



# Fan economy and digital media: How does Produce 101(China) utilize digital media to gain commercial benefit?

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**Abstract.** In the development of the entertainment and cultural industry in recent years, the fan economy has gradually come to the fore and occupied an important economic position. Produce 101 is the most successful talent show which utilizes digital media to develop the fan economy in China. From media headlines to the idols who have successfully debuted through the show, this show has received great commercial benefits. In this case study, I discuss its digital marketing methods through literature research and the interview of a fan. The conclusion is that the combination of marketing strategies and digital media in the fan economy can indeed greatly increase commercial values. But inevitably, this will also have some negative effects.

**Keywords:** Fan economy, Produce 101, digital media, commercial benefit

## 1 Introduction

Produced by Tencent Video, Produce 101 is China's first reality show for female idol group competition [1]. After a series of training and recordings, 11 trainees with the most votes from the audience would make their debut. Though this talent show originated in South Korea, Tencent Video has made localized adaptations and added special competition mechanisms such as “challenge”, “resurrection” and “trainees’ auditioning”. Besides, Tencent Video subscribers and customers of the advertising sponsor have more votes than the general audience. Throughout the show, it’s always the subjective will of the audience that determines which 11 trainees can make a successful debut and form a time-limited girl idol group. As a group, they would continuously record variety shows, perform in commercials events, release new songs, and hold concerts. In the 2020 data list of a certain company, it is estimated that the three girls from this idol group are ranked at the top in terms of business values among potential artists [2]. By the end of the talent show, the total broadcast volume reached 4.86 billion, and the reading volume of the same-name topic on Weibo, one of the biggest social media platforms in China, reached 10.45 billion. The advertising revenue of this program itself has reached 400-500 million RMB, accounting for more than two-thirds of the total investment. Undoubtedly, Produce 101 is a huge commercial success [3].

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## **2 The business model with digital media**

### **2.1 Promotion & Marketing-Video platform**

The power of the Internet is first adopted during promotion and marketing procedures. The production team cleverly directs the potential audience to this show, including existing users of the Tencent Video platform and fans of the guest tutors. Even some of the trainees themselves are already minor celebrities on the Internet. With these advantages, the show quickly attracts public attention.

Tencent Video has always been a video platform giant. It had 900 million active mobile users monthly, and 89 million VIP subscribers in March 2019 [4]. At the time of the program announcement, Tencent Video put this talent show in the most conspicuous position of the homepage recommendations, which greatly improved the popularity of Produce 101. According to my interview, the interviewee also clearly pointed out that, out of curiosity, she would often watch programs recommended on the homepage.

In addition, the program selected 5 stars as “tutors”, who were responsible for daily singing and dancing teaching. These tutors already have a huge fan base. Apart from the experienced artists like Yanbin Hu and Ella Chen who have been in the entertainment industry for more than fifteen years, there are also famous idols like Zitao Huang and Yibo Wang who had made their debut in South Korea and returned to China. Most of these tutors’ fans naturally become part of the audience of this talent show simply because they are interested to watch programs featuring their favorite idols. The remaining fans will watch out for Conformity, which means that when other fans are discussing enthusiastically, they also try to maintain consistency with the particular fan group they belong to. In other words, they watch this talent show out of peer pressure [5]. Moreover, unlike the original South Korean Produce 101 program which invited complete amateurs as trainees, the localized Chinese version features 101 influencers. Although their fan base is not comparable to that of their tutors, the total number of 101 celebrities is large enough to increase the popularity and publicity of the program to another level.

### **2.2 Promotion & Marketing- Social media platform**

The second element in the promotion and marketing process of Produce 101 is the communication of digital media, namely the social platform. Weibo is a multifunctional social media in China. It has a large number of active users, discussing headline news, posting information about the entertainment industry, and so on. At the end of the first quarter of 2020, Weibo's monthly active users reached 550 million [6]. Produce 101 opened a Weibo official account a few weeks before the show for pre-promotion. The official account frequently publishes some trainees’ training routines and micro-blog interactions with the tutors. In addition, fans can join lottery activities to win tickets or sign photos. While increasing the attention of the show, the fans were meticulously served to satisfy them. The program group not only sells this variety show to the audience but also provides a very humanistic service [7].

Another important marketing method is to create Weibo hot topics artificially, constantly crafting a publicity stunt targeting general netizens. The official Weibo account posts some edited clips to highlight certain conflicts or particular personalities to create trending topics. Curious people who are unfamiliar with the show but want to understand the whole story will then spontaneously go to the video platform to watch the complete program, bringing more attention to the show.

### 2.3 Competition System with Psychology

For a pop idol group talent show, the audience holds the voting rights to decide which contestants can make their debut. The voting is presented through online statistics, which makes better use of the convenience of digital media and increases audience participation.

There are three ways to vote. The first is that ordinary users of Tencent Video have 11 votes per day, and VIP users have 21 votes per day. The second is through Weibo, where everyone gets 11 votes every day. The third is OPPO users (a mobile phone company as the sponsor of the program), 11 votes per person per day. The No.1 trainee every week can accumulate 10,000 extra votes.

The additional votes of VIP Tencent users and OPPO customers encourage fans to upgrade their members' accounts and buy phones to vote for their idols, thus utilizing the fan economy to create commercial benefits. In addition to the above-mentioned ostensibly motivation for fans, Tencent Video also updates video clips that are available specifically to VIP users such as interviews with the trainees. From the records of the interview, people tend to buy membership permissions to watch those exclusive videos. Henry Jenkins once pointed out that fans are an important factor in shaping participatory culture in modern times. In the case of *Produce 101*, the fans themselves cast data to maintain their idols, or the audience chooses their idols through their own behaviors, which is good proof and application of this. In the voting process, every individual is equal. Although their power is small, they are all worthy of respect. The difference in one vote is the difference in ranking [8].

In the course of the program, the production group makes full use of the competition mechanism to capture the audience's attention. From the outset, there is the initial classification of Group A, B, C, D, and F based on the performance of trainees, where A represents the best. And after each round of performance, a certain number of votes would be eliminated, increasing the excitement of the program. The "resurrection match" for the auditioned trainees makes the plot turbulent and unpredictable. With these settings, the audience never feels board. At the same time, if fans want their idols to return to the show, they must buy more votes to vote for their idols. In this way, the program group can also maximize revenue.

In addition to using the fierce competition system to create topics, the program is also good at manipulating audience empathy towards trainees' personalities and stories. Take ChaoYue Yang, a member of the winners' group, as an example. Despite her sweet appearance, she is from a poor family and barely has prior experience in singing and dancing. The production team created a so-called "koi" character for her, with koi being a symbol of good luck in traditional Chinese culture. Though her performance is neither

satisfactory nor professional, she was always lucky enough to enter the next rounds and even made her debut with a high ranking in the finale. Somehow, seems to be a representative of most ordinary girls with a below-average level of capabilities as well as poor family background. But most of these girls are not lucky enough to have the opportunity to stand on a big stage to let everyone know them. So they show great empathy towards Chaoyue Yang and form a particular group of fans of her. Then the Misattribution of the Arousal effect gradually began to play [9]. This effect means that people will interpret the physiological response of encountering a stimulus as a heart-beat and produce affection for someone. Here, the audience will misunderstand regret for their own situation as pity for Chaoyue Yang, and gradually like her. They put their desire to succeed in changing their destiny on Chaoyue Yang, and spare no effort to vote for her, help her debut successfully, and support her career. The use of the Misattribution of Arousal effect greatly improves the stickiness of the audience, so they continue to pay attention to the program, and then vote through consumption. Even if the show is over, they will still support Chaoyue Yang's other commercial activities.

In addition to the audience's empathy, the production team also makes good use of the audience's rebellious psychology. Wang Ju, who made her final debut, is a good example. Typically, her appearance does not meet the requirements for female idols by mainstream standards, but after the program team presented these to the public through a series of conflicts and narratives, some people made up their minds to vote for Wang Ju. This is actually consumer products under the action of Personalization or the Smallest Marginal Difference. In modern society, some people pursue the differences brought about by individual differences. As Riesman writes, 'The product now in demand is neither a staple nor a machine; it is a personality[10].'

Similarly, driven by this kind of psychology, fans will spend a lot of time and money on Wang Ju to achieve their pursuit. The contrast with the so-called women's team standard can also easily create topics and attract attention so that the program can achieve commercial benefits.

## **2.4 High-frequency appearance after the talent show**

After the talent show, the 11 trainees who made their debut successfully formed the women's idol group Rocket Girls 101. The time limit is 2 years for the group, so the agency company has to realize the greatest commercial values out of their full 2-year schedules. In addition to participating in many reality shows one after another, they also release EPs or albums. The sales of the album "Bump" have exceeded 15 million. This is the result of consumer capitalism under the promotion of the fan economy. Normally, a consumer's demand is an album. But fans have incentives to upgrade the group's ranking in the music charts by purchasing more, making consumption greater than actual demand. In addition, lists of purchases would be released. And there will be a psychology of comparison within the fan community. Like the previous music charts, the operators also reveal the list of purchases, which also manipulates consumers' actual demand. The agency company has created a lot of income through the online music platform of digital media.

In addition to the income on the album, there is advertising income. The sponsoring brand uses the celebrity effect to increase sales, and the capital uses this to earn advertising expenses. In the interview, the interviewee once discussed whether she would buy some things she doesn't need because of idol endorsements. The answer I got was that she would buy unnecessary somethings that have potential usage. It can be seen that the fan economy will indeed greatly increase the revenue of the brand side. To make better use of fans mentality, brands usually market activities to manipulate consumer demand. In fact, this kind of advertising with celebrities as the main content has surpassed its usefulness. It aims to use the fan economy to generate income. The focus of the brand is only on sales, while the focus of consumers is whether they can provide support for their favorite celebrities [11]. For example, some brands will produce “merch” which are exclusive products featuring celebrities, and will open and hold lucky draws when the sales volume reaches a certain level. At this time, in order to unlock the merch, fans' irrational consumption behaviors go beyond their control, and the operators will maximize their profits. In summary, the fan economy indeed promotes consumer capitalism.

### **3 Pros and Cons of the Application of digital media in the fan economy**

From the analysis of the above case, we can intuitively see the positive role of the diversification of digital media in promoting the fan economy. The multi-digital media platform's user base can make pre-publicity effective and enable capital to use the fan economy to obtain great benefits.

But it is undeniable that the popularization of digital media and the excessive use of the fan economy has also brought some negative effects to society. In the interview, we discussed whether she would quarrel with others on social platforms for idols. The answer given by the interviewee was that if the other fan group made excessive remarks, she would list evidence to refute other fans. This is already a very gentle treatment of speech. In the past two years, there have been countless quarrels, large and small, on Weibo alone. This is a threat to social stability. At this time, the convenience feature of Weibo becomes easy to slander and criticize some actors or TV series that one does not like. This has also caused some well-connected actors in the entertainment industry to dare not talk in public, just because their two fans cannot coexist peacefully.

In the fan economy, there are two dimensions, one is the idols, and the other is the fans. Fans, as consumers, contribute purchasing power and are positive about the commercial value of their idols. This has caused some fans to interfere with idols' normal lives too much. For example, some fans are unable to accept their idol's personal life, and there is even an unwritten rule in the entertainment industry that for actors who rely more on fans, having a love affair is equivalent to unemployment. Some fans were dissatisfied with the script chosen by their idols and boycotted their idols to appear in a certain TV series. Actors and their entertainment companies rely on the purchasing power of fans to prove their commercial value, so they have to consider the feelings of

their fans. Nonetheless, fans are not professionals after all, and sometimes just rely on their own likes and dislikes, which will affect the development of actors.

Furthermore, the consequence of excessive capital use of the fan economy for profit will result in a waste of social resources. In some audition shows, because sponsors sell milk products, the rule of the show is that only the buyers can get the voting code inside the cap of the milk bottle and vote for the trainees. Some fan groups dedicate to fundraising to buy milk in large quantities and then dump the milk in boxes after getting the bottle caps. This is a huge waste of social resources and extreme disrespect for labor. In the interview, we also highlighted this phenomenon and resisted it. The Chinese government has issued relevant laws and regulations to ban the talent show and prohibit the talent show from setting up a costly voting link. And also gradually canceled the Weibo rankings, sparing no effort to reduce the waste of social resources caused by excessive use of the fan economy [12].

#### **4 Future of talent show in China**

The success of Produce 101 seems to have become an irreproducible case. The interviewee believes that China's talent show market has now passed its peak and is about to usher in a trough. Although with the development of time, the proportion of digital media in daily life will become larger and larger, and more forms will appear. However, the decline is inevitable. On the one hand, with the explosion of Produce 101, various types of talent shows have emerged one after another for several years. But in fact, China's entertainment industry does not have enough trainees sources, because the quality of trainees is largely determined by the training time, and frequent talent shows every year result in less training time. On the other hand, the Chinese government has explicitly banned the behavior of spending money to vote, which has greatly reduced the income of talent shows. The lack of profit for advertisers will also reduce the investment interest. Without large-scale capital investment in the early stage, usually there will be no good talent show.

#### **5 Conclusion**

All in all, the combination of different forms of digital media and fan economy can indeed achieve huge benefits. Whether it is the basic user convenience provided by the initial publicity, the social platform provided by the mid-term operation, and the later use of peripheral advertisements, digital media are indispensable. But at the same time, excessive use of the convenience of digital media will have the opposite effect and bring unstable factors to social harmony. We need to use the positive side of digital media to develop the fan economy, but excessive abuse inevitably generates negative effects.

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