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ALTERNATIVE SEXUALITIES/INTIMACIES? YURI FANS COMMUNITY
IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

YEUNG KA YI

MPHIL

LINGNAN UNIVERSITY

2017

ALTERNATIVE SEXUALITIES/INTIMACIES? YURI FANS COMMUNITY
IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

by

YEUNG Ka Yi

楊嘉怡

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy in Sociology

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2017

ABSTRACT

Alternative Sexualities/Intimacies? Yuri Fans Community in the Chinese Context

by

YEUNG Ka Yi

Master of Philosophy

Yuri is a Japanese manga sub-culture which refers to all kinds of works (manga, animation) that portray attraction between two girls, including spiritual bonding and shared values. Through examining the value and interpretation of this sub-culture by *Yuri* fans, this paper attempts to explore the construction of alternative sexuality identity among *Yuri* fans. This Japanese sub-culture has been implanted in Chinese fandom with the popularity of hit *Yuri*-related animations since 2004. With decades of development, *Yuri* has extended its application to various mediums including the slash fandom in TV dramas, idol groups, movies and spread its usage on Chinese social network platforms like *Weibo*. As a result of the popularity of *Yuri*, there has been a growing fan base in China and Chinese fandom has developed their own culture of *Yuri* that is characterized by their focus on specificity in their sexuality. They are enthusiastic about the spiritual connection and the sharing of inner life between two girls. Hence, when mentioning relationships, they have a higher emphasis on the deepening of spiritual bonds rather than sexual desire. In this sense, their highlight on the inner bond challenges the extant understanding of homosexuality and sexual intimacy. Besides, there has been a large proportion of female *Yuri* fans in the community. Although they would identify themselves as “non-heterosexual”, few identify themselves as ‘lesbian’. *Yuri* community are critical towards mainstream lesbian culture in China, especially butch and femme roleplaying. In this regards, I argue that *Yuri* could act a pioneer role in challenging the homonormativity in Chinese mainstream lesbian culture. This research adopted an online ethnography approach which is based on the Chinese largest *Yuri* forum, *Yamibo* forum. Through examining their culture and attitudes on intimacy, this research studies the construction of their alternative sexuality identity and contributes to the knowledge production of queer theory from their queer standpoint

DECLARATION

I declare that this is an original work based primarily on my own research, and I warrant that all citations of previous research, published or unpublished, have been duly acknowledged.



SIGNED

(YEUNG Ka Yi)

Date: 21/10/2017





CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL OF THESIS

ALTERNATIVE SEXUALITIES/INTIMACIES? YURI FANS COMMUNITY
IN THE CHINESE CONTEXT

by
YEUNG Ka Yi

Master of Philosophy

Panel of Examiners :

 SIGNED (Prof. LAW Suk Mun Sophia)	(Chairman)
 SIGNED (Dr. CHAN Kit Wa Anita)	(External Member)
 SIGNED (Prof. BURAK HO Beste Esra)	(Internal Member)
 SIGNED (Prof. CHEN Hon Fai)	(Internal Member)

Chief Supervisor :

Prof. CHAN Hau Nung Annie

Co-supervisor :

Prof. BURAK HO Beste Esra

Approved for the Senate :


SIGNED

(Prof. MOK Ka Ho Joshua)
Chairman, Postgraduate Studies Committee

21 SEP 2017

Date

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	i
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	vi
Figures	vi
Tables	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	vii
Chapter 1 - Yuri Introduction.....	- 1 -
1.1 - Yuri - What it means?	- 2 -
1.2 - Origin of the word – Yuri and Yuri History	- 4 -
1.3 - Queer interpretation in mainstream works - Yuri reading	- 6 -
1.4 - Yuri, GL (Girls' Love) and lesbianism	- 6 -
1.5 - Yuri reader sexuality identity and Lesbian	- 9 -
Chapter 2 - Theoretical framework	- 11 -
2.1 - Sexuality.....	- 11 -
2.2 - Queer Theory background.....	- 11 -
2.3 - Alternative sexuality	- 14 -
2.4 - Yuri sexuality	- 15 -
2.5 - Emerging of modern love and nature of Yuri love	- 17 -

2.6 - Lesbian continuum	- 18 -
2.7 - Female gaze.....	- 19 -
2.8 - Japanese subculture studies.....	- 20 -
Chapter 3 – Methodology : Online ethnography.....	- 23 -
3.1 - Entering the field.....	- 23 -
3.2 - Feminist standpoint theory.....	- 25 -
3.3 - Data collection	- 26 -
3.3.1 - Virtual community and Yamibo forum	- 26 -
3.3.2 - Data collection: Online Interviews	- 29 -
3.3.3 - Data collection: Yamibo forum.....	- 31 -
3.3.4 - Saturation of information.....	- 34 -
Chapter 4 - Nature of Yuri	- 36 -
4.1 - Defining Yuri-related Terms.....	- 36 -
4.2 - What Yuri is not?	- 38 -
4.2.1 - Yuri vs Lesbian	- 38 -
4.2.2 - Yuri vs GL.....	- 39 -
4.2.3 - Relationship with sex.....	- 46 -
4.2.4 - Possession of female body.....	- 48 -
4.3 - What exactly is Yuri?.....	- 54 -
4.3.1 - The discursive production of Yuri.....	- 54 -
4.3.2 - Queer Reading/ Yuri reading	- 54 -
4.3.3 - Spiritual Intimacy	- 55 -
4.3.4 - Kizuna (羈絆) : Xena and Gabrielle	- 58 -
4.3.5 – Above friendship	- 62 –
4.4 - What respondents find attractive about Yuri?.....	- 63 -

4.4.1 - Diversity in Relationship	- 63 -
4.4.2 - Differences between Yuri and heterosexual love story.....	- 66 -
4.4.3 - The aesthetic of Yuri and femininity.....	- 69 -
4.4.4 - The attraction of ambiguity.....	- 76 -
4.4.5 – Yuri as the early-stage of romantic relationships	- 80 -
4.5 – Conclusion.....	- 83 -
Chapter 5 - Chinese speaking Yuri culture	- 86 -
5.1 - Yamibo Forum- Its formation	- 86 -
5.2 - Sense of belonging	- 87 -
5.2.1 – Place for socializing and building relationships.....	- 90 -
5.2.2 - Feminist Concerns	- 96 -
5.2.3 - Influence on the values of Yuri fans	- 98 -
5.3 – Management of Yamibo forum	- 100 -
5.4 - Rejection of Tomboy culture	- 103 -
5.4.1 – Chinese lesbian culture	- 103 -
5.4.2 – Attitude of Yuri fans towards Chinese lesbian culture	- 106 -
5.5 - Community distanced from mainstream lesbian.....	- 110 -
5.6 – Conclusion.....	- 114 -
Chapter 6 - Yuri Love	- 118 -
6.1 - The self-discovery journey as homosexual	- 118 -
6.1.2 - Sexual orientation as a “choice” and negotiation of heterosexuality.-	122 -
6.2 - Yuri love: Ready to Sacrifice for an ideal love.....	- 123 -
6.3 - Yuri love: Pure relationship	- 125 -
6.3.1 - Yuri love: Spiritual intimacy	- 126 -

6.3.2 - Yuri love: A tough road to travel along	- 129 -
6.3.2.1 - Modern love.....	- 129 -
6.4 - Yuri love: Physical intimacy.....	- 135 -
6.5 - Yuri love: Attractive female for Yuri fans	- 137 -
6.7 – Conclusion.....	- 140 -
Chapter 7 – Characteristics of Yuri fans	- 142 -
7.1 - Resistance to hegemonic heterosexuality	- 143 -
7.2 - Resistance to lesbian culture	- 150 -
7.3 – Staying vigilance of own culture	- 154 -
7.4 - Pessimistic love value	- 160 -
7.5 - Conclusion	- 167 -
Chapter 8 - Conclusion.....	- 170 -
8.1 - Visibility of Yuri culture in sexuality studies	- 171 -
8.2 - Challenging the role of sex in a relationship from a feminine standpoint-	172 -
8.3 - Combating compulsory heteronormativity	- 174 -
8.4 - Challenging homonormativity in Chinese mainstream lesbian culture	- 176 –
8.5 - Queer cyber space: Yamibo forum	- 178 -
Appendix 1 : Profiles of Informants.....	- 180 -
Bibliography.....	- 184 -

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figures

Figure 1: Relationship of Yuri, GL and lesbian

Figure 2: Relationship of Yuri genre with GL and narrow definition of Yuri

Figure 3: Victoria's negotiation of sexual orientation

Tables

Table 1: Yuri related Terms

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Chapter 1 - Yuri Introduction

Japanese manga is a colourful and interesting sub-culture comprising myriads of genres, Boys' Love¹ being one of the most frequently-mentioned. BL describes the erotic and romantic relationship between two beautiful males, and its popularity can be seen from the whole sets of BL comics, animation DVDs, and light novels with two pretty boys hugging in the sexiest pose on the cover donning shelves after shelves in manga stores in Akihabara, the centre of ACG² culture in Japan. Lurking around the corner, though, is a secret world of girls' comics - the Yuri comic zone, where one can find all kinds of comic and light novel on girl-on-girl interaction.

Yuri is a manga, animation, TV drama, and in general, media, counterpart of BL. Since BL mainly attracts heterosexual girls or married women with its illustrations on the sexual and romantic relationship between two beautiful boys, it is understandable to assume Yuri, which describes the romantic attraction or intimate relationships between two girls, to be popular among males, who view it with the "male gaze" attitude they normally use when watching lesbian pornography to satisfy their sexual fantasy (Yang, 2012). Surprisingly, it was confirmed in two existing studies on Yuri culture (Maser, 2013; Yang, 2012) that a large proportion of Yuri readers are females. Maser (2013) further discovered that a high percentage of Japanese Yuri readers claimed to be non-heterosexual (Maser, 2013).

The Chinese community has long been absorbing ACG culture from Japan. Along with the development and increasing popularity of Yuri works, Chinese ACG fans also caught onto this foreign sub-culture and even re-interpreted it in their own way to create

¹ Boys' Love - BL

² ACG – Animation, Culture, and Game.

their own version of Yuri culture. The Yuri headquarters of China is on the cyberspace, in form of a discussion forum called *Yamibo*. With about 252,000 fans and 556 million posts covering areas from fanfiction to Yuri animation, *Yamibo* is the largest Chinese-speaking Yuri fan site. Based on a study of *Yamibo* forum and other Yuri fans platform by Yang (2012), similar to its Japanese counterpart, a large proportion of the Chinese Yuri fandom are female, and most of them are self-proclaimed non-heterosexual.

To investigate the secret behind Yuri manga and light novel's ability to attract female readers, the driving force behind female readers becoming Yuri fans, and the pleasure they obtain through reading Yuri works, the following section presents a brief introduction of the manga genre.

1.1 - Yuri - What it means?

There is not an official definition of Yuri, and academic studies on Yuri are rare. Maser (2013) pointed out that Yuri is a discursive culture, meaning that its definition and meaning are produced through reader interpretation rather than by the producer. As such, it is inappropriate to give a definite definition to Yuri. Since Yuri is a culture that is deeply rooted in its fans, it is best understood from Yuri fans' point of view. Every Yuri reader describes and interprets Yuri in her own way, and it is these descriptions and interpretations that shape Yuri.

In practice, there is a broad and a narrow definition of Yuri. The broad version defines Yuri as the relationship between girls ranging from intense friendship to romantic intimate relationship. The narrow definition of Yuri is still a hotly-debated topic among Yuri fans, the main argument being whether the sexual meaning of a relationship should

be viewed as Yuri. Yuri fans following the more precise and restricted definition only acknowledge the subtle romance and the ambiguous interaction between girls as Yuri. Since there is no clear indication of the establishment of a lover relationship between the couple, “More than friendship, not quite lovers”³ is then a common term to describe Yuri (Yang, 2012). The ambiguity and subtle interaction, and the intensive spiritual bonding between females are the main emphasis in Yuri.

Some other adjectives commonly used by Yuri fans to describe Yuri are “innocent”, “beautiful”, and “pure”. Yuri stories in Japanese manga and light novels are usually set in a school, and the main characters of Yuri stories are teenagers or young adults. An author of the Japanese magazine *Comp H* noted that the relationship between girls in these stories highlights the “connection between hearts” but not “connection between bodies” (Kinkyu kikaku,2006). The spiritual and pure characteristics of Yuri give it the sense of “innocent”, “beautiful”, and “pure”.

Yuri emphasizes on the attraction between girls at the very moment of the interaction with the person, by certain acts, certain personalities, certain spiritual connections, certain shared experience, certain talents, or certain beauty and virtue. There is neither calculation of social status and wealth nor consideration of marriage and the like before a couple enters into a relationship. It is a relationship not constrained by martial and reproductive requirements, as in typical heterosexual love. Hence, as Anthony Giddens (1992) put it, this is an expression of democratization of intimacy.

³ More than friendship, not quite lovers - 友達以上,恋人未滿

1.2 - Origin of the word – Yuri and Yuri History

Yuri means “lily” in Japanese, and typically refers to the white lily. The flower was seldom mentioned in Japanese literature and art works before the *Meiji* period, but came to symbolize purity, ideal woman, and beauty in terms of spiritual mean after the arrival of Japanese romanticism (Maser, 2013). Yuri first became a term describing love relationship between girls in 1970, when Japan’s first male homosexual magazine, *Barazoku* (Rose tribe), used it in the name of its lesbian readers’ column, *Yurizoku no heya* (Room for the lily tribe) (Yang, 2012). The chief editor of *Barazoku*, Ito Bunggaku, chose Yuri (lily) as an antonym to *Bara* (rose), which represented lesbian and gay respectively. Since then, Yuri became a representation of girl-girl relationship, and along with the increasing popularity of Yuri works the 1990s, the term gained its status as a description of the intimacies between females in manga, animation, and light novels.

In view of the lack of academic studies on Yuri culture, Yang (2012) made reference to a piece of writing on the history of GL entitled *GL no keifu* (Pedigree of GL) in *Da Vinci Magazine*, a Japanese mainstream literature magazine, and proposed that the development of Yuri can be traced back to *S shosetsu*⁴ that was popular in the *Taisho* and *Showa* periods. By 1990s, *Shoujo* manga⁵ became popular, followed by popular *Shoujo shosetsu* in late 90s, and finally, Yuri specialized manga publications found today.

The “S” in *S shosetsu* is an abbreviation for “Sister”, and represents the sisterhood

⁴ *S shosetsu* - “S” fiction

⁵ *Shoujo* manga – 少女漫畫, teenage female comics

relationship in girls' senior high schools in Japan, where older students tend to take care of younger students, with an intimate relationship developed between them. Some of the more popular and famous works include *Hana monogatari*⁶ by popular *Showa* period female writer *Yoshiya Nobuko* and *Otome no minato* by *Kawabata Yasunari*, winner of the Nobel Prize in literature.

The 1990s was the era of *Shoujo* manga, with titles like *Oniisama e...*⁷ and *Sailor Moon* taking the centre stage. Many fanfiction were produced, and the Yuri coupling of *Sailor Moon* characters *Haruka x Michiru* was created, which attracted a lot of audience. This period was a milestone in the development of Yuri culture. *Shoujo* fictions marked another important era for Yuri culture. Representative works include *Maria-sama ga Miteru*, an excellent writing welcomed by male and female readers alike, which depicted the sentimental and delicate relationship between girls and the “sisterhood” system in girls' high school.

The era of Yuri text production started with the publication of the first Yuri manga anthology magazine – *Yuri Shimai* (Yuri sisters) in 2003. After it was discontinued in 2005 after only 5 issues, another Yuri magazine, *Comic Yuri hime*, took its place and gained huge popularity among fans. In 2009, another Yuri manga anthology magazine, *Tsuhomi*, also debuted.

1.3 - Queer interpretation in mainstream works

⁶ *Hana monogatari*- 花物語

⁷ *Oniisama e...*- おにいさまへ...

- Yuri reading

Yuri fans praise and celebrate the ambiguity in the relationship between two girls. It is common that fans use the “Yuri interpretation” on heterosexual manga or light novels to search for the ambiguity and subtle romance between female characters. Yang (2012) explained such queer reading by referencing Chinese feminist writer Chang Hsiao-hung (1997), who re-interpreted fictions written by Eileen Chang, one of the most influential Chinese writers in the 20th century, for possible homosexual bonds. Yang (2012) coined the term “Yuri reading” to refer to Yuri fans’ queer reading of heterosexual or mainstream manga and works, which formed a large part of the Yuri culture. Recall the popular 90s *Shoujo* manga and animation *Sailor Moon* mentioned in the previous section. The work revolved around adventure and hetero-love stories of the different characters. Yuri fans used Yuri reading to view the ambiguous interactions between two of the supporting characters, Sailor Uranus *Haruka* and Sailor Neptune *Michiru*, which led to dozens of fan creations when *Sailor Moon* was broadcasted. *Sailor Moon* provided a boost to the development of Yuri culture, since it was the first influential mainstream work with a popular Yuri couple.

1.4 - Yuri, GL (Girls’ Love) and lesbianism

The relationship among Yuri, GL, and lesbianism is rather complicated. The GL (Girls’ Love) genre is an antonym of the BL (Boys Love) genre. In Japan, Yuri readers usually use GL as a substitute for Yuri, with no discussion on the differences between the two. However, it is a different story in the Chinese-speaking fandom. Since Chinese fans began to actively embrace this Japanese sub-culture in 2004, arguments have begun on major Yuri forums on the definition of Yuri and GL and their difference from lesbian

sexuality. This can be considered the biggest difference between the Japanese and Chinese Yuri culture. For the Japanese, Yuri, GL, and lesbian are considered interchangeable. As such, there is generally no discussion on the need to clarify the terms. Yet, the Chinese fandom considers a clear distinction in the definition of Yuri, GL, and lesbian to be crucial. It is also common to see arguments amongst Chinese fans on the nature of Yuri, especially on whether it involves sex or the establishment of romantic relationship between the two female characters. Besides, Chinese Yuri fans also distinguish clearly between Yuri and lesbian, considering them as different categories.

It has been concluded by Yang (2012) that, among Chinese fandom, the term Yuri refers to the vague relationship between two girls and places more focus on the spiritual love between them, while GL is more related to sexual relationship and is relatively close to lesbian relationship in reality. Figure 1, taken from the *Yamibo* forum, gives a more detailed illustration of the relationship between Yuri, GL, and lesbian.

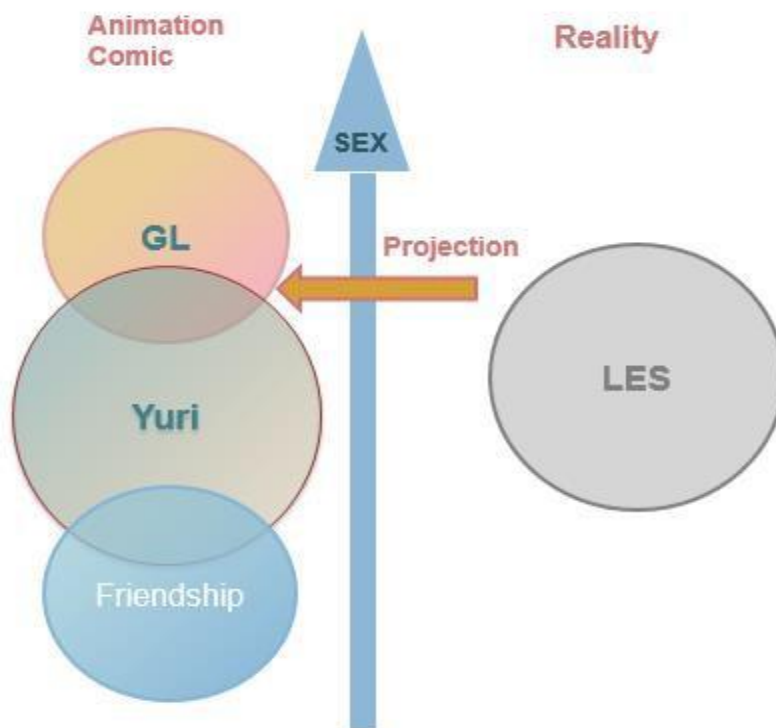


Figure 1: Relationship of Yuri, GL and lesbian⁸ Source: *Yamibo* forum

Another way to look at the difference is that Yuri is in a 2D medium (manga, animation, and light novels) while lesbian is in a 3D medium and is more related to reality. In other words, Yuri and lesbian are in different categories in which Yuri is a form of love while lesbian is an identity.

In early years, Yuri used to indicate lesbian relationships in literature, since narratives depicting intimate relationship between girls were rare. However, with the popularity of Yuri texts in the past decade, Yuri culture has become better known as one that highlights and emphasizes on pure and spiritual bonding, and Yuri was detached from lesbian's sexual relationship (Yang, 2012). Yang (2012) also pointed out that, according the Japanese online fans dictionary - *Yuri dictionary*⁹, Yuri and lesbian are not totally identical, as "lesbian" carries social and political meanings, while Yuri is just a form of love. On the same note, Maser (2013) refused to directly address Yuri as "lesbian", and used the term female same-sex intimacy instead. She specifically mentioned that lesbian is not a neutral descriptive word, and thus she put the word in quotation marks to "denaturalize the terms, to designate these signs as sites of political debates" (Butler, 1994).

1.5 - Yuri reader sexuality identity and Lesbian

Maser (2013) reported that 60.7% of her female respondents claimed themselves to be

⁸ This figure was also used in Yang's research.

⁹ *Yuri dictionary* - 百合辭書

“non-heterosexual”. This matches the observation of Yang (2012), who noted that many female members on the *Yamibo* forum are “non-heterosexual”. Although discussion threads on whether members are lesbian are readily closed by forum moderators to avoid censorship from the Chinese authorities (keywords like lesbian are considered to be sensitive in China), it can be deduced from threads in which female members make personal love query that they are referring to a female partner.

Although Yuri fan may consider themselves as “non-heterosexual”, it does not mean that they identify themselves as lesbian. If the primary definition of lesbian is love between females, then the sexuality of Yuri could be said as lesbian. Butler (1994) said that “identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary.” In other words, terms like “lesbian” and “homosexual” set up an excluding labelling system that filters those who deviate from the terms as outsiders (Butler, 1994). Hence, it may not be appropriate to label Yuri fans as lesbian.

Although sexual orientation of Yuri fans overlaps with that of lesbian, the content of Yuri readers’ sexuality can be different from that of lesbian. Yuri readers tend to focus more on the spiritual relationship between each other. Besides, Yuri fans largely criticize tomboy culture within the lesbian community and seldom engage in local lesbian community. Since the Yuri community has a culture that is incompatible with mainstream lesbian culture, it is not accurate to directly refer to Yuri fans as lesbian.

The current research is built upon the author’s interest in clarifying the differences in sexuality between Yuri community and lesbian, and to formulate and explain the sexuality and sexual identity of Yuri fans. To this end, this study investigates the construction of sexuality in the Yuri community, since their sexual identity cannot be

accurately defined using current sexuality and queer studies. From the standpoint of Yuri culture, this research also seeks to contribute to the extant understanding of sexuality and queer studies by challenging the role of sex in the formation of knowledge. Through online ethnography, this research also attempts to capture the subjectivity of Yuri fans in challenging the heteronormativity and homonormativity in mainstream society.

Chapter 2 - Theoretical framework

The key theoretical concepts used in this research will be introduced in this chapter. Four main theoretical concepts, namely, 1) Sociological concept of sexuality; 2) Queer theory; 3) Pure relationship; and, 4) Female gaze, will be used to frame, analyze, and make sense of the data in this research. Also, the significance of studying the Yuri culture will be explicated through the illustration of the key theoretical framework.

2.1 - Sexuality

Sexuality, in sociological terms, is a cultural product of an individual's sexual attraction. Foucault pointed out in his book, *History of Sexuality* (1990), that sexuality is the set of process in social and culture dimension that structures and formulates the expression of sexual desire, identities, and acts. Halperin (1989) further proposed that sexuality generates sexual identity, and an individual's sexual identity is driven by sexual desires.

While the term sexuality cuts across areas such as passion, affection, love, and attraction in a relationship, it is only defined by human sexual nature. However, relationships in Yuri are not driven by sexual desire towards female, but are due to the affection and intimacy between females. As such, sex is not a prioritized consideration, and there are other factors affecting the development of a relationship in Yuri, as if in other forms of romantic relationships. Seemingly, the current understanding of sexuality cannot fully explain and define the sexuality in Yuri culture.

2.2 - Queer Theory background

The development of queer theory has been accompanied by lesbian and gay studies. It

filled the gap in lesbian and gay studies, as well as in feminism, while providing a new interpretation to sexuality. Seidman (1997) proposed four major conflicts concerning the problem of identity politics among lesbian and gay studies. The first problem is that lesbians and gays are not getting the same attention. When it comes to homosexuals, the first thing that comes to people's mind is usually gay men, making gay men seem to be representatives of the whole homosexual community. The second problem is that the existing lesbian and gay community neglects the questions and problems in defining their identity. For example, why is gender the major determining factor when choosing sexual object, and why are gays and lesbians defined by their choice of sexual object? Why divide people into groups according to their sexual choice and gender? What about bisexuals? Are they the ones being neglected? Scholars on bisexuals seemed to think so. For example, Hutchins and Kaahumanu (1991) stated that the straight and gay communities focus so much on gender when talking about desire that they have ignored the alternate factors.

The third problem raised in identity politics is that a hierarchy of binary opposition bias was formed under the assimilationist model employed in homosexual politics. Lesbian and gay groups are in fact creating a new hierarchy and restriction. Using social norms and laws as a tool, they classified desire into acceptable and unacceptable forms. Other forms of sexual activities that deviate from the laws or the social norms, such as BDSM, bisexuals and fetishism, are being excluded in this case (Rubin, 1993). The fourth problem is that the identity politics of lesbian and gay communities is only focused on white, middle-class gay male. Other sexual minority parties, such as black, lower-class, bisexual women who are less privileged are excluded.

Michel Foucault, a key person in the evolution of queer theory, developed the idea of

post-structuralism, which is also an important factor in the rise of queer theory. As opposed to essentialism, which highlights that human identity and selfhood are constituted by human nature, post-structuralism claims that homosexuality is socially constructed. Such idea of social constructivism can also be found in queer theory, which proposes that gender and sexuality are socially constructed. This gives gender and sexuality the defining nature of being able to be deconstructed and reconstructed, and being constantly changing, and paved the way for the development of queer theory. As Foucault implied in his work *History of sexuality* (1978), there is not just simply repression on sexuality or a simple classification of what is being excluded or accepted, but also a proliferated and continuous discourse on the “repressed sexuality”, as well as acceptable and unacceptable behaviors.

Institutions of power, such as churches, medical institutions, and schools, are places where there are widespread discourses on sexuality and gender. In churches, for instance, confessions on sexual behavior have to be very concise and detailed, down to even a hint about sex in a dream. This, in fact, creates a continuous specific discourse concerning sex. Other institutions, such as medical institutions and schools, also serve a discursive purpose on sex. For instance, the analysis and classification of sexuality and the “perverted” behaviors in the medical system and the continuous and endless measures taken by educational institutions to prevent children from engaging in sex have given children, parents, and teachers opportunities to talk about sex. They are all practices that proliferate and provoke more discourses on sex while excising power at the same time. Sexuality and gender are constructed socially along with these endless discourses on sex. Moreover, knowledge concerning sex is also the practice of power. Body and sex are being regulated in an implicit way, in which they become the subject for study and knowledge. The classification of normal and abnormal behavior

according to norms has become a regulatory practice of power in which various sexual behaviors are being constantly censored and examined. In providing an explanation on how power is exercised in society, Foucault offered a social constructivist theory on sexuality, which paved the way for queer theory, and once the principle under sexuality has been revealed by the “repressive hypothesis”, the nature of sexuality could be re-constructed.

2.3 - Alternative sexuality

Queer theory questions the nature of sexuality in lesbian and gay studies and the patriarchal hierarchy. Via the deconstruction of the binary opposition system on sexuality, queer scholars rebuild a new understanding. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, one of the foremost queer scholars, contributed hugely to the foundation of the queer theory by providing an alternate understanding to sexuality and opened the gate for more forms of sexuality, identity, and relationship and. In her book *Epistemology of the closet* (1993), Sedgwick challenged the nature of sexuality, claiming that it has restricted the dimension of how sexuality could be viewed. Also, she pointed out one of the constraints in defining sexuality, namely, ones’ sexual desire object is only determined by the gender, when, in fact, there can be alternative dimensions of sexual orientation - “dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types” (Sedgwick, 1993).

The word “closet” in the title of Sedgwick’s book (1993) is a metaphor for being a LGBTQ. When one discloses his/her own sexual identity, it would be referred to as “coming out of the closet”. Early in her book, Sedgwick (1993) described the nature of “the closet” and coming out, which has long existed in the history of homosexuality.

By coming out and stating that “I am gay”, one is in fact putting a constraint on ones’ identity. Specifically, one is forced to indicate his/her sexuality, stick on a label and put himself/herself on either the homosexuality side or heterosexuality side (Sedgwick, 1993). Regardless of whether they have an alternative sexuality or are purely just homosexual, they are being thrown into a labelling system created by heteronormativity (Sedgwick, 1993). The closet system has, in fact, built a hierarchy of what is being excluded and what is being accepted that serves to expel other forms of sexuality (Sedgwick, 1993). By pointing out the dynamic and fluidity that sexuality could be, queer theorists then reconstruct the identity of sexuality.

Queer theory challenges traditional homosexuality studies, which had been assimilated into the heterosexual hierarchy and adopted the norms and restrictions created by heterosexuality. It also exposes the hidden nature of gay and lesbian studies, that is, they have, in fact, granted legitimacy to heteronormativity and put themselves in a position of being stigmatized. Besides, queer theory has a significant strategical meaning, namely, it unites all other forms of sexuality and relationship, such as bisexuals, drags, transgenders, homosexuals, and those who are opposed to the marriage, heterosexual, or gender hegemony. It has created a new approach by challenging the monogamy and heterosexual hierarchy with a more fluid, flexible, and negotiable dimension.

2.4 - Yuri sexuality

The fluidity, flexibility, and negotiability of sexuality can also be seen among Yuri readers. Maser (2013) researched on the sexuality of female Yuri readers, and found that over 60.7% of the respondents reported that they were “non-heterosexual”. Maser

took care in choosing the wordings used in the questionnaire, refraining from using terms like homosexual or lesbian. The sexuality identity among Yuri readers is rather complicated, and they usually would not consider themselves as lesbian, as seen on *Yamibo*, where most Yuri fans hold a belief that it is just a coincidence that the person they love is a girl. The sexuality of Yuri readers, for those who considered themselves as “non-heterosexual”, could be one of the dimensions of sexuality under the interpretation of queer theory.

The desire object could also belong to a diverse dimension. For Yuri readers, apart from the gender of their partner, it is the intimacy, the interaction, and the emotional ties that attract them. The form of relationship among Yuri readers is rather alternative in that their desire object or their relationship is not purely determined by gender, but would also include shared values and spiritual interaction. Therefore, it would be incorrect to consider the sexuality of Yuri readers as lesbian. Their sexuality identity could be overlap with lesbian, yet it is not identical to lesbian. As will be examined in future chapters, Yuri readers are mainly attracted by the spiritual interaction among girls and they have a higher standard on spiritual relationship. It is an alternative form of desire and their sexual desired object is more than gender, and may include spiritual intimacy as well as mutual understanding.

Queer theory questions the existing definition of sexuality, which is determined by gender, and emphasizes that the choice of sexual object could be more than gender. For Yuri culture and Yuri readers’ sexuality, this genre may even question the nature of relationship, namely, relationships have to be tied with sex. Sex is no doubt one of the important elements in a relationship, yet an intimate relationship is more than sex. The emphasis of inner bonding in a relationship by Yuri fans poses a challenge to the

definition of sexuality. Specifically, why does a relationship have to be defined by sex but not the attraction or inner bonding between people? Is it not that such construction of knowledge of sexuality is under the influence of the phallus culture?

Interestingly, Miller (2014) found that female homosexual couples in fact have a lower sexual frequency compared to gay and heterosexual couples, and females have lower sexual frequency without involvement of male in a relationship. In Byers' (2005) longitudinal research on heterosexuals' relationship satisfaction, it was confirmed that the quality of intimate communication has vital influence on both the relationship and sexual satisfaction, which concurred with previous studies (e.g., Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Fowers & Olson, 1989) on the influence of intimate communication on romantic and sexual relationship. These results show that different sexualities have different preference on the role of sex, and it is not appropriate to put all sexualities under the account of sex. The alternate emphasis on spiritual connection and mutual understanding in Yuri relationships echoes Giddens' framework (1992) of modern love and questions the existing knowledge in sexuality, which considers sex as a vital part in defining an individual's sexuality. The concept of modern love will be discussed in the following section.

2.5 - Emerging of modern love and nature of

Yuri love

With the invention of modern contraceptive methods and reproductive technologies came the detraditionalization of 20th century love relationship and emergence of modern love. Plastic sexuality, as suggested by Giddens (1992), has separated the reproductive purpose in sexual activities and untied the bonding of male sexual

experience within sex, allowing for more forms of sexuality, including pure relationship. Pure relationship highlights the equality within a relationship in form of respect for, and balance of status between, the two parties. It reflects an internal referential social bonding that is highly reliant on the interaction between the two parties. People enter into a relationship not because of social status or traditional bonding as in a feudal marriage system, but on their own will. Therefore, confidence in, and satisfaction with, the other party has become crucial factors for both parties to stay in a relationship.

Confluent love is another term introduced by Giddens (1992). Confluent love puts emphasis on the fact that, because partners totally expose themselves to each other and bear the emotional burden for each other, their relationship requires strong trust between, and bonding with, each other. It includes an equal negotiation within a love relationship, in which sex should serve the purpose of affection. Yuri, with its high demand for emotional ties, is also a kind of relationship that yearns for equal love as in confluent love. Such desire for confluent love and pure relationship among female Yuri readers may also be connected with their high admiration of spiritual bonding in Yuri love. However, similar to other heterosexual pure relationships, Yuri love may also face the problem of fragileness in relationship so commonly seen in modern society. In this case, commitment and ones' faithfulness become crucial ties to ensure stability.

2.6 - Lesbian continuum

Adrienne Rich (1980) proposed a new concept in female relationship known as "lesbian continuum", which extends the identity of "lesbian" to encompass female interactions, including intimacy among women and the sharing of inner self between females.

Obviously, the presence of sexual desire towards women is less important in this case, and the interaction and intimacy bonding among females become the essential factor – a stark diversion from the prevalent phallus culture in the patriarchal society, which considers sexual experience as the most important factor in a relationship (Rich, 1980). Lesbian continuum is concerned not with erotic relationship, but with women friendship. It includes shared female experiences, such as feeding of children, female orgasmic sensation, as well as memories with mother (Rich, 1980.) Examples of this include Chloe and Olivia in Virginia Woolfs' *A Room of Ones' Own* and the sisterhood formed to resist marriage expectation in China. Apart from marriage resistance, the concept of lesbian continuum also serves to fight against “male tyranny”, which is imposing heterosexuality as the compulsory way of life.

Similarly, Yuri also focuses on female intimacy and the inner self of women, especially their emotional ties. Yuri culture admires and worships female bonding that is built on shared experiences, intimacy, and understanding of each other. Although it may be an unintended result that the Yuri genre is able to resist male tyranny, it is true that Yuri fans are seeking forms of relationship other than heterosexuality.

2.7 - Female gaze

Mulvey proposed in *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema* (1989) the theory of female gaze, as a counterpart to male gaze. Gammam and Marshment (1989) further explained that female gaze is a subversion of the pleasure in male gaze. In other words, female is the subject in the gaze and male is the object. Female gaze is a resistance to the phallogentric nature of presenting female characters as the object, replacing them with males instead, and is useful as an alternative interpretation to the heterosexual centered

culture. For example, Hemmann (2013) used female gaze to analyze Japanese literature and BL works.

The meaning of pleasure also differs among audience, as different people have a different framework when viewing the text (Star, 1992; Brooks, 2002). Star (1992) illustrated this with how lesbians and heterosexual females have different interpretations when viewing telerugby. Similarly, lesbians and alternative audiences would also have different viewpoints regarding female gaze. Yuri culture has an alternative interpretation of female intimacy that is different from that of a heterosexual, and in the Yuri culture version of female gaze, female is both the subject and the object. Rather than objectification of the opposed sex, Yuri culture attempts to reclaim the subjectivity of female by putting female at the focal point, capturing the sentimental flow within female intimacy, and having females as the spectator of the texts. Another example is Gallagher's (1999) work on viewing the World War through female gaze, in which she also mentioned that having a female subject and female readers is useful for constructing female subjectivity.

2.8 - Japanese subculture studies

Over the past 20 years, academic research on Japanese sub-culture mainly focus on BL, the complementary genre to Yuri. These studies straddle various disciplines, including literature, gender, cultural, queer, and even interdisciplinary studies (e.g., Isola, 2010; Levi, McHarry, & Pagliassotti, 2010; McLelland, et al., 2015). Most of the findings pointed to BL culture as fantasies for *fujoshi* - its female fandom. For example, Matsui (1993) concluded BL culture as a female identity construction process under the female fantasies and oppression of patriarchal society. Galbraith (2011) did an ethnography

study on *fujoshi* and expanded Fujimoto's (1998) argument on the escapism fantasies among *fujoshi*.

Yuri only gained the attention of the academic community recently, as such, there is only limited literature on Yuri culture. Among these, Maser (2013) analyzed Yuri culture in Japan through text analysis, the production of Yuri manga, and the fandom in Japan, and established Yuri as a discursive culture that is produced by its readers rather than Yuri text creators. In Taiwan, Yang (2012) investigated how the Japanese Yuri culture was absorbed into the Taiwan ACG culture and its ensuing development using the *Yamibo* forum and Chinese publication of Yuri texts. She also analyzed the female subjectivity in Yuri animation from a text analysis approach. While these studies provided valuable information on the Yuri community, both of them employed text analysis and focused on the production of Yuri manga. It is clear that a research gap exists that can be filled with an in-depth investigation on the Yuri fans community and their sexuality in the discourse of queer or gender studies.

To this end, the current thesis will attempt to bridge the gap between Yuri culture and sexuality studies and encourage discussion on the role of sex in sexuality studies. Another goal for this study is to formulate how Yuri culture would interact and contribute to the existing knowledge in queer and sexuality studies. Hence, the following research questions are proposed:

- (1) How does the Yuri sub-culture challenge the current understanding of sexual intimacy/relationship, in particular, the role of sexual desire in an intimate romantic relationship?
- (2) What are the implications of Yuri fans' sexual subjectivity for homonormativity and heteronormativity?

Recall from previous discussion that the establishment of sexuality is based on individual's sexual desire. However, Yuri fans do not consider sex as a priority, so it is inaccurate to define their sexuality by their sexual desire. The first research question will reveal how Yuri challenges the sexual-centered nature of sexuality studies. At the same time, it is difficult to describe the sexual identity of Yuri fans, and thus, it is inappropriate to use the phrase "come out of the closet" on them. The second research question will investigate how the subjectivity of Yuri fans is possible, especially in challenging the heteronormativity and homonormativity in gender studies.

Chapter 3 – Methodology : Online ethnography

3.1 - Entering the field

The current study involves an investigation of the behavior of a particular cultural sub-group and its values, beliefs, and internal issues, making online ethnography a suitable method to be adopted (Creswell, 2012). As can be deduced from its namesake, online ethnography focuses on studying virtual communities using methods of traditional ethnography, from which it was derived. It is a qualitative approach in which behaviors or activities of a group or culture are collected and depicted over a period of time. The aim of this research is to study the culture and attitudes among Chinese Yuri fans. To this end, since the roots of the Yuri fandom in Chinese communities can be traced back to the largest Yuri forum, the *Yamibo* forum, it would be best to adopt the online ethnography method to study the *Yamibo* forum.

Skageby (2010) described the stages of applying the online ethnography method. In the first stage, the researcher should consider entering the targeted field, for instance, by engaging themselves in the studying group and participating in the activities in the communities. The investigator of the current study has been a member of the *Yamibo* forum for 10 years and has participated in several activities organized by the forum. Such experience has provided the investigator with an identity and allowed the investigator to develop a close relationship for easier approach to the studying community.

The next stage is to consider researcher participation and whether to take a hidden or

open approach. The advantage of researcher participation is that the culture and values of the targeted group can be better captured. For the current study, since the investigator is a veteran member of *Yamibo*, participation of the researcher in the targeted community is inevitable. The next step is to determine the approach to be used for researcher participation, which can be either the hidden approach, in which all observations and participation are conducted with the researcher disguised as an undercover, or the open approach, which is the opposite (Skageby, 2010). The choice will depend on whether the identity of being a researcher, if exposed, would affect the quality of responses collected, and whether the trust between the researcher and interviewees would be hampered, since questions asked may involve the personal life of interviewees (Skageby, 2010). Since there is no conflict of interest between the current investigator and Yuri fans, the open approach was adopted.

The data collection process in online ethnography consists of three main parts, namely, document collection, online observation, and online interview. Document collection involves collecting useful interactions on the internet, such as forum discussion archives. Relevant blogs or discussions that might contribute to the research questions would then be saved and recorded. Online observation includes internet use and involvement via online techniques such as instant messaging and member profile (Skageby, 2010). Any possible discussions or threads that may reveal relationship structures or cultural hierarchies would be recorded. Finally, online interview is also an important source of information for answering the research questions. Generally, direct instant interview would be conducted via communication technology such as Skype or QQ.

When analyzing the data collected, the grounded theory approach is adopted (Glaser

and Strauss, 1967). The central theme of the grounded theory approach is “let the data speak”. Grounded theory study, as contended by Strauss and Corbin (1998), involves coding of the data and the concept development of the data afterwards. This is achieved by a constant comparison within the data and searching for emerging concepts from the data for the formation of a theory. After classifying and conceptual ordering of the data collected, a theory will be discovered and conceptualized from the data. During the process, the sampling of data is done according to the theoretical saturation during the data collection (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

3.2 - Feminist standpoint theory

Another theory applied in the current study is the feminist standpoint theory. This theory is related to the politics in the production of knowledge, and questions whether scientific knowledge can be produced from a feminist standpoint. While the objectivity of scientific knowledge has long been emphasized, the normative features of “scientific knowledge” have mostly been ignored (Harding, 2004). Specifically, as stated by Haraway (1988), knowledge is always socially situated. As such, the claim that scientific knowledge is objective and neutral has in fact never been achieved (Harding, 2004). However, this kind of claim has put the oppressed and minority groups and the knowledge of they produced into systematic ignorance.

One of the aims of the feminist standpoint theory is to empower the oppressed group, for example, women, by raising the awareness and importance of the knowledge produced them, so that the oppressed group will have the subjectivity in knowledge. In practice, since knowledge is socially constructed, the distinct position of the oppressed group has in fact put them in an advantaged position in producing their unique

knowledge. For example, the female experience has a significant meaning in feminist knowledge production, and therefore, women's experience should be emphasized when producing such knowledge. Of course, men could also contribute to feminist knowledge from their unique perspective and from their specific social situation (Harding, 2004). This shows that the production of knowledge has its precondition. There are always interests and values involved in the production of knowledge, yet it does not reduce the empirical quality of those knowledge (Harding, 2004). To understand the meaning of one subject, one has to be situated in the particular context and culture it belongs to.

As a minority culture group, the unique experience of Yuri fans themselves are significant in the production of homosexuality knowledge and the understanding of Yuri love should be situated under their specific context and culture, as stipulated by the feminist standpoint theory. By applying this theory, the sexual identity of Yuri fans and their implication of subjectivity in challenging heteronormativity and homonormativity could be further investigated.

3.3 - Data collection

3.3.1 - Virtual community and Yamibo forum

A virtual community refers to a social segregation on the internet in which there is enough people engaging public discussion for a period and developing bonding and relationship (Rheingold,1993). Although virtual communities are based online, they are not that "virtual", as they are in fact real communities with real people and real experience (Kozinets, 2010). Hence, there are consequential effects to many aspects of

users' behavior, since they are social groups that actually exist in reality (Kozinets, 1998).

The development of the Chinese Yuri fandom has been accompanied by the growth of virtual communities, with the formation of Yuri forums and different BBS¹⁰ that gathered different people with same interest. A main characteristic of online forums, which nurtured Yuri culture in the Chinese content, is that it allows interaction and sharing of ideas and comments among different members via the different threads and replies posted under specific boards. Discussions and posts concerning love values, attitudes, and beliefs may provide inspirations to members, which may further reshape their attitudes and beliefs. Such dynamic process resulted in the formation of a sub-culture among Chinese Yuri fandom.

Yuri fans have developed their own culture under the influence of Japanese animation, with the fantasy and projection of pure love and interactions among themselves. Online forums, being a major medium for exchange of ideas and feelings among Yuri fans, provide valuable information for capturing the culture of Yuri fans and their values.

As mentioned previously, several Yuri forums and BBS were developed along with the rise in Yuri fandom. These include the *Yamibo* forum, Strawberry Club forum¹¹, and *Baihe* Bar¹², all of which are based in China. Among those, *Yamibo* forum has the longest history, enjoys the highest popularity, and boasts the largest number of posts. Established in 2004¹³, there are currently approximately 252,000 registered members

¹⁰ BBS - Bulletin Board System

¹¹ Strawberry Club forum - 草莓社論壇

¹² *Baihe* Bar - 百合貼吧, a discussion board under the online communication platform offered by *baidu tieba*

¹³ *Yamibo* forum started operation in November 2004.

and 556 million posts¹⁴ on *Yamibo*. Another popular source of Yuri information was the Strawberry Club Forum, which was formed in 2006 but closed in 2016. Finally, *Baihe* Bar has about 180 million posts and 200,000 subscribers. However, different from traditional forums, which require members to answer qualification questions before registration, there is no restriction for becoming a member of *Baihe* Bar. Posts are also not well-censored, leading to many of them not involving discussions and infused with meaningless responses. Most importantly, members of *Baihe* Bar are unable to develop a strong sense of community and solidarity as seen on *Yamibo*. Among Yuri fans, the recognition of being a 300 member¹⁵ automatically leads to the building of a special bonding that would enhance each other's intimacy. This phenomenon will be further discussed in Chapter 5. Hence, the *Yamibo* forum was selected as the study field for this thesis, based on its significance among Yuri fans as observed by the investigator.

Apart from the forums and BBS based in Mainland China, there are also other discussion boards where Yuri fans would visit. Yang (2012) introduced three other online forums that are frequently visited by Taiwan Yuri fans, namely, the "Yuri" sub-board under Komica2, an anonymous imageboard website, the "GL" board of PTT Bulletin Board System¹⁶, the largest BBS in Taiwan, and the "Heaven of Yuri" board of Bahamut BBS¹⁷. However, they are not active as *Yamibo* forum is, as measured by the number of new posts made daily. In general, "Yuri" board, "GL" board, and "Heaven of Yuri" board only see ten to twelve new posts every day, while hundreds of posts are made daily on *Yamibo* (Yang, 2012).

¹⁴ Figure as at May 2017.

¹⁵ 300 member – another name for *Yamibo* forum member.

¹⁶ PTT Bulletin Board System - 批踢踢實業坊

¹⁷ "Heaven of Yuri" board of Bahamut BBS – 百合天國, 巴哈姆特討論區

Yamibo forum, hence, is the best field for studying Chinese Yuri fans, not only because of its popularity among Yuri fans, but also the solidarity among Yuri readers it created. More importantly, there are many in-depth discussion and critiques on Yuri fans' sexuality, love values, and beliefs on *Yamibo*, making it the place for Chinese Yuri fans to develop their culture and concepts of Yuri.

3.3.2 - Data collection: Online Interviews

Online interview was the major data collection method in this research. Specifically, semi-structured interviews were carried out. In a semi-structured interview, there is not a rigid set of questions, but only a list of required information the researcher expects to obtain. Rephrasing of the questions is needed and it allows the interviewee space for interpreting their own definition and their own understanding to specific words (Denzin, 1973).

When reviewing the feminist standpoint theory, Harding (2004) mentioned the epistemic privilege in knowledge production, which causes another form of oppression on the voices of minorities. As such, and according to Haraway (1988), knowledge is situated, and if we accept that absolute objective knowledge is impossible (Harding, 2004), the unique experience of Yuri fans could contribute to the knowledge of Yuri culture from their particular standpoint. Thus, a qualitative approach with snowball sampling is selected. Besides, it has also been adequately indicated that in a qualitative interview, richness and saturation of information outweigh representativeness and randomness of a sample (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008). On the other hand, since the whole population of Yuri fans is still unknown, the random

sampling method is infeasible for this research.

For the reasons stated above, a snowball sampling method was adopted. In the end, 18 active female Yuri fans on the *Yamibo* forum were recruited. It should be noted that these interviewees and the interview data presented in this study by no means represent the whole population of the Yuri community. Instead, the current study is an attempt to uncover the unique experience of the interviewees from their particular standpoint as a Yuri fan.

Following the standard procedure for the snowball sampling process, I took advantage of my years of experience as a Yuri fan and my familiarity with the Yuri community and recruited my close friend, who is also an experienced Yuri fan, as the first interviewee. I also recruited some interviewees from a group of Yuri fans with whom I am well-acquainted. These are mostly veteran *Yamibo* forum members who were willing to be interviewed and ready to provide me with their thoughts and opinions. The next step was to invite these interviewees to recommend other potential interviewees. Fortunately, some of them voluntarily suggested names of people who might be able to provide useful information for the current research.

The identity of the interviewees was hidden behind their nickname, with only limited amount of personal information recorded for the purpose of analysis. These include age, places they lived in, family relationship, sexual orientation, how long they had been a member of *Yamibo*, and whether they had love experience.

The questions in the interview were divided in three categories:

Nature of Yuri: What is your definition of Yuri? Why does Yuri attract you? How has

Yuri influence your sexuality? etc.

Sexual identity and lesbianism: Would you consider your sexuality as lesbian? What is your view on Tomboy or the *T/P* classification in mainstream lesbian culture? etc.

Love value: What is your expected mode of romantic relationship? What is the role of sex in a relationship? What kind of characteristics do you find attractive on a female? What is your ideal type of partner? etc.

As will be seen in the analysis of the interview data, some of the interviewees were more frequently quoted. It is because they were more willing to provide a detailed account when answering the interview questions. This is not to say that the other interviewees did not give valuable information. It might be the case that they revealed similar thoughts but less elaborate. With the aim of obtaining a more detailed picture of Yuri culture and presenting the concept more clearly, those giving a more detailed description were preferentially quoted.

3.3.3 - Data collection: *Yamibo* forum

As described previously, there are over 556 million posts and 252,000 members on the *Yamibo* forum. Originally, there were 16 discussion boards, including “Administration Board”, “Anime Discussion Board”, and “General Discussion Board”¹⁸. After a reform in October 2015, the 16 boards were restructured into 9 boards. Sub-discussion boards, such as “Music and Movies Board”, “Cosplay Board”, and “3D –Idols Board”¹⁹ were

¹⁸ “Administration Board”, “Anime Discussion Board” and “General Discussion Board” –管理版, 討論區, 灌水區

¹⁹ “Music and Movies Board” and “3D –Idols Board”- 音樂影視區, 三次元偶像區

merged into the “General Discussion Board”, which was renamed “The Sea” board²⁰ in order to boost popularity of minority topics.

The most popular and hit boards on the *Yamibo* forum are the “Gallery Board”, “Literature Board”²¹, and “General Discussion Board”, each with over hundreds of new threads updated on a daily basis. “Gallery Board” is the place where members share graphics of their favorite or interested Yuri animations. The latest Yuri manga from Japan and their translated Chinese version, done by a team of voluntary members, can also be found. “Literature Board” includes thousands of fanfictions or original Yuri fictions.

“General Discussion Board” includes posts in which members share their personal life, discussions on intimate relationships, and sharing of certain Yuri works. Hot social or political issues (mainly about mainland China) or social issues concerning female rights or LGBT rights are also being discussed. Moreover, social activities, such as regional gatherings, seeking potential partner, searching for members with similar interests, seeking relationship consulting are also found on the “General Discussion Board”. Since the “General Discussion Board” includes topics concerning Yuri fans’ values or beliefs, online data collection was mainly focused on this board.

Here is a summary for the data collection on forum threads.

²⁰ “The Sea” board” - 海域

²¹ ”Gallery Board”, “Literature Board” - 貼圖區, 文學區

Field: *Yamibo* Forum

Targeted board: “General Discussion Board” (灌水區/海域)

Time Frame: 2016 and before, until saturation of information

Targeted threads and posts: Discussions in which Yuri fans revealed their attitude towards romantic love and sexuality, and their identity identification would be included. Threads with key words such as “reality”, “sexuality”, “Yuri”, “Les”, “T”²², “Love”, and “sex” would be the focus of investigation and found via the forum search engine.

The data collection process included a close reading of forum threads over the years backwards in time from 2016. The initial filter produced 80 threads, from which 40 were selected as the target threads. Screen capturing and coding of significant information was done using NVivo. From the close reading of the threads, it was found that the discussions, which mostly concerned Yuri fans’ values about love, sexual identity, and views on nature of Yuri, have much in common with the interview data. Since the data from threads were more fragmented compared to the more detailed and well-explicated interview data, the latter was adopted as the main target for analysis, with data collected from the threads as supplement. To be specific, some topics that were not covered in interviews, such as whether Yuri fans had thought about dying alone, appeared in forum threads, and they were collected for further analysis.

Participant observation was also involved in the data collection process. Throughout the research, I visited the *Yamibo* forum once a week to chat online with the Yuri community. Attention was dedicated to discussions on specific topics, such as values about love, lesbian, and marriage, and field notes were written after consent was obtained from the participants. I also participated in the gathering activities and Yuri

²² T – Tomboy, abbreviation for tomboy.

culture events organized by Yuri fans in Shanghai. During the gathering activities, I made friend with Yuri fans in Shanghai and gained access to potential interviewees through them.

Since I have been a member of the Yuri community for ten years, in order to keep a distance from the data and minimize bias, I refrained from visiting the *Yamibo* forum for leisure purpose and consistently discussed with my supervisors on my interpretation of data provided by informants. My supervisors helped a lot in providing new insights on the information provided by the interviewees and stimulated me to think in different directions. Besides, I also discussed my interpretation and understanding on data with my good friend, Alla, a recently-graduated postgraduate student. As an outsider to the Yuri community, she also provided me with a different insight on the interpretation of data, which helped me to further analyze the interviews in an objective way.

3.3.4 - Saturation of information

The level of saturation of information was determined from the repetitiveness of the collected data and richness of the content (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2008). In the current research, by the 18th interview, it was found that data collected started to overlap with previous interviews with few new insight gained from the data. Moreover, the richness of the data collected was ample for the data analysis process. So the number of interviews was capped at 18. On the other hand, in the forum thread collection process, threads were studied backwards from 2016. A quick search of threads before 2010 returned results indicating a recurrence of discussion topics. It was therefore determined that the thread collection has reached its saturation, and thus, most attention was dedicated to threads between 2016 and 2010.

Chapter 4 - Nature of Yuri

Yuri is usually understood as a sub-genre in ACG. However, it is also used to describe relationships, sexuality, sense of aesthetics, culture, and interaction. The following section provides a definition for different Yuri-related terms in this thesis. A review of literature on sexuality and queer study reveals that Yuri is absent from the discussion on sexuality and devoid of visibility. However, as indicated in Ainley's work (1995) on lesbian identity, sexuality exists whenever there is a language to describe oneself. In other words, having a language to describe oneself offers the agency for the visibility of sexuality. Through different discourses on the content of Yuri, this sub-culture could find its place in the study of gender and sexuality. The current chapter attempts to contribute to the visibility of Yuri by analyzing its nature through three questions: "What Yuri is not?" "What exactly is Yuri?" and "What respondents find attractive in Yuri?" Through understanding the nature of Yuri, Yuri's relationship with heteronormativity and how the Yuri sub-culture challenges the existing understanding of the role of sex in romantic relationship can be examined.

4.1 - Defining Yuri-related Terms

The following table shows the Yuri-related terms used in thesis. This table could help in understanding the language and specialized wordings used in Yuri culture and provide definition to special terminology created in this thesis in order to understand Yuri culture.

Table 1: Yuri related Terms

Yuri genre	Animation, manga, fanfiction, and TV dramas that involve Yuri relationship between two females, as well as the derived Yuri audience culture.
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Yuri love/affection	The feeling of liking and care for each other, including acts being done for each other (i.e., sacrifices) between two females.
Yuri relationship	The relationship between two females that is more than friendship and fits the interpretation or definition of Yuri fans.
Yuri intimacy	The interpersonal relationship between two females that is very close and may or may not involve sex.
Yuri interaction	Female interaction that involves care more than friendship. It can be love or hate towards enemies or resonance in mind.
Yuri romance	The atmosphere of ambiguity between two females.
Yuri fans	Yuri readers passionate about Yuri texts.
Yuricon	(百合控) A Japanese term for Yuri fans.
Yuri readers	People who read Yuri texts.
Yuri community	The social group of Yuri fans characterized by their Yuri community culture.
Spiritual desire	Strong wish for spiritual connection in a relationship.
Yuri reading	To have an alternate interpretation on female characters in the original text.
Yuri text	Animation, manga, fanfiction, TV dramas, and literature that involve Yuri relationship.
Yuri fanfiction	Fan-created fiction that adopted the characters and setting from original Yuri story. Yuri romance is involved.
Yuri fanfiction writer	Author (usually Yuri fans) who writes Yuri fanfiction

4.2 - What Yuri is not?

4.2.1 - Yuri vs Lesbian

Since the Yuri genre involves the intimate relationship between females, some people may associate it with lesbian relationship. However, Yuri is not totally identical with lesbianism and it is inappropriate to directly refer to Yuri as lesbianism. As underscored in Maser's (2013) research, the social position and political discourse related to lesbianism and Yuri are slightly different. Specifically, there are overlapping between the two sexualities, yet they belong to different categories. For example, while they are both non-heterosexual relationships, Yuri does not necessarily include sexual relationship. As will be explained by two experienced Yuri fans, Canton and Ms Green, Yuri is a form of love while lesbian is a social identity within a lesbian community.

Yuri is a form of love while lesbian is an identity.

Canton

(Age 27, homosexual, forum member)

Yuri, in my opinion, is a kind of female intimacy that goes beyond friendship, while lesbian is the name of a sexual-minority community in which girls love girls. The former is a relationship, the latter refers to a community.

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

Thus it can be seen that Yuri is not about sexual desire. Rather, it is a relationship on its own. As such, Yuri should not be solely defined as an erotic lesbian relationship, and, as discussed in literature review section, since sexuality is a sexual identity that is

built upon sexual desire, the current definition of sexuality cannot be applied on Yuri.

4.2.2 - Yuri vs GL

Yuri and GL have nearly the same meaning in Japanese anime culture (Yang, 2012), yet these terms are interpreted differently in the Chinese fans community, who classifies them according to the intensity of female intimacy based on different factors, like sex. Thus, various interpretations exist on the definition of Yuri as well as the differences between Yuri and GL, as Yuri fans have their own understanding of Yuri and its relationship with GL, making Yuri a discursive culture that relies on interpretation of the audience.

The differentiation between Yuri and GL in the Chinese context, according to information from veteran forum members, began in 2008 with the popularity of *Mariasama ga miteru*²³. At that time, for the convenience of Yuri fanfiction writers on the forum,²⁴ and to cater to the different tastes of Yuri fans, Yuri fictions with sexual relationship were classified as GL and those that involved Platonic-type spiritual intimacy were considered Yuri. In addition, considering homosexual relationship being a rather sensitive topic in China back then, the terms Yuri and GL were employed as a shield to cover up homosexual fictions.

Yuki, an experienced Yuri fan, agreed that the origin and the popularity of using the terms Yuri and GL in the Chinese context are related to the sensitivity in China towards homosexual relationship. She further revealed that Yuri and GL were used as tags for convenience in filtering and searching in fanfiction board. Usually, authors of Yuri

²³ A famous Japanese Yuri animation

²⁴ *Yamibo* forum has quite a lot writers who create original Yuri story or write fanfiction.

fictions would tag the GL label on texts that include sexual relationship.

In the early stage of the “Yamibo” forum, a lot of fans used Yuri to describe the “purer” type – with no sex scene and no direct mention of “in a relationship” or “romantic love” - of female intimacy. GL, on the other hand, was used to indicate texts or fanfictions with romantic relationship and actual sexual relationship. Some authors even added the “GL” tag to indicate the presence of sex scenes. And then such usage gradually caused those who originally had no idea about the terms to distinguish between Yuri and GL like other forum users.

From its beginnings, Yuri was more of a general term for “female intimacy that is more than friendship”. From my observation, the expansion, or increasing ambiguity, of its definition can be related to the need for lesbian fiction to be kept in a low profile or framed as stories on “sworn sisterhood” (義姐妹關係).

Yuki

(Age 23, homosexual, forum member)

By clarifying the differences between Yuri and GL, the nature of Yuri genre could be explicated. Specifically, based on the responses of the interviewees, it can be seen that there is a broad definition and a narrow definition for Yuri. For example, Alice, a *Yamibo* forum moderator, held a broader definition of Yuri. She thought that GL, which involves sexual relationship, and Yuri, which does not involve sexual relationship, can both be included in the Yuri genre. She also echoed with Yuki that Yuri and GL is

distinguished for the purpose of searching and filtering for different kinds of Yuri fanfiction and animation, as they serve as labels to enable fans to search for sub-genres of girl-girl texts.

*I think Yuri includes those with sexual relationship (GL) and those without (Yuri). They are distinguished just for convenience in searching and filtering. Purely Platonic (relationships) are Yuri and those related to 18X²⁵ would be GL... **It is just one genre with different forms.** I don't understand why some people are so keen on setting them apart. I don't think Yuri with sexual relationship is impure. (Emphasis added)*

Alice

(Age 30, bisexual, forum moderator)

Compared to Alice, who differentiated between Yuri and GL by whether sex is involved, Fisher, an experienced Yuri fan, held a narrow view of Yuri by defining it through romantic relationship. In her view, Yuri is about spiritual resonance rather than romantic love. As soon as there is indication of romantic love, it would become GL.

Fisher: *Well I view Yuri and GL as two different entities.*

...well... to be specific, Yuri does not involve romantic love but GL is romantic love.

Researcher: **No romantic love for Yuri?**

Fisher: *Yes, I think that Yuri indicates a high degree of resonance in the spiritual channels of two people, but it is not romantic love.*

This kind of distinction is in fact really idealistic, and it is hard to

²⁵ 18 age or above –which indicates include sex scene

describe and define in real life.

Have you watched NANA? I always think that Nana Osaki and Nana Komatsu form the perfect example of Yuri.

Researcher: So you consider this an important point for Yuri? What about a couple who have a high degree of resonance spiritually? Do you consider their relationship as Yuri?

Fisher: No, as soon as there is romantic love, then it is GL.

It is just my personal definition, but seemingly it is not in line with the general understanding of Yuri.

Fisher

(Age 34, homosexual, forum member)

Whether “love” exists within a female relationship is open to the interpretation of different Yuri fans, however, as Yuki pointed out, “love” is the most important component in Yuri. Yuki held a more inclusive and broader sense of interpretation of Yuri, as her definition also included GL, which defined by a clear romantic relationship as established between two women. This broader interpretation of Yuri echoed with the definition of Alice, though she differentiated between GL and Yuri by the presence of sexual relationship rather than romantic love.

I think Yuri and GL are really close to being synonyms. If you really have to, you can put GL (in which there is a clear romantic relationship between females) under the Yuri genre.

*To be honest... it is very easy to understand GL (abbreviation for girl's love), which literally indicates love between girls... In principle, regardless of the presence of a sexual relationship, **as long as they***

both admitted that this is “love”, it should be classified as GL. On the contrary, even if there is clear physical relationship between the two, as long as there is no “love”, it is hard to call it GL.

For me, Yuri is a very broad and encompassing word. It can represent a type of people, and also a kind of relationship. As long as it is between two females, as long as it is binding and bonding, then regardless of how it is manifested, whether it is clear, how long it can be maintained, and the final result, I would call it Yuri. (Emphasis added)

Yuki

(Age 23, homosexual, forum member)

Compared to Fisher, who believed that a distinctive difference between Yuri and GL is that Yuri does not involve a clear romantic relationship, Yuki believed that “love” is a key determinant for Yuri. The meaning of “love” also differs between Fisher and Yuki, as the latter thought that “love” needs not be clearly written in, but could be implied from, the context of the text, for example, whether there are bonding or intimate connection between the two female characters. Yuki’s interpretation of “love” ranged from spiritual resonance to romantic relationship.

Like Yuki and Alice, Mandy also believed in a broader definition for Yuri. As one of the founders of the *Yamibo* forum, she recalled that the Yuri and GL dispute started around 2008 and stemmed from the different interpretations of Yuri and GL held by Yuri fans. Mandy herself agreed that Yuri is equivalent to GL and romantic love among females.

Well... from my personal view and observation, the “fighting” between GL and Yuri started around 2008 on “Yamibo”... Members defined Yuri and GL based on their own understanding, and for sure, different people would view GL and Yuri differently. I don't understand what's there to argue about. They are just too many people with too much free time... For me, Yuri equals to GL and “romantic love between females”... When “Maria sama ga miteiru” was a hit, some people thought that Yuri equals to “more than friendship but not quite lovers”... But anyway, in my definition, Yuri equals to GL and “romantic love between females”, regardless of whether there is sexual relationship.

Mandy

(N.A., heterosexual, founder of “Yamibo” forum)

As the discussion and argument on the definition of Yuri and GL continued on the *Yamibo* forum, some Yuri fans finally found that distinguishing between GL and Yuri would be an attempt in vain, and thus they opted not to clarify them.

I think it is not necessary to distinguish the two or assert a clear definition after you've read so many discussions and Yuri text.

Evan

(Age 32, heterosexual, Yuri fanfiction writer)

As observed from the different discourses on the definition of Yuri and GL, the interpretation of Yuri varies among its fans, showing that Yuri is a discursive culture built on the interpretation of fans. However, from the definitions of Yuri given by the

interviewees, it can be concluded that Yuri is an encompassing genre that includes GL, as indicated in Figure 2. Specifically, the Yuri genre encompasses both GL and a narrow definition of Yuri, which represents a spiritual intimacy that is close to romantic love.

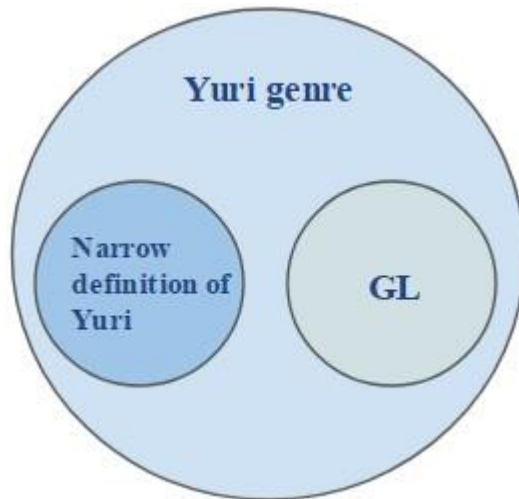


Figure 2 : Relationship of Yuri genre with GL and narrow definition of Yuri

On the other hand, the different discourses of what Yuri is not offer the subjectivity to the Yuri community when challenging the role of sexual desire in sexuality and the heteronormality in mainstream love story, which will be explained in the following sections. Besides, the varying definitions of the nature of Yuri and how Yuri should be distinguished from GL stemmed from the different interpretations by Yuri fans. Those who hold a broad definition of Yuri expect Yuri to be an inclusive genre that is absent from hostility and exclusiveness towards those who are different from them. On the other hand, Yuri fans who hold a narrow definition of Yuri may have a higher standard on romantic relationship. This may be due to the fact that Yuri is one of the projections of their ideal love. In this case, Yuri fans who have a higher expectation on ideal love would possibly hold the narrow definition.

4.2.3 - Relationship with sex

Although Yuri fans highlight the importance of the spiritual connection between females, it does not imply that they are obsessed with a platonic relationship that is devoid of a sexual relationship. In fact, Yuri fans not only do not resist sex scenes, they in fact enjoy and even yearn for them. It is just that they have a higher standard for the kind of sex scenes that appear in a Yuri story. This is because the elements the fans want to underscore are the love, the bonding, and the strong intimacy and connection, all of which are not solely defined by sexual relationship. There is a popular saying among Yuri fans that goes “not (depicting) Yuri for the purpose of Yuri” or “not (depicting) sex scenes for sex scenes”. For fans, sex scenes should serve the purpose of motivation in the plot. As such, sex scenes that are depicted only as an attempt to gratify sexual desire are not welcome among Yuri fans. For example, titles like *A Kiss for the Petals*²⁶ and *Koihime Musō: Doki Otome Darake no Sangokushi Engi*²⁷, which claimed to be “Yuri” animation or game but only portrayed sexual scenes of female characters without any romantic foundation are, in fact, consuming the label of Yuri without creating a good story. Victoria, a former forum moderator, explained how she emphasized on the beauty that found in Yuri intimacy that is not solely built upon sex.

The emotional or affection demand of male and female are different.

For woman, it is more than physical desire. I think the essence of Yuri is its beauty on the spiritual side. I am not saying that there should not be sex, but the significance is built upon the sense of

²⁶ *A Kiss for the Petals* (その花びらにくちづけを) is a Japanese adult Yuri visual novel series which was also adapted into a PC game. It is a story about a romantic relationship between girls in a high school, with a large amount of sexual scenes depicted.

²⁷ *Koihime Musō: Doki Otome Darake no Sangokushi Engi* (恋姫無双～ドキッ 乙女だらけの三国志演義) – a series of Japanese adult video games and novel based on the classic “Romance of Three Kingdoms”, but with all the male historical characters (like Cao-Cao 曹操) depicted as female. This story is about their adventures and the ambiguous interactions between the female heroines.

aesthetics. (Emphasis added)

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

Edward, a male Yuri fan, mentioned that for Yuri games, he cared more about whether the plot is close to reality than whether there are sex scenes. Those using sex scenes as selling point did not attract him, and he insisted that it is meaningless to read text that claimed to be Yuri but in fact was void of its spirit. On the other hand, Orange, a married Yuri fan, pointed out that if the story plot is good enough and there is adequate romantic portrayal of two female characters, female Yuri fans would not mind watching a nude or intimate shot.

*Societal background should also be considered in the plot. Therefore, the game gives me a feeling that it is not "Yuri for the sake of Yuri", but "Yuri for the sake of life". As an adult PC game, I think that I am attracted to it for **not using its sex scenes as selling point.** (Emphasis added)*

My view is that Yuri creations should not be totally detached from reality. Even if I'm just playing (a Yuri PC game) for fun, I should still be able to gain something from it. It is meaningless to create Yuri for the sake of Yuri.

Edward

(Age 27, heterosexual, Yuri fanfiction writer)

Orange: *We don't mind if there is no nude or intimate shots. But if the **emotion and affection of the two characters are well-depicted** and the affection part of the story line well-developed, suitable amount of **intimate actions** is acceptable. (Emphasis added)*

Researcher: *So you also have expectations for sex scenes being well-connected with the plot?*

Orange: *Of course, sex scenes must be well-connected with the plot! I would love to see a sex scene that comes naturally.*

Orange

(Age 36, married heterosexual, forum member)

Yuri fans have a high standard for sex scenes and refuse those that are there to solely gratify sexual desire. Sexual desire is decentralized and the quality of story highlighted as the purpose and essence of a plot or story. Such view challenges the phallus culture in mainstream romantic stories, namely, once it is about relationship, it has to be related to sex. Yuri fans believe that there are other elements that should be valued in a relationship.

4.2.4 - Possession of female body

Concerning the female body, mainstream pop culture has long been dominated by male's centralism, which establishes that romantic relationship has to be accompanied by sexual relationship. For example, Laura Mulvey (1989) discussed in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* about the domination of male gaze in mainstream movies and the exploitation of women in order to gratify male's scopophilia. In this

sense, the possession of a female is always done through her body – more specifically, by penetrating her body (sexual behavior).

The Yuri genre opens a door for other ways of interaction other than active-passive relationship, namely, a more diverse and equal interaction. It challenges the mainstream heterosexual hierarchy through different interpretation and portrayals of female interaction, and assigns a new meaning to female interaction that is against the heterosexual gender norm. For example, when discussing the differences between Yuri and heterosexual love story, Victoria and Ms Green, both veteran member of the *Yamibo* forum, made a reference to *Kannazuki no Miko*, a popular Yuri animation. The story revolved around a love triangle between the two female leads, Chikane and Himeko and between Himeko and the male lead, Ogami. Towards the middle of the story, Chikane raped Himeko. That rape scene was critical to the love-triangle relationship, as there was a clear indication of the love relationship between Chikane and Himeko. Thereafter, the story became inclined towards the romantic relationship between the female leads rather than that between Himeko and Ogami. However, both Ms Green and Victoria believed that the rape scene was added for the male audience. They also challenged the nature of the possession of female body and why it must be depicted through sexual behavior.

Ms Green: In Kannazuki no Miko, I liked the part about Himeko's impression of Chikane. It was Chikane who liked Himeko in the first place, but Himeko's impression of Chikane changed after she was being raped by Himeko. It is the part which I won't like it.²⁸

²⁸ The interview with Victoria was an exception. It was a face-to face interview in the presence of Ms Green. During the researcher's study trip to Shanghai for a Yuri manga event, she went to Hangzhou with Ms Green to visit Victoria. Victoria suggested that it would be better to have the interview done that night due to time constraints. Therefore, a face-to face interview was carried out with Victoria in the

Victoria: Yes, this kind of plot is more **male-orientated**. (Emphasis added)

Ms Green: Isn't there a saying that goes "**A female's way towards affection is through her vagina**"? (Emphasis added)

Victoria: This kind of notion is rather frowned upon by females. We all like this (Yuri) for its aesthetics... **Once it caters for the taste of males, it would become like "I have to fuck you in order to own your love"**. Although there are a lot of Yuri manga of this type on the "Yamibo" forum, but the real Yuri is built upon the sense of aesthetics. (Emphasis added)

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

Both Ms Green and Victoria understood the desire to possess the other party and the existence of jealousy in a relationship, but such feelings need not necessarily be expressed through sexual act. This is a characteristic of the Yuri culture, which challenges the phallus hegemony of viewing sex as a crucial component in a relationship and questions the nature of possession via female body. In Yuri, females do not possess each other through vagina, and sex is not the only indicator of romance relationship. Such view resists the sex-orientated culture by creating a new meaning for possession in a relationship specific to Yuri, namely, possession of female that is not built solely upon sex, but also spiritual and emotional connection. On this, Victoria

presence of Ms Green, who also provided a lot of precious information in the process.

said that offering a rose to a lady tells a very different love story from just having sex with her. She indicated that females have an aesthetic judgement different from that of male, and that, rather than sex, females focus more on personality and sentimental aspect.

***Ms Green:** Yes, it is a feeling of beauty throughout, and the affection between the two girls is pure. **You can be possessive, you can be jealous about her being with others,** it can be a one-to-one relationship, **but it does not necessarily have to be tied to sex.** It is all about spiritual interaction. (Emphasis added)*

***Victoria:** Being beautiful is the key. I think aesthetic judgment plays a crucial role. Males and females have different method of aesthetic judgment. The aesthetic judgment of male is: You have big breasts and then you are sexy, **while women judge from many perspectives: Sentimental or affection.** For instance, I give you a rose or I fuck you directly tell a different story... **Males judge beauty from a sexual desirability perspective.** Their notion of beauty is mainly **based on their sexual interest,** while **females mostly judge beauty from perspectives other than sex,** for instance, internal characteristics or emotional side. (Emphasis added)*

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

Yuki also expressed a similar view as Ms Green and Victoria. She thought that Yuri is about two females being irreplaceable to each other. She indicated that in mainstream

culture, the sense of irreplaceability can usually only be expressed as possessing the other party or sex.

The kind of Yuri that I like would be like ... they (the two females) would finally reach the point in which they are "particularly important and irreplaceable". This, in pop culture, would almost always be linked with possession and sex.

Yuki

(Age 23, homosexual, forum member)

The differences between the expression of possession of desire in male and female, as emphasized by Victoria, is due to the difference in aesthetic judgment between the genders. Victoria's view further proved Gidden's (1992) conclusion that females have a larger emphasis on emotional intimacy while men focus on physical sex, and Holland et al's (1998) suggestion that love and emotion are "female" and discussion of sexual practice are "male". However, such views seem to point to the essentialistic dualism debate.

Yuri opens the door to alternate ways of possession of woman. It is not necessarily tied to sex. Rather, it can be related to the internal characteristics of women in a female-only intimate relationship. With this, Yuri also breaks the male centralism by eliminating males from the subject role. Females are no longer "the other" in a Yuri story, the role of which is filled by males. In addition, the rigid stereotype of a superior and subordinate role in a heterosexual romance relationship is also challenged, since there is only one gender in the Yuri world, so both parties can be equal.

Without the presumptions of heterosexual romance stories, along with the small size of currently available Yuri texts (including dramas, movies, animation, and manga), Yuri can be helpful in the in-depth exploration of the various possibilities of different types of attraction and interaction between females.

4.3 - What exactly is Yuri?

4.3.1 - The discursive production of Yuri

There is no definite definition for Yuri, as it is an abstract concept produced and shaped by the different discourses and discussions of the qualities of Yuri. As such, the Yuri culture is discursively produced and is constituted by the varied yet overlapping interpretation of the Yuri text by fans (Maser, 2013). In other words, every Yuri fans may have a different interpretation of the definition of Yuri. For example, whether a certain female relationship in an animation or TV drama should be considered as Yuri will almost certainly lead to discussions on the *Yamibo* forum and among Yuri fans. Through the different discourses of “What Yuri is not” and “What Yuri is”, the subjectivity of Yuri culture could be established.

4.3.2 - Queer Reading/ Yuri reading

One of the features in Yuri culture is the queer reading/Yuri reading among fans, which has been underscored in Yang’s work (2012) as the main action that constitutes Yuri culture. Through interpretation and decoding, the reader can give a meaning to the relationships in the text. Yuki pointed to the importance of readers having a “Yuri eye” to discover the different possibilities of female intimacy from the text. In other words, even if the writer did not intend to write a female intimate story, Yuri fans could still find space for Yuri reading and re-interpret a new meaning for the female characters.

Most of the time, instead of worrying about whether there is real “Yuri” in a new animation or drama, as an audience, I care more about whether I can “imagine them (the female characters) being together, light a spark that belongs only to them, and develop a unique romantic relationship, all without disrupting the original

setting in the text. This is the so-called "Yuri eye"! As long as you can infuse everything with your imagination, who cares they (female characters) are just friends with only three lines of dialogue in the original story?

Yuki

(Age 23, homosexual, forum member)

As mentioned in previous section, Yuki also insisted that Yuri is distinguished by whether there is love and affection between the female characters. Such is also open to the interpretation of readers of the Yuri text.

*In summary, a Yuri story has to “**be between female**” and “**have love**”. But **readers can have different view** on what is “female” and “love”, just like every other thing in the world. So it is normal to have different understandings of Yuri. (Emphasis added)*

Yuki

(Age 23, homosexual, forum member)

4.3.3 - Spiritual Intimacy

The existence of spiritual connection between females is a recurrent theme among Chinese Yuri fans, as the interviewees all agreed that the resonance of mind and spirit, that is, spiritual intimacy, is at the core of Yuri. This is the element they consider important in a relationship between females and is the main cause that attracted them to Yuri.

Fisher: *Yes, I think that Yuri indicates a **high level of resonance on***

their spiritual side, but it is not romantic love. (Emphasis added)

Ms Green: *If you are analysing it based on feminine characteristics, you may find that most intimate relationship between females come from **the resonance of the spiritual and sentimental aspects.** (Emphasis added)*

Fisher

(Age 34, homosexual, forum member)

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

*I think Yuri is more of a **spiritual kind of relationship.** (Emphasis added)*

Yuki

(Age 23, homosexual, forum member)

*The kind of Yuri that attracts me is one with **resonance of their (female characters) mind.** (Emphasis added)*

Anson

(Age 31, homosexual, Yuri fanfiction writer)

Spiritual resonance in an intimate female relationship is an indication that both parties have complete mutual understanding and know each other well. Fisher considered spiritual bond as a connection and understanding so deep that the partners seem to have

become a part of each other. Apart from emotions or feelings, the resonance can also be a sync in values and ideals, such as an appreciation of each other's dream or ideal career path. As Fisher pointed out, the relationship does not necessarily have to be romantic. It can also be a life-long harmonious companionship. To that, Canton added that the spiritual connection can also lead to a sense of security that stems from the trust between partners.

*It is like they highly understand and support each other. It's like the traditional besties, but Yuri is a step further than besties... It is difficult to describe that feeling, it is like they are interacting with each other as if **"you are (spiritually) a part of me"**.*

Sometimes this kind of feeling would lead to romantic love, but more than often, it doesn't. It is more obvious if we use the friendship between men as a comparison - "high mountain and running water"²⁹ (高山流水), soulmates, the harmonious relationship between the king and his ministers (君臣) in ancient China. Transpose those onto females, and that would closely match my kind of Yuri.

***Resonance in aspects like careers, ideals, and dreams also counts as Yuri.** Romantic love is sometimes in sync, and sometimes out of sync, with them. It is **not necessary for soulmates to become a couple.** People with **different interests and hobbies can still have a life-long harmonious companionship.** This is a kind of resonance on another spiritual level. This is how I differentiate Yuri and GL.*

²⁹ -It is a set phrase in Chinese which means understanding and appreciative friends.

(Emphasis added)

Fisher

(Age 34, homosexual, forum member)

*The spiritual resonance is like a **sense of security you get from the other party**, and since you know each other well, she **would treasure your kindness**. (Emphasis added)*

Canton

(Age 27, homosexual, forum member)

The emphasis on resonance of spiritual aspects and a sense of security implies that Yuri is a projection of Yuri fans' view of ideal love. Correspondingly, spiritual intimacy is the element that Yuri fans considered important in a romantic or intimate relationship. Spiritual desire is usually being ignored under the prevailing phallus culture, as the phallic nature of sexuality is built upon individual's sexual desire and presuming that sexual desire is the crucial elements in romantic relationship. The Yuri community challenged this by highlighting the normally-ignored spiritual desire, as they yearned for stories that portray the resonance of spiritual aspects and high level understanding between females. There are also alternate forms of romantic relationship valued by the Yuri sub culture, which will be further explored in the following sections.

4.3.4 - Kizuna (羈絆) : Xena and Gabrielle

Another expression seen in Yuri relationship is bonding or Kizuna (絆 in Japanese, 羈絆 in Chinese), which literally means bonding with string. It is an indication of the

intense bonding between two parties, which can be either family or friends. It may also refer to the entangled fate between the two. The relationship between Xena and Gabrielle, the two female protagonists in the 1995 American TV drama *Xena: Warrior Princess*, was frequently mentioned by the interviewees as an example of such a relationship. In the show, Xena and Gabrielle are ancient western heroines who fought for justice and the greater good. Xena's and Gabrielle's fate had been entangled throughout their journey, and their relationship was much appreciated by Yuri fans. For instance, both Anson and Mandy pointed out that Xena and Gabrielle form the best representation of a Yuri relationship. Anson, who was a Yuri fanfiction writer, appreciated the resonance of their minds, and Mandy, one of the founders of the *Yamibo* forum, was touched by the sacrifices they made for each other. The fact that Xena and Gabrielle learned and grew up for the purpose of protecting each other also made Mandy view their relationship as the ideal Yuri love.

*Anson: The ideal kind of Yuri is like the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle. Though their relationship was not defined clearly in the drama, the bonding between them was so ideal. It is totally different from "The L word"³⁰. The **relationship between Xena and Gabrielle had satisfied all the fantasies that I have in love.***

Researcher: Is it about the Kizuna and bonding between them? And that they grew together and learned from each other?

³⁰ A very popular America/Canadian co-production TV Drama portraying the lives and love stories of a group of lesbians in Los Angeles.

*Anson: Yes, and also the **resonance of their minds.** (Emphasis added)*

Anson

(Age 31, homosexual, Yuri fanfiction writer)

*The point I like about the show is that both the female protagonists **took care of each other and grew together.***

*When Xena spoiled Gabrielle and when Gabrielle gave up her insistence on peace for Xena. The scene in which Gabrielle killed someone for Xena was especially stunning. I was deeply touched. It made you understand what true love is. On Yuri relationship, I dare say that no other drama can surpass it... **They grew for each other, as in for protecting each other and becoming each other.** They grew to become a better person for each other. (Emphasis added)*

Mandy

(N.A., heterosexual, founder of "Yamibo" forum)

Apart from Xena and Gabrielle, Evan and Yuki also talked about what Kizuna meant to them. For Evan, a male Yuri fanfiction writer, female intimacy that is more than friendship and has been through thick and thin can be considered a Yuri relationship.

*Yuri is when they (female characters) are **more than pure friends.** A friendship **that has gone through thick and thin can also be counted as Yuri.** (Emphasis added)*

Evan

(Age 32, heterosexual, Yuri fanfiction writer)

*As long as **there is Kitsuna and bonding between them**, regardless of the type of relationship it is presented as, whether it is clear, the duration, and how it ends, it can be called Yuri. The kind of Yuri that I like... they (female characters) would finally reach a point in which they are "**particularly important and irreplaceable**" (This, in pop culture, would almost always be linked with possession and sex.)*
(Emphasis added)

Yuki

(Age 23, homosexual, forum member)

A story plot in which the female characters are enemies but at the same time fall in love with each other is also popular among Yuri fans. Alice liked Yuri stories with a love-hate relationship between two attractive and charming women. Anson also enjoyed the presence of an enemy relationship in a Yuri story, in which both female characters have strong and tough personalities.

*I love the **love-hate relationship** between the female Soviet assassin and Agent Carter ³¹. It is mainly because both individuals were **attractive, and the spark created when they clashed with each other was especially charming.** (Emphasis added)*

Alice

(Age 30, bisexual, forum moderator)

Researcher: What kind of Yuri text would attract you?

Anson: The type of Yuri relationship that has a **strong seme & a**

³¹ Character in Agent Carter, an American TV Drama.

strong uke (強攻強受)³² and where they love and kill each other.

(Emphasis added)

Anson

(Age 31, homosexual, Yuri fanfiction writer)

4.3.5 – Above friendship

As mentioned previously, Yuri is more defined by the nature of the relationship itself rather than the sexual relationship between females. The forms of the relationship vary from “more than friendship” to enemies, as exemplified in the following. Ms Green, Canton, and Evan all stated that Yuri is about a relationship between two females that is more than friendship.

Yuri and GL can be classified based on the intensity of romantic love, with Yuri at a lower level and GL at a higher level. For me, I personally am more inclined towards the former one. All female relationships that are more than friendship can be considered Yuri.

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

When a girl cares about another girl in a way that is more than friendship, that would be Yuri love.

Canton

(Age 27, homosexual, forum member)

Yuri is: When (two girls) are more than purely friends.

³² Means “top and bottom” in Japanese anime culture and also widely used on Chinese networks.

Evan

(Age 32, heterosexual, Yuri fanfiction writer)

For Victoria, Yuri is friendship that is very close to, but not yet, a romantic relationship. Whether the relationship between two females is more than friendship is determined from the care and concern that one has on the other.

There is not a clear romantic relationship, but it is very close. Such feeling... is because they “care about each other”. (Emphasis added)

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

4.4 - What respondents find attractive about Yuri?

4.4.1 - Diversity in Relationship

One of the reasons that Yuri is attractive to its readers is that Yuri stories are different from mainstream heterosexual love stories with similar interactions and story plot. Such uniqueness is due to Yuri stories not being shaped by the presumptions that limited the plots of mainstream heterosexual love story. Canton, a Hong Kong Yuri reader with 11 years of experience, highlighted that she was attracted by the unusual story plot in Yuri manga.

It (Yuri relationship) is pure and sincere, because it is “not the usual kind” of love. It is not yet molded by the mainstream form of love. Unlike heterosexual relationship, Yuri does not easily fall into

common interaction models. Rather, its progress is more natural and free. After all, because only a minority holds such affection, this kind of affection remains relatively unaffected by social norms.

Canton

(Age 27, homosexual, forum member)

Yuri is a sub-culture that started to redevelop in 2004 with the airing of *Maria Sama ga miteiru*. Since then, it has been providing new grounds for exploration of alternate types of female interaction as well as female intimacy - topics that have long been ignored in mainstream animation and movies. A report known as “Woman in film” (2014) revealed that, based on the Bechdel test, which examines the frequency of female characters and their interaction in movies, between 2010 to 2014, 544 out of 1543 Hollywood movies included at least one scene in which women are talking only about men. Hickey (2014) also reported that most of the iconic Hollywood films had failed the Bechdel test. In fact, in many mainstream Hollywood movies, when two women are portrayed, their interactions are mostly limited to being competitors for a male’s love, or jealousy towards each other. In some movies, there is even no interaction among females. Thus, it could be observed that female intimacy and interaction still only play a minor role in the Hollywood pop culture, and Yuri could serve as the agency for exploring female intimacy.

When talking about typical heterosexual interactions in the mainstream pop culture, Canton added that interaction between heterosexual couples helped to reinforce and perpetuate gender stereotyping and the heterosexual hegemony.

For example, insisting on girls being dainty and dependent and need

to flatter boys or play hard-to-get. Or that, once boys have taken a certain action, it means they have already revealed their love. Or that, girls must reply in a certain way, which carries a certain meaning, etc.

Canton

(Age 27, homosexual, forum member)

Canton explained that, in a Yuri story, females are given space to reinterpret their actions and not be bounded by those gender norms. As such, the traditional boundaries are broken and a more diverse story, which is full of possibility, becomes available.

*By having more freedom, I mean the “actions” are neither being **over-defined** or **over-interpreted**, nor are they being symbolized. Hence, the meaning carried by the “action” is not as narrow, and the forms of affection become more diverse. (Emphasis added)*

Canton

(Age 27, homosexual, forum member)

Canton also observed an equal relationship within a Yuri story. Gender equality can have attained in Yuri due to the fact that both parties are of the same gender. No one holds a superior status because of their gender, and the associated definite ways of interaction do not exist.

For example, in the interaction between a boy and a girl, if the girl cried and ran away in the middle of their conversation, the general understanding would be “the boy must chase the girl”, so he can “say sweet words to her”. But such consensus does not exist in the world

of Yuri.. Girls can run away for whatever reason, and the other person need not chase her.

Canton

(Age 27, homosexual, forum member)

4.4.2 - Differences between Yuri and heterosexual love story

Another characteristic of Yuri is that the attraction between females can be more diverse. As Canton noticed, in a heterosexual story, it is common to see male characters being attracted by the appearance, especially body shape, of female characters. While appearance still plays an influential factor in attraction between girls, it can be much more than that, and thus, Yuri opens the possibility for many alternate kinds of attraction and interaction, since love can happen in many different ways.

There is no specific condition for girls to fall in love with girls. Any factor is possible, like appearance as you said. I think that the difference between heterosexual love and Yuri is that Yuri love between girls can happen in more diverse forms. Boys give me a feeling that they would like a girl for her appearance, but this is not the only reason girls like girls. This is why there is more diversity in the reason for falling in love and the forms and meaning of ensuing interactions.

Canton

(Age 27, homosexual, forum member)

Because female can be attracted to each other by qualities other than appearance, alternate ways of attraction and interaction become available, making Yuri stories more colourful than mainstream romantic stories. This was what attracted Edward to Yuri.

***Edward:** When I first read “Satougashi no Dangan wa Uchinukenai”³³ and related fanfiction, I did not have any idea about Yuri. But after reading it, I found it really special, because it is different from heterosexual love stories and even BL (Boy Love) stories. The genders are supposed to be equal, but in fact, females are in an oppressed position in society. Isn’t it meaningful to read about love between the oppressed?*

***Researcher:** What are the differences between Yuri and heterosexual story and BL story?*

***Edward:** Emotionally? Well... Usually, in heterosexual animations, male characters take the leading role. Although there are examples in which females take the initiative, most of the time males are the “subject”. In other words, girls have to “throw” themselves to boys. I do not have an in-depth experience with BL comics, but problems stemming from males being the subject and females being the “other” would not exist in female intimacy.*

Edward

(Age 27, heterosexual, Yuri fanfiction writer)

Stephanie, a BL-turned-Yuri fan and organizer of the Shanghai Yuri culture event,

³³ A manga series based on the novel *Sugar Candy Bullets Can’t Pierce Anything*. It tells the story of a teenage girl, Nagisa, and Umino, a new comer to her school in rural area.

recalled that she finally realized that BL stories are just a copy of heterosexual stories after she discovered Yuri.

When I first read BL fictions, I found that they are really good pieces, then I started to browse for different kinds of BL fiction, and I almost read all of the classic pieces in BL fiction. Then, I tumbled upon a board entitled GL³⁴ stories and then I thought... maybe I can read them too... I found that I love GL more... because after reading so many BL fictions, I found that they are just a copy of heterosexual interaction.³⁵ But when I first read GL, the delicate sentiment found in interactions during the “ambiguity period” really attracted me. That’s why I never returned to BL again.

Stephanie

(Age 22, homosexual, forum member)

*A good story should include a detailed account of the feelings of both parties in a relationship, so that readers **won’t feel that there is a dominating and a subordinated power position.** (Emphasis added)*

Edward

(Age 27, heterosexual, Yuri fanfiction writer)

In summary, Yuri stories challenge the heteronormativity presentation in mainstream

³⁴ GL fanfiction are usually written by Chinese female writers, with themes ranging from adventure, reality, and the ancient China. It also constitutes the Yuri genre.

³⁵ Both Japanese (e.g., Mizoguchii, 2003) and Taiwanese (e.g., Chen, 2006) scholars criticized the story setting, the depiction of sex scenes, and the uke and seme (攻 / 受) in BL story for being copies of the gender binary in heterosexual hegemony.

love stories, where gender stereotyping limits how males and females should behave, constraining the available methods of interaction and leading to gender inequality in relationships. Specifically, the requirement for males to be proactive and females to be passive has created a distorted gender notion and an unequal gender power relationship. As stories between people of same gender, Yuri provides an alternate form of relationship with equal gender and equal relationship.

4.4.3 - The aesthetic of Yuri and femininity

Victoria remarked that male and female perceive a piece of text differently, illustrating her view with the 2013 LGBT movie, *Carol*, which was very popular among Yuri and lesbian community.

*Males don't know anything about fashion. "Straight men carcinoma"³⁶ don't even pay attention to it... When they see a girl, they would only focus on what she would look like naked. And thus, **the aesthetic judgment of a girl is totally different....** Of course, girls also watch sex scenes, as in the case of "Carol". But I'm sure those who liked "Carol" also liked Yuri. Though, for **male, "Carol" might not be fulfilling and satisfying.***

***Straight girls may also appreciate "Carol" for its beauty.** The director portrayed the beauty between the two characters, especially in the scene when Theresa was in Carol's car and they were driving through the tunnel. That moment and that atmosphere was stunning. (Emphasis added)*

³⁶Straight man carcinoma (直男癌) - A Chinese online abbreviation meaning "male chauvinist pig"

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

It is not surprising to find the fetishistic male gaze of female nudity in mainstream movies, as that gratified male audience's sexual desire. The portrayal of naked female body affirms the scopophilic masculinized position of the audience (Schatz, 2004). On the other hand, pieces of movie or artwork that cater for female gaze are still being taken over (Schatz, 2004). With the appearance of Yuri, females become subjects of stories. Female desires are finally captured, and it is not necessarily sexual. To this end, Yuri challenges the existing understanding on sexuality, in which the social identity of sexuality is based on individuals' sexual desire. Since sexual desire is not the crucial element in a Yuri relationship and it cannot be accurately defined under current account of sexuality, Yuri is capable of questioning the centralized sexual desire in sexuality, and placed spiritual intimacy and affection in a significant position in a relationship.

Victoria mentioned another lesbian movie, the 2015 *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, which is well known for its vigorous lesbian sex scene, and compared it with *Carol*.

*Well, I don't like the sex scene in "Blue is the Warmest Colour". Not beautiful at all. I don't like that movie. It is a **very "lesbian" movie. I don't like that...** The delicate emotional flow between the two characters in "Carol" was really beautiful. There may be implicit implications of sex in it. It is **acceptable even if they really had sex, as long as the aesthetic sense and beauty in it isn't destroyed. If it turns to a sex scene like Japanese AV, then I don't want it.** There are lots of overlapping between Yuri and lesbian culture, and they are not mutually exclusive. But the sense of beauty and aesthetics*

cannot be hampered. Once it becomes purely about lust, then the feeling is lost. Even you are making a porn video, you still need good lighting, the actors need to be pretty, and pubic areas can't be shown directly. (Emphasis added)

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

Alice also shared the same view as Victoria on *Blue is the Warmest Colour*, considering it to be too “fast-food” and devoid of beauty. Orange added that sex scenes with the only purpose of gratifying sexual desire are not welcome by female audience. The sense of aesthetics is crucial in a sex scene from the stance of a female spectator.

*“Blue is the Warmest Color” was not beautiful, I don't like it. And also The L word ³⁷, it is **too “fast-food”**, I totally don't like it. (Emphasis added)*

Alice

(Age 30, bisexual, forum moderator)

*There could be **naked scenes and intimate shots in movies or Yuri texts**, but for girls, there should be a certain level of aesthetics. If it is **just catering to sexual desire**, then it is only suitable for men. (Emphasis added)*

Orange

(Age 36, married heterosexual, forum member)

³⁷ A famous American lesbian TV drama

Yuri readers do not favour explicit and physical portrayal of female intimacy or lesbian relationship. Rather, they appreciate the implicit romantic flow between females as they found beauty within it. They also treasure the delicate sensibility, the ambiguity, and the femininity - characteristics that are derived from feminine attributes. Hence, Yuri fans largely acknowledge the femininity and are attracted by the beauty within it. Yuri genre thus provides a female subjectivity by telling a romantic story between two females, which, at the same time, are being appreciated and desired from a “female gaze”. While the male gaze views the female body as a sexual desired object, female gaze under the Yuri genre appreciates the beauty within the female body and acknowledges femininity rather than objectifying it. It views female from a standpoint of appreciation and is not offensive. Female subjectivity can thus be constructed under the female gaze under the Yuri genre.

Ms Green explained that Yuri stories are able to further display the femininity of a woman, in which the expression of emotion is implicit, veiled, and subtle. The ambiguity in women’s feeling and affection can also be seen in a Yuri story.

*It is because **when females are put in a Yuri story, it would further show their feminine side. In addition, the way in which women express their emotion is rather indirect and subtle. For instance, when expressing their feelings, confessing their love, and even when falling in love, women do not show their emotion directly or obviously. Such is the unique beauty portrayed in the poem “She came, her face half hidden behind a pipa still.”³⁸ Also, the unique ambiguity between females is a defining characteristic of Yuri.***

³⁸ 琵琶行 - 猶抱琵琶半遮面 The Pipa Tune, a poem was written by Bai Ju-Yi

Hence, those who like this form of relationship would naturally become a Yuri fan. (Emphasis added)

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

Alice and Futa concurred with Ms Green, pointing out that the delicate, sentimental, and unspoken characteristics, which a sentimental girl is usually equipped with, is the soul of Yuri.

*The soul of Yuri can be found in **the delicate, sentimental, and unspoken** little thoughts that exist among females. (Emphasis added)*

Alice

(Age 30, bisexual, forum moderator)

*As a Yuricon³⁹, of course, I like to watch Yuri that has been affirmed as romantic love relationship. But **the ambiguous emotion between girls, which only exists among sentimentally delicate girls, is attractive to me too.** (Emphasis added)*

Futa

(Age 22, homosexual, forum member)

Moreover, while the delicate and refined mind coincides with female aesthetic judgment, the distinct intimacy between females provides a deep intensity that touches the audience. The sentimental and fragile emotion in Yuri stories also resonates among

³⁹ Yuricon(百合控)- a Japanese term for Yuri fans.

its readers. Yuki explained that Yuri readers touched by Yuri stories shared a similar experience of unrequited love. Along with the timid and delicate moments in Yuri stories, which serve as a projection of reader's experience, Yuri readers would experience an enhanced feeling of touching and sense of involvement.

*Throwing away the gender factors, this kind of stories (Yuri) are always favored by its fans. Maybe it's because the **readers resonates easily with these delicate and timid emotions**. After all, everyone must have experienced unrequited love... And Yuri is wonderful in that, when this kind of affection happens between two women, it will become **PARTICULARLY** intense, making you **MUCH MORE** worried about their relationship. The best term to describe its uniqueness would be "forbidden love", and the **refined and soft viewpoint of the character would make it even more sophisticated...** It is like doubling the touching feeling you find in shojo (young girl) manga, probably more than doubling. (Emphasis added)*

Yuki

(Age 23, homosexual, forum member)

The shared resonance of unrequited love, as well as the same appreciation towards femininity united Yuri fans on the *Yamibo* forum and constructed their identity. This shared sense of experience offers the subjectivity for Yuri community by challenging the male gaze and the centralized sexual experience in the nature of sexuality.

Apart from the sentimental and refined emotion featured in femininity that contributes

to the sense of beauty, pureness is also another characteristic of femininity that coincides with the aesthetic judgment of a female and was appreciated by Yuri fans. The pureness of a relationship is touching and moving for most Yuri fans.

*I think since that Yuri occurs among females, there is a **sense of purity to it**. Pure means **innocent and clean**, it is the adjective for describing beautiful things. From ancient times, **female have been considered substances of beauty by many writers and artists**. The author of the *Dream of the Red Chamber*, Cao Xueqin, praised female through the mouth of the protagonist, Jia Baoyu, saying "Woman are made of water". (Emphasis added)*

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

Victoria pointed to the popularity of Korean dramas, the pureness of which is that sex and kissing scenes are rare. The drama was produced from a female viewpoint and followed the aesthetic sense of females, which is beyond physical relationship.

*Just like in Korean dramas, in which **there might not even be a kiss**. **This fits the aesthetic judgment of a female**, and explains the large amount of crazy female fans... For example, there are just a few kissing scenes in the famous Korean drama "My Love from the Star", and they are not even French kisses... Pureness like this is touching. Men might be thinking "What the hell?", but this coincides with a female's aesthetic judgment. For woman, the demand for affection **is beyond the sexual aspect**. (Emphasis added)*

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

In summary, it can be seen that femininity and the beauty within are themes that are appreciated by, and resonated among, Yuri fans. The reason for this is that as females, they are able to appreciate the qualities in femininity mostly ignored by the male audience. For female Yuri fans, the interaction between females and the intense intimacy are beautiful objects that they appreciated through the “female gaze”. The female gaze is not an offensive action like the male gaze. Rather than objectifying the female body and treating it as a sexual object, female gaze in the Yuri genre serves to appreciate the beauty in female and femininity. By placing female as the subject and exercising the power through femininity, Yuri can challenge the presentation of female from the scopophilic male gaze and also the over-emphasis of sexual desire in a relationship under influence of male gaze.

4.4.4 - The attraction of ambiguity

As established in previous sections, Yuri fans are largely obsessed with the ambiguity between females. Such ambiguity was found to be another important component that contributes to the essence of the definition of Yuri. Victoria recalled the time when Yuri animation was first introduced to the Chinese community. Back then, most of the fans were in fact attracted to Yuri not by the romantic love implied in the animation, but by the Yuri-type relationship, which is very close to romantic relationship.

*What were the Yuri readers attracted by? It was definitely not about the romantic love between two female characters, because there **wasn't a clear indication that romantic love exists between them.***

(Emphasis added)

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

The point Victoria made can be seen in Alice, who was one of those attracted by the ambiguity in Yuri stories. Alice revealed that she enjoyed the subtle atmosphere in Yuri text. However, if the authors or directors have a direct or explicit depiction of romantic relationship, especially through a sex scene, she would lose interest.

*In general, I prefer drama or animation infused with ambiguity. I especially like the subtle atmosphere. I feel nothing of a relationship that is **too obvious and direct**. I only watch dramas in the ambiguous stage, and am totally not interested **in sex scenes**. (Emphasis added)*

Alice

(Age 30, bisexual, forum moderator)

Ms Green considered Yuri relationship to be private in addition to being full of ambiguity, and thus, also emotionally complicated.

*Let's look at it from the features of the characters and relationships. Because Yuri is a relationship between females, and most females are equipped with feminine characteristics like **gentle, sensitive, and affectionate**, Yuri relationships are especially private and full of ambiguity, and thus, a **feminine-type relationship that is additionally emotionally complicated**. (Emphasis added)*

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

Futa further explained that the ambiguity in Yuri stories provides space for its readers to fantasize. This is especially true for Chinese homosexuals who are travelling along a difficult path and facing huge challenges, who can use Yuri as an exit to escape from the social norm of heterosexuality and the cruelty towards homosexuality. The ambiguity also provides endless possibilities of imagining about a relationship, which can compensate the homosexuals for the hopelessness in reality.

*The attractiveness of ambiguity is derived from the space it provides for readers to fantasize about in a Yuri story. It is also related to the cruelty in reality. Being homosexual is difficult, especially in China with its traditional family values. Moreover, such relationships face lots of barriers, making many homosexual couples to choose to give up. The ambiguity of Yuri, thus, **can compensate for the hopelessness in reality through endless imagination.** (Emphasis added)*

Futa

(Age 22, homosexual, forum member)

On providing space for imagination, Futa also mentioned that it is possible for a heterosexual girl to enter into a Yuri relationship in a Yuri story, which rarely happens in reality. She added that a lot of messages about the relationship remains hidden in manga and animation, and usually only the positive aspects of a relationship is portrayed. This provides Yuri fans with ample space for imagining how the relationship could develop, and is an alternative to what many Yuri fans are doing in reality, that is, fantasizing relationships between female idols or pop stars who are not real lesbian. Because of real-life limitations, homosexual relationships are rarely long-lasting. But

because they are not real lesbian couples, Yuri fans can never break up with their fantasized other half. Through this, Yuri fans can escape from the disappointment stemming from real world romantic relationships.

In Yuri stories, straight girls could also enter into a Yuri relationship. But in reality, situations like this will only disappoint Yuri fans. A lot of messages can be hidden in virtually-created things (Yuri manga), providing the audience with a large space for imagination. There is nothing comparable to this in reality.

*For example, a Yuri manga ends when the two female leads finally come out as a couple, and then everyone is happy. But if it is in the real world, unless one of them passes away, the story won't end. **If they finally break up**, those who have been the **audience of their story would have their space for imagination shut down**. That's why many Yuricons love to **fantasize a relationship with pop stars or idols who are not really lesbian**. Because **they are not really in a relationship, they will never break up**. This provides ample space for Yuricons to imagine. (Emphasis added)*

Futa

(Age 22, homosexual, forum member)

This is why, as Futa pointed out, manga and animation that portray ambiguous Yuri relationship are especially popular. She used *Yura Yuri*⁴⁰ as an example, and explained

⁴⁰ A Yuri animation in which there are only female characters in the story and their romantic relationship is not clearly indicated.

that since the female characters in the story stay in an ambiguous relationship forever, the story could never end. Thus, it successfully gathered a large fan base along with a high commercial value.

Interviewer: On the other hand, I think an everlasting relationship is really difficult.

*Futa: True. There are Yuri stories in which the characters **stay in an ambiguous relationship forever, and those are more popular.** The success of “Yura Yuri”, which is published in the magazine “Yuri Hime”, is exactly because everyone is in an ambiguous relationship, **the story would never end, creating an everlasting business value.***
(Emphasis added)

Futa

(Age 22, homosexual, forum member)

The recurring mentioning of ambiguity by Yuri fans has in fact proven that Yuri is a discursive culture. This common emphasis among Yuri fans has created the identity of this community. Through different discourses on what Yuri is, the subjectivity of the Yuri community is established, and the unity of this community is consolidated.

4.4.5 – Yuri as the early-stage of romantic relationships

Yuri fans also see Yuri as the early stage of a relationship, which they are obsessed with. To them, the ambiguity in Yuri is similar to what is experienced in the pre-stage of a romantic relationship. However, Yuri also represents a particular moment and stage that

serves its own function, namely, providing guidance for readers in pre-stage and opening the door for alternate statuses in relationships. Paris Tung, a forum moderator on *Yamibo*, noted that Yuri highlights the early-stage of a romantic relationship. Although Yuri is limited to the early stage, it serves the function of providing a reference for young readers and exploring an alternate form of relationship.

Many Yuri stories focus only on the part before they (the characters) established their relationship, just like the traditional love stories. For those who haven't experienced love, this would be a good reference. I wish there could be more topics or issues like Yuri to drive society to think about the different possibilities and relationship status.

I think Yuri serves a unique function and provides unique contributions.

Yuri is a stage. And it is useful. Some people may still be in this stage at an old age. But this is not a big problem.

Paris Tung

(Age 31, bisexual, forum moderator)

Recall that many Yuri fans hold a pessimistic view on relationships, and this explains why they are attracted to the ambiguity stage of the romance. From a thread on *Yamibo* discussing whether members are ready to live alone until the day they die, a member responded that she would rather not enter into a relationship with her potential lover, because she thought that the best moment of a relationship occurs before the relationship starts. It will only get worse afterwards.

Even if I met the one I love, I still don't want to enter into a relationship with her. Love has already reached its peak when a couple decides to be together. Regardless of the direction it will go, it will only go downwards. And of course, the prerequisite for this is that the one you love also loves you.

Goodooler

(Forum member)⁴¹

This way of thinking seems to be rooted in Chinese culture. For example, a poem by Northern Song Dynasty poet Cai Xiang depicted “Flower that is yet to blossom and the moon that is yet to full”⁴² as the most beautiful moment. The classical Chinese philosophical text – the *Book of Changes* (Zhouyi)⁴³, mentioned that “When the sun has reached the meridian height, it begins to decline. When the moon has become full it begins to wane”⁴⁴. These descriptions of the beauty and brightness before the full stage of the relationship coincide with the theme among Yuri fans that underscores the ambiguity in the pre-stage of romantic love, and is a display of the oriental characteristics of Chinese Yuri fans.

4.5 – Conclusion

In conclusion, Yuri is a discursive culture produced through different discourses on

⁴¹ goodooler (2016). *Academic approach: I wonder whether 300 members had thought about dying alone if they have not met their “right” one.* Retrieved from 29 March,2017
<http://www.yamibo.com/thread-253386-3-1.html>

⁴² “Flower that is yet to blossom and the moon that is yet to full”-花未全開月未圓, a poem by Cai Xiang, a northern Northern Song Dynasty poet.

⁴³ Book of Changes⁴³ - 周易

⁴⁴ “When the sun has reached the meridian height, it begins to decline. When the moon has become full it begins to wane.”- 日中則是,月盈則虧,天有孤虛,地闕東南,未有常全而不缺者

“What Yuri is” and “What Yuri is not”, as well as the attractiveness of Yuri. The current chapter displays the different discourses on the nature of Yuri in an attempt to provide the visibility for Yuri culture in academic studies on sexuality. The nature of Yuri has been explicated in three questions: “What Yuri is not?” “What exactly is Yuri?” and “What respondents find attractive about Yuri”.

What Yuri is not? Yuri is not about lesbian. Yuri is a form of love and a form of relationship, while lesbian is a social identity equipped with a political meaning. It is also not about the erotic relationship that two women would have. Rather, it portrays a story in which two females are involved in a relationship that is more than sexual – one that involves their affection and emotional flows. Yuri relationship is not platonic though. Yuri fans would love to watch sex scenes, but they have a high standard for those scenes. Specifically, they insist that sex scenes need to serve the plot rather than to gratify sexual desire. To this end, Yuri fans are against the phallic expression of possession of a female body by sexual behavior, and they are constantly searching for alternate ways of expressing the possession. Their emphasis on the relationship itself (i.e., spiritual intimacy and affections) and decentralization of the nature of sexual desire challenge the role of sexual desire in mainstream culture as well as in nature of sexuality.

If Yuri is not the things described above, then what is Yuri? Yuri is a discursive culture that is constituted through the main action of queer reading/Yuri reading. By having an alternate interpretation to, and decoding of, the original text/plot, Yuri audience creates a new meaning for the relationship of the female characters without disrupting the original setting. It also breaks the constraints normally seen in heterosexual love stories as Yuri fans create a wide range of alternate female intimacy stories.

The essence of Yuri culture is spiritual intimacy. The spiritual resonance between female characters is much appreciated and yearned for by Yuri fans. In fact, the spiritual resonance and high level of understanding between female characters in Yuri culture is the projection of Yuri fans' ideal love. The emphasis on spiritual aspects also challenges the phallic tradition of placing sexual desire as the priority when mentioning romantic relationship. Yuri advocates different expressions of love relationship and the breaking of the traditional emphasis on sexual desire.

What are Yuri fans attracted to? Firstly, the diversity in the forms of expression of relationship that is different from those in heterosexual love stories. This is because Yuri involves the relationship of two people of the same gender, so the gender stereotyping of how a male and a female should behave in a heterosexual relationship no longer exists in Yuri stories. The equal gender leads to an equal relationship. The interactions between the two female characters are based on their own emotional flows and personalities. External factors like gender presumption will not become obstacles in the portrayal of intimacy. Yuri stories talk about the relationship itself, and have more human touch as they delicately describe the sentimental flows between the characters.

Yuri fans are also attracted by the femininity, the ambiguity, and the sense of aesthetics they find in Yuri stories, and also the sentimental and delicate interaction between girls. Through the "female gaze", females become the subject of Yuri stories, and this, again, challenges the dominating phallus culture that focuses on sexual desires and sexual female body. The female gaze under Yuri culture emphasizes on the beauty of femininity and opens an alternate form of appreciation to the love stories.

To sum up, Yuri is a discursive culture constructed by the interpretation of the audience and the nature of Yuri challenges the role of sex in sexuality and relationship. It also challenges the heteronormativity representation in mainstream love stories by offering a new interpretation of female intimacy in Yuri stories and having an alternate way of appreciating femininity.

Chapter 5 - Chinese speaking Yuri culture

Following an introduction and analysis of the discursive production of Yuri culture and its nature in the previous chapter, the current chapter will focus on further investigating the *Yamibo* forum. *Yamibo* forum is the gathering place for many Chinese Yuri fans, and acts as a significant cradle for the development of the Chinese Yuri culture. Through investigating *Yamibo*'s culture and its development, the identity construction and the subjectivity of Yuri fans can be determined.

5.1 - *Yamibo* Forum- Its formation

The *Yamibo* forum is the largest Chinese Yuri forum. It was established in 2004, and as the only Chinese Yuri forum at that time, it became the forum for Yuri fans from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia. Among the members, over half reported themselves as female (Yang, 2012).

Japan started airing Yuri animations on TV in 2004. Back then, Chinese ACG⁴⁵ fans had to depend on a group of volunteers to record and translate the shows. Yuri was a new genre, and some ACG fans might not even be aware of the existence of this culture. The consecutive airing of several hit titles, including *Maria-sama ga Miteru* and *Kannazuki no Miko*, expanded the fan base of the genre. It was before the formation of the *Yamibo* forum, so the new Yuri fans were dispersed among various ACG forums like *DongManHuaYuan* and *Manyou*⁴⁶, where they visit to look for resources and discuss the story and characters of the Yuri animations.

⁴⁵ ACG- Anime, Comic, and Game

⁴⁶ *DongManHuaYuan* (Anime Garden/動漫花園) and *Manyou* (Comic Fans/漫友) are two major ACG forums in China

Recall from the interview with two of the founders of the *Yamibo* forum that most ACG forums are heavily populated by males who are not welcoming of discussions on female characters or Yuri relationship, and many female members, especially Yuri fans, feel offended by such an atmosphere. With the airing of the series *Mai-Hime*, several Yuri fans thought it was time to create their own space for discussing animation, and this was how the *Yamibo* forum came about. *Yamibo* quickly became a shelter for Yuri lovers and those interested in Yuri-related or *shoujo*-themed animation, as it was able to provide a friendly environment for discussing female characters and animation. Thirteen years later, *Yamibo* is the largest Chinese Yuri forum, with about 252,000 members and 556 million posts⁴⁷.

5.2 - Sense of belonging

Based on the interviews and the researcher's personal observation, it can be concluded that *Yamibo*'s members have a strong sense of belonging towards the forum. This may be due to the forum being considered by fans as an important place in their life that has changed their life trajectory. As revealed by several interviewees, many Yuri fans found their self-identity, especially their sexuality, values, and self-affirmation on the *Yamibo* forum. For example, 9-year member Ms Green said that the *Yamibo* forum is a significant place to her, as she came to know that being homosexual does not mean that she is a perverse or freak. She also came to realize that there are also other people who have the same interest and sexuality as her around China and the world. It helped Ms Green to accept her own sexual orientation and interest.

Of course I was quite heavily influenced... It let the young me

⁴⁷ See Chapter 3.3.2 for other information on the *Yamibo* forum.

*understand that I am **not a freak or perverse...** and that there are so many other people with similar interest and sexuality as me all over China and the world. It **made me better at accepting myself.***
(Emphasis added)

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

Alice also considered *Yamibo* an important place for her, since the forum awakened her interest and sexuality, which allows her to be herself now.

*I won't be the Alice you're talking to today if not for "Yamibo"... It is about the **awakening of Yuri.** So, it has a really special position in my heart. (Emphasis added)*

Alice

(Age 30, bisexual, forum moderator)

Although some interviewees indicated that they were not as active on the forum as before, they still held the same affection for *Yamibo*, namely, a place they called home. Ms Green, Victoria, and Futa all expressed a strong sense of belonging to *Yamibo*, describing it as a homestead. Ms Green added that *Yamibo* forum is an inseparable part in her life too.

*Although I seldom visit or join discussions on "Yamibo" forum now, **it is still an inseparable part of me.** In a sense, "Yamibo" is like **another home** to me. It gives me warmth, security, and a sense of belonging. (Emphasis added)*

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

It is still like a home to me. I yearn for this place, though I seldom visit the forum now... It's just like my hometown... Even if I live in another place in the future, I would still feel the sense of belonging.

(Emphasis added)

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

In the past, it's a place for making friends and getting news on Yuri.

*Now it feels like my **hometown** for me. Even though I'm usually away,*

*if I know **a big event or big issue is happening on Yamibo, I will go***

***back.** (Emphasis added)*

Futa

(Age 22, homosexual, forum member)

Canton, who had been on *Yamibo* for 10 years, said she treated the forum as her nurturing ground.

Researcher: What kind of emotional attachment do you have on "Yamibo" forum?

Canton: The sense of belonging that you attach to the place you grew up in.

Researcher: Yes, I also have this kind of feeling.

Canton

5.2.1 – Place for socializing and building relationships

One of the reasons for the strong sense of belonging members have to the *Yamibo* forum is that they treasure their memory with the precious friends that they met on the forum. It is the people the members care about, and it is also because of people that some members decide to stay.

Victoria, a former forum moderator, said that the forum would just be a place for her to access resources or information, and she would easily have left if not for her meeting someone whom she felt special and interesting. That person, interestingly, was Paris Tung, another interviewee in this study.

*In fact, it must be because of someone that you stay on a forum. You must've met someone so you want to stay. If I'm here just to browse threads, I will go after I'm done reading, after I get the information I need. **So it must be because of people that members stay.** Back then, it was Paris Tung who kept me around. (Emphasis added)*

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

Victoria said Paris Tung caught her attention with a thread in which Paris wrote on a classical music concert she attended. It was then that Victoria recognized that there might be people sharing the same interest as her, not only on Yuri, but also on other aspects like music. Victoria recalled that after she found that Paris Tung was an

interesting and wonderful person, she made her record songs and they sang together. It is common to see such singing activities conducted via online software like Skype or YY on *Yamibo*. Sometimes, the two recorded songs they liked and shared them on the forum. Later, Victoria formed a singing group on the forum known as *Mengyinshe* (萌音社), through which she met a lot of people, including her girlfriend, and made her determined to stay on the forum.

It is because she (Paris Tung) wrote a thread about her watching the Wagner concert.. It is because of this thread that I felt there are many people who share a similar interest with me. So I replied to her threads and start chatting with her. She is such an interesting and wonderful person. Then we started singing together and posting our performance onto the forum, moving many members to tears, or so they said. In fact, we did it just for fun. Later, I established "Mengyinshe" (萌音社) and met a group of important friends, so I decided to stay. I also met my first girlfriend because of Mengyinshe.

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

Yuki, an active member and an organizer of Yuri fans gathering in Shanghai, also treated *Yamibo* as an important place for her, since she met many important friends in her life on the forum, not to mention her girlfriend. They even travelled and celebrated festivals together. The precious memories she gained from this place made *Yamibo* an inseparable part of her life.

Every 300 buddy ("Yamibo" member) I met is very important to me.

*They accompanied me through my puberty. **Everyone, including***

members I met when I first came, took great care of me⁴⁸. Even now, I'm still meeting new friends and sharing my life with them through this platform... I travel and celebrate festivals together with them (300 buddies). I also met nice girl here and we experienced a relationship together.

*Everyone here is willing to **listen to my problems and share theirs**. These are all really precious memories.*

*What's so special is that many 300 buddies **travel on a differentiated yet equivalent pathway**. We gained so much through this platform that it has become inseparable from our life. (Emphasis added)*

Yuki

(Age 23, homosexual, forum member)

Yuki emphasized that *Yamibo* members were willing to share their lives. Victoria agreed, saying she met many important people who are involved in her life on *Yamibo*.

*This place **let you met so many good friends** – people who are **involved in your daily lives**, or even very important to your life. This place is just like home, and people are attached to it. (Emphasis added)*

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

⁴⁸ Yuki was twelve years old when she first went *Yamibo* forum.

Yuri is not the only topic of interest on *Yamibo*. There are many different online activities and in-depth discussions surrounding various topics and hobbies, like literature, movie, art, and music. For example, Paris Tung and Victoria were moderators for the Music and Movies board. Through discussions, communication, and activities, members get to know friends who become important people in their lives and form their social network. The singing interest group *Mengyinshe* (萌音社) formed by Victoria was one such example. Other member groups include those for online games and card games. The social connections not only stay online, but would also extend to real life. For examples, members may participate in local gathering in different cities, especially those with higher population of Yuri fans, like Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu, and Guangzhou. Agnes was an active participant in many different groups for fun, such as singing and Werewolf, a party game online.

The hobbies groups organized by forum members were very active. There was a chatting group called “girls’ ‘host’ club”⁴⁹, and I was one of the “hosts”. Hosts have different personalities, and our duty was to chat with young female members... There were many activities organized by the forum and a chatting group on MSN and QQ. We also verbal chatted via Skype. Sometime there were verbal chatting activities or singing activities.

Agnes
(Age 32, homosexual, forum member)

⁴⁹ Agnes has been one of the girl “host” Generally, in the girl host club, there are different kinds of girl host with different characteristics such as wearing maid’s uniform or acting as characters in Yuri animation.

There were also different groups related to online games and local gathering groups. Agnes mentioned that such groups are formed for cities with large population of Yuri fans, like Shanghai and Chengdu. Many members actively participated in these offline (real-life) gathering groups. Sometimes, members from other cities would also travel to these large cities to join the gatherings.

*There were also different chatting groups for online games like Werewolf and Legends of the Three Kingdoms (三國殺) and offline gathering groups. There were many of these groups, and members in them were quite active... **Beijing, Shanghai, Chengdu and Guangzhou**, these were cities with large Yuri fans population. **Members from other cities may also join these gatherings**, and they were added as members of these chatting groups. There were even online game groups within these gathering groups, such as those for World of Warcraft and Overwatch. (Emphasis added)*

Agnes

(Age 32, homosexual, forum member)

Some interviewees mentioned *Yamibo* as a place for them to find possible lovers, and in fact, some were really able to find a partner there. Fisher, who met both her ex-girlfriend and her current girlfriend on *Yamibo*, said the forum had changed her life trajectory and social network.

“Yamibo” is a nice gathering place for people sharing the same interest. It totally changed my life trajectory and my social network. I met both my ex and my current girlfriend because of 300 (“Yamibo”).

Fisher

(Age 34, homosexual, forum member)

Victoria also met her first girlfriend on *Yamibo*. Though that relationship ended, she was still hopeful that she could find her potential lover on *Yamibo*. Local lesbian community or Victoria's social network is not a choice. It is also due to the fact that the local lesbian community have a different value and culture that incompatible with that of Yuri community which will be explicated in the following sub-chapters(Ch5.4,5.5).

The reason I started a relationship-seeking post thread was that it was more possible this kind of person would appear on "Yamibo", and a larger possibility that I would fall in love with her. I don't think I would fall in love with someone in my real-world social network.

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

Through the different activities available on the forum, *Yamibo* members form their social network and meet many of the important people in their lives. It is obvious that the *Yamibo* forum acts as an important platform for socializing and building relationships. Based on the interviews, this is because the connection among members that they have built a strong sense of belonging to the *Yamibo* forum. As a socializing platform, *Yamibo* consolidated members' identity as a Yuri fan and as a community. Through the various online and offline activities, the Yuri community was able to develop shared memories, relationships, sense, and experience, which further lead to the solidarity of Yuri community. Such solidarity contributes to the formation of sexual identity, resulting in the development of self-consciousness and subjectivity among

Yuri fans. As will be discussed in the next section, the subjectivity of Yuri fans is developed as a response to the challenges stemming from established heteronormativity and homonormativity.

5.2.2 - Feminist Concerns

The “General Discussion Board” on *Yamibo* forum provides an environment for members to debate on different issues concerning politics, LGBT issues, or feminism. Some interviewees said that they were attracted by the various viewpoints⁵⁰ there, particularly those with a reasonable argument.

Anson was especially active in debate threads. He was impressed that such debates were always held in a peaceful and reasonable manner. Members would always respect each other’s attitude and taste.

Discussions are carried out under a peaceful atmosphere. Members would understand and respect each other’s attitudes and taste, and many of the views are very reasonable.

Anson

(Age 31, homosexual, Yuri fanfiction writer)

Ms Green had a diverse interest, and was attracted by discussion threads in which the arguments are reasonable.

The General Discussion Board has very diverse topics. I will read those with reasonable argument or worthy of discussion. I am

⁵⁰ General Discussion Board –Members are active in giving opinions to other members who post questions about their relationship. They also involve in different discussions on topics ranging from relationship consultation to LGBT issues.

particularly interested in threads on social issues, current affairs, history and culture, and also feminism.

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

Yuri fans' interest in feminist and LGBT issues is not limited to merely discussing online. As Paris Tung, a Taiwanese, mentioned, she was concerned with the social movement on legalizing same sex marriage in Taiwan, and she hoped to contribute to the homosexual rights movement.

I hope to try my best to help if same sex marriage were legalized in Taiwan. I am quite concern with social movements.

Paris Tung

(Age 31, bisexual, forum moderator)

Alice, on other hand, said that Yuri fans yearn for a new form of marriage and family, because they are excluded from the traditional family system. They hope that by seeking an alternate form of family, they could break the constraints of traditional values.

*Everyone on “Yamibo” forum is focused on women’s right and the search for a new form of marriage and family. Maybe it’s because many people had an unhappy experience in their family that they yearn for a different world... You know, **only those who had been hurt would want to change the status quo.** Yuri fans are excluded by the traditional marriage and family, so they hope to **search for an alternate way of living and to break the tradition.** (Emphasis added)*

Alice

(Age 30, bisexual, forum moderator)

Sharing Alice's view, Canton also agreed that *Yamibo* members have a view that is different from the mainstream heterosexual values.

"Yamibo" is a sanctuary, far away from the mainstream love values.

Canton

(Age 27, homosexual, forum member)

It can be seen that Yuri fans are concerned with women's right and LGBT issues. Because of the constraints placed on them by the traditional heterosexual hegemony, Yuri fans are eager for changes in family and relationship, and an alternative form of marriage and family. *Yamibo* forum provides them with a gathering place to consolidate their identity as "the other", as opposed to the traditional family system. This forms the basis of the subjectivity among Yuri community in challenging heteronormativity.

5.2.3 - Influence on the values of Yuri fans

Interviewees also mentioned that the active discussion on topics like women's right or sexual minorities also created an atmosphere for them to think critically about the culture around them, which in turn influenced their values. Yuki treasured the chance *Yamibo* had given her to learn more about feminist and LGBT issues, which are often neglected by mainstream media. In addition, discussions with other members opened her to alternate viewpoints – those that deviate from the mainstream heterosexual values.

*I met different kinds of people with different kinds of opinions on 300 (“Yamibo”). Through communicating and arguing with them, or just by being an audience, I started to think about what kind of person I am and how to **critically think about and deal with different issues, such as women’s right, LGBT, sexual orientation, and relationship consultation.** Without this platform, I **couldn’t have got in touch with these “non-mainstream” topics, and might’ve easily just adopted the mainstream heterosexual viewpoint.** I first came in touch with the term “gender stereotype” on 300 too. Thus, it is a particularly meaningful place for me. (Emphasis added)*

Yuki

(Age 23, homosexual, forum member)

The young Canton also established her own values based on those of other members.

In the first few years after I joined the forum, my values were based on the standard of those of other members.

Canton

(Age 27, homosexual, forum member)

The *Yamibo* forum serves as a platform for members to access with values that deviate from the mainstream heteronormativity. By browsing and involving in the discussion threads on disputable topics on the forum, members influence each other’s values with their own viewpoint and feminist values, which helped to awaken the self-consciousness among Yuri fans. Through this, the Chinese Yuri community developed a value and culture that deviates from the mainstream. Hence, the queer

cyber space provided by *Yamibo* offers the agency for the subjectivity of Yuri community to fight against the compulsory heterosexual society and assist in their sexual identity formation. This will be further explored in Chapter 7.

5.3 – Management of *Yamibo* forum

The solidarity found among Yuri fans and their attachment to *Yamibo* can also be partly attributed to the management of the forum. Many of the interviewees described *Yamibo* forum as a place filled with “human touch”. For example, Ms Green explained that *Yamibo* members are quite attached to the forum because they sense a feeling of “human touch”.

I have mentioned about 300 (“Yamibo”) members have a higher level of attachment to the forum. It is because of the strong feeling of “human touch”.

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

One of the interviewees, Regina, was the administrator of the forum. When asked about how she and moderators dealt with meaningless comments in the threads, Regina praised *Yamibo* members for their strong consensus on the need to regulate this kind of comment. In fact, many members would have already left their own replies to criticize those comments before moderators would step in to warn that member.

Researcher: Is there a consensus among forum members that long chatting threads and meaningless comments should be prohibited?

Regina: *Yes, they care a lot about ensuring the quality of discussion. Members would've started to criticizing before moderators or admins have to step in deal with it. Unless an action requires administrator authority to be performed, **small issues are normally dealt with by other members, and the answers they provide are even better than those of the admins.** (Emphasis added)*

Regina

(Age N.A., N.A., administrator)⁵¹

As for “battle posts”⁵², Regina would usually wait until members become tired of the argument, then she will lock the thread. She stressed the importance of timing in deciding whether a thread should be locked, and a critical determinant would be whether members’ argument has reached a saturation point. This is evidence of the humane touch liked by many members, as threads are locked not automatically but after considering whether members have been satisfied from arguing.

Researcher: How you deal with battle posts?

Regina: *“Everyone’s tired, right? Let’s get some rest”, and then I will lock the post. The timing is important. If I lock it too early, they wouldn’t have vented all their anger yet. If I lock it too late, it will waste members’ valuable time.*

Regina

(Age N.A., N.A., administrator)

⁵¹ Regina’s sexual orientation and age is kept private on her request.

⁵² Battle posts are those threads in which members argue about the definition of Yuri or whether a certain animation can be considered as Yuri animation etc.

Since politics, current affairs, and women's right are considered sensitive topics in China, it would be interesting to learn about how forum administrators would deal with it. For *Yamibo*, Regina replied that members are free to discuss any topic, as long as they do not violate forum rules⁵³.

Researcher: Politics and current affairs are popular topics on 300 ("Yamibo") forum, at least in the past few years, and many were listed as premium threads. Does 300 really welcome threads on politics, current affairs, women's right, and LGBT issue? Or would they be considered too sensitive?

Regina: This is a place for Yuri fans, and Yuri fans are just as diverse as ordinary people - male and female, old and young. This is a place for them to communicate. So, as long as they did not violate forum rules, they are free to discuss any topics. It is the forum's belief. It is human-oriented.

Regina

(Age N.A., N.A., administrator)

This kind of human-based management, including consideration of members' feeling in the discussion threads and respect for free speech, not only attracts members to stay on the forum, but also allow them to develop a strong sense of attachment to *Yamibo*. This strong sense of belonging and attachment is another source of solidarity in Yuri fans' identity and provides the platform for the subjectivity for Yuri community in

⁵³ Such as personal attack.

challenging mainstream heteronormativity and to critically review news on current affairs or women's rights movement.

5.4 - Rejection of Tomboy culture

A feature of *Yamibo*'s culture is its objection and repulsion of tomboy culture. Threads concerning tomboy culture or the butch/femme system are always being disputed on the forum. It is clear that Chinese Yuri fans are strongly reluctant in labelling themselves in either *T* or *P*⁵⁴. Threads posted by newcomers trying to look for *T* or *P* lesbian are promptly criticized by other forum members and locked by the administrator for the reason that *Yamibo* is not a lesbian forum. The newcomer will quickly learn about the culture of the forum and the reason for rejecting the tomboy culture when she further explores the forum. The following two sub-sections will analyze the reasons for the repulsion of tomboy culture and Chinese mainstream lesbian culture within Yuri fandom, and will explore the subjectivity developed from the interaction between Yuri community and homonormativity in Chinese lesbian community.

5.4.1 – Chinese lesbian culture

Since 1990, the Chinese lesbian community has been rapidly developing along with the popularity of the internet and different online platforms (Kam, 2012). Several lesbian forums were established in the early 2000s, including *Lessky*, *Chinese lala web*, and *Nutong tieba* (Maizi, 2011), which provided a platform for lesbians from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong to communicate (Kam, 2012). It is a tradition within the Chinese lesbian community for lesbians to identify themselves as *T* or *P* – a culture

⁵⁴ The *T/P* labelling corresponds to the butch/femme roleplay in Western lesbian culture. *T* represents Tomboy, the masculinized side in a lesbian relationship, and *P* refers to Pure, the femme lesbian.

they learnt and developed based on the butch/femme identity from online communities or lesbian bars (Kam, 2012; Wang, 2015; Chiang and Wang, 2016), and *T/P* couples are commonly seen. There is also a category for lesbians who refused to identify themselves as either *T* or *P*. Known as *Bufen (H/Half)*, they are lesbians with androgynous gender (Maizi, 2011; Kam, 2012).

There has been increasing discussion on *T/P* culture among lesbian community in recent years. Although there are people who are against the labelling system, the *T* and *P* gender identity is still a majority culture within the Chinese lesbian community (Wang, 2015). It is, therefore, one of the social norms within Chinese lesbian community that its members are required to follow the gender play, be “regulated” by unwritten rules, and to apply the similar tactics as in the heterosexual society (Maizi, 2011; Chiang and Wang, 2016). As Chiang and Wang (2016) revealed, the *T/P* eroticism is “the ethics (*lunli*) of the community” among Taiwanese lesbians. This *T/P* eroticism is a major phenomenon in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China’s lesbian community.

In general, lesbians identified as *T* usually wear masculine clothes, earrings, and a cool face. They ride motorbike, drink, smoke, and are fashionable. On the contrary, *P* lesbians wear dresses and have long hair and red lips. They look feminine just like a heterosexual girl. It is common that couples in a *T/P* relationship would call each other “husband” and “wife” like any Chinese heterosexual couple. Although *T/P* couples are the majority among Chinese lesbians, there are butches who are interested in butches only, forming a relationship called “*T/T* romance”⁵⁵. Similarly, there are also couples who are pretty girls with long hair holding hands with another long hair girl. They

⁵⁵ *T/T* romance- *TT* 戀

would identify themselves as “*P/P* romance”⁵⁶. This shows the diversity in the pairing of different gender identities among lesbian couples.

Over time, new gender identity terms, like *tie-T*⁵⁷, *niang T*⁵⁸, and *ye P*⁵⁹ are developed and used as gender identification within Chinese lesbian community. The adjective in the front refers to differing degrees of masculinity and femininity within the *T* and *P* gender identity system. *Tie-T* are characterized by having the most masculine features – so much that they are compared to “iron”. One way to verify whether one is *tie-T* is to check if she allows her girlfriend to touch her body. If she refuses to be touched or be “bottom” in sex, then she can be classified as *tie-T*. *Niang T* are *T* who are cool but with more feminine features. For example, they have long hair and like to wear suit and trousers. On the other hand, *Ye P* refers to those feminine lesbians with certain masculine characteristics.

Although diversity is allowed in gender identities, newcomers are forced to enter the labelling system once they approach the community. When they enter a lesbian chat group or socialize on lesbian forums, it is common that they would first be asked about their gender identification. Such culture started in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and gradually spread to the Chinese lesbian community (Kam, 2014). Since one has to declare their gender identity in order to fit in, an enforced labelling system and compulsory declaring process is formed. The labelling effect is further enhanced when newcomers really choose to classify themselves into different gender categories and intentionally perform according to those gender identities.

⁵⁶ *P/P* romance- *PP* 戀

⁵⁷ *tie-T* – 鐵 *T* (iron *T*), comparable to “stone butch”

⁵⁸ *niang T* – 娘 *T* (sissy *T*)

⁵⁹ *ye P* - masculine *P*

The labelling or stereotyping of gender identity is a source of pressure, especially on *T* lesbians in China. Under the influence of Chinese traditional patriarchy society, *T*, who are in a way playing the “male” role, are expected to share a heavier financial burden (Maizi, 2011). They also tend to perform patriarchy in their habit and behavior, by imitating the way of walking, speaking tone, and pose of males, lowering their voice, for example (Yan, Xuan, & Yuan, 2014). They also make themselves take on responsibilities like a man, and are more aggressive and strive for more decision power. Yan, Xuan, & Yuan (2014) further pointed out that some *T* chose to become butch because they yearn for power dictated by the patriarchal system. In some cases, *T* may even dally with women’s affection and compete with other *T* in the number of women they have dallied with (Yang, 2008). It seems that they are attempting to imitate the playboy image originally only found in males. By adopting a “male” identity in lesbian community, they want to execute the power a man would have on women. On the contrary, *P* are expected to be soft, tender, and gentle rather than being independent or decisive (Maizi, 2011).

The *T/P* ratio is not even. Generally, the population of *T* is higher, leading to some lesbians complaining that a *P/P* romance would reduce the number of *P* available for *T*, and is thus a waste of *P* resources (He, 2008).

5.4.2 – Attitude of Yuri fans towards Chinese

lesbian culture

Yuri fans form a strong community that is against the labelling system of the lesbian mainstream culture. In addition, because Yuri fans have long been invisible in the community, and even in the discussion of sexuality, they are considered outsiders to the lesbian community. In fact, Yuri fans keep themselves distant from the lesbian community and refuse to enter any labelling system, including identifying themselves as the androgynous lesbian (*Bufen*). Ms Green made it clear that she disliked the labelling system within Chinese mainstream lesbian. She stated that human is diverse and should not be constrained by labelling and gender stereotypes.

*I dislike this classification system. Homosexuals are a minority already, and you are further labelling them? Especially when "T" like to imitate the habits and behavior of heterosexual males and take on a proactive and strong stance, and "P" act like a heterosexual woman and behave in a passive and vulnerable way. This is what I don't hope to see. **Human are supposed to be diverse. They should not be bounded by such rules and restrictions.** (Emphasis added)*

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

Yuri fans especially dislike T's intentional imitation of male's gesture. Ms Green believed that this shows that tomboys are not confident with their female identity, so they are trying to cover it up with male characteristics. She also disliked the frivolous attitude among mainstream tomboys who fickle with love like a male.

Some "T" are annoying. For example, they deliberately imitate the

frivolous manner of some males, making it seem that they could get a girl easily if they act like that.

*They refer to themselves as ye⁶⁰ all the time. I think unless they have gender identity disorder, this just shows that **they are not confident with their female identity.** (Emphasis added)*

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

Fisher echoed with Ms Green that she also disliked frivolous *T* who behave like a male, as they are copying the image of males in the patriarchal society. She also criticized the lesbian community in China for imitating the mainstream heterosexual love relationship.

*I always think to myself, you're dressing and behaving like a man, are you identifying yourself as a male? That's more like gender identity disorder than homosexual... and there is this type of **playboy "T", who are just imitating the male image in patriarchal society.** For example, like Shane⁶¹. I know she is very nice to her fans, but I don't like her very much, for her "T", that is... She's not only flirting around, but also **giving me a strong feeling that she's a male.** (but she is not like Max⁶², who is a transgender).*

Sometime I think that the homosexuality community in China is in

⁶⁰ Ye- 爺 One of the ways male refer to themselves

⁶¹ Shane - A tomboy character in the lesbian drama *The L Word*

⁶² Max – Another character in *The L Word*

fact imitating the heterosexual society. (Emphasis added)

Fisher

(Age 34, homosexual, forum member)

Although they dislike the habits of T, Yuri fans in fact appreciate those girls who are cool or “handsome”. It is just the attitude of those T, as Fisher described, that Yuri fans dislike. As Agnes put it, she liked the cool style but not the male mentality. She also agreed that handsomeness and coolness should be detached from the gender stereotype notion and considered as a character in itself.

***Agnes:** Some girls like to dress up themselves to look cool. I also like those cool and handsome styles, but I won't think of myself as a man.*

***Researcher:** I also think that it is not a problem to like being cool. After all, this is not a “male” only style. Girls can like cool for cool itself. It is not necessary to attach a gender label.*

***Agnes:** Yes, I agree. (Emphasis added)*

Agnes

(Age 32, homosexual, forum member)

Agnes’ reply demonstrated that Yuri fans also appreciate female dressing in cool or handsome style, as long as it is not an attempt to imitate males. Yuri fans think that T are not completely accepting and respecting their gender as a female, because they also disrespect the status of female, like many males do. Specifically, they would rather enter the unequal social system and acquire the power and privilege that has been endowed in the male gender by pretending and acting like a male than breaking the

distorted social structure. The attitude of Chinese Yuri fans towards the mainstream lesbian culture is an important component in constructing their sexuality identity. Their common attitude also contributed to the construction of their subjectivity, which challenges homonormativity in the Chinese lesbian culture.

5.5 - Community distanced from mainstream lesbian

Although there is a high proportion of homosexuals among female Yuri fans, they choose to keep themselves distant from mainstream lesbians (Maser, 2013; Yang, 2012). For instance, they seldom call themselves *lala*, which is a term particularly derived from, and localized by, the Chinese lesbian community to indicate Chinese lesbian (Kam, 2012). Yuri fans seem to be a community that can be “classified” as lesbians who are different from the mainstream lesbians. This is due to Yuri fans’ disagreement of the mainstream lesbian values and culture. It should be noted that, they are not fear of being labelled homosexuals. In fact, they feel comfortable with it, and are willing to dedicate themselves to LGBT right activities. As opposed to tomboys, who are popular in the lesbian culture but not so among Yuri fans, Victoria suggested that Yuri fans worship *yujie*⁶³, which Ms Green agreed by saying that *yujie* are the representation of perfect image of female in Yuri community.

Victoria: *You can observe that the culture of “Yamibo” is markedly different from that of other lesbian forums in China. “Yamibo” members strongly belief in, and worship yujie with long hair.*

⁶³ Yujie - 御姐, Mature feminine woman, originated from Japanese term “o’nee”

Ms Green: I think yujie is a collection of all the good qualities that a perfect female should have.⁶⁴

Victoria: *Yes, it is the most beautiful collection. The most worshipped value on 300 ("Yamibo") is the one belonging to "yujie". If you are a "yujie", everyone will worship you. If you said you're a "T", then no one will care about you. But then if you compare us with people in the lesbian community, you will find that if you are a handsome T, everyone will worship you. This is the difference in values and sense of aesthetic between Yuri culture and lesbian culture. (Emphasis added)*

Ms Green

(Age 28, homosexual, forum member)

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

Besides, Yuri fans disagree with the "fast-food" culture of the lesbian community. Most of them revealed that people in lesbian communities are too frivolous and their intention of finding girlfriends is too obvious. Some interviewees recalled their experience with using social networking apps for lesbians and joining local lesbian gatherings, and found that they feel uncomfortable with the atmosphere among local lesbian.

Yes, I have used apps for les, but it would be the last method I consider using, because this way of meeting new (lesbian) friends is

⁶⁴ Victoria's interview was conducted in the presence of Ms Green.

too intentional and purposeful. It is not an ideal way.

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

I have an account on lesbian forums, but I seldom login. My ex-girlfriend was in the local lesbian community and thus I had been in touch with them. But I didn't get myself into those communities.

Most of them were too intentional. I didn't feel comfortable with the atmosphere. (Emphasis added)

Agnes

(Age 32, homosexual, forum member)

Interviewees also revealed that lesbian dating apps and local community gatherings are representations of casual sex or relationship. Local lesbian community gatherings seem to gather women who have a strong intention of dating and sex, which is not what Yuri fans are looking for. This is another example of the incompatibility between the culture of the lesbian community and the values of Yuri fans, and explains why Yuri fans rarely join the local lesbian community. Canton pointed out that ladies in local lesbian communities are more frivolous. Anson echoed with Canton that many in the lesbian community are looking for one-night stand, but she has no intention of having casual sex. Thus, she rarely uses lesbian dating apps or joins local lesbian community.

Those lesbians whom I met through other platforms seem to be more easy than Yuri fans on "Yamibo".

Canton

(Age 27, homosexual, forum member)

Interviewer: Would you consider using apps for les for dating?

Anson: I had thought about it. But then I am a “neat freak”. I have no intention of having casual sex. I won’t mingle with those in lesbian communities either. Sometimes there are lesbian events in study abroad forums. Usually I would just take a look. Most importantly, I think the purpose of those forums and local lesbian communities **are for one-night stand and I am not interested in having casual sex.**

(Emphasis added)

Anson

(Age 31, homosexual, Yuri fanfiction writer)

The most common gathering places for the Chinese lesbian community are lesbian bars and KTV (Maizi, 2011; Yan, Xuan, and Yuan, 2014), and their main purpose is to find a date. Chinese lesbians have a low visibility in public, and communication is lacking within the community (Maizi, 2011; Shi, 2014), as evidenced by the small number of voluntary lesbian activism campaigns in some second or third-tier cities in China. While lesbian activist groups are more active in big cities like Beijing and Shanghai, the overall participation or awareness of Chinese lesbians is not high (Maizi, 2011). Under this condition, most of these people have a low sense of sexuality identity and lack understanding on gender and sexuality issues. In addition, there is a lack of discussion on lesbian politics and identity, and on education on queer or feminist knowledge, which leads to them not understanding much about sexual and gender fluidity. This can be seen from Chiang and Wang’s (2016) interview with Melon, who identified herself as a *T*. It was after she joined an LGBT activist group that she finally learned about the concept of gender and sexual fluidity. This was the first time she felt that “it is alright to be a woman”. Before that, Melon deeply believed in the local

lesbian culture and followed the “ethics” and rules on *T*.

The criticism by Yuri fans on the butch and femme roleplaying is the same argument among western feminists during the second-wave feminist movement in 1960. Levitt, Gerrish, & Hiestand, (2003) and Harris and Crocker (1997) both criticized the butch and femme roleplaying for imitating the heterosexual society and demonstrated the feminists’ yearn for breaking the restrictions on gender and advocating androgyny. Since the 1980s, western lesbian politics had already gone through thorough discussion and developed an explanation on sexuality as well as butch/femme gender identity, and have moved on to post-feminist debate on butch and femme. China is now following these footsteps, as can be seen from some Chinese lesbians refusing to enter the *T/P* gender play and declaring themselves as “*Bufen*”, an androgyny gender, and Yuri fans criticizing *T/P* roleplaying. While there are works, for example, Zhao (2011), attempting to investigate and defend the *T/P* gender role using western post-feminist theory, a Chinese version of the theory is still necessary. Chinese lesbians will be able to move on to post-feminist debate on sexuality and gender as long as local lesbian communities have an adequate and saturated discussion on *T/P* gender identity, especially on gender fluidity and the problem of copying the constraints in patriarchal society. In a sense, Yuri is playing an important role as a pioneer in the debate of Chinese butch and femme by activating *T/P* debate within the homosexual community and providing their own arguments.

5.6 – Conclusion

This chapter is an analysis of the culture of *Yamibo* forum and its relationship with Chinese Yuri fans. *Yamibo* forum acts as an important platform for the development of

Chinese Yuri culture as well as fans' acceptance of their sexual orientation. It provides room for Yuri fans to discuss on not only the Yuri genre, but also issues on women's right and LGBT movement. Through the discussions, the critical thinking skill of Yuri fans is enhanced.

Most interviewees agreed that the *Yamibo* forum has become an inseparable part of their life, as their social network and life trajectory were largely being influenced by people they knew on the forum. This important queer cyber space also helps with the awakening of sexual orientation in numerous Yuri fans, and is a gathering place for people in the same shoes to communicate. Through such communications, members come to accept their sexual orientation better, and are able to construct their sexual identity as a Yuri fans. Most members have a strong sense of belonging to *Yamibo*, because this is where they developed their social network and even met their potential lovers through participating in different online and offline activities. The human-oriented approach of management also increases the sense of attachment of members to the forum. This attachment strengthens and consolidated their sexual identity as Yuri fans.

Moreover, *Yamibo* provides a platform for Yuri fans to access and discuss LGBT and women's right issues, which are usually ignored by the mainstream media. Yuri fans are concerned with LGBT and women's right, and are willing to participate in those movements. Through such discussions, Yuri fans can get in touch with values that deviate from mainstream viewpoints, which might influence their own values and help in cultivating their self-consciousness. The shared experience on *Yamibo* forum among Yuri fans is the foundation for the establishment of their sexual identity and subjectivity, which is the result of challenging the mainstream patriarchal or heteronormative values

and culture.

At the same time, the *Yamibo* culture is opposed to the mainstream lesbian culture, especially tomboy culture. It is one of the vital characteristics that differentiates Yuri fans from lesbians, despite the fact that most female Yuri fans are homosexual. The labelling system of *T*, *P*, and *H* and *T/P* coupling are the major rules in Chinese lesbian community. Yuri fans heavily criticize Chinese mainstream tomboys for their complete imitation of males and for trying to obtain the patriarchal power endowed in males by pretending to be a male. They are trying to take on the role of the oppressor under patriarchal system and enjoy the benefits ascribed to males rather than challenging the distorted power structure. The joint criticism by Yuri fans offers them the subjectivity for challenging the homonormativity in the Chinese lesbian community.

Yuri fans also dislike the “fast-food” culture among local lesbians, as most of them are looking for casual sex. Chinese mainstream lesbians have a low visibility in the public domain, and they lack communication and solidarity. They rarely participate in homosexual activist campaigns, which limited their knowledge of sexual identity and understanding on gender and sexuality. Most local lesbians do not reflect on the labelling system and tomboy culture, but are willing to unconditionally accept it.

Finally, the criticisms proposed by Yuri fans on the lesbian culture are the exact arguments by western feminists during the 1960s, as they both criticized butch and femme roleplaying for being a copy of the heterosexual hegemony. Through their criticisms and self-reflection on the Chinese mainstream lesbian, Yuri fans are acting as a pioneer in leading the discussion and awareness of gender stereotyping within Chinese mainstream lesbian community.

Chapter 6 - Yuri Love

This chapter will demonstrate the awakening of Yuri fans' sexual orientation through the story of Victoria - former moderator of *Yamibo* and Yuri fan for 13 years. Her story is an example of intimacy between members of the Yuri community and a clear manifestation of what many non-heterosexual Yuri fans yearn for in their relationship, namely, spiritual intimacy and mutual understanding. Victoria's story and quotes from other interviewees showed how Yuri love is exploring an alternate expression of intimacy and demonstrated Yuri love as a form of pure relationship. Besides, the discourses on Yuri fans' love experience revealed how Yuri relationship is challenging the traditional assumption on the role of sex in an intimate relationship and how the alternative sexual identity of Yuri fans is possible.

6.1 - The self-discovery journey as homosexual

Victoria considered Yuri as an important triggering point in her self-discovery process. Identifying herself as homosexual was not easy, but the real-world considerations of choosing to live a homosexual life and resisting the heterosexual system were even more challenging. When she first came in contact with Yuri and the interaction between girls, she felt like she discovered the new world. Before that, the world of lesbian was meaningless to her.

It was because Noir⁶⁵ that I found "Yamibo" forum, in 2002. This forum lets me get in touch with a whole new world, like an alternate door being opened. Although I knew what is homosexual, before I get obsessed with Yuri, I didn't find any connection between the two. This world was irrelevant to me. It

⁶⁵ A classic Yuri animation from 2001 about two female assassins going on a journey to search for their mysterious past.

was like non-existent to me. (Emphasis added)

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)⁶⁶

A lot of members on *Yamibo* were originally unaware of their sexual orientation until they were “turned to gay” by Yuri, as Victoria put it. This leads to an interesting question of whether sexual orientation is biologically-determined or socially-determined - a historically hotly-debated topic in sexuality study. There are two views on the cause of homosexuality, namely, biological determinism, which considers genetic factor as the vital cause, and social constructionism, which states that sexuality is socially-determined by culture and social factors. Victoria proposed the following idea on sexual orientation. She believed that sexual orientation has a biological substrate that can be triggered by cultural or social factors like Yuri.

In fact, lots of “Yamibo” members were not aware of their sexual orientation before coming in touch with Yuri culture. They are “turned to gay” by Yuri. So am I.

I think sexual orientation is intrinsic, but it needs to be discovered/realized. When we were born, our default setting was assumed by the mainstream culture to be heterosexual, but you may discover your real sexuality by going through a certain incident, for example. So it is not about being “altered”, as one naturally has the potential of being gay. You just need something to make you discover it afterwards. I think it is impossible for sexuality to be changed or solely determined by external factors.

⁶⁶ Victoria’s particulars will not be repeated in this chapter unless necessary.

(Emphasis added)

Before falling in love with Yuri, Victoria had a boyfriend. After Yuri helped her to discover her homosexual tendency, she has been struggling to accept her sexual orientation and negotiating with the presumed heterosexuality.

*It is hard for you to accept a change in your sexual orientation. **It is even harder for you to accept yourself as gay.** There is definitely a period of struggle in the first place. You would think, **it might be because the first boyfriend was not good enough and that he might not be the right person.** Would getting a boyfriend work? It won't be "Oh! so I am a lesbian? So great!" Rather, it must be like "What!? I turned out to be gay?! No, I have to try another one (boyfriend)." (Emphasis added)*

Victoria had three relationships with male before she got to know Yuri. She recalled the first two boyfriends being too annoying, so she ended up finding a third one. She really liked the third boyfriend and there was spiritual connection between them. However, their relationship still came to an end.

*When I met my third boyfriend, I was already on "Yamibo". **He was a member too, and sometimes he would write Yuri fanfiction for me,** which made him quite popular on the forum, because his fanfiction was really good.*

***But when your body was reluctant to him, he could feel it.** Although girls could fake an orgasm, it is different from the real*

one.

*Unlike many relationships, we broke up not because his sexual desire was too strong. It was about the disappointment and hurt that was caused when your lover rejected your body. I don't think he had a strong sexual desire. **He was an exceptional one among males (in terms of sexual desire).*** (Emphasis added)

Victoria said that she could have just got married with the third boyfriend and gone back to a “normal” heterosexual life. Yuri was a trigger for her sexual orientation awakening, but it is not enough to “change” her sexual orientation. It is necessary to decide between heterosexuality and homosexuality and negotiate with the former heterosexual life. In addition, there are many reality and social considerations, and it is definitely much easier to go the heterosexual way.

*It is because you found out that you can't go that way (being straight), so you chose the other. But **these two paths are not equal.** It is not like you are choosing between two bright paths. There is a big difference between these two paths. If you go get married and have children, that's a fine and broad way. But for the other one, well... at least in China it is a strange way to go... **There is a price for being a homosexual.*** (Emphasis added)

Therefore, Victoria had gone through a long process of negotiation and struggling with the presumed heterosexuality under the compulsory heterosexual hegemony after discovering her sexual orientation. Her interest in Yuri is not an adequate impulse for her to choose a homosexual life.

*It is not like you think Yuri is wonderful or moe⁶⁷, so you choose to be homosexual. It is related to whether it is contradicting the former sexual orientation you had. This is a very realistic question. **You can choose to just marry a straight guy and engage in a heterosexual marriage. At that time, I had a boyfriend. If I married him, then I would be leading a normal life.** By choosing the other path, I've chosen to leave the original community. There are lots of **reality considerations**, and they are **not just spiritual**. **Thinking "Yuri is wonderful" by itself is not enough.***

*When you discover Yuri and found that it is wonderful, it is one thing. **When you consider changing your sexual orientation, that's another issue.** (Emphasis added)*

Through negotiating with her former sexual orientation and considering the possible challenges that being a homosexual could lead to, Victoria finally decided to live her life as a homosexual. As she mentioned, she could have just chosen to lead a “normal” life and get married at that time, but she could not surrender and finally decided to give up being a heterosexual and chose to be homosexual based on her free will.

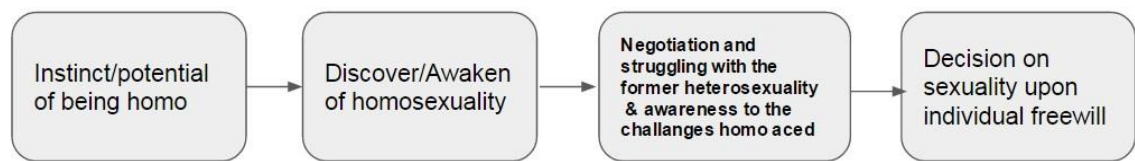
6.1.2 - Sexual orientation as a “choice” and negotiation of heterosexuality

Victoria proposed that there must be certain sexuality instinct or tendency inherited for one to become homosexual. Yet, “becoming homosexual” does not solely depend on biological factors, but also the negotiation with the compulsory heterosexuality. While

⁶⁷ Moe – 萌, a Japanese term for describing something lovely and cute

whether or not to enter into a queer life is a personal choice, it is impossible not to consider the possible sacrifices and accept the uncertainties one is going to face in the future. After considering the risks, the final decision should be made on one's free will. Using Victoria's case as an example, Figure 3 explicated the process of negotiation in her sexual orientation.

Figure 3 The process of Victoria's negotiation in her sexual orientation:



The toughest challenge when making a sexual orientation choice is the oppression stemming from the hegemonic compulsive heterosexuality and traditional family values of modern China, which forces individuals into a paradoxical situation, namely, whether to follow the social norms or to resist it and take the risk of being a minority. An individual has to be aware of the risk and potential challenges of living as a homosexual in China. Hence, the final decision has to be made after giving deep thoughts and determination, which is in fact similar to mainstream lesbian experience. In this sense, the process of Victoria's negotiation with presumed heterosexuality shows the agency of Victoria's sexual orientation choice under heterosexual hegemony.

6.2 - Yuri love: Ready to Sacrifice for an ideal love

Members of the Yuri community yearn for spiritual intimacy, and there is a high demand for spiritual connection in a relationship between Yuri fans. In the following,

the romantic relationship between Yuri members will be referred to as Yuri love.

Victoria said she used to think that relationships portrayed in love stories are just based on imagination, until she found one in Yuri love. The love in a Yuri relationship could reach a transcendent level of intimacy. Sex could be left out of the equation as long as both parties are together. Victoria had always wished for an everlasting intimacy with her love, but had never reached such intensity in her relationships with males.

*I won't sacrifice myself for a man, no matter how talented and excellent he is. I would only admire him, but wouldn't die for him. **But when I found that girl⁶⁸, I think I would. I would do anything for her. That's the difference. You found someone with whom your relationship can reach that level, and that someone is a woman, not a man.***

*After I discovered **the loveliness of Yuri, I think it is feasible. Yuri love can reach a high level of intimacy in which minds are in sync and I would wish to stay with my love forever. I could only find this kind of feeling on female but not male.** (Emphasis added)*

Victoria mentioned that when Yuri love is attained, sex would take a back seat.

*Although sex is important, it is not that necessary for me to have sex with her. **It is possible that we don't have sex at all.***

*Well... it is not about having sex in an aesthetic way. **Sex brings lots of pleasures, but it is not the most important issue.** (Emphasis*

⁶⁸ The first girlfriend she found on *Yamibo* forum

added)

As could be observed from Victoria's experience, sex is not the most significant element in a love relationship. The de-prioritization of sex in a relationship among Yuri fans challenges the notion that sexual desire is of utmost importance in sexuality or relationship (Halperin, 1989), and that the sexual identity of individual is built upon one's sexual desire, but not one's affection or spiritual intimacy. However, for the mostly female Yuri fans, sex is not the most important issue in their relationship. This is also a challenge to the phallus nature of the traditional sexuality and sexual identity, as well as in queer theory, which placed sexual experience at such an important position in their theory foundation that other elements, such as affection, spiritual connection, inner value, which are also vital in intimacy, are neglected. Instead of sex, Yuri culture raises the awareness on love and affection in a relationship. In this sense, Yuri fans' sexual identity is defined by females' spiritual connection and affection, but not by sex.

6.3 - Yuri love: Pure relationship

Giddens (1992) suggested a modern form of relationship known as pure relationship. Pure relationship involves mutual self-disclosure to each other in which their trust is built upon communication and the mutual disclosure (Giddens, 1991). As such, equality can be attained in a pure relationship due to the democratized nature of the interactions. Giddens usually used lesbian relationships as an example of pure relationship, as such relationships involve equal gender and emphasize communication. In fact, the love relationship between Yuri fans is also another expression of pure relationship, with equal gender and a democratized nature. In this section, the love experience of Victoria,

Paris Tung, and other members will be used as illustrations.

6.3.1 - Yuri love: Spiritual intimacy

Spiritual intimacy is a recurring theme in the Yuri sub-culture, and Yuri fans would apply it in their real-life love experience. Victoria focused a lot on the spiritual connection she and her first girlfriend had. The first three years of their relationship was a long distance one, since they lived in different cities⁶⁹.

The first three years, we were in a long distance relationship. There was a strong intensity of Yuri love, since there are lots of interactions on your spiritual side, but less about your daily life.

Researcher: *By spiritual, do you mean your interest and resonance in your values?*

Victoria: *Yes. There were a lot on the spiritual side, and about the sense of aesthetics.*

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

Paris, a veteran member and moderator of *Yamibo*, shared Victoria's view. She considered the sharing of joy and sadness, growing with each other, and communication as the main elements of intimacy.

In the actual practice of living together with your partner, I think intimacy is about sharing joy and sadness and is like a steady flow. It is also about growing and moving forward together in your

⁶⁹ They have met before, but the relationship remained long distance. Sometimes they would fly to each other's city for gathering.

career, your mentality, and your knowledge. If necessary, there should be lots of communication so you can understand each other's thoughts, solve the problem, and move on. I think that's called intimacy. (Emphasis added)

Paris Tung

(31, bisexual, forum moderator)

Besides, Paris Tung also highlighted disclosure of self, especially of your vulnerable side and evil part, as a significant part of intimacy. Communication and disclosure of self is even more difficult than just having sex.

*After all, I think **revealing your most vulnerable, most evil, and most weird side** to your partner is much more difficult than just having sex. Thus, **having an open heart and healthy communication** is what **we called intimacy**.*

I am really happy now. I think I've also made my partner more willing to express her own thoughts and concerns. (Emphasis added)

Paris Tung

(31, bisexual, forum moderator)

Both Victoria and Paris Tung were most concerned with the spiritual connection, the communication, and to learn and grow together in an intimate relationship. They did not consider sex as the top priority, though both admitted that it is an indispensable part of a relationship. In addition, the emphasis on spiritual connection and self-disclosure, as mentioned by Victoria and Paris Tung, also shows that Yuri relationships share the characteristics of pure relationship.

Interesting, Paris Tung said she would not consider buying a house or keeping a pet together to maintain a relationship, as it felt like forcing her partner to stay with a baby, like some couples in traditional heterosexual relationship do. She insisted that the vital part of a relationship is the love and affection that one had on the other. If there is none, the relationship would easily end even if there were shared property or babies. Not holding a relationship with external ties is also a feature of pure relationship.

Researcher: Do you think it is necessary to have own some shared property, like buying a house together or having a pet, to maintain a relationship?

Paris: I think that would look like using a property or baby to constrain the other. If the affection is gone, then the relationship will still end no matter what.

Researcher: A relationship is dependent on your heart.

Paris: Yes, for me, at least I would think that way.

Besides, although the Yuri community opposes the mainstream lesbian culture, the relationship interactions within the Yuri community are similar to those of lesbians. The lack of social ties, like children, marriage, and legal responsibilities for same-sex couples and the dependability on one's will for a relationship to stay alive make Yuri relationships a form of pure relationship, as defined by Giddens (1992). A pure relationship has no external ties, such as social or economic factors, and both parties are free to end it anytime. The nature of Yuri love makes this kind of non-conventional relationship much more fragile and difficult to maintain.

6.3.2 - Yuri love: A tough road to travel along

6.3.2.1 - Modern love

Victoria emphasized several times in her interview that Yuri love is a tough road to travel along in modern days, not just because of the same-sex factor, but also due to the many choices and temptations that challenge an individual's will power, making it much harder to have an everlasting relationship in a modern society. Victoria referred to the comments of a famous lesbian Chinese theater director, Tian Qin-xin, when she was asked whether she believed in everlasting love. Tian took a puff on her cigarette and said, "Do you think it is possible that you only love one person in your life? Don't be silly. When you have experienced life, you will find that it is impossible". Victoria added that the lack of convenient travel options and poor communication technology might have made an everlasting relationship more possible in the past, as it was difficult to meet or stay contact with many people.

*Everlasting love is difficult in modern society because there are **many alternatives**. There are too many opportunities for you to meet others people, which makes it harder for your lover **to stay with you forever**. We are no longer in your parents' society.*

(Emphasis added)

6.3.2.2 - Low break-up cost

It is not easy to divorce your partner in a conventional marriage in China, as traditional Chinese society considers divorce a taboo. Family members and relatives would make every effort to obstruct the divorce process. Apart from social bonding, children also

present a barrier.

Conventional marriages are different since they have kids and social bonding.

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

*Heterosexual relationships are less fragile since a couple has to go through many troubles and barriers if they decide to divorce. Your property will be divided, and you have to struggle against family objections. When heterosexual couples want to divorce, **their family members** will step in and try their best to **persuade them not to divorce**. Besides, the **Civil Service Bureau (of China)** **must mediate the couple**, since it is related to their salaries. When you consider **the many barriers to divorce**, you will give up and just let things be. (Emphasis added)*

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

Victoria accounted for heterosexual lovers having a longer relationship by the many barriers for them to separate. She further mentioned that it is more of having less friction than having high love intensity that makes a relationship last.

*The person who can have an everlasting relationship with you would not be your true love or the one you love most, but the one who is most suitable... It is the one who cooperates with you better and causes less friction to your daily life. It's less **about true love***

and more about having less friction between lovers. (Emphasis added)

Yuri love differs from conventional relationships that there will not be any barrier if one party wanted to leave or terminate the relationship, nor are there family members to act as mediators between the couple. Yuri relationships are free, and both parties can choose to terminate the relationship on their own will. Without kids, marriage, and financial factors like social insurance to consider, it is much easier for couples involved in same-sex relationship to break up than heterosexual couples. The low breakup cost in Yuri relationship is also a feature of pure relationship.

*The relationship between **same-sex couple is extremely fragile, since the breakup cost is too low. Spiritual connections are easy to change.***

*If it is Yuri (love), it will be just the relationship itself. **No other things to tie you up. No kids. No shared property. No social security. You may leave anytime you want to, as soon as there is a crack in your relationship...** When you have enough love experience, you will notice that quarrels are inevitable even if two persons are really in love with each other, because they are two independent individuals. (Emphasis added)*

6.2.2.3 - Barrier in Long distance relationship

Victoria enjoyed an unforgettable 7-year relationship with her first girlfriend, Alison, whom she met on *Yamibo*. It was also a part of many *Yamibo* members' memory, since

there are threads in which they shared their relationship on the forum. Victoria said it was Alison who made her wish for everlasting love and willing to sacrifice for her. Alison let her realize that true love portrayed in romantic stories can be true in the real world.

*When I was with my ex-boyfriends, **I didn't really want to cook for him or sacrifice anything for him.** I would follow my own will rather than revolving around him. Well... it is like this when you have not reached that love intensity. But when you truly fall in love with someone, no matter how independent you are, you would still change for her. Maybe you've never cooked before, but you would cook for her and enjoy the process. **You would lower yourself.** **When you meet your true love, to a certain extent, she has a higher priority.** (Emphasis added)*

After being a long-distance relationship for 3 years, Alison moved to Victoria's city in the fourth year. While they treasured every moment they spent together, their relationship still came to an end.

*We really treasured this relationship. Alison had strong faith in romantic love and she also wished for an everlasting love. But it turned out that all the expectations on love may only be achievable if you're still in school. **There are lots of reality issues that we haven't considered.** She might not be aware of the challenges she had to face and might not be ready for them. And when reality kicked in, she felt unbearable and left.*

I do not doubt the intensity of her love. It was just that she might not have realized how tough the real-life challenges could be. It is

*about the **ability to resist and overcome those barriers** (Emphasis added)*

Long distance relationships face a lot of challenges . For example, Alison had to get adapted to a new environment in Victoria's hometown. Alison was from Taiwan, meaning that the culture in mainland China would be totally new for her. Victoria explained that the difference in culture and values had added pressure to their relationship.

***Reality barriers started from living together, with living habits and different attitudes due to different culture.** The mainland Chinese culture was quite tough for her to get adapted to. After all she grew up in a different environment... You might find lots of things that make you feel uncomfortable in a new environment. I won't blame her for that. It is true that she had to overcome a harder challenge than I had to. It caused more stress on her than on me. After all, I was in my hometown. (Emphasis added)*

Despite the difficulties and harsh situations that Yuri love might face, Victoria still opted for Yuri love. For her, marriage serves as a social function for raising child and providing stability to society. It is the ordinary and conventional pathway for women as expected by society. Heterosexual couples seemingly enjoy longer relationship only because the breakup cost is too high, but not due to their love intensity. For Victoria, although Yuri love is more challenging to one's will power, only Yuri could provide the foundation for struggling with challenges of reality, namely, the spiritual sync.

***Yuri is far better than BG** (heterosexual love). If it is an ordinary*

*marriage, it would just be finding a partner or roommate for your later life. **It could lower your living costs, for sure. And I could live an easier life and have a perfect family. But this is not love. If it is Yuri, it could have attained the transcendental level (of love).***

*I think the **function of marriage is just for reproduction.** In other words, in a heterosexual marriage, if I were facing any difficulty or if I met someone that I love more, I could just divorce and leave. **Marriage certificate is just a piece of paper anyway.** (Emphasis added)*

The transcendent level that Yuri could attain was what attracted Victoria to pursue it and to endure the stress and uncertainty in homosexual life. Victoria considered Yuri love to be a better form of relationship than heterosexual love, even if she had to face many difficulties when travelling along the sexual minority pathway. As discussed above, Yuri fans believe that choosing a heterosexual life would mean compromising to the marriage system in China rather than achieving true love. The yearning for true love made Victoria dare to choose the difficult homosexual life. Victoria's experience is a good demonstration of Yuri fans' high expectation of romantic relationship and how they are willing to sacrifice a "normal" life and gamble their future to pursue their ideal love.

Victoria understood that it is impossible for the sense of aesthetics or the beauty within a relationship to last forever, and that spiritual bond are fragile to a certain extent, thus she believed that the key to everlasting relationship would be family values. In other words, an everlasting relationship requires assimilation and diffusion into every facet

of each other's daily routine, so that love is in every moment of each other's life and becomes part of life. According to a survey thread⁷⁰ on *Yamibo*, over 80% of 186 respondents reported they had had experience of long distance relationships. This shows that long distance relationships are a common phenomenon in the Yuri community, and many Yuri fans may have faced the same difficulties Victoria had faced.

6.4 - Yuri love: Physical intimacy

Some interviewees mentioned that, rather than having sex, they found moments of physical closeness, like hugging or kissing, more enjoyable, and they were able to achieve more fulfillment and a sense of security when staying physically close to their partners. Paris Tung said that she and her partner are both too lazy to have sex and do not have strong desire for sex, but they enjoy kissing and hugging. They both think that physical intimacy is more comfortable and less time consuming.

Basically I am the kind of person who does not have strong desire for sex. If it is not that I just happened to have an interest for sex, basically I give no particular thought to it. I just want to go home quickly to have a drink or sleep or work. I am too lazy to have sex.

Researcher: And your partner doesn't mind that?

Paris: Well... she's also ok with it. We are very similar. But we kiss and hug.

Researcher: So you prefer more physical closeness?

Paris: Yes, because it is comfortable, amusing, less time consuming,

⁷⁰ 300 Discussion: Long distance relationship meant to fail? Retrieved from 29 March, 2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-254149-1-1.html>

and there's no need to clean up afterwards. (Emphasis added)

Paris Tung

(Age 31, bisexual, forum moderator)

Orange is a married female Yuri reader. Although she considered herself heterosexual, she had a very close relationship with her best friend⁷¹ when she was in university. She recalled that they had a very intimate relationship, and the things she liked most is her best friend's hands. She enjoyed touching her best friend's hands because it was soft and her best friend's skin because it was delicate.

We were very intimate at that time. We slept together, went to school together, studied and hanged out together.

The part I like most is touching her hands. They were soft and long, and her skin was so delicate. You know, girls in Chengdu have really smooth skin. It was a really good feeling.

Orange

(Age 36, married heterosexual, forum member)

Instead of sexual activities, Yuri fans are keener on physical intimacy in their relationship. This again challenges the prioritization of sex as the most important element in a relationship. Yuri love provides an alternate way of expressing intimacy through physical closeness.

⁷¹ Best friend – 閨蜜. A Chinese term originating from 閨中密友, a female's best friend whom she could talk and share intimate topics or secrets with

6.5 - Yuri love: Attractive female for Yuri fans

Most Yuri fans consider mature and independent women to be most attractive. They also appreciate elder female (aged 30 or above), married women, or *Yujie*⁷². While males usually prefer younger girls and regard elder women as a burden, Yuri fans consider elder women of great attractiveness. In general, they yearn for a mature, intelligent, and independent *Yujie* as their ideal lover. In a thread⁷³ asking what type of female Yuri fans like, quite a number of them replied *Yujie* or elder woman. Some even claimed they like married woman.

For me, as long as she is "Yujie"...

Soulmate

(Forum member)⁷⁴

Married woman has the best characteristics! I really like gentle big sisters (大姐姐). I want to hug them and also want to be gently hugged.

er11

(Forum member)⁷⁵

I want a woman with straight long black (黑長直) hair. A woman who is gentle and kind to me. A mature and reliable elder sister.

Qinshengxiaye

⁷² Yujie - 御姐. Mature women older than 30. They are equipped with characteristics such as independent, knowledgeable, and reliable.

⁷³ *What type of female do Yuri fans like?*(2016), Retrieved from 29 March, 2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-254244-2-1.html>

⁷⁴ Soulmate (2016). *What type of female do Yuri fans like?* Retrieved from 29 March, 2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-254244-1-1.html>

⁷⁵ er11 (2016). *What type of female do Yuri fans like?* Retrieved from 29 March, 2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-254244-5-1.html>

(Forum member) ⁷⁶

It is also observed that Yuri fans tend to like female who are older than themselves. A member even opened a post⁷⁷ asking why most Yuri fans are interested in older females. Some members replied that mature women have a charisma.

Mature people have an attractiveness that is difficult to explain.

Maybe it is because I am usually taught by the elders but seldom learn from the youngsters.

phoebuffay

(Forum member) ⁷⁸

Besides, Yuri fans place an emphasis on the inner qualities of a female, including being kind, tough, independent, intelligent, reliable, and knowledgeable.

Kind, intelligent, strong, mature, independent, and introverted.

Mozijiang

(Forum moderator) ⁷⁹

Whatever she does, she is capable of finishing it. She should respect others yet stay firm on her own standpoint.

Stanlie29

⁷⁶ Qinshengxiaye 秦生夏葉 (2016) *What type of female do Yuri fans like?* Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-254244-2-1.html>

⁷⁷ *Why are most Yuri fans interested in females who are older?* (2016) Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-255644-1-1.html>

⁷⁸ phoebuffay (2017). *Why are most Yuri fans interested in female who are older?* Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-255644-1-1.html>

⁷⁹ Mozijiang 末子醬 (2016). *What type of female do Yuri fans like?* Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-254244-1-1.html>

(Forum member) ⁸⁰

It is someone who is calm and interesting, and knowledgeable.

L1374149696

(Forum member) ⁸¹

It is also common for them to yearn for a partner who could understand themselves, so that they could have a supportive relationship.

I like a woman who doesn't go with the flow and has her own ideas.

She should be rational, intelligent, kind, and also be able to understand me. We could support and take care of each other.

M548936

(Forum member) ⁸²

A person who really understands me. That's enough.

jaja122

(Forum member) ⁸³

As for Ms Green, she insisted that it is important that their values are in sync with each other's.

What is important is that our values are in sync with each other's.

⁸⁰ Stanlie29 (2015). *What kind of person would you found attractive ? Anyone in Yamibo that your found attractive?* Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-224017-1-1.html>

⁸¹ L1374149696 (2015). *What kind of person would you found attractive ? Anyone in Yamibo that your found attractive?* Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-224017-1-1.html>

⁸² M548936 (2016). *What kind of person would you found attractive ? Anyone in Yamibo that your found attractive?* Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-254244-1-1.html>

⁸³ jaja122(2016). *What kind of person would you found attractive ? Anyone in Yamibo that your found attractive?* Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-254244-2-1.html>

This is really a must.

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

Mature women who are above 30 are more popular in the Yuri community. This is a totally different phenomenon from the mainstream culture, in which younger girls are more popular and older women are considered as “leftover women”. The worship of mature women in the Yuri culture subverts the traditional stereotype and stigmatization on mature women commonly seen in the patriarchal society. Besides, the highlight on inner values of, and mutual understanding with, their ideal lovers is a reiteration of the spiritual and inner value oriented nature of the Yuri community, and shows the deprioritization of sex in relationship from a feminine standpoint.

6.7 – Conclusion

Through Victoria’s story, this chapter described the various characteristics of Yuri love and difficulties faced by those in a Yuri relationship. Victoria first recalled how Yuri culture helped awaken her sexual orientation, and that it has “turned” not only her, but also other forum members into homosexuals. However, she added that although Yuri acted as a “trigger” for her sexual orientation, choosing to live a homosexual life involves more than “love for Yuri”. Specifically, a long struggle and negotiation with the presumed heterosexuality is needed. For Victoria, this difficult process involved breaking up with her third boyfriend, whom she felt she could communicate with, and considering all the risks associated with turning into a homosexual, as homosexuality is a difficult pathway to travel along in China due to the different social constraints and family pressure. However, Victoria refused to enter a heterosexual marriage, which she took as a compromise to the compulsory marriage system in China. She despised the

fact that marriage has become a task for reproduction and it is not a life she wanted. For her, Yuri love is the ideal form of relationship, and she was willing to take the risk of dealing with the difficulties as a homosexual.

Victoria also discussed how she treasured her relationship with her first girlfriend, Alison, whom she recalled to have a high level of spiritual intimacy with. Her love for Alison was so strong in intensity that she was willing to sacrifice and change for her. While sex was also a significant component, it was not a necessity for her. It is a feature of Yuri love that sex is deprioritized in a relationship and replaced with alternate elements, such as spiritual intimacy and mutual understanding, both of which are also vital for a relationship. Victoria's experience is proof that Yuri fans' sexuality, instead of being defined by sex, is built upon the females' spiritual bonding, affection, and mutual understanding.

Since a Yuri relationship involves equal gender and equal interaction, which requires adequate communication, it can be considered a form of expression of Giddens's (1992) pure relationship. High level of mutual disclosure and understanding is characteristic of Yuri relationships, in which the intimacy is built upon inner connection. Meanwhile, there are no external ties, such as children, marriage, or financial factors to hold the relationship, so Yuri relationships share the characteristics of pure relationship in being fragile, as the cost for break up is low. These features are especially prominent in long distance relationships, which is common among Yuri fans. Victoria's story is thus able to provide a glimpse of the barriers and fragility Yuri fans may face in their relationship.

From a different viewpoint, Jamieson (1999) in fact questioned Giddens's pure relationship for ignoring the implicit social inequality in relationship. However,

information on interviewees' social background was not collected in this study due to privacy, and data collected was not enough to show signs of social inequality within relationships. Further study on Yuri relationships is needed in order to examine signs of social inequality in relationships within Yuri community. However, from the story of Yuri fans and quotes from their interviews on relationship, it is obvious that a certain degree of equality could be attained within a Yuri relationship, which involves two females - two equal gender. Their emphasis on communication and revealing of the vulnerable self reflects their concern and respect for each other's willingness and feelings, and equality in interaction can be attained in the process.

Another interviewee, Paris Tung, emphasized that physical intimacy is more favored by the Yuri community than sex, and mentioned that she enjoyed physical closeness provided by kissing and hugging. Yuri relationship thus explores an alternate expression of intimacy instead of having sex as the vital element.

Finally, *Yamibo* members also discussed the types of female they find attractive, and named mature elder women (*Yujie*) as their ideal lover. This is a totally different story from the mainstream culture, in which younger girls are worshipped and elder women stigmatized. Thus, Yuri culture subverts the patriarchal stereotyping and stigmatizing of elder women by appreciating the matureness, reliability, and resourcefulness of elder women.

Chapter 7 – Characteristics of Yuri

fans

In the previous chapter, Yuri love was discussed using Victoria's story as an example of romantic relationship within Yuri community. This chapter will further explore the characteristics of Yuri fans and argue that Yuri fans form a rebellious community. They are rebellious in the sense that whenever they discover an unbearable or irrational oppression in the normative society, or even in a minority culture, they not only refuse to co-opt, but they also resist it. They are being critical of the normative and hegemonic society and they are sensitive to gender issues and the persisting normativity in their surrounding culture. Their rebelliousness is expressed in three levels, as will be analyzed and explicated in the following sections. This chapter will also analyze the negotiation with the surrounding norms by the Yuri community and the reflectiveness they developed, both of which provide important implications to the subjectivity of Yuri community.

7.1 - Resistance to hegemonic heterosexuality

As discussed in the previous chapter, *Yamibo* forum has been acting as an important gathering point for Yuri readers to explore and identify their sexual orientation, as Yuri is a trigger for numerous Yuri fans to discover their sexuality. However, in China, forming a family through heterosexual marriage and having children are compulsory tasks for family continuity (Kam, 2012; Gaetano, 2014), and they are considered significant filial duties under Confucian tradition. Individuals who do not get married, especially females, would face great pressure from their family, as having a family with children is a symbol of maturity and adulthood, and signifies that a person has become a responsible adult. The state also plays a role in reinforcing the monogamous heterosexual marriage through community monitoring, resources allocation, and social

status (Kam, 2012). For example, married couple enjoys more economic benefit in China in form of state-owned enterprises offering married employees more economic and material rewards (Kam, 2012), such as being allocated a larger apartment in a shorter amount of time than those who are single (Kam, 2012). Moreover, the Chinese government has been intensifying the stigmatization on single women and homosexual women, both of whom choose not to enter the hegemonic marriage system, through state-related media, medical institutions, academic research, and official institutions.

Homosexual or lesbian studies in China usually identify homosexuality as “abnormal” and “a problem to be solved”, as exemplified in several studies that included suggestions - disguised as concluding sentences - on how to prevent the phenomenon and create a heterosexual “healthy environment” for the younger generation (e.g., Liu and Lu, 2005; Tian, 2003; Wang & Wen, 2002). These studies serve a monitoring purpose for the government and were analyzed from a hegemonic heterosexual standpoint rather than from the perspectives of gender and sexual minorities. Apart from academic studies, official bureaus in China treated the marriage problem as a societal rather than a private issue. For example, the Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau warned in its report on single population that marriage problem would lead to uncertainties for society (Cao, 2007; Gaetano, 2014). Recently, the representative of China's Communist Youth League announced in the press conference held on May 2017 that old unmarried youth is a problem that needs to be solved (Chen, 2017)⁸⁴. At the same time, the Zhejiang Provincial Party Committee had already set up a marriage department – an official dating and marriage institution of the state providing matchmaking service to Chinese youth to help solve the “problem”. It is an official

⁸⁴ Chen.Y. (2017). *Zhejiang Province, the provincial party committee to set up a marriage department dedicated young people off single*. Retrieved from 20 May,2017 <http://www.top-news.top/news-12962081.html>

state institution that involved in dating and marriage of Chinese youngster. The official agency for female issues in China, the All-China Women's Federation, even reprinted the editorial of *China News Service* (中國新聞網) entitled *How many "leftover women" deserve our sympathy?* (Xinhua News Agency, 2011)⁸⁵ on their website.⁸⁶ This article stigmatized highly-educated "leftover" women as sluts and morally-corrupted women who look for one-night stand and wealthy men to be their mistress.

It is obvious that, in China, the state has established powerful institutions and measures to monitor and legitimize the monogamous heterosexual hegemony, and women who do not enter the marriage and childbirth system as expected, including single women, lesbian, infertile women, frivolous women, and sexually active women are being branded as "abnormal women" (Kam, 2014). In face of the double expectation for marriage and childbirth, Yuri fans refuse to go with the flow and insist on their choice on sexuality, placing the Yuri community at the opposite end of social norm and having to fight against the formidable pressure created by the heterosexual marriage hegemony alongside other sexual minorities. For Fisher, the *Yamibo* forum played a significant role in her life, as she chose not to be surrender to the marriage expectation forced upon her and found herself a girlfriend and built her own social network on the forum.

"Yamibo" forum changed my life. Like my social network and my girlfriend. If I haven't been on "Yamibo", I might have already returned to my hometown and married a man

⁸⁵Xinhua News Agency (2011). *How many "leftover women" deserve our sympathy?* 新華社 (2011) 有多少剩女值得我們同情? Retrieved from 29 March,2017

http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/lady/2011-03/10/c_121170425.htm

⁸⁶ This article can no longer be found on All-China Women's Federation's website after causing widespread disputes on the internet.

Fisher

(Age 34, homosexual, forum member)

Both Yuri and the *Yamibo* forum provide a space for Yuri readers to escape from the marriage expected of them and explore alternate possibilities in sexuality. Another weapon used by Yuri fans to resist the mainstream heterosexual culture and search for alternate interpretations of female intimacy is the queer reading of Yuri text, as discussed in Chapter 4. Yuki, for example, indicated the essence of Yuri story/relationship is not whether the writer has described a clear romantic/Yuri relationship, but whether the reader can find alternate interpretations of female intimacy in the text and subvert the traditional romantic story and role playing.

*Most of the time, instead of worrying about whether there is real Yuri relationship in a new animation or drama, as an audience, I care more about whether I can “**imagine them (the female characters) being together, light a spark that belongs only to them, and develop a unique romantic relationship, all without disrupting the original setting in the text**”. This is the so-called “Yuri eye”! As long as you can infuse everything with your imagination, who cares they (female characters) are just friends with only three lines of dialogue in the original story? (Emphasis added)*

Yuki

(Age 23, homosexual, forum member)

Yuri fans’ spirit of resistance against the heterosexual marriage expectation is manifested not only in the text but also in reality. They are aware of the shackles that

marriage would add on them and how marriage and childbirth have become a mission or task that has to be accomplished because of the expectation of the heterosexual society and family rather than because of their free choice. Therefore, they intentionally resist the norm by refusing to follow the mainstream ideology on marriage and forming a family. Through struggling against, and negotiating with, the marriage pressure in various ways, such as by queer reading, Yuri fans are able to reclaim their sexuality, body autonomy, and decision on their own life, and such rebellious acts towards traditional values have united Yuri fans in discussing those issues. For example, Alice reported that Yuri fans believe that most of the heterosexual girls in China are not conscious of the pressure from marriage expectation and heterosexual hegemony, and since these girls form the majority of society, those who are aware of the hegemonic constraints have become the “heterogeneous” part of society.

*“Yamibo” forum is a place where there are **more open-minded people** than in the three-dimensional world (real life). It is a nice place.*

*In certain aspects, **“Yamibo” members are outliers, like the “heterogeneous” part of a homogenous society.** For example, issues like traditional family formation, modern marriage, gender relationship, and society’s hostile and unfair treatment of female tend to be viewed by “Yamibo” members from a female point of view.*

*Most women focus on relationship/marriage rather than female themselves. **They are very traditional and it is not easy for them to accept new ideas.***

It is also related to state policy and public opinion manipulation.

The mainstream values are like this, and thus this is the expected

result.

So, most of the time, I really feel like I'm the only person who knows what I'm doing. It is miserable.

The mainstream value still consider female a subordinate to family and to male. (Emphasis added)

Alice

(Age 30, bisexual, forum moderator)

Alice observed that most heterosexual women in China are only concerned about sustaining a relationship for the sake of marriage but not from the standpoint of a female. Jigesi and Evans concurred, as both pointed out their observation that in Chinese society, people only consider marriage as a task to be completed, and in the process, they would give up their self-autonomy.

*Well.... To have a kid and buy house? Whether you have a kid or not, owning a house is a requirement for living in our society nowadays. These are real-life issues. Or you can say they are problems specific to a certain period of life. Love, marriage, and childbirth should come naturally. When you fall in love deeply, you will consider these issues. I feel that **modern people are treating them as tasks to be completed. Males have to be rich and own a house and a car, and females have to have fair skin, be rich, and be beautiful (白富美).** If love is just **for reproduction**, how can "DINK"⁸⁷ family and platonic lovers live with it? (Emphasis added)*

⁸⁷ DINK- a new style of family with "dual income, no kids"

Jigesi

(Forum member) ⁸⁸

*Now my family is arranging blind dates for me. I feel really sad and frustrated. I understand that being with someone who has a better economic status will make life easier, but is it the perfect life? I think **Chinese people are living without their self**. Most of the time they can't choose their own way of living, and have to follow their family's choice and consider social stigma. (Emphasis added)*

Evans

(Forum member) ⁸⁹

Such posts show that *Yamibo* members have a clear notion on the compulsory heterosexuality in China, and they are strongly against it. Upon further study, it was found that their motive for resisting the hegemonic heterosexual marriage system is their faith in love and intimacy. Their faith in true love has prompted their insistence on searching for ideal love, and if they cannot find their true love in the end, they would rather choose to be alone for the rest of life than to surrender to the marriage system or find a substitute partner. As evidence from a survey thread posted on the General Discussion board on *Yamibo*, which asked members whether they have thought about dying alone if they cannot meet their “right one”.⁹⁰ Among the 979 members who voted, over 80% said that they would choose to die alone. Sha, one of the 80% who

⁸⁸ Jigesi 吉格斯.(2013). *What can I do? I can't stand it. I don't like men and I don't want to get married*. Retrieved from 29 March,2017. <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-145254-1-1.html>

⁸⁹ Evans.(2013). *What can I do? I can't stand it. I don't like men and I don't want to get married*. Retrieved from 29 March,2017. <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-145254-1-1.html>

⁹⁰.Academic approach: *I wonder whether 300 members had thought about dying alone if they have not met their “right” one*. Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-253386-3-1.html>

voted to die alone, explained that it is better to die waiting for the right partner than to find someone just to soothe the loneliness.

*I don't know whether this question is about "quality over quantity"
(寧缺毋濫) or "bachelorism". If it is the former, I choose "yes". If I
haven't met the "right" person, then I will wait till I meet one.
(Emphasis added)*

Sha

(Forum member)⁹¹

“Quality over quantity” in relationship is a recurring theme among Yuri fans. Their strong belief and faith in true love is the driving force behind their willingness to tolerate loneliness in their future life. In addition, their belief in romantic love and intimacy motivates them to reclaim their autonomy on body and sexuality. Backed by this strong faith, they dedicate themselves to fighting back the stress exerted on them by the heterosexual hegemony, including being stigmatized as “unmarried women”, “spinster”, “homosexual”, and “unfilial”. There is no doubt that Yuri fans are a group of women who are clear on their intention to fight for sexuality autonomy.

7.2 - Resistance to lesbian culture

The second level of rebellion is that Yuri fans recognize the difference between themselves and the majority, including the heterosexual hegemony and the mainstream lesbian culture, as discussed in Chapter 5. Through the differences they experienced, they have formed their own identity and subjectivity in challenging homonormativity

⁹¹ Sha 沙.(2016).*Academic approach: I wonder whether 300 members had thought about dying alone if they have not met their "right" one.* Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-253386-3-1.html>

and heteronormativity. Stein (1993) concluded from his study of lesbian and queer identity that the construction of identity is based upon the shared experience of being the “other” within the mainstream culture. Thus, before analyzing Yuri fans’ resistance to lesbian culture, it would be helpful to investigate the history of *Yamibo* forum. As will be explained later, Yuri fans’ experience as an outsider in, or “the other” of, the system and the norm echoed with the incompatibility that they experienced in the mainstream lesbian community.

The *Yamibo* forum was formed because of Yuri fans’ dissatisfaction with the mainstream ACG environment, which was filled with discussions were hostile and disdainful towards female and *straight men carcinoma*⁹². Under this circumstance, the founders of the *Yamibo* forum decided to build a land of Yuri culture for themselves. Anson, a veteran member of the *Yamibo* forum, recalled that *Yamibo* forum become one of the a few female-friendly ACG forum while other mainstream ACG forum are full of disrespect to female.

*“Yamibo” forum was a **female-friendly forum** at that time. Mainstream ACG forums were dominated by male members, and the atmosphere was not good. I wanted to find a forum with more female members and friendly discussion atmosphere. Back then, the atmosphere on “Yamibo” forum was not bad. Even now, I still think that “Yamibo” forum has a better attitude towards female characters compared to other mainstream ACG forums. Many **mainstream ACG forums** are filled with comments like “What’s the use of female characters being powerful? They’re still **being fucked***

⁹² Straight men carcinoma (直男癌) - A Chinese online abbreviation meaning “male chauvinist pig”

by the male leads". (Emphasis added)

Anson

(Age 31, homosexual, Yuri fanfiction writer)

Yamibo forum thus provides a space where Yuri fans can engage in different discussions on sexuality and love value. The opportunity to further explore the Yuri culture and discuss sexuality helped many Yuri fans recognize their sexuality, and when they discovered that the mainstream lesbian community is not an ideal environment for them, they decided to break away, despite the fact that they were able to access more resources by remaining in the majority lesbian community than creating another place and starting from zero. Not only so, Yuri fans also criticized the mainstream lesbian culture, which they considered to be distorted. As discussed in Chapter 5, the Yuri community disagreed with the labelling of *T* or *niang T*, *P* or *ye P*, or *H* in mainstream lesbian culture, and criticized the nature of Chinese Tomboy culture for simply imitating male habitats and attempting to obtain the male power inherited under patriarchy. Mandy and Futa both considered the *T/P* labelling unnecessary.

I am really annoyed about the "T/P" labelling

It's just two women. Where's the need for labelling?

Mandy

(N.A., heterosexual, founder of "Yamibo" forum)

In mainstream lesbian culture, "T" will search for "P" and "P" will search for "T". I don't think lesbians need such categorization.

Futa

(Age 22, homosexual, forum member)

After visiting a lesbian bar, Victoria was clear that she did not like the atmosphere inside, because she found that most lesbian couples are consisted of a *P* and a chubby tomboy, which is just a carbon copy of the heterosexual system. Ms Green agreed with Victoria and said she also had a bad impression of *P*, as they always asked to be spoiled.

Victoria: *I have been to lesbian bar. I don't like the atmosphere in there. And it was filled with chubby "T". Every little "P" was together with a chubby "T".*

Ms Green: *I do not have a good impression of "P". It seems that they expected their partner to spoil her. Feels like just a copy of the "strong male, weak female" heterosexual model, just that in this case, it is strong "T" weak "P".* ⁹³

Victoria: *Absolutely! It is just an exact copy of heterosexual system. I don't understand why they don't just go find a man? (Emphasis added)*

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

Victoria

(Age 36, homosexual, former forum moderator)

⁹³ It is a conversation between Victoria and Ms Green during Victoria's interview. Victoria's interview is conducted in the presence of Ms Green.

Besides, as discussed in Chapter 5, Yuri fans dislike the tomboy culture in mainstream lesbian culture due to the fact that tomboys are in fact trying to obtain the power endowed in male by pretending and imitating a male's gesture. This shows that tomboys disrespect their female identity. As Futa put it, tomboys imagine their identity to be identical to male and are thus constrained by the patriarchal hegemony.

*I really dislike "Tie T" (鐵 T, literally "iron T"). I think they are too rigid and can't get along with me. "T" don't want to be uke-ed by others (被攻)⁹⁴, as they consider their status to be the same as male. I won't be friends with this type of people. They are **constrained by the patriarchal ideology**. (Emphasis added)*

Futa

(Age 22, homosexual, forum member)

Through criticizing the mainstream homosexual community, Yuri fans formed their core identity and created their own Yuri culture. The history of *Yamibo* forum shows that Yuri fans have the shared sense of being the "other", which helped shape and consolidate their identity as "Yuri fans". The differentiation process has led to a process of identity construction. Specifically, their identity is built on the differentiation from heteronormativity and homonormativity.

7.3 – Staying vigilance of own culture

The two levels of rebellion and resistance discussed above are in fact due to the Yuri community being aware and vigilant of social normativity. This reflective vigilance can

⁹⁴ Sexual position as bottom or power position as passive one.

also be applied to the Chinese Yuri community, as Yuri readers would criticize on phenomenon that they are concern about, based on their reflection on their own culture.

Vigilance is also commonly mentioned in feminist writing, which points out that feminists need to stay vigilant of the customs and social norms around them. They also need to constantly stay vigilant of issues that vary from theory to romantic relationship, races, institution, state apparatus, as well as themselves. This sensitivity enables feminists to stay awake in an illusive patriarchal society and to establish their own knowledge on feminist theory. For instance, in the final paragraphs of *Feminist Rhetorical Resilience* (Flynn, Sotirin, & Brady, 2012), the authors encouraged readers to stay vigilant when theorizing and suggested that “we should remain ethically reflective and vigilant as we continue in our efforts to theorize current ideals”. Moreover, White (2008) also concluded that many previous feminist writing would call for vigilance in monitoring an egalitarian relationship.

However, there are differences between the vigilance in Yuri readers and feminists. The vigilance in Yuri is not for pointing out that certain ideology is improper. Rather, it serves to identify cases suspected of stereotyping, labelling, discriminating, or stigmatizing. Such criticisms belong not to a theoretical domain, but are targeted towards examining whether practical acts are stereotyping, stigmatizing, or labelling. Usually, they are not generated from a collective “Yuri fans” standpoint, but are results of individual reflection. Therefore, unlike feminists, Yuricons would not say “we, as Yuri fans, should keep constant vigilance of our surrounding”. Yuri readers do not advocate for the community to stay vigilant, but would reflect on themselves from an individual standpoint. In other words, the fact that Yuri fans stay vigilant does not contribute to the “Yuri business” of promoting or proliferating the Yuri culture. Yuri

fans do not consider this a part of being a Yuri fan, but such vigilance coincidentally happen among Yuri fans and is one of the reasons why they gathered and are sensitive to, and critical of, the current environment.

Hence, the *Yamibo* forum provides an online space for gender debate and discussion on sexuality and LGBT, and, as such, offers the agency for the autonomy of Yuri fans' sexuality and self-consciousness and for their negotiation with the normative society. It is a nurturing place for the numerous *Yamibo* members who intend to reclaim their self-autonomy and teaches them to be vigilant of their environment and reflect on their own culture through discourse and debates among members. Yuri fans can influence each other through the debates, and sometimes, senior members can provide guidance to younger members. Canton, a veteran member of *Yamibo*, is one of those who were greatly influenced by her seniors, both in her values in romantic love as well as life philosophy.

Researcher: Do you think the forum has any influence on you? For instance, on love, choosing a partner, or life philosophy?

Canton: In all of the aspects. Everything you just mentioned.

I got to understand better how people older than me think, because they interacted with us a lot back then.

*We exchanged quite a lot of ideas through discussion. Sometimes members with rich life experience would **advise other members and analyze for them.** (Emphasis added)*

Canton

(Age 27, homosexual, forum member)

The self-reflection of Yuri fans would sometimes translate into a critical atmosphere on the forum, where they can be critical when discussing Yuri culture and the customs within *Yamibo* forum. One of the examples is the stigmatization of sex when defining Yuri as a pure relationship. Yuri fans stay vigilant to prevent the culture in Yuri from becoming one that complies with gender issues and stigmatization. Ms Green and Alice, for instance, both expressed a clear stand against labelling Yuri as pure, as opposed to relationships that involve sex being classified as “not pure”. This distinction can lead to another privileged hierarchy with being pure or non-sexual being the better option, thus creating another stigmatization of sex.

*In fact, I am getting more against adding the label of pure on Yuri, as this is in fact a **stigmatization of sex**, implying that a relationship is no longer “pure” as soon as it involves a higher level of love and sex. I understand that at first, fans were just being sarcastic and trying to classify whether it has reached the level of GL or H, but it can’t get rid of the notion that “sex is dirty”. It’s probably related to the tradition cultural values in East Asia. (Emphasis added)*

Ms Green

(Age 29, homosexual, forum member)

*Labelling Yuri as pure seems to be related to the virginity complex and it is weird. My concept is that spirit and body form one entity. I think most adults hold this kind of view. **Platonic relationship is rare.** It is just different demand in a relationship. It is not necessary to **create a privileged hierarchy by labelling a relationship as being pure or spiritual or sexual...** Well, it is common for younger Yuri fans*

to think that Yuri is pure. (Emphasis added)

Alice

(Age 30, bisexual forum moderator)

Apart from the criticisms towards Yuri culture as described above, the rejection of tomboy culture, which has been discussed in Chapter 5, is also being criticized. Paris Tung, a moderator of *Yamibo* forum and the official Chinese translator of *Mariasama ga miteru*, criticized the forum for its hostility towards tomboy and pinpointed the implicit gender stereotype in Yuri culture. She noted that Yuri fans have a strong stereotype on the femininity of female, and this presumption of the feminine context in fact put constraints on how an ideal woman should behave.

*I think fans of Yuri and BL have some stereotypical thoughts on gender. That's why they feel that only **girl (feminine) with girl (feminine) can be considered aesthetic**. Yuricons will probably throw up if it's girl (masculine) with girl (masculine).*

*I think this phenomenon comes from their own presumption of a **traditional definition of gender stereotype**. I think those who love Yuri are like this, holding many ideas on what a girl should be like.*
(Emphasis added)

Paris Tung

(Age 31, bisexual, forum moderator)

Paris Tung criticized Yuri fans for so being stuck to gender stereotyping that they cannot accept a CP (coupling) between a masculine female (*T*) and feminine female. Anson also shared a similar view as Paris Tung, as she challenged the boundaries of Yuri as to

why *T* cannot be considered as Yuri. Anson viewed Yuri as an inclusive genre. To her, as long as there is Yuri interaction, *T* should also be included under the Yuri genre.

*I have no comment on “T”, but I disagree with those who think that “T” shouldn’t be counted as Yuri. I would flip the question, **why isn’t a coupling with “T” Yuri?***

*For me, Yuri is a self-recognized female falling in love with a female. But there’s no problem with a self-recognized male falling in love with a female too. This is in fact just a kind of Yuri interaction in my view. **Why are we restricting Yuri and excluding everything that don’t fit our own definition?** (Emphasis added)*

Anson

(Age 31, homosexual, Yuri fanfiction writer)

To conclude, the Yuri community stays vigilant of the normative society, mainstream lesbian culture, and their own culture. As a sexual minority, Yuri fans try to avoid stigmatization, discrimination, labeling, as well as stereotyping, all of which are normally seen in the normative world. In this sense, it is the implication of Yuri fans’ sexual subjectivity in resisting the homonormativity and heteronormativity. Firstly, they fight against the expectation of heterosexual marriage and shatter the prevailing idea of heterosexuality. Secondly, they are aware of the labelling and disgracefulness towards womanhood in tomboy culture and *T/P* labelling within mainstream lesbian culture. As a result, they chose to create their own space online as the agency to resist the mainstream and homosexual norms. Thirdly, their dissatisfaction towards the hetero-norms and homo-norms drives them to also be vigilant of being stigmatizing, labelling, and stereotyping within their own culture as well.

7.4 - Pessimistic love value

It has been established that it is their faith on love and intimacy that has made Yuri fans aware of the possibility of dying alone. The idiom “quality over quantity” (寧缺毋濫) is a recurring theme among Yuri fans when discussing relationship and marriage, which implies that the Yuri community holds a pessimistic attitude towards romantic relationship. Yuri fans would rather wait for true love than to just be with someone for their company. Recall the forum survey on dying alone⁹⁵, in which 80% of the 979 surveyed members did not feel positive in finally finding their true love. Forum members Huange and Dongren Azeroth both revealed that they do not think it is easy for them to find their true love. Other members, like, LI801, C.yan, and c8843838 insisted on “quality over quantity”, claiming that they would not be with someone just for chasing away loneliness.

I think it is quite difficult to find the right one...

Huange

(Forum member)⁹⁶

I think my standard is too high... so maybe I won't have a companion for the rest of my life

Dongren Azeroth

(Forum member)⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Academic approach: I wonder whether 300 members had thought about dying alone if they have not met their “right” one. Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-253386-3-1.html>

⁹⁶ Huange (2016). Academic approach: I wonder whether 300 members had thought about dying alone if they have not met their “right” one. Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-253386-3-1.html>

⁹⁷ Dongren Azeroth(2016).Academic approach: I wonder whether 300 members had thought about dying alone if they have not met their “right” one. Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-253386-3-1.html>

*This is what I plan to do if I can't find the right one. After all, **if I have to live with someone I don't like and not compatible with my values, then I'd rather be alone.** At least I'm free of all constraints and attachments. (Emphasis added)*

L1801

(Forum member)⁹⁸

"Quality over quantity" ideology +1 (寧缺毋濫)

Although I am afraid of loneliness and I am a person who can't live without love. But still, I will only be with the person I really love.

C.yan

(Forum member)⁹⁹

We cannot force love. I would rather be alone for the rest of my life than to suffer.

C8843838

(Forum member)¹⁰⁰

The topic of dying alone led to some members coming up with an idea to build a retirement home in their community, so that they would have the company of their close friends. Taki, an active veteran member and a forum moderator on *Yamibo*, was very supportive of the idea and provided a blueprint of what the future of Yuri fans could be

⁹⁸ L1801 (2016). *Academic approach: I wonder whether 300 members had thought about dying alone if they have not met their "right" one.* Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-253386-3-1.html>

⁹⁹ C.yan (2016). *Academic approach: I wonder whether 300 members had thought about dying alone if they have not met their "right" one.* Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-253386-3-1.html>

¹⁰⁰ C8843838 (2016). *Academic approach: I wonder whether 300 members had thought about dying alone if they have not met their "right" one.* Retrieved from 29 March,2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-253386-3-1.html>

like.

**300 (“Yamibo” forum) retirement home is a dream for many 300ers
in the 300 QQ chatroom.**

*My current wish is to be around my favourite junior 300ers for 250
more years, and to have 300 buddies whom I could travel around
with after I get old.*

*I have been hanging out with my 300 buddies for 12 years, **and I
don’t mind doing this for the next and the next next 12 years. As
long as 300 is here, I won’t be alone.** (Emphasis added)*

Taki

(Forum moderator)¹⁰¹

Other members, like j8047528 and Maipianpian, also support the idea of living with the close friends they made on Yamibo, and even thought about building a “Yuri retirement home”.

*I have thought about it (having to die alone), but “quality over
quantity” (寧缺毋濫) as always.*

*I’m already looking for friends who are supportive of each other, and
we promised to **live in a retirement home** together when we get old.
(Emphasis added)*

J8048528

¹⁰¹ Taki (2016). *Academic approach: I wonder whether 300 members had thought about dying alone if they have not met their “right” one.* Retrieved from 29 March, 2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/thread-253386-2-1.html>

(Forum member)¹⁰²

Yes (I have thought about having to die alone). If my partner and I don't have mutual love, then I'd rather stay single. Of course, it would be best if I can meet the right one. If not, living alone is OK too. Although I can already foresee the different kinds of problems, like family and social pressure, but I still want to follow my own will.

Let's build a Yuri retirement home together!!

Maipianpian

(Forum member)¹⁰³

Through discussion, members of *Yamibo* forum were trying to create a blueprint of the foreseeable future together for the Yuri community. The virtual world has become an increasingly important gathering point for queer communities (Gross, 2003) and a better arena for performing queerness compared to mainstream society (Bury, 2005). Interestingly, this online queer space has extended to offline domain, as people with common values and interests first met online on the *Yamibo* forum and then committed to build an offline retirement home in the future.

Although most Yuri fans have a pessimistic view of love, they stay positive and constantly encourage themselves in the process of searching for true love, although they are well aware that the result will not be optimistic. As can be seen from a forum

¹⁰² J08048528 (2016). *Academic approach: I wonder whether 300 members had thought about dying alone if they have not met their "right" one.* Retrieved from 29 March,2017
<http://www.yamibo.com/thread-253386-2-1.html>

¹⁰³ Maipianpian 麥片片(2016). *Academic approach: I wonder whether 300 members had thought about dying alone if they have not met their "right" one.* Retrieved from 29 March,2017
<http://www.yamibo.com/thread-253386-5-1.html>

thread entitled *How many long-lasting female-female couples could there be in the reality?*¹⁰⁴, Yuri fans are willing to make an effort to change and make themselves stronger in order to keep the relationship, and they are introspective, as they tend to put the responsibility on themselves rather than on society, which is in fact adding constraints on homosexuality and cruelly attacking female-female relationships. They believe that the problem is self-related rather than gender-related, and that the individual in fact plays a larger role than sexuality when dealing with intimacy.

It's more of your own problem if you can't stay put. Not really related to homosexuality.

Fengzhishuxiu

(Forum member)¹⁰⁵

Most people are seriously waiting (for true love) and earnestly making effort. It is just that love can be affected by too many factors. Social constraints and family pressure are examples, but it's even more affected by an individual's decision. This doesn't mean that there are no long-lasting or till-death-do-us-part couples. When love is there, treat it well. If it is gone, just let it go. We are all independent individual, and it is love and affection that bring us together. Love is voluntarily, don't use it to tie others up.

SleepMouse

(Forum member)¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ *How many long-lasting female-female couples could there be in the reality?*

Retrieved from 29 March, 2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=251089>

¹⁰⁵ Fengzhishuxiu (2016). *How many long-lasting female-female couples could there be in the reality?*

Retrieved from 29 March, 2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=251089>

¹⁰⁶ SleepMouse (2016). *How many long-lasting female-female couples could there be in the reality?*

Retrieved from 29 March, 2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=251089>

I think your affection on the other party is the foundation of a relationship. It is what makes you willing to bear with her, or even change your habits for her.

Although a homosexual relationship is much more difficult than a heterosexual one, regardless of the kind of relationship, as long as the love is there, and both are willing to maintain the relationship, they will pour their hearts out to do it.

BiboBibo no Mito

(Forum member)¹⁰⁷

Yuri fans, like Canton, admitted that most relationships they know did not last long. 123, a forum member, mentioned that 1 to 2 years is the normal length of a relationship. A problem with love on the forum, as Sophie mentioned, is that, as a community-based website, *Yamibo* is a relatively close circle, meaning that there is a high chance that ex-lovers would meet or people are involved complicated relationships. Moreover, long-distance relationship is very common. In a related survey thread, 80% of the 186 respondents revealed that they have been in a long-distance relationship. Canton proposed this as one of the reasons why relationships on the forum could not last long. But many members are still positive about having a long-distance relationship. These observations are confirmed by 123 and Canton, the relationships within the community seems did not last long and Sophie indicated that it is a small community that there are lots of gossip and complicated relationship within the community.

¹⁰⁷ BiboBibo no Mito (2016). *How many long-lasting female-female couples could there be in the reality?* Retrieved from 29 March, 2017
<http://www.yamibo.com/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=251089>

Within my social network, relationships do not last long. Some broke up after 1 or 2 years, many broke up after dating for few years.

123

(Forum member)¹⁰⁸

There are quite a lot gossips on “Yamibo”. Well... in fact relationships in this community are quite complicated.

Sophie

(Age 23, homosexual, forum member)

Researcher: According to your knowledge, do you think everlasting relationship is possible in the Yuricon community?

Canton: *Not really. If you mean same-sex romantic love among people who love Yuri, then the possibility is not high. From what I have seen and heard, I have never seen a long-lasting couple.*

Researcher: Yes, I mean the same-sex romantic love among community of people who loves Yuri. What factors do you think might be causing their relationship unable to be sustained?

Canton: *Mainly social and family pressure. Also, the high proportion of long-distance relationship.*

Canton

(Age 27, homosexual, forum member)

¹⁰⁸ 123 (2016). *How many long-lasting female-female couples could there be in the reality?* Retrieved from 29 March, 2017 <http://www.yamibo.com/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=251089>

Although interviewees and *Yamibo* members revealed that it is common to see Yuri fans changing partners, Paris Tung noted that Yuri fandom is still a young community, and it might be too soon to expect widespread long-lasting relationship. Changing partners is a process through which Yuri fans search for their true love. It is possible that, after been through all the relationships, they could finally realize where their true love is.

Researcher: Do you think everlasting relationship is possible in the Yuricon community?

Paris Tung: I think many 300ers have not yet reached that age, so they don't know what is meant by ever-lasting. This community is so close that one may find true love in someone they have dated before. And they are still young. Can't be sure there won't be true love. Maybe they get back together after 30 years and continue their relationship until death.

Paris Tung

(Age 31, bisexual, Forum moderator)

What Paris Tung proposed in fact opens another dimension for viewing the short relationship among Yuri fans. A short relationship does not directly translate to being impossible to find true love or ideal love. Whether Yuri fans will finally find their true love when they grow older can be a future research topic.

7.5 - Conclusion

This chapter argued that Yuri fans are a critical and rebellious community. They are critical and sensitive towards the heteronormativity and homonormativity surrounding their community, and they resist coping with it. From the discussion threads on *Yami*

and the interviewees, Yuricon's rebellious acts are manifested in three levels.

First, Yuri fans struggle against the pressure from marriage expectation in China and refuse to comply with the mainstream heterosexual love story. They are aware that marriage and forming a family have become a task to be completed under Chinese traditional culture. With the virtual space provided by *Yamibo* forum, Yuri fans, "abnormal woman" in many people's eyes, gathered to reclaim their sexuality subjectivity through fighting against the heterosexual normativity.

Second, as members of the community discovered their sexuality through discussions of intimacy and love value, they found out that the mainstream lesbian relationship and culture is incompatible with their core value, and they challenge the homonormativity within it. Yuri fans, as discussed in Chapter 5, disagree with the labelling system in mainstream lesbian community and strongly criticize the inherited disrespectful attitude towards female identity found in Chinese tomboy culture. The disagreement towards the mainstream lesbian culture has also become one of the consensuses within the Yuri community, which in turn formed the Yuri fans' own identity.

Third, the changes made towards heteronormativity and homonormativity by the Yuri community are based on their vigilance of surrounding norms. This sense of vigilance gathered Yuri fans together in their own online space, the *Yamibo* forum, which nurtured new members by equipping them with critical thinking skills and reminding them to stay vigilant via discussions on sexuality, gender, and other issues. Veteran members are willing to share their views and experience through discussion, which effectively influence the junior members. It offers the agency for Yuri fans' autonomy on relationship and sexuality, as well as self-consciousness.

In general, the Yuri community holds a pessimistic view on intimacy, and they do not have a positive feeling that they can finally find their true love. “Quality over quantity” (寧缺毋濫) is a common theme on the forum, as many Yuri fans said they would rather be lonely than to find a partner just for their company. Hence, many of them claimed to have psychologically prepared themselves for dying alone.

Finally, it can be seen that *Yamibo* forum, as Yuri fan-central, is the place where Yuri community exercise their agency in challenging and negotiating with the heteronormativity and homonormativity.

Chapter 8 - Conclusion

I have been a Yuri fans since I was fourteen. The memories from *Yamibo* forum and the enthusiasm of fans in Yuri culture is an inseparable part of my life. This connection is what drove me into investigating Yuri culture under the account of sexuality studies. Yuri is a unique culture nurtured by influence from both Japanese and Chinese culture. It is also a product of its mostly female fans' interpretation. Despite its gaining popularity, this minority culture has been absent from academic discussion. On the contrary, BL, the counterpart to Yuri, has been getting a lot of attention in the academia, spanning across cultural and gender studies (e.g., Isola, 2010; Levi, McHarry, & Pagliassotti, 2010; McLelland, et al., 2015). In view of the absence of Yuri culture in sexuality and queer studies, the current thesis attempts to bridge the gap by bringing Yuri into the discourses of sexuality and queer studies.

In general, this research recalled the sociological term of sexuality as defined by Foucault (1987). Through the analysis of Yuri culture and its fans, the current study questioned the nature of sexuality for placing sexual desire in a privileged position in a relationship. Sedgwick (1993), a respected queer scholar, in her writing *Epistemology of closest* questioned why gender became the crucial element in our sexual desire object when concerning sexuality. Yuri culture further questions why sexual desire became the determining act in sexuality in a relationship. The stress on spiritual resonance and mutual disclosure in Yuri love raises an alternate emphasis on the emotional ties, the intimacy, and the interaction when sexuality and relationship are concerned. The analysis of Yuri love also revealed that it involves spiritual intimacy and high degrees of understanding to each other. This feature echoed with Giddens's (1992) notion of pure relationship, in which there is a high demand for mutual disclosure. Yuri love

could thus be considered as an expression of pure relationship. Moreover, the process of Yuri reading by Yuri communities creates an alternate female gaze, which places female as both its object and subject and with female's relationship as its theme. Such central focus on female and femininity are slightly different from the female gaze proposed by previous scholars (Gamman and Marshment, 1989; Hemmann, 2013; Mulvey, 1989).

This chapter summarizes findings from the current research. Arguments previously discussed are weaved together to provide an understanding of Yuri as a rebellious minority culture, how it explores the realm of alternative sexuality, as well as how it challenges the current account of sexuality and queer studies.

8.1 - Visibility of Yuri culture in sexuality studies

While reviewing the literature on sexuality and gender studies, it was found that the current sexuality discourse is unable to accurately describe the Yuri culture and its fans' sexual identity. Sexuality, according to Foucault (1978), is a process of social and culture discourse shaped and organized by the expression of sexual desires, identities, and acts. The sexuality of an individual is defined by particular sexual terms, which also produces sexual identity (Halperin, 1989). However, Yuri fans do not consider sexual desire as the most imperative element in their relationship. Thus, it would be inaccurate to describe Yuri fans' sexual identity from the perspective of sexual desire. The first question asked by this thesis is that, if current knowledge in sexuality is not applicable to Yuri fans, how can their subjectivity be merged with academic discourses of sexuality, and what is their position when concerning sexuality studies?

According to Ainley (1995), “having a language to describe yourself means you exist”. Yuri is a discursive culture derived from fans’ interpretation. Thus, it is a product of the imagination of Yuri fans. From the different discourses of Yuri fans on “what Yuri is” and “what Yuri is not”, as well as the position of “the other” in Chinese mainstream lesbian culture, the subjectivity of Yuri sexual identity is defined, and this provides the agency for the Yuri community to challenge heteronormativity and homonormativity.

8.2 - Challenging the role of sex in a relationship from a feminine standpoint

Sedgwick (1993) questioned the binary opposition of gay and lesbian politics by asking why sexual orientation is constrained to sexual desire in gender while other dimensions, such as certain sensations, certain objects, or acts, are not considered. Yuri fans take this one step further by questioning the need to prioritize sexual desire in human relationships. Certain affections, certain spiritual intimacies, certain subtle atmospheres, and certain nuanced emotion flows can also be the vital keys in defining relationships.

By proposing the concept of lesbian continuum, Rich (1980) criticized the focus on female erotic relationships and championed the idea of female intimacy, which opposes the phallogocentric nature of considering sexual experience as the vital element in relationships. This fits well into the Yuri culture, which highlights the subtle intimacy and spiritual connection between two females. Yuri fans are largely attracted by the beauty of the spiritual intimacy that they find in the deep connection and resonance of minds within female intimacy. On the other hand, Yuri relationship should not be equated to platonic relationship, as it still acknowledges the significance of the role of

sex in a relationship. However, for Yuri fans, human relationship is beyond physical. To them, the most important thing in a relationship is the love, the affection, the subtle moment of falling in love, the sentimental flows, and the mutual understanding that two females share. As such, Yuri fans despise sex scenes that are included solely to gratify sexual desire. Yuri community thinks that sex scenes should only serve the purpose of the plot and the interaction of the characters. Therefore, lesbian movies containing explicit depictions of erotic relationship are not welcomed. It is obvious that Yuri places an alternate emphasis on spiritual intimacy and mutual understanding, which challenges the sexual-centered discourse of sexuality. Yuri fans reclaim the awareness on the inner connection and affection in romantic relationship, and their sexual identity is defined by female spiritual intimacy and mutual understanding rather than sex.

The possession of female body in mainstream pop culture is usually through sexual activities under male gaze. However, from a feminine standpoint, the possession between female is not through sex but internal connection. Yuri stories explore alternate ways of expressing possession in relationships. As opposed to the male gaze under mainstream pop culture, which Mulvey (1989) described as objectifying of female body to satisfy male sexual desire, Yuri culture focuses on the female gaze, a subversion of male gaze (Gamman and Marshment, 1989). However, different from the female gaze proposed by Gamman and Marshment (1989), in which females are the subject and males are the object, the Yuri genre has an alternate female gaze where females are the main character, female intimacy is the main theme, and female readers are the largest audience. In other words, female acts as both the subject and object of the gaze in Yuri stories. This female gaze under Yuri genre is an affirmation of the subjectivity of female, and makes female an object of appreciation rather than for gratifying sexual

desire. This is a subversion of the patriarchal repression on female in mainstream culture.

8.1 - Combating compulsory heteronormativity

Yuri fans yearn for romantic stories that are rid of gender stereotypes on the characters. They want a story in which the interactions between characters are based on their personalities and the emotion flows between them, rather than from presumed gendered actions, namely, males must take the initiative and females should be passive. In Yuri stories, the genders are equal, and therefore, they depict the equality in a relationship. The two female characters can then act freely without any gender presumption. This feature of the Yuri genre is what attracts its female followers. In addition, since Yuri relationships are not bounded by the traditional gender stereotypes, and are completely based on the personalities of, and sentimental flows between, the characters, they can be initiated and developed in more diverse forms. This empowers Yuri stories to challenge the homonormativity representation of romantic stories under mainstream culture.

Queer reading/Yuri reading is a vital feature in Yuri culture. When performing Yuri reading, fans decode and interpret an alternate female intimacy within a heterosexual text. This produces the discursive nature of the Yuri culture, and is an expression of fans' resistance to the compulsory heterosexuality and their desire to seek other forms of expression of female intimacy.

Apart from the alternate decoding of heterosexual texts, Yuri fans also resist compulsory heterosexuality through real-life practice. On the *Yamibo* forum, many Yuri fans show their awareness of the shackles and unfairness added onto females under the

traditional marriage expectation. Interviewees in the current study also expressed their view that, under the manipulation of the Chinese government and pressure from the family, marriage has become a compulsory task to be done. It is not about love anymore. On this, Yuri fans have a strong intention of not entering into the compulsory marriage system and reclaiming the self-autonomy on their body and relationship.

Many Yuri fans also had their sexual orientation awakened on the *Yamibo* forum. This is also true for the interviewees, who mentioned that they uncovered their sexual orientation through discussion of Yuri texts and sexuality on the forum. In this sense, *Yamibo* forum has become a significant platform for the establishment of Yuri fans' sexual identity. Interestingly, some interviewees confessed that, although they referred to themselves as homosexual, they in fact do not resist being in a relationship with male. Some were even attracted to male before they become Yuri fans. As for those who referred to themselves as bisexual, they revealed that it was not gender, but other factors such as personality or appearance that attracted them to their partner. This shows the fluidity of Yuri fans' sexual orientation and the openness of Yuri fans to different forms of relationship.

Spiritual connection, or the mutual understanding between each other, is highly appreciated by the Yuri community. Relationships in Yuri community also share the same features found in Yuri stories, namely, embracing spiritual bonding and mutual disclosure to each other. They also share the features of pure relationship proposed by Giddens (1992) in that it is an equal relationship with mutual self-disclosure to each other and communication and trust play a vital role compared to other external factors. Recall Victoria's story in Chapter 6, which is a Yuri relationship between two female parties who developed and ended their relationship on their own will and according to

their interactions. The equal negotiation between the two female parties and the importance of communication in the attainment of an intensive bonding in a Yuri relationship point out that such relationship is a democratized intimacy.

Moreover, the emphasis in spiritual intimacy and refusal of the marriage system is an expression of Yuri fans' pursuit of ideal love, despite the fact that they are aware that such actions may end up in vain. The recurring notion of "quality over quantity" indicates that Yuri fans are willing to sacrifice the possibility of having a companion for the rest of their life and suffer from the loneliness in hope of finding their ideal love.

8.2 - Challenging homonormativity in Chinese mainstream

lesbian culture

The Chinese mainstream lesbian culture is largely infused with *T/P* role playing and gender labelling system. Newcomers to the local lesbian community are forced to enter the labelling structure and declare themselves as one of *T*, *P*, or *H* (*Bufen*). Besides, *T/P* eroticism is the major form of coupling in the homosexual community in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. Within the *T/P* eroticism, it is obvious that there is a dominating and subordinating power relationship, as demonstrated from *T*'s behavior. Yuri fans are extremely critical of this, especially tomboys' intentional imitation of male gesture and behavior, including how they walk, how they sit, and the tone they speak in, through which they attempt to obtain the power endowed in male in the distorted patriarchal society. Besides, as shown in Maizi's work (2011), tomboys consider themselves as having a larger economic burden and decision power in a relationship. They want to take up responsibilities as a heterosexual male does, and they are the more aggressive and proactive party in a relationship (Maizi, 2011).

Although most female Yuri fans are self-proclaimed homosexuals, their sexual identity tangled with that of lesbians since the Yuri culture is incompatible with the Chinese mainstream lesbian culture, especially the tomboy culture. Yuri fans consider the imitation of male by Chinese mainstream tomboys an expression of lack of confidence in their female identity. Rather than resisting the patriarchal heterosexual structure in their relationship, Chinese mainstream tomboys seem to be trying hard to fit into the distorted patriarchal structure. Moreover, the labelling system is also heavily criticized within the Yuri community, as fans think that it enhances the stereotyping on different sub-genders. The attitude of Chinese Yuri fans towards the Chinese mainstream lesbian culture is thus an important component in the construction of their sexuality identity.

A review of the Chinese mainstream lesbian culture revealed that this culture was founded upon the bar and karaoke culture - both popular gathering places for local lesbians. Online chatrooms also played a role, as lesbians there have obvious intention of finding a mate. Despite this, the Chinese lesbian community rarely participates in LGBT political activities. Chinese lesbians remain mostly invisible in public domain and the academia, leading to them usually having a low sense of sexual identity and lacking understanding of basic sexuality and gender knowledge. Because of this, the Yuri community has taken on the leading role in the discussion of butch and femme topics in the lesbian community. Through this, Yuri fans can help to promote feminist awareness and critical thinking of the labelling system and patriarchal nature of tomboy culture within mainstream lesbian community, and cultivate a mature gender and queer ideology within the minority.

8.3 - Queer cyber space: Yamibo forum

Bury (2005) stressed the importance of online space in queer performance. The *Yamibo* forum undoubtedly plays a significant role as an online space that helped form the Chinese Yuri culture and the sexual identity of Yuri fans. Interviewees mentioned that Yuri fans have a strong attachment to *Yamibo* forum and their community, as it is where they met a lot of the important people and friends in their life. The anonymity provided by online space allows Yuri fans to find people like themselves and to reveal and share their interest in Yuri freely. *Yamibo* forum also offers a platform for socializing among Yuri community. Some members formed a social network so strong that their connection has extended from online to offline activities in form of different fan gatherings and even planning to spend the rest of their lives together living in a *Yamibo* retirement home.

Moreover, *Yamibo* provides an arena where Yuri fans can get in touch with LGBT and women's right issues – discussion topics and values that deviate from the mainstream hetero-centric values. Interviewees mentioned that members can influence each other with their ideas and values through the communication. Hence, *Yamibo* acts as an important player in the arousal of the awareness of self-consciousness and self-autonomy among Yuri fans. This awareness further provides the agency for developing the subjectivity of Yuri community in resisting the mainstream heteronormativity and homonormativity.

The absorption of the Japanese Yuri culture in China is also a result of the urbanization and technology development that came along with the Chinese economic reform, as the Chinese Yuri community is made up of the early teenage generation who lives and breathes the internet and online social network. This is especially true since 2000, when

the Chinese Yuri culture developed alongside the China computer network. While China was web-ready since 1987, the cost for internet connection was too high that it was unaffordable for most households. However, since 2000, with the cost of broadband network reduced, internet became accessible for normal households and there has been a rapid growth of internet users since then. The *Yamibo* forum was able to ride this tide and experience rapid growth since its establishment in 2004. This also explains why it took until 2004 for the Yuri culture, which has emerged in Japan since 1990, to finally get started in China and for a solid queer cyber community to develop.

The current thesis has established the discursive nature of Yuri sub-culture as well as its challenges on current sexuality and gender studies, and has paved the way for further research on this unique feminine sub-culture under the account of sexuality and queer studies. A possible topic to be examined would be an in-depth research from the perspective of male Yuri fans. To start with, male Yuri fans may not be viewing Yuri from a “male gaze” approach.¹⁰⁹ Besides, further investigation on the causes for the unique development of the Chinese Yuri community would definitely be helpful in capturing the full picture of Chinese Yuri culture.

¹⁰⁹ The male informants in this thesis reported that they read Yuri text from a viewpoint as an outsider than to substitute themselves as one of the characters or objectifying any female characters.

Appendix 1 : Profiles of Informants

Eighteen informants were interviewed in this research. A semi-structured online interview approach was adopted and pseudonyms were used for most of the informants. Their age, education level, years of being Yuri fans, city they were living in, sexual orientation, etc., are listed in this section. Some of the details are not shown due to confidential reason.

Sixteen informants were female Yuri fans, and the other two were male. One of the informants was a heterosexual married woman who is a Yuri reader and an active participant in the Yuri community. Informants came from different cities across China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and overseas. Many informants showed fluidity in their sexual orientation, mentioning that they had been attracted by male or used to have a romantic relationship with male. Some of them also indicated that they were attracted by factors other than gender. Finally, the informants were aged between 22 and 36, and on average, they had been a Yuri fan for 10 years. One thing worth noticing is that the age when they first learned about the Yuri genre was between 12 and 21, that is, the teenage period.

1. Agnes

Thirty-six, Female. Postgraduate education. Living in Beijing. Yuri fan for 11 years. In a relationship. Homosexual. Project Manager.

2. Alice

Thirty. Female. University graduate. Living in Shanghai. Forum moderator. Yuri fanfiction and Yuri original fiction writer. Yuri fan for 12 years. Single. Bisexual. Had

a white-collar job in private firm.

3. Anna¹¹⁰

Female. Doctoral candidate. Living in London but originally from China. Forum member. Yuri fan for 5 years. Student.

4. Anson

Thirty-one. Female. Doctoral graduate. Living in Germany but originally from China. Yuri fanfiction and Yuri original fiction writer. Yuri fan for 10 years. Single. Preferred female but did not resist being in a relationship with male. Doctor.

5. Canton

Twenty-seven. Female. University graduate. Living in Hong Kong. Yuri fan for 10 years. Single. Preferred female but did not resist being in a relationship with male. Service engineer.

6. Edward

Twenty-seven. Male. University graduate. Living in Britain but originally from Henan. Yuri fanfiction writer. Yuri fan for 8 years. Single. Heterosexual but did not resist being in a relationship with male. Student.

7. Evan

Thirty-two. Male. University graduate. Living in Shanghai. Yuri fanfiction writer. Yuri fan for 13 years. Single. Heterosexual but did not resist being in a relationship with

¹¹⁰ Anna's detailed information is not shown for the sake of confidentiality.

male. Accountant

8. Fisher

Thirty-four. Female. University graduate. Living in Beijing. Yuri fan for 11 years. In a relationship. Homosexual. Editor.

9. Futa

Twenty-two. Female. University graduate. Living in Hunan. Yuri fan for 9 years. Single. Homosexual. Student.

10. Mandy¹¹¹

Female. One of the founders of *Yamibo* forum. Yuri fan for 13 years.

11. Ms Green

Twenty-nine. Female. University graduate. Living in Jiangxi. Yuri fan for 9 years. Single. Homosexual. Teacher.

12. Orange

Thirty-six. Female. Postgraduate education. Living in Beijing. Yuri fan for 5 years. Married. Heterosexual. Project director.

13. Paris Tung

Thirty- one. Female. Postgraduate education. Living in Taiwan. Forum moderator. Official Chinese translator of *Mariasama ga miteru*. Yuri fan for 12 years. In a

¹¹¹ Mandy's further information is not shown for the sake of confidentiality.

relationship. Bisexual (attracted by factors other than gender). Manager at private bank.

14. Regina¹¹²

Female. Forum administrator. Yuri fan for 13 years.

15. Sophie

Twenty-three. Female. University graduate. Living in Canada but originally from Hong Kong. Yuri fan for 10 years. In a complicated relationship. Had good impression of male but preferred relationship with female. Student.

16. Stephanie

Twenty-two. Female. University graduate. Living in Shanghai. Shanghai Yuri event organizer. Yuri fan for 5 years. Single. Homosexual but did not resist being in a relationship with male. Student.

17. Victoria

Thirty-six. Female. University graduate. Living in Hangzhou. Former forum moderator. Yuri fan for 13 years. In a relationship. Used to have a boyfriend but preferred relationship with female. Journalist.

18. Yuki

Twenty-three. Female. High school graduate. Living in Shanghai. Shanghai Yuri fans gathering organizer. Yuri fan for 11 years. Single. Homosexual but did not resist being in a relationship with male. Freelance translator.

¹¹² Regina's further information is not shown for the sake of confidentiality.

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