

Original Paper

Customising Intimate Fantasies: Self Narratives and Subjectivity Practice in China's *Mengnv* Community

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Abstract

This study examines China's mengnv community, exploring their self-empowering cultural practice of customising intimate fantasies through creative writing and its cultural implications. Combining feminist literary criticism and reader-response theory, the research employed focus group interviews and textual narrative analysis to reveal how these young girls transitioning from late adolescence to emerging adulthood negotiate selfhood through reimagining intimacy. Findings show that the mengnv community engages in self-empowerment by reconstructing the erotic power structure and fostering non-erotic female alliances. Unlike passive consumers of traditional romance novels, they actively produce and spread texts on digital platforms, transforming fantasy into embodied narrative action and contemplating the self and the other in the exploration of eros.. However, contradictions persist: some texts reproduce the pseudo-subjectivity of Mary Sue logic and foster self-alienation through "low perceived deservingness" internalisation, and their "anti-shared ownership" (tongdanjufou/tongjiajufou) practices reflect how privatisation of emotions undermines collective action. The study argues that while the limitations exist, mengnv practices have demonstrated marginalised young girls' capacity to carve out resistant spaces through micro-narratives.

Keywords

mengnv, fantasy, subjectivity, emerging adulthood, female alliance

1. Introduction

This article focuses on China's *mengnv* (literally "dreaming girl") phenomenon, a subcultural practice among young females who construct elaborate fantasies through self-created narratives, artworks, and videos. It originated from Japan's "yumejoshi", referring to young girls who would construct romantic

narratives between a fictional character in a pre-existing popular work and themselves or an original character of their own making by producing textual or visual fanworks (Pixiv encyclopedia, 2025). As Hinerman (1992) has noted, “part of what it means to be a fan for some people in some places clearly involves fantasy-work”. However, *mengnv* groups would distinguish themselves from general fans through an obligatory creative dimension: to qualify as *mengnv*, one must actively produce or substantially contribute to creative work centred on their fantasies with themselves (or their original character) as the main characters. While earlier scholarship framed female fantasy as escapism from patriarchal domesticity and substitutive satisfaction for emotional emptiness (Radway, 1984; Hinerman, 1992), this study posits that *mengnv* practices transcend compensatory satisfaction of emotional needs, instead functioning as a dynamic arena for subjectivity negotiation.

Transplanted into the Chinese context, the term “*yumejoshi*” has undergone semantic expansion through localised reading and creative practices, evolving into “*mengnv*”, while the *mengnv* community has redefined itself within China’s socio-digital landscape. Contemporary Chinese *mengnv* groups no longer restrict themselves to heteronormative romantic fantasies; their creative scope now encompasses homosexual romantic narratives, as well as non-romantic relational modes—familial bonds, friendships, and ambiguous intimacies (Moegirlpedia, 2024). Concurrently, their objects of fantasy (termed “*mengjue*”) have diversified beyond fictional characters from literature and media to include virtual game avatars, live-action film/TV personae, and real-life celebrities from the entertainment and sports industries.

Illouz (2007) argued that as economic rationality permeated emotional life, emotions also simultaneously obscured economic reality, and authentic human emotions became enmeshed with consumer products, ultimately merging with them to form commodified entities—to the point where the distinction between genuine feeling and artificially manufactured sentiment becomes irrecoverably blurred. “Emotional emptiness” has been more than a condition but a commodified label, which has also reduced *mengnv* in the public imagination to either quasi-adults who “date” through fantasies or delulu fangirls incapable of distinguishing reality from imagination.

However, this article reveals that being a *mengnv* carries more complex significance for the young Chinese females involved. While rejecting the imposed real-life intimacy, they keep thinking about the significance of the present intimate relationship for them and explore the possibility of stepping out of this framework. While trying to resist the positions assigned to them by the existing cultural industry, they navigate the unknown ocean of identities and emotions in adolescence and emerging adulthood. Lindtner and Dahl (2020) suggested that according to psychoanalytic theory, fantasy often stems from suppressed desires, expressing one’s longing for an identity with integration, wholeness and unity. During late adolescence and emerging adulthood, young women would engage in particularly intense explorations of their social roles, life possibilities, and the meaning of emotions in their lives

(Schechter, Herbstman, Ronningstam, & Goldblatt, 2018). Amidst the profound uncertainties that characterise this liminal life stage, *mengnv* groups have engaged in fantasy production as a means of exploratory self-expression and a generative practice through which they map out alternative cognitive and behavioural possibilities for themselves. Consequently, unlike the Smithton female readers in Radway's (1984) 1970s-1980s study of romance readership, China's *mengnv* groups have occupied a distinctly different life stage, for whom thinking about the self may be a more central issue rather than the emotional void resulting from providing care and emotional nourishment for the family.

Diverging from some of the prior fan culture studies that examined female fans' obsession with male idols (Ehrenreich, Hess, & Jacobs, 1992) or their emulation of female celebrities as role models (Stacey, 1994), Chinese *mengnv* groups have begun positioning female stars or fictional female characters as the objects of their romantic (or ambiguous) fantasies—while many still self-identify as “heterosexual”. This article would also explore what underlying psychological complexes and exploratory attempts, such as fantasies, might reveal. As these young women began to fantasise about kinship or friendship with celebrities and virtual characters, it is worthy of interrogating whether these emerging fantasy paradigms still fundamentally stem from “emotional emptiness”—merely representing old wine in new bottles—or whether they signify more substantive transformations in affective structures and identity negotiations.

The research questions are thus as follows: What are the differences between what Chinese young girls have thought, desired and gained when they are trying to be a *mengnv*, compared with the Smithton female readers in Radway's research? Thorne (2004) argued that Japanese females' production and consumption of *yaoi* works, while questioning present gender norms, have not collectively evolved into organised feminist movements. The second research question thus focuses on whether contemporary *mengnv* practices demonstrate meaningful divergence from the historical patterns: To what extent has the *mengnv* community succeeded in achieving collective action?

The creation of *mengnv* includes various forms, from fiction, illustrations, and comics to videos. In China, the primary form involves publishing *mengnv* fiction publicly or semi-publicly on online platforms, with most works typically under 100,000 Chinese characters. The online publication of *mengnv* fiction not only generates income for a minor portion of professional writers but, more significantly, also provides young girls with an accessible and relatively unrestricted means of self-expression. This study focuses on *mengnv* fiction and writers and readers of such works. Typically, when composing *mengnv* fiction, the author's primary intended readers are either herself or the small groups she represents. Consequently, these individuals simultaneously occupy the roles of author and target reader for their own works while also serving as readers of other *mengnv* fiction when not engaged in creation. Hence, the research employed a dual analytical framework combining reader-response theory and feminist literary criticism. Through focus group interviews coupled with

narrative analysis of *mengnv* fiction, the study tracked *mengnvs*' self-cognition and examined the interplay between observed behaviour and textual representations to uncover the complexities underlying Chinese *mengnv* communities' customised fantasy practices.

2. Fantasy and Women's Emotional Labour

Lacan's mirror stage concept posits that pre-Oedipal children construct self-cognition by mistaking their mirror image, perceiving the external world as an extension of the self (Evans, 2003). When the separation between the child and the mother tends to be complete, it marks the child's entry into the symbolic order, where the child becomes aware of the presence and absence of jouissance. At this juncture, drives transform into desires, and the ego becomes shaped by language and family structures, while the unconscious emerges as the repository of repressed desires (Žižek, 1991). Lacan (1977) called this mechanism of prohibition, which enforces the split, the "Law of the Father". However, this primordial yearning for wholeness will persist and be reproduced through fantasy, expressing the pursuit of fullness and the desire to eliminate disturbing absences. Thus, fantasy is born from the tension between unconscious desires and the "Law of the Father", constituting a temporary resolution to the suspended subjectivity. However, this experience manifests through fundamentally divergent trajectories of expression within gendered social structures.

Modern society cannot sustain its operations through rationality alone; it systematically designates women as bearers of emotional labour, tasked with perpetually restoring the workforce depleted by rational systems within domestic spheres, producing new generations of labour and caring for those discarded by societal mechanisms (Hegel, 1991). Radway (1984) revealed that women who take care of their families develop a persistent sense of "emotional depletion" due to the absence of affective recuperation mechanisms, thereby yearning for the nurturance associated initially with their primary caregiver (the mother). During the Oedipal phase, though women seek independence through identification with the father, due to the enduring pre-Oedipal bond with the mother, a psychological duality is formed: the simultaneous pursuit of patriarchal symbolic autonomy and longing for maternal care (Chodorow, 1978). Contemporary sociocultural norms asymmetrically and systematically suppress men's capacity to express tender caregiving qualities (Johnson, 1997). Consequently, women turned to substitutive fulfilment, with motherhood emerging as a significant pathway—where identifying with the child allows fantasies of returning to a state of complete satisfaction (Hummer, 2024). As women still crave adult partners' complete devotion, romance novels provide temporary emotional compensation through escapist reading, yet offer only transient relief before reality reasserts itself.

Penley (1992) pointed out that reducing female subjectivity to an eternal regression to maternal nurturing essentially obscures the complex interplay between social discipline and psychological mechanisms in the construction of female identity. Particularly since the late 20th century, the

increasing delay in the young population's assumption of adult responsibilities has led to a persistent disjunction between biological maturity and social roles, giving rise to a new life stage termed "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2000). For females from late adolescence to emerging adulthood, their understanding of self and intimate relationships often exhibits dynamism: on the one hand, they still rely on emotional support from their families, maintaining a childlike need for protection; on the other hand, the postponement of societal expectations allows them to explore more autonomous models of intimate relationships rather than immediately entering into traditional marriage and maternal roles. However, this mechanism manifests unique tensions within the sociocultural context of China.

3. Confucian Order, Emerging Adulthood, and the Expression of Affect

Data reveals a steady increase in marriage ages among Chinese citizens, with the proportion of 20-24-year-olds registering marriages dropping significantly from 2005 to 2016 (Wang, 2018). Zhong and Arnett (2014), through interviews with Chinese migrant female workers, identified a culturally distinct conception of adulthood: Chinese women primarily define adulthood by taking on family responsibilities (e.g., supporting parents and securing stable jobs) rather than by Western standards like reaching a certain age or living independently. Due to the expansion of higher education and accelerated urbanisation, the prolonged duration of young Chinese females' education and career preparation has objectively delayed their transition into familial responsibilities (Liu, 2016).

Yet, Confucian notions of benevolence ("*ren*") presuppose a patriarchal family structure in which fathers and other male members occupying higher generational seniority in the kinship hierarchy enjoy greater status than mothers, female members, and other junior members of lower generational standing (Kim & Li, 2017). Some families may explicitly practice son preference. A quantitative study by Liu, Guo, Su and Ren (2023) revealed that parents' preference for sons over daughters in one's childhood was positively related to the happiness of male adults but negatively for female adults, with childhood education opportunities and childhood health resources playing as a mediating effect.

Furthermore, during the Chinese compulsory education stage, the so-called "*zaolian*" (adolescent puppy love) is institutionally prohibited. Shi's (2016) discourse analysis of academic papers on adolescent relationships (1979–2015) demonstrated that while definitions of "*zaolian*" varied, the consensus deemed any romantic involvement among underage students to be categorically discouraged. Mirroring this, comparative research showed that Chinese adolescents, especially girls, showed lower romantic involvement and fewer intimate relationships than their Canadian peers (Li, Connolly, Jiang, Pepler, & Craig, 2010). Young females may be temporarily exempt from external emotional labour, with their affective needs partially met through familial structures. Yet their subordinate position within these same hierarchies, combined with cultural repression of intimacy, creates a paradoxical

psychological tension: their emotional fulfilment remains simultaneously enabled and constrained by the very system that sustains it.

Cultural consumption can provide substitutive emotional fulfilment for young girls. However, popular culture offers scarce and homogeneous female roles for self-projection. For instance, while *Star Trek* featured supporting female characters like Communication Officer Janice Rand, Nurse Chapel, and Lieutenant Uhura, these 23rd-century women remained confined to sitting behind switchboards, assisting doctors, or serving coffee to men (Penley, 1992). Some female creators attempt to incorporate female perspectives with fanfiction or infuse the “female gaze” into male character interactions, such as writing slash fiction. As Ueno (1998) argued, boys’ love in *shoujo* manga functions as a safety device that allows girls to manipulate the dangerous thing called “sex” from a distance removed from their own bodies.

In pre-Ming-Qing China, women remained marginalised in literary spheres. However, the socioeconomic transformations in Jiangnan during the late Qing Dynasty, coupled with the flourishing of talented women’s culture, enabled gentry women to engage in self-expression through *tanci* (a kind of rhythmic literature, narrating and singing accompanied by musical instruments) creation (Xu, 2017). Their works frequently had autobiographical undertones, crafted independent female personas, and challenged conventional matrimonial norms while celebrating feminine camaraderie (Li, 2024). This distinctive creative practice constituted an early cultural strategy for female subjectivity construction within Confucian structures.

Since the mid-20th century, affect has been industrially produced as an economic commodity (Illouz, 2007). Yet from a historical-cultural perspective, the emergence of the *mengnv* phenomenon may transcend the mere co-construction of emotional commodities and “authentic” feelings. It represents young women’s conscious efforts to diversify feminine narratives within cultural production. Crucially, further research could examine whether such practices differ substantively from other forms of female creation and whether becoming a *mengnv* or engaging in *mengnv* fiction constitutes merely an identity-affirming consumption process or possesses latent critical potential.

There remains limited scholarly literature directly addressing *mengnv* culture and its counterparts in other cultures. Korean-American writer Esther Li’s 2023 debut novel *Y/N* is the first published work to explicitly depict a fangirl channelling her unexpressed desires into writing *Y/N* fanfiction (Note 1). Wang (2024) employed literary theory to examine *mengnv* fiction’s immersive narrative frameworks and the collaborative processes of creating romantic, liberated, and diverse textual worlds. McRobbie (1991) noted that some feminist studies risk underestimating the power and capacity of “ordinary” women and girls, who inhabit distinct cultural-political spaces shaped by age, class, race, and culture and unconsciously wage their own struggles as women. For *mengnv* studies, excluding the community would constitute a fundamental methodological flaw. Therefore, this research engages directly with

mengnv participants to explore how young women experience and interpret their participation in this culture.

4. Methodology

Conducted between July 2024 and February 2025, this study employed two research methods. The focus group interviews were designed to uncover the complex emotional and cultural dynamics within the *mengnv* community, while the textual narrative analysis aimed to identify core narrative patterns across various *mengnv* fiction types and compare differences between participants' recommended and non-recommended texts. They enable a comprehensive understanding of *mengnv* reading and creative practices and the underlying motivations and sociocultural implications.

4.1 Focus Group Interviews

A recurring theme in focus group studies is their capacity to amplify marginalised voices. As Nichols-Casebolt and Spakes (1995) argued, applying this method to feminist research could be better for listening to diverse voices and fostering an interactive atmosphere. When studying marginalised groups, the potential divergence between researchers' and participants' viewpoints makes intra-group dialogue particularly valuable, and the cultural nuances emerging from participants' interactions often reveal deeper insights than researcher-led inquiries (Morgan, 1996). The focus group could function as a foundational participatory research tool.

Given the vast geographical distribution and substantial population size of China's *mengnv* community, using focus groups enabled the researcher to approach a wide range of participants. Moreover, the complex motivations underlying *mengnv*'s emotions and behaviours could be effectively unpacked through intra-group dialogues.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, blending predetermined questions with exploratory questions to balance standardisation and naturally emerging data. As the moderator, the researcher alternated between active facilitation during structured phases to ensure equal discussion and minimal intervention in open-ended discussions to optimise participant autonomy.

When grouping interviewees, factors such as age and preferred *mengjue* type (real-life celebrities versus fictional characters) could significantly influence participants' perceptions and experiences regarding *mengnv* fiction consumption and production. Grouping participants based on similar age ranges and *mengjue* preferences could make the focus centre on the core questions and facilitate mutual understanding and active interactions among members.

However, this grouping strategy required careful navigation of two culture-specific phenomena: *tongdanjufou* (同担拒否 in Japanese fandom contexts), which means denoting an aversion to interacting with fellow fans who share the same object of admiration (typically celebrities or idols), and *tongjiajufou* (同嫁拒否 in Japanese fandom contexts), which specifically describes *mengnv*'s

psychological resistance to acknowledging other *mengnv*'s claims of "marital relationships" or "spousal rights" over the same *mengjue* (Moegirlpedia, 2024). Consequently, while maintaining homogeneity in broader *mengjue* categories, the study avoided grouping participants who favoured exactly the same *mengjue* within the same group to ensure all members remained psychologically comfortable and verbally engaged throughout the sessions.

To avoid platform-specific bias, this study recruited participants through three *mengnv*-frequented social media platforms—*Weibo*, *Xiaohongshu*, and *Douban*. Purposeful sampling ensured demographic diversity while maintaining intra-group homogeneity in age and *mengjue* preferences. Specifically, this study involved 30 participants. To optimise discussion depth, they were divided into seven groups of ≤ 5 members each and those groups were described in further detail in Table 1. When addressing a specific participant, a stratified coding system was implemented: two-digit intra-group identifiers (e.g., 01, 02) combined with group prefixes (G1-G7) formed standardised "GX-XX" codes (e.g., G1-01).

Table 1. Focus Group Composition

Group	Partici- pants(n)	Creative Experience	Reading Experience	Primarily Focused <i>Mengjue</i> (Past 3 Months)	Age Range
1	4	Yes	Yes	K-pop & J-pop male idols	17, 18, 20, 22
2	5	Yes	Yes	Chinese male celebrities	16, 18, 20, 22, 25
3	4	Yes	Yes	Male fictional characters	16, 19, 20, 21
4	5	Yes	Yes	Female celebrities	20-23, 25
5	3	Yes	Yes	Female fictional characters	17, 18, 21
6	5	No	Yes	Male celebrities/fictional characters	19, 20, 22, 23, 24
7	4	No	Yes	Female celebrities/fictional characters	20, 22, 23, 25

The focus group interviews were conducted via online meetings, with each session averaging two hours in duration. Mandarin was used as the language of communication throughout all interviews. Every session was audio-recorded after obtaining explicit consent from all participants.

The structured part of the interview questions covered: (1) demographic information, (2) reading histories, habits, and preferences, (3) knowledge and evaluation of *mengnv* and *mengnv* fiction, and (4) external and self-perceptions (see Appendix 1). All audio recordings were transcribed and translated into English to facilitate later thematic analysis, which was conducted using NVivo.

4.2 Text Narrative Analysis

This study prioritised participants' own experiences and perspectives. Yet, as Sperber (1993) has noted, "an interpretation is a representation of a representation". When trying to convey native viewpoints accurately, the researchers inevitably construct the interviewees' interpretations through their own perspectives. Furthermore, when examining text-related behaviours, attention to the texts and the participants' interpretations of those texts serves as a crucial perspective, offering alternative critical insights into the participants' thinking processes. Consequently, this study incorporated textual analysis of *mengnv* fiction as a supplementary method.

For the textual analysis sample collection, the selection process began with participants' responses to two open-ended questions: "Could you describe your favourite/the least favourite *mengnv* fiction and why you like/dislike it?" The researcher thoroughly read all recommended texts, ultimately selecting seven representative pieces suitable for analysis. Since most recommended works depicted heterosexual romantic relationships, to enhance sample diversity, the researcher supplemented the collection with three additional popular or highly rated texts from platforms identified by participants as their "most frequently used websites/apps" (AO3, Asianfanfics, and *Xiaohongshu*). The three texts featured homosexual romantic relationships, platonic friendships, and familial bonds, respectively.

The selected texts include: *草莓香烟* (*Strawberry Cigarettes*) (depicting heterosexual romance with a K-pop male idol, featuring both HE and BE endings, published on Asianfanfics); *【金珉奎*我】Mysophobia* (heterosexual romance with a K-pop male idol, HE, on AO3); *池袋西口* (*Ikebukuro West Exit*) (heterosexual romance with a K-pop male idol, open ending, Asianfanfics); *嫁给袁朗* (*Marrying Yuan Lang*) (heterosexual romance with a Chinese TV drama male character, HE, Qidian Chinese Network—noted as an early proto-*mengnv* fiction by interviewees); *翔我 王牌冤家* (*Xiang×Me: Frenemies*) (heterosexual romance with a Chinese male celebrity, HE, Lofter); *成为陈都灵, 是我少女时期的一种英雄主义* (*Becoming Chen Duling: My Adolescent Heroism*) (ambiguous adolescent feelings toward a Chinese female celebrity, nonlinear narrative, *Xiaohongshu*); *我这辈子最擅长的事情是嫉妒文淇* (*My Greatest Talent Is Envyng Wen Qi*) (homosexual romance with a Chinese female celebrity, nonlinear narrative, *Xiaohongshu*); *獾獾的有求必应屋里没有蛇* (*The Badger's Room of Requirement Has No Snakes*) (homosexual romance with a K-pop female idol, HE, Weibo); *那时候我和她们一起在电子厂打工* (*When We Worked Together at the Electronics Factory*) (friendship narrative with K-pop female idols, nonlinear narrative, *Xiaohongshu*); and *刘西蒙是个好爸爸* (*Liu Ximeng Is a Good Father*) (familial bonds with a Chinese male celebrity, HE, AO3).

In the course of this analysis, certain texts recommended by readers but not selected for narrative analysis—including *换乘要在夏令时* (*Transfer During Daylight Saving Time*), *过把瘾就死* (*Live Fast, Die Young*), and *坏苹果* (*Bad Apple*), and so on—may also be referenced in part to examine whether key narrative patterns identified in the primary sample similarly emerge in comparable works.

The researcher read *mengnv* fiction marked as the least favourite by participants and then chose to focus on texts disliked by participants because of their ideological frameworks, thematic premises, or structural logic rather than technical deficiencies in writing. Eight texts were selected based on participants' substantive objections to their core messaging, with titles withheld to avoid undue criticism of specific works. Several customised *mengnv* texts commissioned by certain participants were also excluded from analysis due to their non-public status and methodological incongruity with studying communally consumed narratives. This approach prioritised texts operating within shared fandom economies while maintaining analytical rigour through selective corpus construction.

The process of text analysis synthesised narrative and thematic analysis to examine the particularities of individual storytelling and recurrent patterns across texts. This dual perspective enabled the simultaneous interrogation of unique narrative architectures and broader cultural schemata manifest within the dataset (McAllum, Fox, Simpson, & Unson, 2019). For instance, based on the analysis of the cross-text common features, stories in most of the participants' favourite romantic *mengnv* texts might open directly with or frame the narrative around the first encounter. In contrast, the least favourite texts often obscured this scene and merely briefly introduce it as a background.

Additionally, the study examined differences among the narrative languages and styles of different texts. Participants' favourite romantic *mengnv* texts (both heterosexual and homosexual) predominantly adopted a lyrical, prose-like style, emphasising atmosphere, fluid pacing, and poetic resonance, while the least favourite romantic *mengnv* texts lacked such lyricism.

5. Explorations of Self-Subjectivity during Transitional Growth Periods

The concept of "emerging adulthood" proposed by Arnett (2000) specifically refers to a newly identified life stage between the ages of 18 and 29. While women in late adolescence (aged 15-19; Benasich & Ribary, 2018) share core traits with those in emerging adulthood: active identity exploration and focused self-development. While still constrained by external authorities, the former begins to break from dependency to form independent cognition, whereas the latter gains greater autonomy through partial or complete detachment from parental control. This similarity suggests that as a common behaviour in transitional growth periods, self-exploration runs through individuals' dynamic progression from adolescence to adult roles. However, the complex interplay between individuation and traditional family ethics creates contradictory dynamics in Chinese women's self-reflection and emotional exploration during these transitional phases.

Participant G1-02 explained that she initially turned to *mengnv* fiction due to disillusionment with real-life men. She expressed a genuine longing for love, hoping to "find someone who can actually get women, is gentle, caring, and handsome" and to fall deeply in love. However, she swore that "that kinda guy doesn't even exist in real life". In contrast, her favourite male idol effortlessly embodied the

masculine traits she adored. She admitted that this idol only revealed himself through stage performances and a handful of variety shows, but she could still feel his unique charm and believed he was utterly different from the men around her, treating her only in ways she preferred. The whole group was nodding along, especially G1-04, who kept going, “Mhm! SAME!”. While G1-02 asserted that no man in “reality” could meet her ideals, she simultaneously located a male idol in that same “reality” who fulfilled her fantasies of ideal masculinity. Hinerman (1992) noted that Elvis fans viewed him as embodying “represented a perfected realm, a world beyond the one that forbids or restricts the full expression of desire”. This real-life male idol was also endowed with a divine aura, making him seem to transcend the ordinary world. The moderator revisited this theme in the other groups with *mengnv* whose *mengjue* objects were real-life celebrities, asking: “Do you think they (the *mengjue*) genuinely possess these ideal masculine/feminine traits?” G2-01 pointed out that it might indeed be their “gazing from afar” that endowed these idols with such distinctive charm and said:

Meeting him in real life could shatter my illusions. Like when I first got into him during my first year, I was so obsessed. I had enough money from my parents, and it was my first time being away from home with no one to nag me... so I just kept flying around the country to catch his live shows. During the honeymoon phase, everything he did was just perfect for me. But after that wore off, I went through this really rough patch where I even started dreading seeing him. I was scared he’d change or turn out different from what I imagined. I don’t know. Does anyone else feel that way?

G2-05 disapproved of this view: “Then you only love your imagined version of him... You should love him as he truly is. It was his authentic charm that captivated us initially”. However, she mentioned her experience when her mother pressured her to date since college and arranged matchmaking meetings shortly after she turned 20. She became a *mengnv* during university, idolising a male singer, but began writing *mengnv* fiction as matchmaking intensified. She said,

When I write about him, I write about us strolling under cherry blossoms in spring... about him rushing home right after work just to stay with me...I know he’s this super wild guy. But I swear he’d 100% chill with me doing those quiet little things, too. That’s what love is—just being there for each other, no matter what.

She provided some very precise scenarios, which she truly recognised as being with a loved one rather than rushing into a motherlike traditional marriage. However, the charm of the *mengjue* that emerged in these specific scenarios might merely be her imagination, and it served her needs for an ideal partner and an ideal love.

It can be concluded that while *mengnvs*’ initial obsessions with celebrities are rooted in these celebrities’ external appeal, they fundamentally serve as a fantasy practice oriented toward the idealised needs of oneself, demonstrating a marked subjective turn where individuals reframe intimacy as a site for self-exploration and empowerment. Kristeva (1987) contemplated love as a psychic force shaping

subjectivity and noted: “Love is the time and space in which “I” assumes the right to be extraordinary. Sovereign, yet not individual. Divisible, lost, annihilated; but also, and through imaginary fusion with the loved one, equal to the infinite space of superhuman psychism. Paranoid? I am in love, at the zenith of subjectivity”. Unlike the passive consumption of romance novels, *mengnv* fiction writing temporarily suspends real-world power imbalances in relationships through mastering the power of narrative while placing the needs related to oneself in the first place.

Even when reading *mengnv* fiction, their engagement diverges fundamentally from mainstream romance readership. In responses to “least favourite tropes in *mengnv* fiction”, “Reducing readers’ ability of self-insertion identification’ was mentioned 8 times and “The destruction of the ideal character setting of *Mengjue*” received 15 mentions. These views reveal a stringent self-referentiality in fantasy consumption, and the core lies in maintaining the functional integrity of fantasies as projection apparatuses for subjective desires.

Fantasy has become the experimental field for *mengnv* to explore the desires of subjectivity. In the *mengnv* fiction 池袋西口 (*Ikebukuro West Exit*), the characterisation of Hamada Asahi (Asa) dismantles the stereotypical “strong protector” image of traditional masculinity. The narrative repeatedly depicts moments of his physiological and emotional vulnerability—sudden intimacy after hair bleaching, feigned composure while sweating from spicy food, curling up at the doorstep on a rainy night—pulling the male body down from its “untouchable” pedestal while deconstructing and reassembling masculinity. Furthermore, Asa is often positioned as the object of gaze in intimate dynamics—described as “a dishevelled kitten” or “a stray puppy adopted from a pet café”—subverting the traditional power structure where men dominate as desiring subjects. Meanwhile, the female protagonist asserts herself as the desiring subject, consistently controlling relational tempos—initiating intimacy, deciding separations, and evading commitments. This female-authored novel is saturated with distinctly feminine ambiguous expressions of eroticism, which leads to the unveiling of love’s potential of becoming “the zenith of subjectivity”.

What merits special attention is that *mengnv* groups express their desire through ambiguous scenarios rather than straightforward pornographic representations. In the investigation of “least favourite tropes”, the basic category “Excessive and groundless pornographic content” received five critiques. Interviewee G3-02 critiqued some *mengnv* fiction as having “sex scenes for the sake of titillation, lack of character depth or narrative coherence”. It aligned with Radway’s (1984) findings, where female readers evaluated romantic novels’ emotional intimacy over explicit sexual depiction and valued affective bonds rooted in mutual admiration over visually imagined erotic encounters. Where the *mengnv* community fundamentally diverges from the consensus with Radway is in its distinct antipathy toward “pregnancy” tropes, a subcategory mentioned four times. G6-05 explained her aversion: “Why must escapist fantasies replicate real-life marital and reproductive pressures?” and G1-01 said: “The

moment the male lead (I don't admit this is my *mengjue*) says, "Let's have a baby, I stop reading". And only one work among the recommended *mengnv* fiction incorporates pregnancy narratives. According to their descriptions, as biological events, the pregnancy and childbirth plots imply uncontrollable body transformations and potentially shift the stories' focus from the "self" to the "maternal" role, thus undermining the authorial dominance over the fantasy.

However, some texts still duplicate the pseudo-subjectivity contradictions in the traditional romantic novels studied by Radway. First, some *mengnv* fiction adheres to *Mary Sue*'s logic, with female protagonists achieving seemingly high status through being desired by multiple high-status men. Yet these female characters, as objects of desire, are still symbolic rewards of power competition among men, which coincides with the "male homosocial desire" (Sedgwick, 1985). Such mechanisms conflate desirability with domination. Second, such texts risk fueling post-consumerist self-alienation. As interviewee G1-04 confessed: "I often feel unworthy of him because I've sacrificed nothing—not attending fan meetings, not gifting luxuries. How can I claim to love him without such proofs?" *Mengnv* practices, designed to enhance the perception of subjectivity, may engender new forms of low perceived deservingness, trapping women in cyclical oscillations between fantastic transgression and real-world frustration.

6. Female Alliances beyond Libido

The interview data reveals that fantasies and obsessions with female celebrities/characters manifest not only among queer-identified *mengnv* (lesbian/bisexual) but also among self-proclaimed heterosexual practitioners. Even when such fantasies carry romantic undertones, heterosexual *mengnv* rigorously reaffirm their "straight" identity. Interviewee G4-01 described her ambiguous affective bonds with female celebrities as transcending conventional romantic love, friendship, or kinship categories. This supplementary account amplifies the epistemological illegibility of such intimacies under patriarchal regimes that categorise emotions as either "platonic or erotic". However, there are a large number of intimate experiences that are difficult to classify into this binary framework in participants' minds. As Vicinus (2004) pointed out when analysing Linton's works, "The central paradox of Linton's writing was her inability, or unwillingness, to imagine an asexual friendship between women". Consequently, romantic narratives are appropriated as symbolic vehicles for articulating non-erotic female alliances complex. Illouz (1997) contended that capitalism colludes with mass media to enshrine romantic love as the gold standard of emotional intensity. When women attempt to express admiration for female idols, the hegemony of romantic rhetoric monopolises the discursive representation of "profound emotions" owing to the absence of socially legitimised alternative narratives.

In the *mengnv* fiction text 我这辈子最擅长的事情是嫉妒文淇 (*My Greatest Talent Is Envyng Wen Qi*) recommended by participants, "I" constantly expressed my "jealousy" and imitation of an

accomplished female peer during adolescence. This emotion made “me” always pay attention to her. Eventually, upon reuniting with her after growing up, “I” finally realised that behind this feeling lies a complex, ambiguous, and ineffable love. Here, the very unspeakability of ambiguous desire constitutes resistance to what Butler (1990) termed the “violence of the heteronormative matrix”. This “aphasia” state paradoxically operates as a certification mark of the alliance complex. By anchoring desire in the peer’s intellectual excellence rather than physical body beauty, this text ultimately constructs a matrilineal chain rooted in intellectual recognition.

Analysis of queer-identified participants’ narratives reveals their shared conviction that *mengnv*’s devotion to female *mengjue* is not merely a mimetic reproduction of heteronormative relationships but rather a fundamental reconfiguration of the very modalities through which female intimacy is understood. As interviewee G04-05 observed:

Those works centred on female idols are decidedly more grounded—they depict the intertwining of souls and resonance between minds. Writers of female idol *mengnv* fiction exhibit a particular affinity for themes like the growing pains of East Asian females, where the subtle, often ineffable complexities of female relationships are meticulously deconstructed. These relationships are multifaceted: childhood friends turned lovers, deskmates in a Chinese high school, stepsisters or stepmothers. The intricate dynamics of East Asian femininity are rendered with visceral, even bleakly poetic intensity.

G07-03 further analysed the reason why *mengnv* fiction fantasising about women is fundamentally distinct: “Because women already embody an innate beauty that requires no digging... We share the same gender, occupy analogous social positions within our cultural framework, and thus possess a natural intimacy that fosters mutual understanding”.

At the topological level of the flow of desire, same-gender-oriented *mengnv* fiction enacts a gender transposition of the core elements within male homosocial desire put forward by Sedgwick (1985). In these female-authored narratives, no symbolic intermediary of another gender is required, and women spontaneously construct direct circuits of desire between one another grounded in shared lived experiences and cultural positioning, which enables them to become the subject and object of desire simultaneously. On the level of the female body, same-gender-oriented *mengnv* writing does not constitute avoidance of sexuality but rather an exploration of alternative corporeal narratives, one that refuses to fragment the female body into isolated “sexy zones”. It cultivates a metaphor of growing pains: shared experiences of menarche, upgrowth anxieties, or weakness become hidden bonds between female lives. Such shared bodily memory functions as an alliance cypher, resisting the symbolic dissection of women’s corporeality.

Significantly, participants’ emphasis on an “East Asian” context reveals how these practices constitute situated responses to region-specific gender conditions. Within Confucian norms that rigidly enforce gender segregation, female homosocial intimacy occupies an ambivalent survival space, which can be

tolerated as “boudoir camaraderie” and can also be vulnerable to accusations of “transgression”. The recurrent relational tropes in *mengnv* fiction—childhood sweethearts, sisters, stepmothers—represent tactical appropriations of culturally sanctioned roles to facilitate affective experimentation.

7. Intimacy and Exclusion in *Mengnv* Communities

Radway’s (1984) research revealed how women in Smithton constructed an alternative female community through romance novel reading—one that provided crucial emotional sustenance, though not as tightly-knit as local physical groups. Similarly, *mengnvs* forge expansive, fluid online communities via internet-based reading and creative practices, offering significant affective support at some random moment.

Participant G6-01 disclosed that last year her post attracted numerous fans who adore the same idol as her. She reported crying for days after discovering that these fans purchased more star-related products and regularly attended their *mengjue*’s fan meetings, and that she did not seem to deserve to be the idol’s *mengnv*. When she subsequently shared this renewed sadness in a new post, over a hundred comments poured in from other *mengnvs* with different *mengjues*. One particularly impactful response stated:

The key is replacing a worshipper’s perspective with a creator mentality. Psychologically reframe “I fantasise about xxx loving me” into “I’m architecting a universe where xxx and I coexist in love”. They are perfect just because we imagine them to be. There is no such thing as deserving or not. They exist because of us.

Mengnv community in virtual spaces forge a form of quasi-kinship that effectively establishes an alternative female emotional support network operating outside the real-life discipline. While the community is fluid—with participants often interacting anonymously and without fixed connections—the shared emotional experiences and mutual validation among *mengnvs* cultivate an informal yet intimate affective collective.

However, the phenomena of *tongdanjufou* and *tongjiajufou*—manifesting as resistance to a character setting shared by multiple people, hostile critiques of other *mengnv*’s creative works, and the enforcement of exclusive discursive norms—reveal an existing mutual exclusion. These behaviours stem from a possessive demand for exclusive emotional ownership of characters, where individuals reinforce the uniqueness of their own fantasy relationships by invalidating others’ narratives. Thus, *tongdanjufou/tongjiajufou* essentially constitutes a form of boundary work. Some participants self-reported marked hostility toward fellow fans encountered on social media.

The antagonism surfaces more overtly on social media like *Xiaohongshu*, as seen in a viral text picture declaring: “Those who fantasise about marrying my *mengjue* and even resort to divination to “verify” his love are such clowns... How could their cold, transactional delusions compare to the real bond

between me and my *mengjue*...” This rhetoric exposes the discursive violence inherent in struggles over fantasy ownership.

Illouz (2007) argued that emotional capitalism fosters a cultural tendency to treat personal feelings as unquestionable “truth”, where the emotional experience becomes the ultimate criterion of legitimacy. If feeling equals reality, then each individual’s affective experience constitutes an isolated “reality bubble” impervious to external intervention. The privatisation of emotion exacerbates relational alienation since emotions, whether collectively triggered or not, are experienced and responded to only within the interiority of the individual psyche. What emerges is that human relationships degenerate into battles over emotional sovereignty rather than collaborative meaning-making. *Mengnv*’s subjectivity-forging through fantasy labour may unwittingly internalise the individualising logics of emotional capitalism, trapping in a more subtle mode of self-exploitation that masquerades as empowerment.

8. Conclusion

This study systematically examines the cultural practices of China’s *mengnv* community, revealing their complex implications for young women’s self-empowerment and gender politics. Employing feminist literary criticism and reader-response theory alongside dual methodologies—focus group interviews and textual narrative analysis—it investigates how *mengnv* engage in subjectivity exploration through customised intimate fantasies. Key findings demonstrate that during the late adolescence to emerging adulthood transition, the *mengnv* community utilises social media to subvert traditional intimacy scripts, converting fantasy into embodied narrative praxis, making intimacy a field for self-discovery, and expanding beyond heteronormative romance to explore non-heterosexual orientation romantic, friendship, and kinship relations. Their paradigm reconfigures power dynamics in the structure of desire while symbolically constructing non-erotic female alliances.

Despite its significant critical potential, *mengnv* culture embodies structural contradictions in its resistive practices. While some texts deconstruct traditional gender scripts, they simultaneously replicate the pseudo-subjectivity trap like *Mary Sue* narratives. When women attempt to reconfigure intimacy through fantasy, they may carve out new subject positions yet risk re-embedding traditional gender hierarchies. Thus, feminist subjectivity-building must critique the content of fantasies and their consumerist logic rather than focusing solely on surface-level narrative revisions. Within the *mengnv* culture, the synergetic mechanisms of emotional capitalism persistently loom: platform algorithms privileging attention capital may suppress imaginative diversity, while the reproduction of “low perceived deservingness” exposes the paradox of fantasy liberation coexisting with reality disempowerment.

Moreover, while *mengnv* constructs quasi-kinship networks on social platforms, practices like *tongdanjufou* enact social exclusion, undermining collective solidarity. To form female homosocial alliances, a new affective grammar transcending romance paradigms is required. Subject to further exploration, Clough and Halley's (2007) "affective turn" could be used to liberate emotions from identity and cultivate a more dynamic female intimacy discourse.

This study opens space for an innovative rethinking of feminist subculture research. The notion of emerging adulthood offers a novel lens to examine young women's negotiations in transitional periods, particularly how self-thinking strategies during delayed family obligations interact with traditional cultural tensions. Meanwhile, feminist studies in East Asian contexts should reckon with the ambiguity of emotions within Confucian frameworks. The *mengnv* phenomenon demonstrates that even within hyper-commodified affective economies, women carve out resistant spaces through micro-narrative practices. These findings suggest adopting more inclusive theoretical frameworks that recognise the subversive potential latent in marginalised cultural praxis.

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Notes

Note 1. In Y/N fanfiction, readers insert [Your/Name] and play out an intimate relationship with unattainable celebrities (Cyber Definitions, 2022).

Appendix 1

Structured Interview Outline

I. Demographic Information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Age ● Marital status ● Occupation ● Education level ● Sexual orientations ● Duration of being a <i>mengnv</i> ● Duration and frequency of reading <i>mengnv</i> fiction
II. Reading History, Habits, and Preferences
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. When did you start reading <i>mengnv</i> fiction? What was the trigger? (A specific person/character?) Do you remember the content? 2. Have you always focused on one person/character? Whose <i>mengnv</i> fiction do you currently read? What makes them special to you? Why did you start reading <i>mengnv</i> fiction about them? 3. What kinds of <i>mengnv</i> fiction tropes do you usually enjoy? What kinds do you dislike? 4. How do you allocate time between reading <i>mengnv</i> fiction and other genres (e.g., original novels, fanfiction)? 5. Where do you access <i>mengnv</i> fiction? 6. Do you discuss or recommend <i>mengnv</i> fiction with/to fellow fans? Do you read comments on social media after finishing a story? Have you commissioned personalised <i>mengnv</i> fiction? What are your thoughts on <i>tongdanjufou</i> (同担拒否) or <i>tongjiajufou</i> (同嫁拒否)?
III. Knowledge and Evaluation of <i>Mengnv</i> and <i>Mengnv</i> Fiction
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do you consider being a <i>mengnv</i> an important part of your identity? Do you label yourself as a <i>mengnv</i> on social media? 2. (For those focused on fictional characters) How do <i>mengnv</i> fiction and other fiction/fanworks differ? Why is <i>mengnv</i> fiction uniquely meaningful to you?

3. (For those focused on real-life celebrities) Do you see yourself as engaging in typical “fandom” behaviour? Is *mengnv* culture part of idol fandom? Would you call yourself a “girlfriend fan”?
4. (For creators) What are the benefits and drawbacks of writing *mengnv* fiction?
5. What makes a *mengnv* fiction “perfect”? What elements make a story flawed or even a “red flag”? Could you describe your favourite/least favourite *mengnv* fiction and why you love/dislike it?
6. How strongly do you immerse yourself when reading? Is self-immersion a key factor in your enjoyment? Is it a quality benchmark? Can you give examples? (For creators) Do you consider readers’ immersion when writing?
7. What matters most in *mengnv* fiction—the accuracy of the character’s portrayal, the plot development, or the relationship dynamics between the character and “you”?

IV. External and Self-Perceptions

1. How do others (other fans, friends, family, etc.) view your *mengnv* identity? Have you faced negative reactions?
2. As a *mengnv*, have you experienced an encouraging “real-life” moment? Conversely, was there a time you considered quitting, either as a *mengnv* or for a specific character?
3. What does reading *mengnv* fiction mean to you? Has it positively or negatively impacted your personal growth, daily life, or social interactions?
4. Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experiences, opinions, or stories as a *mengnv*?