From Loose Groups to Rigorous Organizations: The Transitional Logic of Chinese Fan Communities from the Perspective of Media Development

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Abstract.

Currently, Chinese fan organizations demonstrate strong internal cohesion and efficient executive force, far exceeding previous fan groups. This article explores the development of Chinese fan communities and finds that the Internet, a new kind of media that breaks through time and space limitations, has caused this change. Firstly, the development of the Internet has made timely interaction between fans possible, strengthening the internal cohesion of fan groups. Besides, the information cocoon brought by personalized recommendation algorithms further makes the fan communities change into homogeneous groups with similar value orientations and high group identification regarding their respective idols. Meanwhile, the flow economy based on the Internet has prompted fan groups to seek ways to achieve efficient data labor, leading to the division of labor within fan groups. As a result, these previously loose fan groups evolve into rigorous organizations with a hierarchical structure, functional division of labor, and institutional norms. The common emotional foundation—is the recognition of idols; the common goal—is creating internet flow for idols; the field of collective action is the internet and social media platforms; and the mechanism of unified action—the hierarchical and functional system makes the current Chinese fan organizations unprecedentedly strong.

Keywords: Internet media; information cocoon; flow economy; structured organization.

1. Introduction

Fan culture has a long history in China. In the past, there was already a large number of fans regarding some actors and singers as their idols. However, nowadays, the form of Chinese fan communities has changed. They are no longer loose groups as they were in the past but rigorous organizations with complicated structures. A term especially used to describe these organizations is „Fan Quan"(fandom). These new organizations are much more powerful than past groups. In recent years, they have caused many social hot events. For example 2019, on the Sina Weibo platform, fans of two Chinese idols, Jay Chou and Kun, engaged in an online battle to compete for first place in the Super Topics ranking for their respective idol. In 2020, Sean Xiao fans reported several works and websites to maintain their idol's image, triggering a large-scale online melee with netizens. In 2023, fans of idol group TFBOYS held parades in the city of Xi'an to celebrate the group's 10th anniversary concert. In those events, these Chinese fan organizations demonstrated strong internal cohesion and efficient executive force far beyond their counterparts in the past, which have sparked widespread public discussion and become an important research topic regarding fan culture.

Research on the generation mechanism of internal cohesion and executive force of Chinese fan organizations mainly focuses on two aspects. One is to explain the generation of their internal cohesion from the perspective of fans' emotional needs. Some scholars believe that the internal cohesion of Chinese fan organizations comes from identification. Transforming from passersby to individual fans and fan organization members is a process from idolization to self-identification and group identification [1]. Furthermore, a fan organization usually strengthens group identification by building interactive platforms and mobilizing its members to participate in various activities, ultimately forming a closely united „interactive community" with collective memory and sharing emotions [1]. In addition, Chinese fan culture has so strong charisma because it is closely related to the current value orientation of Chinese society. Young people in or from small towns face practical difficulties, such as the difficulty of flowing to a higher class in society [2]. As a result, they project their vision onto idols to seek psychological comfort [2]. This „healing" effect of Chinese fan culture is an important reason for its powerful influence and charisma [2]. Another aspect is to analyze the efficient executive force from the perspective of the complicated structure and operational mechanisms within these organizations. The development of fan communities from the traditional media era to the internet

era has shown a scale, configuration, functionalization, and institutionalization trend, ultimately forming orderly, self-managed, and rigorous organizations [3]. Currently, Chinese fan organizations have formed a self-organizing structure consisting of several subsystems and secondary subsystems, including the core „Fen Tou"(influential fans who play a leadership role), the management level, the branch offices, and plenty of ordinary fans [4]. They share the work and cooperate according to the regulations of the affiliated organizations, jointly enhancing the influence of the „Fan Quan" culture [4].

Group identification is indeed an important source of internal cohesion of fan organizations. However, this psychological need also existed in the past, but at that time, no fan organization with strong internal cohesion formed based on this. What are the factors that make the present different from the past? Besides, the hierarchical system and division of labor within fan organizations indeed contribute to their efficient executive force, but what are the reasons why previously loose fan groups with simple structures have evolved into such fan organizations with complicated structures? Existing studies mainly focus on individual aspects. Few studies analyze the reasons for such changes from a holistic perspective. This study attempts to analyze this change from the perspective of the development of social media, outlining the overall process and its reasons for the transition of Chinese fan communities from loose fan groups in the traditional media era to highly cohesive and executive fan organizations in the Internet era.

2. Changes Brought About by Development of Media Technology

2.1 Frequent Interactions and Close Connections

In an era dominated by traditional media such as television, newspapers, and magazines, fans exhibited a dispersed state due to spatial distance limitations. The interactions between fans, especially real-time interactions, were not strong. It was often only during special events, such as idol concerts or meetings, that numerous fans could gather into substantial groups and engage in collective activities. The fan group in the era of traditional media is more of a term than a, strictly speaking, social group, as fans did not have close social interactions with each other.

However, with the development of media technology, the form of fan groups has gradually changed. As McLuhan said, „The medium is the message." The medium carries significant meaning, that is, its important role in changing society. A new kind of medium will create corresponding new ways of life. In 2005, due to the popularity of mobile phones, the TV talent show Super Girl created a new way for fans to express their support for idols, that is, to vote for their idols through mobile text messages, which allowed a large number of fans to participate in the production of idols as well as the competition among them. They help their idols win competitions through various means, including voting for them, going to the show to cheer on them, and even distributing promotional materials in multiple cities to promote their idols to the public and invite them to vote for them. In this process, fans have transitioned from passive fans to actively participating, and the fan craze sparked by Super Girl is also considered the beginning of Chinese „Fan Quan" culture [5].

Furthermore, the development and popularity of the Internet have further changed the form of fan groups. As a new kind of medium that has broken through time and space limitations, the Internet allows more and more fans to find people who share a common idol with them through the Internet, which enables the previously dispersed fan individuals to gather together. Meanwhile, timely interactions between fans have also become possible. On the one hand, fans can quickly obtain relevant information about their idols from the Internet. On the other hand, they can communicate whenever and wherever they want through social media platforms such as WeChat groups and QQ groups. The Internet has created technical conditions for frequent interactions and close connections within fan groups, thus laying the foundation for forming more stable fan organizations.

2.2 Two Important Factors: Information Cocoon and Flow Economy

Besides, two other important factors caused by the Internet strengthen interactions within fan communities, ultimately driving the previously loose fan groups to evolve into complicated fan organizations. They are the information cocoon brought by personalized recommendation algorithms and the flow economy in the era of big data.

2.2.1 Information cocoon

On the one hand, the information cocoon further strengthens the internal consistency of Chinese fan communities [6]. The concept „information cocoon" was proposed by American scholar Cass R. Sunstein. It refers to the phenomenon that people often selectively accept information based on their interests and preferences and will finally be confined to a closed information environment like a cocoon. The phenomenon of information cocoons has a long history. However, with the rapid development of the Internet, personalized

recommendation algorithms, which were originally designed to filter, classify, and accurately distribute information, have become accelerators for manufacturing information cocoons in practical applications [7]. Online platforms and smartphone or computer applications of news media can use algorithms to analyze users' preferences and then selectively push information that interests them.

In contrast, users are confined to the information provided by platforms and applications based on their preferences and know very little about the content. As to fans, they often actively search for information about their idols out of their love for them, and they tend to browse the positive information. Gradually, under the influence of personalized recommendation algorithms, they only receive positive information about their idols, further deepening their identification with idols. At the same time, this sense of identification will be further strengthened in interactions with other fans, ultimately forming a homogeneous group with similar value orientations and judgments regarding their idols.

Take Weibo, China's largest online fan culture field, as an example. Firstly, fans often actively follow Weibo accounts related to their idols, such as the idol's official Weibo account, to get the latest news about their idols as soon as possible. Based on this mechanism, the content pushed by their Weibo homepage is often related to their idols. Considering that those Weibo accounts only post content beneficial to idols, fans will see more positive information about idols when using Weibo. Secondly, as an online community for fans to communicate and interact, the Super Topics on Weibo also actively build an information cocoon [8]. Generally speaking, ordinary people who are not fans, even fans whose account level does not meet the requirements, often cannot post in the idol's Super Topics. Instead, they can only browse the posts. This mechanism makes every idol's Super Topics only have one kind of expression: the strong love and recognition of the idol by senior fans. This kind of expression is constantly repeated, which causes the fans' sense of identification with their idols to be further strengthened. Finally, based on this strong sense of identification with their idols, fans form homogeneous groups with a high level of group identification.

2.2.2 Flow economy

On the other hand, the flow economy encourages fan groups to seek mechanisms to achieve more efficient data labor. Many fans, to express their support for their idols, often watch film and television dramas or variety shows in which their idols appear and purchase products endorsed or recommended by them. This means that there are large

potential consumer groups behind the highly popular and influential idols. Therefore, such idols are more popular in the market. They are more likely to obtain development opportunities and resources. In the era of big data, abstract concepts such as popularity and influence are quantified as concrete data, namely flow [9]. The larger the flow of idols, the larger the consumer group behind them, and they are more likely to win the favor of capital and obtain more opportunities and resources. Therefore, to help their idols develop better, fans may take the initiative or create a greater flow for them, requiring a larger scale of and more efficient data labor.

Take Weibo as an example. Weibo has set up multiple rankings for idols to sort their internet flow, such as Super Topic ranking and Star Power Ranking, each with its calculation criteria. These calculation criteria are often complicated and include a variety of indicators. For example, the number of fans on the idol's Weibo account, the number of likes, reposts, and comments on each post, the number of members and content in the idol's Super Topics, the number of views and discussions on articles related to idols, and the number of virtual gifts given by fans have all become indicators for calculating different rankings [10]. Fans work hard to make their idols rank high, which could create a greater probability for them to gain development resources. As the competition between idols is fierce, fans' data labor has to be much more efficient, which requires division of labor and cooperation among fans, driving the loose fan groups to evolve into structured organizations.

2.3 Structured Fan Organizations

As mentioned above, the development and popularization of the Internet, as well as social media, have changed the dispersed situation of fans, providing technical conditions for interactions across time and space, which has made the relationship between members within a fan group closer. Besides, the information cocoon further strengthens members' consistency and group identification. In addition, the flow economy has made the goal of fan group activities clearer, that is, to help idols obtain greater internet flow. To achieve this goal, more efficient data labor is needed. Therefore, the previously simple fan groups changed into complicated fan organizations. The change is manifested in the following three aspects.

Firstly, a hierarchical structure is formed within fan organizations. Usually, a fan organization comprises a decision-making level at the top and an executive level below it [4]. The decision-making level is generally controlled by the company that creates the idol, whose main members are influential fans closely related to the idol's team or direct staff. The main institution

of the executive level is the idol support association. Furthermore, the idol support association will be divided into multiple levels, including the global support association, the national support association, and many city support associations. In addition, each level of the Idol support association also has its hierarchical structure, including the core management team and various executive departments. The work of the management team mainly consists of two parts. On the one hand, it conveys the idol's and related company's intentions to the fans, determining the direction, goals, tasks, and other contents of their actions. On the other hand, it conveys the fans' opinions to the idol team or the company they are affiliated with.

Secondly, a functional division of labor is formed within fan organizations. Currently, fan organizations have formed complicated structures with multiple functional departments. Most large fan organizations have the following departments. (1)Hitting and Voting department: this section is mainly responsible for helping idols achieve good rankings on various ranking lists and voting for them when needed; (2)Support department: this section is mainly responsible for expressing support for idols on site or the Internet when they hold or participate in activities; (3)Propaganda department: this section is mainly responsible for promoting idols, as well as clarifying false information about idols, refuting or eliminating information unfavorable to idols, and so on; (4)Public Welfare department: this section is mainly responsible for participating in some public welfare activities in the name of idols or idol fans to enhance the positive image of idols [11]. In addition, fan organizations will also form multiple working groups based on specific job responsibilities, including art designing groups, copywriting groups, finance groups, data groups, etc. Sometimes, each department has its independent work groups, while sometimes, multiple departments share certain work groups. These departments and working groups perform their respective duties and cooperate to jointly achieve multiple goals, including creating internet flow for their idols.

Thirdly, rules and regulations have been developed within fan organizations. Nowadays, a big fan organization with many members often has normal regulations to manage the members' behaviors. These regulations include guidelines for daily actions, such as the rules that departments should follow when recruiting new members, and temporary rules for special events or dates, such as the posting standards on major national holidays [3]. For example, when Han Lu, a famous Chinese idol, participated in recording a reality show program, his fan organization introduced related regulations that its members should abide by during that period in an online community, Lu Han Bar, where fans interact with each other. The rules mainly included not visiting the program crew, not commenting or reposting the content that might involve related information about the plot or crew, not inquiring about Han Lu's news on social accounts related to cooperative partners, collaborating with the program's promotional plan to promote the show with more hot words [12]. In such a hierarchical operation mode, the internal cohesion of fan organizations is further strengthened, and the executive force is greatly improved, ultimately demonstrating the immense power that the public can feel.

3. Conclusion

Through analysis, this article finds that the development and popularization of the Internet have enabled the previously loose fan groups to change into rigorous fan organizations. With the help of the Internet, a new medium that breaks through time and space limitations, interactions between fans have become more frequent and closer. Besides, the influence of the information cocoon further strengthens the consistency within a fan group. In addition, driven by the flow of the economy, a complicated structure with hierarchy and division of labor has been developed. Then, these Chinese fan organizations gain strong internal cohesion and efficient executive force. For a specific fan organization, its members have a common emotional foundation, which is their recognition of their idol; they also have a common goal, which is to create internet flow for their idol; they also have a field for their collective action, which is the Internet and social media platforms; and they have an efficient mechanism to unify their action as well, which is the hierarchical and functional system. These are why the previously loose fan groups have become so powerful.

In addition, the conclusions of this study can help formulate policies to guide the healthy development of fan organizations. Chinese fan organizations are so powerful that they inevitably have significant impacts on public life, providing them with correct guidance is necessary. Based on the conclusion of this study that the information cocoon and flow economy play important roles in the transition of Chinese fan communities, guidance for their healthy development can be approached from the following aspects. On the one hand, personalized recommendation algorithms should be improved to break the information cocoons, helping fans have an objective understanding of their idols. On the other hand, the problem that entertainment capitals excessively control data power should be solved to avoid more severe adverse

impacts of flow logic on fan organizations, which requires improved supervision of entertainment capitals. Last but not least, education and guidance for young people, who are the main members of fan organizations, are of utmost importance so that they can rationally chase stars rather than blindly worship them. However, these are only some macro directions, and further research on how to implement them is needed.

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