

# *Research on Fan Identity of Chinese Entertainment Industry in the New Media Era*

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**Abstract:** With the development of the entertainment industry, China's fan economy is becoming an integral part of the popular culture and entertainment economy. The current Chinese fan economy and entertainment market is traffic-driven, with fans organizing support activities on Internet and new media platforms, forming an extremely unique fan culture phenomenon in the world. This paper attempts to study the construction of fan identity and its influence in the new media era, using methods such as qualitative and quantitative research to set up questionnaires and in-depth interviews. The research results found that in the construction of fan identity, it can be divided into three parts of idol-making participation, emotional connection and group identity for in-depth analysis, which involves fan behaviors such as fan consumption, text poaching and organizing support activities. Among them, continuous investment and the formation of fan group rules are important features. As for the influence of fan identity construction, the research explains it in terms of both positive and negative influences, including the impact on individual fans and the impact on the social level. The construction of fan identity not only brings positive development and positive emotional value to fans at the individual level, but also promotes the development of related industries in the social aspect. However, negative effects, such as the lack of individual rationality and the occupation of public resources, can not be ignored and require the joint efforts of the government, platforms, idols and fans to make fan culture develop in a healthy way.

**Keywords:** fan culture; identify; new media.

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1. Background Information**

The word "fan" is derived from the word "fanatic", which is derived from the Latin word "fanaticus" and is used to describe excessive and uncontrolled religious belief. The de-religiousized "fan" is used to describe "excessive and inappropriate enthusiasm" in a general sense[1]. In 2005, along with the broadcast of the "Super Girl" talent show, the group of fans gradually entered the public eye. In 2018, "Idol Trainee" gained widespread attention on the Internet while marking the boom of the idol industry. However, to most people, "excessive and inappropriate enthusiasm" is the most accurate description of the fans.

In the era of new media, social platforms provide a wider scope of activities for fans. Especially, in the talent show, fans take the initiative by determining who has a chance to debut. They vote

frantically for their idols and increase their popularity in order to get a chance for their idols to debut. They also use the vast amount of resources in the Internet to create secondary works to popularize their idols and consume irrationally to maintain the commercial value of their idols. However, all these fan behavior seems crazy, it is organized. Over a long period of time, they have developed a set of organizational rules, which can maintain the stable operation of the entire fan group and make it easier for individuals to develop a sense of identity.

It's clear that it is the strong sense of identity that makes fans do many crazy behaviors. Zheng and Tan connected fan identity with performance theory, arguing that fan identity is fictional and drifting, and in many cases is a kind of alter ego that people construct in an alternative space outside of their daily lives and work[2]. Zang and Yan hold the point that the fan group has its own internal concept map and a set of exclusive language, and as long as they are in the same group, they will have a common symbolic code, and their exclusive language is to distinguish from other social groups[3].

This paper mainly focuses on the process of fan identity and its effects. From the establishment and maintenance of fan identity to the final formation of a standardized fan identity, the research attempts to show the whole process of establishing fan identity. Using questionnaires and in-depth interviews, the article will also analyze the positive and negative effects of this identity construction.

## 1.2. Method

### 1.2.1. In-depth Interview

Through the Sina Weibo platform, the research randomly draw idols from different areas of the entertainment industry. In this way, Yifeng Li was draw from the actores. Jason Zhang and Stefanie Sun was draw from the singers. Then the research selected an active fan in the comment section of their social accounts for interviews.

The first respondent is Una, whose idol is Yifeng Li. Li is an actor having a huge number of fans. On Sina Weibo, his social account has over 60 million followers. His fan group has the strongest sense of identity and the most typical fan activities. His fans often engage in support activities, use his character's image for secondary creation and conflict with other fan groups to defend him.

Alice, the second respondent, is a fan of Jason Zhang who is a famous pop music singer in China. Jason has a large group of young fans. They also engage in certain fan activities such as posting a lot of content to recommend Jason's songs. But the friction with other fan group is less.

Fiona is the third respondent. Her idol, Stefanie Sun, is a famous female singer in Asia. Stefanie comes from Singapore, but she symbolizes the highest level of the Chinese music field and has amassed a large Chinese fan group with her beautiful Chinese songs. Her fans have less support activities on the Internet, but nearly everyone can sing a few of her songs.

Through online in-depth interviews, the research attempted to explore the mental activities of fans in the process of following idols. Two topics are mainly focused on: "Have you gained positive development under the influence of your idols? Pleas talk about it." and "In the process of chasing your idol, are you happy? Or, can this process reduce your stress in real life?" Their answers are the direct reflection of the effects of fan identify.

### 1.2.2. Questionnaire

The research adopted an online questionnaire to collect some views about idol-chasing from fans and people not having an idol respectively. Using the question-skipping function based on the answer, different questions were set for the two groups. The questions they answer depended on their answer to the first question, "Do you follow Chinese stars?" The answer "Yes" led to questions for fans, and the answer "No" led to questions for respondents who don't chase an idol. The research released the

questionnaire link on WeChat and Sina Weibo platforms. According to the data, the combined questionnaire views of the two platforms were 300, and received 254 valid ones.

For those respondents who chase the star, to explore the positive effects of fan identity for individual, the research set two questions that "Do you get more positive than negative emotional value from following stars?" and "Do you consider your idols as role models and have made progress?" As for the positive effects for related industries, there were two questions: "Have you ever spent money for your idol's support activities?" and "Have you ever participated in an organized fan charity event?"

As for those respondents who don't chase an idol, the research set two questions. The first one was designed to examine the pollution of the Internet environment by fans' overreaching remarks: "Have you ever felt uncomfortable with certain fan comments in the Internet?" There were four options to choose from: "Always", "Often", "Occasionally" and "Never". The second question was to explore the imbalance in the field of public opinion, the research set a question: "How do you think entertainment gossip is taking over news resources?" There are four options to choose from: "very serious", "serious", "average" and "less serious".

## **2. The Construction of Fan Identity in the New Media Era**

### **2.1. Participatory Idol-making - the Establishment of an Active Identity**

#### **2.1.1. Producing Idols with Traffic: Data and Lists**

The most prominent feature of the "fan" phenomenon is the high level of participation and desire for expression shown by fans. They are active in forums, microblogs and other communities. They purposefully support their idols through fan groups and other forms of organization. They not only read idol-related texts and watch idol-related videos, but also produce peripheral videos or written works for idols and buy idol-related products. To some extent, their activities can determine which idols get a chance to debut and better resources, i.e.. Those who generate the highest traffic or rank in the top of the entertainment lists are winners.

In a word, it is a participatory culture. In 1993, Henry Jenkins studied the re-creation activities of fans of American television series based on the original texts. He summarized them as the concept of "participatory culture" to refer to "a form of culture that invites fans and other consumers to participate actively in the creation and distribution of new content[4]." The main feature is its reliance on online technology. Fans perform online "digital labor" through the channels provided by new media platforms, and thus gain the initiative to decide which idols will be given the opportunity to debut. This is a process in which fans build an active identity.

#### **2.1.2. Maintaining the Value of Idols: Buying Endorsements and Fan Consumption**

After the idols get the chance to debut, the fans have to maintain the commercial value of them by crazy consumption so that the idols can resources constantly. According to the questionnaire research in the 2020 Tencent Entertainment White Paper, among the reasons for watching the online concert, "supporting favorite singers and idols" accounts for 72%, ranking first among the reasons. Moreover, 53.3% of people are willing to pay for it[5]. Some behaviors of fans in the music field are particularly typical of their behavior in the current entertainment industry. For example, many idols release new singles in the form of digital albums, and in order to increase sales and make the idols appear more popular, fans will repeatedly buy the albums multiple times. Actually, consumers as fans usually consume to meet their personal psychological needs, with emotional tendencies, focusing more on the symbolic value of goods, and pursuing the realization of psychological satisfaction[6]. As Baudrillard says in *The Consumer Society*, what consumers consume in a consumer society is no longer the actual use of a commodity, but its symbolic value. What they consume is the abstract value

meaning of commodity. They are firm in their belief that these consumption are a form of publicity for the popularity of their idols. In this process, fans still hold a kind of initiative to decide the idols' future. Their identity is not only as consumers, but also as the makers of a better future for idols.

## **2.2. Emotional Connection - The Maintenance of a Permanent Identity**

### **2.2.1. Role-acting Worship - Long-term Identity Construction**

The process of chasing idols satisfies fans' desires to some extent, and they find the perfect role that meets their expectations in the process of chasing and fantasizing. Fans appreciate the works of their idols with empathy, transferring their unrealizable emotions in real life to their idols. The interactive behavior of their idols fulfills their fantasies, thus creating a sense of gain and giving birth to a group of "girlfriend fans" or "mom fans". They imagine themselves as their idol's girlfriend or mother and love their idol as if they were really in the relationship.

However, the role-acting worship is not the one-sided wishful thinking of the fans. Obviously, the aforementioned participatory idol-making requires a lot of effort from the fans, both in terms of time and money. So it's essential for idols to build a emotional connection so that their fans can support the more permanently. Thus, sometimes they act like a boyfriend to cater to the fantasies of their fans. Horton and Wohl attributed this phenomenon to parasocial interaction. Parasocial interaction is actually an illusion created in the audience's mind that a face-to-face, one-way personal interaction is taking place with the characters in the medium[7]. As a result, along with the emotional engagement, fans will develop a longer-term identity.

### **2.2.2. Emotional Secondary Creation**

Secondary creation means that fans create a new text style around their idols by combining the mass information (mainly videos) provided by the mass media and putting it together for their own purposes. Jenkins described this behaviour as "poaching". In this process, fans invest a wealth of emotions for the purpose of achieving a better creation. At the same time, they get a sense of accomplishment and likes and comments from other fans, which could potentially become their social capital in the fan group.

Actually, it's another way to build an emotional connection and identity. Fans have no access to their idols nor can they interfere with their idols' work. But through secondary creation, they can create whatever they want. Their emotions are not only invested in their idols, but also in their secondary creative works. The investment of energy and emotional attachment can invariably enhance their sense of identity.

## **2.3. Fan Group Identity - the Formation of a Normative Identity**

### **2.3.1. The Formation of Group Boundaries under the Shared Value**

A fan group refers to an organization formed by the aggregation of many fans. Based on the value of defending their idols, fan groups form distinct group boundaries. Through Sina Weibo's authentication function, fans have the choice to mark the star fan groups they belong to on their homepage, which can distinguish oneself from others who are not authenticated, and thus gain a sense of group identity and belonging. It's convenient for fans from the same group to find each other and establish relationships. Moreover, fans will work together to maintain the group boundary. For example, when browsing social media, if they find someone make unfavorable remarks about the idols or some amoral points which may leave a bad impression on others, they will send the ID to a account which can be representative of the whole fan group. The account will announce that the ID

is not or is no longer belong to the fan group. This behaviour can be seen not only as a maintain of the group boundary, but also a sign of identity. They hold the point that individual fans' words and action could affect the whole impression of the fan group and even others' positive feelings towards their idol.

### **2.3.2. Generation of Intra-group Rules**

Social psychologists contend that "Integration is a characteristic of groups that connects a group of people with little or no connection into a tight-knit group[8]." And the formation of such a group relies not on the loose camaraderie of friends, but on regulated discipline. Function as maintaining fan order and organizing supporting activities, fan groups have their own rules of operation. It's a way to protect the common interests of fan groups.

Take Yifeng Li's fans group for example, there are opinion leaders leading fans' support activities, whose words and actions are seen as guidelines by other members. They have considerable right of speech in leading fans to post idols' positive content and doing tasks such as giving likes and comments on idol-related news. Even if some of their fans do not agree with them, they must abide by these norms as long as they accept their identity as fans. At the same time, the opinion leaders' words and actions are monitored by other fans, because they have more influence and can even represent the entire fan group. They must disclose the accounts of their support activities for Yifeng Li and keep the uniqueness of their fan identity, i.e. following other idols is not allowed. In a word, loving and protecting Yifeng Li is the core and fundamental rule. Besides, there are some other rules as supplement to keep the fan group running properly. In the process of following the rules and completing tasks again and again, fans form the habit of maintaining the group operation and friendly interpersonal relationships also develop among members. Group identity is established and maintained.

## **3. The Effects of Fans Identity Construction in New Media Era**

### **3.1. Positive Effects of Fans Identity Construction in New Media Era**

#### **3.1.1. Positive Development Guided by Idols**

Identity represents an individual's approval of his or her idol and recognition of his or her fan status. In this way, fans will endorse and even imitate the behavior and ideas of their idols. Thus, a good idol will lead fans to develop positively. In the questionnaire, faced with the question: "Have you taken your idols as role models and made progress?" 83.9% respondents chose "yes".

"When speaking anonymously online, I will be very careful about what I say. Because I am a fan of Yifeng Li, I can't leave a bad impression on others, and I can't make people think that his fans are disgusting. Because he is a very nice person, he once said: "Don't judge others casually", so we shouldn't speak rudely either, we should be polite and friendly fans." Una said, who has become a faithful fan of Yifeng Li (a Chinese actor) for seven years.

"Yes, he serve as a role model for me. He is a very excellent singers. He is dedicated and always stays true to his original dream. I wish I can be as good as he is. Although I'm not good at singing and I can't let him know me, but becoming excellent in the field we each love is the result we both look forward to. So I'm studying really hard now." Alice said. She is a big fan of Jason Zhang, who is a famous singer in China.

It's clear that chasing a idol is not a matter of investing time and energy with no reward. A good idol can be a role model for fans. With the identity, fans consciously examine their own words and actions. In fact, whatever the purpose, they have gained their own positive development.

### 3.1.2. Realistic Stress Dissipation and Emotional Value Provision

Idol-chasing as a type of entertainment can bring people happiness. Moreover, this kind of pleasure is different from the short time feeling brought by the game, it gives people an emotional support. An idol can be an emotional anchor when one is faced with a difficult reality. According to the questionnaire, there are 98.2% fans hold the point that in the process of following the stars, they get more joy than sorrow.

"Well, in my mind, chasing is to have fun. If chasing an idol doesn't provide me with emotional value, why I do that? I wouldn't I spend time, money, and energy in exchange for being unhappy. Like I said earlier, it's a hardship to study diligently to become a good person. Chasing a star can relieve me of the pressure of reality and bring me happiness. At the same time, I feel proud to be his fan." Alice said.

"My idol is Stefanie Sun. She is a very famous female singer. I started listening to her songs in my junior high school, and now I've graduated from university. Her voice can bring me a good mood. I remember in my senior year of high school, I was under a great deal of pressure and studied late into the night every day. Her songs always accompanied me and gave me a lot of strength." Fiona said.

In addition, becoming a member of certain fan group can gain good friendships with common interests. When taking part in the support activities or working together to vote for and popularize their idols, fans will also become friends with each other, which can provide emotional value.

### 3.1.3. Fan Support Activities Promote the Development of Related Industries

Once the identity of the fan base is constructed, they will take a common value-protecting their idol and striving for collective honor. To fan groups, common values do not need to be cultivated later, because such values are the basis for group formation, but they need to constantly act on this value to demonstrate the necessity of the group's existence. That is to continuously organize support activities for their idol.

There are two main types of fan support activities, one is support for important anniversaries and the other is public charity support. To some extent both have contributed to the development of related businesses, and having a positive effect.

The first kind of support activities refers to a series of activities organized by fan groups to cheer for their idols. In the questionnaire, 76.8% fans have ever spent money for supportive activities. The most important form of support is birthday support, which is organized on the occasion of the idol's birthday to celebrate the idol's birthday and organize a birthday party, which not only satisfies the fans' feelings of blessing the idol, but also helps the idol to enhance its business value and gain more exposure channels and resources. Birthday support is generally large and comes in many forms, such as showing videos on big screens in shopping malls and performing light shows in landmark buildings. This requires calling on resources from all sides, thus promoting the development of various industries.

Besides, in order to raise the popularity of idols and create a positive image, fan groups will organize many charity activities. Fan groups spontaneously fundraise and crowdfund, participate in charity activities in the name of their idols. 67.9% fans said that they had participated in an organized charity activities in the questionnaire. Take Yifeng Li's fans for example, every year on his birthday, his fans donate to the "Spring Bud Project" to help out-of-school girls in China. In addition, there are many other ways to support charity. Fans create charity funds to invest in environmental protection, build music classrooms for children in mountainous areas and collect supplies for disaster area.

## **3.2. Negative Effects of Fans Identity Construction in New Media Era**

### **3.2.1. Group Polarization Induced by Excessive Identity**

In cyberspace, fans can express themselves anonymously and in a state of anonymity with few constraints. This state makes it easy for fans to lose their sense of social responsibility and self-control, and act out of control under the herd mentality. In recent years, in various issues involving idols, fans engage in intense discourse among themselves through such violent acts, which are unique to Internet platforms[9]. Out of defense of idols and excessive identification with their own fan identities, emotions have been infected and amplified in the collective, leading to frequent online cursing battles. They are intolerant of different viewpoints and convinced that they must defend their idol. Once there are disapproving remarks about their idols, they will collectively strike out to refute or even insult them. According to the questionnaire, a total of 69% of people who doesn't chase an idol chose "always" and "often" for the question "ever feel uncomfortable with fans' words". To some degree, it can be seen that the inappropriateness of the fans' statements.

This phenomenon is particularly common among different fan groups. Fans identify strongly with the group they belong to, keeping hostile attitude to the group of others. Large-scale Internet cursing wars cause serious network pollution and also have an inevitable negative impact on minors and teenagers with inevitable negative effects.

### **3.2.2. Strong Emotional Involvement Leads to a Lack of Rational Values**

With strong emotional involvement, fans choose to see the strengths of their idols and ignore the weaknesses. Moreover, their worship of idols is based on an unconditional trust. Fans can not know the real face of their idols, so what they see is just what they are allowed to see. It's just the persona performed by the idols. The idols' every smile, even the "real" and not hypocritical in fans' mouth are a kind of performance. In such a situation of information inequality, people choose to become a fan of an idol, which means that they fall in love with a "false" person. Once this identity is established, they may can't bear the real face of their face.

Double deception is created: the deception of idols to their fans and the deception of fans to themselves. After the scandals of the stars were exposed, some fans chose to follow the idols because they could not afford the sunk costs they had incurred in the process. Just like in the case of Yifan Wu and Shuan Zheng, in the face of the conclusive evidence, some fans still choose to "clear" their idols. They verbally abuse critics of their idols and the victims of the incident, misinterpret evidence to confuse the public and claim that they will continue to support their idols no matter what happens. It's a sad lack of personal rationality. As Gustave Le Bon said, under the influence of a group, the civilized ways and moral constraints in the individual's thoughts and feelings suddenly disappear, and childish behavior, primitive impulses and criminal tendencies suddenly break out[10].

### **3.2.3. The weakening of the gatekeeper function leads to confusion in the public opinion field**

In the era of traditional media, news releases require several layers of gatekeeping. News material depends on journalists. Editors controlled whether news material was published or broadcast. In the new media environment, the complexity of information and public opinion is unparalleled in the past, which gives the fans the opportunity to post their comments freely.

On the one hand, as mentioned earlier, due to group polarization, the cursing war between fans pollutes the public space on the Internet, making the online environment full of hostility. On the other hand, a great amount of entertainment information dominated the headlines. According to the questionnaire, on the question "the degree you think entertainment gossip dominates news resources", 35.7% people choose "very serious" and 37.8% people choose "serious". Much valuable social news

goes unnoticed, but idols' gossip often draws heat debate. In the long run, things like politics, education, journalism, sports, and business will all go silent and become accessories to entertainment, "with the result that we become a species that is entertained to death"[11]. Fans keep posting content about their idols, and they comment a lot to control the direction of public opinion. Social media platforms condone and even encourage this behavior in order to gain more traffic, ignoring the imbalance in the public opinion field. It is the lack of gatekeepers in the new media era that caused this situation.

#### 4. Conclusions

In the new media era, the construction of fan identity is an initiative and participatory process. Fans can win resources and opportunities for their idols by voting and buying idol-related products. Social media platforms provide opportunities for them to be more proactive in creating secondaries and organizing support activities to promote their idols. In this process, fans continuously invest their emotions, time and energy, whose identity is gradually formed and strengthened. It is worth noting that identity is not arbitrary but rather normative. Fans form their own group rules to keep the organization functioning. With the group rules in place, they can better defend their idols and validate their role in the group.

However, in recent years, with the rapid expansion of fan groups, the negative effects of fan identity have gradually emerged. Because of their excessive rhetoric, many people see fans as representatives of irrationality and stupidity, but in fact, behind the crazy disorder of fan culture, there is also the connivance of the platform and the speculation of capital. So we can't blame it all on the fans. The government must establish a long-term working mechanism to coordinate and regulate the parties of stars' companies, platforms and fans in order to create a positive cyberspace. The platform should improve the rules of the platform, maintain the public opinion environment, not malicious speculation, and refuse to "traffic first". What's more, fans as well as the stars themselves must also focus on the correct value orientation. Only by working together can we make this "love" truly meaningful.

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