

Fan Culture and the Spread of Public Benefit During the Pandemic of COVID-19

—A Case Study of Fans Clubs of Cai Xukun and Xiao Zhan

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ABSTRACT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, medical supplies and help for venerable community were relatively scarce in China. Fans of celebrities gathered on Weibo and donated a large number of materials and money. The donation of fans during the epidemic was a collective activity with great effect. Not only did they make a great contribution to public welfare, but they were also affirmed and praised by the national mainstream media. This article aims to study the reasons, channels, content, effects and impacts of fan community participating in public welfare activities during the epidemic. At the same time, it also focuses on the transformation of fan culture and explores the millennial generation's social participation and the presentation of their values. This article uses a combination of quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis to summarise the communication effects in four aspects and finds that the millennial fan culture is actively guided by the country gradually and transforming. It also points out the advantages of high efficiency, openness, transparency, and easy supervision of fan charity during the epidemic.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, Weibo, public welfare communication, fan charity, fan culture

1. INTRODUCTION

Along with the rapid developments of computer technology and Information Communication Technology, the breadth of network application has been continuously widened, and the Internet shows its unique and irreplaceable advantage in communicating. Netizens can easily achieve interpersonal communication, organizational communication, group communication and mass communication in cyber space through the applications of network and multimedia technology, which also mobilises social force to pay close attention to the Internet and invest more in it (Peng, 2009) [4]. In the era of traditional media, media was a "mimetic society" which reflected the whole society. But now the Internet has become one part of our society, and it is a real society which interweaves with the offline life (Peng, 2009) [4]. For example, Jackson Yee's fans advertised in their community and generated donation online, then bought 2749 saplings as the 14th birthday gift for him in 2014. The fans gave those saplings to poor peasants in Guyuan, Ningxia province which is an arid area and has severe weather. By 2006, this project already got 600,000 yuan to expand the planting scale, which not only protects the environment, but also helps the undeveloped area. Fans got together online but consumed and included in the offline society. Netizens can not only get together through Internet, but also can spread their influence more widely. Nowadays, the communication among fans has become more and more common. For example, fans of singer Jay

Chou voted on Weibo for him because another idol's fan said Chou was not popular anymore. They wanted to prove that their idol was still influential. So they quickly formed a group online to vote for him. Chou had not got into the list before, but within four days, he ranked the top one of the lists with more than 100 million searches.

Many fans can obtain information and realise communication through virtual community communications. On one hand, network communication provides more convenient and faster channel for fans, on the other hand, online non-profit programs are more targeted and effective. Convenient and fast way of donation avoids waste of resources to a large extent. With the spread of different news media, more netizens would join in the public welfare programme. Online social media platforms provide channels for network communications, especially virtual community communication. Such as Chinese domestic social media, Weibo, has developed into a gathering place for idols because of its fast speed of spreads, large numbers of users, and wide range of spreads. Weibo not only allows fans and idols to contact more closely, but also promotes various forms of communication between fans and brings the Internet the generation of fan communities, as well as has reshaped fan culture.

During the pandemic of COVID-19, there were large demands of medical items and the help of disadvantage group. Idols and other celebrities who have a huge social impact made their own contribution in advertising public benefits. Their fans group also deliver public welfare information with detailed plans, good structures and

disciplined organisations. Some of them organised and participated in many large scopes of online and offline donations in the name of their idol's fan club, in order to advertise the positive images of their idols while helping others. During the epidemic, those donations were typical collective actions of fans on social media, which not only made a great contribution in public welfare activities, but also received appreciations from the mainstream national media. This article aims to study the reasons, channels, content, effects and impact of the popular stars Cai Xukun and Xiao Zhan's fan groups participating in the public welfare activities during the epidemic, and also to focus on the transformation of fan culture represented by the fans of these two idols, as well as explores the embodiment of the social participation and values of the millennials. This article tries to argue that fans activities have transformed from furiously chasing stars to diversely expressing their love for idols, which has enriched fan culture.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Network communication depends on network technology and computer application technology. Peng (2009) [4] pointed out that Web2.0 gives back the dominance of the Internet to individuals, and fully explores the enthusiasm of individuals in Internet communication. The wisdom and influence contributed by Internet users who participate in it has become more and more conspicuous, which replaces the influence created by a few people in the past.

Group communication is the most common and frequent way of communication in virtual communities (Peng, 2009) [4]. In the network era, the group communication has a faster speed, wider range and social function, such as fans club. Huang and Luo (2007) [3] divided the ways of network communication in fan community into expression of opinions and feedback of information, peer-to-peer communication, many-to-many communication in real time and peer-to-many broadcasting. According to Jiang (2016) [5], the interactivity and timeliness of online communities can integrate the opinions of fan community in a short time and promote the generation of relevant fans' practical behaviours.

The western academic circle has produced a wealth of theoretical achievements about the fan culture. Along with widely use of new media, fan culture has become the new research hotspot. Western theory has roughly experienced three stages of evolution. In the first stage, Stuart Hall's coding and decoding theory and John Fiske's [2] productive audience provided foundation of active audience theory. In the second stage, theories represented by Pierre Bourdieu's sociology of consumption provided a larger and solid theoretical foundation for researching fan culture, and further answered the questions about capital, consumption and community organisation in fan culture.

In the third stage, the emergence of the Internet and new media has turned the study of fan culture into a more diverse perspective, and psychology, sociology, communication, culture and so on have provided

theoretical support for it. Fan community in the era of new media takes advantages of media and group, gradually turns from "receiver" into "poacher" and "conspirator" to participant in the growth of idols, and media is an important booster for development of fans (Zhu, 2017, p.7) [12]. At present, as the enthusiasm of fans has been exerted to a greater extent, fan culture has also shown more diverse and complex characteristics. Some scholars thought that on the one hand, fan culture shows a high level of creativity, on the other hand, it also has problems such as irrationality and lack of control (Jiang, 2016) [5].

Weibo is the most popular Chinese domestic social media where the most representative celebrities are stationed and the biggest fans gathering place. Inspired by idols, fans have become the backbone of creating public welfare energy in this era. Through Jin's [7] study of a South Korean pop star's middle-age female fans, she found that fans can draw positive demonstrative energy from idols to enrich and perfect themselves (Jin, 2015). Thus, fan public welfare communication on Weibo is becoming popular today. It has significantly improved the social awareness and sense of responsibility of Chinese netizens (Shi, 2014) [11]. In *Social Media for Social Good: Cases and Best Practices*, the author thought that social media like Weibo provides efficient, convenient, diverse and low-cost communication tools. It promotes the revolution of commonweal concept and practice, and helps Chinese non-profit organisations build their credibility, finally realises sound development of China's public welfare programmes (Wang, 2013, p3) [10].

At present, there are relatively few researches about the public welfare on Weibo, and literature related to this article is deficient. Among these literatures, some did not collect data to study the public welfare performance of fans from an academic perspective, but used existing documents and individual cases to prove the author's hypothesis, which was not persuasive and academically rigorous. This research shows the irreplaceable role of fans in the public welfare communication of Weibo through data analysis, and further demonstrates the diverse and rich image of fans. This article also makes some progress in the research method by combining quantitative analysis and content analysis, cutting into the theme from multiple angles, making the content more objective and the arguments stronger.

3. RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA COLLECTION

This article combines quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis. In the part of quantitative analysis, the data collection starts from 23rd January 2020 when many hospitals in Wuhan subsequently announced that they had needed donation of medical supplies to 8th April 2020, when Wuhan unblocked. This article collected data of donations released by several fan clubs on Weibo during this period, such as global fan clubs of Xiao Zhan,

Cai Xukun, and Jackson Yee. The donation items are classified and listed with charts. In the qualitative analysis part, some contents of anonymous interviews are selected to be analysed. This part focuses on the individual donation experience and explores the psychological motivations and practices of fan charity.

4. FROM FAN CULTURE TO PRACTICE OF CHARITY CULTURE

4.1. The reasons of fan's practice of public welfare

According to Weibo Fan White Paper in 2018 [8], fans have integrated the charity culture into a part of their star-chasing life, and actively follow their idols to practice charity within their capabilities. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, many fans already supported their idols by practicing charity. Through interviews with several fans, it can be concluded that the reasons for their participation in fan charity activities can be roughly divided into the following parts:

The first reason is to express fan's concern, love and follow for their idols better and practicing charity also can build good images of idols and the fan community. For example, in the interview, a fan of Xiaozhan mentioned that participating in public welfare activities initiated by fan community is a good experience and it can help others. Encouraged by her idol, she felt getting closer to her idol because she did the same good thing with her idol. The second reason is to gain a sense of social belonging and group identity, so that they can avoid individual isolation. At the meantime, this kind of collective activity is a commitment of individual fan to the whole fan community. The third reason is that fan community realises openness and transparency in the process of fundraising and distribution. It gains trust of the members and attracts fans to donate voluntarily. A fan of Jackson Yee said that during the non-pandemic period and the pandemic, she both participated in the charity donations organised by the fan club several times, totally donating about 300 yuan. After each donation, the fan club publicised the whereabouts of materials and donations and provided evidence such as data and photos. The open and transparent process made her trust the fan club which she joined in.

4.2. The characteristics and contents of public welfare communication on Weibo

Through the content analysis of several fan club official Weibo accounts from 23rd January 2020 to 8th April 2020, the contents and characteristics can be summarised as following points:

Firstly, every Weibo post was tagged with relative topics like "fan charity of XXX" "Wuhan hospital" "protective

supplies" "COVID-19" and so on to increase exposure and searches. Secondly, there were various contents of those posts with attached pictures and posters of idols, some of them even had the links of donation and related videos, which attracted more fans and improved their enthusiasm and convenience to participate in the public welfare. The amount of reposts, comments and likes of many popular Weibo posts was considerable. In addition to posting on Weibo, fan clubs also advertised and guided fans through discussion groups and fan group chats on Weibo. These diversified channels allowed fans to receive public welfare information in a more timely and comprehensive way and to be able to respond in time.

A large number of fans donated a lot of money and materials under the call of the celebrity foundations and the fan clubs, mainly in education, childcare, poverty alleviation construction, animal and environmental protection, and social security. However, there are few donations for health care. The main reason is that celebrities have few endorsements in this area, and the country or the society has not actively advertised it. Also, the supply and reserves of medical and health products are rarely in short supply in normal times. The emergence of the pandemic has caused a change in fans charity, that is, public welfare donations to medical and health have been supplemented in a large number.

Donations from fans in medical and health care area during the pandemic can be roughly divided into the following aspects: donations of protective materials and medical equipment, donations of caring female doctors, and participations in various foundations and Non-Government Organizations. Until 29th March 2020, Xiao Zhan's fans have donated more than 4.42 million yuan and organised a hundred batches of materials to support the hospitals, including protective materials and daily necessities. The specific donation items and amounts are shown in the figures below.

Item	Amount
Rubber surgical gloves	65,000 pairs
Goggles	700 pairs
84 disinfectant	48 buckets
Medical protective clothing	899 pieces
Medical surgical masks	5,400

Figure 1 One of Xiao Zhan's fan club named @Xiao Zhan·WeFollow collected data that fans donated medical materials in 2020

Organization	Item	Amount
Fan club of Luo Yunxi	Period brief	4,288 pairs
	Sanitary towel	5,760 pieces
Yao Chen's female fan club	Period brief	1,800 pairs
Fans of Liu Shiwen	Money	11,111 yuan
Fan club of UNINE	Money	1,460 yuan

Figure 2 Some donations from fans in an activity called “Help Sisters Fight the Pandemic” on Weibo

Foundation or NGO	Amount
Hubei Red Cross Foundation	25,775 yuan
China Siyuan Foundation for Poverty Alleviation	582,185 yuan
Chengmei Charity Foundation	12,345 yuan
China Social Assistance Foundation	5,940 yuan
China Social Welfare Foundation	6,943.81 yuan

Figure 3 Some donations from Cai Xukun’s fans during the pandemic

In addition to medical materials, there were donations related to caring children and teenagers [9]. According to the summary from Xiao Zhan’s fan club, until 27th March 2020, Xiao Zhan’s fans have donated 51 schoolbags with books and stationeries and 52 scholarships for students who were affected by the pandemic in Hubei, totalling 105,000 yuan (@Xiao Zhan-WeFollow). In terms of agricultural assistance, due to the impact of the epidemic, lots of agricultural products were unsold in many parts of the country. Xiao Zhan’s fan club took actions five times to help farmers, advocating fans to buy those agricultural products from corresponding Taobao shops, such as green tea in Anhui province, bamboo shoots in Guizhou province, and lilies in Lanzhou city (@Xiao Zhan-WeFollow).

Another feature of fan charity during the epidemic is that various fan clubs united, and even fans in different fields who have never met also united to break the previous barriers of competition and participated in donations together. For example, a hundred fan groups donated 18

batches of medical staff during the epidemic. The first batch of materials was delivered to Zhongnan Hospital of Wuhan University with 143,100 disposable medical gloves. The collection was completed on 24th January 2020 and transported on the 25th to give timely help for the medical staff.

According to the above data, during the epidemic, celebrity fans not only actively participated in medical and health donations, but also actively contributed love to other vulnerable groups affected by the epidemic, reducing a certain burden for the government and the country in fighting the epidemic and resuming production. At the same time, there is no interruption of donating other projects because of the pandemic.

4.3. Analysis of communication effects in fan charity culture

The public welfare behaviours of fan groups are not only reflected through simple data, but their effects also have great research value. Refers to Peng’s [4] definition and classification of network communication effects (2009, P336) and through the analysis of data, this article summarises four aspects of communication effects.

In terms of micro-effects, the participation of fans in public welfare has greatly helped to build positive images of celebrities and fan groups. During the epidemic, CCTV 6 and various mainstream media such as China Women’s Daily, Ban Yue Tan, etc. affirmed fans’ contributions and praised them for “supporting process specifications, efficient operation, and openness and transparency (@China movie report) ”.

In terms of macro effects, fans gradually expand the influence of their idols by practicing public welfare and help the fan group gain greater satisfaction and honour, achieving the realisation of self-showing and self-worth. On the one hand, fan charity helps to remove the stigma and stereotypes of fans. In the past, the public’s impression of fans was basically a blind fanatical worship of idols and pure perceptual fetishism, but through the practice of fan charity and commons of mainstream media, it is obvious that fan culture is more diverse and positive, and it is closely integrated with social development. On the other hand, the large-scale public welfare behaviour of fans has demonstrated the citizenship and social responsibility of young generation, and has also made the country notice the important role that young people played in the society. Fan group is a very large community and there are many teenagers in it. The effective guidance of the government on fans and fan culture can avoid irrational behaviours and maintain the stability of the network. Therefore, the state has begun to guide and manage the network environment to promote the formation of positive social values of the youth group. For example, the Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission carried out “Qinglang” action [1] to create a healthy environment for teenagers on the Internet during

summer holiday, focusing on punishing irrational behaviours of fans (@CCTV) [6].

In the aspect of short-term effects, fan charity alleviated the shortage of medical supplies in pandemic areas to a certain extent, especially in Wuhan. They protected the personal safety of medical staff, helped some disadvantaged groups to obtain medical supplies, therefore played a role in fighting the epidemic and restoring production.

In the aspect of long-term effects, as mentioned above, after the epidemic outbreak, fans expanded the scope of public welfare to medical and health care field, which promoted the development of public welfare. They also actively promoted correct hand washing methods, use of public chopsticks, and caution on the raw food and so on. Those advertisements enhanced the health awareness of netizens, and helped to cultivate good hygiene habits.

Moreover, the medias' advertisements for fan charity reflected the professionalism and social responsibility of journalists. They reported the practice of fan groups from a diversified perspective, creating an open, inclusive and interactive platform, abandoning the image of a superior media elite. They enhanced their own credibility, sense of youth and vitality, and grasped the psychology of the younger generation better.

5. Conclusion

This article takes the public welfare practice of fans on Weibo during the pandemic as an entry point, taking fan clubs of Xiao Zhan, Cai Xukun and other influential celebrities as examples. Through analysing from several aspects such as the reasons for public welfare practice, the content, characteristics and effects of public welfare communication, it can be concluded that during this period, the public welfare culture among fans has four kinds of influences, separately on individuals, fan groups and the society. It is worth thinking about that after receiving the donations, the fan clubs will always disclose the whereabouts of the donations and materials on the official account, such as lists and receipts of donations, photos of loading and unloading, places where donated items have arrived, etc. Fan clubs posted the information in discussion groups and fan group chat on Weibo in a truly open and transparent way, and also provided a good monitoring channel for fans. In contrast, the Red Cross Society of China Hubei Branch has lost the trust of some citizens due to improper distribution of donated materials and non-disclosure of information during the epidemic, prompting those citizens to find other channels to contribute their love.

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