

Dog With A Blog: Adolescents' Relationship Anxiety In Reconstituted Family Interactions

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Abstract:

This study explores the portrayal of adolescents' relationship anxiety within the reconstituted family context,, as depicted in the Disney television series Dog With A Blog. With the increasing universality of the reconstituted family, the unique psychological challenges that adolescents confront within this family structure are worthy of attention. This paper defines relationship anxiety as a psychological state in which an individual continuously feels insecure and worried about their own value, sense of belonging, and relationship stability. This study will analyze relationship anxiety in three operational dimensions: trust crisis, loyalty conflict and alternative intimacy. Media representations play a crucial role in navigating adolescents' perspective and behavior towards these potential challenges. Through a qualitative contextual analysis of the first ten episodes of the series, this study analyzes how relationship anxieties are shown in show's context and the way the relationship anxieties could be resolve. The analysis reveals that the plot provides a vivid representation of the three dimensions: scapegoating leads to trust deficits, the acceptance of new sibling roles drives loyalty conflicts and the pursuit of intimacy relationship through virtual relationship. When the series provide positive resolutions towards the relationship anxiety, this show may risk at creating over-simplified expectations in resolving the familial difficulties. The study concludes that while considering the guidance of the media, we also need to notice the unrealistic relational challenge that might have negative impact towards adolescents' mental health.

Keywords: Relationship anxiety, Reconstituted family, Trust crisis, Loyalty Conflict, Alternative Intimacy, Adolescent Mental Health, Media

1. Introduction

According to INSEE's report, as of 2022, reconstituted families with children under the age of 18 in France accounted for 8.9% of all households [1]. This phenomenon can be reflected in today's society, where the diversification of family structures has become an important part of the growth of these teenagers. However, for adolescents involved in such families, adapting to a reconstituted family often involves numerous challenges and uncertainties. These seemingly "different" experiences from those of their partners may also lead to them becoming a mentally vulnerable group.

In this context, the purpose of this study is to deeply discuss the psychological state of adolescents in recombined families -relationship anxiety. This paper defines relationship anxiety as a psychological state in which an individual continuously feels insecure and worried about their own value, sense of belonging, and relationship stability when

engaging in social interactions, especially with family and friends. In the context of reconstituted families, this state may manifest in issues such as "adjustment and adaptation of family communication"[2] and "adjustment of social relationships"[3], etc.

It is crucial to understand how the media deal with such relationship anxiety: because it is related to how teenagers handle it when they are in such situations. Thus, this study chose *Dog With A Blog* for analysis. It is a television program premiered in October 2012 by Disney, and is widely recognized as a family comedy. As the show is set in a reconstituted family consisting of two adolescents and one young child, it provides rich materials for the study of family interaction and relationship anxiety.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Object

Table 1. Main Characters Introduction in *Dog With a Blog*

Character	Bennett James	Elaine Jennings	Tyler James	Avery Jennings	Chloe	Stan
Age	Middle-aged	Middle-aged	Teenager	Teenager	Child	Child
Personality	Arrogant/Kind	Sarcastic	Simple-minded	Psycho about rules	Precocious	Humorous
Relationship	Father	Mother	Brother	Sister	Younger-sister	The dog

The story begins with Bennett James and Elaine Jennings, along with their respective children, re-established this new family. However, one year later, the children still struggle to get along. Bennett James adopted a dog from an animal shelter and let the children raise it together, hoping to enhance their bond in this way. Stan, as an on-looker, records the life of the James family by his blog. According to table 1, the main characters in the *Dog With A Blog* exhibit family's dynamics, including ages between different adolescents.

Considering the intended audiences of the show, this might be divided into two populations. Based on the background of the program (family life in American communities and American middle school life) and the content of the program (comedy that resolves conflicts in family life in a light-hearted and pleasant way), this study suggests that the main audience of the program is early American teenagers aged between 8 to 14. Meanwhile, considering that this is a family-oriented comedy, parents of American adolescents are identified as the secondary audience in this study. Of course, as this film spreads in the media, it will gradually reduce the monotony of the audience, but the main audience will still be teenagers aged 8 to 14.

2.2 Research Method

To ensure the depth of the research, this study adopts a qualitative research approach. Based on this method, this study analyzes the adolescent relationship anxiety depicted in the "*Dog With A Blog*". The content of this study is based on the EP01-EP10 of the first season of *Dog With A Blog*. The total duration is approximately three hours. The selection of these ten episodes was based on two primary criteria. First, they are the most representative episodes within the entire series, demonstrating the highest viewership and holding significant influence. Second, these episodes feature the most prominent conflicts related to reconstituted family dynamics, which directly align with the central focus of this research.

Based on the definition of relationship anxiety and the content of the program, this study quantifies relationship anxiety into three operational definitions:

3. Operational Definition

3.1 Trust crisis

This refers to the widespread sense of distrust among fam-

ily members (mostly semi-blood-related siblings/steppes and steppes) in the system of reconstituted families. This type of crisis is usually manifested as a “presumption of guilt”, where one party is often deemed the primary culprit.

3.2 Loyalty conflict

This refers to the conflicting feelings experienced by adolescents when integrating into a new reconstituted family (. They need to sense a kind of loyalty to their original parents. At the same time, they are expected to form new relationships with their new family. This will extend into a sense of struggling and guilty.

3.3 Alternative intimacy

When the adolescents could not find stable relationship within the reconstituted family, they would find external emotional comfort and value affirmation, as the “substitute” for the lack of feeling of family intimacy. Such substitutes may include positive friendships, negative relationships, or excessively dependent relationships with others.

During the viewing process, this study recorded the language and behavior of the characters, made detailed records and codes of the relevant content containing “relationship anxiety”, and focused on analyzing the characters’ situations, the family relationships involved, and the solutions adopted, in order to discuss the guiding methods of relationship anxiety in this program.

4. Analysis

4.1 Trust crisis

The structural complexity of reconstituted families often gives rise to emotional conflicts among members. This study focuses on analyzing relationship anxiety among adolescents. “Dog With a Blog” reveals the influence of three core dimensions - trust crisis, loyalty conflict and alternative intimacy - on the psychology of teenagers. By presenting the daily conflicts of a reconstituted family, the show illustrates how these dimensions shape adolescents’ emotions. This study will analyze the causes and manifestations of relationship anxiety from these three operational dimensions. Trust crisis

An example of this dimension is located in EP02. The main event in this episode is that the family car is damaged. After the crash, the parents identified teenager Tyler as responsible without investigation, citing “he had similar behavior before” as the reason. This judgment ignored Tyler’s innocent defense, eventually leading to Tyler being

punished and crying out, “You never believed me.”

This plot vividly demonstrates that in a reconstituted family, a member may face constant pressure to prove their innocence due to others’ preconceived notions. This persistent disbelief can lead to emotional instability for that member, as well as disappointment, distrust, and even estrangement towards other family members. This continuous pressure to prove oneself is an important source of relationship anxiety. From then on, in EP01, Avery Jennings once showed distrust towards Tyler James. saying Tyler has always “driven away the one thing that I cared about most”, she thinks Tyler will do harm to Stan. This trust crisis is not a single event. In the subsequent episodes, once a problem occurs (such as something being damaged or a plan going wrong), suspicion will also be directed at a specific child. The repeated “distrust” reflects the significant challenges in reconstituted families. Even if “distrust” is repeatedly refuted, this lack of trust often leaves the characters in the show feeling powerless, intensifying their sense of insecurity or anxiety. Therefore, relationship anxiety in this case can be understood as an unconscious reaction to similar situations.

4.2 Loyalty conflict

In EP01, the sibling conflict triggered by Stan’s departure from home is a typical case :Avery firmly believes that Tyler uses Stan to threaten him and divides the two into “two camps”, refusing to recognize Tyler’s role as the “elder brother”. In reconstituted families, teenagers’ “loyalty” often faces a double test: they have to maintain the emotional connection of their original family while also adapting to the identity and role in the new family. This plot reveals the fragmentation of identities within a reconstituted family. When the teenagers in a reconstituted family remain loyal to their original family and children status, they find it hard to accept changes in their identities, such as becoming the elder brother or sister of a stranger.

This experience of loyalty conflict may impede adolescents’ ability to develop a positive self-concept and stable self-identity, causing confusion in interpersonal communication [4]. This is because teenagers are unable to adapt to such a change in identity. This confused expression of identity is an important source of relationship anxiety.

4.3 Alternative intimacy

Examples of this dimension appeared in Episode5 and Episode7. In the main storyline of Episod7, Avery and Lindsay (Avery’s friends at school) are extremely eager to gain the approval of the popular girl at school. They mention that they “want those girls to like me,” and the two go to great lengths to help the popular girls find

someone willing to wear the mascot costume, even though this move might harm their own interests. The underlying motivation behind this behavior of seeking external approval is that Avery and Lindsay have not received sufficient recognition within their family. [5] This is one alternative to intimate relationships to seek social approval. In Episode5, Stan and Avery were addicted to an online game and even had a conflict over a new friend they met in the game: Stan believed that this friend was his friend because he first met him online, while Avery thought that only friends they met in real life were true friends. Both of them ignored that the truly close person was the other, and eventually get hurt by this online friend. This is essentially an example of evading real family interactions. When they fail to find a stable intimate relationship (such as a family member), teenagers will turn to other relationships to make up for it. This kind of relationship can sometimes be a virtual one. [6]

Therefore, this study can conclude that being overly concerned about others' approval may lead to low self-efficacy, and engaging in the virtual world to seek alternative satisfaction constitutes evasive behavior that can induce relationship anxiety.

5. Discussion

The analysis of this study demonstrates that "Dog Blog" presents to audiences, through plot development, the negative dynamics within reconstituted families: trust crises, loyalty conflicts, and substitutive intimacy. But at The same time, the show resolved these contradictions for The James Family with a downplaying orientation (for example: using Stan's humor). Therefore, the audience needs to decide for themselves whether these orientations are suitable for them.

Adolescent mental health is influenced by numerous factors, including individual traits, lifestyles, family environments, and social relationships. Among them, family environment and social relationships have a significant impact on the mental health of teenagers. Research shows that positive family environment variables (such as rewards and nurturing) have a significant positive correlation with adolescent mental health[7]. Social relationships, including peer relationships and school environments, are also closely associated with adolescent mental health. In contrast, a negative family environment and negative social relationships have a significant negative correlation with the social interaction and interpersonal relationships of teenagers[8]. It is undeniable that the trust crisis has brought a tacit understanding of being understood to the teenagers watching this program. This to some extent normalizes family trust crises. Meanwhile, the portrayal

of loyalty conflicts offers an idealized solution to viewers facing similar struggles. Furthermore, alternative intimacy can also imperceptibly enhance teenagers' sense of self-efficacy. These pathways offer viewers ways on how to create more positive family environments and social relationships from their own perspectives. However, in the analysis, this study also found that the solution of this program is limited: At the end of each episode, the James Family can well resolve the conflicts brought about by the reconstituted family --- these conflicts are usually long-term.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of this study shows that Dog With A Blog presents to audiences, through plot development, the negative dynamics within reconstituted families: trust crises, loyalty conflicts, and substitutive intimacy. But at The same time, the show resolved these contradictions for The James Family with a downplaying orientation (for example: using Stan's humor). Therefore, the audience needs to decide for themselves whether these orientations are suitable for them.

Through analysis from the text and related paper, the influence of this TV program on teenage viewers is two-way: on the one hand, it plays a positive and proactive guiding role in helping teenagers handle disputes among reconstituted families, encouraging them to think positively and solve problems amicably; On the other hand, it is overly naive and simplistic in dealing with disputes among reconstituted families among teenagers, leading them to have unrealistic expectations for handling such relationships.

The limitation of this study lies in the overly monotonous sample size and the lack of cross-cultural and cross-age sample cases. In future research, analyses and comparisons of different TV programs could be conducted, supplemented by questionnaires on the mental health of teenagers and interviews with some teenagers about the content of these media. Such an approach would enable a deeper understanding of adolescents' cognitive mechanisms.

From the perspective of teenagers' mental health, this program can be more realistic on the existing basis and offer more operability, rather than achieving immediate results. Through such adjustments, the program could better guide adolescent development.

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