture inclusivity. As Chinese female fans' RPS (Real Person Slash) practices align with the Oppositional Gaze theory, this paper analyzes how marginalized audiences employ gaze as resistance in contemporary cultural contexts.

Keywords: Feminism; Popular Culture; Fan Culture; Real-Person Slash (RPS); Oppositional Gaze; Chinese Pop Culture

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, a craze for "Real person Slash" has prevailed among Chinese young people, particularly involving extensive participation from female audiences. Real person Slash (RPS) originated from "Slash" in Western fan culture, which was initially used to describe homosexual relationships between male fictional

characters. The term now more broadly refers to the act of fans imagining that real-life celebrities or public figures are in romantic relationships or couples. In China, influenced by Japanese BL (Boys' Love) culture, Chinese fans' enthusiasm for same-sex celebrity couplings has surged, with RPS more commonly termed "real-person CP" (CP being an abbreviation of "coupling"). By the end of 2024, according to publicly available data from Weibo, China's largest social platform, 95% of the top 100 CP-related topics were dedicated to same-sex pairings. Among these same-sex CP topics, 14 of them are female-female couples, while the remaining were centered on male-male couples. Therefore, based on big data statistics and definitions, while the term "CP" in the Chinese context can generally refer to any pairing, mainstream discussions on social media predominantly focus on same-sex CPs, especially male-male CPs (Boys' Love CPs).

Specifically, in a 2021 data survey, a total of 4,521 valid responses were received from Chinese CP fans. Among these fans, 99.2% were female, with ages mainly ranging from 15 to 25 years old, and more than 60% were students. Additionally, 94.94% of them had "shipped" male-male CPs[1]. Behind female fans' obsession with "shipping CP" (fantasizing about romantic relationships between real-life people) lie multi-dimensional needs such as stress relief, emotional comfort, and social interaction[2]. In the process of shipping, they project their own romantic psychology, experiencing the sweetness and throbbing of love while satisfying their expectations and fantasies about ideal romance[3]. The core of this cultural behavior lies in how female audiences, through their immersive engagement with love and same-sex themed works, actively reconstruct viewing logic by projecting the emotions of fictional characters onto actors. This creative reinterpretation of celebrity relationships is

essentially a practice through which female audiences break through traditional media power structures via the "Oppositional Gaze"--instead of being "objects of the gaze", they deconstruct mainstream narratives as active "viewers". No longer content with passively accepting predetermined narratives, they transform their imagination of idealized emotions into a creative reinterpretation of celebrities' relationships through the act of "hoping for real-life couples", thereby establishing their subjectivity within fan culture.

As this female fan base has expanded, "real-life couple shipping" has gradually evolved from a niche individual behavior into a mass cultural phenomenon. In the related communities where people engage in shipping RPS, fans have built countless small utopian communities through platforms such as Weibo Super Topics and Douban groups, and have established clear divisions of labor within the CP fan base: "key fans" guide public opinion, while "fan creators" outputs include diverse fan-made content such as fanfiction, images, and videos. These CP fans also construct collective identity through creative acts such as "creating memes" and "secondary creation", forming an "emotional community" that resists mainstream gender norms[4]. Due to the different types of fans, such as sole fans (fans who only passionately like one of them) and CP fans holding different positions towards the idol's queerbaiting behavior, contradictions and conflicts can easily arise. After such conflicts, the sense of community belonging among CP fans will be strengthened, thus boosting the sustained development of the CP community[5]. Meanwhile, as the scale of such groups expands and the market demonstrates enormous commercial value, capital operations within the cultural industry have correspondingly shaped these CP dynamics into a commercially boosted emotional commodity, tailoring them to the demands of the female consumer market and transforming them into continuously upgraded idol merchandis[6]--processes that inadvertently provide structural support for the subsequent cultural articulation of these communities. This construction of emotional communities based on same-sex CPs not only echoes the "queer reading" tradition in international fan culture but also forms a unique oppositional strategy within China's specific media censorship and gender discourse framework-challenging

heteronormativity circuitously through "depoliticized" entertaining expressions.

2. Analysis of Fan Practices within Theoretical Framework

The creative practices of female fans are predominantly embodied in generating fanfiction and transformative works centered around their favorite CPs, including but not limited to narrative reconstructions and adaptations of original source material. Among the two, fanfiction more effectively demonstrate the cultural characteristics of oppositional gaze due to the inherent original narrative strategies and critical thinking dimensions of female fans-this gaze forms a subtle yet incisive resistance to issues such as gender power structures and ethical disciplines through the systematic deconstruction and reconstruction of mainstream cultural symbol systems. Fanfiction refers to the practice where fans craft original narratives or visuals (such as novels and comics) using a CP's established images and settings as a backdrop. These works center on the two CP members as protagonists, constructing a unique worldview or plot that revolves around their relationship. In recent years, the innovative settings regarding gender reflection in fanfiction can be broadly categorized into the following main types: narrative reconstruction based on new gender settings and gender power, experimental exploration focusing on ethical relationships and emotional patterns, and diverse expression integrating subcultural symbols and media innovation.

First, there is the category of narrative reconstruction based on new gender settings and gender power, with innovation in setting patterns as its core feature. In the realm of physiological and social rule reconstruction, the ABO worldview (Alpha/Beta/Omega worldview) reconstructs social power structures through a fictional biological gender tripartite system-dividing humans into Alphas ("powerful beings" with dominant physiological characteristics), Betas (intermediate groups without significant physiological privileges), and Omegas ("vulnerable beings" with both reproductive capacity and pheromone sensitivity, often treated as reproductive resources)[7]. This setting deeply binds gender roles to biological instincts, using core concepts such as "pheromone control" (Alphas influencing Omegas' physiological states through

pheromones), "marking behavior" (a symbol of permanent physiological bonding), and "heat cycle mechanisms" (Omegas' periodic physiological passivity) to metaphorically address real-world issues like gender oppression and unequal resource distribution. Taking the fanfiction *Sweet-Oriented Marking* about the Chinese CP Bo Jun Yi Xiao (Wang Yibo×Xiao Zhan) as an example, in traditional ABO narratives, Alphas' dominant marking of Omegas is often seen as a naturalized expression of power order[8]. However, this work constructs a subversion of the traditional Alpha-Omega (AO) power structure through the dual narrative strategies of "Omega posing as Alpha" (Xiao Zhan-Omega character feigning an Alpha identity) and "Alpha feigning Omega" (Wang Yibo-Alpha character displaying vulnerable behaviors during his rut). Xiao Zhan as an Omega character actively controls the marking power and usurps the social identity of an Alpha, while details such as the softening of the Alpha's pheromone scent (iced peach milkshake flavor) and the demasculinization of nesting behavior transform the hegemonic image of Alphas into emotionally dependent figures. Shifting Omegas from "objectified reproductive resources under gaze" to subjects of gaze. In this narrative practice, female fans use fictional texts as a mirror to deconstruct the mainstream gender order through "looking back" via role-perspective inversion and rewriting of biological rules. They implant feminist gazing power into the Alpha-Omega bio-symbolic system, making reproductive narratives a resistant field against gender essentialism and a site for reconstructing subjective discourse.

Intersex or transgender settings more directly challenge biological determinism. In a short fanfiction created by a Chinese female fan for the Western film and television CP "Winter Soldier × Captain America"[9], the character Bucky deconstructs the binary cognition of "masculinity = strength/femininity = weakness" through the body politics discourse of "gender fluidity". The visual imagery of "iron arm, combat vest and graceful figure coexist" in the work essentially represents fans' reconstruction of gender identity through an oppositional gaze. As bell hooks emphasizes the "right to self-representation of marginalized groups", this kind of creation strives for cultural visibility for non-binary gender identifiers through the plural collaging of bodily symbols[10]. And it

resonates with how females in Western fandom circles explore and reconstruct diverse gender identities through fan creation practices such as "gender-fluid pairing"-forming an echo in their pathways of gender identity reconstruction[11]. The popularity of the Sentinel-Guide system reflects fans' power demands behind their preference for equal relationships. In the sentinel-guide fanfiction *East-Flying Shrike* for the variety show Detective Academy, multiple sentinel-guide partner groups break the traditional power framework through a "competency collaboration" model[12]. When facing the conspiracies of the transnational organization MG in Country M and the dark secrets of X School (actually a mysterious research institute), the characters advance investigations through two-way coordination of "guides analyzing mental memories and sentinels conducting on-site investigations" in key plots like the death of Zhen SOLO and the mystery of the detention cell. This setting abandons the one-way "guides assisting sentinels" model, allowing both sides to form "equal complementarity of intelligence and action" in solving transnational conspiracies and pursuing truth while rejecting the traditional "single male dominance" narrative logic. By emphasizing the functional collaboration of sentinel-guide abilities, the work reduces eroticized descriptions of characters' bodies, shifts the focus to team coordination and logical reasoning. This narrative strategy also embodies a practice of "degendered gaze": by emphasizing the technical collaboration of sentinel abilities, the work detaches the characters' bodies from traditional erotic gazes and disrupts the ingrained image of the body as an object of desire[13].

The second category is the experimental exploration focusing on ethical relationships and emotional patterns. This type of creative work serves as a vanguard where female fans challenge traditional ethical frameworks through an oppositional gaze. As bell hooks has emphasized: The cultural practices of Black women often expose the hypocrisy of dominant cultural ethics through "transgressive acts", such as the recoding of traditional ethical taboos[14]. This transgression is not mere destruction but a critical and creative practice. For example, in recent years, there has been heated discussion about "stepmom literature" that challenges ethical norms. This kind of fanfiction takes

non-blood "parental-child" or stepfamily relationships as its narrative core (p.s. in the current context, the term "stepmom" has transcended gender boundaries, especially in Boys' Love fanfiction, where it often refers to male characters, such as "fatherly stepmom" and "gentle stepfather" tropes), creating emotional tension through age gaps and identity dissonance. Such creations establish an ethical buffer through the device of "non-blood ties", while still preserving the dramatic conflict of "transgression". Their underlying logic lies in resisting the patriarchal notion that "generational hierarchy equals power hierarchy." For example, in the fanfiction *Broken Commandment*[15], the "stepmom" character is set as a teacher, breaking through the stereotype of "stepmothers as evil supporting female characters." Endowed with traits such as professional independence and emotional autonomy, this characterization deconstructs the patriarchal single regulation of "women's domestic roles".

The innovation in master-apprentice/superior-subordinate narratives reflects female fans' re-examination of power dynamics. For example, the redemption-themed setting of "prickly superstar × pretty sweetie" in the fanfiction *Superior-Subordinate Relationship* about Ma Jiaqi and Ding Chengxin serves as a vivid model of how female fans reconstruct power relations[16]. On the surface, the superstar's industry status erects the authoritative barrier of traditional hierarchical roles, yet the emotional wounds hidden beneath their "prickly" exterior shatter the stereotype that "those in power must be dominant". Though the "pretty sweetie" is characterized by physical attractiveness, they take the initiative in redemption with sincere heart, dissolving the oppressive nature of power through non-utilitarian emotional bonds. Their interactions are not one-way obedience, but rather a process where the superstar learns to let down their guard through the sweetie's gentle companionship, while the sweetie gains insight into the industry under the superstar's guidance. Power here transforms into equal spiritual resonance through mutual healing. This narrative abandons the traditional framework of "control and dependence", using female fans' unique emotional nuance to reconstruct workplace relationships into a flexible field of "mutual healing of wounds and symbiotic growth". It turns power from a cold symbol of hierarchy

into a warm bond carrying understanding and growth, vividly demonstrating the female perspective's innovative appeal to "depoliticize" and "emotionalize" power relations.

The psychologized turn in captivity/forced love narratives represents a quintessential practice of female fans' oppositional gaze, as exemplified in the fanfiction *You Are My Unshakable Addiction*[17], which undertakes a deep deconstruction of power games and a delicate unveiling of emotional textures. The story centers on the framework of "obsessive dominant × growth-oriented submissive", breaking through the flat model of one-way oppression in traditional forced love tropes: the dominant's "reformation from a playboy" and "paranoid captivity" are not mere outlets for desire, but metaphors using "unshakable addiction" to transform violent control into a psychological dilemma driven by traumatic memories—a symbol of "pathological craving for love and security". This allows the narrative to transcend superficial power oppression, penetrate the surface of forced love from a feminine perspective, and reconstruct the intertwining of emotional harm into a deep exploration of "the loneliness behind control" and "spiritual awakening beneath compliance", subverting the conquest narrative under the traditional male gaze.

The dynamic reversal of power and emotion unfolds through the submissive's growth arc within the "regret-and-redemption" narrative: from initial fear and compromise to later resistance that dismantles the dominant's emotional logic, the submissive rebuilds self-boundaries through pain, while the dominant exposes their emotional ruins in remorse, turning captivity scenes into a laboratory for psychological wrestling. This reversal shatters the static power hierarchy—the submissive's spiritual awakening challenges the dominant's emotional logic, while the dominant's repentance reveals the emotional void behind their control. The work molds "adult dangerous relationships" into an arena for mutual emotional reckoning, transforming forbidden themes into a psychological theater where female fans reconstruct power and emotion dynamics: the entanglement of love and harm is no longer exploitative pleasure consumption, but a quest for emotional redemption through an empathic perspective. Ultimately, this achieves a feminist reconstruction of forced love narratives through

the "psychologized turn".

The third category is diverse expression integrating subcultural symbols and media innovation. Taking the cyberpunk genre as an example, the fanfiction *Seven Falls* about NCT members Mark Lee and Haechan demonstrates the oppositional gaze of female fans through its futuristic setting[18]. Firstly, the work subverts the power framework of traditional male narratives by reconstructing character relationships: the bond between Mark and Haechan is not based on heroic strong-weak dependencies, but centered on delicate emotional connections and memory sharing. This weakens the hierarchical power structures common in traditional male narratives, placing characters in equal emotional symbiosis and subverting the stereotype of "male dominance by strength." Secondly, the emotionalization of cyber space serves as a carrier for female gaze: technological settings in the future world are infused with emotional warmth. Through deep excavation and delicate portrayal of characters' inner worlds, the creator breaks through the technology-centric, rational-dominated male perspective typical of cyberpunk genres, using emotional resonance and memory bonds to drive the narrative. This showcases women's unique interpretation of "integration of technology and emotion." Such creation dissolves the cold mechanicality of traditional cyberpunk narratives, transforming the future world into a field where female fans can convey emotional connections and delicate experiences. By replacing rigid male-centric discourse with a softened technological narrative, it constructs a resistant gaze space uniquely imbued with female consciousness.

The creative transformation of Cthulhu elements is also worth noting. For example, in the historical fanfiction *The Tang Dynasty Ghost Affairs Bureau*[19], the parallel-universe-inspired legends of the Tang Dynasty are integrated with the Cthulhu mythos: the protagonist intervenes in incidents of twisted folk beliefs and the resurgence of ancient powers through the "Ghost Affairs Bureau", uncovering the collapse of the world's underlying logic across temporal rifts alongside historical figures like Li He. This innovation of "Chinese-style Cthulhu" reflects Chinese fans' implicit adoption of bell hooks' "oppositional gaze" theory-as cultural "outsiders", creators use Eastern historical narrative as the "subject of gaze", transforming the foreign subcultural symbol of

Cthulhu into an "object" deconstructible by local logic. Through narrative devices like time travel, the "unknowable cosmic horror" is translated into the Tang people's ethical panic over the "disintegration of heavenly order and human ethics". The presence of real historical figures imbues heterogeneous horror elements with an emotional frequency rooted in Eastern philosophy. This "taming" is not mere appropriation but a cultural translation that reconstructs the power dynamics of subcultural symbols, injecting local emotional codes into the Cthulhu system through the interplay between the mainstream and the marginal, thus achieving the creative transformation of subculture.

Media-innovative creations represented by "found-phone literature" transform oppositional gaze into everyday practice through fragmented narratives. Take the Chinese fanfiction *flame* created for Thai CP BKPP (Billkin and PP Krit) as an example[20]: the work uses a "pseudo-documentary" form simulating phone chat logs and social media updates, grounding the "reunion after separation" and "roommates" tropes in "life-like" settings to reclaim the celebrity CP from capital-packaged media symbols, restoring them as "real individuals" with private emotional trajectories. At its core, this creation employs bell hooks' theory: as "others" in cross-cultural fandom, fans deconstruct the mainstream entertainment industry's standardized production of CP images by intercepting and collaging virtual social scenarios-using fragmented dialogue to challenge cohesive official narratives, and subverting commercialized persona frameworks with privatized emotional logics. Here, fragmented narrative becomes a carrier of "oppositional gaze": it disassembles the act of gazing into part of daily information consumption, allowing fans to subtly reconstruct the power dynamics between idols and followers through seemingly "passive" content pasting, thereby establishing a meaning-making system for marginalized groups within database-style creative mechanisms.

3. Summary and Reflection

This study takes bell hooks' "Oppositional Gaze" as its theoretical anchor to systematically examine the cultural practices of Chinese female fans in Real Person Slash (RPS) creation, revealing how marginalized groups challenge mainstream gender power structures through the

reconstruction of gaze. Theoretically, the study extends and enriches hooks' interpretation of "marginality." Unlike Laura Mulvey's unidirectional critique focused on the white male gaze, hooks' theory emphasizes the agency of marginalized groups—they are not passive "objects of gaze," but subjects capable of deconstructing mainstream narratives through the "reversal" and "reconfiguration" of gaze. The practices of Chinese female fans confirm the transnational applicability of this theory: as dual "others" in terms of gender and culture, they resist the standardized production of the entertainment industry by intercepting and collaging virtual social scenarios during cross-cultural fandom, transforming celebrities from capital-packaged symbols into "individuals with emotional depth." This "marginal gaze" not only challenges gender power but also responds to transnational cultural capital hegemony. Meanwhile, Chinese female fans construct a unique meaning-production system through "cultural translation," converting foreign subcultural symbols into carriers for local ethical discussions within the tensions of "mainstream-marginal" and "East-West" dynamics.

In the context of gender theory, the practices of Chinese female fans provide a new research model for "resistant gender narratives." Through fan creations, they deconstruct traditional gender essentialism, demonstrating a local response to Judith Butler's "gender performativity theory"—in Boy's Love CP narratives[21], characters' gender attributes are no longer the inevitable result of biological sex but "performative identities" dynamically constructed through emotional interactions. This narrative strategy breaks the stereotype that "men must occupy positions of power," presenting gender identities as fluid and negotiable cultural symbols, which aligns with Butler's argument that "gender is a product of repetitive practices."

Meanwhile, fans' exploration of transgender and non-binary gender roles essentially represents a popularized interpretation of Queer Theory[22]. By detaching "gender" from biological attributes and redefining it within the context of social relations and emotional interactions, they challenge the monopolistic narrative of "normal gender" in mainstream discourse. For example, creating "gender-fluid" characters in fictional worlds or blurring gender boundaries in realistic-themed creations not only provides an

imaginative space for gender minority groups but also questions the natural legitimacy of "heteronormativity" through cultural consumption, promoting the penetration of gender theory from academic fields into popular culture.

The study also reveals the special value of "emotional labor" in the reconstruction of gender power[23]. Through collective creation and emotional resonance, female fans embed gender critique into seemingly entertaining narratives—they infuse egalitarian cores into mainstream emotional frameworks like "sweet romance" and "redemption," transforming gender issues into perceivable and experiential emotional symbols. This approach of "using emotion to convey reason" not only avoids the resistance of direct theoretical critique but also activates audiences' subconscious reflection on gender inequality through emotional resonance, providing a new pathway for the popularization of gender theory.

From an Intersectionality perspective, the "oppositional gaze" of Chinese female fans is essentially the intertwined product of multiple power relations including gender, culture, and generation. As subjects simultaneously positioned at the margins of "female," "youth," and "subcultural participants," their creations inherently carry compound resistance to mainstream power structures—challenging the gender order under the male gaze, resisting the co-optation of youth culture by consumerism, and attempting to reconstruct the subjectivity of local discourse amid collisions between Chinese and Western cultures. This multi-dimensional resistant posture offers a highly interpretable empirical sample for the interdisciplinary integration of gender theory and cultural studies. However, this cultural activity still has limitations: for example, Chinese female fans generally emphasize "clear top-bottom dynamics" in male-male CP narratives, and assign feminized traits such as sensitivity, tenderness, and dependence to the "bottom role." This is essentially a projection of the traditional cultural concept of "yin-yang complementarity" onto homosexual imagination. Such thinking transplants the power structure of "male dominance-female subordination" from the heterosexual framework into same-sex relationships, making the "bottom role" a symbolic carrier of traditional feminine qualities. From the perspective of cultural genes, the

category of "yin and yang" in Chinese philosophy is not only an abstraction of natural laws but also deeply involved in the construction of gender order-the binary cognition of "masculine yang and feminine yin" penetrates into ethical norms, family structures, and even emotional narratives. Even in fan creations that break through the boundaries of heterosexuality, creators still tend to construct relationship models based on the logic of "yin-yang complementarity," subconsciously believing that power structures must rely on differences in gender qualities. This path dependence demonstrates that traditional culture has extremely strong resilience in shaping gender cognition, and even the resistance practices of marginalized groups can hardly fully break free from its deep structure.

Judith Butler's "gender performativity theory" points out that gender is a "performative identity" constructed through repetitive practices[24], and the solidification of "top-bottom" labels is essentially an instrumental utilization of gender performance: by reinforcing the feminized characteristics of the bottom role, fans not only satisfy the tension needs of emotional narratives but also tacitly align with the mainstream culture's psychological expectation that "non-normative emotions must be nested within traditional frameworks". Although this writing strategy does not actively maintain heterosexual hegemony, it objectively perpetuates the binary cognition that "gender must match power relations", making same-sex emotions a "mirror replica" of heterosexual narratives rather than a genuine breakthrough in gender pluralism.

Furthermore, the "safe zone" for cultural expression formed by the censorship system not only limits the public visibility of same-sex CP narratives but also quietly shapes the self-censorship mechanisms within fan communities-creators often have to resort to "edge-of-the-envelope" metaphors, emotional margins, or fictional world-building to avoid regulatory risks. This habitual mode of expression further locks discussions on gender issues into the realm of privacy and entertainment. When same-sex emotions can only circulate within closed communities through consumptive discourses like "sweet moments" or "shipping lore", their potential for social critique is dissolved in the symbolic carnival, making it difficult to transform them

into public issues capable of shaking the real-world gender order.

At the same time, the systematic silence on LGBTQ+ issues in mainstream cultural spheres has led to a lack of communication vehicles for pluralistic gender awareness outside these communities-the cautious attitude of traditional media, the absence of such topics in educational systems, and the ambiguous stance of public policies together constitute a "dissemination gap" in gender equality discourse. This gap prevents CP fans' emotional practices from accessing institutional dialogue channels or building broader social consensus through public discussion. These "double restrictions from within and without" keep same-sex CP culture lingering on the margins of mainstream culture. Its imaginative practices of gender subversion may ultimately be co-opted into a special entertainment commodity within the existing order, rather than becoming a cultural force truly driving the iteration of social gender cognition. These limitations collectively lead to threefold constraints on the research findings in terms of theoretical interpretation, practical evaluation, and social inference: The tension between traditional culture and Western theories weakens the deconstructive power of the "oppositional gaze" at the theoretical level, leaving patriarchal symbolic imprints in fans' gender reconstruction practices. At the practical level, censorship mechanisms and self-censorship induce an "emotional metaphorization" tendency in research samples, making it difficult for gender critique to break away from the realm of entertainment discourse. In terms of social impact, the clique-oriented data and dissemination gaps render the research conclusions unable to verify the actual impact of CP culture on the mainstream gender order. These limitations indicate that the gaze resistance of Chinese female fans remains in a dynamic game of "marginal breakthrough and systemic co-optation," and its true efficacy as a social transformative force requires further testing in more open cultural contexts with diverse samples.

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