

# Idol Economy and Consumption of Younger Generation Entertainment: A Sociological and Motivational Approach on Chinese Fans

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## ABSTRACT

The basic situation of Chinese fans and their relationship with their entertainment idols are discussed from both sociological and psychological perspectives. Specifically, questionnaires and a corresponding systematic literature review based on description are carried out. By means of typological descriptions, the changing nature of Chinese entertainment industry is defined in communication technology way and sorted by sociodemographic variables (e.g., gender, age and idol/cultural circles). Moreover, younger generation is the main power in Chinese idol economy according to the results. However, their relationship with their idol shows no explicit psychological mechanism.

**Keywords:** Chinese Entertainment, Fan Group-

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporarily, media techniques have brought the change of intrinsic between fan group and artists studio in Chinese entertainment industry [1]. Innovative media audiovisual language and streaming broadcasting create new company, platform and mobile application, which define the ecology of Chinese entertainment environment together [2-4]. With this rapid development of social media and platform, gifts/donations from fan groups draw researchers' attention forming a new trend of 'gift economy' [5]. In this case, nationwide surveys are supposed to carry out in order to understand the Chinese fan group consumption habit. On the other hand, the psychological motivation of some exaggerated high-expenses donation or gift also become the hotspot of scholars' study [6]. With the purpose of depict the current situation of Chinese idol/fan group economy, both the data of fan group expenses and idolaters' motivation are important figures.

According to Ref. [1], a standard widely accepted by Chinese entertainment company is provided to calculate the value of a certain fan in their fan/potential fans. This standard measures and locates 'super fan' based on average revenue per unit (ARPU), indicating that the relationship between fan groups and their idols are

always within the category and notion of economic interests [6]. Despite the social platform boast about the creativity and we-media spontaneousness of the streaming content, the vital part of whole entertainment still counts those fans as income sources. The identity of self-broadcaster or we-media content producer is only the wishful thinking of fans or irrational idolaters their own.

In order to comprehensive understand the situation of Chinese entertainment consumers, a questionnaire is ought to be designed considering both their irrational expenses and psychological motivation. On this occasion, we carry out the empirical study based on above methods with following organisation: the data and methods are introduced in Sec. 2; the activities of Chinese fan group are demonstrated in Sec. 3 based on typological methods; a subsequent discussion is presented in Sec. 4; a brief conclusion is given in Sec. 5 eventually.

## 2. DATA AND METHOD

This research placed Chinese mainland entertainment industrial consumers as its main object. It adopted random sampling among 280 people from different provinces and cities and conducted an online survey (questionnaire). Thereinto, 272 questionnaires were valid and taken back with 97.1% effective recovery ratio.

The Excel 2010 is used for data entry while SPSS 25.0 is utilised to carry out a statistical analysis. Classified data statistics were described as percentage while quantitative data were described by means  $\pm$  standard deviation. Besides, multiple response sets were used for multiple choice analysis. In addition, the comparison of gender, salary and different fans clubs was analysed by C2.

### **3. CHINESE FAN GROUP RELATED ACTIVITIES**

To begin with a scrutiny on Chinese idolaters or fan groups' behaviours, one must aware the exactly affairs happening in their daily adoring activities. By means of typological methods, these activities can be placed into four categories described below.

#### ***3.1. Traditional Celebrities Joining the Streaming Advertisement***

Living broadcast is an emerging member and important part of the current Chinese Internet entertainment industry as well as the new media network ecology. The celebrities, whose main career achievements are from silver screen or theatre, show great enthusiasm to join the battle in winning the championship of the live broadcast industry currently. With the great influence and fame as well as other unique advantage of traditional celebrity, their invasion began to gradually influence the regular order of the live broadcast field. They began to get involved in commercial sales, replacing the professional seats of online anchors. Furthermore, they refreshed their previous online live broadcast identities by copying the net celebrities as examples. However, the rapid transformation and subversion of the new media live broadcast industry has gradually challenged consumers' belief and attachment to traditional celebrities. Facing this challenge, some traditional celebrities find solution in using streaming content to promote their entity investment rather than virtual ones.

Since 2013, catering industry seems to be ushering in a wave of celebrity store openings. In July of this year, a food reality show featuring film star Nicholas Tse as the chef was released. Nicholas Tse took his friends in the circle to travel the world together to find and cook food from all over the world. Before that, Nicholas Tse had officially set foot in catering industry, the bar *LinX* he invested in opened in Shanghai earlier this year. As the trend prevailed, soon Carina Lau opened another bar just across the street from Nicholas Tse's bar [7].

Public information shows that in the first half of this year alone, more than 6 movie stars have entered the catering industry. At the beginning of this year, a hot pot restaurant jointly invested by three celebrities, Li Bingbing, Ren Quan and Huang Xiaoming, opened in

Sanlitun, Beijing. The restaurant occupies an area of 1,700 square meters and is named "Hot & Spicy No. 1" [8]. Meanwhile, another popular singer Yuan Chengjie also started the catering business. It is reported that his pan-fried food store has branches in Beijing and Shanghai, whose number has reached ten [9]. Moreover, on May 28 this year, Huang Xiaoming, another popular entertainment super star had his dessert shop opened in Shanghai.

#### ***3.2. Internal Industrial Chains Built within Fan Groups***

The most common form of internal fan group industrial chain is called proxy shooting. Super stars relate to many sites (collectively referred to official websites, support clubs, and fan forums), which have very important meanings for their fans. The main function of one sort of sites is to publish pictures of their idols. When fans cannot show up at the airport to pick up their idols, they will take the initiative to contact professional fans to photograph those pictures. The price of the shoot is proportional to the celebrity's position in the whole industry. Normally, fans will buy three to nine units (a hundred photos) each time they are taken. Take the top star as an example, the price of a unit ranges from 150-200 RMB. Meng Jia, a photographer once revealed to Lieyun website: "It may sound like a lot of for 100 photos, but it's actually just standing at the airport and taking photos of the celebrity. It takes just a few minutes to press the shutter for 100 photos" [10]. Whenever many celebrities gather in the same city (e.g., Magnolia award ceremony), seven or eight celebrities will be photographed at the airport every day basically. In this case, a photographer earns thousands of dollars after receiving more than a dozen requests. In addition, some professional fans of proxy shooting will sell the same photo to different sites after simple processing, e.g., size changes or filters, i.e., saving time while receiving more orders.

#### ***3.3. Fan Donation and Charity***

Chinese super stars are vying to be charity ambassadors. Their fans follow with love and support. Thus, charity has become an important part of the star-fan ecology. Fan Liang Ran (pseudonym) is responsible for an official data station of his idol. Fans' charity support may seem unorganised, but in fact it has its own rhythm and layout. For example, fan groups share celebrity charity content every three to five times through their social media accounts. It matters for fans to share and promote these contents even if they do not give a penny for their idol's charity program. The reputation and fame gather through the content sharing of their fans. It is cost-free marketing and self-promotion to guide fans to feel the energy of idols, which increases team cohesion as well as facilitates the support activities.

### 3.4. Internet Celebrities

With the development of people's online entertainment activities, more and more short video platforms enter human being's life. At the same time, several short video makers have gained fans. Some of them are even as popular as many stars, known as Internet celebrities. As a result, many Internet celebrities want to enter the entertainment industry to maintain their popularity and gain more fans. So far, there have been many success stories. Take Papi, a Chinese famous Internet celebrity, as an example. she relies on her own talent that says something funny with a straight face. Specifically, she often imitated some of the pretentious female entertainers and some classic variety scenes in early period [11]. Besides, she photographed many real phenomena in life (e.g., the state of fans watching the movies, a girl looks like in love etc.), which has struck a chord with many people. Another reason for her fame is that her image was very different from that of other Internet celebrities of her time. In our impression, Internet celebrities are always those who have beautiful faces, but Papi is so different that she has an average-looking and doesn't even wear makeup for the camera. It is suggested that those who like this homespun and natural video style like Papi are different from those who just like to see the beauty of uniformity. Those who just want to get relaxed in their free time, and just as a pastime, they prefer to watch the beauty instead of the videos like Papi's with a certain meaning. However, those who prefer Papi may not only want to feel relaxed, but also learn something from the videos. In daily life experience, most of the people who like this kind of profound videos are generally the people with relatively high education level. They prefer the idols who can bring knowledge and positive energy. Furthermore, her video format is also distinct, which represents reality by a deductive way. For instance, on 21th March, 2020, the topic of her video is about office rumours. She acted the phenomenon of office rumours, which many people say is true. And at last, this video reveals the undesirable phenomenon of verbal violence in society.

In 2017, Papi participated in the first variety show, which opened the door to enter the entertainment industry. Since then, she has given interviews, participated in variety shows as well as acted in movies, indicating a successful transformation. However, her success is not an accident. She graduated from one of the best drama schools in China, which is Central Drama Academy in Peking. Besides, instead of trying to adapt her style to the showbiz world, she used her humour and eloquence to make it more visible on screen, which attributed to her success.

However, not all the Internet celebrities can be successful when they enter a new field. Nowadays, many Internet celebrities went on a talent show, e.g., Xiaozhai Lin, Zaizai Niu etc. They already have some fans and

influence online, but their own singing and dancing ability is not up to the standard, i.e., cannot stand for long though they have a fan base.

Moreover, another clear change in Chinese entertainment industry is that the difference between Internet celebrities and stars becomes smaller. As many Internet celebrities enter the entertainment industry, many stars have also begun live streaming their goods on short video platforms. In this case, we consider that it is an attempt to blend the roles. Like those Internet celebrities are not so easy to be part of an entertainment world full of professionals, it's difficult for the stars to succeed in selling their goods, because they lack of realism. Fans always think that the stars are so far away from them that they don't really use the cheap stuff, i.e., creates a sense of distance.

These new born phenomena describe some characteristics of Chinese idol economic ecology. Firstly, most of fan or superstars' activities take places and get promoted through electronic platform or new media environment. Secondly, these activities are more favourable to young people because they are more convenient to join the social media and platform. Finally, fan groups or fans are treated as kind of resources to bring benefit for their idols, from the perspective of entertainment studios or companies.

## 4. DISCUSSIONS

Besides the phenomena mentioned above, a questionnaire based investigation here illustrates the basic picture of Chinese fans and their consumption habits. In this survey, 13.2% of the respondents were males and 86.8% were females. Among them, 67.3% of the respondents were groupies. Following are basic social demographically descriptions for star-chasing groups.

The age group was mainly between 14-23, most of the respondents are still students (69.4%). In terms of salary (pocket money), the largest proportion is 1000-3000 RMB per month (31.1%), the next is over 5000 RMB (23.5%). As for cities, most people come from second- and third- tier cities (36.6%), the second is the new first- tier cities (25.7%). With regard to fan circles, most people like Japanese and Korean stars (51.1%), the second is Chinese mainland stars (36.9%). Besides, 78.1% of the respondents would spend money for their idols. The main reason for consumption was to buy albums (25.1%), the next was to peripheral products (22.1%), the least was to spend money on talent shows (2.9%). The most people spend money on the things which were limited the time and quantities (37.4%), the next is special gifts or treats (34.1%). In the question designed for comparison of gender, salary and different fan circles,  $\chi$ -square tests are applied and P-values are calculated listed in Table 1. In the test, there is a statistical difference if P-value <0.05, vice versa. The comparison between fan circles of

different genders has no statistical significance ( $\chi^2=4.186$ , P-value=0.233). Among them, the males mainly like the Chinese mainland stars (50.0%), females mainly like the Japanese and Korean stars (52.4%). There is a statistical difference among different salary levels ( $\chi^2=19.282$ , P-value=0.014). Those whose monthly salary or pocket money is less than 500 RMB mainly like Chinese mainland stars (56.3%) while others are more likely to adore Japanese and Korean stars.

**Table 1.** Comparison of whether spend money (%)

		Yes	No	c2	P
Gender	Male	3(50.0)	3(50.0)	2.876	0.120
	Female	140(79.1)	37(20.9)		
Salary	<500	23(65.7)	12(34.3)	5.389	0.249
	500-1000	15(75.0)	5(25.0)		
	1000-3000	46(80.7)	11(19.3)		
	3000-5000	25(89.3)	3(10.7)		
Fan circles (multiple response sets)	>5000	34(79.1)	9(20.9)	18.065	0.003
	America and Europe	14(60.9)	9(39.1)		
	Japan and Korea	104(83.9)	20(16.1)		
	Chinese mainland	62(69.7)	27(30.3)		
	Southeast Asia	3(60.0)	2(40.0)		

Several patterns are available to depict Chinese idol economic environment. In the population we studied, the number of idolaters is large. This phenomenon may be caused by the development of Internet. According to Ref. [Lu Peng et al], the convenience of information transmission, publicity, packaging and others undoubtedly increase the contact activities between fans and idols. Therefore, people have more understanding on stars and have a stronger sense of gain from chasing them. Typically, the patterns can be divided into three categories, which involves age, gender and psychological motivation explanations.

Age or generation gap which depends on the year or decade that fans were born dominates the basic

understanding of idol economy. In terms of fan groups, most of them are still students. Compared to employees, students have more time and energy to engage in activities about idols. This study also found that most people who are idolaters aged from 18-23, in which corresponds to the college stage. During this period, their living and schooling environment is relatively free and the pressure of life and competition is relatively low.

People who like Japanese and Korean stars take a large proportion. It reflects the influence of Japanese and Korean entertainment culture on Chinese people from the side. The influence of Japanese and Korean stars can be speculated largely due to their looks are more in line with the preferences of Chinese people.

Entertainment industry define its consumer by their potentials in purchasing power, which in fans action are measured by their will to spend money. Most people are willing to spend money on their idols. The motivation of fan's consumption is mainly from the attraction of idols and they can bring emotional satisfaction for fans. Therefore, a large number of fans are willing to spend money on idol related items. However, it is also found that if the idol makes a mistake in principle, or suffer a morality misbehaviour public judgment, most fans will choose to be rational instead of continuing to consume. Income levels has an impact on consumption level. This study found that with the rise of income levels, the number of people who spend money on idols more than 10000 RMB increases too. With the income increases, the disposable money gradually increases, i.e., the money spent on their idols increases.

Compared with different genders, salary levels and different fan circles, females who have more than 1000 RMB per month and like Japanese and Korean stars will spend more on idols. Following reasons might be accounted for this. First, males are relatively more rational compared to females, so the proportion of the number who spend money on idols is lower than female. Next, higher income level means more disposable income so that they have enough ability to consume. Finally, the majority of those who like Japanese and Korean stars are females and they are more willing to spend money on them, i.e., the proportion of people consume in Japanese and Korean circle is higher than others. In terms of the comments on fan's excessive consumption, most males think that it is irrational, but females think that is within the ability to consume. It may be attributed to the more rationality of male. Whereas, they can think more about others for women, i.e., they have different opinions.

By exploring the psychological motivation for consumption, we found that group and difference-seeking psychology only have a little effect on the fan's consumption without statistical differences.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In summary, a thorough understanding of Chinese entertainment industry and its audiences is at hand with general descriptions and questionnaire survey on Chinese fan groups and their consumptions. In the perspective of industrial innovation, it is assumed that the most rapidly changing point is media communication technology. By changing the modes of information dissemination, social media and streaming content nowadays redefine the nature of entertainment idol and their relation with idolaters. The survey results demonstrate that gender, age dominates the pattern of fan consumption. In other words, the more likely to embrace the era of new media, the more positive a fan is in spending money for his or her idol, which confirm the general description of Chinese entertainment industry in this study. Besides the sociological stats, some psychological motivation mechanism is also important to understand fan groups. nevertheless there is no significant findings to verify that certain psychological effect exists based on the survey results. Thus, the psychological explanation applied for Chinese entertainment industry remain to be answered in future study.

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