



Chinese fandoms on Weibo: devotion and aggression

Ruoxin Yang*

School of Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT, United Kingdom

E-mail: M121r2y@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract. Sina Weibo is one of the popular social media sites in China. It boasts millions of users. Digital social media can easily bring together fans from different geographical areas on the same platform and can turn their actions into a digital presentation that can be recorded and disseminated. This paper looks at the Chinese fandom on Weibo. The fans show their devotion and aggression by giving their favourite idols unrestricted amounts of time and money, as well as by defending them with very violent methods like verbal abuse and reporting. This is a result of the rank's construction escalating fan rivalry and the idols' implied endorsement of its inclusion. Fandoms that are so devoted and aggressive must be discouraged by idols, social media platforms, and even the government since it is bad for fans' own mental health and the growth of a peaceful online community. Fans themselves must maintain reason. Overall, this study supports the notion that it takes the efforts of several parties to create an organised fan base successfully.

Keywords: fandoms, Weibo, Chinese fandoms, social media.

1 Introduction

Official Chinese statistics estimate that China's population accounts for around 18% of the world's total population, with Internet users accounting for 74.4% of the total population [1, 2]. Being a relatively limited Internet market with a significant number of Internet users, China's Twitter-like social media site Weibo is building a distinct online social environment. Due to its "trending rankings," users utilise Weibo not just as a social networking tool but also as a key source of news. Hence, Weibo has become a "press conference" for a variety of entertainment enterprises. China's idol business has entered a period of fast growth due to the influence of Korean pop culture. Despite the absence of a systematic "assembly line" like in South Korea, the idol business in China has been expanding significantly. As a result, there is an excess of idols relative to the public's scarcity of resources [3, 4]. In order to maximise benefits, such resources will be allocated to well-known artists. How can these otherwise obscure artists become famous? Businesses appear to have made all efforts possible. What, then, can they do as fans? The answer is provided by the idol's fans: they have a strict discipline, even a hierarchy, "Kong Ping" (artificially manipulating the trend of public opinion by boosting the comments in favour of the idol through likes), "La Cai" (disparaging other idols

© The Author(s) 2023

S. Yacob et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of the 2023 7th International Seminar on Education, Management and Social Sciences (ISEMSS 2023)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 779, https://doi.org/10.2991/978-2-38476-126-5_26

to sell (to sell their idol by putting down other idols)), and "Fan Hei"(Report statements against their idols) for their idol ^[5]. They devote a great deal of time and even money to their favourite celebrities, invading the social media "battlefield" like an "internet army." Due to the relatively closed nature of the Chinese Internet market, there is a relative lack of international research on the fan base on Weibo. What is undeniable, however, is that this community is huge. Therefore, it is necessary to regulate and study such a huge group.

The subject of this research paper is to discuss the behaviour of Chinese fans on social media platforms. This article will use the concept of 'digital labour' by Fuchs, C and Sevignani, S as a theoretical framework. The term "digital labour" refers to the unpaid creation of content by ordinary users on blogs, wikis and other content-sharing platforms, from which the dominant capital makes a profit. What are the concrete manifestations of the aggressiveness and devotion of Chinese idol fans on the social platform Weibo? What is the impact of fan polarisation on online society? This is the direction that this paper wishes to study and explore. This paper will first explore the phenomenon of Chinese Weibo fans' devotion to their idols, the reasons behind it, and the implications for the fan base and the entertainment industry. Secondly, it looks at the aggressive nature of the fan base and its causes and impact on the entertainment industry and society. Finally, the article will make recommendations for regulating Weibo fans in China.

2 The devotion of Chinese fandoms on Weibo

In the article by Yin and Xie (2021), a Chinese fan was quoted as saying, "Since other idols' admirers in my vicinity are already doing it, I have no option but to participate. Your idol will fail if he does not have such fan backing." Even though they are aware that their behaviours are "wrong," they are compelled to participate in the "game" to display their adoration for their idols ^[5]. Its 'participatory' culture fosters a 'nurture' for their idols. This kind of nurturing is similar to a mother raising a child: when the child achieves something, there is a sense of achievement as a mother.

In order to better explain how a fan becomes a devotee of the idol step by step, "Chaohua" would be introduced as a module specific to Weibo. Chaohua, as distinct from a regular hashtag, uses a double "#" notation pattern, i.e., #hashtag# ^[6]. Most literature translations will refer to it as a super hashtag or super topic, but it should be studied as a forum. Users can own and monitor the Chaohua by requesting; the corporation evaluates these requests and answers within three days. If a person owns a Chaohua, they have access to a wide range of exclusive features, provided that the hashtag remains active. In addition, when a "Chaohua" is built, the members in it need to maintain a minimum of one post per week. Otherwise, the "Chaohua" will be logged off ^[7].

Chaohua serves as a nurturing base for fans who play the role of mothers. The reason for this stem first and foremost from the underlying computing logic of Chaohua developed by Sina. An official system of growth has been developed to give a visual presentation of data on the fans' sense of upbringing. It is related to Heat value, which is the activity level. Activity includes daily check-ins, posting within Chaohua,

retweeting, commenting, and liking posts with Chaohua on them, among other activities (shown in table 1).

Table 1. Sina Chaohua Rating System ^[7]

Ranking	Upgrade criteria
Silver 1	Last week's heat value reached 5,000
Silver 2	Last week's heat value reached 10,000
Silver 3	Last week's heat value reached 20,000
Golden 1	Last week's heat value reached 40,000
Golden 2	Last week's heat value reached 80,000
Golden 3	Last week's heat value reached 150,000
Diamond 1	Last week's heat value reached 300,000
Diamond 2	Last week's heat value reached 600,000
Diamond 3	Last week's heat value reached 1,200,000

The higher the level of promotion, the more privileges Chaohua members will enjoy. These virtual privileges are rewards given to fans by Sina. Unusual permissions make fans swoon. Even if these rewards do not bring them substantial benefits in real life, they give fans spiritual satisfaction. In order to receive such virtual rewards, fans struggle to post using Chaohua. Especially when it comes to the celebrity's promotional period, according to Yin and Xie's research, they spend one to two hours on their daily 'digital labour' ^[5]. Fans spend so much time and do everything they can to promote their idols. Something that should have been done by the employees of the entertainment companies who are given the salaries, but now the fans are picking up the slack. What do fans get out of it? It is also worth noting that celebrity/official access to Chaohua and interaction boosts more points ^[7]. This rule encourages celebrities to enter the community and interact with fans and, in fact, raises the expectation that fans will receive something in return. When their posts are more likely to be seen by their favourite idols, they are more likely to post to get a different satisfaction from interacting, which refers to the interaction with their idols like friends that others do not have but they do. According to Hill, it is a digital bond that the idols are deterritorialised while simultaneously attracting admirers, thus contributing to the multiplication and reproduction of emotional experience boundaries ^[8].

Another important point to note is the "Chaohua Hosts". Each Chaohua can have three moderators to manage the Chaohua ^[7], a position mostly held by the "Fentou (Fans' key of leader)", who are usually a team. They retweet the tweets of celebrities and their studios, update the news about the celebrities and launch campaigns to support the idols. They may also be in contact with their idol's company to get advance information about their idol's schedule so that they can organise the fans to cooperate with their idol's promotional efforts. In this way, a fan management model, similar to a pyramid scheme, is formed: the company passes on their needs to "Fentou"; the 'Fentou' then uses specific brainwashing words to promote to fans in order to control them and help them achieve either publicity or attacks on their opponents. However, the fans are not as well controlled as they think they are. Once these brainwashing tactics cause a rebellion among fans, it can also affect the idols themselves ^[9]. In 2018, it was a surprise

to many that Kris Wu's album topped several popular rankings, including iTunes (Borak, 2020). Later, it was uncovered that his admirers utilised Weibo to establish a step-by-step plan for boosting him. Since then, Weibo's administration has sought answers to these coordinated operations on its site. In addition, he received much ridicule: some Chinese netizens said that Kris and his fans were "disgracefully thrown abroad"^[10, 11].

As mentioned above, both the act of fans charting for their idols and the act of signing in daily is a form of "digital labour". Digital labour is a term that has been central to discussions within the sphere of the Internet's political economy. The fundamental argument in this discussion is that the predominant capital accumulation model of contemporary corporate Internet platforms is based on the exploitation of users' unpaid labour, who engage in the creation of content and the use of blogs, social networking sites, wikis, microblogs, and content sharing sites for fun, and in these activities create value that is central to profit generation^[12]. In this case, retweets and attention from fans are actually an asset. Moreover, they "donate" these assets to their idols for free. It is not that they are unaware of the value of their 'digital labour'; on the contrary, they are proud of the value they create for their favourite idols. Moreover, the existence of the list allows their value to be quantified, which in turn urges them to perform unpaid work in order to surpass the previous one or not to be surpassed by the one who comes after. The 'wealth' they create not only benefits their idols and is harvested by capital. In addition, their focus on enhancing the rankings created by the platform also profits the platform side as the platform gets loyal users. Therefore, platforms create various ranks to gain profit to urge fans to vote. This is not really a good thing for idols, on the one hand, as the need for fans to vote for several lists means they need to spend more events and energy, which can lead to them losing enthusiasm for their idols. On the other hand, the ranks are artificially manipulated by fans, which means that when someone is famous enough, or when fans are keen enough to help their idol get fixed at the top of a rank, the rank becomes more about 'enthusiasm' than the rank itself. As a result, a powerful person is buried in the ranks rather than being able to find out what makes him or her tick. So they had to join the ranks of those who voted for the ranks in order to be seen. More and more people are joining the poll ranking, which also means that it will take more time and experience to get to the top, which will enter a vicious circle.

Taken together, fans who are addicted to giving everything they have to their idols can bring many pitfalls. Too much devotion to their idols takes up much of their time and costs much money. Such ill-advised spending can lead to tragedy. According to Wang's report, Yang Lijuan's father felt a huge burden on his life because his daughter was spending too much money to chase her idol and eventually chose to commit suicide^[13]. In addition to the damage that excessive celebrity following can do to a family, it can also be a bad influence on the future of society - the young adults. According to the data portrait of an idol fan in China, the age of the fans is highest in the 15-20 and 20-25 age groups. It is true that groupies are an outlet for their stress and emotions. However, with the brainwashing and manipulation of entertainment companies and Fentous, as well as the tacit approval of their idols, these young fans are gradually losing their judgement. They become "weapons" to be used by capital and their favourite idols^[14, 15].

3 The aggression of Chinese fandoms on Weibo

As the article mentioned above, the fan base is devout to their idols. They are like devotees, defending and supporting their "gods". So, when their "gods" are denigrated, they fight back as if they have been offended. This characteristic would have been more often seen in football fans, so the article wants to borrow from Knapton et al.'s research on the psychology of football stars' fans to explore the aggressiveness of fans on Weibo.

In Knapton et al.'s article, the football "fan" is someone who follows the football team's games and regularly attends or at least observes matches from a distance (e.g., in a pub or at home). It is usual to differentiate between "fair weather" and "die-hard" supporters, with the latter basing their everyday life and relationships around football, such as by scheduling their workweek around the hours of their club's football matches. It seems logical to assume that diehard football fans are more likely to engage in spectator violence, given that they tend to have a strong attachment to their team and that strong identification is associated with spectator violence ^[16]. As mentioned above, celebrity fans dedicate their time and money to their favourite celebrities, and this dedication brings with it a strong sense of identification with the celebrity that drives them to be aggressive. Supporters who see that their identity is endangered (or strengthened) are prone to experience emotions that might result in a lack of self-control ^[17].

One of the more notable examples of fan aggression on Weibo is the "227" incident involving fans of Xiao Zhan and critics. In China, it is against the law to distribute pornographic works. However, there is a grey area, and "Archive of Our Own (hereinafter "Ao3")" as a website outside of China is not regulated by the government. As a result, numerous authors of fan fiction produce limited works on this website. The incident began when a Xiao fan resented the limited fan fiction created by the author of "Ao3" and organised other followers to report the site to the Chinese authorities for obscenity. China consequently banned "Ao3" as a result. As "Ao3" is not only a site for Xiao fans to write fan fiction but also a place where other fan fiction can be viewed, the decision infuriated other fans. As of March 2023, the Ao3 website has over 56,900 fandoms, 5,584,000 users and 10,830,000 works ^[18]. In addition, while Ao3 does not prevent controversial portrayals such as rape/incest, as the site insists on "maximum inclusivity", they do require authors of fan fiction to provide content warnings for their work, such as graphic depictions containing violence, rape, underage, etc. ^[19, 20]. This means that Xiao Zhan's fans chose to read the story even though they knew it might include uncomfortable content, and after discovering the uncomfortable content, they used their call to arms to gather other fans together to report the site. Xiao's fans and other fans have engaged in numerous online "wars." These include but are not limited to insulting each other, boycotting Xiao's endorsement brand, and even reporting each other to the point where both accounts have been banned from Weibo ^[21]. It appears that the essence of this event is cyber violence under the guise of justice and that the illogical communication in cyber violence has led to an imbalance in the environment of public opinion. In this, various fan groups attack each other. When one person throws out his opinion on the matter, he receives numerous irrational comments. Furthermore, as Xiao's fans have pioneered "reporting", each fan will start snapping at each other's words when they disagree, finding loopholes and using the reporting function. The

underlying cause of the broke up among the fans was Xiao's initial refusal to respond. If Xiao and his team had tried to discourage and restrain fans at the start of this 'whistleblowing' feast, the 'war' would not have lasted so long - it continues to this day, with 'boycott' comments still being seen when Xiao endorses a product.

4 Discussion on fan specification methods

As mentioned in the previous article, platforms may create various ranks to gain profit to urge fans to vote. In order to rectify the fan voting chaos and combat capital harvesting of the fan economy, China issued a policy in August 2021 requiring the abolition of celebrity artist lists, optimising and adjusting ranking rules, strictly prohibiting the presentation of messages that lead fans to abuse each other, and other measures, requiring the abolition of all ranking lists involving individual celebrity artists or combinations and strictly prohibiting new or disguised online individual lists and related products or functions^[22]. In this case, the fans' frenzy of voting for their idols has eased.

In addition to the efforts made by the Chinese government and authorities to eradicate negative and obsessive fandom, social media site creators are also tugging in the same direction. As of September 2011, the country's biggest online platforms, e.g. Bilibili, Weibo, and Tiktok, had pledged to crack down on immoral performers^[23]. It has been demonstrated that certain celebrities led to the emergence of undesirable behaviours among their followers. In addition, many followers were discovered to have begun idolising the celebrities, indicating that they are willing to injure themselves for the sake of the stars. Thus, social media platforms such as Sina Weibo have vowed to oversee the entertainment sector in China to guarantee that celebrities convey the correct ideals to their audience. This legislation would monitor celebrity behaviour, and in the event of a celebrity behaving in an unethical manner, they would lose their appeal on social media platforms.

These findings suggest several courses of action for how to regulate idol fans so that they develop in a healthy way. Firstly, social networking sites should be governed. Secondly, celebrities should be in the vanguard of advising their fans, given that hostility makes the online environment hostile. Finally, the government should also control online platforms like Weibo in order to mitigate the negative consequences that celebrities participating in unlawful activities may have on their admirers. Finally, fans should be sensible in their interactions with internet sites.

5 Conclusion

This essay has discussed the devotion and aggression of Chinese fandoms on Weibo. This is demonstrated by their unrestrained dedication of time and money to their favourite idols and their use of extremely aggressive tactics such as reporting and verbal abuse to defend their idols. This is a result of the creation of the list increasing the competitiveness between fans and the tacit approval of the idols themselves in it. Such devotion and aggression of fandoms are not conducive to their own mental health and the development of a harmonious online society and therefore need to be discouraged

by idols, social media platforms and even the government. Fans themselves need to remain rational. Overall, this study strengthens the idea that building an organised fan base is not something that can be achieved by the efforts of just one party. It is unfortunate that the study did not include a comparison of data on the practical aspects of advising fans, as this paper focuses more on the causes, which could be the focus of future research.

References

1. People's Daily. (2021, May 12). We are still the world's most populous country, accounting for approximately 18% of the global population. Retrieved March 29 from http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2021-05/12/content_5605914.htm.
2. Xinhua News Agency. (2022, August 31). The number of Internet users in China reached 1.051 billion. Retrieved March 29 from http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-08/31/content_5707605.htm.
3. Choi, J., & Malanga, R. (2014). *K-pop - The International Rise of the Korean Music Industry* (1st ed.). Routledge.
4. Frost & Sullivan. (n.d.). The "Made in China" idol industry is ready to take off. Retrieved March 29 from <http://legacy.frostchina.com/?p=8269>.
5. Yin, Y., & Xie, Z. (2021). Playing platformized language games: Social media logic and the mutation of participatory cultures in Chinese online fandom. *New Media & Society*, 0(0), 14614448211059489.
6. Sina Weibo. (n.d.). Encyclopedia MDPI | Scholarly Community. Retrieved March 29 from <https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/32486>.
7. Sina Entertainment. (n.d.). Rules for creating a ChaoHua. Retrieved March 29 from <https://huati.weibo.cn/about/super>.
8. Hills, M. 2015. *From Para-social to Multisocial Interaction: Theorizing Material/Digital Fandom and Celebrity In: A Companion to Celebrity*. Hoboken, NJ, USA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc: 463–482.
9. China Comment. (2020, July 29). Survey on teenage groupies: Be wary of rice circle thinking eroding mainstream values. Xinhua Net. Retrieved March 29 from http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-06/29/c_1126170695.htm.
10. Borak, M. (2020, July 20). Chinese social platform tries to make celebrity stans less toxic. *South China Morning Post*. Retrieved March 29 from <https://www.scmp.com/abacus/culture/article/3093941/weibo-trying-put-stop-chinas-extreme-celebrity-fan-culture>.
11. Shih, G. (2018). Ariana Grande fans accuse Chinese star Kris Wu of using bots for rankings. Retrieved March 29 from <https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/music/2018/11/08/ariana-grande-fans-accuse-chinese-star-kris-wu-of-using-bots-for-rankings.html>.
12. Fuchs, C. & Sevignani, S. (2013). What Is Digital Labour? What Is Digital Work? What's their Difference? And Why Do These Questions Matter for Understanding Social Media? *TripleC*, 11(2): 237–293.
13. Wang, V. (2007). Father kills himself chiding Andy Lau's indifference to his daughter. Retrieved March 29 from https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/entertainment/2007-03/29/content_839726.htm.
14. Zhou, W., Zhang, Y., Li, Y., Sun, Q., & Yang, Z. (2023). The Mechanism of CP fandom Behaviors among Chinese Young Adults: A Grounded Theory Study. *Behavioral Sciences*, 13(1): 30.

15. He, G., Pu, Q., & Wang, H. (2022). Characteristics and Culture of Fan Based from the Perspective of Big Data. *Advances in Social Sciences*, 11: 524.
16. Knapton, H., Espinosa, L., Meier, H. E., Bäck, E. A., & Bäck, H. (2018). Belonging for violence: Personality, football fandom, and spectator aggression. *Nordic Psychology*, 70(4): 278-289.
17. Dimmock, J. A., & Grove, J. R. (2005). Relationship of Fan Identification to Determinants of Aggression. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 17(1): 37-47.
18. Archive of our own. (n.d.). Archive of our own. <https://archiveofourown.org/>
19. Minkel, E. (2018). The online free speech debate is raging in fan fiction, too: The conversation is as old as fan-fic itself. Retrieved November 8 from <https://www.theverge.com/2018/11/8/18072622/fanfic-ao3-free-speech-censorship-fandom>.
20. Baker-Whitelaw, G. (2013). Unpacking the unofficial fanfiction census. Retrieved July 15 from <https://www.dailydot.com/parsec/fandom/fandom-fanfiction-ao3-tumblr/>.
21. Jing, G. (2022). Research on the misconduct and motivation of Chinese fans from the perspective of field theory--A Case Study of "Xiao Zhan 227 event. *Sichuan Academy of Social Sciences*.
22. News, J. (2021). Weibo removes celebrity Chaohua ranking. Retrieved August 27 from <https://finance.sina.com.cn/tech/2021-08-27/doc-ikqciyzm3936122.shtml>.
23. Global Times. (2021, September 11). Weibo, Douyin among 14 platforms vowing to reject tainted entertainers, clean up irrational fan culture. Retrieved August 27 from <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202109/1233966.shtml>.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

