



# The Stigmatization of Fan Groups in China

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**Abstract.** With the development of the Internet, the speed of information dissemination is constantly accelerating and the scope of dissemination is constantly expanding. Online media's ability to spread information has already surpassed traditional media. Thanks to the popularization of social media and image dissemination, fan groups quickly generate influence on online platforms. The rapid growth of the fan groups has attracted the attention of the public and scholars, but is the representation of fan groups on social media objective and unbiased? This essay analyses the representation of fan groups on social media through Goffman's theory of stigmatization and conducts a semi-structural questionnaire to uncover fans' self-identity. It demonstrates that the fan groups generally experience discrimination, and the media's selective reports exacerbate the situation, causing even hostility toward the fan groups. This can also be seen on online platforms like Weibo and Bilibili. According to group psychology, when massive stigma appeared on social media, the majority of the audiences would stand up for one side, unifying the public opinion which is generally hostile to the fan groups. Therefore, the cyberspace in China is replete with criticisms of fan groups and fan culture, and this would somehow lead to the isolation of fan groups. In some cases, particularly for female fans, they might feel it shameful to acknowledge this identity. However, the right to speech on social media should be everyone's right, not a weapon directed against some disadvantaged groups like fan groups.

**Keywords:** Fan groups · Fan culture · Stigma · Media representation · Self-identity

## 1 Introduction

Social media is experiencing striking changes, and it is gradually becoming a major part of people's life. Celebrities dominate different media platforms. More specifically, not only their public work schedules but also their private life are exposed on social media. In China, celebrities' personal life is the most popular topic online. Once a sport star or a famous singer is revealed to have an affair with others, this information will go viral online and tease fierce discussions. These celebrities' fans are generally the most active groups in these discussions. Fan groups are generally regarded as "fanatic" and "irrational", and the fans in China are no exception. They are even experiencing hostility outside the fan groups. A typical case would be the fans of a Chinese celebrity, Zhan Xiao. They are widely criticized in cyberspace in China, partly due to some fanatic

behaviour. Their behaviour led to the shutdown of AO3 (Archive of Our Own) in China, which is a non-profit open-source repository for fanfiction, and these have strengthened stereotypes of the fan groups in China. In other words, they are stigmatized.

This paper looks into the fan groups in China, focusing on their stigmatized situation and their corresponding identity. More specifically, to what extent are they stigmatized in China? How does this situation influence their life? What is their identity from their perspective?

In general, fan culture can be regarded as a branch of mass culture, but it is somehow different from mass culture. American scholar Henry Jenkins held a positive view of fan culture. He studied fandom, more specifically, fans of some famous TV programs like *Beauty and the Beast*. In his famous work *Textual Poachers*, he argued that fan culture is positive as the fans would utilize the fragmented texts to produce their own meanings, and even himself, is a fan of a famous TV program, *Star Trek* [1]. Jenkins's study has raised scholars' attention to fan culture. Similarly, John Fiske also stressed the positive influence of popular culture. He used the term "popular culture" rather than mass culture, as he believed that the term "mass" suggests something silly and passive. However, in his view, the main body of mass culture is actually ordinary persons who are active and have their own agency [2]. Moreover, he argued that fan culture is a heightened form of popular culture in industrialized society. He regarded fans as excessive readers [3]. In contrast, the Frankfurt school's scholars generally hold a negative view of the mass culture. According to Adorno and Horkheimer who suggested the theory of culture industry, culture is produced as standardized and commercialized goods in the industries, and this violates the meaning of culture [4]. All these could be applied in the discussion about the content of fan culture and the cultural domination involved in it. However, in terms of stigmatization, current research has hardly noticed it and related it with fans' identifications. They generally assumed that fan culture and fan groups are stigmatized without extensive analysis of the theory of stigma, and these scholars also held negative views of fan groups and fan culture. As Joli Jenson argued, few studies regarded fandom as a normal culture and a social phenomenon. Fans are characterised as obsessed loners who are obsessed with celebrities [5]. This paper considers the stigmatized fans in China to fill this gap. More specifically, the way stigma and fans' identifications interrelates.

In order to find out whether fan groups are stigmatized in China, the media's reports about fan groups are collected, covering both official media represented by *People's Daily* and regional media like *Chongqing Daily* and *Beijing Youth Daily*. They can be accessed online, mainly from the platforms Sina Weibo and WeChat. These resources are representative since they are influential media in China and they are both official media, representing the mainstream. Taking *People's Daily* as an example, it has about 148 million fans on Sina Weibo. Netizens' comments on fan groups are also considered. They are mainly collected from online platforms like Sina Weibo and Bilibili, since most of the netizens are active on these platforms. Bilibili and Sina Weibo are also the space of flaming wars. However, there are some limitations in this research, as online information can be deleted and edited later. This means that some information accessed online might be unreliable, and may even lead to invalidity in the research. Nevertheless, this paper tries to show a general picture of the fandom by critically examining these materials.

Furthermore, this research includes a semi-structured questionnaire to uncover fans' identity in relation to the stigmatized situation. The number of samples is 537, and the questionnaire focuses on people's impressions of the fan groups and their experiences of being a fan. The theory of stigma is adopted in this essay. More specifically, the social stigma suggested by Goffman is featured for the social discrediting and tainted mark associated with the stigmatized groups [6]. The materials mentioned above would be evaluated from this perspective.

This research demonstrates that fans suffer stigmatization on different platforms. The criticisms of fan groups tease conflicts between the fan groups and the non-fan groups which might even lead to social segregation. The main idea of this paper is that fan groups are stigmatized in China due to the media's selective reports and unclear cyberspace. Fans are criticized with biases.

## 2 Stigmatization of Fan Groups

Stigmatization is a social phenomenon leading to the marginalization of a specific person or a community. Stigma and prejudices lead to discrimination and loss of dignity. Erving Goffman originally defined stigma as a mark or attribute that makes the person "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" [6]. It is worth mentioning that stigma in this essay is about "deviant" subcultures (fan culture), not the stigma associated with mental illness or physical deformity. As the pathology of fandom is different from the pathology in medical science.

Fan studies carried out by western scholars like Jenkins and Fiske mainly focused on television fans, discussing their initiative and passive positions. Due to the different economic environment and media preferences, the fan culture discussed by Jenkins and Fiske cannot fully explain the current situation of the Chinese fan culture. Although they really help to classify the general features of fans, it is important to recognize that fans in China mainly consist of celebrities' fans, and this is slightly different from the television fans discussed by Fiske and Jenkins. These fans of celebrities are generally recognized as groupies, and they are always criticized for their "fanatic" behaviour. Sasaeng fans, for example, are these obsessive fans who invade the privacy of celebrities, including seeking out celebrities at their dorms or homes, stealing their personal belongings or information, and harassing their family members. All of these can be even regarded as criminal behaviour. Moreover, fan groups in China are also criticized for teasing flame wars, cyber-bullying and doxing. Fans would gather on platforms like Weibo, and they will berate others rudely. Meanwhile, those who participate in such behaviour are always juveniles who are still in school. These phenomena have risen wide concerns in Chinese society. The Chinese government's official account also published several articles, criticizing the deviant fan culture in China [7].

### 2.1 Representation of Fan Groups on Social Media

Once someone expresses negative opinions on a celebrity online, he will be berated by some loyal fans of the celebrity, and more severely, those fans may even commit doxing, which means that they will reveal personal information about that individual online and

may harass or even threaten him [8]. This is outrageous and unacceptable behaviour, and that is one of the reasons why fan groups are criticized. Fans might also be criticized for their irrational consumption. More specifically, they may buy things related to their idols excessively, even when they cannot afford them. They might resort to online credit. All of these lead to criticisms of fan groups, but it is important to notice that not all fans are fanatic. The fact is that media would select these extreme cases in the fan groups and would report them in order to make sensations. A fan named Lijuan Yang who was obsessed with her idol, Andy Lau, is a typical case.

Next is the overview of the Chinese media's representation of fan groups. Generally, the media show negative views of the fan culture and fan groups. *People's Daily*, published a report in August 2021, revealing the current condition of fan culture and suggesting that the condition needs to be changed [6]. In the report, the reporter criticized the deviant fan culture and pointed out that the fan groups increasingly consist of teenagers. They lack guidance, and it is widely concerned that they will be misled by the deviant fan culture. This report did not criticize the fan groups directly, but it appealed to platforms' measures dealing with these problems, and over 10 million netizens have read this report. The regional media also published news relating to the fan culture, but the content they published is highly similar to the reports from *People's Daily* (*Beijing Youth Daily*, *Jinan Daily*, and *Chongqing Daily*). In general, they concluded that the fan groups are irrational and believed that the significant constitution of fan groups are teenagers who are easy to go astray and have no ability to judge which is right or wrong. In their reports, they used "immature" to describe those fans, but the fact is that the teenagers who always participate in fan practices like supporting their idols only took up about 8% of the fan groups [9]. In these reports, fans showed a wasteful lifestyle when doing fan activities; some of them even paid their life when their illusions went up in smoke. They indulge in illusions and even dream to have an intimate relationship with their idols.

## 2.2 Netizens' Opinion of Fan Groups

All these lead to criticisms of the fan groups, and netizens would normally label these fans as fanatic and irrational. Netizens showed their hostility to the fan groups. Even when some fans show their favour to their idols online, they will be berated and cursed by other netizens rudely. Online platforms like Weibo and Bilibili which used to be the places for fans to express their feelings to their idols, now are enriched by the criticisms of the fan groups and the fan culture. This has resulted in the phenomenon that the fans might feel shame to express their favour to their idols in front of the public.

Additionally, these fans are differentiated from the others in society, and this can be seen through the flaming war between the fans and the netizens. This showed that stigma is associated with being a fan. The data in the questionnaire also proved this. 302 of the participants are fans, and 103 of them joined the fan groups which would frequently carry out fan activities. Regarding the negative effects of fan culture, most of them (about 38%) believed that they are experiencing discrimination and misunderstanding from others. These respondents are asked to grade the fan culture in China, and the grade ranged between 1 and 10. The higher the grade, the better impression of the fan culture, and the results showed that respondents who are not fans have a higher score (4.22)

than fans (5.88). This is partly due to the negative representation of fan groups on social media. This showed that stigmatization is becoming the biggest feature associated with fan groups.

Generally, the fan groups mainly consist of female fans, around 80% [10]. This is partly because females are considered to be more emotional than males. Females are more likely to invest their emotions in their idols, and their idols always represent their aspirations for the future, and they would always take pleasure in growing with their idols. They would gain a great sense of achievement if their idols are one of the most influential idols on different platforms. This is one of the reasons why fans are eager to take part in fan activities to support their idols. More importantly, when they join the fans group on the platforms, they could communicate with other fans by sharing information about their common idols. In the fan groups, they share symbols of the fan culture, and they could even provide emotional support for each other. This is really appealing to female fans. Here is a female fan of Korean idols giving an account of why she enjoys being a fan:

In reality, our life does not always run smoothly. Therefore, I need something that could bring me joy, and being a fan really makes me happy. Additionally, being a fan is like unrequited love, we do not have to build an intimate relationship to gain joy. It is really relaxing and without any burden. Whenever I feel bored, I can get rid of it easily.

In this case, these female fans regard fan groups as heaven in reality, and it is a way for them to channel their interest. At the same time, they are deprived of the right to express their feelings. Under the contemporary context in China, they lack the right to speech, as it is always those key opinion leaders who dominate their expressions. They are guided by the capital, while the public always criticizes them, regardless of the reasons behind this phenomenon [1].

### 3 Fan Groups Under Stigmas

#### 3.1 Portrait of Fan Groups

It is widely acknowledged that the main constitution of fan groups are female fans, and China is no exception. A white paper published by Sina Weibo in 2019 proved this. In the report, female users who are active in the topics relating to celebrities took up 81.6% of the total users on this platform, and most of them (74.4%) are aged between 20 and 29. According to the questionnaire, students with an undergraduate degree, college degree and higher degree made up 83.7% of the samples, and this is not consistent with the stereotypes that fans are generally from low educational backgrounds [10]. It is also notable that the main constitution of fan groups is not only student but also people who are not full-time students or already have jobs, which constituted about half of the sample (50.6%). This means that being a fan is not only a way for the students to demonstrate their interest but also a placebo for the people in society. This showed that fans are not merely “immature” young people, let alone the “ignorant” and “fanatic” descriptions on the online media.

### 3.2 Influences of Stigma on Fan Groups: Take “Fangirls” as an Example

The stigmatization of fan groups has impacts on the fans to varying degrees. Being a fan is becoming less socially acceptable in China. The stigmatization has caused the fan groups to be marginalized, as they are differentiated from the “others” in society. This can be seen through the flaming war between the fans and the netizens. The public believes that these fans are doing unnecessary activities. They find it hard to understand why the fans would spend massive money and time on their idols, who are thought to be the “strangers” to them. This coincident with Joli Jenson’s description of “obsessive loners” who have a heavy illusion of the celebrities, while the fans cannot accept the biased comments from the public [5]. The hostility from the society has increased the solidarity inside the fan groups, as they are facing a common “match”, and this has teased the reluctance from the fan groups, engendering the aggravating segregation of the fan groups from the mainstream. The most typical case is the prevalence of the appellation to the female fans, the “fangirl”, which is a stigmatized word associated with female fans.

“Fangirl” is a term commonly used to devalue young and feminine fans, as Ysabel Gerrard described [5]. This is also true in cyberspace in China since feminine fans are generally labelled as “fangirls”. More specifically, they are regarded as fanatic and pathologic groups and differentiated as the “others” in society.

These criticisms are mainly shown in cyberspace in China, particularly on online platforms like Bilibili and Sina Weibo. This is actually not only due to the negative aspects of fan culture but also the lack of supervision of the platforms. The netizens would not be responsible for what they say online, and on those platforms, fan groups and fan culture actually provide them a channel of catharsis. They would always berate fan groups online, regardless of the real condition of the fan groups. Here is a high school student’s comment on it:

I like Sina Weibo so much, I find it a wonderful place to curse others while the acquaintances cannot see it despite I am swearing at them.

In this case, the student regarded the online platform as a way to give vent to his resentment while not being responsible for his behaviour. Therefore, the flaming wars in the cyberspace should not be merely ascribed to the “deviant” fan culture. It is the platform that should take measures to adjust its mechanism, such as imposing real-name registration.

Despite the fact that those netizens would not be responsible for their behaviour online, the fan groups are influenced to different extents. From those fans’ perspectives, they, particularly female fans, are experiencing hatred from the non-fans.

I am a Xiaofeixia (appellation to fans of a Chinese celebrity, Zhan Xiao), and it is my pleasure to introduce myself in this way. Recently, I’ve read comments about the ‘fangirls’ online. No matter whether they are bad or not, I really have no idea how to reply, but one thing I want to say is, please do not attack these ‘fangirls’ viciously. We really do not mean to court troubles. We merely want to spill the tea and talk about some interesting things about our idols, but being a fan of someone

is not a shameful thing at all. At least I gain a lot from it. I hope everyone could have the right to run after whom they like.

This showed that feminine fans normally experienced hostility from society, particularly in the cyberspace in China. Those fans lose the right to express their feelings to their idols, whereas most of them did nothing actually.

## 4 Conclusion

This research fills the gap in the field of cultural sociology. It gives a detailed analysis of fan culture and fan groups in China, combining theories of popular culture and stigmatization. It discovers the stigmatization of fan groups in China from different aspects.

The main finding of the research is that fan groups are stigmatized in China due to the media's selective reports. Fans may feel shameful to acknowledge that they are someone's fans in front of the public due to hostilities outside the fan groups, whereas the fans ought to have the right to express their feelings to their idols. The real cause of the problem is the intervention of capital in the fandom economy. Therefore, it is the online platforms that ought to be responsible for "raucous fan culture", not merely the fan groups. However, it is hard to track the real identities of netizens, and this could be a source of invalidity of the research. Meanwhile, in the discussion about the portrait of fan groups, the data are from an investigation conducted by Sina Weibo and this might reflect their interest to some extent. They might show it in their favourable way.

This essay discussed the stigmatization of fan groups in detail from different aspects, which is helpful for the public to inspect the fan groups more critically. More importantly, it justifies the fan groups and appeals for governmental measures.

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