

“Carnival” on the Internet: Research on the Impact of Fan Community Stratification on Fan Economy

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Abstract:

This article uses the big data crawler technology to conduct keyword analyses and word cloud diagram drawings on more than 10,000 pieces of data from Weibo and other Internet platforms, and through a six-month short-term field trip and one-on-one interviews with key groups, the impact of different levels within fan communities on the fan economy is discussed with idols as the core, and it is concluded that the stratification of fan communities based on fan consumption is the main driving force for the development of the fan economy.

Keywords: fan community stratification, fan economy, Internet publicity and marketing

1. Introduction

With the popularization of Web 2.0 technology in the 21st century as well as the development of 3.0 technology that has been continuously improved and upgraded in the later period, communication methods such as the Internet have gradually become popular, and fan culture, which was previously only a branch of youth subculture, has begun to enter the arena of academic research. Whether China’s “star-chasing” research period in the 1990s or the “fan culture” research period after 2000 was ultimately collectively referred to as “fan culture” after 2010 [6]. The booming Internet environment has made this “participatory culture” superimposed and integrated with various disciplines such as communication, sociology, economics and management. This article attempts to use literature research methods, online field surveys and other research methods, based on the perspective of the carnival theory, to study fan community stratification from the aspects including socio-economic environment, fan community development paths, other aspects of communication methods, publicity and marketing ideas, as well as price positioning and others. The new media and new changes in the fan economy are guided by the new media background. At present, more research in society either simply analyzes the Internet celebrity or fan economy based on the carnival theory, or separately studies reasons for the stratification of fan communities. However, fewer people combine this theory with the stratification of fan communities to deepen or carry out detailed investigations or summaries of practical related issues such as the economic development of fans. Based on this, the author used his experience

of actually inspecting the core of a certain fan group for about a year to conduct research through online interviews and summaries, combined with literatures. At the same time, on the premise of complying with relevant laws and regulations of various countries, we use word clouds, Web crawlers and other methods to extract relevant keywords, compare and judge key data on fan economic development, and draw certain reliable conclusions.

2. Literature Review

Zhu Lili (2022) took the “list-making” behavior of fan groups of celebrities such as Jay Chou and Wang Junkai in China as an example, proposing that: “The key factor in the rise of fan culture comes from the combined efforts of multiple subjects. On top of this, fan groups have expanded into a large-scale Internet society with a high degree of organization, action and influence, whose flow cultural politics and circle cultural politics are deeply tied to many current social problems, refreshing the mainstream society and academic circles in both positive and negative aspects, as well as the perception of fan culture and fan communities [1].” It is also believed that the platform further promotes the transformation of users as fans into the role of “prosumers”, gradually integrating the roles of producers and consumers. Henry Jenkins made his own judgment by dialectically looking at the pros and cons of the Web 2.0 era: it not only demonstrates individual creativity, but also strongly builds collective collaboration and collective wisdom. This potential is what he calls “fan activism”. From the summary and discussion of Web 2.0, this type of behaviorism will continue promoting and expanding in the subsequent upgraded and progressive 3.0 era, and such be-

havior is also the main driving force for the development of the fan economy. This kind of collective collaboration, in the context of the empowerment of social media and platform capital, gradually deflates fans and forms communities on an equal footing. (Ju Chunyan, Yang Xuan) The development of communities has gradually formed a pyramid-like structure of fan communities, where fans have also been stratified and differentiated, which has had varying degrees of impact on the development of the fan economy^[3]. Yan Daocheng and Tan Kuolin also analyzed the carnival theory of the former Soviet scholar Bakhtin in detail, who believed that the real “carnival” was not to copy the medieval carnival rituals, but should be a kind of criticism and compensation for realities^[4]. Therefore, after transforming the carnival theory into a phenomenon, Bakhtin raised the life phenomenon to the level of human freedom and liberation to interpret it, which meant that we should adhere to the healthy core of carnival culture, that is, “pursue individual life freedom and advocate individual liberation.” Combined with the current actual situation, the Internet fan community level is a community with clear and strict group norms and division of responsibilities. Henry Jenkins, Zhang Lin and others conducted a comparative study between “text poachers” and Chinese fan culture. They also believed that the main body of the fan economy must be cautious about the particularity of individual cases, including special historical contexts, as well as specific societies, cultures and environments. From the localization of products to consumers’ reverse adaptation to products, it can be seen that fans in each country have their own “circle” structure.

3. The Classification of Fan Communities from the Perspective of Carnival

3.1 .Core Fans

This refers to a group that has a very high status in a fan group, where they have a large number of followers, strong appeal, and reads a lot of blog posts. They can also control the flow of information and become opinion leaders of the fan group. They are “active in interpersonal communication networks, often providing information, opinions or suggestions to others while exerting personal influence on them”^[5]. They are usually the leading bloggers among fans, accounting for less than 0.01% of them, some of whom will hold important positions in some official fan organizations. Joining this tier requires meeting one or more of the following conditions:

(1) Purchase a large number of celebrity albums (or official peripheral products, roughly ranking in the top 0.1% of the overall fan consumption, and thus be selected to take exclusive photos at autograph sessions (autograph blog-

gers)

(2) Timely forward positive news about stars on domestic and foreign websites, or photos and videos taken by other overseas fans. (resource bloggers)

(3) Pick up stars at airports, buy front-row tickets for concerts, participate in group music festivals and other activities, or take and upload photos in a timely manner. (offline bloggers)

Such bloggers need to spend a lot of materials and energy, who not only have enough time to participate in various activities of stars, but also spend a lot of money. Among fans, such behavior is called “money power”. But at the same time, the spiritual rewards received by such fans are also extremely rich, not only to obtain the recognition or gratitude of stars, but more importantly, the spiritual satisfaction brought by the great appeal among “fellow fans” (similar fans). Such appeal will better drive the consumption desire of other fans in later stages, thereby achieving the feedback effect and increasing the average purchasing power of the stars’ fans. Such behavior will be explained in detail later.

3.2 .Active Fans

Active fans here refer to those with a large number of fans. In addition to a high degree of participation in celebrity activities, they often have outstanding expertise in a certain aspect, certain appeal, as well as a large number of blog readers and high relevance to the contents. They are usually located at the second level in fan groups, accounting for 1% to 2% of them, who also play a mainstay role in the Internet activities of celebrity fan groups. To join this level, one or more of the following conditions must be met:

They have skills in drawing, photo editing and editing, can reprocess officially-released videos or resources and publish them on online platforms for sharing, thereby promoting the idol groups in addition to enjoying them with other fans.

They publish blog posts about celebrities at a high frequency, with interesting contents and novel perspectives, which gain recognition and love from many fans.

Discover malicious comments about the groups on the Internet as soon as possible and organize fans to report them. Clarify false news or rumors about group members based on facts and restore the stars’ reputation in a timely manner.

This type of bloggers need to have a good grasp of hot topics, a general understanding of the types of contents that fans expect or like, and certain personal skills to combine relevant information about the stars with their own skills to produce high-quality and high-volume secondary-creation blog posts. Because of their originality and

personal style, this type of bloggers will also have more appeal and followers. Like core fans, they can increase the stickiness of mid- and long-range fans to the stars and drive fan consumption.

3.3 .Ordinary Fans

This type of fans will also take practical actions to support their favorite stars, such as attending concerts and buying idols’ peripheral products, etc., but due to their small size, they participate in fan activities more as readers, mainly forwarding official, core and active fans’ blogs. They will also publish original blogs related to idol groups, but the number of readers is relatively small. This level accounts for a large proportion of fans, often accounting for 60-70% of them. Because of the large number of this type of fans, they are often regarded by major companies as main consumer groups of the fan economy.

3.4 .Passerby Fans

This type of fans refer to those who only have a good impression of a star but will not take any actual star-chasing action. This type of fans are the most unstable, who usually do not join, but only occasionally “pass by” or “wait and see”.

The recognition of an idol by others is only the foundation for an individual to become a fan. The key to becoming a fan is to achieve the self-recognition of an identity of “being someone’s fan”. In other words, to become a fan, an individual must go through a process of recognition from others to self-recognition^[2].

3.5 .Similarities and Differences among Fan Levels

Different fan classes represent more of fans’ identity in a group. The multi-layered structure of internal differentiation of fans makes them have great differences in terms of discourse power and resources, etc. Fans closer to the core are often regarded as “people closer to idols”, and this kind of groups will often have a higher group status through the long-term accumulation of such behavior, thus better meeting their own needs for respect and recognition. Therefore, whether it is core or active fans, their greater appeal and sense of respect motivate the middle- and lower-level fans to invest more financial resources and energy to obtain a qualification as advantage members of higher-status groups. The Chinese often call it “people going to higher places”. *“With the identity of big fans, some fans can be guided and some inappropriate behavior can be corrected.”* Ms. Q (core fan, 23 years old)

4. The Impact of Core and Active Fans on Fan Economy Promotion

The influence of fan levels on fan economy is not only a

“necessary investment” in the process of level promotion, but more importantly, the publicity and influence brought by the influence of such levels. Taking album promotion as an example, based on the relevant keyword information of fan super topic communities on Weibo, the most frequently-appearing words can be captured.

The author used a python crawler program to scrape Weibo posts from 2021 to 2024 with keywords such as “group name” and “album promotion”, and used the “word cloud” system to perform statistical analyses on more than 10,000 data points, sorted them according to the number of times the keywords appearing, processed them into cloud charts, and obtained the following results.



Figure 1 G group micro-blog search term cloud map based on relevancy

In addition to colloquial adjectives such as “beautiful” and “fabulous”, unique aspects such as “style” and “concept” are also the main breakthrough points of fan promotion. In this dataset, there are 4,560 blog posts related to “style” and 2,533 others related to “concept”, which is enough to reflect its importance in publicity. Focusing on the popular blog posts of core and active fans of the G group (based on the standard of more than 10,000 retweets), we found that blog posts would continue transforming in form during communication. Ordinary fans will add a variety of emoticons, change the fonts of individual words, and improve the aesthetics based on the blog contents of core and active fans. In addition, not only blog posts, such copywriting will also appear in the comments of some “marketing accounts” as a promotional function.

Taken together, fan promotions often use current hot topics and hot words to write promotional copies, and increase attention through repeated reposting. Not only that, through the extensive use of obvious emoticons, numbers and other forms, we can catch the attention of “passers-by” in a timely manner during quick browsing. By analyzing the number of blog posts read, we can evaluate and judge

the effectiveness of a copy, then target the blog posts with higher effectiveness and launch on a large scale. Although it will lead to “homogenization” of propaganda, a practicality-reflected repeated exposure is better.

Fans will also pay more attention to the creative design of an album itself during promotion. “The art and design must be good-looking. If it is too conventional, passers-by will not have the desire to buy it. Many fans pay for it.” Ms. T (active fan, 20 years old) “I feel that the good-looking inner pages will make passers-by want to buy it. You can promote this aspect more. For fans, some of the high-quality photo cards have very ‘shocking’ designs, just like scams, and I think that passer-by fans now care more about added value, for example, giving away some small gadgets, which may not increase the cost a lot, but will also make people want to buy it, like taking advantage of the mentality.” Student S (ordinary fan, 16 years old)

“It’s just a self-made idol poster by big fans for promotion, and then some relatively new and funny sentences like ‘control criticism are more eye-catching.” Ms. P (an ordinary fan, 18 years old) is more interested in publicity methods and copywriting. What people choose is to follow the footsteps of core fans as well as copy and paste their copywriting in large sections, which has the effect of “swiping the screen” and “brainwashing”. What’s more, using popular Internet memes to produce videos and put them on short video platforms such as TikTok are also a better means of publicity, so I won’t go into details here.

5. Summary

Core fans, active fans and “fan sites” have certain influence on the fan circle, which can provide various information and resources about idols, drive the purchasing intention of ordinary and passer-by fans, as well as create a variety of publicity methods. Whether core, active, ordi-

nary or passer-by fans will consume star-related products. On the contrary, consumption level is the simplest way to become a fan, which is a major driving force for the fan economy to gradually occupy the mainstream of Internet consumption, and is also the main basis for the stratification of fan communities.

As the trend of “younger fans” continues developing, whether the “consumerism” of fans or the “competitive mentality” and “impulsive consumption” hidden in the promotion of levels is possible to lead minors with incomplete physical and mental development astray.

However, core and active fans, as the most influential and appealing levels in a fan group, need to use their identities and influence in a timely manner to guide fans and correct inappropriate behavior, rather than just playing a positive role in celebrity promotion. At the same time, we also have the obligation to regulate and correct the current irrational star-chasing phenomena among minors.

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