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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

# An Empirical Research on the Cultural Production of Online Fan Communities Based on Celebrity Micro-blog Super Topic

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| ABSTRACT

Due to the reform of the traditional entertainment system and the development of the new decentralized entertainment industry, a great promotion has been achieved to the prosperity of China's fan culture and entertainment industry, and a new generation of fan groups has been established gradually. Taking the network as the medium, the major social media as the platform and micro-blog super topic as the center, they have formed an online fan community with strict discipline, a clear hierarchy and a strong action force. Due to the mutual entanglement between fan culture and platform in the platform society, an algorithmic culture is formed. Data-driven algorithmic governance has become an important tool for fan management. Since some fans represented a tendency to become professionalized on this basis, a new business operation mode under the empowerment of online communities has been established to conduct cultural production and complete the anti-commercial incorporation. In this context, the research question of this paper is: What is the organizational composition of the online fan community for cultural production? How does this structure work in today's network environment?

## 1. Introduction

Data-driven algorithmic governance has become an important tool for fan management. Since some fans represented a tendency to become professionalized on this basis, a new business operation mode under the empowerment of online communities has been established to conduct cultural production and complete the anti-commercial incorporation.

### 1.1 Research Origin and Research Questions

From the hot broadcast *Super Girls* in 2005 to *Youth with You* and *Creation Camp,* which were popular all over the country in recent years, the prosperity of China's entertainment industry and the formation of a fan culture was promoted by the reform of the entertainment system in the traditional sense and the development of a decentralized entertainment industry, and the new fan groups have emerged in that context. What is different from "star-chasing" in the traditional sense is that the new fan groups represented the characteristics of organization, structure and commercialization. Taking the network as the medium, the major social media as the platform and micro-blog super topic as the center, they have formed an online fan community with strict discipline, clear hierarchy and strong action force, and have become the third power under the industrial production mechanism of entertainment stars (Wang, 2019).

After the establishment of fan groups, they will organize and participate in various fan activities for the purpose of promoting idols and gradually entering the social field of vision. In 2014, major Internet giants began to enter the entertainment industry, and after the advent of the era of the attention economy, the new media industry list has become an important reference for measuring

various indicators of idols. The economic attributes of fan activities have been stimulated and gradually become one of the important activities in fan culture, and the scale of the cultural entertainment industry has also expanded. In the context of new media, the meaning of idolatry has begun to change, and fan groups in the entertainment industry are no longer satisfied with buying tapes, magazines, posters and other behaviors, and the idols they worship not only contain stars but gradually tend to diversify, such as industry leaders, Internet celebrities, experts, etc. The boundaries of the entertainment industry began to blur, and the trend of "universal participation" gradually emerged.

### 1.2 Literature Review

It is believed by the Birmingham School that youth and youth culture has always been important targets for incorporation by the dominant mainstream culture. One of the main ways to accomplish the incorporation of a youth subculture is commodity incorporation, which means that the subculture is separated from the primitive culture through the integration and utilization of subculture by the market and capital, and the cultural style of resistance becomes the cultural style of consumption. Those "unhealthy connotations" are removed in this process, and subcultures become "objects suitable for mass consumption" (Hebdige, 1979, p. 130).

It is argued by the French scholar Michel De Certeau that, as text poachers and nomadic readers, fans operate from the margins of culture, from a position of vulnerability in society. Fans have limited influence on the entertainment and culture industry due to their lacking of the tools to participate directly in commercial, cultural production, and it can only be enjoyed through the appropriation of attention culture by the fan group (Jenkins & Yang, 2008).

It is argued by Du Xiaozhen and others that, as a normal form of "economy of attention", the "fan circle economy" attracts the continuous attention of the public through the orgy of the entertainment industry so as to achieve the scale benefit of releasing sensual economy or hedonistic consumption, which has the characteristics of high social organization, professionalism, large scale and commerciality. Being constructed of three parties: the intermediary side (commercial capital and network platforms), the demand side (members within the fan circle) and the supply side (brokerage agencies and celebrity idols), the organizational basis of the fan circle economy has a clear division of labor in each layer and thus has formed a mature economic industry chain. The motivation source stimulating members in the fan circle to make consumption is the fans' emotional identification with the idols, such as behaviors of "sad fishing", "abusing fans", and "drawing fighting", etc. In addition, the above behaviors can also enhance adhesion within the fan group (Du & Dai, 2022).

The above arguments are also reflected in the theory of interaction rituals, which considers interaction as a source of social dynamics and that all images of individual existence in society are formed in social interaction with others. Having empowered users with the right to express their attitudes and emotions, the online platform also allows members of the fan circle to achieve unity in cyberspace. With the continuous generation of emotional energy, interactions and rituals can form the basis of organizational thinking, organizational beliefs, organizational ethics and organizational culture when it is connected to symbols. As individuals in the organization, they are still able to continue to use the symbols and emotions of the organization to trigger subsequent social interactions (Pan & Zhang, 2014). Although Émile Durkheim has always emphasized the presence of the body in physical space, this presence still has its own applicability even in cyberspace of the Internet age. Having provided an interactive emotional space, cyberspace enables people to express their words and convey their emotions through a variety of media forms. The emotional framework of collective emotional energy is still maintained by the collective sense of identity and shared concerns (Chen & Wang, 2022).

It is argued by scholars such as Liu Shengzhi that, under the operation of consumption social capital, the idol industry has become an important branch of the entertainment circle. Idols, actors and even ordinary people can be endowed with various "character settings" and "labels" and then decorated into figures fully in line with the audience's aesthetic taste so as to attract fans' sensibility and consumption behavior. Centering on emotional needs and satisfaction, this relationship between fans and idols has formed a "quasi-social relationship", which is similar to that of real intimate relationships. American media scholars Donald Horton and Richard Wohl proposed the term quasi-social relationship, and they also found that audiences have an emotional dependence on the media figures they know and love, forming a social relationship similar to that between friends or lovers in reality, but this relationship is a one-way social relationship based on imagination, so they call it quasi-social relationship (Liu & Shi, 2022).

### 1.3 Problem Statement and Objectives

Among the words in the current pop culture field, the word "fan circle" is undoubtedly the hottest one, where "fan" is the harmonic sound of the English word "fan", which is also the abbreviation of the word "fanatic", and the word "circle" has the meaning of community and organization which often refers specifically to the fan community of online celebrities, and can also be used to describe those things whose organizational structure and behavior patterns are similar to those of the online celebrity fan community (Gao, 2022). As a subculture generated by fans or from fan circles, fan culture has a certain economic productivity and

rebelliousness. As a culture that gives fans their identity and values, the "rebelliousness" here means that they are determined to "free themselves from the normalized forms constructed landscape that they take for granted" (Herbdig, 1979, pp. 114-125).

Therefore, in addition to participating in the entertainment star-production industry, online fan communities also maintain a dynamic balance with mainstream culture by carrying out cultural production and endowing themselves with legal context. The transformation of online fan communities is not only ordinary social activities and social connections but its large scale and spending power make it have certain economic effects. Thus, the research question of this paper is: What is the organizational structure of the online fan community for cultural production? And how does this structure work in a network environment presently?

## 2. Organizational Construction of Online Fan Communities
The researches on community construction and community identity are two important research topics in sociolinguistics (Song & Feng, 2023). Under the background of globalization, new media language practices have "enabled people to use symbolic resources in a broader and more complex way, to practice multiple identities, and to establish diverse social relations".

### 2.1 Structure of Online Fan Communities
Instead of being a completely homogeneous state, followers can receive corresponding rank titles based on their experience value within Weibo super topic. The super topic level is closely related to the number of check-in days by fans, the number of interactions, the number of posts, etc., which is also a reflection of fans' seniority and power of influence. After following the super topic, new members will start advancing from level 1 and enjoy different levels of privileges different levels within the super topic. For example, fans are required to post discussions only after reaching a certain level within some super topic; otherwise, they will be deleted by the administrator. Taking Bai Jingting's super topic as an example, the rules for obtaining experience value are as follows:

Acquisition Rules for Experience Value
**Initial Innovation Capability**

| | |
|---|---|
| Post on the current super topic and be commented on | 5 comments +1 point |
| Multiple comments by the same user are counted as 1 comment only | 10 comments +2 points |
| | 15 comments +3 points |
| | 20 comments +4 points |
| | 30 comments +6 points |
| | 50 comments +11 points |
| | 100 comments +30 points |
| | More than 100 comments additional points |
| | Daily limit 1000 points |
| The current post is added as essential post | 1 point for one time |
| The same post which is added many times will be counted as once only | Daily limit 6 points |

**Interaction Ability**

| | |
|---|---|
| Comments on the current super topic | 1 point for each |
| Comments by yourself won't be counted | Daily limit 6 points |
| Forwarding of current super topic | 1 point for each |
| Forwarding by yourself won't be counted | Daily limit 2 points |
| Sign in on the current super topic | Signing in for once +4 points |
| | Continuous signing in for 2-29 days +6 points |
| | Continuous signing in for 30 days or more +8 points |

**Fans Attracting Ability**

| | |
|---|---|
| Follow the current super topic for the first time | +1 point |
| Invite friends to follow the current super topic | 2 points for each following |
| Following by the same user several times will be counted as once only | Daily limit 12 points |

Figure 1 Acquisition Rules for Experience Value of Idol Bai Jingting's Super Topic

The Super Topic management team is responsible for managing and setting the rules within Super Topic. Generally, the administrators are composed of fans with higher rank and longer time in the circle, who have the right to manage fans, organize activities, block posts and users, and each of them has their own duties. Generally speaking, the management team of super topics will have special departments to be responsible for the anti-hacking of relevant idols, the management of posts, the management of users, the composition of the management team and the release of announcements, etc., respectively.

Regular followers with higher ratings can become mini-hosts of the super topic by sending applications to the Weibo platform and management team so as to have the power to become opinion leaders, but they still have no management rights.

### 2.2 Order of Online Fan Communities

Due to the mutual entanglement between fan culture and platform in the platform society, an algorithmic culture is formed. Data-driven algorithmic governance has become an important tool for fan management, such as content removing, account blocking, and withdrawing features, etc. According to data discipline, the platform is able to correct the transgressions of fans to make them become users who conform to the rules and social expectations of the community (Yan & Du, 2022).

As fan organizations with emotional attributes, online fan communities have roles of serving to strengthen fan contact, enhance fan identity and stimulate a sense of belonging to the fan community. In the Super Topic, for the purpose of helping fans follow the star's dynamics synchronously, the account of the management team will summarize and release resources such as film and television works that the star has participated in, related resources, social media dynamics, entertainment activities and fan work output, so as to accumulate subcultural capital.

[Official Platform/Related Information]  Micro Blog Text
[Film and Television/Entertainment Shows] Micro Blog Text
[Fashion Magazine] Micro Blog Text
[Output blogger/site] Micro Blog Text
[Resource Package in 2017] Micro Blog Text
[Resource Package in 2018] Micro Blog Text
[Resource Package in 2019] Micro Blog Text
[Resource package in 2020] Micro Blog Text
[Resource Package in 2021] Micro Blog Text
Figure 2 Summary Post of a Super Topic Manager

While conducting the promotion of celebrity-related information, Super Topic also formulates strict rules to regulate behaviors of fans in the community, such as identity filtering, posting rules, reporting process, and the application process for the small host. In addition to the formulation of online rules, online fan communities also organize offline support activities for fans, such as pick-up and delivery, flower and letter delivery, movie roadshows, concerts, etc. Before the start of the activities, Super Topic managers will organize fans in an orderly manner for the purpose of maintaining the external image of the star ("fans behavior, idols pay").

Standards for posting on the super topic

1. Excellent creative works by fans (pictures, audio, video, text and quality content of other forms)
2. Positive public welfare publicity
3. Resource collection and summary
4. Data popularization and list hitting call
5. Endorsement/magazine listing

[Standards for super topic being added as essential post]
1. High quality and interesting original advertising post
2. High quality photos, hand-painted, retouching, drawing by fans, etc.
3. High quality clip video
4. Resource collation
5. Data popularization
6. Official activities and public welfare activities
 Figure1 Part of the Rules of a Super Topic

The segmentation of fan communities is formed because of this rule. Fans will continue to construct differences and distinctions between different fan communities. However, this segmentation of fan communities is broken due to the intervention of online media, and they can apply to join any fan community on the web or form new online fan communities with the help of online media.

### 2.3 Social Participation in Online Fan Communities

Under the guidance of celebrities and their teams, and for the purpose of building a good positive image of celebrities in society, online fan communities will take the initiative to organize and encourage fans to participate in positive social activities. Taking the public benefit activities for example, the management team of the online fan community will organize fans to plant trees in the

name of the stars in Alipay's "Ant Forest", and the stars will set up a public welfare fund to give back to society. Through the positive behaviors in such an event, the fan community changes the social stereotype of the fan community as impulsive, selfish and crazy.

## 3. Online Community Fan Economy

Being firstly originated from TV talent shows in Western countries and the spiritual and cultural consumption behavior exported from it, the fan economy has a main body generating economic benefits, that is the celebrity figures which is the main economic form of economic benefits generated by the entertainment and cultural industry (Chen, 2022).

### 3.1 Fan Professionalism

Professional fans, which are also known as "fat fans", are a special form of fans in the fan culture phenomenon. Most of them are employed by the celebrities themselves, their brokerage firms or teams, and their following is driven by both emotional attachment and financial interests. Generally speaking, professional fans are able to guide the fan discourse among online fan communities. With relatively loose individual members, they have gradually formed hierarchical differences in the continuous development of fan culture, and they have the division of labor around celebrities on this basis and become a gradually mature consumer group (Wei & Yang, 2015). The biggest difference between "fat fans" and ordinary fans is that they have a clear division of labor, share the income according to their performance, and obtain economic capital through the promotion, management and operation of online fan communities. In terms of the original meaning of "fan", the alienation of fan identity can hardly be avoided due to the strong involvement of interest for the professional fans.

Guiding the speech and behavior of ordinary fans is one of the responsibilities of professional fans, among which consumer behaviors are included, such as crowd funding and hitting the list. In addition, to bring free labor (digital labor) to investors, fans' strong promotion and consumption of celebrity idols can also form stable market revenue. Being the judges of the community threshold, professional fans are also monopolists of community resources. In general, they are able to have direct contact with the celebrity team so as to receive more celebrity-related information (such as pictures and videos, schedule, event organization of the celebrities, etc.) to attract ordinary fans and mobilize fan resources for business operations and social participation. Professional fans are also able to get paid accordingly, which partly comes from the employment of celebrity teams, and partly comes from ordinary fans who buy celebrity-related information. By transforming this cultural capital into economic capital, professional fans obtain economic income and social prestige in the process of organizing their production and purchasing activities.

### 3.2 Business Acquisition and Anti-business Acquisition

As a part of the "Shadow Cultural Economy", fan culture has represented a kind of alienated values. Due to the intervention of capital, the pure appreciation relationship between fans and celebrities, which is based on spiritual and cultural activities, has materialized. Always being a lack of social legitimacy and institutional support in the relationship, and this is one of the reasons why fan culture has been commercially incorporated.

With the deepened degree of the monetized economy and due to the opinion-oriented control by the capital, fans' love for stars is measured by money. It seems that the more money they spend, the more sincere the love. From the perspective of capital, flow stars are commercialized when they are packaged into products with different "character settings" while fans are "leeks". The special feature of such "products" as celebrities is that they have both material character and spiritual character, which makes the fan culture easy to be incorporated into the business.

However, a new mode of operation has gradually emerged in the fan economy with the rising of online fan communities. Being contributed to the empowerment of the network, the fan economy has become much more than the object of capital operation. With the rising of their ability to resist commercial incorporation, a chain and market for anti-commercial incorporation are forming through internal cultural production. Fans and their consumption behavior are no longer just the objects of commercial incorporation; the continuation of the fan community is also achieved through their internal production. For example, there are fans who often produce and sell merchandise related to celebrities within the community, and they design products by themselves and participate in all links of their production, processing and sales, etc. The fans organize similar production at every major festival or celebrity-related day and rush to buy such products. It has become a large and mature market in the fan economy.

## 4. Conclusion

As a youth subculture, fan culture is seeking a balanced relationship with mainstream culture under the empowerment of online communities. Instead of being the former scattered individuals, fans have formed a hierarchy of "management team - small super topic hosts - ordinary fans". They have formulated rules and regulations on the basis of this to realize the management of the community. The organization of online fan communities is the basis for the cultural production by fans. They contribute to the

reconstruction of the external image of fan communities by participating in social activities and regulating their own words and behaviors, and other methods. They complete their resistance to commercial incorporation on the basis of this.

At the same time, the professionalization of fans has promoted the transformation of the cultural capital and economic capital accumulated by fans. The fan communities have begun to participate in the operation of commercial activities actively (such as participating in the design of peripheral products, sales related information, and offline event planning) and to enhance their sense of identity through the economic behavior of anti-commercial incorporation. This is also beneficial to their professional development in online fan communities, thus providing the fan culture with its source of social legitimacy.

This paper aims to explore how the organizational composition of cultural production in online fan communities is changing from fragmented individuals to systematic management organizations and how this structure is undergoing destigmatization of external image construction and social business counter-integration in today's online environment. It is obvious that fan culture is growing in a positive way compared with that in the past, but we still cannot deny the existence of group polarization in fan culture at the same time, which is the main reason why it is difficult for fan communities to integrate with each other and with mainstream culture. Positive guidance from society is also necessary; it also provides ideas and directions for subsequent research.

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