

The symbiotic development of Fandom and online media platforms in the era of new media

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Abstract: "Fandom" is a subcultural community formed by a gathering of fan groups. In recent years, with the continuous development of new media, the connection between the circle of fandom and new media has become closer. The both sides are complementary and gradually "make themselves outside of the fixed circle" in the contemporary Internet world. This paper takes Weibo, a platform where fandom has become prominent, as an example to discuss how Weibo has become bigger and stronger through the fan economy, and how fandom becomes widely known by relying on Weibo and other similar platforms.

Keywords: Fandom, New media platform, Fan economy

1. Introduction

In recent years, the continuous development of media technology is followed by the rise of new media. The new media represented by the Internet has been rapidly popularized, with the characteristics of fast dissemination speed, large information content and wide coverage. Nowadays, the new media has become the main channel for people to obtain information after traditional media such as newspapers and television. According to the *Statistical Report on Internet Development in China*, as of June 2021, the size of China's Internet users reached 1.011 billion, with an increase of 21.75 million from December 2020. At the same time, in June 2021, the Internet penetration rate reached 71.6%. Among them, the proportion of netizens aged 10-29 was 29.7% and the population was about 300 million. It can be seen that they are the "main force" of Chinese Internet, and the "post-00s" are even called "Internet natives". The teenagers grew up in the Internet era, whose lives have been greatly influenced by the development of emerging media culture. They can learn through the Internet, communicate through the Internet, use the Internet to conduct various literary activities and even create their own youth subcultures. The fan culture is one of them.

2. The formation and development of Fandom

Fan culture is based on fandom. The word "fandom" is composed of "fan-" and "-dom", "fan-" means fans and "-dom" represents their identity, which means a group formed by people with same interests; the "Fandom" refers to a group of fans gather together due to they love the same idol or idol group, and it also be called "fan circle" sometimes.

But compared to ordinary "fan circle", the structure of "fandom" is more compact. The organization of fandom has the characteristics of hierarchy, independence and exclusivity^[1]. People who participate in it are more like well-trained "army" on the Internet. They hit wherever under the leading of opinion leaders -- often called "big fans" by fans, to make a name for their idols. There are various levels in fandom, they are star studios, star support clubs, leader fans, big fans, ordinary fans, etc. from top to bottom. Fans are also divided into different sections, they collaborate with others and perform their own role. So the internal structure of fans is getting more organized and tending to be hierarchical. At the same time, due to the access system, fan network communities are also exclusive^[2]. Such system makes team members feel a sense of security and control, and causes the team's content organization more rigorous and standardized.

The generation of fandom can be considered from the following three aspects. First, from the perspective of personal reasons, fandom is generated from the emotional expression and cognitive needs of minors. Second, in terms of social impact, there are conflicts arisen between the cultural development and the lack of cultural products suitable for minors^[3].

The emergence of the most typical fan group in China was spawned by "Super Girls" in 2005^[4]. "Super Girls" has started a wave of star-chasing in China, and this form of "fan voting debut" has increased the stickiness of the fan group, and fans could find a sense of belonging in this circle. Since then, there has been a steady stream of large talent shows. In 2018, iQIYI launched "Idol producer", which imitated the Korean draft model, and became popular throughout the country, and 9 winners were elected by the people voting from an idol boy group to debut. The show reorganized the content and form, and started the mode of "boy band cultivation", allowing fans to participate and experience the growth of idols. In such mode, the stickiness between fans and idols, fans and fans are strong and steady. Idols need fans to make their debut, so they will enhance communication with fans; and Fans have already fascinated by some characteristics of idols, coupled with watching idols grow step by step, the sense of distance between them to idols will be reduced, and they will be more "whole-hearted". The official support clubs, big fans, and professional fans will promote fans to vote for idols, and this process also generates economic benefits for themselves, achieving a virtuous circle.

3. Fandom and the media

In the last century, a group of artists represented by Teresa Teng brought their singing to thousands of households with radio, building their own fan groups. After TV programs entered every household and film and television dramas became entertainment way of people in life, new visual media brought a more direct channel to chase stars for people. Fan culture has entered the era of rapid growth. The advent of electronic media MP3/DVD has given fans more independent choices, and fan culture has stepped into a period of entertainment upgrades. The birth of new media has also created a broader platform for fans, and brought fans the massive information spread through the Internet. At the same time, it also greatly improving the productivity and purchasing power of fans, which is the participatory culture advocated by Henry Jenkins, cultural consumers are not passive text recipients, but cultural participants who actively rewrite, criticize and cite original text^[5].

Online media in the new media era provides platforms for fan groups and becomes a kind of virtual community. Fans can speak freely in the virtual community, communicate with people of the same taste, and form their own "circle", which is called fandom. Each fandom is independent of the others and they are coexisting within a larger circle at the same time. Fans carry out some activities on these platforms, such as "controlling comments", "voting for ranking", "buying endorsements", "reporting anti-fans", etc. They can participate in their own communities, such as Douban's "group" and Weibo's "super topics".

The media's participation in the fandom is extremely high. Taking Weibo as an example, Weibo has set "Trending list" and there are various topics in the list, a topic could be listed in if it has enough clout. In addition to Trending, Weibo has specially set up "entertainment trending", to publish entertainment topics in real time. It also has "Sina Weibo Super Topic" and fan communities, where fans can speak freely. Super topic set up the function of sign-in, and fan sign-in under the super topic will increase the activity and exposure of it. When fans search for their idols on Weibo, the "real-time" information appears is called "square". "Square surfing" is a practice that fans post microblog with tags of their idols and related topics, and the content of the tags and topics are uniformly stipulated by support club or leader fans. "Voting for ranking" is in a similar way, fans increase exposure by provide clout with attaching tags or topics. In such fan activities, the platform gains activity. Some ranking lists even require fans to spend money for tipping so that the platform can directly benefit from it. This is how the platforms achieve commercial monetization through the fan economy.

Fans of idol stars often have a large base, they are high activity in social platforms with strong consuming willingness and great publicity ability. If idol stars are connected with social and political topics, the topics will be widely viewed in a shorter period of time, and attracted extensive attention^[6]. In addition to fans, marketing accounts are also active on social platforms. Those marketing accounts and other accounts with similar functions are mainly to carry and process the latest news from different platforms, idols and fans, becoming an entertainment information transfer station which relies on the scale of fans and attracts clout rapid to survive. Except the commissions of positive or negative press releases of actors, the Weibo advertising sharing plan is also a major income source for marketing accounts. The so-called Weibo advertising sharing plan is getting rewards from the platform according to the number of views and interactions. Anti-fans often use the influence of these accounts to increase the visibility of negative information. Correspondingly, fans of the related actors must post positive comments, thus forming a "hedge" to reduce the exposure of negative information. The marketing accounts obtain clout from it, and if the number of page view is large enough, they can be rewarded

through the Weibo platform.

Nowadays, a new fan economy has formed on the platforms. Multiple subjects participate in such economy, the connection between fan groups and star groups is no longer just an emotional connection, and the new economic model of "Internet plus fandom" makes fans feel more involved^[7]. In order to close the distance between the two groups, fans not only have spiritual incentives, but also "close the gap" with money. And the platforms will often benefit from this.

The platform provides a stage for fandom, and the activities of "fandom" bring activity and even "real money" returns to the platform. The two sides are mutually beneficial, forming a relatively stable structure.

4. The disadvantages of media operation under fandom model

The fan economy yield by fandom has indeed brought a lot of dividends to the media, among them Weibo should be the biggest beneficiary of the fan dividend. Especially in the Internet era, the most information fans get comes from the Internet, which makes new media have bigger space for survival and development.

Nevertheless, as a public platform, Weibo should have its own position to guide a healthy and harmonious community atmosphere. Idols need to gain visibility through the media, in order to obtain some kind of existence or recognition in public places^[8]. Fans carry out a series of activities such as "voting for ranking" and "controlling comments" on platform, which are aimed at improving the visibility of idols and make their idols "well known outside of fixed circle". However, the mutual well-been relationships between fans and idols and also between fan groups are far from satisfying the trending required by Weibo. As a result, it connives those marketing accounts to fill the community with things that lead to the "wars" between fans, makes fans "diss each other", thereby naturally gets huge attention. At the same time, the operation of Weibo trending also has a "gray area" –people can spend money to buy trending or reduce it. Therefore, Weibo trending descends to a money-making tool as losing its fairness and cannot truly reflect the clout of information.

All kinds of behaviors make Weibo more commercial and entertaining. The public platforms represented by Weibo should have a public nature that assist in communication activities to implement democratic and rational values instead of commercializing the logic of public issues and amplifying entertainment. Social platforms should not become a platform for traditional media, opinion leaders, fans and other forces to "take the stage in turn", "eat melons" and "diss each other", and forming a community atmosphere of "amusing ourselves to death".

5. Suggestions

In the post-pandemic era, the Internet and the real world are becoming increasingly interdependent. In human society, the role of virtual network world is getting more and more important. The online culture and subculture contained in the speech and behavior of netizens are bound to reflect the values and ideological tendencies of people as the subjects of online culture^[9]. The influence of the Internet on people is gradually and imperceptibly, getting deeper and deeper. This is the reason why public media should shoulder social responsibility and be a "gatekeeper".

Public media platforms should improve their awareness of subject responsibility and self-management capabilities. As an important checkpoint for information dissemination, media platforms should play a good role as "gatekeepers", to undertake social responsibilities, call for correct values, advocate online ideology that conforms to core socialist values, and build a healthy and harmonious virtual community. For example, last year, under the supervision of the Cyberspace Administration of China, Weibo adjusted its trending mechanism and added "top position" to the list to release the latest trends of the country. At the same time, it established "entertainment trending" and "important news trending" to set up trending lists for entertainment news and social news separately, in order to avoid entertainment news occupying too many public resources. Weibo indicated its position clearly by making the information that the public cares about to be listed in trending, to achieve the information heat coordination and reduce the entertainment atmosphere of the platform. Platforms should be a "gatekeeper" of information, shut out illegal information, and will not provide a platform for such information for temporary traffic. At the same time, the platforms mustn't use the convenience of the "gatekeeper" to interfere with the regular order of information dissemination. Platforms,

however, should allow different voices to speak out, and do not completely become a "slave" to commercialization.

The government should strengthen network supervision. New media have only developed in recent years, and the relevant laws and regulations on network management are not yet perfect. The online real-name system is still not complete, and the establishment of mechanisms of relevant reporting, evidence collection, and detection are not easy, which also increases the difficulty of network governance. In recent years, the government has also taken many actions in network governance. For example, the *Network Information Content Ecological Governance Provisions* that entry into force on March 1, 2020 and the *Carry out the 2020 "Clear" Minors Summer Internet Environment Special Rectification* promulgated in July 2020, have been carried out in a timely manner and have well rectified the online environment. The state should improve relevant laws and regulations to ensure that there are laws to abide by. It is also necessary to intensify rectification efforts, and show no tolerance to online violations of laws and regulations, so that the Internet is no longer a "place outside the law" and return a clean environment to the Internet society.

Netizens represented by fans should strengthen the cultivation of media literacy. Media illiteracy could destroy and damage the human spirit latent, just as contaminated water and food will damage their flesh^[10]. Media literacy is a pluralistic concept which should be understood and cultivated from multiple dimensions of cognitive, emotional, aesthetic, moral, participatory, communication (transmission), social, legal system, and ethics. Only by improving the media quality of netizens, the Internet could restore clean fundamentally.

6. Conclusion

The online public media platform makes the dissemination of information more convenient and popular. After removing the "demonization", fandom is just a subcultural circle gathered by a group of people with the same interest. The network social circle formed by the combination of both is a good platform for sharing preferences and communicating. However, due to many reasons such as insufficient personal media literacy and insufficient platform governance capabilities, fandom and its related platforms become "pandemonium", which is absolutely undesirable. That existed is rational, and we should not hands-off the various phenomena caused by fandom on the Internet. We must not manage it "one-size-fits-all", as well. The governance of media platforms related to fandom still has a long way to go.

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