

# *How Characteristics of Virtual Communities Influence the Identity of Online Fans in China? – Using Sina Weibo as An Example*

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**Abstract:** This paper introduces the relationship between fans' identity reconstruction and the characteristics of virtual communities via the rise of new media. The research will explore fans' ego and social identity perceptions in online platforms, and state phenomenon that occurs in virtual communities that influence fans' identity. Sina Weibo platform will be used as an example to explore the model of online star-chasing activity in China by subjecting fans as the research object. Method of interview will be adopted to explore the changes in fans' self- recognition and behaviors in virtual communities, and explained by the identity theory to give the final conclusion.

**Keywords:** virtual community, fans, ego identity, social identity, identity reconstruction.

## **1. Introduction**

Sina Weibo is one of China's most popular social network sites and has become the crucial medium for over 600 million registered users to share information such as breaking news, social events, and products [1]. Sina Weibo provides an essential outlet for Chinese citizens to share their views and develop a greater understanding of different aspects of the country. Sina Weibo presents itself as an online public sphere that opens to critical debates [2].

Despite its popularity, few systematic studies explore Sina Weibo's characteristics — especially the vital role that the platform plays in Chinese fan culture and the entertainment industry, especially its function as a Super Topic community.

Weibo Super Topic Community is an interactive platform of online interest content gathered by members with the same fun-related content based on a topic of sustainable discussion. Most of those in the Super community are celebrity fans [3]. Super Topic community is a communication platform derived from the effect of celebrity micro-blog and a centralized discussion platform for fandom members, gathering many fans with high viscosity and passion to the forum. In addition, the community management of Super Topic is more organized. It has strict rules and filters out "fake fans" through screening to ensure the purity and harmony of the fandom [4].

Online social media platforms provide a virtual space for the formation of fan groups. Before the emergence of Internet technology and social media, fans were scattered all over the world and communicated through traditional means such as letters and phone calls. Nowadays, fans can interact with other fans in the virtual network space without the restrictions of time and geography and use

online social media as a platform to form a well-organized, cohesive and active fan group. Fans gather and interact in virtual communities such as Sina Weibo, and different online media influence the boundaries of fan groups' activities and interaction methods, among which Sina Weibo is the most active place for fan interaction and communication by virtue of its easy and convenient operation and fast dissemination.

As the system of fangirling shifts from offline to online, this is because the emergence of new technology changes people's way of how we consume media. Therefore, fans are finding new ways to interact with their favorite celebrities through social media. With the assistance of online networking, fans seek out like-minded others to share and produce content, and these small virtual fan communities coalesce to form huge fan groups. New media, including such platforms as Weibo, have created more and more-broad platforms that support these large groups of fans' celebrity-chasing activities. Fan groups, enabled by Weibo and other media, inaugurated a social culture different from the past — the word "fanquan" (fan culture) explicitly describes this phenomenon.

China's star-chasing ecology has changed. The model of supporting one's favorite celebrity shifts from offline to online. The emergence of online virtual communities provides fans with space to gather, discuss and concentrate. However, by its "virtual" characteristics, fans can selectively "perform" themselves in cyberspace. As a virtual community is a consequence of self-categorization and a channel of interaction with other members, personal and social identity are influenced by the new recognition of self and the new way of communication within a group. All of the situations above are limited to the virtual world, so fans are likely to experience an identity reconstruction from the experience which would not overlap with the real world.

This paper will investigate how virtual communities influence the identity of their members and will do so by surveying fans in the Chinese microblogging platform, Weibo's "Super Topics" community. This paper uses Weibo as a case study to observe online information dissemination mechanisms and assess how fans' identity is "reconstructed" as a result.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Virtual Communities**

"Virtual community" has been defined as an online platform for people with shared interests or goals [5]. The term "virtual" itself means that electronic communication is the primary form of interaction [6]. Computer-mediated communication allows people to locate and talk to others with similar interests and to form and sustain virtual communities [7]. When enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, they form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace [8]. Virtual communities not only have members who share similar interests, but those members are also willing to maintain friendships; they create interdependencies and feelings of belonging to the community. Indeed, virtual communities are typically cultivated through strong social ties among members, who know each other and exchange information mostly through face-to-face interaction, which facilitates feelings of membership, a sense of influence, and mutual affective connection [9].

"Virtual community" is a phrase consisting of the juxtaposition of concepts. Virtual means not real, but community refers to a social unit for people to have real discussions and contacts. This phrase foregrounds the most obvious feature of the virtual community— it is virtual. Therefore, the identity that individuals establish online might correspond to the way that they are having communication with other netizens. Their identity also has a chance to be virtual, constructive, or more dynamic.

### **2.2. Identity: Theoretical Background**

Erikson pointed out the three possible explanations of the word "identity". He stated in his research:" first, a conscious sense of individual identity; at another to an unconscious striving for continuity of

personal character; 'at a third, as a criterion for the silent doings of ego synthesis; and, finally, as maintenance of inner solidarity with a group's ideals and identity [10]." From Erikson's definition, researcher conclude that identity is one's self-recognition, psychological incentives of action, and position within a social group.

### 2.2.1. Ego Identity

Erik Homburger Erikson first proposed the concept of Ego identity. Ego identity can be simply defined as persistent sameness within oneself (self-sameness) and a persistent sharing of some essential character with others [10]. Erikson believes that the formation of self-identity is the core task of adolescence, namely the psychological process of making sure that " I am myself" and not someone else, and that self-identity, as the essence of personality, involves a commitment to ideology, roles, and values [10].

### 2.2.2. Social Identity

Tajfel and Turner first outlined the theory of social identity. There are two distinct segments of social identity theory: social identity theory [11] and self-categorization theory [12]. Both theories acknowledge the origins of social identity in cognitive and motivational factors, although they are emphasizing different aspects [13]. Tajfel and Turner emphasized the psychological incentives for a group member to judge the existing group membership [11]. Turner et al. said that motifs are vital elements and demands for group members to achieve a positive social identity by positive distinction process "[12].

In contrast, the self-categorization theory focused more on the cognitive foundations of social identity. Self-categorization theory built and extended Tajfel's statement of cognitive nature establishment earlier, and further delves in to those psychological factors which motivate and stimulate the categorization of individuals within a group.

The self-categorization explains how individuals come to identify and "act as a group"[12].

The theory states that social identity consists of three processes, which include social categorization, social comparison, and positive distinction [11]. Individuals enhance their self-esteem by acquiring and maintaining a positive social identity. Much of this positive identity comes from in-group and related out-group comparisons.

## 2.3 Online Identities Reconstruction

Online identity refers to "a configuration of the defining characteristics of a person in the online space.[14]" Ruyter and Conroy defined online identity as the combination of characteristics that help to define a person in cyberspace, and differentiate themselves from other netizens on shared platforms [15]. However, people's online identity could be distinct from their offline identity [14, 2]. Donath claims that in the physical world, one's identity inherently corresponds to their body, and appears to be consistent and genuine [16]. Vice versa, the identity that a person establishes online sometimes shows discrepancy with their real-life identity and not as representative [17]. Although offline identity is less doubtable because people get fewer opportunities to fake an identity when they are surrounded by acquaintances. Also, offline identity is still constrained by physical factors and corporal body [16], and easily goes beyond control [14].

identity reconstruction is the phenomenon that individual establishes an online identity which partially or fully vary from their real identity by conceal some of their personality to achieve the ideal presentation of self [2]. Hatoss has argued that an individual's identity is changeable rather than consistent [18]. People present themselves differently depends on the situation, especially when there is a virtual platform where there are no acquaintances [19]. Stern S. noted the situation of virtual life

does not intersect or overlap with real life, and online platforms became a suitable place to express themselves in a way to live a different identity without that much pressure, especially for adolescents [20].

### **2.3.1. Posts and Tweets: Interaction with Celebrity**

Celebrity fans are more likely to create a parasocial relationship by following and subscribing to the celebrity's pages and channels as well as posts on this online public sphere [21,22]. Parasocial relationships are one-sided relationships where one person extends emotional energy, interest, and time, and the other party, the persona, is completely unaware of the other's existence [23]. Giles demonstrated in his research that Fans could fulfill their psychological needs when they get a chance to observe the real-time dynamic of their idol's life [24]. Therefore, fans develop intimacy with their idols through this one-sided relationship via communication platforms like Weibo and Twitter. Celebrities are the representation on social media. They could be icons to embody moods and also encourage their followers to consume. Because of liking and admiration, fans are unconditional followers and obeyers of celebrities. Therefore, Fans' identities are so easily altered by the influence of celebrities, thus leading to the influx of new identities in online culture [25].

### **2.3.2. Peer Pressure and Hierarchy Along with Cultural Capital**

Within fan communities, social hierarchy can be perceived in the form of capital [26]. Bourdieu stated that becoming a member of a group or fandom takes social capital, which provides "a 'credential' that entitles them to credit." Jenkins's early research on 'textual poachers' demonstrated that fans, in order to gain reputation within fan networks, duplicate cultural works from official works, such as fan-fiction and videos, without profit. Investing in that cultural capital by learning how to duplicate cultural works can build a fan's social capital — can help their reputation grow among fan networks [27]. The fan becomes the person who is "worthy of being known". Their sociability work is extremely fruitful when it is exercised" [26].

According to the theory of Bourdieu, researcher conclude that people unconsciously became the peer pressure of those ordinary fans. Those fans also wanted to be superior online to represent the whole fan group. Therefore, they are forced to spend huge amounts of money to support their idols; or sacrifice their own time to produce immature idol-related fan fiction or videos in order to achieve that position.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1 General Introduction**

The primary aim of this study is to explore how characteristics of virtual communities influence the consistency of one's ego and social identity— online communities of fans gathering, and influence their individual and social identity online. This paper will use Sina Weibo as a case study to discuss the production and dissemination of fan culture under established virtual communities.

This research will adopt interviews as the main method of data collection. This study, which centralizes fans as the main object of research, conducted in-depth interviews of identified fans and used qualitative analysis methods to evaluate the answers to the posed questions. Qualitative interviews are regarded as exploratory and are used to uncover trends in thoughts and opinions. Interviews of this research will mainly focus on gathering user experience on the Weibo platform; every piece of answer aims to be subjective for the researcher to analyze from various perspectives.

## 3.2 Interview

Interviewing can be defined as a “conversation between two people in which one person tries to direct the conversation to obtain information for some specific purpose [28].”

Interviews can be split into three types: structured interviews, unstructured interviews and semi-structured interviews. Structured interviews are very standardized. The interviewer will prepare the interview outline in advance, and the interview process is a fixed procedure with a process completely dominated by the interviewer. The unstructured interview has no obligatory questions and fixed procedures. Interviewers still prepare questions that are going to be asked, but might not be in the same order and answers might suggest new questions, and those can be further followed up on. The process is influenced by the social interaction between the interviewer and the participants. Semi-structured interviews have a degree of predetermined order but still ensures flexibility in the way issues are addressed by the informants [29]. Therefore, standardized responses that have been suppressed by mechanical processes can be effectively avoided. Also, give the interviewer opportunities to make adjustments according to feedback, and gain new insights as the interviewee is constructing new phenomena [30]. Therefore, Semi-structured interviews will be adopted in this research.

### 3.2.1. Interview Design

1) demographic & Fandoms – getting basic information and relating that to fandoms that participants are involved in, different fandoms result in fans having different impressions and definitions of fan culture.

2) Weibo usage & Weibo Super Topic - Questions are designed to gather users' opinions of the Super Topic community along with both advantages and disadvantages; and fans' daily routine and responsibilities within the community.

3) Money spent and peer pressure – linking the final part of identity in the interview. It aims to collect the reasons for peers within the same community's influence on social and personal identity. Indirect guidance for participants to mention identity.

4) virtual community influence on identity – directly point out the theory of identity and ask participants to develop that based on their own opinion.

The targeted participants need to satisfy the following features: (1) Weibo users for at least one year. (2) Use the Weibo platform for star-chasing activity. (3) Participate in the Weibo Super Topic Community. Participants who satisfy at least these three requirements are able to elaborate deeply on the system of fan culture online.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Demographic

Table 1 shows nine pieces of interviews conducted according to the established procedures. All of them are recorded by smartphone, ranging from 20 minutes up to 32 minutes.

A total of nine participants were voluntarily interviewed in this section, and all of them are considered to be valid. All interviewees are Chinese high school students between the age of 16 and 18. Target interviewees are K-pop and Chinese fans who use Weibo frequently and have a deeper understanding of how Weibo functions. The ratio of gender for interviewees is not balanced as there is only one male participant. However, no gender differences are detected in his wording. Therefore, researcher decided to keep this piece of response but make the rest of the participants all female to avoid further bias.

Table 1: Information samples.

|   | Sample A | Sample B | Sample C       | Sample D     | Sample E | Sample F | Sample G | Sample H | Sample I |
|---|----------|----------|----------------|--------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Gender                                    | Female   | Female   | Female         | Female       | Male     | Female   | Female   | Female   | Female   |
| Age                                       | 17       | 17       | 16             | 16           | 18       | 16       | 16       | 16       | 17       |
| Duration/mins                             | 25       | 29       | 32             | 20           | 30       | 27       | 22       | 25       | 28       |
| fandom that fans participate in (country) | Korea    | China    | Thailand Korea | China, Korea | Korea    | China    | Korea    | China    | China    |

## 4.2 Weibo Enhance User Experience

According to the results of interview, Weibo is undoubtedly an indispensable position for fans to pursue stars. When Weibo was launched in 2009, it adopted the strategy of inviting celebrities, writers, and other public figures to enter Weibo, attracting fans of public figures to download and use Weibo, and finally realizing the promotion and popularization of Weibo. Later, after continuous careful optimization, Weibo launched a private personalized customization service, which concentrated the content of Weibo users' preferences on the user's personal page, just in line with the needs of fans to pursue stars. Fans can choose to focus only on the content they are interested in. Through the filtering mechanism of Weibo, fans can gradually obtain information with high relevance to themselves. Through Weibo, fans can find like-minded friends with them, fans no longer just simple information recipients, but the combination of information producers, communicator and recipients. Fans who have more information will pass the information to ordinary fans in turn so as to realize the sharing of information and resources. In this way, the relationship between fans becomes closer and plays an important role in promoting the formation of fan groups. With its features of simple and convenient operation, personalized user content customization, and instant information dissemination, Weibo perfectly meets the needs of fans for gathering, plays an important role in the formation of fans, and provides a suitable place for fans to gather.

There is one intuitive experience of using Weibo that the interviewees agreed on: Sina Weibo creates a sense of intimacy between celebrities and followers by providing instant updates on celebrities' latest personal activities. Although fans are still limited in having real communication with celebrities, the relationship is still parasocial in spite of the occasional reply a fan might receive. In data analysis, researchers found that overall user perceptions of using Weibo tended to be positive and were not precisely associated with the fandoms they were involved in. All of the participants give unity on the attitude of the virtual community. When the researcher demonstrated the concept of virtual community and asked them, "What do you think the meaning of virtual community is?" Their instant response to the question is advantageous rather than disadvantageous. All of my participants mention the same word: "sense of belonging." Therefore, researcher concludes that the benefits of the Weibo Super Topic community outweigh its disadvantages.

## 4.3 Factors and Influences on Identity in Virtual Communities

Within the nine valid samples, 6 of them claim that they experienced an identity reconstruction when going online through Weibo's characteristics. Users' identity is unconsciously influenced by their behavior and self-recognition. These categories play vital parts in forming the new identity in a virtual community.

### 4.3.1. Behavior

The ego identity theory that has been pointed out above emphasizes the continuity and unity of the "I"[10], but the virtual socialization of the internet breaks this consistent self-perception, and individuals who are addicted to this virtual community will display an alternative way of being that is different from their real-life selves, and even derive an alter ego, generating role the value conflict of alienation and the scenario of human dichotomy.

The first point that researcher want to point out is individuals' role alienation in virtual socialization. All interviewees acknowledged that their social patterns in virtual communities would be somehow different from offline reality. Seven of them claimed they are more extroverted online because users are not real names registered within the virtual community. Possible consequences include users establishing an ideal state of self as a self-presentation; avoiding accountability for inappropriate wording; seeing virtual communities as an escapism from reality, as it won't overlap with real life.

Researcher found that participant A and participant H are two extremes of how virtual community altered fans' ego identity. Participant H believes that her model of stardom will not change through the medium of virtual community. While the rise of new media has changed much of the fan culture, neither has the way she supports her idols. Her perception of her identity as a fan is consistent. On the premise that the interviewer did not mention the theory of self-identity, she repeatedly mentioned: "A person should show consistent behavior and ideological morality from the inside out." Take money spent to support their favorite celebrities as an example. For ten years of fangirling experience in K-pop fandom, she spent over 100,000 RMB to support her idol. As mentioned above, peer pressure within the virtual community can unconsciously force a fan to spend money in order to be more gregarious with other fans within the group. However, when answering the interview question, "If without fan culture and pressure of online virtual community, will you still be willing to spend money for your idol?" She answers in an undoubtedly way and claims that she never regrets any piece of expenditure on her idol, even if it is meaningless. And the reason for that is that her idol is her role model and the one who helps her improve—a typical example of ego identity, which is not easily altered by the emergence of virtual culture.

Participant A serves as another extreme. The rise of social media and virtual communities influence her ego identity. When answering the same question above, her response is: "There is no chance for me to spend money on my favorite celebrity without the influence of Weibo and other social media." Her thoughts of virtual community in star-chasing activity are quite negative. In comparison with participant H, A is more rational in recognizing the existing problems of fan culture by criticizing those unhealthy fund-raising activities within the virtual community of fans. However, she still participates in these activities due to her identity as an online fan and a peer, and she breaks the ego identity from archetype identity.

### 4.3.2. Self-recognition and Categorization

According to the theory of social identity, in social life, people automatically classify things into categories and automatically distinguish between in-groups and out-groups when classifying others. This self-identity of individuals increases the boundaries between internal and external groups, and individuals are keen on their own group, believe that their group is superior, and appreciate the differences between groups by seeking positive social identity and self-esteem, favoring the group they belong to.

In interest-based weak-tie relationship socialization, especially in the fan group, identity is the bond that maintains the community relationship. The identity within the fan group formed around idols can strengthen the cohesion of the group, and the interaction between fans and idols can also strengthen the social identity between each other and the emotional bond within the fan group.

Firstly, fans are attracted to virtual communities, in part because they change their sense of egocentrism into communitarianism. All nine interviewees admit Weibo Super Topic brings them a sense of belonging, stabilizing their identity as a fan. Participant D said: "Fans aren't there to compete with each other, but working together, and sharing the passion towards the same goal, and forming a friendship with this group of people that have the same interest as you."

Before analyzing the second finding in social identity and categorization within fans, the hierarchy and "social ladder" within fan groups and virtual communities need to be explained further in-depth. The potential hierarchy among fans became the main source of peer pressure and influenced fans' social identity. As peers influence important attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics [31], individuals strive to fit in a community containing a variety of members. Within online fandoms, capital expenditure for idol-supporting; producing idol-related by-products (videos, gifs, fan fiction) became a pervasive phenomenon. This is known as investing in cultural capital within fandom. As mentioned above, investing in that cultural capital by learning how to duplicate cultural works can build a fan's social capital — can help their reputation grow among fan networks [26]. And this promotes building hierarchy within the online fan community. Participants A, B, E, F, G, I reflect that they believe people who stand one higher position inside fan groups will feel more superior than others. Thus, to be able to win in this fierce competition and earn a sense of superiority, some fans forced themselves to support their favorite celebrity both financially and non-financially in an unspontaneous way under peer pressure. This negative influence concludes that social identity contributes strongly to the development of in-group bias and conflict [32,12].

However, in relation to seeking this self-esteem and bond within the fan group, the Majority of participants admit that they or they have seen acquaintances trapped in the whirlpool of peer pressure. Virtual communities of fandoms are like a microscope of society, with people positioned in different "classes". Using the Weibo Super topic as an example, the user's level within this Super Topic will appear right after the portfolio picture and be shown to every participant within the Super Topic. Additionally, the number of followers and the interaction statistics of a user's post also decide the position of a fan in this fandom.

## 5. Conclusion

The Internet era's quick information transmission has substantially increased the frequency and speed of group gathering and dispersal, and the subjects, grounds, and dynamics of identity have all changed dramatically, resulting in significant distinction and disputes.

The emergence of virtual communities and their characteristics have greatly influenced the ego and social identity of fans. Specifically, the transformation of identity originates from three levels:

1. The differentiation of identity subjects into "real and imaginary" makes the value beliefs of identity subjects increasingly diverse and complex. This refers to the break of ego identity by fans to join in a virtual community.

2. The changes in social dynamics and the fragmentation of identity bases have weakened the original social identity bases to a certain extent, with association to the hierarchy within fan groups along with the contribution of fans' cultural capital and peer pressure, to a great extent make some of the fans redefining their position and identity within the group. The increase of active and constructive identity makes the multidimensional discrete nature of social identity more prominent and generates corresponding differentiation and conflict, such as fans' dependence on Super Topics.

3. The subjects of social identity are social members, and their identification with themselves is a necessary precondition and basis for their social identity. Traditional social members' identities are stable and constrained, and people are constrained by their groups and social circumstances, yet their personal identities are relatively constant. However, in the Internet era, people may choose to "act" in the cyber domain due to the networks' virtual nature. Therefore, one's identity is constructive. Also,

same social member can join different virtual communities and create multiple identities, this identity differentiation from online to offline leads to one's break of ego identity and finally enduring the process of identity reconstruction.

## Appendix

### Interview question

#### *Demographic & Fandom*

1. Please simply introduce your gender identity, age and educational backgrounds.
2. Which fandom do you belong to?
3. What is the reason that you choose to join an online fan community?

#### *Weibo usages & Super topic*

4. How long and how often do you use Weibo?
5. Can you please introduce Weibo generally with several sentences?
6. What convenience do you think Weibo brings to fangirling online?
7. Have you ever participated in ranking, fundraising, comments controlling or other supporting activities on Weibo? Can you tell me about your most impressive experience?
8. Are there any rules or requirements for fan members within your community? (What are they? What do you think of these regulations? Will they follow suit? What do you do if a fan member breaks these rules?)

#### *Weibo Super Topic*

9. What do you think of Weibo Super Topic? Why do you think it exists??
10. Are there any pros and cons you think Weibo Super Topic brings to fangirling?
11. Have you ever made friends with fans you met online that are in the same fandom with you?

#### *Money spent & peer pressure*

12. Have you ever spent money to support your idol? How much and what is the reason for expenditure?
13. Would you spend money without the influence of social media and the so-called fan culture?
14. Have you ever felt under peer pressure within the fandom that you participate in? Have you ever felt the hierarchy among fans?
15. Have you ever spent money because of peer pressure or special requirements within the community? Can you talk about it?

#### *Identity change*

16. How do you think your real identity as a fan is different from your online identity?

17. What impact do you think the existence of virtual communities like Weibo will bring to fans?
18. Do you use the name of “xx's fan” identity in your social media accounts or daily life to present yourself? Will there be any difference between the two scenarios?
19. How have you changed since you started fangirling/fanboying on Weibo?

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