# Approval

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name:</th>
<th>Qun Lou</th>
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<tr>
<td>Degree:</td>
<td>Master of Arts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Title:</td>
<td>Para-social Interactions in Chinese Audio Melodramas</td>
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<tr>
<td>Program Director:</td>
<td>Katherine Reilly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zoë Druick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senior Supervisor</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Associate Dean</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professor</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Katherine Reilly</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Program Director</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
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Abstract

Audio melodramas of boy’s love have become a media phenomenon in China and have formed online communities on social media. This paper examined how these communities’ members interact in the listening process and trans-media extensions. This paper employed the concept of para-social interaction (PSI) to disentangle the novelty of PSI in the social media context. Nine thousand on-screen comments, three hundred comments, and a hundred posts from an audio melodrama The Untamed’s community on Sina Weibo were gathered and analyzed. The findings contribute to the theory of PSI and provide information about the question of whether our social relationship is becoming more or less authentic under the considerable influence of media expansion.

Keywords: Para-social Interaction; Audio Melodrama; Boy’s Love; Social Media; Prosumer; The Untamed
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<td>PSI</td>
<td>Para-social Interaction</td>
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<td>BL</td>
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## Glossary

<table>
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<th>Term</th>
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<td>Sina Weibo/Weibo</td>
<td>A service website launched by Sina.com that provides microblogging.</td>
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<td>Super topic</td>
<td>An online community in Sina Weibo, which is a product combines topic mode and fan community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tanbi</td>
<td>A word from Japanese, originally referring to aestheticism, and later used by Chinese women to express boy’s love.</td>
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<td>The Untamed/Modaozushi</td>
<td>An online audio melodrama based on the original Tanbi novel of the same name.</td>
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<td>Yaoi</td>
<td>A Japanese term that focuses on homosexual relationships between two male characters and has a direct sexual description.</td>
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1. Introduction

In China, online audio melodramas have become very popular since 2002 (Ma & Yang, 2016). The Tanbi (which means boy’s love) audio melodrama is a kind of radio play, and its theme is mainly about the gay romance. Spreading on social networks, its mode is a combination of weekly broadcasting and season broadcasting. The Chinese network audio drama was widely and deeply influenced by Japanese audio dramas, which were mostly adapted from ACG (Animation, Comic, Game) culture. With the development and popularity of Chinese online novels of boy’s love, the new Chinese Tanbi audio melodramas with the adaptation of online novels as the main content began to become popular in China. In 2018, a pop drama (Modaozushi/The Untamed), adapted from a Tanbi online novel, gets a substantial fan following to draw from, the clicks of which on the first platform are over 100 million and the views of its Super topic on Sina Weibo are over 430 million (www.douban.com).

The audio melodrama platform of The Untamed offers a variety of interactive forms for its listeners. The unique one is on-screen comments. Users can send a large amount of text displayed in subtitles to interact with other listeners while listening to the episode. These on-screen comments give the audience an illusion of instant communication with others. Other forms are functions of liking and gift-giving. Liking is that audiences can express their love and support for the drama by liking it. Gift-giving means that listeners can give producers online gifts that need to be purchased first on the platform. The on-screen comments, function of liking, and gift-giving are all valid forms for the audience to express their emotions. For example, an audio melodrama named The Untamed has many people who are active in interacting with the material they are listening to. In the comments that run across the screen or below the video window, listeners are speaking to characters, voice actors, or other audiences. Sometimes they speak to each other, even though they never really know each other. Moreover, the first episode of The Untamed’s first season got online gifts from over 13 000 people and likings from over 145 000 listeners at its platform Missevan. Obviously, audio melodramas have become a common phenomenon encouraging thousands of listeners to interact with mediated others.
This paper is specifically focusing on exploring how intimate the participants seem to be with the characters in the stories. This behavior is especially unusual, since these characters are not real people, and they are mediated by communication technology. There is a framework for studying intimacy with mediated others called Para-social interaction (PSI). I use PSI to answer three questions in my project of the case of an audio melodrama.
2. Research questions

RQ1. Does PSI happen in the case of online audio melodramas?
RQ2. If so, how does it happen?
RQ3. How is PSI different in social media as compared to mass media?

PSI emerged in the 1950s to explain intimacy with mediated others in mass media contexts (Horton and Wohl, 1956). The main framework for studying PSI focuses on three things: cognition, emotion, and behaviour. All three things together are evidence of the existence of para-social interactions.

This paper used this framework to study PSI in the case of social media. There is no doubt that para-social interactions exist in the listening process of audio melodramas. Similar to TV dramas and traditional radio programs, audiences tend to empathize with the media characters in audio melodramas when listening to them. This paper will explore this particular process of para-social interactions occurring in online audio melodramas from two specific perspectives, which are the perspective of media personalities and the perspective of many mediated others. From the existing broadcasting mode of Chinese online audio melodramas, the media consumption process of Tanbi audio melodramas is mainly divided into two principal parts: the branding of the media personalities and the consumption and acceptance of the audience. Para-social interactions will be established in both these two parts.
3. Literature Review

3.1. Melodramas

Online audio melodrama became a mania in China in recent years, shaped by both new media forms and youth subcultures. “Audio Drama,” the term used in China, one type of radio play, is a dramatized and purely acoustic performance (baike.baidu.com). Tim Crook described it as “auditory in the physical dimension but equally powerful as a visual force in the psychological dimension” (Crook, 2001, p8). This argument accurately reflected the characteristics and strengths of audio drama. The original radio plays in China were produced by official radio stations of China. This type of radio plays had a narrow theme selection and a single communication channel, the radio channels. Although the scripting, voice acting, and post-production of this type of radio play were of good quality, it could be distributed only through radio channels, and the timing was not flexible. The listening period and the content of traditional audio drama could be rigid, so it did not have a significant impact. Over the last two decades, “drama” about same-sex love has emerged in both Japan and China. From then on, “drama” has become the specific term of online radio plays in China.

Melodramas are rooted in medieval morality plays (Hayward, 1996). In general, melodrama looks back at ideal, nostalgic eras, expressing “forbidden longings” (Hayward, 1996). Melodramas are usually appealing strongly to emotions, and characters are often simply drawn (Brooks, 1995). Melodramas are “women’s picture” (Kuhn, 2007) and represent women’s social status.

As a new type of audio melodramas, Tanbi audio melodramas have similar features in appealing female audiences’ emotions. Moreover, women can create content and enrich personalities to fictional characters of online audio melodramas. In the beginning, the entire production and transmission process of audio melodramas is carried out on the internet. No matter producers in the production process of audio melodramas, such as the planners, directors, writers, voice actors, or the audiences of audio drama, they are all formed by the network. The rise of the Internet provides a nongeographically restricted freedom for this type of media art product, making it possible for people who produce audio melodramas to be free from time and space, as
well as provide audiences with possibilities to participate in the recreation of the audio melodramas’ content. Audiences can post and spread fan works via social networks.

3.2. Fan & Prosumers

The creation of an audio melodrama was very similar to that of a fan video at first. From 2000 to 2014, Chinese audio melodramas were created entirely by fans of novels or comics with no profit. These works were not for commercial use but were completely an independent interpretation of novels or comics, especially Tanbi literature. And also, the audience of the audio melodrama at that time was mostly fans. Some young people who interested in Tanbi subcultures such as online novels, video games, or comics spontaneously formed groups of common interests and made the earliest online audio drama creations. They were not only producers but also audiences. This model of audio melodramas still exists today, but it is fading. This kind of communication model has stimulated the aggregation and development of relevant online communities to a certain extent and gradually evolved into today’s audio melodramas’ ecosystem.

Since Tanbi audio melodramas were born from the format of fan works, let us start the discussion from looking at the fans. The productivity of fan audiences is recognized by Jenkins (Jenkins, 2012), who states that ‘media fans are consumers who also produce, readers who also write, spectators who also participate’ (p.208). Jenkins has a unique insight into new media audiences, especially fans. He described fans as textual poachers who were not crazy or superficial, but fighters who competed for cultural rights (Cai, 2011). Fans reinterpret the text and turn the experience of media consumption, such as watching TV into a rich and complex participatory culture. In general, the audience cannot interfere with the production and dissemination process of the media text but can interpret, deconstruct, and even rewrite it in the process of media text consumption. However, the collective audience fails to recognize this point. Only fans, this unique audience, is on the one hand psychologically dependent on the cultural industry, and the other hand, is keen on the autonomic symbolic interpretation of the media text, for example, many fans will create their fan videos after watching a movie.

In 2006, when Jenkins discussed the fan-films created by fans of Star Wars, he realized that the re-creation of cultural, industrial products is not the uniqueness of fan culture anymore, but has become an increasingly central aspect of the contemporary
pop culture. He jumped out of a single perspective of fan culture study and explored the media integration and cultural integration hidden behind the fan films (Jenkins, 2006). The trans-media flow of cultural products has become a trend. Popular online games have been adapted into TV series, and well-known comics have been remade into movies. Intertextuality permeates social culture (Jenkins, 2006). When the audience consumes media, it is often tricky to only buy one single product but to consume other related derivative products as well. The audience is unconsciously dominated by consumerism in this fusion culture. At the same time, the development of new media technology has brought dramatic changes in the media consumption pattern to the general audiences.

The rise and popularity of emerging media such as the Internet and mobile phones have made consumers in contemporary society transform into the prosumers (producer & consumer) who can directly participate in knowledge production activities such as media content (Deng, 2009). Since the year 2015, significant changes have taken place in the creation of online audio melodramas. By the assimilation of consumerism, audio dramas began the transition from full non-profit to commercial mode. The development of online audio platforms and social media has facilitated the economic transformation of audio dramas. Audio platforms usually fund commercial audio melodramas which are produced by professional dubbing staff. The works are serialized and released on the platform regularly and marketed on social media such as Weibo. Interestingly, professional dubbing staff who produce the commercial audio melodrama are often readers and even fans of its original novels or comics. This change of mode not only makes the audio drama a cultural, industrial product but also makes audio melodramas have more listeners, enabling fans to form fan communities on Weibo and other social media, providing more possibilities for para-social interactions.

Moreover, also, readers of Tanbi literature tend to be listeners to audio dramas and will gather together by listening to specific works to form a fan community on the platform and social media. Many fans listen to the drama and then do fan work, such as drawing scenes from the show or expanding the plot. They often create new terms to name themselves to share the same identity.

The boundaries between media consumers and producers are eliminated, and the media landscape has become a more democratic and diversified form of mass
media participation (Zhou & Guan, 2010). This transformation not only enriched the media content but also provided the possibility for the expansion of the fan community and the spread of collective intelligence. In this environment, the relationship between the media industry and the fan culture has become unprecedentedly complex. There are conflicts and cooperation between the two, and Jenkins (2006) calls it convergence culture and suggests that fusion culture has its own aesthetic goals for the content.

On the other hand, fan works should be cultural motivators and give the audience something to do – some meaningful participation (Ji, 2009). He believes that producers and consumers are interactive participants, and some consumers, namely fans, have more ability to participate in convergence culture than other consumers. Also, Jenkins (2006) emphasized the social interaction of the audience in media consumption, pointing out that consumption has become a collective process, namely the meaning of collective intelligence. The reading process and production process of fans are not isolated, but collective. They share and exchange information and emotions, form fan groups, and interact in real and virtual spaces.

The spread and interaction of audio dramas on social media are also very active, which is also an essential manifestation of media consumption. In this process, audio melodrama consumers show great initiative and choice. Jenkins has done more research and discussion on social networks and online communities in Spreadable Media (2006). The development of new media has made people no longer pay attention to what the media has done to us, but what we use media for and why. The privilege of communication is no longer in the hands of specific media, but every consumer can become the source of information, and every consumer can become a text producer. A message can only be spread if as many consumers as possible are willing to share and forward it (Jenkins, 2006). One of the most important reasons that a star or media text can be continuously disseminated is the positive promotion of audiences. For audiences, promoting a specific message is not for financial gain, but the transmission itself can meet their own emotional needs or promote interactions with other viewers (Jenkins, 2006). The interaction existing in the audience on social media, such as forwarding and commenting on a message, is production and consumption.
3.3. *Tanbi* & Boys’ Love

In the trans-media era, online audio dramas have presented new features. The development of dramas is based on the influence of Chinese online *Tanbi* novels and *Tanbi* culture, which is concentrated on gay romance. Gay romance is a genre of romance fiction featuring two male protagonists engaged in a sexual or emotional relationship with each other and mainly marketed by and for women (Iannacci, 2011). *Tanbi* novels and audio melodramas have been rapidly spreading in China in the internet age, and therefore, the *Tanbi* culture has become more active and popular. Chinese *Tanbi* culture differs from the mainstream heterosexual gender narrative discourse and is replaced by a gay one, which is almost exclusively produced by and for women (Liu, 2010).

Chinese *Tanbi* literature was historically shaped and influenced by Japanese *Yaoi* culture (Yao, 2012), which came into being in Japan after World War II and was first shown in Japanese comic works (Zhu & Zhao, 2015). At that time, Japan was in trouble with its economic recovery, and Japanese women were not only economically but politically attached to men. Women’s social status was very low. Therefore Japanese *Yaoi* comics, whose primary audience was women, fully showed feelings of cruelty, contradiction, and despair. This kind of comic works replaced the heroine with beautiful teenagers and arranged the desperate and cruel fate of the characters for these teenagers, expressing despair and helplessness to their tragic fate. *Yaoi* comics was introduced to mainland China with Japanese animation, and under the influence of *Yaoi* comics, Japanese *Yaoi* novels are gradually introduced into China through the Internet (Yao, 2012). *Tanbi* was the term translated from *Yaoi* to express the meaning of beautiful-boys’ love, or *BL* (Bunneh, 2019) in short, by Chinese netizens (Zhu & Zhao, 2015). Most of *Tanbi* works’ producers and fans are women (Yao, 2012).

With the rapid development of the network, China has gradually formed some large and systematic *Tanbi* sites (www.jjwxc.net). Online *Tanbi* novels became popular with the formation of such websites. Soon after, online audio melodramas adapted from *Tanbi* novels began to appear in such sites as well. With the development of social media, more and more *Tanbi* fans can publish their works through *Weibo*, and their readers can leave a message to them and can also create an online community such as *Super topic* to communicate more frequently and carefully with mediated others. *Super*
topics are communities of interest in Sina Weibo, which could gather the content of good quality and fans related to a particular topic.

The online audio dramas and Tanbi novels are having a large audience group. Tanbi culture is no longer the original niche culture. The convenience of network media makes the separated Tanbi fans gather together online and promotes the interaction within the fan group (baike.baidu.com). Also, the fantastic creativity and consumption ability are captured by consumer society. Many audio dramas are commercialized and adapted into films and TV series, which promotes the spread of the Tanbi culture. Restricted by the policy, these films and TV series can not meet the expectations of Tanbi fans. However, there are no apparent restrictions on audio dramas in China, so they tend to be bolder about all kinds of BL stories. Although audio dramas are being commercialized now, their primary producers, and audience are still heterosexual women. According to McRobbie (1990), women themselves interact in different ways and form their own unique culture. Tanbi audio melodrama is a unique culture product of women interacting with each other with excellent research value.

Most Yaoi works do not focus on men’s same-sex love in real life. They are products of female fantasy and capitalization. A Japanese scholar has pointed out (Nakajima, 1995) that Yaoi reflects women’s struggle to adapt to modern society in order to ensure their status, especially in a male-dominated society like Japan. In this period, the research topic of Yaoi revolves around the reasons why the audience likes Yaoi literature. At that time, Japanese society imposed the duty of being a good wife and mother on women. In such a social context, Japanese researchers analyzed Yaoi in psychological or psychoanalytic perspectives and regarded women’s love of Yaoi as a psychological problem (Nakajima, 1995). It is a common problem for all women. In recent years, the negative conclusions of Yaoi research have gradually decreased. Most scholars have adopted a neutral attitude. They think that women who like Yaoi experience the feeling of love and being loved in the utopian relationship between men (www.douban.com).

In English-speaking countries, there are also works of the same sex love just like Yaoi and Tanbi, which are generally called Slash (Penley, 1989). Most of the Slash works are to rewrite the text of some famous films and television works, to tell gay romance. Most researchers classify Slash as a fan culture (Zhu & Zhao, 2015). Constance Penley
(1992) thinks that Slash is one of the most radical and exciting appropriations of popular culture by women she has ever seen. She believes that the study of the Slash phenomenon can help us to understand how women resist and negotiate the robust media environment we live in and adapt it to individual desires. According to the fantasy theory in psychoanalysis, the author proposed that this special constructed male emotional relationship and sexual scene realized the multiple identification and pleasure satisfaction of women. She sees porn in Slash as a new kind of female porn created by women. Slash implies the need for women to re-construct heterosexual masculinity by keeping the heterosexual identity of the two male characters (Penley, 2013).

Since the 21st century, the research on Tanbi has gradually paid attention to the relationship between Tanbi and women and society (Zhu & Zhao, 2015). Liu Qianyue (2014) believes that Chinese Tanbi literature provides women with free space. Wang Ping and Liu Dianzhi (2008) conclude that women's love for Tanbi culture is not only for aesthetic needs but also to meet sexual needs and their curiosity and point out that there are some political problems behind the Tanbi phenomenon, such as the patriarchy and feminism (Zhu & Zhao, 2015). In Chinese tradition, the relationship between father and son mirrors that of ruler and servant. In a New York Times (2014) article entitled Why Many Young Chinese Women Are Writing Gay Male Erotica, the author notes that:

One popular subgenre, father-son incest, in which, in a reversal of the usual narrative, the son controls the father, is a veiled call for social and political change (Tatlow, 2014).

What Tanbi women shared was the dissatisfaction with the standards of femininity that have to be followed, while their social and historical moments refuse to acknowledge and sympathize with this dissatisfaction (Tao, 2009).

Online audio drama mirrors the specific lifestyle of Tanbi women, which brings it a unique research value. The construction of people's identity is not a natural or psychological inevitability but is determined by social and cultural values, and therefore, the female Tanbi fans cope with the crisis of self-identity and gender identity by loving Tanbi culture (Tao, 2009). Tanbi works reflect women's dissatisfaction with gender stereotypes, as well as the deep need to pursue independence and gender equality.

Stress and anxiety also contribute to the popularity of Tanbi culture. In 2016, China Youth Daily surveyed 2,000 young people between the ages of 14 to 35. The
survey showed that 94.7% of the young people surveyed had experienced the stress of a vicious circle (China Youth Daily?, 2016), that is, they cannot solve their stress and anxiety, leading to a vicious circle of psychological problems. From the related in-depth interview results (Yang, 2006) of the Tanbi women, it can be seen that some Tanbi women will choose to read or listen to Tanbi works when they are depressed, and it will make them feel excited and relaxed. They find satisfaction and pleasure in the culture of Tanbi. Nowadays, the Tanbi novels and online dramas are becoming new choices of leisure activities that can meet the needs of audiences to release their anxiety and emptiness.

3.4. Para-Social Interaction

Although online audio drama and the Tanbi subculture behind it have become a hot social phenomenon in China, few studies use PSI to analyze audience behaviours and their psychological motivation. Mao Liangbin (2012) did social research on the impact of para-social interaction on private car owners’ radio listening and examined the radio host’s Weibo and patience with the ads in radio programs. This article is the only one that analyzes the use of PSI in audio broadcasting, but this is far from enough. In the previous studies of PSI and gender, scholars mostly regard gender as a trait of the audience and ask questions of whether the viewer’s gender influences PSI (Schiappa et al., 2007; Vorderer, 1996). However, few studies focus on a single-gender audience of PSI. At the same time, social media platforms provide an unprecedented open, borderless and multi-media physical space as well as a relatively equal, free spiritual space for this specialized audience of a single gender, providing a platform in China for a Tanbi subculture to spread. Social media creates a unique space for sub-cultural members to seek identity and establish an online community.

Therefore, it is particularly important to study the behaviour and psychology of this specific female audience group in the process of PSI of audio dramas. It is valuable to ask what characteristics and changes of the subculture behind audio dramas, and whether PSI plays a role in the possible feminism and gender politics.
3.4.1. The Normativity of PSI

The para-social interaction was first proposed by Horton and Wohl (1956), who defined it as personal connections between media users and media roles. It was meant to refer to a kind of psychological relationship experienced by an audience in their mediated encounters with performers in the mass media. PSI is described as an illusionary experience, such that media audiences interact with personas (e.g., talk show host, celebrities, fictional characters, social media influencers) as if they are engaged in a reciprocal relationship with them. Although the number of para-social interaction studies has been growing, there is no clear and uncontroversial definition of this concept. The process of PSI can be considered as an interpersonal process between the media personalities and the audience during the media exposure (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). In 1999, John Hoerner explained in Scaling the Web: A Parasocial Interaction Scale for World Wide Web Sites that personae sometimes will be the fictional creations of the sites’ webmasters. The study made the point that personae:

“take on many of the characteristics of a companion, including regular and frequent appearances, a sense of immediacy…also, the feeling of a face-to-face meeting” (Hoerner, 1999).

The traditional PSI mode is one-sided (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and this was because the audience watched the media personality while this media personality cannot see any reactions of the audience (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008).

However, the PSI may have a change since the trans-media environment provides audience possibilities to interact with mediated others, not only media personas but also their online friends. The popularity of social media has changed the sense of company. Through social media, people can feel intimate with their net friends, even if they are far away or do not know each other at all.

3.4.2. The Novelty of PSI

The novelty of PSI has been influenced dramatically by the changes in media. Social media allows for multidirectional communication over unidirectional communication, and social media supports presumption instead of consumption, and social media allows participants to form relations with each other that could also be a form of PSI. Emotional identification with media figures is still the core of the para-social
relationship (Horton and Wohl, 1956). It penetrates the audience’s cognition of the social components in daily life. Horton and Wohl (1956) speculated that these secondary relationships compete with primary relationships in social life. More importantly, TV producers and directors are taking advantage of this new emotional economy, encouraging television personalities not just to present, but to enhance their personalities by adopting behavioural forms. Barry King (2008) later introduced the notion of the para-confession. He thinks that celebrity secrets, which often involve ritualized celebrity confessions, are intended to increase contact with the audience. He thinks it has become part of the talk show culture. The goal is to inspire confidence in the audience. The spirit of confession magically transforms troubled stars into needy friends. The fundamental goal is for celebrities to improve ratings and star power. Celebrity culture is the global village of the present day (McLuhan, 2001). Because of the transmedia environment, we feel closer to celebrities even though we may not know the person who lives in our neighborhood. Rojek has a great way to describe this phenomenon. He points out that This phenomenon is precisely what the media has done to our daily social interactions (Rojek, 2015).

Many scholars conclude that para-social interactions emerge in television and radio as well as online environments such as blogs and other social networking sites (Ballantine and Martin 2005; Goldberg and Allen 2008; Labrecque, 2014). According to Daschmann (Hellmueller & Aeschbacher, 2010), celebrities now have to promote themselves actively for their audiences’ limited attention. In such a competitive environment, a famous person must remain present on all the accessible media channels to stay in touch with the public (Sonntag, 2013).

Nowadays, it is too limiting to confine para-social interaction to the relationships between media personalities and audiences (Rojek, 2015). For example, the development of Internet media has changed netizens into another form of existence. Although there is no physical contact between audiences, they can still build and develop emotional relationships. Rojek (2015) expanded the term familiar strangers to describe those people with whom we live but never meet. Familiar strangers could include not only online celebrities but online friends. Rojek (2015) compared them with fictional characters in novels and poems and pointed out that both familiar strangers and fictional characters can make us feel intimate. In this way, the scale of PSI should not be limited to celebrity culture or mass media context.
Moreover, the saturation of media also provides us with data about ordinary people. We are separated by the distance of physical space and the cultural necessities of mediocrity (Rojek, 2015). The unprecedented expansion of media has reshaped our relationships with others. The development and popularity of social networks contribute significantly to our universal sense of connection. Rojek gave an example of this phenomenon:

We receive postings from people we may know slightingly, or who post because they share the same surname, or went to the same school or university. Even if we make no direct response, we are conscious of these wraith-like presences in the background (Rojek, 2015, p9).

The definition of interaction was limited to individuals who appeared face to face (Goffman, 1956).

However, Rojek argued that the social media context had expanded this definition. Social media makes individuals interact with each other through the internet. Since Goffman’s day, “the nod count of familiar strangers has grown massively” (2006, p7) and proliferated the social presence of statistical men and women, and celebrities. The online blogging sites of celebrities offer users access to the real daily life of celebrities and online friends. As a result, interactions could be generated on a larger scale and make individuals feel intimate with many mediated others. This phenomenon is becoming more and more commonplace.

Chris Rojek investigated the impact of para-social interactions of presumed intimacy, where audiences form reliable identifications with mediated others, whether they be celebrities, political personae, or online friends. Characteristics of para-social interaction in this thesis are that the audience reacts to people in the audio melodrama community on social networks as if they were real people, and form intense intimacy with them. In general, PSI will happen in the listening process of online audio drama as well as in the trans-media extensions of audio drama series. Assisted by new technologies, web 2.0 provides interactivity and allows users to interact with others (Hambrick, Simmons, Greenhalgh, & Greenwell, 2010). Moreover, in this way, users can also interact with media personalities by visiting their blogs or websites (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). For example, Lueck’s study (2015) showed that the communication on social media platforms between celebrities and their fans is accompanied by PSI, since such celebrities may receive more than 3,000 comments from fans while they do not
engage in any personalized communication with their fans. Therefore the communication between celebrities with their fans does not qualify as real interaction but to establish PSI. This paper studies audio melodramas by PSI to ask and explore how para-social interaction is established in the media of online audio melodramas, and what impacts it may have on the behaviours and relationships of the audience and the mediated others in online communities.
4. Methodology

For this paper, I chose one of the most popular audio melodramas to analyze how producers and listeners performed in the listening process and in its trans-media extensions, to find modes and traits of its para-social interactions in a social media context.

_The Untamed_, one of the most famous audio melodramas in China, directed by TrioPen Studio (baike.baidu.com), has three seasons, which includes fifteen episodes. It is hosted and produced by Missevan, which is a specialized audio melodrama platform. _Missevan_ is one of the leading broadcasting platforms of online audio melodramas in China, and the massive success of this platform is closely related to the function of real-time on-screen comments.

An on-screen comment is an essential form of para-social interaction between the user and the media characters or other audience of the drama, and it is also the most direct emotional expression of the audience. When the on-screen comments function appears, audiences have access to the one-way _PSI_ to characters as well as the two-way _PSI_ with other audiences. Listeners could post instant comments on the screen as they listen, read comments from other listeners, and share and communicate emotions in on-screen comments. In this process, the audience realizes collective media consumption and develops the interaction among audiences in the virtual space. However, this interaction is not directed. When the audience sends the comments, it is not clear who will see the content, and the audience cannot know the identity of the sender when reading the on-screen comments. This interaction between audiences is anonymous, in which the only certainty is that they are all listeners, and they share a collective identity. Moreover, on-screen comments are sent as a scroll with temporal and spatial fluidity. Every comment that the audience sees on the screen is scrolling and anonymous. Therefore, the audience’s interaction through the on-screen comments is accidental. It is impossible to achieve a two-way interaction, but always a one-way expression.

_Missevan_ is the first online audio platform with the function of on-screen comments in China. As the most successful _Tanbi_ audio melodrama, _The Untamed_, has an authentic world view and does not exaggerate the relationship between same-sex
couples. Instead, it puts them in a realistic environment, making it easier for audiences to have emotional connections. Many details of characters in *The Untamed* are very accurate and could make listeners feel that these characters exist in the real world. No matter the music, voice acting, or sound effects, they are all excellent. Although the audio melodrama only has sound without the picture, the sound is detailed enough to make the audience see the picture before their eyes. The sound effects are authentic and vibrant, and the characters are also very three-dimensional. For example, the simple scene in *The Untamed* in which a male protagonist appears contains a lot of sound effects such as ambient sound, footsteps, clothes rubbing sound. The presence of these sounds increases the authenticity of the play. Although the main story of the play tells about the firm love between two men, it is not limited to that. The whole play has a complicated storyline and character relationship, which gives the audience enough time and space to immerse themselves in the story and provides the prerequisite for PSI between the audience and the characters.

This case study offers an insightful discussion and a productive space to think about PSI on social media, because these girls, fans of *Tanbi*, tend to hide their real identity and personal information while they are consuming *Tanbi* works online. Chinese social media platforms also permit their users to hide their real names and photos. This situation provides a perfect environment in which participants will never really know but actively interact with mediated others on social media.

I analyzed the data of *The Untamed* to see if it had the conditions for para-social interactions. I used Python to gather the data. I used Python to grab data from web pages, observed and organized it. Firstly, I gathered 9000 onscreen comments that appeared in the first 3 episodes of the first season. Secondly, I gathered 300 comments that appear below the video window for the first 3 episodes of the first season. And, thirdly, I gathered 100 posts and their replies on the fan community of *The Untamed* on Weibo. I selected the comments’ text of the first three episodes from the first season of *The Untamed* because while the other episodes must be purchased, these are free to listen to. These three episodes are the most widely listened, and they are at the stage where listeners could choose whether to continue paying for them. Their behaviours of purchasing are strongly related to their emotions and cognition for characters in *The Untamed*. Therefore, it is very appropriate and very representative to select comments’ text from these three episodes as research samples.
There is a total of 9,000 on-screen comments in these three episodes. Through the word frequency statistics of these 9000 on-screen comments, I found that the most important types of on-screen comments were:

1. One-way communication with characters in the audio play. Many listeners spoke directly to fictional characters in the play. The most frequent words were saying thanks to some characters for their kind actions within the show.

2. One-way communication with producers of the audio play. Listeners were very grateful for the work producers did. Words such as good drama or a lovely team were secondly frequent.

3. Some words to express feelings. Listeners tended to express their emotions by sending on-screen comments. The thirdly frequent words that appeared in on-screen comments were laugh and cry. Listeners sent these words to mean they were extremely happy or almost crying for the characters and the story.

4. One-way communication with other audiences. Listeners were able to read and reply all on-screen comments but unable to know where these comments came from because on-screen comments just run across the screen window without senders’ names. A high number of listeners tended to reply to some comments even though they had no ideas about whom the senders were. Sentences such as “I am writing homework” or “Does anyone know where to listen in the second season?” were pretty frequent.

It can be seen that most of the on-screen comments were interactive, which reflected the communication between users and media characters and producers as well as the interaction among users. The audience treated characters as real people and talked to them. When listening to audio melodramas, the audience would interact with media characters, witnessing their lives and stories, entering into the fictional world, and generating sympathy. Meanwhile, although the audience did not receive feedback from the characters, producers, and other listeners, they were willing to be empathetic to communicate with all of them. This behaviour had been shown in these 9000 on-screen comments.
Also, 300 comments that showed on the platform below the screen were selected. The four main types of them were:

1. Calling for purchasing the authorized edition of *The Untamed*. This type reflected listeners’ hope for the good sales of *The Untamed*. They said in the comment that *The Untamed* was worth buying. This type of comment seemed like free advertisements, and these senders spoke for producers when commenting. They called on other listeners to fight piracy.

2. Reminding other listeners not to over-promote *The Untamed* to avoid it being banned. Since the regulations on the subject of audio melodramas in China are not completed, the subject of *Tanbi* is nothing illegal. But in many other media works, *Tanbi* theme is unacceptable by officials. Many listeners feared *The Untamed* would be banned, and they said this in comments to persuade people not to over-advertise.

3. Discussion of the storyline or characters. Listeners tended to exchange their thoughts and express their feelings about the story and fictional characters. In these 300 comments, many listeners shared their feelings and their understanding of *The Untamed*. It was prevalent to see long conversations in these 300 comments, discussing fictional characters’ lives or emotions. These conversations showed that many audiences were willing to enter the fictional world and be empathetic with fictional characters in *The Untamed*.

4. Communication with producers via comments and replies. Producers were very active in these 300 comments. Some voice actors sent comments sharing their understanding of characters they acted, and many listeners preferred to reply to them and got involved in the communication.

Moreover, this paper selected the top 100 posts from *The Untamed* online community site on *Sina Weibo*, and mainly analyzed the posts as well as the replies, to explore the power relations between producers and listeners in the context of Chinese social media. Here are about 13.8 million fans of the audio melodrama *The Untamed*’s Super-topic, and more than 22,000 microblogs have been posted on this. Over 66,000 people participated in the discussion on the Super topic. The top 100 microblogs of Super topic were selected, 74 of which were released by the producers, including
melodramas, episodes, interviews, tidbits, surveys, and advertisements of merchandise. Producers were most active in the online community. They posted pictures of voice actors, shared funny stories when producing and replied some comments of their listeners. Other users posted another 26, 16 of which were posted by individual users. Fourteen of them were fans works, and the categories included fan paintings, fan songs, and fan comics. The other ten were from ad accounts, and all these ten posts were commercial aimed to promote their accounts. They marketed their accounts by attracting listeners to repost or reply to their posts.

The following conclusions can be intuitively drawn by sorting out the above text discussed in the Super topic. Fan-created texts personified characters in audio melodramas and added more details to them. Ad accounts, on the other hand, focused on getting close to the feelings of the audience to attract more people and enhance their business value. They use the audience’s emotions regarding the characters as real people and friends, to arouse the empathy of the audience and to attract audiences to repost their posts. Moreover, producers posted and replied very often to promote themselves, to attract listeners involved in the communication and interaction, and to form a more solid community. Internet users now have more access to mediated others’ information. As a result, they have more choices and power to decide which one they would like to consume. Producers, therefore, need to market and promote themselves to maintain PSI with users. However, 74% of the most popular posts in The Untamed online community were from producers. Producers were still the one who had the voice. They posted content in the community and got the most attention. Users were most willing to repost and reply to producers.

The numbers of users’ comments for the 26 other users’ posts are shown in the table below:
The data (table 1) showed that personal users were more active in posting on Sina Weibo; however, the content of posts by ad accounts was significantly more interactive than those of individual users. It could be intuitively concluded that the users on Weibo were more inclined to interact with the ad accounts that published the impression of the audio. When interacting with the personal account, the users were more inclined to say thanks to the production team or were more likely to interact with media characters through voice acting which was similar to audio dramas’ media format. Comments on fan works were often more interactive, and fans would form long conversations about the content of high-quality fan works, to intensely discuss the plots or characters in the audio melodramas. The replies to the ad accounts were often one-way emotional expressions. Users usually replied to those accurate and touching posts, but they would not form a conversation. Users just expressed that they have the same feeling with those posts. The replies to producer’s posts were similar to the comments below the screen. The difference was that on social media, producers tended to read fan’s comments to give them feedback. Sometimes producers even replied to fans’ comments in a friend-like way. Producers posted actively to produce connections with listeners.
5. Analysis: Behaviour, Cognition, Emotion and Tanbi Culture

5.1. Behaviour

Behaviours, cognitions, and emotions together are clear evidence of PSI in the case of The Untamed. From the analysis of The Untamed, I found five sorts of audiences' behaviours in the PSI:

- 144,215 people engaged in the listening process of The Untamed.
- They tended to talk to characters via on-screen comments.
- Gift giving by 12,541 people in the first episode of the first season. While listening, audiences are reminded to give online gifts by the platform and producers.
- 166,000 members of the online community of The Untamed participated in Weibo.
- Many listeners created fan works to enrich the details of the characters’ personalities.

From the interaction between users and media characters or users and users, it can be seen that users generate behavioural interactions and feedback in the listening process based on some cognitive and emotional motivation. For example, audiences gave producers online gifts, which can be turned into cash. When listening to audio dramas, the on-screen comment was full of the platform screen, and users can freely express their opinions and emotions via it. In addition to the one-side interaction with media characters, users also interacted with each other through the on-screen comments. From the text analysis of the on-screen comments in The Untamed, the content of on-screen comments was not only the emotional expression of the story, but also some subjective thoughts of the audience, and a large part of the content was the response to other on-screen comments. These texts were often powerfully communicative. Listeners sent and read on-screen comments and got a sense of company and intimacy to others behind the screen whom they will never know (Edward,
2019). From this, it can be concluded that the interaction behaviour that happens between audiences in the on-screen comments was para-social interaction. The intimacy created by the PSI in the on-screen commenting was the most crucial reason for the popularity of online audio melodramas (Edward, 2019). When listening to an audio melodrama, there were also interactions between the audiences. If one user asked a question, other users would answer it in on-screen comments. Users also discussed and debated with other audiences in on-screen comments.

5.2. Cognition

Cognition is the evidence that people who engage in these above behaviours are forming intimate ties with the characters or the voice actors or other participants of The Untamed. I found two main types of evidence. Firstly, listeners tended to form discussions in comments. Audiences usually had long conversions with other listeners to explore the reasons behind the characters’ actions or to share their understanding of the audio drama. Characters in The Untamed were not as simple as those in some traditional melodramas. It was great fun and a great activity for listeners to discuss the personalities of these fictional characters. Secondly, listeners tended to participate in the online community. On Sina Weibo, it was pretty common to see posts and replies sent by both producers and audiences, talking about the voice actors and characters as if audiences knew them for a long time. Sometimes audiences even shared their own daily life with other users in posting. For example, there was a video post showing that one listener met a cosplayer on the street. Some users regarded members of the online community as close friends since they had a shared interest and shared an identity.

5.3. Emotion

Listeners were not just doing something or thinking something, but also feeling something. For example, they tended to use images of smiles to express joy and tended to use images of crying to express sorrow. Listeners also texted directly in the comments to express their attachment and show their love. According to the statistics of on-screen comments on the platform Missevan of the first three free episodes of The Untamed in the first season, the most common motivation for users to use on-screen comments was to talk to the producers or characters in audio melodramas. Through the on-screen
comments, the user expressed his or her feelings about the fictional characters and also producers. This kind of conversation was unidirectional since the user was anonymous when sending on-screen comments. The function of on-screen comments in the audio melodrama was more like to provide an anonymous chat room for audiences. Users can read messages while sending, and they cannot know the source. This kind of interaction was conducted by users for the characters, stories, and producers, and users will express their feelings through on-screen comments when they felt close to the characters of the drama (Edward, 2019).

5.4. Tanbi Culture

The popularity of the unique theme of Tanbi shows us the fact that the contemporary female self-consciousness in China is in the stage of awakening and developing. However, this awakening faces the lack of women’s subjectivity in society for a long time, which is very easy to cause a female identity crisis. In China where men dominate women, although it seems that feminism has always had a loud voice in cyberspace, online female body consumption has become more popular. On Sina Weibo, the largest social network in China, countless female celebrities continue to post their photos to attract fans and boost traffic to their blogs. Female discourse presents a contradiction and conflict, which makes it easier for women to feel anxious and stunned, resulting in a chaotic state of female gender identity (Zheng, 2016). Most researchers have a consistent description of the characteristics of the Tanbi fans group. They are women between 15 and 25 years old. Their family condition is generally excellent, and the majority of them are heterosexual. Also, they rarely contact the real gays in reality, and they tend to hide their love for Tanbi from their parents, teachers, and other elders (Zheng, 2016). With the development of the Internet, this group of Tanbi women becomes younger and younger. In the minds of young girls, male images are constructed from their needs and fantasies, which exist as complementary non-self (Zheng, 2016). To sum up, Tanbi culture is playing a role in alleviating the problems of gender anxiety and identity crisis. The crisis of self-identity of young people in modern society, together with the gender anxiety of women, constitutes the deep social reasons for the recognition and acceptance of the Tanbi culture.
6. Findings

6.1. PSI in Different Groups

Based on the data, the PSI between participants and these three different groups has different characteristics.

PSI with fictional characters is unidirectional, and with no response. Audiences become prosumers to create or enrich the personalities of the characters. The audiences treated characters as real people and friends, and they believed their stories and discussed them through on-screen comments and posts on social media. Part of the audience would also make fan works for characters, and these fan works aimed at being close or adding more personalities to the characters of audio melodramas. They painted for fictional characters and even celebrated characters' birthdays. They expressed their support or opposition to the characters' actions in the audio melodrama through the on-screen comments as if they were talking directly to these characters. Producers not only completed the audio dramas very well but also put some tidbits or interviews on an irregular basis to build a media image of voice actors and promote PSI between voice actors and audiences.

PSI with producers is bi-directional, with some responses but not much. Producers maintain PSI by promoting themselves and getting feedback from audiences. The audience can establish a more direct connection with the media characters through social media such as Weibo. The audience can communicate with the media personas through private letters or comments, and a few fans were likely to get responses from media figures, but such responses were rare and slow. The communication between the audience and the media personalities was still unequal. Producers posted and replied actively, and their voices were much louder than fans to maintain PSI.

PSI with other audiences is multi-directional and reflects in conversations in the comments or on social media. Firstly, the listener regarded other listeners as friends as well and generated para-social interactions with them. The audience communicated with other audiences by posting on-screen comments and posts. This kind of communication was anonymous, and the audience actively shared the details of their lives, such as "I am writing homework while listening to the drama" "You are not alone" or "I saw a
cosplayer who played *the untamed* [sic] on the street.” They had first determined that the on-screen comments and social platforms provided a public sphere for them so that many people who had the same interests can communicate with each other even if they did not know each other. Besides, para-social interactions among users on social media had been influenced and deliberately shaped by the capital market. For example, the blog post with the highest number of interactions on *Weibo* was that of Ad accounts. These Ad accounts capitalized on the audience's desire to communicate with others and attract users' attention and financial value through such posts.

Secondly, audiences on social media such as *Weibo* can quickly form online communities with common interests. Taking *Weibo* as an example, there are mainly two kinds of communities, namely *Weibo group*, and *Super topic*. In *Weibo groups*, members can send public messages and have free conversations. In *Super topics*, people communicate mainly by posting and commenting on microblogs. There are differences between the two kinds of online communities. Influencers and their fans can come together in a *Weibo group*, and the fans can talk to each other, and the influencers can interact with their fans if they want. Interactions between fans in *Weibo groups* tend to be frequent and two-way, although they may not know each other. They have plenty of time and opportunities to communicate with each other online in a high intensity, and eventually, get to know each other well as statistical men or women. The way fans communicate with each other is very similar to the way people interact in daily life, but not real social interaction. Therefore, this communication between the audiences within the online community, such as *Weibo group* is *PSI*. This para-social interaction also promotes fan cohesion in *Weibo groups* and promote their fan activities.

However, being more open, the *Super topic* is different. Users can post on *Super topics* and read other people's posts and comments, thus generating cognitive and emotional reactions. But users are not sure who their messages will be read by or commented on when they post or comment on others, and the feedback from other users is often delayed, so it is difficult for the two sides to continue the "dialogue". As a result, except for a few users who generate stable interactions, most of the members of *Super topic* are expressing themselves but do not interact with others. This kind of activity is closer to fan behaviour. Therefore, the interaction between the audiences of audio melodramas in *Super topics* on *Weibo* is not para-social interaction.
Thirdly, Tanbi culture provides a space for them to hide their real identity, and to inhabit a shared identity.

In general, listeners of online audio melodramas hide their real personal information such as names, gender, or photos. They use net names and cartoon images when interacting with mediated others in communities of online audio melodramas. Take audio melodrama The Untamed as an example. The listeners of this audio melodrama created a new term Wangxian girls to name themselves. On the one hand, Weibo and other online websites provide the possibility to hide real names when communicating with other users. On the other hand, they do not merely use fans to refer to themselves, but rather have a stronger desire for identification. This way of naming is widespread in Chinese Tanbi literature. Audiences give their favorite couple an acronym and create a new term with this acronym followed by girls, meaning that they are the girls who like the two men’s love. This unique way of naming reflects the gender awareness of Tanbi fans. They recognize that Tanbi literature is a unique culture for women, and recognizes their identity in a self-named way, to make them different from ordinary fans who chase celebrities.

6.2. PSI in Social Media

As I have shown, the formation of mediated intimacy with other participants is shaped and promoted by social media. This way is especially interesting in a Tanbi space, because people hide their identity, exploring their imagination and even fetishes. Secondly, listeners become prosumers now, and they have additional outlets to express their intimate connections in a social media context. Thirdly, participants have new and extra powers to shape the characters they are intimate with such as fan paintings. Last but not least, producers become more active to maintain PSI with audiences. The branding of mediated personas are normative, but in a social media context, it became more active.

Unlike the traditional PSI between celebrities and audiences, media personalities will generate celebrity branding behaviours during the dissemination and consumption of online audio dramas, such as using Sina Weibo to communicate with fans, establishing Super topic as fan communities, live broadcasting to present themselves and selling other merchandise to audiences. These behaviours combine their celebrity effects with
the virtual characters they play in the audio drama, which unusually pushes the audience to have a feeling of dependence on the media personalities, and ultimately tends to encourage the audience from media consumption to commodity consumption. The specific characteristic of para-social interactions in online audio dramas, that is, it is not merely the interaction between audiences and celebrities, or the empathy of audiences to characters, but is a combination of virtual characters and celebrity worship by the intentional promotion of the media personalities on behalf of the producers.
7. Further Research and Limitation

This paper has demonstrated the existence of PSI in the process of listening to online audio melodramas based on the data from social platforms and literature review. Moreover, PSI exists not only between characters and audience but also between ordinary people within the audience’s sub-groups. Whether this means that female audiences spend much time and emotions to generate PSI and will be less dependent on real social relationships needs further exploration.

Moreover, the question of what is ‘real’ social relationship needs to be further discussed, since ‘real’ social relationships are also mediated. Further research on the relationships between the audience’s psychology and behaviours in the process of media consumption is necessary. It is essential to study the psychology of the audience to promote the further development of the PSI theory. Limited by the conditions, this paper only sorts out a theoretical background and does some preliminary research. Besides, data collection on Sina Weibo and Missevan did not provide real personal information such as gender. Therefore, research cannot be directly carried out from this perspective. In the future, the arguments would need to be improved with relevant surveys, conduct questionnaires and in-depth interviews on the audience, to get a deeper understanding of the show's psychological impact and people’s feedback on this increasingly common and immersive set of para-social interactions.
8. Conclusion

In conclusion, PSI does happen in the case of online audio melodramas. Audiences form presumed intimacy with producers, characters, and other audience members both in the listening process and on social media. Para-social interaction occurs when the audience reacts to media others in the audio melodrama community on social networks, and the audience treats them as if they were real people. The more the performers adjust their performances to accommodate the audience’s reaction, the more viewers tend to respond to the programs they participate in. The virtual instant communication of on-screen comments makes it easier for the audience to feel closer and closer. We can understand the para-social interaction in audio drama listening from the three aspects of cognition, emotion, and behaviour. It has been found that in the trans-media extension, producers are using PSI to produce connections with listeners and gain more profits.

In the past, PSI was unidirectional, and audiences were in the role of consumers only. Now PSI is multi-directional, and audiences become prosumers. The unprecedented expansion of media has reshaped our relationships with others (Rojek, 2015). The popularity of social networks contributes significantly to our universal sense of connection. Studying PSI could help us to understand why and how social networks change our sense of company and connection, and provide us a foundation to learn more about the problem of whether our social relationship is becoming more or less authentic under the massive influence of media expansion.
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