

A Study on the Motivation of Differentiation of Fans in the Background of Celebrity Misbehavior

Lingjia Chen^{1,a,*}

*¹Institute of Communication and Journalism, South China University of Technology, Guangzhou
Higher Education Mega Centre, Guangzhou, China
a. 202030580013@mail.scut.edu.cn*

**corresponding author*

Abstract: With the development of the Internet and new media, fandom culture has made great progress in China. However, under the overall prosperity, individual celebrity misbehavior has set off a heated debate on the Internet, triggering a relatively apparent phenomenon of fan behavior differentiation. Therefore, studying the motivation of fans' behavior differentiation has practical needs and educational value. This research can not only make contributions to fan economy, value cultivation, and social stability but also make a new interpretation of the celebrity-fan relationship from a more micro and localized perspective. Based on a systematic literature review and in-depth interviews with fans, the research explored the motivation of fan behavior differentiation from the perspective of self-identity and fan economy. The research found that self-identity and fan economy provide a reasonable explanation for the differentiation of fan behavior under the corresponding conditions, which is the key direction to solving the dilemma of fans.

Keywords: fandom culture, fan behavior, fan economy, self-identity, motivation research

1. Introduction

The change in the celebrity-fan relationship is accompanied by the evolution of media technology. From the worship of celebrities in the era of mass media to participatory star-making in the era of the Internet, the relationship has become more dynamic. On this basis, the Fandom culture has made great progress in China. According to *China's Pan-Entertainment Industry Market In-Depth Analysis and Investment Strategy Consulting Research Report from 2020 to 2025* by the CRIN, the number of Chinese fans is over 500 million currently. The pan-entertainment industry, with an annual market value of 90 billion, covers multiple forms of entertainment, such as literature, animation, film, television, music, games, performances, and derivatives. Fans and the fan economy have become a social force that cannot be ignored [1].

Although the overall trend is booming, there is still individual misbehavior. Celebrities usually need to maintain excellent persona to meet the needs of fans' self-identity and emotional sustenance. Essentially, celebrities have the same selfish desires as the public. However, compared with ordinary people, they will face more temptation and attraction in a flashy social class, thus, they are more prone to "misbehave". Today, with the rapid development of the new media and entertainment industry, any information related to celebrities is straightforward to be published on the Internet, causing heated discussion. For example, idol Yifan Wu was sentenced and deported on November

25, 2022, for the crime of rape and mass immorality. Before the court made the final decision, the Internet was the main battlefield of the confrontation between the two sides. The victim woman once posted evidence on Sina Weibo platform, triggering 657,000 comments. Yifan Wu's previous reply also triggered more than 1 million comments. In addition, from 2020 to 2022, more than 20 A-list celebrities issued apology statements on Sina Weibo. Internet users who were keen to learn about relevant information ridiculed themselves as "onlookers", and also called 2020 "the year of ruining celebrities' public persona". Celebrity misbehavior has become a common entertainment industry phenomenon.

Such a large-scale celebrity misbehavior event will inevitably have impacts on the fans. Obvious differentiation can be seen in their behaviors: some fans firmly maintain their idol, others choose to unfollow rationally, and some go to the other extreme, which is an accusation. Why did fans make such a choice under the double attack of the collapse of idol belief and the pressure of external public opinions? What is their intrinsic motivation to act? Does this bring a deeper interpretation of the "celebrity-fan" relationship? These are questions worth exploring in the field of fan culture.

Meanwhile, as a group that can cause significant social impact, studying the motivation of fans' behavior differentiation has practical needs and academic value. In terms of economy, the strong purchasing desire and power of fans are the cornerstones of constructing the fan economy. A thorough understanding of the fan economy will help promote the stable development of the industry. In terms of ideology, analyzing the motivation of fans' behavior will help fans improve their self-cognition, cultivate correct values, and eliminate the public's "stigmatization" of fans. In terms of social development, exploring the operation mechanism of the Fandom is conducive to improving its atmosphere, as well as maintaining the harmony and stability of reality and the network society.

However, previous studies mostly focused on fan culture and mostly used theoretical systems borrowed from the West. There are relatively few discussions on the Fandom culture with Chinese and East Asia characteristics. In addition, previous studies mostly combed comprehensive social phenomena from the macro level, while this study will explore the causes of fans' behavior differentiation under the stimulation of specific events from the medium and micro perspective. Through a literature review and in-depth interviews, this study explored the motivation of the three types of behavior of fans after celebrity misbehavior. On this basis, this study made a summary and presented a new "celebrity-fan" relationship. Finally, this study put forward targeted suggestions to various social parties.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Fandom Culture

The study of fan culture started from the study of audience and mass culture, which can be traced back to the 1970s. Gary et al. suggested the division of fan culture in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, which has been widely recognized by the academic community. The first stage is to correct the name of fans with "positive audience". The second stage is to carry out a fan culture study under the social and economic background, and the third stage is to conduct a diversified fan culture study [2].

Unlike fan culture, the scope of Fandom culture is relatively narrow, and the subject is clearer. Fan culture is the study of all fan behaviors and phenomena based on the social context. In comparison, Fandom culture focuses on the fan group itself and carries out in-depth analysis of its classification, norms, terminology, behavior, operation mode [3].

In addition, the Chinese Fandom culture is not entirely consistent with the "Fandom culture" imported from overseas. First of all, Chinese Fandom culture is deeply influenced by Japan and South Korea. Their capital operation modes, such as fan investment and data-making, also entered China.

These high-participation celebrity chasing modes make the celebrity-fan relationship closer. In addition, due to the influence of Confucian culture and the three cardinal principles and five constancy, the East Asian fans communities have a relatively obvious organization and class nature, presenting a top-down information control, which is significantly different from the Western show business [4]. Therefore, some theories of Fandom culture are not applicable. Thirdly, the development of Fandom culture is also closely related to the development of China's pan-entertainment industry. The operation mechanism of short video platforms and online TV localizes the Fandom culture. Therefore, Fandom culture should be analyzed in combination with the actual situation.

In general, Chinese Fandom culture is a new form of fan culture developed along with the involvement of the Internet in the entertainment industry and the changes in the ecosystem of the idol industry. The specific communication mode and the internal operation mechanism of the group are generated by the production and consumption behavior of the fans around a specific celebrity with the online social platform as the main space [5].

2.2. Fan Behavior

The research on fan behavior mainly focuses on fan support, participatory star-making and fan consumption. Analyzing the influencing factors of fan behavior from an economic perspective is also one of the hot issues currently [6]. In essence, behavior is the manifestation of emotion and cognition. In the West, Hunt, Bristol and Bashaw divided fans of sports stars into devoted fans, fanatical fans and dysfunctional fans according to the intensity of relevant behaviors [7]. Domestic scholars tend to study the internal operation mechanism of fan communities. Most scholars agree that there is a relatively distinct hierarchy within the fan community, which is mainly divided into core fans, ordinary fans and passers-by. There is also a clear division of labor within each level, such as text dissemination, image repair, video editing and data making. It vividly represents the autonomy and strictness of the fan community.

This study focused on the fan behavior caused by celebrity misbehavior, and differentiates it according to the attitude contained in the fan behavior, such as firmly maintain (supportive), timely unfollow (neutral), and angrily accuse (negative). It also advanced the analysis according to the structure of "consciousness-behavior". It is worth clarifying that both internal consciousness and external behavior will change with time, and fans' identity is also dynamic. Therefore, the researchers need to beware of binary opposition or over-absolute exposition.

3. Research Method

This study mainly used a systematic literature review and in-depth interview methods. The author has conducted a relatively extensive collection of literature and materials related to Fan culture, Fandom culture and Fan behavior. Also tried to make reference to the early literature as little as possible, so as to fit in with the operation form of the new media era. At the same time, a targeted search is carried out according to different fan behaviors. In addition, the author conducted six in-depth interviews by combining convenience sampling and snowball sampling, mainly asking questions about the psychological mechanism of worshiping the idol, maintaining their adoration, and withdrawing their fan identity.

4. Types of Fan Differentiation

On the basis of a systematic review of existing research, this research starts from the perspectives of self-identity and fan economy to analyze the motivations of the three behavioral differentiation of firmly maintain, timely unfollow and angrily accuse. The demonstrations were verified with in-depth

interviews to reproduce the psychological change mechanism of fans truly, and partially present the new relationship of "celebrity-fan" in the new media era.

4.1. Firmly Maintain

Firmly maintain means that fans choose to continue to support the celebrity after they know the misbehavior, and openly express their support through various behaviors, including controlling comments, sending spam, making recommendations, reporting, etc. In the "227" event of actor Zhan Xiao, his fans monitored the public opinion related to Zhan Xiao on the platform in real-time. Once they found a message that ruined the image of the celebrity, they spread it within the chat group, and called fans to publish comments with fixed format and similar content in the comment area below the message, so as to minimize the negative impact on Zhan Xiao's image. The reasons for this fan behavior can be summarized as follows.

4.1.1. Self-identity: Avoidance and Polarization

Self-identity is a process of finding, recognizing and becoming oneself, which is especially important for young people. There are two main ways to achieve self-identity, one is to explore the distance between "self" and "ideal self" through self-analysis and introspection, and the other is to explore the difference between "self" and "ideal self in the eyes of others" by setting a role model [8]. In the past, people's role models may have been limited to those around them, such as parents, siblings, and friends. However, nowadays, people can easily get access to information from all over the world. It is not surprising that people regard celebrities with exquisite appearances and superior abilities as their role models. Generally speaking, the realization of self-identity is a gradual process. Fans first become interested in a celebrity, then search for information related to the celebrity. They also contact groups who share the same preferences and gradually generate self-identity. The idea of "I want to be like the celebrity" and "The celebrity and I are very similar" not only reshapes the image of the idol with fans' emotions and life experience, but also in turn improves their own personalities. In the interview, the interviewees generally agreed that idols are the projection of self-worth and the embodiment of the good quality they adore. For example, some respondents said that they are motivated by the progress of their idols, or that their idols inspire their personal creativity through actions.

Self-identity is mainly divided into two aspects, one is the identification between fans and celebrities, and the other is the identification between fans. The former may form avoidance psychology, and the latter may cause group polarization.

Stever mentioned the two specific forms of self-identity between fans and celebrities in *Parasocial and social interaction with celebrities: Classification of media fans*. One is "I want to be like the celebrity", the other is "The celebrity and I are very similar" [9]. The former means the idol has qualities that fans like but do not fully possess. Therefore, the fans chase and worship them. The latter is usually the reinforcement based on the former to explore the commonality between celebrities and fans, which is not limited to personalities. Wearing the same clothes or eating the same food can effectively close the psychological distance between celebrities and fans. In this process of self-identification, fans and celebrities form a very tight relationship. Therefore, when the celebrity misbehavior event happened, the original "perfect" image was destroyed, and the fans could not accept this fact in a short time. Self-doubt may be generated and this can lead to avoidance psychology, such as making excuses for celebrities and trying to persuade themselves. When fans' individual minds are not mature and stable, they may be persuaded by themselves and continue to maintain their celebrity. In the interview, some interviewees also mentioned that when they first learned about the

event, they would indeed defend their idols by questioning the feasibility and imagining, and even refused to make any comment before knowing the full picture of the event.

In addition to the self-identity between fans and celebrities, there is also self-identity between fans. According to Gustav Le Pen's group theory, it is difficult for individuals to remain rational in the group, and they will unconsciously pursue the opinions of the majority. When the internal identity of the fan group is high and the opinions are consistent, the probability of group polarization behavior will also greatly increase [6]. This theory is also similar to the "spiral of silence". For example, in the "227" event of Zhan Xiao, the core fans in the fan community required all fans in the "anti-blacken" chat group to actively collect and slander Xiao Zhan's posts, and to flood the screen and report. One of the interviewees who has done similar behaviors also confessed that group discussion will arouse their anger and they are more likely to do extreme behaviors.

4.1.2. Fan Economy: The Sunk Cost

In the era of mass media, the communication between fans and celebrities tends to be one-way. Fans can only passively appreciate the works of celebrities and follow their steps. However, with the development of the Internet, new media and the pan-entertainment industry, the fan economy is booming. Fans have almost participated in the whole process of idol production and have paid countless time, energy, emotion and money. All of these can be considered as the cost of following someone. A netizen once calculated the money that a heartfelt fan spent on the idol Linkai Wang, which was about 36000-52500 yuan every three months [10].

Sunk cost refers to individuals who tend to insist on the irrecoverable resources they have invested [11]. When celebrities misbehave, their images, reputation and business value are impaired, which makes the cost that fans have invested in them become irrecoverable resources. However, for fans who are highly dependent on the emotional value provided by idols, it is very difficult for them to make rational choices. It is easier to indulge in the past and not to face reality. This is one of the reasons why many fans firmly maintain celebrities after knowing their true personalities of them. In addition, Bruine de Bruin et al. also mentioned that compared with elders, youngsters usually do not cancel failed projects when making decisions because they are more sensitive to "waste" and "failure" [12]. This is also consistent with the age group of fans. In the interview, some interviewees also mentioned that they had spent a large amount of money and time on celebrities and are worried about the loss caused by celebrity's misbehavior, so they dared not imagine it.

4.2. Timely Unfollow

Timely unfollow means that individuals choose not to continue to be a fan of the celebrity after knowing the full picture of the event. Specific behaviors are divided into the explicit type and the implicit type. Explicit behaviors refer to making public statements on social media platforms and actively handling physical and virtual resources related to the celebrity, such as souvenirs, accounts and materials. Implicit behaviors mean that the individuals have not made a public statement or actively dealt with relevant resources but will not continue to pay attention to the celebrity and gradually withdraw. For example, idol Han Lu announced his girlfriend on Sina Weibo on May 8, 2017. His Fan Club Account @ *Chaolu FORLUHAN_Luhan* announced that they would unfollow him and this triggered a large number of fans to unfollow, and eventually reached the number of 820000. The following reasons may trigger this fan behavior.

4.2.1. Development Theory: Evolution of Life Stage

Life is a process of development. Stever mentioned Erikson's Life Stage Theories in the article *Fan Behavior and Lifespan Development Theory: Explaining Para-social and Social Attachment to*

Celebrities, that is, every stage of life is driven by crisis. For adolescents, a crisis is an identity versus diffusion. For young adults, it is intimacy versus isolation. For middle adults, it is generativity versus self-absorption. When all crises are solved unanimously, healthy self-identity is realized [13]. Normally, fans' preferences for celebrities will change with age and experience. However, the misbehavior of celebrities may accelerate this process. When celebrity misbehavior occurs, the perfect persona is broken, and the real personalities are exposed to the public. Fans may find that the celebrities are not consistent with the self-identity of their life stage, and can no longer feel the joy from worshipping them. Therefore, the attraction of celebrities will gradually disappear. For example, idol Yibo Wang was loved because of his advanced dancing skills and handsome appearance. Later, he found that he did not finish junior high school and could not even write elementary Chinese characters, thus, partial fans unfollowed him.

In the interview, many interviewees talked about their behavior of adoring celebrities when they were young, and also felt that they are mature and calmer now. They also saw the evolution of the values they pursued in their choice of idols.

4.2.2. Fan Economy: Dynamic "Investment" Relationship

Nowadays, in order to further meet the needs of fans for intimate relationships, entertainment companies have made fans fully participate in the work and life of idols. Fans are encouraged to raise funds to help idols make their debut, or vote to decide the singing stage and clothing of the idols. These mechanisms create so-called "progressive idols" and "participatory star-making".

From the perspective of economics, fans have become the direct "investors" of idols. The rights and roles of each side have changed, and the "celebrity-fan" relationship has become more dynamic and equal. When celebrities release their works and breakthrough themselves, fans can see the future development value of the celebrity, as well as the emotional response and interest they may gain. They will maintain their love and increase their investment through all kinds of labor. However, when the celebrity broke the perfect persona and the popularity declined due to the misbehavior, the fans could not see the possibility of "appreciation" of the celebrity in the future. They may be disappointed with the celebrity and decrease the "investment". This model that allows individuals to quickly withdraw from their "fan" status is called a dynamic "investment" relationship.

It is noticeable that any kind of investment cannot be completely rational, which is also the reason why many fans still choose to maintain their idols because of the sunk costs invested previously. Only a few relatively rational fans can stop losses in time. In the interview, some respondents believed that the relationship between them and their idols was dynamic and reserved. Idols provide positive values and fans give back timely.

4.3. Angrily Accuse

The angrily accuse is another change, which means that fans not only unfollow the celebrity after they understand the event, but also conduct verbal attacks and revenge on the celebrity on the public platform, such as defamation and derogation. These behaviors realize the extreme change of "fans - passers-by - anti-fans". If the situation is serious, it may cause online violence. For example, after actor Feiyu Chen was revealed to have sexual relations with his fan, one of his core fans sent out a series of photos without any modification. These pictures reveal the true face without any filter, causing more ordinary fans to unfollow.

4.3.1. Self-identity: Social Reintegration

Although the Fandom culture has been growing in recent years, it is still considered as subculture. At the same time, because of the social stereotypes and prejudice against fans, fans are usually

considered as a group of "teenagers who only scream and have no brains". Therefore, it is particularly important for fans to gain the recognition of mainstream society and remove stereotypes. Therefore, when celebrities are labeled negatively due to anomie behavior, some fans are also eager to take off the labels of "fanboy/fangirl" and "irrational", as well as return to rational social public identity [14]. In this process, they may take extreme actions because of their urgency to express their positions.

Being a fan of someone also means that fans have established a position centered on the values of the celebrity. When the behavior of celebrities contradicts human relations and deviates from the mainstream values of society, it has the effect of "share weal or woe" [13]. In addition, in the contemporary era where social media is so developed, the boundary between virtual and reality is very vague. The online behavior of fans will also affect offline social relations. Students, teachers and family members in life will also give each other a certain evaluation according to the celebrities they like [15]. Therefore, in order to get rid of the relationship with the anomie celebrity as soon as possible, many fans will also choose to criticize on the social media platform and clarify their personal positions. In the interview, many interviewees also expressed that they were very concerned about others' views on themselves and their idols. They will also make socialized behaviors in order to conform more to the public preferences, such as scolding the misbehaved celebrities together with friends.

4.3.2. Fan Economy: Pressure Reappears

The fan economy is mainly composed of emotional consumption and irrational consumption. Most fans do not care about the practical value of the purchased items, but pay more attention to the symbolic value, or the emotional value brought to them. The movie *Man Jiang Hong* starred by actor YangQianxi Yi once had a situation of "ghost field" at 1:00 midnight. The tickets were sold out online, but no one watched it in reality. In fact, his fans spent a lot of money to make data for the box office.

However, after the celebrity misbehavior, the symbolic value of the item was dissolved and could not continue to provide emotional value for fans. The consumption pressure returned to the view, and fans might feel regret. This also becomes a potential incentive for fans to angrily accuse the celebrity. In the interview, although the interviewees handled such items in different ways, most of them felt regretful and depressed.

5. Conclusions

This research found that the avoidance psychology caused by the self-identity between fans and celebrities, the group polarization caused by the self-identity between fans and the sunk cost are part of the reasons for fans' firmly maintained behavior. The solution of personal crisis and the dynamic "Investment" relationship, to some extent, cause fans' timely unfollow behavior. The desire of social recognition and the reappearance of economic pressure are the reasons for fans' angrily accuse behavior. In the corresponding situation, a relatively reasonable explanation for the differentiation of fan behaviors can be made from the perspective of self-identity and fan economy. Therefore, the dilemma of fandom culture can be effectively solved from these two views.

On the basis of the existing motivation analysis, this study puts forward several suggestions to help solve the network violence and chaos in the fan's communities. It is suggested that the media platform should play a maintenance role, and fans should maintain independent thinking and jointly build an equal and harmonious internal relationship of the fan community. It is proposed that the government set up relevant regulations to supervise, and entertainment industry practitioners guide fans to rational consumption, and jointly prevent the invasion of capitalization on the fandom culture. It is encouraged that fans to keep self-examination and avoid irrational behaviors, and the public to eliminate prejudice, so as to jointly create a comprehensive social atmosphere.

This research has made a more in-depth analysis of the motivations of the specific phenomenon of fan behavior differentiation. Among them, the differentiation caused by identity and the dynamic "investment" relationship has vividly demonstrated the new trend of fandom culture. This study also put forward targeted suggestions which are conducive to improving the atmosphere of the fans' community.

It is worth noting that this study only carries out qualitative research based on the existing literature and in-depth interviews, lacking in the breadth of data sources. Besides, the way of behavior classification is relatively simplified, which fails to show the development status of fandom culture fully.

References

- [1] CRIN. (2020). *China's Pan-Entertainment Industry Market In-Depth Analysis and Investment Strategy Consulting Research Report from 2020 to 2025*. Retrieved from <https://www.chinairn.com/hyzz/20200613/155348592.shtml>.
- [2] Gray, J., Sandvoss, C., and Harrington, C. L. (Eds.). (2017) *Fandom: Identities and communities in a mediated world*. NYU Press.
- [3] Jenkins, H. (2012) *Textual poachers: Television fans and participatory culture*. Routledge.
- [4] Luo, JJ. (2020) *An Analysis of Fandom Culture from the Perspective of Field Theory*. Master's Thesis, Central University for Nationalities, <https://kns-cnki-net-443.webvpn.scut.edu.cn/KCMS/detail/detail.aspx?dbname=CMFD202101&filename=1020097317.nh>
- [5] Cho, Y. (2011) *Desperately seeking East Asia amidst the Popularity of South Korean pop culture in Asia*. *Cultural studies*, 25(3), 383-404.
- [6] Hu, Y., Liu, CY. (2021) *Mirror of Reality: the Social Symptoms Behind the Fandom Culture*. *Journalism University*, 8,65-79.
- [7] Ma, WH. (2022) *Research on Fan Behavior from the Perspective of Group Polarization*. Master's Thesis, Shanghai Foreign Studies University.
- [8] Hunt, K. A., Bristol, T., and Bashaw, R. E. (1999) *A Conceptual Approach to Classifying Sports Fans*. *Journal of Services Marketing*, 13(6), 439-452.
- [9] Jiang, M. (2016) *Research on Chinese Fan Culture from the Perspective of Mass Culture* (Doctoral Dissertation, Jilin University).
- [10] Stever, G. S. (2009) *Parasocial and Social Interaction with Celebrities: Classification of Media Fans*. *Journal of Media Psychology*, 14(3), 1-39.
- [11] Film Entertainment Show. (2019). *When Lingkai Wang's Love Affair is Exposed, Fans Behaviors: How High is the "Sunk Cost" of Supporting an Idol*. Retrieved from https://www.sohu.com/a/288255004_534590
- [12] Chen, AH., Lu, YB. (2014) *Research on Active Behavior of SNS Users: Integrating the Perspectives of Commitment, Social Support, Sunk Cost and Social Impact Theory*. *Nankai Business Review*, 3,30-39.
- [13] Bruine de Bruin, W., Strough, J., and Parker, A. M. (2014) *Getting Older isn't All that Bad: Better Decisions and Coping when Facing "Sunk Costs"*. *Psychology and Aging*, 29(3), 642.
- [14] Stever, G. S. (2011) *Fan behavior and Lifespan Development Theory: Explaining Para-social and Social Attachment to Celebrities*. *Journal of Adult Development*, 18, 1-7.
- [15] Zhang, XY. (2022) *Analysis on the Cause of Fans' "Depollution" in Weibo Platform* (Master's Degree Thesis, Liaoning University).