

“Where There Is Love, There Is Money”: Negotiating Gift Economy and Capitalist Logic in Chinese Digital Idol Fandom

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Abstract

“Where there is love, there is money” is a common slogan in idol fandom, reflecting the belief that genuine affection for idols naturally translates into financial support. In this context, love and money are treated as equivalent. This research examines how fans navigate between emotional expression and structural exploitation. Initially driven by affective dedication and voluntary participation, fan activities have gradually been absorbed into the capitalist framework, where love is quantified as labor and financial support. Using a qualitative approach that combines semi-structured interviews and online textual analysis, this study explores how Chinese digital idol fans engage in practices of consumption, content creation, and emotional labor, all of which blur the boundaries between personal devotion and commercialized participation. While fan communities once showcase creativity, mutual support, and subcultural agency, these same practices are increasingly mediated by market logics and algorithmic infrastructures. The fan economy, though rooted in affect and voluntarism, has evolved into a system where financial contributions and digital productivity become markers of legitimacy within fan communities. This dynamic creates moral pressures and internal hierarchies, complicating the ideal of unconditional gift-giving. Rather than framing fandom solely as resistance or co-optation, this research highlights its ambivalent nature: a negotiated space where empowerment and exploitation coexist. It questions whether affective authenticity can be sustained under increasing commercialization and calls for more nuanced understandings of fan agency that recognize both the possibilities and limitations embedded in contemporary fan culture.

Keywords: fan studies, Chinese idol fandom, affective economy

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Introduction

“Where there is love, there is money” is a common slogan in idol fandom, meaning that fans believe that if someone loves an idol, they will definitely spend money on them. Money and love are equivalent here. Under the background of the increasing popularity and everyday use of media platforms, the boundaries between fans' identities as consumers and workers have gradually blurred, and their practices have become intertwined, jointly constructing a specific cultural ecology. The development of the fan economy in this process is precisely the ultimate pursuit of the idol industry for the fan community. However, when the industry tries to fix fans' love into quantifiable, obligatory commercial labor, to what extent is actual emotion destroyed and denied.

Literature Review

There is good reason to believe that fan consumption and fan labor are characterized by a certain degree of initiative and selectivity. In Anthony Y.H. Fung's (2009, 2013) research on popular culture and youth culture, he traces the rise of pop singers Jay Chou and idol Li Yuchun, analyzes the changes in Chinese fan culture promoted by them, and the complex interactive relationship between fan groups and the government. In addition, during the heyday of idol talent shows such as Super Girl and Produce 101, fans mobilized through organization to purchase voting rights for their idols and vote collectively. This voting mechanism, which is similar to popular election politics, has entered the public eye in the context of the entertainment industry and has been a success (Xiao, 2012).

In the context of idol fandom, idol fans have demonstrated a certain ability to act collectively and have bargaining power in certain situations. For example, interviewee Meloniano (2023) mentioned that some K-pop fan clubs with strong purchasing power often adopt joint bargaining strategies and directly negotiate with entertainment companies to obtain more favorable prices for goods. According to his description, some fan clubs were able to successfully negotiate a 30–40% price discount. In addition, collective “boycotts” by fan groups are also seen as an effective means of negotiation with idols and the industry. For example, Wang, E.S. (2022) documented that after BTS members' remarks related to the Korean War triggered the dissatisfaction of Chinese nationalists, many Chinese BTS fan celebrities collectively cancelled large-scale orders and stopped the scheduled birthday support activities, while posting screenshots on social media (such as Weibo) to express their protests. This phenomenon shows that fans are not simply passive consumers, but to some extent can use market mechanisms and use consumption decisions as a tool to express their positions and play games.

Overall, driven by the market and the media, the fan economy is the result of idol fans' active participation in the practice of consumerist discourse. The mechanism behind it can be found in Galluzzo's (2022) research on how business shapes consumers. By reviewing the development of consumerism in Europe and North America in the 19th and 20th centuries, Galluzzo points out that young people often try to escape the monotonous, serious and closed lifestyle in traditional society, and the rise of the market economy provides them with new consumption channels. In this process, the rapid development of the media has promoted the formation of subcultures and helped young people establish unique aesthetic standards and identities. Consumption is no longer just seen as a means of satisfying material needs, but has gradually become an important means of expressing individuality, displaying taste and distinguishing social classes. The rise of consumerism has prompted people to break away from

the ascetic thinking of the past and begin to recognize and embrace the pleasure of consumption.

This logic of consumerism is also reflected in the context of idol fandom. A study on postmodern consumption and fandom of Japanese popular culture points out that fan consumption is logically similar to the consumption behavior of ordinary consumers, both involving the pursuit of happiness, social capital and personalized identity (Stevens, C. S., 2010). To some extent, the fan economy allows individuals to temporarily escape the constraints of traditional family and workplace environments and find emotional sustenance in their consumption behavior. Interviewee Shark directly stated that due to various restrictions in real life, she was unable to pursue her ideals without any worries, but supporting idols who love art and helping them achieve their dreams gave her emotional sustenance. In this process, idol fan culture not only provides young people with a form of entertainment, but also becomes a way for them to reconstruct their identity in the digital age. Fans generally recognize the value of consumer desire in the process of idol worship and regard it as a reasonable personal choice. In discussions about the fan economy and real-life consumption, many idol fans express positive identification with idol worship consumption. For example, they believe that fan consumption for idols is not fundamentally different from consumption behaviors such as travel and shopping, and that they are all ways for individuals to pursue happiness. Some fans even say, “My real life is not as interesting as idol worship” (Strawberry milkshake watermelon juice, 2025).

However, the rise of the fan economy is accompanied by deep concerns about the mechanisms of capitalist exploitation. The digital labor contributed by fan communities, especially in the fields of content creation and media promotion, is highly susceptible to being absorbed and commodified by capital. Driven by the “name of love,” this unpaid labor, which was supposed to be voluntary, has gradually been transformed into free publicity for the industry and a tool for digital platforms to make profit, strengthening the invisible exploitative mechanism. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, fans' transformative works are also being quantified as a key indicator of the market value of idols, which in turn has gradually shifted fan creation from a challenging cultural practice to one that caters to commercial logic. This change has raised concerns about the possible erosion of the core value of transformative works, that is, whether they are being transformed from a subversive expression of mainstream narratives into a tool to serve the growth of commercial profit.

It is worth noting that in the process of seeking legitimacy for the fan economy and transformative works, if their commercial value is overemphasized, fan consumption and labor may be moralized and even evolve into an implicit obligation. In a study of K-pop fan communities, Sun, M. (2020) points out that “the Chinese K-pop fan labors themselves define fans as those who contribute to the idols and fandom” (p. 402). Under this logic, the success of idols is shaped as the result of the collective efforts of fans, thus making fans responsible for their continued investment in idols. However, the concept of idol success itself does not have fixed criteria but is dynamically shaped by the logic of industrial operations. In fact, idols and their industries have gained substantial economic benefits through this logic, while most fans, despite their active participation in industry production, are still subject to the moral framework of the gift economy and cannot enjoy the same social or economic benefits as the idol industry.

Furthermore, the expansion of the fan economy, especially the competitive mechanism surrounding fan wars, is also becoming a core profit method for idol industries and digital platforms. Ge and Wang (2022) documented how digital platforms use custom algorithms and

celebrity ranking mechanisms to implicitly force fans who want to increase the commercial value of their idols to invest a lot of time in platform labor to improve virtual data, while also driving fans to consume virtual goods. Chen (2018) traces the formation of K-pop-related fan communities on the early Reddit-like platform “Baidu Tieba,” pointing out that fan labor has undergone a transformation from spontaneous behavior to organized management. In this process, the bar owners (i.e., community organizers) of the post bar played a key role in the operation of fan labor: “Although fans join the post bar voluntarily, this ‘voluntariness’ is often subject to group pressure, as well as the domination and exploitation of the post bar organizers and the entertainment companies behind them” (para. 12). In addition, some entertainment companies even hire dedicated personnel to infiltrate the community as “fans” to directly manage the fan community, monitor and guide public opinion, to promote the organized operation of fan labour and promote the sale of commercial products. The function of cultural mediation is not limited to emotional connections, but is deeply coupled with economic and labor systems, so that new fans are transformed into efficient fan labor while learning the structure of the fandom.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach, primarily utilizing methodological triangulation and data triangulation. It combines semi-structured interviews with fan interviewees, online text observation within fan communities, and relevant historical literature to cross-validate the relevant practices of fan emotional labor and emotional economy shifts. Between 2022 and 2024, I conducted 20 interviews with Chinese idol fans recruited through online fan communities and snowball sampling. Interviewees ranged in age from 18 to 26 and varied in levels of participation and financial contribution. All interviews were conducted with the informed consent of the participants. Interviewees were made aware of their rights and the purpose of the research prior to participation. All interview data have been anonymized in storage and publication. In addition, I conducted discourse analysis of fan-generated content on Weibo, Douban, and RedNote. All the online textual materials analyzed in this study were drawn from publicly accessible sources. In cases where content might involve sensitive or controversial issues, additional anonymization was applied to protect the individuals involved.

The Obligation of Fan Emotional Economy

“Daimeng de Tuofen Huicai” (rough meaning: cute accounts for fans deciding to unfollow a celebrity, colloquially abbreviated as TFHC) is a Weibo account specifically designed to provide a platform for fans who wish to anonymously express their disappointment toward once-admired mainland celebrities (Daimeng de Tuofen Huicai, n.d.).

Within idol fandom, for various reasons, some fans choose to end their support for their idols. This behavior is called “tuofan,” which means “to leave the fan identity.” If the act of tuofan is accompanied by dissatisfaction with the idol, and the idol and their related actions are publicly exposed or criticized, it is called “huicai,” which means “to step back and trample on” the once-beloved star. To some extent, this phenomenon is similar to the cancel culture in the Western context. However, whether it is tuofan or huicai, especially the latter, (both?) means the interruption of emotional and economic support, and may have a negative impact on the idol's commercial image. Therefore, the public expression of such emotions often encounters strong resistance from fan groups that still support the idol, and even triggers online violence. Against this background, intermediary accounts like TFHC (short for TuoFan HuiCai) have emerged and have become popular among fan groups. These accounts are dedicated to posting

content for fans to dump their idols. The operating model mainly relies on an anonymous submission mechanism – fans can send their dissatisfaction with their idols to the account operator via private message. The operator will conduct a small amount of content review, hide the fans' accounts and private information, and then publish the content. This move not only provides disappointed fans with a space for emotional catharsis and identification, but also effectively avoids the risk of retaliation against public expression of dissatisfaction.

It is worth noting that a large number of submissions not only reflect the fans' dissatisfaction with the existing fan culture, but also have a certain degree of rebelliousness and self-reflection. However, this does not mean that the contributors have fully reflected on the structural ills of fan culture. A notable example is that the account requires contributors to attach screenshots of their past fan consumption records to prove their previous investment. Afterwards, other fans will calculate the total expenditure of each contributor in the comment area – those with higher expenditure amounts are often more likely to win sympathy and recognition, while those with lower consumption amounts are more likely to be ridiculed. This evaluation system shows that although fans often mention their own emotions and labor investment in their contributions, in the end, the total amount of money they spent is still the most visible and indispensable criterion. Some contributors even need to actively declare that their own consumption amount is relatively low when submitting, but they have done their best, in order to ask for understanding and tolerance from other fans. This phenomenon reflects an implicit consensus within the fan group: while fan's love is measured by the amount of consumption, fan's economic contribution to idols has been generally regarded as a moral obligation. Only fans who have created enough commercial value for idols can gain community recognition and be allowed to express fan disenchantment with their idols.

For example, Nine Percent is a limited group selected through fan voting on the talent show *Idol Producer*, and its leader is the aforementioned Cai Xukun. A fan, referred to here by the pseudonym Orange, who once supported the group submitted a post to TFHC to share why she decided to quit fandom, especially the psychological process she went through after suffering online violence from Nine Percent members' fans (see Figure 4, Daimeng de Tuofenhuicai, 2025). In the post, the fan Orange attached 11 screenshots of her spending records. Netizens in the comment section calculated that her total spending was no less than 16,297.34 RMB (about 2,250 USD). However, even though her spending was substantial, she was still mocked by some fans.

Figure 1

Screenshot of Fans Mocked Orange in the Comment Section of the Account TFHC



The reason is that there are nine members in the group, and if this amount is divided equally, Orange has spent less than 2,000 RMB (about 276 USD) on each member. Therefore, fans believe that Orange's spending amount is not outstanding for an individual idol in the context of fandom and does not qualify as Tuofan and Huicai. In response, fans who oppose her said (see Figure 2):

“Nine people for seven years, only a little over 200 (RMB) per person per year?”

“It makes me laugh, many people buy endorsements for albums for more than this amount, what's there to brag about?”

“The extent that she would be scolded in any fandom.”

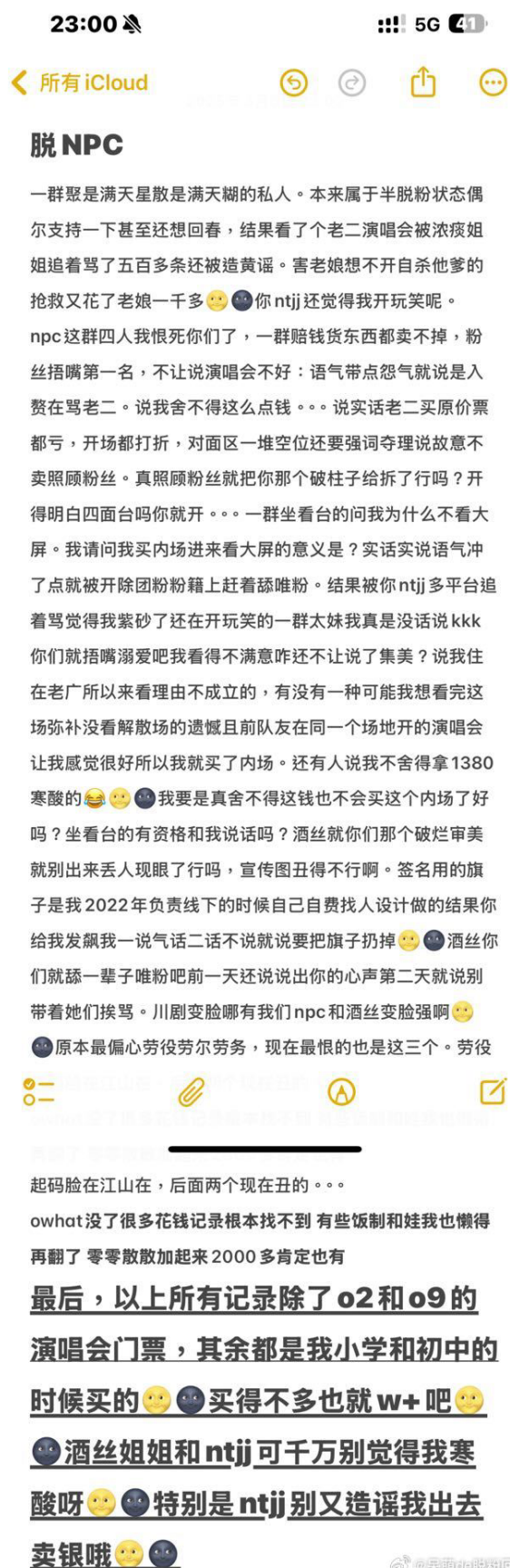
Figure 2

Screenshot of Fans Questioning the Authenticity of Orange in the Comment Section of the Account TFHC



In addition, some fans also noticed that Orange did not provide records of purchasing a specific album by a certain member or endorsing a product, thus questioning the authenticity of her fan identity (see Figure 3).

Figure 3
Orange's Complaints About Nine Percent and Idol Fandom Posted by TFHC Account



In an attempt to refute the mockery directed at her, Orange criticized the phenomenon of “fan gagging” (i.e., a climate that suppresses reasonable criticism) within the fandom in her post and responded to the doubts in the comment area (see Figure 4 and 5). However, Orange’s reflection did not touch on deeper structural issues. In Orange’s post, she emphasized that she had purchased the album and performed various forms of support work for her idol, and said,

I was only in junior high school back then, and I was still a little girl who felt that even a short-sleeved shirt that cost a few tens of dollars was expensive. I was only willing to spend so much money because of them.

Do you remember this flag from Chen Linong's concert in Guangzhou? (I made it.) In the end, I was the one who was questioned about my fan identity. How many of the people who scolded me actually love them more than I do?

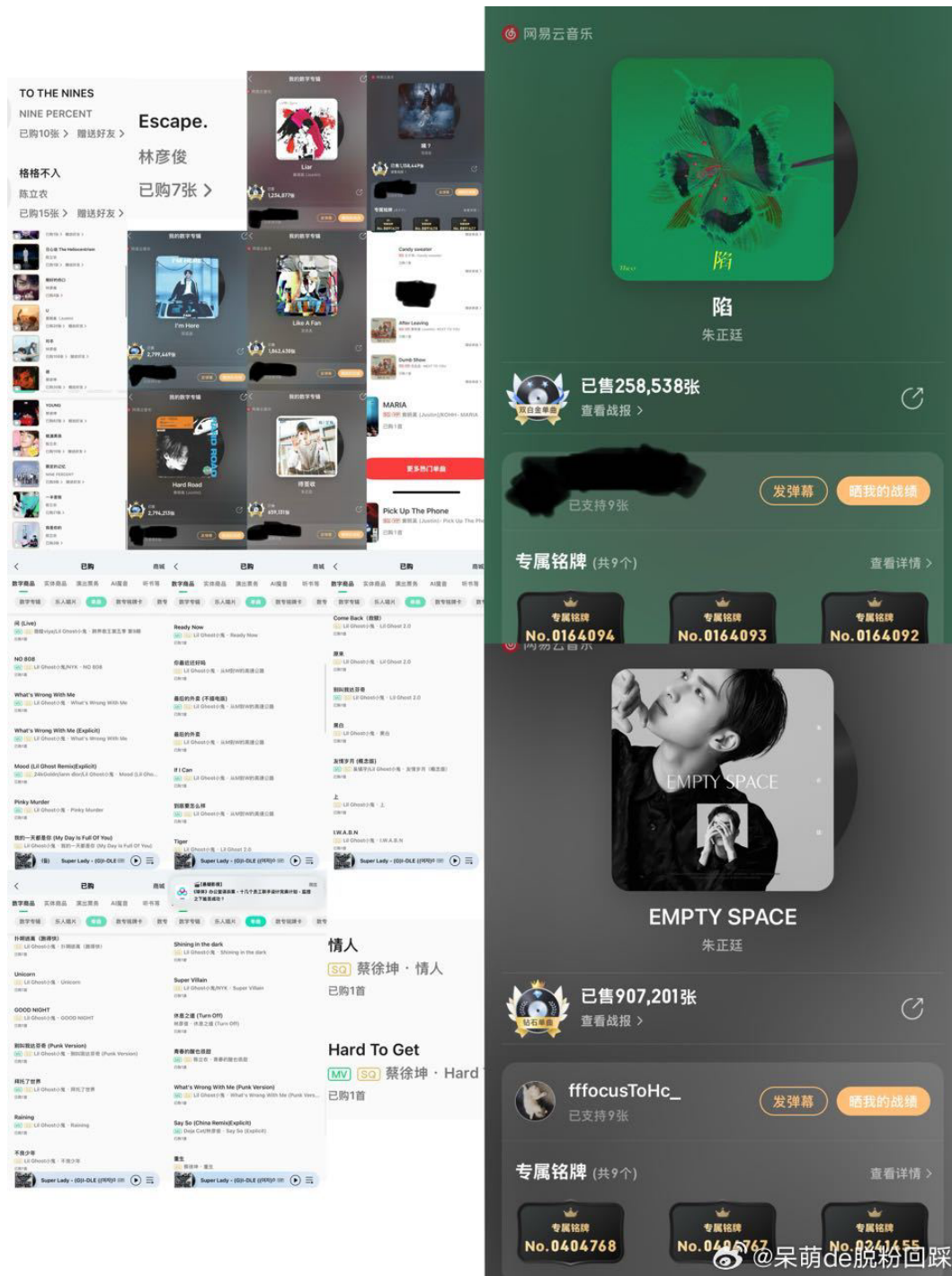
This narrative shows that Orange defends her fandom credentials and the legitimacy mainly for two reasons: First, Orange believes that she has already spent enough money compared to other fans, and second, she has done her best within her limited financial resources. Although Orange mentioned her disappointment with Nine Percent because they didn't perform well enough, and questioned the fans who insulted her, they may not love Nine Percent as much as she does. But all the arguments about love on both sides ultimately come down to direct monetary expenditure. Even when Orange said that she had once considered suicide due to the online violence from other fans, her final argument was to emphasize that the rescue cost in the hospital spent 1,000 RMB. One potential point is that Orange feels the cost of the rescue should also be counted as part of the expenses of being a fan, to demonstrate her love, as well as her financial strength, or potential commercial value. And she hardly mentioned the emotional obsession with idols in the past, or the mental pain caused by being driven to suicide by online violence. Love as a subjective emotional expression and meaning is easily replaced and overshadowed by commercial logic in the discussion of fandom.

Figure 4

Screenshot of Orange Defending Herself in the Comment Section of the TFHC Account



Figure 5
Screenshot of Orange Posting Records of Spending Money on Idols



It is worth noting that in this debate surrounding “who is qualified to Tuofan and Huicai,” almost no one questioned the logic of consumption within the fandom. Both Orange and the fans who criticized her tacitly agreed that the level of consumption is a core measure of fan identity and love, and this agreement is deeply rooted. In the current context of fandom, the definition of fan identity has become extremely homogenized and is closely linked to commercial profits. This change has not only affected the way fans interact within the community, but has also shaped the deep intertwined relationship between fan culture and the logic of capital.

The benefits that fans get from this identity mostly remain at the emotional level. The current fan consumption model of young people is highly digital in nature and includes a large number of consumption behaviors with no physical substance or low physical value (such as, repurchasable digital albums, digital collectibles, purchasable data promotion services, etc.). The convenience of online payment and the operating model of digital platforms enable fan support behaviors to be quickly transformed into industry profits. Chen (2018) expresses concern about this trend, namely that the entertainment industry may actively guide and even manipulate fan groups, shaping their collective identity through marketing strategies to improve the efficiency of monetizing the emotional economy. The impact of such manipulative strategies is already evident in fan culture, for example, fans' perception of the amount spent as a measure of "love," which leads to the obligatory consumption of rewards.

Take the case of Orange, according to her consumption record, mainly buys digital albums, fashion magazines and idol-endorsed products. Among these, repeated purchases of same digital albums are a common way of showing support in fan culture, and their symbolic meaning is closer to "rewarding" their idols than to general consumption of digital content. In addition, her consumption of idol-endorsed products mainly involves clothing, cosmetics and food, and almost all of these goods are purchased online. On these e-commerce platforms, merchants often specifically label the names and images of idols to distinguish between ordinary goods and goods targeted at fans.

In fact, this phenomenon reflects a shift in the business model of the idol industry. In advertising collaborations involving idols, the traditional advertising model's reliance on long-term brand promotion is weakening. For fast-moving consumer goods with high substitutability, such as clothing and food, advertisers prefer to take advantage of the immediacy of the fan economy to encourage fans to quickly place orders based on emotional support, rather than cultivating brand loyalty over the long term through advertising. Brands that hire idols as brand ambassadors often set up a special online purchasing option for the idol's fans. This option features the idol's name and image, distinguishing it from other regular purchasing options. Fans will concentrate their purchases on this option, and the sales volume under this option is counted as evidence of support for the idol. After the ambassadorship collaboration ends, fans will immediately stop purchasing. This consumption pattern has become a consensus among fan groups. In related discussions, almost no one mentions the actual value of these products. Instead, the discourse system of fan groups emphasizes the symbolic significance of the consumption behavior itself. This shows that in the current idol industry, fan consumption has gradually shifted from individual consumption preferences to a collective emotional mobilization mechanism, and the latter has been effectively integrated into the industry's operating logic and transformed into a sustainable business model.

In China's online consumer environment, common e-commerce platforms such as Taobao generally have a product sales display function, and music platforms also make public sales data for digital albums and stimulate competition among different idol fan groups through sales rankings. This mechanism not only promotes repeat purchases by fans but also becomes part of a data war. In this context, fan celebrities and fan clubs often set specific consumption goals and mobilize ordinary fans through social media to purchase albums or other goods as a way to support their idols. At the same time, fan groups will also spontaneously collect and organize sales data and publish comparative information on social networks to demonstrate the advantages of their idols in market competition.

As Galluzzo (2022) points out, under the influence of the consumerist value of “being yourself,” women have to learn more about consumerist fashion and spend more money to maintain their new image in order to appear relaxed and rebellious. This can also become a source of bondage and anxiety. Similarly, in the context of idol fandom, being a fan of an idol also always means making continuous efforts and spending money to become the ideal type of fan. The over-acknowledgement of the value of consumption has sometimes worryingly led fans into another kind of bondage, seemingly of their own volition.

In the long-term process of legalizing and regulating reward-based consumption, a noteworthy moral requirement has gradually taken shape: fans are expected to provide economic support to their idols as a matter of course, and even to invest resources “as much as possible.” This morality not only shapes the operating mechanism of the fan economy, but also strengthens the identity of fans to a certain extent. If we observe the comments of young Chinese idol fans about consumption, we can easily find a paradoxical phenomenon: a certain ascetic logic of “restraining one's desires” seems to be revived. However, unlike traditional asceticism based on moral or religious beliefs, the legitimacy of this logic is based more on commercial logic.

Fans generally believe that it is more valuable to invest funds in supporting their idols' careers than in personal consumption (such as buying milk tea, food, or entertainment expenses for travel). Within this framework, individuals voluntarily cut back on material enjoyment in their daily lives to strengthen their sense of morality as “ideal fans.” For example, many of the fan groups interviewed regarded behaviors such as “reducing daily expenses to support idols,” “working in thin clothing in cold weather,” and “working part-time specifically for fan consumption” as proud “contributions.” This consumption practice not only shapes the identity standards within the fan community, but also promotes the maximization of the fan economy. Ideal fans are expected to “spare no effort” to support their idols, but the actual rewards (such as entertainment experiences or financial rewards) that fans can get in return are often ignored or concealed. This phenomenon essentially echoes the logic of asceticism – supporters need to suppress their desire to consume in other areas in order to maximize the benefits of their idol or religion, while the rewards are mainly in the form of moral affirmation or future promises.

Under the logic of consumerism, the fan economy ultimately aims at a kind of “success” in the conservative sense: idols need to gain higher popularity and greater economic returns. However, this ultimate goal contrasts sharply with the rebellious spirit of the early days of consumerism. Traditionally, the rise of consumerism has been accompanied by a challenge to mainstream cultural norms, especially among younger groups, where consumption is often associated with identity expression, individual choice and rebellion against the established social order. However, in the context of idol fan culture, this rebelliousness presents a highly contradictory state.

On the one hand, fan behavior itself is still regarded as “irrational” or “rebellious” by mainstream society, and is labeled “immature” or “addicted.” Many fans are also aware that following idols does not fit into the mainstream social framework of defining “success.” However, on the other hand, fans do not project their own “rebellious values” onto idols and the idol industry. Instead, idols are still required to maintain a moral image of “purity,” “hard work,” and “positive energy,” and must continue to achieve commercial success in a highly competitive industry environment to prove their value. In this process, the industry still measures idols by a single commercial indicator, and the “ideal fans” are also measured by the economic benefits they can bring.

This phenomenon shows that although fan behavior may be regarded as a form of subculture that carries connotations of anti-mainstream values, its core goal is still conservative. Unlike other subcultural groups with clear countercultural attributes, idol fans do not really abandon or challenge the existing social value system. On the contrary, through crowdfunding-style consumption behavior, they actively adapt to and further consolidate the success criteria under the market logic. This phenomenon reveals a deep contradiction in fan culture: the pursuit of “being oneself” by fans does not point to an escape from the existing social order, but resembles a transfer of anxiety about success. In terms of underlying logic, idol fan culture does not get rid of or reflect on the mainstream value system, but rather further strengthens and replicates it through consumerism.

Conclusion

This paper aims to review and analyze the contradictions and evolution of idol fan culture in recent years, both in practice and in collective awareness. With the development of online commerce, the gift economy model, which was initially characterized by cross-class, unpaid sharing, has gradually evolved into a commercial tool that can be quantified by industrial institutions and used for negotiation. Fan agency has played a complex and far-reaching role in this evolution: on the one hand, fan agency has enabled fans to transmit and extend emotions, integrating isolated fan individuals into a collective with market influence; on the other hand, this collective voice has been assimilated by capitalist ideology, reinforcing fans' collective identity. When fans' emotions are measured solely by the influence generated by the “fan economy,” love is transformed into a potential profit source for the idol industry. Class divisions in real society easily extend into the internal structure of fan communities. Meanwhile, the painful experiences endured by fans are often used as tragic evidence to mobilize and unite the collective, further reinforcing group identity, fostering ambiguous hostility toward the outside world, and promoting compliance with and embrace of capitalist structures and authority systems. In this series of interactions, the love and hatred of individual fans are incorporated into collective economic logic, and diverse perspectives are marginalized and rejected, while the intangible emotional experiences implied are ignored.

In the future, the idea of returning to the old days of fandom is unrealistic, but it is crucial that voices advocating for the importance of personal emotional experiences over collectivism, and for interpreting fan emotions from diverse perspectives rather than through a single economic value statement of influence and importance, continue to be heard.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content

in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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