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## MONETIZING QUEERBAITING: BOYFRIEND DAILY CHECK-INS AS A STRATEGY TO ENGAGE QUEER FANDOM

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### Abstract:

This study investigates the increasingly prominent phenomenon of queerbaiting in Chinese social media, which involves baiting and luring queer audience into consuming existing media texts, often through representations with queer undertones, including erotica. In the Western context, queerbaiting can be understood through two distinct aspects: in-canon and extratextual approaches (Ng, 2017). According to Bridges (2018), in-canon queerbaiting refers to "(1) any in-canon inference or subtext suggesting queerness, or (2) actual occurrence of queerness that results in the luring of queer viewers to engage, become fans, and, given today's fully interactive fandom cultures, to serve as vectors for deep promotion of a media franchise" (p.119). This type of queerbaiting involves embedding queer subtext within the media narrative itself, suggesting or hinting at queer identities or relationships to attract a queer audience. On the other hand, extratextual queerbaiting takes on a different dimension. As Brennan (2019) argues, it refers to self-identifying and self-claimed homosexual behaviours that are used to entice queer audiences. This approach aligns with Lam's (2018) theory of fans using their own "slash imagination" to blend online personas with real-world identities by breaking the "fourth wall." This form of queerbaiting encourages fans to interpret and expand upon the queer elements suggested outside the primary text, often involving influencers or celebrities performing queer-coded behaviours to engage queer viewers.

In the Chinese context, queerbaiting is known as "*zhinan maifu*" (直男卖腐) (Chen et al., 2023). This neologism combines "*zhinan*," which literally means "straight men," with "*maifu*," which means "selling homoeroticism." The term describes the practice of ostensibly straight men presenting homoerotic behaviours or queer-coded performances to appeal to a queer audience, thereby monetizing queer desire without explicitly identifying as queer. The understanding of queerbaiting thus varies between Western and Chinese contexts, but in both cases, it involves strategically using queer-coded elements, such as on-camera and streaming performances and well-tested media tropes, to attract and engage queer audiences. The difference lies in the nature

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of how queerness is presented: in-canon through subtext or narrative suggestion, and extratextual through behaviours and performances outside the primary text, primarily suggested and re-edited by fans. In China, the term emphasizes the commercialization of queer aesthetics by straight-identifying individuals, reflecting a unique cultural adaptation of queerbaiting practices.

With the development of streaming media and its innovative application in e-commerce, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, social media platforms such as Douyin have become rich sites for economic and cultural analyses. This project is significant because, despite the Chinese government and platforms regulating queer content in a seemingly strict manner (Wang, 2019), queerbaiting as a genre of media production continues to proliferate through short videos, often evading tightened regulatory regimes.

Simultaneously, Douyin's considerable monetization potential with e-commerce in various formats, such as e-gift-giving, sponsorship, and advertorials, has made queerbaiting a marketing strategy that garners scholarly and market attention. Furthermore, most queer content creators on Douyin often present themselves as straight precisely because of their tacit engagement with queerbaiting strategies. This approach allows them to sustain their media production within a tightly regulated environment while making their data accessible for this research.

The study emphasizes a departure from fan-centred queerbaiting research and instead examines the phenomenon from the producer's perspective. It dissects the actions and goals of influencers who aim to attract followers, monetize their content, and profit by manipulating audience interpretations and queer imaginaries as part of their strategies. These influencers must navigate and protect themselves from homophobic regulatory and social environments.

This study challenges heteronormativity in Chinese social media by arguing that queerbaiting is a dynamic and creative practice that responds to a unique sociocultural context. It differs from the perspective found in Western fandom literature, where queerbaiting is often regarded as exploitative. Combining offline and online aspects of influencers' lives through walkthrough and semiotic analysis, this research investigates the strategies employed, if and how influencers succeed in achieving their goals through self-presentation.

The data for this research was collected through a two-phase process on the Douyin platform. The first phase involved conventional content and textual analysis, gathering data from influencers' daily posts, Douyin homepages, livestreams, and comments. In the second phase, a digital walkthrough studies platform-specific data, using Douyin's built-in data centre and Starmap. Starmap provides comprehensive influencer information, including account details, content displays, follower demographics, interaction rates, and other metrics that are made available to brands interested in potential partnerships (Marszałek, 2020).

The study presented here focuses on analysing a popular queerbaiting trend as one of the key themes from my larger PhD project. The chosen theme on Douyin is known as

"boyfriend's daily report (check-ins)" ("男朋友的报备日常"). The research examines how queer discourse and symbols are used within this trend to attract queer or queer-friendly audiences, and how influencers navigate platform censorship. Additionally, the study investigates how these influencers monetize their fanbase after attracting followers. The research sample consists of 10 male influencers who use the "boyfriend's daily report" queerbaiting strategy, with follower counts ranging from 10,000 to 1 million. The goal is to understand whether there are differences in how influencers with varying levels of social influence perform this queerbaiting strategy and attract audiences.

Results indicate that across the 10 influencers analysed, white socks emerged as a common queer erotic symbol employed by all queerbaiting influencers to implement their strategies. This finding echoes Ai et al. (2023), who argued that white socks are a potent queer erotic symbol with a strong appeal for the queer community in China. However, differences in how influencers construct their online personas were observed, with varying degrees of emphasis based on the level of social influence. These variations are likely due to differing levels of scrutiny and platform regulations that influencers face.

Furthermore, the queerbaiting strategies used by these influencers involve both in-canon and extratextual forms. They perform and construct queer scenarios in different ways, employing homoeroticism to attract followers and guide them toward monetization. By creating scenarios that suggest queerness either directly or through fan imagination, influencers engage their audiences and entice them to participate financially, where business models are explored and critiqued.

Therefore, this study analyses the strategies employed by influencers who use the "boyfriend's daily report" style of queerbaiting. The analysis is conducted through an examination of the contexts and queer symbols used on their homepages, using Ai et al. (2023)'s study of queer erotic symbols as a reference. After the strategy analysis, the research evaluates monetization methods supported by different business models and platform functions, such as the commercial plugins on influencers' homepages and their livestreaming activities, in order to explore whether there are differences in monetization tendencies across various fan demographics. The findings provide insights into how different fan bases impact the use and outcomes of queerbaiting strategies, highlighting the ways in which influencers balance audience attraction with platform compliance to achieve monetization goals.

**Key Words:**

Queerbaiting, Social Media, Self-presentation, Influencer Marketing, Monetization.

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