

Evolution of Fan Culture in China from the Perspective of Media Revolution

Renjie Liu

School of Foreign languages, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, Wuhan, China, 430074
liurenjie1031@126.com

ABSTRACT

Nowadays, fan groups and fan culture, which become an essential part of social culture, have a considerable impact on the online and offline world. The evolution of fan culture is closely related to the media revolution. The revolution of media has taken fans from being one-sided audiences to consumers, and eventually to the current interactive fan culture. This paper uses case analysis and literature analysis to explore the nature of the characteristics of fan culture in order to address the root causes of some of the negative concomitant phenomena generated by fan culture. Thus, it concludes that changes in communication methods and the pursuit of individual identity, and the enhancement of emotional transmission shaped the evolution of fan culture. Besides, some problems caused by those changes need government and public concerned more about it.

Keywords: Fans, Fan culture, Media Revolution, New Media

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, there are more and more fans emerge on social media. A lot of people have a favorite celebrity or idol and fans' group, and their activity can be seen on various new media platforms. In this era, fan groups and fan culture, which become an essential part of social culture, have a considerable impact on the online and offline world. To define the fans, Oxford English Dictionary wrote that this word meant as "a person who has a strong interest in, or admiration for, a particular person or thing"[1]. Price, L. and Robinson L. defined the fan as "a passionate enthusiast who avidly follows something or someone"[2]. Besides, the fan culture represents the most authentic way of life for fans, a self-contained system of emotions, technologies, ideas, attitudes, and behaviors, expressed through symbols and texts and realized through media[3]. This way of life can be classified as those sub-regions within a larger cultural region that have a unique cultural identity and is characterized by a culture of difference based on various elements[4].

The media is the vehicle of the fundamental element through which fans can act and form their culture. Taking the Chinese fan community as an example, the changes of media has taken fans from being one-sided audiences to consumers, and eventually to the current interactive fan culture[5]. However, there are more and more

problems coming up, for instance, the fans become younger and younger, the blind worship leads to excessive consumption, the public opinion is destroyed by the fan groups, etc. Thus, this paper explores the nature of the characteristics of fan culture in order to address the root causes of some of the negative concomitant phenomena generated by fan culture. In general, this paper seeks to offer an interpretation of the evolution of fan culture from a perspective of media revolution, summarizing the unique fan culture characteristics of the three stages, exploring the essential reasons behind the characteristics of fan culture, and summarizing some of the negative effects and phenomena caused by fan culture, and give relevant countermeasures. This paper also sorts out the Chinese fan culture, which provides a basis for future research and gives a new point for further study.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF FAN CULTURE IN CHINA UNDER THE MEDIA REVOLUTION

2.1. Audience Fan Culture

Before the 1990s, printed media, such as newspapers and magazines, was the main means of communication, which became the common way for the public to receive information. The audience existed more as receivers of

information dissemination, lacking a channel for information feedback immediately. While with the popularization of television, the phenomenon of admiring celebrities gradually became popular with the suitable environment. For example, Teresa Teng, Leslie Cheung, Bruce Lee who were singers and film stars from Hong Kong and Taiwan, were very famous at that time. Besides, athletes such as the Chinese women's national volleyball team who was the winner of the Olympics game, and Li Ning, the "Prince of Gymnastics", received a lot of attention.

The characteristics of the fans in this media environment can be summarized in two ways. Firstly, becoming a fan is limited to individual behavior. Restricted by limited media to gain information, fans could only search for new schedules of their idols in newspapers, magazines, radio and television to obtain relevant information, or communicate with their idols by writing letters or making phone calls to television stations. More often than not, they use audio and videotapes to get in touch with their idols and express their preferences through acts such as imitating their idols' hair and clothing or posting their idols' posters and photos in their rooms. Secondly, young people were the main members of fans in the 1980s and 1990s. Based on the social environment at that time, the fan groups did not form a large-scale and organized social group. In other words, the fan culture was still in a nurturing period at this time.

2.2. Consumer Fan Culture

After the 1990s, with the stabilization of television and the emergence of the Internet, more variety shows and entertainment programs gave celebrities the opportunity to promote themselves. Furthermore, fans had more platforms to communicate with other people of the same taste. And as people's standard of living increased dramatically, people's expenditure began to be enjoyment-oriented. In 2005, a TV program named Super Girls was extremely popular in China which started an unprecedented star-making campaign. And through online and offline interaction, a large social group and a cultural phenomenon were formed in a very short time. The advent of the consumer society gave fan culture a new form and expression, and a more active, autonomous and participatory fan culture began to emerge.

The characteristics of fan culture in this period can be divided into the following three points. Above all, it is the generalization of idols. The idols of fans didn't only limit to humans, which from people to things, from reality to virtuality, from beauty to ugliness. The phenomenon of fans has become part of the daily life of the public. Besides, the consumption behavior of fans surged ahead dramatically. The fan economy makes the commercial value of stars and their merch rise rapidly. According to the data in the 2006 Annual Report of China's Cultural

Industry, the direct economic income of "Super Girl 2005" was RMB 68 million[5]. In the context of consumer society, the number of fans means market share and the stickiness of fans determines the influence of idols. What's more, professional fans appeared in society. They specialize in canvassing, campaigning and image planning for the participating artists. Whether part-time or full-time, professional fans follow the stars as a job and earn financial income from it. This shows that fan culture in the context of consumer society, idols are more diversified, fan activities are mostly linked with commercial behaviors, and the consumption power and influence of fan groups are gradually taken seriously by enterprises and media.

2.3. Interactive Fan Culture

After 2015, with the rapid update of media technology, people are becoming more dependent on new media and the universal Internet. At this stage, fans have more and convenient platforms to establish connections and form communities, which have an impact not only economically but also culturally on society. The most important feature of fan culture in this period is interactivity.

The first characteristic of fans in this period is the strong power of fan groups. Based on the communication properties and operation mechanism of online communities, the power of fan groups began to grow significantly. The practice of fans is no longer an individual act. Through platforms such as 'Weibo', 'Tieba' and 'Douban', fans developed and grew into a huge group. The online communities not only make it easy for individual fans to find their favorite idols and fan groups with the same hobbies as themselves but also can gather the opinions of fans in a short period of time and drive the generation of relevant fan practices. For example, micro-blogging super-talk enable fan groups to assemble quickly in the virtual world and maximize fan power, while in Micro-blog hot search list fans will post with relevant tag in an organized way which makes the star get more people's attention. The second point is that the interaction between fans and their idols is enhanced. Stars can create their own accounts, and fans can comment on every post sent by the stars, and they can also send private messages to the stars which stars can reply as well. The idol is not an image that is far away from the fans' lives, but a living, breathing person with whom they can communicate more. Meanwhile, the fans' voice has increased, they can give their opinions to the idols and their companies. How to make the fans satisfied also has become the most important thing for every star to consider. The third point is that fans have also become content producers. Fans can promote their idols through editing video clips, writing novels, or communicating with fellow fans. Those things can be a new way to promote their idols to attract more new fans. Fans are

gradually elevated to the position of a fan rather than an audience. On the one hand, as consumers, fans can make suggestions on the "products" they consume; on the other hand, fans are also content producers, which in turn help idols to promote and become more famous.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE EVOLUTION OF FAN CULTURE

3.1. Causes

3.1.1 Changes in Communication Methods

The evolution of fan culture is closely related to the media revolution. The media revolution is the process of the change from a culture of mass media to social media in recent media history[6]. In the age of Mass Media, spanning the rise of TV culture in the 1950s to the end of the 20th century, media had a significant effect on people's daily life. With the rise of Cable TV in the 1990s, the ubiquity of internet entertainment sources, the invention of smart phones and the rise of social media, people's living habits and ways of thinking are also changing constantly. With the media revolution, fan culture is in a constant state of flux. The invention of various technologies, applied to the media, has changed the way people behave to varying degrees. The creation of the internet and various news websites has made it easier for people to access information. The formation of social software has brought people closer together, regard of the distance, and this has led to a shift in the behavior of fans and the formation of different fan cultures. In China, fan culture is also in the midst of such changes and is very typical. With the change from print media to mass media, forms such as television, radio, and film provide new ways for fan behavior, leading to fans from being one-sided audiences, to consumers. In the new century, the country vigorously develops the Internet industry and improves the utilization space of the Internet, which makes people's daily life engage in the online world. The new media has "accessibility to individual users as senders and receivers" to become interactive, which the country is vigorously developing, is characterized by convenience, interactivity and immediacy[7]. With the development of new media, fans eventually to the current interactive fan culture with idols. The three stages overlap with each other and all present a unique fan culture.

3.1.2. Changes in the Pursuit of Individual Identity

People are fluid beings, and different eras and the resulting different social relationships define the nature of people and their identities[8]. Changes in the media revolution have also shaped people's different identities and pursuits. From the first stage to the second stage of fan culture, the development of media gave people the

opportunity to discover and create stars. In this stage, people discovered some "grassroots" stars, saw their own possibilities in them, and thus put their emotions on these stars. With the deepening of the media revolution and the development of new media, people have more platforms to express themselves and communicate with others online, and their pursuit of self-identity has changed. At this stage, people are inclined to be self-centered and satisfy their ego desires. Therefore, fans will produce more content to satisfy their imaginary needs. During the mass media period, the image of the self was confined to a small area, and it was as if a wall separated the general public from the self, making it difficult to establish a sensual and intuitive image building. However, in the era of digital existence, through the connection of the Internet, a "bridge of the Internet" has been built between the general public and the self, and the image of the self has been clothed in a digital veneer[8]. This allows people to express more realistic ideas and is no longer constrained. As a result, fan culture also tends to make it possible to influence the behavior of their idols through the power of fan groups who will use social media platforms to express their opinion.

3.1.3. Enhancement of Emotional Transmission

Traditional media release information on limited platforms and the content is fixed and cannot be modified. Also, the public has no feedback channels and communication platforms to form the spread of emotions. Due to the development of the Internet, content can be instantly disseminated, full-time flow and diversified presentation[9]. These three features make the information symbols in the network meet the conditions of ordinary individual emotion dissemination, which precisely cater to the active and contagious characteristics of emotions and make it easier to diversify the expression and dissemination of emotions. Therefore, the Internet has contributed to the unprecedented widespread of social emotions. The social media platform has enhanced the intimacy between individual Internet users, and certain elements can become the core of content creation because of the rapid formation of consensus on issues of common concern. The flow of public sentiment is also rapidly diffused, reinforced and re-aggregated because of this efficient, multi-node and extensive structure, which inevitably leads to the formation of polarized views and consciousness of the group[9]. Thus, in fan culture, the influence of fan groups is becoming stronger and stronger as a result of the increasing emotional transmission of information on the Internet, where individual individuals are easily influenced by the views espoused by the majority of people in an online environment.

3.2. Associated Problems and Countermeasures

The rapid development of the fan base has also led to

many accompanying problems. The first is the younger age of fans. Due to the popularity of the Internet and electronic devices, more and more kids have access to the Internet world. Therefore the age of fans is getting younger and younger, and teenagers are easily influenced by the outside world and less capable of independent thinking, which means they are easily seduced and controlled in terms of aesthetics and behavior[10]. Some fan leaders are in a higher position and take the lead in spending money on their idols, using their greater appeal and influence to call on younger fans to spend money on their idols, sometimes even using moral coercion. So fans who do not spend money are ostracized and despised by their fellow fans and evicted as "do not love their idols". As teenagers are not financially independent, they cheat and steal money from their parents. To guide the younger fans to follow the stars wisely, not only need the government's supervision and guidance of social institutions but also need parents to pay more attention to their children and make appropriate guidance. It is not that children can not follow the stars, but to follow the stars rationally, should understand the idol behind the effort, learn from their flashpoint, as their own growth and motivation, rather than consuming to fit in fans group.

On the other hand, in the era of pan-entertainment, the fan economy is overly sought after and has become an important channel for entertainment capital to be realized. In order to maximize the exploitation of fans' emotional consumption, capital over-exploits the commercial value of stars and vigorously promotes the misconception of consumption and idol supremacy in the entertainment market. Both entertainment capital and commercial capital need to take a long-term view to remeasure the pros and cons of a perverse guided fan economy for the long-term development of society. The government also needs to regulate this, and through various publicity channels, establish the correct public concept of star-following and build a fan culture in line with core socialist values. Although the emergence of professional fans and a large number of fan groups has contributed to the development and prosperity of fan culture to some extent, they have actually created a false prosperity scene due to their obvious attributes of quick success and profit, often with exaggerated remarks or fabricated facts of posting and re-posting of controlled comments. This has created a chaotic situation in the development of fan culture and the resentment of the people who do not fancy any stars towards fan culture. Regardless of the form of comment control, it is an intervention in the atmosphere of public opinion. The government and related companies need to use relevant measures for some regulation. Moreover, this requires the self-discipline and rational thinking of fans themselves.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper tries to find out the relationship between the media revolution and fan cultures. In conclusion, the media revolution has taken fans from being one-sided audiences to consumers, and eventually to the current interactive producers. Generally, changes in communication methods and the pursuit of individual identity, and the enhancement of emotional transmission shaped the evolution of fan culture. Furthermore, some problems caused by those changes need government and public concerned more about it. However, the cases in this paper are not totally sufficient and some analyses lack the support of the grounds. Therefore, the study is not detailed enough that it can continue to study further in the future.

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