

Online moving of Chinese boys' love fans: A platform ecology perspective

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Abstract

This study examines the online moving of Chinese Boys' Love (BL) fans through the lens of platform ecology, exploring how they navigate censorship and create opportunity spaces across multiple digital platforms. Employing mixed methods combining participant observation, in-depth interviews, and secondary data analysis, the research maps the complex tactics BL fans used to maintain their community and content in a restrictive digital environment. The findings reveal that fans move between commercial, fan-run, and outbound-link platforms, to access different types of content and spaces. By combining platform affordances, fans create opportunity spaces that fulfill their desires for BL content, demonstrating remarkable resilience in the face of increasing restrictions. The study contributes to both fan studies and platform studies by extending analyses beyond single-platform interactions and deepening the platform ecology heuristic. It highlights the importance of cross-platform mobility in equipping fan communities to withstand structural vulnerabilities imposed by censorship and platform governance. The research also integrates political-economic analysis with ecological thinking, balancing considerations of user agency and power imbalances.

Keywords

Boy's Love, fandom, fans mobility, censorship, cross-platform practices, platform affordances, opportunity space

Introduction

In 2021, following the shutdown of a prominent fansub group (Zhao, 2021), people lamented the plight of Chinese-language slash fans, likening them to “cyber-nomads” wandering without a home. This characterization echoes recent disruptions in Boys' Love (BL) communities—a genre featuring male–male romances—including the 2020 blocking of Archive of Our Own (AO3) in mainland China (Romano, 2020) and the three-month suspension of another popular BL platform Lofter (Decode, 2020).

The digital era is marked by the constant flux in online platforms (Fiesler and Dym, 2020), particularly affecting transformative media fan communities (Floegel, 2022). Chinese BL communities exemplify this dynamic, having undergone multiple cycles of dysfunction, death, rebirth, and rebuilding due to their portray of non-heteronormative sexuality. While previous research examines single BL

communities within the broader online public sphere (Chao, 2016; Hu et al., 2023; Yang and Xu, 2016a), the increasing platformization of BL content production (Zhang, 2024) has led to fan practices that transcend individual platforms. However, research examining the frequent online moving of Chinese BL fans remains limited (Zheng, 2019).

This study addresses this knowledge gap by employing a heuristic of platform ecology (Ibert et al., 2022), which enables mapping BL fans' online action spaces based on

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their needs while integrating both fan agency and the platform infrastructure into the analysis. The research inquires:

1. What drives BL fans online mobility?
2. How do Chinese BL fans navigate and utilize multiple platforms to create opportunity spaces that fulfil their needs?
3. How do fans respond to disruptions in their opportunity spaces, and what impact do these responses have on the existing platform ecology?

Through a combination of participant observation and in-depth interviews, this study identifies three distinct platform categories utilized by BL fans and illustrates how fans bridge platform affordances to create comprehensive opportunity spaces. By incorporating censorship into the heuristic, the research examines how regulatory pressures create resource mismatches between fans and single platforms, necessitating cross-platform movement. Finally, this study explores the breakdown of BL fans' opportunity spaces and subsequent efforts to repair these spaces.

This research contributes to both fan studies and platform studies by offering a novel perspective on fan online practices within interconnected platform environments. While previous studies focus on platform abandonment patterns (Fiesler and Dym, 2020) or the biopolitics of online queer fandom (Floegel, 2022), this study examines the synchronic cross-platform practices of Chinese BL fans, providing insights into platform interconnections and functionality transition.

The following sections introduce the platform ecology heuristic and its relevance to studying Chinese BL fans' online practices, detail the research methods employed, map out the online opportunity space of BL fans, and conclude by summarizing the study's contributions and limitations.

Studying Chinese BL practices within a platform ecology heuristic

Platform ecology provides a heuristic for understanding how different platforms interlink to afford seamless transitions between functionalities in contexts where online practices permeate daily life (Ibert et al., 2022). This approach differs from both macro-political perspective (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Srnicek, 2017; van Dijck et al., 2018), and single-platform analyses (Wachsmuth and Weisler, 2018; Wang, 2016) by highlighting interrelations between multiple platforms while centering on a specific user group—in this case, BL fans—to explore interactions between users and their environment.

This framework enables fans' agencies to emerge clearly from the digital landscape. Rather than suggesting users settle on a new platform, as online migration theories imply (Fiesler and Dym, 2020; Zheng, 2019), it recognizes

that Chinese BL fans move simultaneously across multiple platforms, creating opportunity spaces. Focusing on fans' agency, this approach identifies platforms relevant to their needs and practices while tracing how they integrate platforms into activities.

Two core concepts from platform ecology are particularly relevant to this study: (1) ecological niches, and (2) affordances and constraints.

Even a reflective agent remains a product of their situation when agency cannot be enacted in an equitable environment (Gibson, 2014). The concept of ecological niche—originally referring to environmental features that support and limit a particular species (Gibson, 2014)—applies here as a socio-technical niche encompassing conditions specific to BL fans' needs across platforms (Ibert et al., 2022). This concept helps illustrate how China's censorship fundamentally shapes BL fans' online environment.

The second core concept, affordances in the ecological perspective, emphasizes relationality and practice (Gibson, 2014). Affordances encompass potential relationships between actors and environment, requiring active agents' social practices to seize opportunities by linking means and ends (Ibert et al., 2022). Users can employ platforms' features in various ways depending on users' interests, capabilities, and needs (Ibert et al., 2022). Through this lens, fans' agency remains significant, even when mediated by technological infrastructures and constrained by embedded power asymmetries. Furthermore, while platforms define what can and cannot be done through affordances and constraints, a relational understanding introduces the concept of "imagined affordances" (Nagy and Neff, 2015) that users' perception of technologies shaped by their prior knowledge and expectations.

While the evolution of Chinese online BL communities has historical roots, their large-scale online moving is closely tied to the platformization of cultural production (Zhang, 2024). Platform analysis thus serves as the entry point for this research. The cross-platform ecology that BL fans navigate constitutes an environment rich in multimedia products. Among theories addressing the digital-age multimedia environments, polymedia (Madianou and Miller, 2013) shares the platform ecology's understanding of affordances as an environment of practice. However, polymedia emphasizes the social and emotional consequences of media choices (Madianou and Miller, 2013). Similarly, media manifold theory (Couldry, 2016) captures the media interdependence but focuses primarily on structural relations between media systems and forms, with less attention on user agency. In contrast, the user-centric platform ecology heuristic offers bottom-up approaches (Ibert et al., 2022) particularly suited to tracking BL fans' movement across online spaces and understanding the dynamics of their practices.

Examining BL fans' online practices through the platform ecology heuristic enables a nuanced understanding of the complex sociotechnical and spatial combinations

shaping these practices. By centering fan agency and considering users' needs within a complex online environment, this theoretical framework facilitates mapping opportunity spaces across multiple interconnected platforms. The following section describes the methodology employed to apply this framework in analyzing Chinese BL fans' online moving practices.

Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, combining participant observation, interviews, and secondary data analysis to examine comprehensively the dynamics of Chinese BL fans' online moving practices.

Participant observation

Data collection began in February 2020, focusing on the impact of AO3's blocking in China. The observation encompassed major Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo, Douban, and WeChat, and dedicated fan communities including Jinjiang, Lofter, and other specialized platforms. Following AO3's inaccessibility, BL fans' discussions centered on four main adaptation tactics:

1. Accessing AO3 through VPN or mirror sites.
2. Enhancing censorship circumvention tactics in existing BL communities.
3. Repurposing general-purpose platforms for fan activities.
4. Creating new, dedicated platforms.

Fans actively shared their experience with those alternative platforms, documenting evaluations and comparisons of usability, features and overall suitability for BL content. Through fans-shared experience, the research gained access to the emerging communities and tracked development of them including funding sources, functional design, community policies etc.

Interviews

Between May and June 2021, the researcher conducted interviews with 19 self-identified female BL fans, all adults with university-level education or higher. Participant recruitment occurred through three channels: Chinese social media platforms, existing community connections, and snowball sampling. The informants included four fan creators, with participants' involvement in BL communities ranging from 3 to 13 years. Chart 1 presents the distribution of participants' engagement duration in BL communities.

The researcher conducted interviews via WeChat's voice call function, with sessions lasting between 60 and 130 min. The interview explored participants' personal histories with BL, platforms usage patterns, platform selection criteria, and experiences with alternative platforms. All interviews

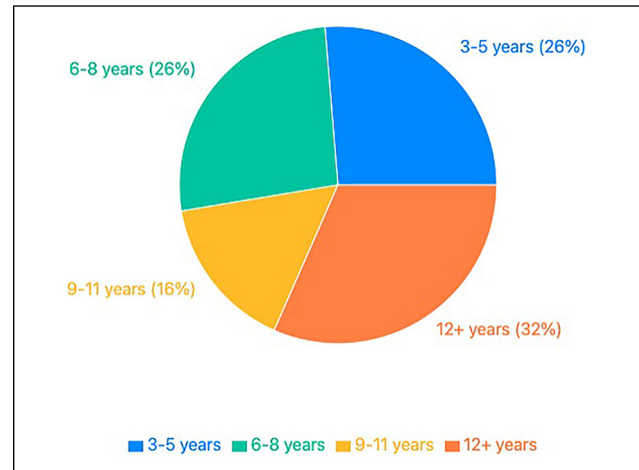


Chart 1. Informants' ages in BL communities.

were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis methods (Braun and Clarke, 2021). Analysis revealed consistent patterns in participants' platform migration behaviors. Chart 2 illustrates platform usage frequency among participants, with 18 of 19 interviewees reporting concurrent use of three or more BL communities. While participants described a chronological order of platform adoption, they typically maintained presence across multiple platforms simultaneously, abandoning platforms only when they ceased operations. The major platforms discussed included:

- (1) Specialized BL webnovel platforms with forum features:
 - Jinjiang (www.jjwxc.net/)
 - ChangPei (www.gongzicp.com/)
- (2) General platforms repurposed for BL content:
 - Lofter (www.lofter.com/front/login): A Tumblr-like community that evolved into a significant BL fanfiction hub
 - Weibo (weibo.com/): China's primary social media network, analogous to Twitter
 - BaiduTieba: A forum-based platform with fan-created dedicated BL sub-forums
 - Bilibili (www.bilibili.com/): A video-sharing platform used for fan-created content.
- (3) Specialized and pseudonymized BL platforms:
 - H site: A Taiwanese platform centered on BL and R18 content
 - S site and W site: fan-operated, dedicated BL communities

The "others" accessed through outbound links including Douban, Asianfanfics, PO, Shimo, etc. Participants reported discovering new platforms primarily through peer recommendations and followed content creators to emerging platforms. While these usage patterns provide valuable insights into BL fans' online moving, they should not be considered representative of the entire

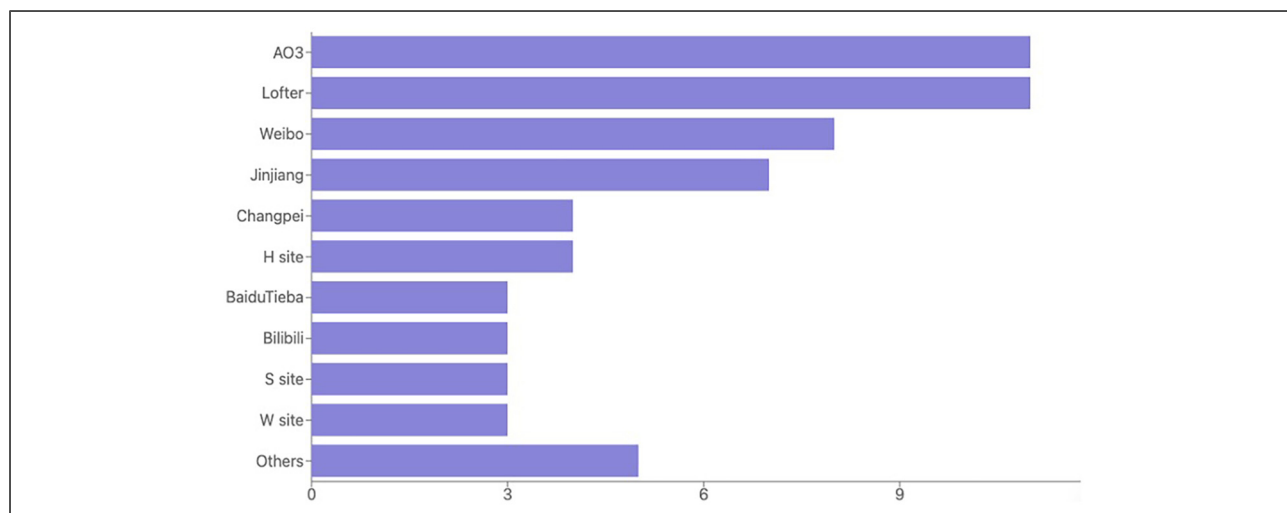


Chart 2. Used platforms of BL fans.

Chinese BL fandom, as comprehensive analysis would require more extensive data collection.

Secondary data analysis

To complement the primary data, the researcher analyzed two types of secondary sources: (1) historical accounts of Chinese BL communities' development and decline, drawn from interviews with community founders, self-media content, and media reports; (2) documentation of censorship mechanisms and fans' responses, sourced from government policies, platform community guidelines, and news reports.

The analysis focused on identifying patterns in fans' online moving, guided by the platform ecology framework. While the researcher's background as a long-term BL fan and intermittent creator provided additional context, this experience was not used as direct research data.

Ethical considerations

The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines. All participants provided informed consent and retained the right to withdraw at any time. While verbatim quotes are used, all participants and online commenters are anonymized. Only publicly accessible commercial platforms and those already referenced in existing literature are named; fan-run communities are discussed using pseudonyms.

Chinese censorship as the socio-technical niche

Within the platform ecology framework, the socio-technical niche encompasses affordances and constraints specific to particular user types across platforms (Ibert et al., 2022).

For Chinese BL fans, censorship constitutes a fundamental component of this niche, as one participant explained: "The moving between platforms is definitely due to censorship reasons... these platform changes are a result of censorship (Conflicts between) fans don't have the power to bring down a website" (AF01).

Two types of censorship significantly shape BL fans' online practices: internet censorship and pornography regulation. The Golden Shield Project—commonly known as the Great Firewall (Chandel et al., 2019)—monitors and restricts internet access in China. This system limits access to global media and international fan communities, creating particular challenges for BL fans due to the subculture's reliance on global popular culture and translational fan practices (L. Yang and Xu, 2017). Although fans employ VPNs to bypass these restrictions, such tools remain unstable and frequently malfunction due to ongoing updates to the Great Firewall.

Pornography regulation, enforced through annual anti-pornography campaigns, specifically targets BL content. The regulatory framework stems from 1988 guidelines that classify "homosexual sexual acts" as pornographic content (National Press and Publication Administration, 1988). Consequently, BL faces censorship even without explicit sexual content, solely for portraying male–male relationships. This targeting persists despite China's decriminalization of homosexuality in 1997 and its depathologization in 2001 (Bao, 2021), creating an increasingly precarious for BL content and its creators.

The impact of pornography regulation on BL communities remains severe and wide-ranging. Anti-pornography campaigns have resulted in the damage or destruction of numerous BL communities (L. Yang and Xu, 2016b; Yi, 2013). These campaigns have led to arrest of fans (Bai, 2021), authors, and platform operators (The Office, 2022; Wang, 2018; R. Yang and Ren, 2019). Beyond these

direct consequences, such campaigns generate widespread panic within BL communities and contribute to negative public perceptions of BL.

Recent regulatory developments have intensified restrictions on BL content. In 2018, a National People's Congress proposal advocated for stricter regulation of BL dramas, citing concerns about their influence on minors' values and attitudes towards relationships (Wang, 2018). By 2021, authorities required major digital platforms to restrict "bad cultures," explicitly including BL, under the premise of protecting minors (XinHua News, 2021). Between 2021 to November 2023, the regulatory body reported 48 specific crackdowns targeting BL content.¹

Overall, as a fundamental component of the socio-technical niche, authorities create structural vulnerability within the platform ecology surrounding BL users. This vulnerability manifests unevenly across platforms: large platforms might only remove specific BL-themed works, while smaller communities face harsher consequences, ranging from suspension to permanent shutdown.² Platforms' ability to manage censorship varies based on their goals, financial resources, technical capabilities, and public relations expertise.

As platforms develop strategies to mitigate censorship risks, a mismatch emerges between platform affordances and fans' demands. This mismatch primarily manifests in three distinct approaches: (1) platforms that permit BL themes while prohibiting sexual content, (2) platforms that reframe BL content as platonic relationships with subtle homoerotic subtext, and (3) platforms operating in marginal internet spaces that allow unrestricted BL content. The following section examines how BL fans navigate these varying affordances, creating new spaces for expression and community within China's regulated online environment.

Cross-platform practices: bridging an opportunity space

Within the platform ecology heuristic, users address resource mismatch through "bridge practice"—combining different platforms in complementary ways to accomplish tasks (Ibert et al., 2022). While the original framework examines both online and offline spaces, this study focuses specifically on mapping online spaces, with BL fans as the central actors. The following participant experience illustrates the complexity of these digital practices:

The platforms I commonly use include Jinjiang, S site, AO3, Lofter, Weibo, and both the old and new sites of Changpei. These are the main ones. Occasionally, I also check out P site and H site. P site is Taiwanese. On these platforms, such as P site, H site, and S site, the restrictions regarding explicit content are relatively loose than Jinjiang and other domestic websites. (AD08)

To analyze fans' platform selection, this study examines the affordances and constraints of three platform types: (a) commercial platforms: large-scale, profit-driven sites; (b) fan-run platforms: community-operated spaces; and (c) outbound-link platforms: interconnected platform networks. This section concludes by demonstrating how fans employ bridge practices to access and consume BL content across these platform types.

Commercial platforms: afford BL content at the cost of sexual expression

The commercialization of BL platforms in China, marked by the 2008 acquisition of Jinjiang Literature City (Jiemian, 2021), fundamentally altered the digital landscape. Major technology companies began integrating BL content and monetizing its fanbase (Zhang, 2024), leading to expand media presence but also intensified content restrictions. Participants described this transformation:

When I was in the middle school, creators were actually quite bold with their work... one particularly daring author (from Jinjiang), Tianlai Zhiyuan, was someone I really like, wrote things like male pregnancy. I think it would probably not be accepted nowadays. (AD05)

I remember, in the very beginning on Bilibili, you could even see scenes from Love Tyrant, a somewhat H (hentai) BL manga. Back then, it might have been many years ago, you could see things freely; now, even same-sex kisses are censored... Over time, (censorship) things have become stricter, and the survival space for BL and shipping³ has become narrower... I think it's probably related to policies. Or maybe, ideology (control)... I think, for instance, when government introduces some policies, platforms might, for their own survival, tighten restrictions beyond what is required. (AD15)

Even with these constraints, commercial platforms offer significant affordances that maintain their relevance for BL fans:

High accessibility: commercial platforms are designed to be accessible to as many users as possible, allowing visits even without registration. The registration process is simplified with minimal verification. Furthermore, these platforms offer both web and app versions, allowing users to access content through their preferred method. Additionally, they integrate payment systems with major online payment channels in China, such as Alipay and WeChat Pay, making it seamless for users to subscribe and access paywall-content.

Content volume: commercial platforms are able to attract creators by offering tangible rewards, ensuring a continuous supply of content for users. Take Jinjiang as an example, as of 2023, it boasts over 5.86 million online webnovels, with more than 10,000 printed works. The platform sees an average of over 2800 newly contracted works every

month. With over 2.62 million registered authors, the website update daily with over 35.64 million words, accumulating a total of more than 137.4 billion published words.⁴

High scalability: scalability means the ability of content to effectively reach and engage audiences (Tiidenberg et al., 2021). Commercial platforms have greatly facilitated the cross-platform production and distribution of BL (Zhang, 2024). For instance, a webnovel on Jinjiang can easily be adapted into various including audio drama, animation, webdrama, online game, etc. Moreover, since these commercial platforms engage in international business, these contents can transcend geographical boundaries and reach audiences worldwide.

Operational stability: platforms' stable operation is crucial for users' experience. Before the acquisition, Jinjiang faced multiple crises, including inadequate server capacity, infringement lawsuits, and financial constraints (Jiemian, 2021). However, after the acquisition, Jinjiang was able to invest more in server infrastructure, ensuring stable and long-term operation. The commercialization of the platform also allowed for the establishment of dedicated legal and public relations departments, enhancing its ability to handle censorship risks. Despite experiencing losses, Jinjiang successfully navigated through several rigorous campaigns and, thanks to years of stable operation, has become the largest Chinese BL community today.

The other side of the coin is constraints. Commercial platforms impose significant constraints on BL content and community practices, primarily through their implementation of regulatory policies:

Limited security: Chinese authorities have implemented a real-name registration system, which requires internet content and service providers to collect users' identification information during the registration process (BBC, 2015). In other words, when fans post content that may be censored, not only risk their virtual accounts being affected but also face potential offline consequences. Furthermore, users' data is not kept secure. Commercial platforms claim ownership over user-generated content in their community policies, allowing them to block or delete user-generated content without consent. BL fans express frustration over the unexpected removal of their creations and private collections, as AD16 lamented:

It feels like in the past few years, there's less and less content that can actually be published... Things get censored or reported all the time... my collections often disappear after a while, just gets cleaned up (without being informed)... Not that I could even view it, the webpage cannot check anyway. It's just so frustrating.

Enhanced content restrictions: commercial platforms go to extreme in purging content that contains sexual depictions and non-heterosexuality. For example, during the 2014 campaign, Jinjiang shut down the "BL" and "BL

slash" subsites for an entire week. Subsequently, Jinjiang rebranded its BL section as "Pure Love" and merged with the non-romantic content (L. Yang and Xu, 2016b). These actions were intended to obscure the sexuality of BL and to downplay their association with this subculture. Broader-audience platforms employ similar strategies, particularly in video content, recasting BL as brotherly bonds or friendship.⁵

These constraints fundamentally alter BL narratives, undermining its core appeal to fans:

There's not even a kiss, or hug in Jinjiang. If I just wanted to read stories without any romance, why wouldn't I choose No-CP? I read BL with expectation of romantic interactions between *semé* and *uké*.⁶ Without those elements, reading BL is no longer enjoyable. (AD08)

While commercial platforms offer significant advantages in accessibility, stability, and content volume, their content policies and security concerns drive fans to seek alternative spaces. The following section examines how fan-run platforms attempt to address these limitations while creating more protected spaces for BL content.

Fan-run platform: crossing the wall, self-gated and educating fans

In response to commercial platforms' restrictions, BL fans have established alternative spaces that prioritize creative freedom. Notable examples include ChangPei, which emerged as an alternative to Jinjiang's restrictions (Yule Zibenlun, 2018), and S site, developed amid intensifying censorship. These fan-run communities employ several protective measures such as offshore server hosting, strict access control and community-driven content moderation. The following analysis examines the affordances and constraints of fan-run platforms, focusing on S site and the ChangPei forum⁷ as cases:

Content inclusivity⁸: especially includes what has been purged by commercial platforms. Changpei's "Marginal Library" can publish diverse BL themes including hermaphroditic characters, male pregnancy and lactation, non-traditional gender identities, bestiality, necrophilia, etc. Similarly, S site allows the following "marginal themes," including sexual relationships involving multiple characters simultaneously such as multiple partners and cuckoldry; character attributes that extend significantly beyond human nature during intercourse, including furies, tentacles, ABO,⁹ lactation, childbirth, insectoids, hermaphroditism, various "estrus" related setups; sexual transactions; incestuous relationships; background themes involving military, political, police, crime; BDSM; necrophilia; not suitable for minors, etc. This inclusivity directly addresses the content gaps left by commercial platforms' strict censorship.

Enhanced security: by hosting servers overseas, these platforms are less vulnerable to Chinese censorship mechanisms. At worst, they become inaccessible from mainland China but the risk of community shutdown or data loss is reduced. Moreover, users can remain anonymous without real-name authentication, ensuring safer online activity.

These expanded affordances, however, necessitate significant operational constraints and community management measures:

Low Accessibility: fan-run platforms impose strict access requirement. Users often need internal invitations or must pass tests on BL knowledge and community policies. For instance, S site requires regular logins and quizzes for account upgrades, with only higher-level accounts accessing certain content. For example, only accounts at level 4 or higher can access the marginal content.

Low searchability: this type of communities are challenging for newcomers to discover. Platforms like Changpei and S site, along with their content, are not indexed by Chinese search engines, making them virtually invisible to casual searchers.

Fan-run platforms employ multiple tactics to maintain BL content's integrity while protecting their communities including circumventing the Great Firewall, limiting accessibility, grading content and users, and educating fans on community norms. These protective measures create significant entry barriers, as one participant explained:

S site is really hard to access, so when I applied, it was quite a hassle... if you don't meet the required level, you can't view any content. You can only see the titles, but once you click on them, you'll realize you don't have access...overall, it's just very troublesome. (AF01)

While these measures protect the community, they also present challenges. Reliance on volunteer labor and rising server costs can lead to platform instability. More critically, the self-gating approach limits new members, potentially stifling creativity and leading to membership decline. BL fans outside the founding members must immerse themselves in the culture for a long time to gain access to these gated spaces. Paradoxically, the promise of inclusive and diverse content can become illusory due to a shrinking creator base. These limitations of fan-run platforms highlight the complex trade-offs between content freedom and community sustainability. While offering protected spaces for unrestricted BL content, the exclusive nature of these platforms often constrains community growth and content development. This tension drives fans to seek additional alternatives through outbound-link platforms, which the following part examines.

Outbound-link platform: finding uncensored gaps from censored space

The outbound-link platform is not an intentionally designed type, but rather a combination of various platforms that are interconnected through fans' tactic of "go for outbound-link." This tactic involves posting partial content on one platform while providing links to more sensitive or restricted content on other platforms. BL fans primarily leverage profile-centered social media (e.g., Weibo), cultural content platforms (e.g., Douban). These platforms, while subject to censorship as commercial types, are repurposed creatively by BL fans and afford:

Community Formation Features: these robust platforms allow users to create subgroups or topics, facilitating community formation around BL interests. For instance, Weibo's "super topic" feature enables fans to create regulated subgroups, while Douban's group function serves a similar purpose. Within these subgroups, members can set rules regarding accessibility and prohibited content etc. For instance, only members with a certain level of Weibo account can join, and only members who have been joined the topic more than 30 days can contribute content. Douban's group function serves a similar purpose. Users of Lofter can connect with others who have common interests through its tag function. Furthermore, on these highly interactive platforms, even a comment section can temporarily attract fans around a particular work or a creator. On the other hand, in the Chinese media ecology, most media content, including BL, is promoted, or disseminated through these public social media platforms. Focusing on specific BL content on these multimodal platforms thus has become an easy choice.

Inconsistent censorship gap: this is not a designed but "imagined affordance" emerged from fan practices. Although these platforms apply content censorship, the filtering algorithms and implementation may vary. Moreover, the biases become more pronounced in manual moderation, and the standards of censorship differ across platforms due to the competition for user attention (Miller, 2019). The tactic of going for outbound-link exploits censorship gaps among them. For example, fans may post their fanwork on Lofter and include links to the part that did not pass Lofter's censorship on Weibo. On Weibo, fans sometimes employ techniques such as flipping images or adding watermarks to evade scrutiny. As each post on every platform undergoes censorship, fans repeatedly utilize and modify links, escaping censorship' spotlight randomly through these gap-spaces.

Platform censorship's unpredictable and inconsistent nature (Zhang, 2024) inevitably leaves certain content uncirculated on domestic platforms, regardless of tactical sophistication. In response, fans increasingly turn to overseas platforms, with AO3 emerging as a crucial outbound-link destination. AO3 affords key advantages, for example, inclusive content policies, high accessibility

(prior to February 2020), and stability and security, making it an attractive alternative to heavily censored domestic platforms. The platform's significance is evidenced by its active support for Chinese users. In May 2019, AO3 acknowledged its growing Chinese userbase and committed to enhanced accessibility:

Recently, the Archive of Our Own has received an influx of new Chinese users, a result of tightening content restrictions on other platforms. We would like to extend our warmest welcome to them, and remind everyone that our committees are working to make AO3 as accessible as possible in languages other than English. (Organization for Transformative Works, 2019)

This led to the establishment of a Chinese-language tag wrangler team and guidelines for archiving content from platforms like Lofter (Hei, 2020). Consequently, AO3 has been seen as Noah's Ark (Hei, 2020), an emergency device within BL fans' platform ecology.

Sketching BL fans' opportunity space

The analysis reveals how fans create comprehensive opportunity spaces through both temporal and spatial platform bridging practices. These practices manifest in two primary dimensions: temporal dimension, on the one hand, participants described evolving platform usage patterns over time, as illustrated by one fan's journey:

At first, I have used Jinjiang a lot, and then Baidu Cloud also has been commonly used. After that, there were frequent book-sharing posts on Weibo, and then H site has gradually started gaining popularity. However, H site is more troublesome to use; it often requires switching sites, and it seems registration is now closed. Then I have accessed Lofter as well... In the past couple of years, I mainly stick to Weibo, check things on Lofter that couldn't be posted elsewhere, and then move to AO3 for other content. (AD03)

On the other hand, bridging practices mainly take the form of spatial combinations. The 2021 webdrama *Word of Honor* (2021) exemplifies how fans create comprehensive content spaces through simultaneous platform usage. This case demonstrates multiple levels of engagement. The series alters the romance in the webnovel to brotherhood and transforms a homosexual protagonist into a heterosexual character.¹⁰ Thus, fans' engagement with this work by watching the adapted webdrama on the streaming platform; moving to Jinjiang to read the webnovel. Meanwhile, on outbound-link platforms including Weibo and Douban, fans created and consumed fan creations based on the original work, characters, actors, and even blends of elements from other sources into stories of *Word of Honor*. Simultaneously, the absence of sexual intimacy on Chinese internet can be satisfied on AO3. Through platform combinations, fans construct

comprehensive opportunity spaces that transcend individual platform limitations. While each platform imposes specific constraints, the integrated network of platforms enables fans to: access complete narrative experiences, engage in community discussions, create and share derivative works, and maintain content accessibility. Figure 1 illustrates this dynamic opportunity space created through multi-platform integration.

This opportunity space created by BL fans demonstrates their resilience in the face of censorship. By flexibly combining platform affordances, fans maintain access to desired content without compromising their interests. However, this cross-platform tactic also introduces challenges, particularly in the form of context collapses that refers to the phenomenon on social media where distinct social contexts intersect, leading to challenges in managing audience expectations, privacy boundaries, and self-presentation (Marwick and Boyd, 2011). The February 2020 blocking of AO3 in mainland China illustrates the cascading effects of context collapse within cross-platform practices. The incident stemmed from a real person slash¹¹ (RPS) involving two male actors, shared on Weibo with an outbound link to AO3. The content' reporting by idol fans, who viewed it as contradicting their preferred image of the actors (Yin and Xie, 2021), led to AO3's blockage. Furthermore, the regulatory body also intensified the regulation on fan culture and the BL subculture as a whole (Ge, 2022). The AO3 incident demonstrates how vulnerability in one component can destabilize the entire platform ecology. This recognition prompted the fans to explore new platform configurations and protective measures, leading to experimental hybrid approaches detailed in the following section.

A hybrid approach: afford everything on single platform

The reduced accessibility of AO3 through mirror sites and VPNs generated demand for more stable domestic alternative, for example, AD10 mentioned: "if domestic platforms were available, I honestly wouldn't be too keen on using 'scientific internet surfing' (an ironic term describing using VPNs to access overseas websites)." Two emerging platforms—L site and T site—proposed a hybrid design approach amid reconciling competing platform requirements. This approach sought to afford fans the "freedom to create, publish, store, and showcase their works"¹² while adhering to a commercial platform framework that could provide ease of access and stability. A particular emphasis was placed on preventing context collapse and ensuring security within a single platform, learning from the challenges faced by previous platforms. The analysis of hybrid platforms (L site and T site) examines both implemented features and intended affordances, recognizing their emergent nature during development. Therefore, aspects such as self-promotional discourse and the founders'

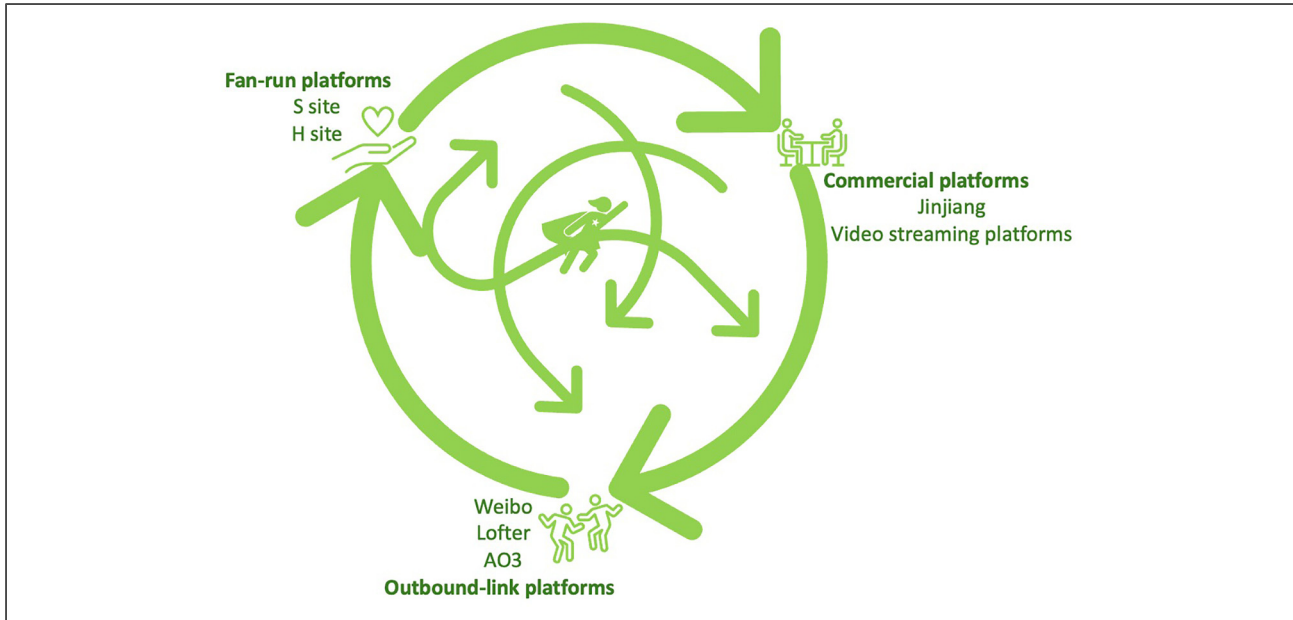


Figure 1. Opportunity space created by BL fans.

explanations of their visions for the platforms are also analyzed as part of their imagined affordances. The hybrid platform design affords:

High accessibility: the hybrid platforms were designed with high accessibility in mind, developing both mobile apps and websites to cater to different user preferences. While L site allowed open registration, T site implemented a quiz system focusing on community etiquette, with answers easily accessible through their social media channels. Both platforms ensure that registered users had access to all the content.

High stability: stability was a key concern for these new platforms, given the volatile nature of China's digital landscape for BL content. The founding teams believed that by mimicking the practices of commercial platforms and operating within the boundaries of Chinese law, they could achieve a level of protection from regulatory harassment. In practice, this meant hosting servers domestically, obtaining internet content provider (ICP) licenses, and implementing the sensitive word library provided by authorities. The platforms also distributed their applications through official channels like the App Store, signifying their compliance with regulatory requirements.

High security: data security was another critical aspect of these hybrid platforms' design. L site, for instance, articulated its preservation mission:

The loss of fanwork is unfortunately a common occurrence. Each time it happens, we feel helpless. We simply desire a platform where we can archive our fanwork. Readers should not have to concern themselves with transferring backups daily, while authors should not be disheartened by the sudden deletion of their creations.¹²

To address these concerns, L site implemented meticulous manual review processes to minimize erroneous blocking triggering by the auto-filtering's inaccurate detection of sensitive words. Importantly, content that failed to pass the censorship was stored in the authors' personal accounts rather than being directly deleted outright, ensuring creators do not experience unexpected loss of their work. Furthermore, L site's private collection feature not only guarantees data security within its own platform but also extended its protection to content sourced from other platforms. It allows fans to privately save content in a snapshot format, regardless of its origin on L site or elsewhere. The snapshot format ensured that even if the original source was deleted, users still retained the content. Notably, L site did not censor private collections, thereby offering a safe place for the storage of sexual content as well. Therefore, BL fans found that combining functions of private collection and LID (a unique ID assigned to each work on L site) provided them with the function to create and share sexual content. Creators can save censored works as snapshots in their private collection, subsequently sharing the corresponding LID with fans. Fans, then can access those banned content through their respective LIDs but the content cannot be viewed to exceed 1000 times for each LID.

Preventing context collapse: warned by the AO3 accident, these platforms are vigilant in their efforts to prevent context collapse. This is also part of ensuring community safety besides data security. First, both L site and T site downplay social features. Second, they restrict RPS since it was the trigger in the blocking of AO3 and may generate the potential conflicts and subsequent reporting. On the L site, RPS is not publicly visible. Meanwhile, T site

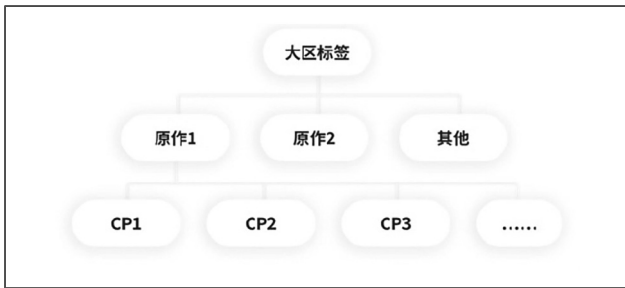


Figure 2. Three-layer tag system of T site.

not only prohibits RPS but also derivatives related to Moxiang Tongxiu—a well-known BL author—as her works often rise conflicts. Finally, they designed rating system to sort content and readers, for example, T site, developed a sophisticated three-layer tag system (Figure 2) that served both to categorize content and warn users about potentially sensitive material. This system, which consists of three layers: the first layer encompasses major categories such as genres (Western media, Japanese media, domestic media, etc.) and time settings (modern, international, future, cross-era, etc.). The second layer specifies individual original works, while the third layer denotes specific character-pairing. By employing color-coded tags and multi-tag search functionality, T site aimed to provide users with granular control over their content consumption, allowing them to avoid material that might not align with their preference.

Overall, the hybrid type aims to provide a single-platform-based solution by combining high accessibility, stability, and data security while preventing context collapse. However, there were notable discrepancies between what they intend to afford and what they afforded, indicating a failure to meet fans' expectations, as experienced by AF01:

I also know when AO3 was blocked, many scattered apps emerged, all claiming with appealing slogans that they provide freedom of creation. However, when you actually visit those platforms, you still have to abide by the rules of censorship. Nothing compares to the freedom of AO3. In effect, none of the platforms within the country truly achieve the freedom of creation...

The first and primary gap lies in the discrepancy between the initial goal of offering “freedom to create, publish, store, and showcase fanwork” and the vision of operating as an open-access, legal platform. For BL fans, the anticipated freedom involves engaging with explicit content depicting same-sex relationships. However, operating openly and within the bounds of law necessitate being subject to censorship, hosting servers domestically, applying ICPs, distributing on app stores, implementing sensitive word filters, and

more. Each of these steps has diminished the freedom that fans expected. Therefore, fans developed new tactics to circumvent for this gap. For example, fans have compiled guidelines to bypass the 1000-view limit of the LID feature, enabling the unlimited sharing of censored content. However, fans' creative making use was taken as a threat to the platform. In January 2021, L site announced the removal of the LID-sharing feature. Despite fans' complaints that they would abandon this platform if the LID feature were discontinued, L site chose to prioritize security, even at the expense of users' needs. The LID feature was not reinstated, and the loss of members continued. By January 2022, L site's app and website were inaccessible, and its social media channel stopped updates.

Another significant gap exists in the attempt to prevent context collapses and the limited autonomy of platform governance. Context collapse often occurs across platforms due to the inherently cross-platform activities of BL fans. Although both platforms intentionally reduced the feature of social interaction and make efforts to educate users about community etiquette to minimize the risk of context collapse within the platform, the risk per se extends beyond the single-platform-based governance framework. For instance, the founder of the T site was denounced for supporting a controversial actor on Weibo. Soon, T site was also involved in the conflict and was opposed by users. Moreover, the context collapse itself would not pose a risk to platforms; it is the use of reporting after the collapse that leads to disastrous consequences as what happened in the blocking of AO3. As reporting is guaranteed by overwhelming power of the authorities, platforms cannot effectively manage risks where their autonomy is restricted. Indeed, T site announced its suspension in October 2023 due to “high-frequency and multi-channel reports¹²” and reminded fans to back up data to avoid potential loss.

As of September 2024, the two platforms that adopted the hybrid approach have yet to resume operations. When the platforms were dysfunctional or dead, the promise of an accessible, stable, and secure home also failed. The failure of these hybrid platforms reveals the structural limitations inherent in single-platform solutions within China's regulatory environment. The experience demonstrates that the vulnerability produced by censorship is fundamentally structural, making it difficult to overcome through single-platform approaches alone.

The closure of hybrid platforms has reinforced the necessity of distributed platform practices within the BL community. In response, fans have enhanced their resilience through geographic expansion and increased integration with international platforms such as AsianFanFics, and communities in Japan and Taiwan. This suggests that while single-platform solutions may appear ideal, the reality of content preservation and community sustainability in restricted environments may require continued reliance on multi-platform approaches.

Conclusion

This study examines the online moving of Chinese BL fans through the theoretical lens of platform ecology. Digital platforms constitute the socio-technical context within which social actors enact and leverage global networks, serving not merely as backdrops but as complex opportunity spaces (Ibert et al., 2022). Through positioning BL fans as a specific user group, this research maps out their cross-platform opportunity space, revealing how China's internet censorship and pornography governance form fundamental components of their socio-technical niche.

The analysis reveals that Chinese BL fans have developed sophisticated tactics for navigating platform governance. They shift between three platform types: commercial, fan-run, and outbound-link platforms, each providing distinct content and community opportunities. Through these movements, fans combine platform affordances to create comprehensive opportunity spaces fulfilling their content needs. When confronted with platform closures and restrictions, they demonstrate remarkable resilience by seeking new spaces, including geographically distant locations. However, this multiple-platform ecology introduces context collapse risks, which promoted experimentation with single-platform hybrid solutions. The ultimate failure of these single-platform attempts reinforces the necessity of distributed opportunity spaces, as censorship-induced vulnerability proves structurally against to single-platform solutions.

This research advances both fan studies and platform studies in several significant ways. First, it extends fan studies beyond single-platform analyses (Chao, 2016; Cho, 2021; Feng, 2009; Hu et al., 2023; Liao and Fu, 2022; L. Yang and Xu, 2016a; Yin, 2021; Yin and Xie, 2021; Q. Zhang and Negus, 2020), illuminating the multi-platform movements of fans in the digital era. The study demonstrates how cross-platform mobility enables fan communities to withstand structural imbalances—a finding relevant beyond BL fandom to broader online community resilience.

Second, this work enriches the platform ecology heuristic through three key contributions. It provides in-depth analyses of individual platforms within a multi-platform context, addressing a gap in the original framework. It also demonstrates the significance of online-only opportunity spaces in restrictive digital environments. Furthermore, one potential blind spot of applying ecological metaphors is lacking a critical reflection on the power relations inscribed in code are at stake but goes too far in emphasizing agency (Ibert et al., 2022). This research integrates political-economic analysis with ecological thinking, balancing user agency against power imbalances.

This study contributes to platform governance research by revealing parallel outcomes through distinct mechanisms. While Rauchberg's concept of platform hygiene (Rauchberg, 2023) illuminates how Western platforms use

data-driven algorithmic systems to enforce normative content standards based on Eurocentric values, Chinese platforms adjust their governance practices in response to shifting regulations. Despite these different approaches, both contexts produce similar user responses: content self-censorship (Rauchberg, 2023) and cross-platform migration (Fiesler and Dym, 2020). This convergence of user practices across divergent governance strategies merits further investigation.

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Notes

1. This data was based on information from the official website of The Office (<https://www.shdf.gov.cn/shdf/>). The author searched the keyword of “BL” (danmei) and summarized the results.
2. For example, in 2012, BL Novel, a small BL website was shut down, and both its founder and several authors were arrested (source: <file:///Users/zhanglin/Zotero/storage/Q34KDQXH/n343381003.html>). In contrast, in 2016, a popular BL web series, *Addicted (ShangYin)*, sparked intense public discussion due to the homosexual intimacy scenes. The releasing platforms—iQiyi and Tencent Video, two of the largest Chinese streaming platforms responded by merely removing the series (source: <file:///Users/zhanglin/Zotero/storage/UWW4WXS2/970103.html>).
3. Shipping: in fandom is the act of enjoying or creating a particular romantic relationship, here the interviewee was particularly referring to shipping between male/male.
4. The referenced statistics about Jinjiang's business is sourced from its official website: <file:///Users/zhanglin/Zotero/storage/YGG7K7FI/aboutus.html>
5. For example, after the removal of the BL webdrama *Addicted* (2016), Chinese streaming adopted a more cautious approach when producing BL-themed web series. They chose to remove explicit plots describing romantic relationships between the male protagonists, instead portraying these relationships as brotherly bonds or reframing them to align more closely with heterosexual narratives. Examples of this approach can be seen in dramas such as *Guardian* (2018), *The Untamed (Chenqing Ling)* (2019), and *Word of Honor (Shanhe Ling)* (2021).
6. Semé and uké are terms used in BL culture, originating from Japan. The semé is the dominant or top character in the sex. The uké is the submissive or bottom character.
7. Changpei began commercial operations in 2017. It kept the old site—aka original forum—but operates separately. The

forum maintains the earlier, more relaxed content management policies.

8. Source from the definition of marginal themes on S site and Changpei.
9. ABO: is a popular trope in fanfiction, especially within BL fandoms. It stands for Alpha, Beta, Omega, referring to a fictional hierarchy of genders and dynamics within a universe where humans are categorized into these three groups, often inspired by the concept of animal pack structures.
10. For example, in the webnovel, the protagonist shows interest in a handsome male butcher, implying his homosexuality. But in the webdrama, the butcher was changed into a woman.
11. Real person slash is a subgenre of fanfiction where fans create romantic or sexual narratives involving real-life celebrities or other public figures.
12. The design of two websites was compiled based on publicly available information shared on their social media accounts. The quotes and other information in this section was similarly gathered, but specific sources are not provided due to ethical considerations.

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